

J.R.R.Tolkien

**The
Homecoming
of
Beorhtnoth
Beorhthelm's Son**

I

Beorhtnoth's Death

IN August of the year 991, in the reign of Æthelred II, a battle was fought near Maldon in Essex. On the one side was the defence-force of Essex, on the other a viking host that had ravaged Ipswich. The English were commanded by Beorhtnoth son of Beorhthelm, the duke of Essex, a man renowned in his day: powerful, fearless, proud. He was now old and hoar, but vigorous and valiant, and his white head towered high above other men, for he was exceedingly tall¹, The "Danes"—they were on this occasion probably for the most part Norwegians—were, according to one version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, led by Anlaf, famous in Norse saga and history as Olaf Tryggvason, later to become King of Norway.² The Northmen had sailed up the estuary of the Pante, now called the Blackwater, and encamped on Northey Island. The Northmen and the English were thus separated by an arm of the river; tilled by the incoming tide, it could only be crossed by a "bridge" or causeway, difficult to force in the face of a determined defence.³ The defence was resolute. But the vikings knew, or so it would seem, what manner of a man they had to deal with: they asked for leave to cross the ford, so that a fair fight could be joined. Beorhtnoth accepted the challenge and allowed them to cross. This act of pride and misplaced chivalry proved fatal. Beorhtnoth was slain and the English routed; but the duke's "household", his *heorðwerod*, containing the picked knights and officers of his bodyguard, some of them members of his own family, fought on, until they all fell dead beside their lord.

A fragment—a large fragment, 325 lines long—of a contemporary poem has been preserved: it has no end and no beginning, and no title, but is now generally known as *The Battle of Maldon*. It tells of the demand of the vikings for tribute in return for peace; of Beorhtnoth's proud refusal, and challenge, and the defence of the "bridge"; the cunning request of the vikings, and the crossing of the causeway; the last fight of Beorhtnoth, the falling of his golden-hilted sword from his maimed hand, and the hewing of his body by the heathen men. The end of the fragment, almost half of it, tells of the last stand of the bodyguard. The names, deeds, and speeches of many of the Englishmen are recorded. The duke Beorhtnoth was a defender of the monks, and a patron of the church, especially of the abbey of Ely. After the battle the Abbot of Ely obtained his body and buried it in the abbey. His head had been hacked off and was not recovered; it was replaced in the tomb by a ball of wax.

According to the late, and largely unhistorical, account in the twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis* the Abbot of Ely went himself with some of his monks to the battlefield. But in the following poem it is supposed that the abbot and his monks came only as far as Mal-

¹ According to one estimate 6 foot 9 inches tall. This estimate was based on the length and size of his bones when examined, in his tomb at Ely, in A.D. 1769.

² That Olaf Tryggvason was actually present at Maldon is now thought to be doubtful. But his name was known to Englishmen. He had been in Britain before, and was certainly here again in 994.

³ According to the views of E. D. Laborde, now generally accepted. The causeway or "hard" between Northey and the mainland is still there.

don, and that they there remained, sending two men, servants of the duke, to the battlefield some distance away, late in the day after the battle. They took a waggon, and were to bring back Beorhtnoth's body.

They left the waggon near the end of the causeway and began to search among the slain: very many had fallen on both sides. Torthelm (colloquially Totta) is a youth, son of a minstrel; his head is full of old lays concerning the heroes of northern antiquity, such as Finn, King of Frisia; Fróda of the Hathobards; Béowulf; and Hengest and Horsa, traditional leaders of the English Vikings in the days of Vortigern (called by the English Wyrtegeorn). Tidwald (in short Tída) was an old *ceorl*, a farmer who had seen much fighting in the English defence-levies. Neither of these men were actually in the battle. After leaving the waggon they became separated in the gathering dusk. Night falls, dark and clouded. Torthelm is found alone in a part of the field where the dead lie thick. From the old poem are derived the proud words of Offa at a council before the battle, and the name of the gallant young Aelfwine (scion of an ancient noble house in Mercia) whose courage was commended by Offa. There also are found the names of the two Wulfmaers: Wulfmaer, son of Beorhtnoth's sister; and Wulfmaer the young, son of Wulfstan, who together with Aelfnoth fell grievously hewn besides Beorhtnoth. Near the end of the surviving fragment an old retainer, Beorhtwold, as he prepares to die in the last desperate stand, utters the famous words, a summing up of the heroic code, that are here spoken in a dream by Torthelm:

*Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegen lytlað.*

"Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder, spirit the greater as our strength lessens." It is here implied, as is indeed probable, that these words were not "original," but an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will; Beorhtwold is all the more, not the less, likely for that reason actually to have used them in his last hour.

