

JRR Tolkien Performance Artist and Modern Medievalist

Imagine if you will a Friday evening December the 3rd at the Tolkien home located at #76 Sanfield road in Oxford. It had been an unusually warm and sunny week with temperatures in the high 50's. The year is 1954 Ronald pipe in hand fusses about with the dial on the wireless. Edith, who has been quietly knitting, tells him to quit niggling about you're not going to get it any better than it already is. It is now about ten in the evening and the Tolkien's are only just tuning in. Here's what they missed earlier that night. First at seven its Shakespeare's "*Troilus and Cressida*" an opera in 3 acts libretto by Christopher Hassall, then a talk by Nickolaus Pevsner, Dam Building in the Dolomites. Then Act 2 of the opera, followed by a plant collector's exciting account on the discovery of an unknown Lilly. Act 3 of "*Troilus and Cressida*", at 10:15 hear an epilogue to the fragmentary Anglo-Saxon poem "The Battle of Maldon" By JRR Tolkien with Gareth Jones and produced by Rayner Heppenstall. Called "*The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*" followed by Chamber Music with The Allegri String Quartet. Soon after the beginning of their show we hear "Blast those bloody ignoramus they've gotten it all wrong!

Tolkien was not happy with this program he actually preferred his own performance which he made in his home study and recorded on his own machine. For this he played both parts and even provided his own improvised sound effects, creating the sound of a squeaking wheel and bumping wagon by dragging furniture across the floor. It would seem that the suggestion of this program to the BBC had come from Tolkien himself. In Humphrey Carpenter's biography he writes "Tolkien was deeply irritated by this radio production, which ignored the alliterative meter and delivered the verse as if it were iambic pentameters. He himself recorded a version that was more to his own satisfaction on a tape recorder in his study at home, in which he not only played both parts but improvised some dexterous sound effects. Although made purely for personal amusement, this recording is a fine demonstration of Tolkien's not inconsiderable talents as an actor. His displeasure of the broadcast version is also known from a letter he sent the producer Rayner Heppenstall after the broadcast with his criticisms, Heppenstall replied that Tolkien seemed to have taken a very negative view of what was done. Rayner Heppenstall had invited Tolkien to the recording session but Tolkien turned him down due to scheduling conflicts. In reply to a letter from Heppenstall he said no dialect was required of the characters of the play since there was no difference of social standing between the speakers. One should be younger and one older and they had different tempers." The Producer said the play would be preceded by Gavin Bone's translation of "*The Battle of Maldon*" and hence "The Homecoming" shouldn't need any introduction. Tolkien replied Heppenstall did not mention this before and he did not believe such a strategy would make the play more understandable. Tolkien it appears was not a stranger to BBC radio in 1936 an excerpt from his translation of the medieval poem "*Pearl*" was read on the BBC Regional network. He also provided his translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight to the B.B.C. for broadcast on the Radio Third Frequency. It was through this program that he already knew PH Newby and was able to suggest the performance of "The Homecoming". Roger Simpson in his book "*Radio Camelot: Arthurian Legends on the BBC 1922-2005*" tells of the making of Tolkien's translation of "*Sir Gawain and the*

green Night” into a radio production. It seems one D.G. Bridson a man who was known as “The Cultural Boss” of the BBC heard of Tolkien's own translation of the Gawain poem and he was apparently able to commission him to provide it to the BBC for broadcast. In typical Tolkien style he agreed to provide the text for production to begin in the second half of 1951 and promptly delivered it to Bridson in July 1953. Simpson says “The translation proved very faithful to the original, following it virtually line for line, and preserving much of the alliterative verse form. Envisaging the product as a broadcast poem Tolkien maintained it should be read by a single voice and that voice should be his own, “It's my pidgin- if you don't let me read it we can wash out the whole thing” Newby controller of the third program, had the difficult task of persuading Tolkien to accommodate himself to the requirements of radio format to allow more than one voice in the performance, and to split the series into four not five installments. Newby had his way. Six voices (None of them Tolkien's) were used for the broadcast. What had been designed as an introductory talk, confining itself to the poem's theme rather than its stylistic qualities, was delayed by Tolkien's indisposition, and finally broadcast only at the end of the series. Simpson says in all however the BBC had achieved a notable coupe, for this verse translation never reached print during Tolkien's lifetime, not until 1975. Simpson goes on to suggest “Radio can also point to the fact that without its suggestion and persistence Tolkien would never have completed his translation of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight” Of course I cannot say that I know this to be true, I have seen other reports that also say it was early in 1953 that his translation was completed.

