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Book Review of: *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* by J.R.R. Tolkien (ed. by Peter Grybauskas)

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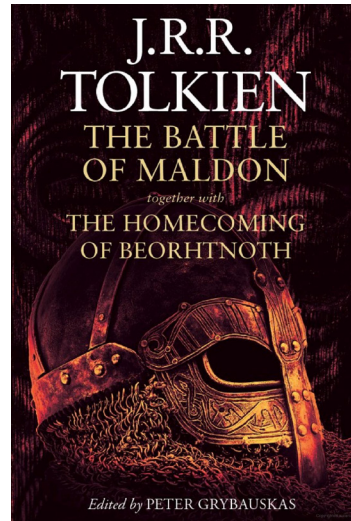


## Online Book Reviews

**J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Battle of Maldon together with The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, edited by Peter Grybauskas. New York: William Morrow, 2023.**

The only play J.R.R. Tolkien published during his lifetime, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son* (written in alliterative verse), first appeared in 1953 as the second section of an article of the same name in the academic journal *Essays and Studies*, preceded by the introductory section 'Beorhtnoth's Death' and followed by the scholarly discussion 'Offermod'. A version of the play was broadcast by the BBC a year later, but it was not reprinted until it was included in the 1966 American paperback, *The Tolkien Reader*, followed in 1975 in the United Kingdom and assorted times since. Then, in *The Treason of Isengard* (1989), Christopher Tolkien published a twenty-seven-line draft version of it in rhyming couplets, dating from the early 1930s, though he noted that there was "another text still rougher" (107). In 2007, Thomas Honegger published an essay designating that published draft with the Greek letter alpha, and selectively surveying another eleven texts in the Bodleian Library in Oxford chronologically as A-K. Now, Peter Grybauskas has not only produced an annotated edition of the 1953 article (in Part One), but (in Appendix IV) an edition of the complete Version D play-text, the last still in rhyming couplets (150–61), followed (in Appendix V) by a discussion of some noteworthy developments in the course of the drafting over some twenty years (162–70).

The first and third sections of Tolkien's 1953 article discuss the incomplete Old English poem usually called *The Battle of Maldon*: an account of the battle there in A.D. 991, when Duke "Beorhtnoth was slain and the English routed" by "a viking host" (3–4). At Oxford, Tolkien had studied that famous alliterative poem as an undergraduate and later lectured on it as a professor in at least 1928 and 1930. In his 1937 edition of the poem, Tolkien's old colleague E.V. Gordon thanked Tolkien for his help with it. Not only did Tolkien lecture on it, he prepared a complete prose translation of it, and many of his notes on it survive. In Part Two of the 2023 volume, Grybauskas has prepared an edition of that translation (56–67), introduced it (53–55), and annotated it (68–81) with "a limited selection" of Tolkien's fifty leaves of handwritten



notes. These in turn are followed in Part Three by his edition of the first 34 pages of Tolkien's "wide-ranging lecture / essay", '*The Tradition of Versification in Old English with special reference to the Battle of Maldon and its alliteration*' (85–126) with "the remaining 10 pages, a technical discussion of elements of *Maldon's* prosody", in Appendix II (135–49). In Appendix I, he complements this with an excerpt from a general lecture by Tolkien on 'Old English Prosody' with examples from *Beowulf* (129–34), and in Appendix III with an excerpt from an "essay" with special attention to "Alliteration on 'g' in *The Battle of Maldon*" (147–49), filling out Tolkien's earlier thoughts on that matter in comparison with *Beowulf* (119–20): all published here for the first time.

Part Three through Appendix III represent what is probably the closest sense which anyone has given us so far of what it would be like to be taught by Tolkien—and that is quite exciting and very rewarding (though not always easy). Happily, we have it all on paper, here, so we can take our time and reread as much as we want. Grybauskas notes that "where Tolkien presents a series of Old English quotations as examples", he has economized on space by "omitting all but the first in the series, giving only the line numbers for reference to those that follow" (85). Fortunately, the texts of all the Old English poems in question, and translations, can be fairly easily found online one way or another, often in versions Tolkien probably knew (for instance, in the Internet Archive). (For *Beowulf* there is, of course, also Christopher Tolkien's 2014 edition of his father's translation with selected annotations.)