The third English voice in the dark, speaking after the *Dirige* is first heard, uses rhyme: presaging the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure. The old poem is composed in a free form of the alliterative line, the last surviving fragment of ancient English heroic minstrelsy. In that measure, little if at all freer (though used for dialogue) than the verse of *The Battle of Maldon*, the present modern poem is written.

The rhyming lines are an echo of some verses, preserved in the *Historia Eliensis*, referring to King Canute:

Merie sungen ðe muneches binnen Ely,
oa Cnut ching reu ðerby.
'Roweð, cnites, noer the land
and here we ther muneches saeng'.

II

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son

The sound is heard of a man moving uncertainly and breathing noisily in the darkness.
Suddenly a voice speaks, loudly and sharply.

TORHTHELM. Halt! What do you want? Hell take you!
Speak!

TÍDWALD. Totta! I know you by your teeth rattling.

TOR. Why, Tída, you! The time seemed long
alone among the lost. They lie so queer.
I've watched and waited, till the wind sighing
was like words whispered by waking ghosts
that in my ears muttered.

TÍD. And your eyes fancied
barrow-wights and bogies. It's a black darkness
since the moon foundered; but mark my words:
not far from here we'll find the master,
by all accounts.

Tídwald lets out a faint beam from a dark-lantern. An owl hoots. A dark shape flits through the beam of light. Torhthelm starts back and overturns the lantern, which Tída had set on the ground.

What ails you now?

TOR. Lord save us! Listen!

TÍD. My lad, you're crazed.
Your fancies and your fears make foes of nothing. Help me to heave 'em! It's heavy labour to lug them alone: long ones and short ones, the thick and the thin. Think less, and talk less of ghosts. Forget your gleeman's stuff! Their ghosts are under ground, or else God has them; and wolves don't walk as in Woden's days, not here in Essex. If any there be, they'll be two-legged. There, turn him over!
An owl hoots again.
It's only an owl.

TOR. An ill boding.

Owls are omens. But I'm not afraid,
not of fancied fears. A fool call me,
but more men than I find the mirk gruesome
among the dead unshrouded. It's like the dim shadow,
of heathen hell, in the hopeless kingdom
where search is vain. We might seek for ever
and yet miss the master in this mirk, Tíða.

O lord beloved, where do you lie tonight,
your head so hoar upon a hard pillow,
and your limbs lying in long slumber?

Tidwald lets out again the light of the dark-lantern.

TÍD. Look here, my lad, where they lie thickest!
Here! Lend a hand! This head we know!
Wulfmær it is. I'll wager aught
not far did he fall from friend and master.

TOR. His sister-son! The songs tell us,
ever near shall be at need nephew to uncle.

TÍD. Nay, he's not here—or he's hewn out of ken.
It was the other I meant, th' Eastsaxon lad,
Wulfstan's youngster. It's a wicked business
to gather them ungrown. A gallant boy, too,
and the makings of a man.

TOR. Have mercy on us!
He was younger than I, by a year or more.

TÍD. Here's Aelfnoth, too, by his arm lying.

TOR. As he would have wished it. In work or play
they were fast fellows, and faithful to their
lord, as close to him as kin.

TÍD. Curse this lamplight
and my eyes' dimness! My oath I'll take
they fell in his defence, and not far away
now master lies. Move them gently!

TOR. Brave lads! But it's bad when bearded men
put shield at back and shun battle,
running like roe-deer, while the red heathen
beat down their boys. May the blast of Heaven

light on the dastards that to death left them
to England's shame! And here's Ælfwine:
barely bearded, and his battle's over.

TÍD. That's bad, Totta. He was a brave lordling,
and we need his like: a new weapon
of the old metal. As eager as fire,
and as staunch as steel. Stern-tongued at times,
and outspoken after Offa's sort.