Neither were his fellow Inklings unknown to the B.B.C. and the listening public. Norman Cantor in his book “*Inventing the Middle Ages*” says C.S. Lewis in the war years was by far the best known of the Inklings group, both within the academic world and even more among the general public. He was rapidly gaining attention among the general public for his children's fiction, for science fiction novels and allegories with a Christian twist, and for a series of B.B.C. lectures that were essentially soft-core sermons. He had also appeared on a show called “The Brains Trust”. Owen Barfield, Nevill Coghill, the Reverend Gervase Mathew, and John Wain had all made appearances on the Third Program.

Though I do not know how often Edith and Ronald may have sat down to tune in the wireless I cannot imagine it would not have been used in their home. The B.B.C. had been broadcasting in England since 1922; certainly I think we can imagine the Tolkien family being supporters of the B.B.C. Radio Third Programme which was started in 1946 The Third was sort of an early English Public Broadcasting System, where one might go if one wished to become *more educated*. The thirds existence was controversial partly because of perceived “elitism” it was sometimes criticized for broadcasting programs of “Two Dons Talking”, and for having a small audience. Yet it became one of the leading cultural and intellectual forces in Britain. Already I have spoken far too long about radio history fascinating to me as it may be, instead it is that program the Tolkien's were tuned in to I should address.

“*The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son*” is a sequel-cum-commentary narrative verse social comment act of authorization epilogue radio drama play by Tolkien created as a commentary on an Old English Poem. I label it as such because I follow the lead of many others who have looked at this work with much more learned and critical eyes than me. I see it called many things by many people, including the honorable scholar Tom Shippey who is the one who called this along with three other works by Tolkien acts of authorization to write fantasy. I do not consider my self learned enough to place a definitive tag upon it.

The Old English poem is of course “*The Battle of Maldon*” created by an unknown author existing in an incomplete form missing the beginning and ending. The poem tells the story of a Viking attack and the response of a Duke whose duty it was to defend the town of Maldon and the Abbey of Ely. This poem like many other ancient documents has many unknowns to it causing considerable discussion as to when it was actually composed, and just exactly what its author wished to convey. There are many who believe the poem praises the actions of the Duke as a hero of indomitable will who took a stand against the bloodthirsty invaders. Others Tolkien included feel the poem condemns the Duke for his rash behavior and desire for glory placing his men and Maldon in danger. Much debate can be said to hang on the interpretation of one word within the Poem “ofermod” which Tolkien glosses as overmastering pride. In the account of the battle it is told how the Vikings had landed on an island which became connected to the mainland in low tide by a causeway easily defended. When the Viking force could not win their way over they used guile. Beorhtnoth seemingly in the interest of a fair fight with ruinous results allows them to cross and is killed along with his heorðwerod

There are those who say he had to bring them across in order to engage the enemy right then and there to reduce their numbers so they would not be able to simply leave Northey Island and just sail on to an easier target. Did the lord allow them to cross just for the sake of sport, Chivalry? Maybe he really thought they could win and it was “The mistake of a noble or a noble mistake” as Tolkien put it. In his essay he said “it is a defect of (Beorhtnoth’s) character not only formed by nature but molded also by aristocratic tradition enshrined in tales and verses of poets now lost save for echoes. Beorhtnoth was chivalrous rather than strictly heroic.” It is a far off vision your name held high, seen beyond the tedium of day to day beyond the pain of battle and death. A warrior’s view from an imaginary tower built with the stones of ancient tales and traditions perhaps already changed by tribology so that it leaned beginning to lose its original form.

John Niles in his Essay from “*Old English Literature*” entitled “*Maldon and Mythopoesis*” says that at the time after the battle there were a number of people talking and writing about it. In the “*Anglo Saxon Chronicles*” he suggests at play a mythopoeic impulse that consolidated events of history into a unified narrative. We know there were varying accounts as to what happened in 991 such as from “*The Life of ST. Oswald*” and the “*Liber Eliensis*” which Niles says stands as an important witness to an independent tradition about Byrhtnoth (or as Tolkien names him Beorhtnoth) and Maldon. This anonymous work may well draw on local legends