In the first section of his 1953 article, Tolkien made clear that his "poem" is set after the events recounted in *The Battle of Maldon*, effectively varying "the late, and largely unhistorical, account in the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*" of the recovery of Duke Beorhtnoth's body from the battlefield for burial in the abbey of Ely (5), something only implied in the early twenty-seven-line draft. In his Introduction, Grybauskas illuminates the complexity of the interrelations of the Old English poem and Tolkien's, saying Tolkien's "has been described as coda, epilogue, sequel, and prequel to *The Battle of Maldon*—all of which is pretty much true" (xiii). He notes that one of the two named characters in Tolkien's poem, Totta, "has a dream vision in which he mutters the most famous lines of the (as yet unwritten) Old English *Maldon*, suggesting that he may one day go on to compose that poem" (xiv), which Tolkien "describes as 'the last surviving fragment of ancient English heroic minstrelsy'" (xviii). In the last section of Appendix V, 'The *Maldon* Poet', Grybauskas tells us more: "While some hint of Totta's role as poet remains in the final text, Tolkien dabbled with, but ultimately abandoned, an explicit designation of Totta as the future poet", providing detailed evidence of this from the Version D and H manuscripts, including passages from two drafts of the first section of the article 'Beorhtnoth's Death' (169–70). Now, it is possible for anyone to read Tolkien's own thoughtful *Maldon* translation together with—whether before or after—his fascinating verse drama

(in either of two complete versions) in company or alone, aloud or silently. (Or even with Tolkien's recording of his own dramatic reading of the 1953 version, available at last, for separate payment.)

In his Introduction, Grybauskas also briefly notes how both Tolkien's poem and the 1953 article may be seen in relation to various other of his works—alliterative poems, "creative 'reconstructions'" of possible sources, and literary criticism—and notes John Holmes's suggestion that, "Beowulf excepted, *The Battle of Maldon* may well have been 'the Old English poem that most influenced Tolkien's fiction'" (xv-xvi). This is something to which he returns in detail in Appendix VI (171–84), which is followed by a useful Bibliography (185–88).

Grybauskas's annotations of Tolkien's 1953 article (36–50), occupying almost half as many pages as the article itself (3–35), draw upon a wide variety of sources, including additional, previously unpublished authorial notes. By contrast, other than brief introductions, there are only four annotations in the whole of Part III through Appendix IV (85–161): his editions of lecture selections and Version D of Tolkien's verse drama. These edited texts are so intriguing and rewarding, I doubt if any reader would have objected if he had annotated them on the same scale as the 1953 article, or even on the scale and in the manner of Michael Drout's magnificent edition of some of Tolkien's other lectures, *Beowulf and the Critics* (2011). In any case, what he has selected for inclusion tell us a lot and give us much food for further thought and study.

For example, Tolkien both accents what is known about Old English composition practice and gives us a humorous glimpse of his own habits when he says (125), "As now verse was naturally composed in privacy, in the watches of the night, and trotted out later at the symposium. To this natural method we have many references: not only in the case of Cynewulf, the polished (if unexciting) poet—who says 'At times I pondered and arranged my thought anxiously by night' (*Elene* 1239 ff.); but also in the case of the maker of a popular lay such as *Havelok*". When we follow up that reference in *Elene*, we find one of the longest surviving examples of rhyming Old English verse, which implicitly ties in with Tolkien's later discussion of "Rhyme" (143–45). Perhaps thinking about Old English rhyming affected his decision to use rhyming couplets in the twenty-seven-line draft version of his own poem and to continue to do so through Version D. And perhaps the very unusual dramatic dialogue in part of another poem attributed to Cynewulf, *Crist*, also contributed to his choice of the form of *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*. Both may have further combined with *The Battle of Maldon* in making this particular piece, among the few explicitly Christian works that he published, such a realistically historical one as well.

Curiously, the back of the title page refers to a "facsimile manuscript page" appearing as "the frontispiece", but no such frontispiece is included. I have

discovered that this is not peculiar to my copy. Nor is it a fault shared by the UK edition: a friend with that version showed me a very interesting frontispiece in it, with a page of the Version I draft of the 1953 text (2–25) including Totta's dream vision. One can only hope that this disappointing omission will be—or already has been—corrected in subsequent impressions.

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