TOR. Offa! He's silenced. Not all liked him;
many would have muzzled him, had master let hem.
"There are cravens at council that crow proudly
with the hearts of hens": so I hear he said
at the lord's meeting. As lays remind us:
"What at the mead man vows, when morning comes
let him with deeds answer, or his drink vomit
and a sot be shown." But the songs wither,
and the world worsens. I wish I'd been here,
not left with the luggage and lazy thralls,
cooks and sutlers! By the Cross, Tída,
I loved him no less than any lord with him;
and a poor freeman may prove in the end
more tough when tested than titled earls
who count back their kin to kings ere Woden.

TÍD. You can talk, Totta! Your time'll come,
and it'll look less easy than lays make it.
Bitter taste has iron, and the bite of swords
is cruel and cold, when you come to it.
Then God guard you, if your glees falter!
When your shield is shivered, between shame
and death is hard choosing. Help me with this
one! There, heave him over—the hound's
carcase, hulking heathen!

TOR. Hide it, Tída!
Put the lantern out! He's looking at me.
I can't abide his eyes, bleak and evil
as Grendel's in the moon.

TÍD. Ay, he's a grim fellow,
but he's dead and done-for. Danes don't trouble me
save with swords and axes. They can smile or glare,
once hell has them. Come, haul the next!

TOR. Look! Here's a limb! A long yard, and thick
as three men's thighs.

TÍD. I thought as much.
Now bow your head, and hold your babble
for a moment Totta! It's the master at last.
There is silence for a short while.
Well, here he is—or what Heaven's left us:
the longest legs in the land, I guess.

TOR. *(His voice rises to a chant.)*
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,
Beorhtnoth beloved.

TÍD. Brave words my lad!
The woven stars have yet worth in them
for woeful hearts. But here's work to do,
ere the funeral begins.

TOR. I've found it, Tída!
Here's his sword lying! I could swear to it
by the golden hilts.

TÍD. I'm glad to hear it,
How it was missed is a marvel. He is marred cruelly.
Few tokens else shall we find on him;
they've left us little of the Lord we knew.

TOR. Ah, woe and worse! The wolvish heathens
have hewn off his head, and the hulk left us
mangled with axes. What a murder it is,
this bloody fighting!

TÍD. Aye, that's the battle for you,
and no worse today than wars you sing of,
when Fróda fell, and Finn was slain.
The world wept then, as it weeps today:

you can hear the tears through the harp's
twanging. Come, bend your back. We must bear away
the cold leavings. Catch hold of the legs!
Now lift—gently! Now lift again!

They shuffle along slowly.

TOR. Dear still shall be this dead body,
though men have marred it.

Torhthelm's voice rises again to a chant.

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 naming 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 unfailing,
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.

TÍD. Good words enough, gleeman Totta!
You laboured long as you lay, I guess,
in the watches of the night, while the wise slumbered.
But I'd rather have rest, and my rueful thoughts.
These are Christian days, though the cross is heavy;
Beorhtnoth we bear not Béowulf here:
no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds;
and the gold will be given to the good abbot.
Let the monks mourn him and mass be chanted!
With learned Latin they'll lead him home,
if we can bring him back. The body's weighty!

TOR. Dead men drag earthward. Now down a spell!
My back's broken, and the breath has left me.

TÍD. If you spent less in speech, you would speed better.
But the cart's not far, so keep at it! Now start again,
and in step with me! A steady pace does it.
Torhthelm halts suddenly.

You stumbling dolt,
Look where you're going!

TOR. For the Lord's pity,
halt, Tída, here! Hark now, and look!

TÍD. Look where, my lad?

TOR. To the left yonder.
There's a shade creeping, a shadow darker
than the western sky, there walking crouched!
Two now together! Troll-shapes, I guess,
or hell-walkers. They've a halting gait,
groping groundwards with grisly arms.

TÍD. Nameless nightshades—naught else can I see,
till they walk nearer. You're witch-sighted
to tell fiends from men in this foul darkness.

TOR. Then listen, Tída! There are low voices,
moans and muttering, and mumbled laughter.
They are moving hither!

TÍD. Yes, I mark it now,
I can hear something.

TOR. Hide the lantern!

TÍD. Lay down the body and lie by it!
Now stone-silent! There are steps coming.
*They crouch on the ground. The sound of stealthy steps grows louder and
nearer. When they are close at hand Tidwald suddenly shouts out:*
Hullo there, my lads! 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.