current at Ely, the site of Byrhtnoth's tomb. In the "*Liber Eliensis*" Byrhtnoth and his widow were well remembered. It tells the story of how the abbot of Ely offered Byrhtnoth and his men generous hospitality after being turned away from the rival house of Ramsey, which was confirmed in the "*Ramsey Chronicle*" Niles Says "The tale may thus be based on actual events, though not necessarily ones that occurred on the eve of the battle in 991. It gives fulsome praise of Byrhtnoth's courage, stature, and generosity together with approving comments on his support of the tenth century monastic reform. Just as Byrhtnoth is raised in stature, the battle at Maldon is amplified into a two part campaign extending over a period of years. First in 887, Byrhtnoth is said to have met a party of Vikings "at a bridge over water". He kills nearly all of them. Four years later, in 991, a Viking army returns to avenge this defeat and boldly challenges Byrhtnoth, who agrees to join in battle against them with only a small force. This is the only account that specifies that Byrhtnoth was outnumbered at Maldon. Niles goes on to say, this statement of his underdog status may be taken as mythic adornment rather than historical fact. Similarly fanciful is the statement that the battle lasted fourteen days. The English are said to have fought valiantly, inflicting great slaughter on their enemies, but the Vikings finally win, decapitating Byrhtnoth. The monks of Ely recover his torso and bring it back to the church for burial. No mention is made of the three themes that figure prominently in Maldon, *an* attempt at extortion, the flight of cowardly retainers, and the heroic resistance of warriors after their leader's death."

I suppose knowing all this controversy which has been going on for so long with the Maldon story, and having his own opinions; Tolkien could not resist some refinement of the tale himself. Hence we have two figures wondering about in the dark in the gruesome aftermath of war. One named Torthelm 'bright helmet' and the other Tidwald 'ruler of time' Tom Shippey's name definitions. Shippey says Tidwald represents the realistic side of the dialogue, Torthelm the fantasy side. Perhaps speculating on the historicity of the Ely account Tolkien created his two subordinates with the lucky task of being sent out on the macabre mission of corpse retrieval, allowing him the chance to have eyewitness accounts of the battle field. Helmut Gneuss in his essay "*The Battle of Maldon 89: Byrhtnoth's Ofermod Once Again*" says "Why would the poet report Byrhtnoth as making a fatal mistake? The only explanation for this seems to be the poet had this detail, and presumably a great deal of what he recited or wrote down, from eye witness accounts of the fight, or from local traditions ultimately going back to the reports of people who *knew what they were talking about.*" This does sound familiar to Torthelm's puzzlement as to why there is not the "hill of heathens one would hope to find" at the end of the causeway. Then Tidwald the voice of experience in war someone who *knows what they are talking about* seeing the evidence of the field confirming the rumors he has heard says "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 principedom has passed, so we'll praise his valor. 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 silent, and the bridge opening." Yet elsewhere in the "*Liber Eliensis*" comes perhaps an explanation even for this. From Gneuss in 'Ofermod Again' "It seems very doubtful to

me that 'lytegian' in line 89 is intended to suggest that Byrhtnoth was gullible. Most commentators are silent on this point. Perhaps the "*Liber Eliensis*" may give us a hint as to what happened: it reports that the Vikings having returned to Maldon for a second battle could have been seeking revenge for their fallen comrades, and if the earl did not face them "that they should rank him among cowards if he declined." Gneuss says, "is Byrhtnoth being criticized in the poem because as professor Tolkien says, he treated a desperate battle as a sporting match throwing away the lives of his men. Did Byrhtnoth do this because he allowed his sense of honor to override his real duty", all in response to Viking taunts- we do not know.

However as Niles points out "*The Battle of Maldon*" poem is noteworthy for its apparent independence from these other accounts. Imagine The Poet, Tidwald and Torthelm gathered over fine beer like their lord had once provided. Having returned from their gruesome task, Torthelm like Frodo at the prancing pony expounding loudly in long lines of alliterative verse. Torthelm putting to use his minstrel and bardic qualities recalling their quest and his courageous behavior among the dead as they lay so queer, and the hacked and horrid faces of the heathen hell hunters from afar, while Tidwald silently mulls over his beer, occasionally interjecting cold hard truth and practical observations to Torthelm's flights of fancy. That these were important works to Tolkien this Old English poem and his own offering to understand it seem to come through in many ways all throughout his personal life, professional life, and his literary works. In his disgust with the ruddy little ignoramus Hitler who so tarnished the German people and the great northern spirit, and in his understanding of the encroachment of the machine that would devalue human life and make little the great acts of sacrifice and loyalty among men of principle. We see it in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Mary Bowman in her Essay "*Refining the Gold: Tolkien, the Battle of Maldon, and the Northern Theory of Courage*" says "Tolkien's relationship with the Old English poem was long and intimate. His friend produced its standard scholarly edition Tolkien wrote a sequel-cum-commentary "*The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*", the drafts of which span a period of perhaps 20 years as early as 1930."

Richard West in "*Tolkien's Legendarium*" gives us "*Túrin's Ofermod: An Old English Theme in the Development of the Story of Túrin*" West points out that "Melian calls him over-bold and counsels him to "fear both the heat of your heart and the cold of your heart". He is never able to attain this moderation. West says Turin grows into a fierce and redoubtable warrior, and a lonely, isolated man, sensitive in matters of honor. He is proud arrogant, and self-willed. The Anglo Saxons might have called him *ofermodig*."

Alexander M Bruce offered an excellent essay "Maldon and Moria: On Byrhtnoth, Gandalf, and Heroism in "*The Lord of the Rings*" Bruce makes the case that in the bridge of Khazad Dûm Tolkien sets to right the wrong choice of Beorhtnoth at the causeway from Northey Island. Bruce points out the comparison-or rather contrast between the two leaders had gone unnoticed, as Janet Croft recently noted in her "*War and the works of JRR Tolkien*" Bruce says "Tolkien takes the mixed message of

“Maldon”-with its positive and negative exempla of heroic action- and shapes a unified presentation of heroic responsibilities in “*The Lord of the Rings*”.

There are those who point to Thorin stubbornly refusing to give up any treasure or to budge from Erebor even if it meant the death of himself and his fellow dwarves, as an obvious act of overmastering pride,

Again from Maldon and Moria Bruce looks at Tolkien’s treatment of what he once called “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”. When the old retainer Byrthwold gives his dying speech “Heart shall be bolder, harder the purpose,/ More proud the spirit as our power lessens” Bruce says “Tolkien repeatedly and positively wove the message of those lines into “*The Return of the King*” even to the point of quoting his translation of the lines essentially verbatim.”

Bowman in her essay acknowledges the work Bruce did in 2007 yet says he gave but a partial picture of “Maldon’s” influence. “Tolkien’s wrestling with the work is evident in his other work, played out in his fiction” she says “Indeed the work of Tom Shippey on “Homecoming” suggests that *Maldon* was the poem that most intensely encapsulated the dilemma with which Germanic Heroic Literature presented the Christian Tolkien “Tolkien’s problem as regards the heroic literature of antiquity was, I would say, on the one hand great professional liking, and on the other extreme ideological diversion.” So says Bowman “It would be hardly surprising to find it working on his imagination as he created numerous heroic characters and opportunities for heroism in his own fiction; it might be surprising not to.” Bowman intends to show how *Maldon* deserves to be included in the list of important works that influenced Tolkien. She believes in the essay offered which follows the play we see hints at possibly rehabilitating the Northern Heroic Spirit. It does seem acceptable to say that in the *Lord of the Rings* we see the heroic spirit as Tolkien believed it should be, where loyalty and obedience go in every direction up down and sideways, where selfless acts and social responsibility are desirable character traits through all levels of society. In Tolkien’s own words “It is the heroism of obedience and love, not of pride or willfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving.” Bowman says “Tolkien draws a distinction between the behavior of the lord and the retainers in regards to types of heroism. He is making an important distinction between two types of heroism, to define an acceptable version to reshape and not reject Germanic heroism. He may critique one aspect of *Maldon* with Gandalf’s action at the bridge of Khazad Dûm; elsewhere in “*The Lord of the Rings*” he celebrates the Germanic heroic code.” She points to parallels of *Maldon* and the flight of the cowards in the Barrow Downs where Frodo has thoughts of fleeing and deserting his friends yet makes the right choice and courage is awakened in him not to leave his friends, again in the “Flight to the Ford” Frodo is told he must flee but again he will not leave his friends until he realizes that his fleeing (on someone else’s horse) his leaving his friends is the right choice for their safety. Frodo’s flight serves his mission by taking the ring out of reach and saving himself. In this he contrasts Byrthnoth as well the sons of Offa. “His choices are shaped by his sense of social responsibility-his “purpose and duty”-to the world at large as well as to his own companions.” Bowman points to the choice of