*There is a noise of scuffling in the dark. Then there is a shriek. Torhthelm's voice
rings out shrill.*

TOR. You snuffling swine, I'll slit you for it!
Take your trove then! Ho! Tída there!
I've slain this one. He'll slink no more.
If swords he was seeking, he soon found one,
by the biting end.

TÍD. My bogey-slayer!
Bold heart would you borrow with
Beorhtnoth's sword?
Nay, wipe it clean! And keep your wits!
That blade was made for better uses.
You wanted no weapon: a wallop on the nose,
or a boot behind, and the battle's over
with the likes of these. Their life's wretched,
but why kill the creatures, or crow about it?
There are dead enough around. Were he a Dane, mind you,
I'd let you boast—and there's lots abroad
not far away, the filthy thieves:
I hate 'em, by my heart, heathen or sprinkled,
the Devil's offspring.

TOR. The Danes, you say!
Make haste! Let's go! I'd half forgotten.
There may be more at hand our murder plotting.
We'll have the pirate pack come pouring on us,
if they hear us brawling.

TÍD. My brave swordsman!
These weren't Northmen! Why should Northmen come?
They've had their fill of hewing and fighting,
and picked their plunder: the place is bare.
They're in Ipswich now with the ale running,
or lying off London in their long vessels,
while they drink to Thor and drown their sorrow
of hell's children. These are hungry folk
and masterless men, miserable skulkers.
They're corpse-strippers: a cursed game
and shame to think of. What are you shuddering at?

TOR. Come on now quick! Christ forgive me,
and these evil days, when unregretted
lie mouldering, and the manner of wolves
the folk follow in fear and hunger,
their dead unpitying to drag and plunder!
Look there yonder! There's a lean shadow,
a third of the thieves. Let's thrash the villain!

TÍD. Nay, let him alone! Or we'll lose the way.
As it is we've wandered, and I'm bewildered enough.
He won't try attacking two men by himself.
Lift your end there! Lift up, I say.

Put your foot forward.

TOR. Can you find it, Tída?
I haven't a notion now in these nightshadows
where we left the waggon. I wish we were back!
They shuffle along without speaking for a while.
Walk wary, man! There's water by us;
you'll blunder over the brink. Here's the Blackwater!
Another step that way, and in the stream
we'd be like fools floundering—and the flood's running.

TÍD. We've come to the causeway. The cart's near it,
so courage, my boy. If we can carry him on
few steps further, the first stage is, passed.
They move a few paces more.
By Edmund's head! though his own's missing,
our Lord's not light. Now lay him down!
Here's the waggon waiting. I wish we could drink
his funeral ale without further trouble
on the bank right here. The beer he gave
was good and plenty to gladden your heart,
both strong and brown. I'm in a stew of sweat.
Let's stay a moment.

TOR. *(After a pause.)* It's strange to me
how they came across this causeway here,
or forced a passage without fierce battle;
but there are few tokens to tell of fighting.
A hill of heathens one would hope to find,
but none lie near.

TÍD. No more's the pity.
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 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.

TOR. So the last is fallen of the line of earls,
from Saxon lords long-descended

who sailed the seas, as songs tell us,
from Angel in the East, with eager swords
upon war's anvil the Welsh smiting.
Realms here they won and royal kingdoms,
and in olden days this isle conquered.
And now from the North need comes again:
wild blows the wind of war to Britain!

TÍD. And in the neck we catch it, and are nipped as chill
as poor men were then. Let the poets babble,
but perish all pirates! When the poor are robbed
and lose the land they loved and toiled on,
they must die and dung it. No dirge for them,
and their wives and children work in serfdom.

TOR. But Æthelred'll prove less easy prey
than Wyrtegeom was; and I'll wager, too,
this Anlaf of Norway will never equal
Hengest or Horsa!

TÍD. We'll hope not, lad!
Come, lend your hand to the lifting again,
then your task is done. There, turn him round!
Hold the shanks now, while I heave the shoulders.
Now, up your end! Up! That's finished.
There cover him with the cloth.

TOR. It should be clean linen
not a dirty blanket.

TÍD. It must do for now.
The monks are waiting in Maldon for us,
and the abbot with them. We're hours behind.
Get up now and in. Your eyes can weep,
or your mouth can pray. I'll mind the horses.
Gee up, boys, then. (*He cracks a whip.*) Gee
up, and away.

TOR. God guide our road to a good ending!
There is a pause, in which a rumbling and a creaking of wheels is heard.
How these wheels do whine! They'll hear
the creak for miles away over mire and stone.
A longer pause in which no word is spoken.
Where first do we make for? Have we far to go?
The night is passing, and I'm near finished ...

Say, Tída, Tída! is your tongue stricken?

TÍD. I'm tired of talk. My tongue's resting.
"Where first" you say? A fool's question!
To Maldon and the monks, and then miles
onward to Ely and the abbey. It'll end sometime;
but the roads are bad in these ruinous days.
No rest for you yet! Were you reckoning on bed?
The best you'll get is the bottom of the cart
with his body for bolster.

TOR. You're a brute, Tída.

TÍD. It's only plain language. If a poet sang you:
"I bowed my head on his breast beloved,
and weary of weeping woeful slept I;
thus joined we journeyed, gentle master
and faithful servant, over fen and boulder
to his last resting and love's ending",
you'd not call it cruel. I have cares of my own
in my heart, Totta, and my head's weary.
I am sorry for you, and for myself also.
Sleep, lad, then! Sleep! The slain won't trouble
if your head be heavy, or the wheels grumble
He speaks to the horses.
Gee up, my boys! And on you go!
There's food ahead and fair stables,
for the monks are kind. Put the miles behind!

The creaking and rattling of the waggon, and the sound of hoofs, continue for some time, during which no words are spoken. After a while lights glimmer in the distance. Torlhelm speaks from the waggon, drowsily and half dreaming.

TOR. There are candles in the dark and cold voices.
I hear mass chanted for master's soul
in Ely isle. Thus ages pass,
and men after men. Mourning voices
of women weeping. So the world passes;
day follows day, and the dust gathers,
his tomb crumbles, as time gnaws it,
and his kith and kindred out of ken dwindle.
So men flicker and in the mirk go out.
The world withers and the wind rises;
the candles are quenched. Cold falls the night.
The lights disappear as he speaks. Torlhelm's voice becomes louder, but it is

still the voice of one speaking in a dream.
It's dark! It's dark, and doom coming!
Is no light left us? A light kindle,
and fan the flame! Lo! Fire now wakens,
hearth is burning, house is lighted,
men there gather. Out of the mists they come
through darkling doors whereat doom waiteth.
Hark! I hear them in the hall chanting:
stern words they sing with strong voices.
(He chants) Heart shall be bolder, harder be purpose,
more proud the spirit as our power lessens!
Mind shall not falter nor mood waver,
though doom shall come and dark conquer.

There is a great bump and jolt of the cart.

Hey! what a bump, Tída! My bones are shaken,
and my dream shattered. It's dark and cold.

TíD. Aye, a bump on the bone is bad for dreams,
and it's cold waking. But your words are queer,
Torhthelm my lad, with your talk of wind
and doom conquering and a dark ending.
It sounded fey and fell-hearted,
and heathenish, too: I don't hold with that.
It's night right enough; but there's no firelight:
dark is over all, and dead is master.
When morning comes, it'll be much like others:
more labour and loss till the land's ruined;
ever work and war till the world passes.

The cart rumbles and bumps on.

Hey! rattle and bump over rut and boulder!
The roads are rough and rest is short
for English men in Æthelred's day.

*The rumbling of the cart dies away. There is complete silence for a while. Slowly
the sound of voices chanting begins to be heard. Soon the words, though faint,
can be distinguished.*

Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam.
Introibo in domum tuam: adorabo ad templum
Sanctum tuum in timore tuo.

(A Voice in the dark): Sadly they sing, the monks of Ely isle!
Row men, row! Let us listen here a while!

The chanting becomes loud and clear. Monks bearing a bier amid tapers pass across the scene.

Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam.

Introibo in domum tuam: adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum in timore tuo.

Domine, deduc me in isutitia tua: propter inimicos meos dirige in conspectu tuo viam meam.

Gloria Patri et Filio et Spiritui Sancto: sicut erat in principio et nunc et semper et in saecula saeculorum.

Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam.

They pass, and the chanting fades into silence.

III OFERMOD

THIS piece, somewhat larger than the Old English fragment that inspired it, was composed primarily as verse, to be condemned or approved as such.¹ But to merit a place in *Essays and Studies* it must, I suppose, contain at least by implication criticism of the matter and manner of the Old English poem (or of its critics).