Maldon's retainers who chose to stay and fight in contrast to Tolkien's "*The Choices of Master Samwise*" saying "What Sam is tempted to choose, what he does choose, and why become particularly pointed when compared to the choices of the *Maldon* retainers." First revenge, but simple vengeance is not sufficient motivation to "Leave the body of Mr. Frodo dead, unburied on the top of a mountain. Revenge was not part of Sam's purpose and duty next he considers suicide, "better both be dead together" he thinks, but "That was to do nothing not even grieve." Bowman says "these options are personally appealing to Sam, comparable to the flight of the coward's individual interests at others expense. Sam is focused on "Purpose and Duty". He eventually leaves Frodo even though it is against every grain of his nature to "seeing it through". His loyalty is enacted by completing the task Frodo gave his life in attempting. Sam sees the right choice to leave Frodo's side as "another lonely journey, the worst" and as the worst suggest it is the most personally disagreeable –but the one that is socially responsible. "Tolkien has structured the situation in such a way that the behavior which Sam's loyalty and courage lead him to is starkly contrasted with everything in "*The Battle of Maldon*": he does not flee, he does not seek revenge, he does not take up a military battle he cannot win, he does not do what will make the best song. He does whatever will best serve his "Purpose and Duty" and in the end succeeds." Bowman saw Tolkien having reshaped the image of "northern heroic spirit" reclaiming it from the Nazi's and redeeming it of its heathenism, with new images of heroism in characters like Aragorn, and Théoden, not forgetting Sam Gamgee. Bowman ends her essay with one last example. She suggest the line of Gandalf to Frodo that "The pity of Bilbo may rule the fate of many" is in direct contrast with the words of Wiglaf "by one man's will many must woe endure"

I will say that while researching this paper I was inspired with the amount of material created in regards to the old poem and Tolkien's commentary. So that I do not feel as though I have by any means created an extensive study of the subject. In fact I do not even pretend to be well versed in the subject, as I know many of you are. I think what I have seen though has convinced me that '*Maldon*' and '*The Homecoming*' cannot be ignored as having heavy influence in Tolkien's works. His thought to publish *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*, *On Fairy Stories*, and the *homecoming* in one volume, as he said 'three things that to my mind really do flow together' attest to this. "They possess the tone and quality that I desired, somewhat cool and clear, be redolent of our 'air' (the clime and soil of the North West, meaning Briton and the hither parts of Europe." Now even though I am misquoting I think this phrase could just as easily have been applied by Tolkien to those types of stories he liked personally, such as those types of stories containing green great dragons with heroes fighting monsters. I do not believe one needs look far into "*The Lord of the Rings*" to see heroes acting heroically not for their own glory or pride but out of a concern for others and a greater social good. He did not reject the northern spirit he gave it a more modern understanding and left behind the heathen part of the spirit. In the section entitled *Hope and Despair of Scull and Hammonds* '*Companion and Guide*' they write "To a first time reader the quest of the ring seems almost bound to fail, while any one reading the book again will know how many hopes are actually fulfilled, not by a *Deus ex Machina* but by the determination by most of the characters to carry on against all

odds, ultimately embracing hope when logic would lead them to despair, and in turn , the failure of the West against Sauron, an embodiment of Evil.” I think this statement could also apply to Tolkien’s correction of the Northern Heroic Spirit carrying on against all odds knowing there is something higher the blackness cannot destroy. In fact I would go on to say that “*The Lord of the Rings*” has much to do with heroes and how they should behave and lessons learned from an Old English poems on how not to behave.

If you will bear with me a little while longer for I fear I would be remiss as a native Vermonter not to share with you my thought that not more than a couple miles from here is buried a man who I think also shows a parallel to the earl of *Maldon* in many ways, he too may have made his own mistakes under the sway of his ofermod, he has yet been raised to mythic proportions as the hero of Vermont. He was a great man with a great military coup to give minstrels songs to sing. When he along with his small entourage entered the gates of a mighty British fort and with hardly a shot fired in the name of the great Jehovah and the continental congress he took possession. And after such a victory who would not go on in search of another to add to fame. This time it did not go so well and in a hasty decision he and once again a small force attack the colonial city of Montreal suffering complete defeat and imprisonment for he and his men and jeopardizing future military actions of the American colonist engaged in their struggle for freedom. Yet as I have said even though he made his mistakes and had to carry on after the war a poor man he is remembered today as a great hero. There are many a tale of the great adventures of Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys, enough to instill the hearts of any young Vermonter to his or her own acts of courage and heroism in the face of a threat to their home and country.