From that point of view it may be said to be an extended comment on lines 89, 90 of the original: *ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode*, "then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done". *The Battle of Maldon* has usually been regarded rather as an extended comment on, or illustration of the words of the old retainer Beorhtwold, 312, 313, cited above, and used in the present piece. They are the best-known lines of the poem, possibly of all Old English verse. Yet except in the excellence of their expression, they seem to me of less interest than the earlier lines; at any rate the full force of the poem is missed unless the two passages are considered together.

The words of Beorhtwold 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. The poem as a whole has been called "the only purely heroic poem extant in Old English". Yet the doctrine appears in this clarity, and (approximate) purity, precisely because it is put in the mouth of a subordinate, a man for whom the object of his will was decided by another, who had no responsibility downwards, only loyalty upwards. Personal pride was therefore in him at its lowest, and love and loyalty at their highest.

For this "northern heroic spirit" is never quite pure; it is of gold and an alloy. Unalloyed it would direct a man to endure even death unflinching, when necessary: that is when death may help the achievement of some object of will, or when life can only be

¹ It was indeed plainly intended as a recitation for two persons, two shapes in "dim shadow", with the help of a few gleams of light and appropriate noises and a chant at the end. It has, of course, never been performed.

purchased by denial of what one stands for. But since such conduct is held admirable, the alloy of personal good name was never wholly absent. Thus Leofsunu in *The Battle of Maldon* holds himself to his loyalty by the fear of reproach if he returns home alive. This motive may, of course, hardly go beyond "conscience": self-judgement in the light of the opinion of his peers, to which the "hero" himself wholly assents; he would act the same, if there were no witnesses.² Yet this element of pride, in the form of the desire for honour and glory, in life and after death, tends to grow, to become a chief motive, driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess—to chivalry. "Excess" certainly, even if it be approved by contemporary opinion, when it not only goes beyond need and duty, but interferes with it.

Thus Beowulf (according to the motives ascribed to him by the student of heroic-chivalric character who wrote the poem about him) does more than he need, eschewing weapons in order to make his struggle with Grendel a "sporting" fight: which will enhance his personal glory; though it will put him in unnecessary peril, and weaken his chances of ridding the Danes of an intolerable affliction. But Beowulf has no duty to the Danes, he is still a subordinate with no responsibilities downwards; and his glory is also the honour of his side, of the Geatas; above all, as he himself says, it will redound to the credit of the lord of his allegiance, Hygelac. Yet he does not rid himself of his chivalry, the excess persists, even when he is an old king upon whom all the hopes of a people rest. He will not deign to lead a force against the dragon, as wisdom might direct even a hero to do; for, as he explains in a long "vaunt", his many victories have relieved him of fear. He will only use a sword on this occasion, since wrestling singlehanded with a dragon is too hopeless even for the chivalric spirit. But he dismisses his twelve companions. He is saved from defeat, and the essential object, destruction of the dragon, only achieved by the loyalty of a subordinate. Beowulf's chivalry would otherwise have ended in his own useless death, with the dragon still at large. As it is, a subordinate is placed in greater peril than he need have been, and though he does not pay the penalty of his master's *mod* with his own life, the people lose their king disastrously.

In *Beowulf* we have only a legend of "excess" in a chief. The case of Beorhtnoth is still more pointed even as a story; but it is also drawn from real life by a contemporary author. Here we have Hygelac behaving like young Beowulf: making a "sporting fight" on level terms; but at other people's expense. In his situation he was not a subordinate, but the authority to be obeyed on the spot; and he was responsible for all the men under him, not to throw away their lives except with one object, the defence of the realm from an implacable foe. He says himself that it is his purpose to defend the realm of Æthelred, the people, and the land (52-3). It was heroic for him and his men to fight, to annihilation if necessary, in the attempt to destroy or hold off the invaders. It was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle with this sole real object as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty.

Why did Beorhtnoth do this? Owing to a defect of character, no doubt; but a character, we may surmise not only formed by nature, but moulded also by "aristocratic tradition", enshrined in tales and verse of poets, now lost save for echoes. Beorhtnoth was chivalrous rather than strictly heroic. Honour was in itself a motive, and he sought it at the risk of placing his *heorðwerod*, all the men most dear to him, in a truly heroic

² Cf. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, 2127-31.

situation, which they could redeem only by death. Magnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong. Too foolish to be heroic. And the folly Beorhtnoth at any rate could not wholly redeem by death.

This was recognized by the poet of *The Battle Maldon*, though the lines in which his opinion are expressed are little regarded, or played down. The translation of them given above is (I believe) accurate, in representing the force and implication of his words, though most will be more familiar with Ker's: "then the earl of his overboldness granted ground too much to the hateful people".³ They are lines in fact of *severe* criticism, though not incompatible with loyalty, and even love. Songs of praise at Beorhtnoth's funeral may well have been made of him, not unlike the lament of the twelve princes for Beowulf; but they too may have ended on the ominous note struck by the last word of the greater poem: *lofgeornost* "most desirous of glory".

So far as the fragment of his work goes, the poet of *Maldon* did not elaborate the point contained in lines 89-90; though if the poem had any rounded ending and final appraisal (as is likely, for it is certainly not a work of hot haste), it was probably resumed. Yet if he felt moved to criticize and express disapproval at all, then his study of the behavior of the *heorðwerod*, lacks the sharpness and tragic quality that he intended, if his criticism is not fully valued. By it the loyalty of the retinue is greatly enhanced. Their part was to endure and die, and not to question, though a recording poet may fairly comment that someone had blundered. In their situation heroism was superb. Their duty was unimpaired by the error of their master, and (more poignantly) neither in the hearts of those near to the old man was love lessened. It is the heroism of obedience and love not of pride or wilfulness that is the most heroic and the most moving; from Wiglaf under his kinsman's shield, to Beorhtwold at Maldon, down to Balaclava, even if it is enshrined in verse no better than *The Charge of the Light Brigade*.

Beorhtnoth was wrong, and he died for his folly. But it was a noble error, or the error of a noble. **It** was not for his *heorðwerod* to blame him; probably many would not have felt him blameworthy, being themselves noble and chivalrous. But poets, as such, are above chivalry, or even heroism; and if they give any depth to their treatment of such themes, then, even in spite of themselves, these "moods" and the objects to which they are directed will be questioned.

We have two poets that study at length the heroic and chivalrous, with both art and thought, in the older ages: one near the beginning in *Beowulf*; one near the end in *Sir Gawain*. And probably a third, more near the middle, in *Maldon*, if we had all his work. It is not surprising that any consideration of the work of one of these leads to the others. *Sir Gawain*, the latest, is the most fully conscious, and is in plain intention a criticism or valuation of a whole code of sentiment and conduct, in which heroic courage is only a part, with different loyalties to serve. Yet it is a poem with many inner likenesses to

³ *To fela* means in Old English idiom that no ground at all should have been conceded. And *ofermod* does not mean "overboldness", not even if we give full value to the *ofer*, remembering how strongly the taste and wisdom of the English (whatever their actions) rejected "excess". *Whita scal gepyldig ... ne næfre gielpes to georn, ær he geara cunne*. But *mod*, though it may contain or imply courage, does not mean "boldness" any more than Middle English *corage*. It means "spirit", or when unqualified "high spirit", of which the most usual manifestation is pride. But in *ofer-mod* it is qualified, with disapproval: *ofermod* is in fact always a word of condemnation. In verse the noun occurs only twice, once applied to Beorhtnoth, and once to Lucifer.

Beowulf, deeper than the use of the old "alliterative"⁴ metre, which is none the less significant. Sir Gawain, as the exemplar of chivalry, is of course shown to be deeply concerned for his own honour, and though the things considered honourable may have shifted or been enlarged, loyalty to word and to allegiance, and unflinching courage remain. These are tested in adventures no nearer to ordinary life than Grendel or the dragon; but Gawain's conduct is made more worthy, and more worth considering, again because he is a subordinate. He is involved in peril and the certain prospect of death simply by loyalty, and the desire to secure the safety and dignity of his lord, King Arthur. And upon him; depends in his quest the honour of his lord and of his *heorðwerod*, the Round Table. It is no accident that in this poem, as in *Maldon* and in *Beowulf*, we have criticism of the lord, of the owner of the allegiance. The words are striking, though less so than the small part they have played in criticism of the poem (as also in *Maldon*). Yet thus spoke the court of the great King Arthur, when Sir Gawain rode away:

*Before God 'tis a shame
that thou, lord, must be lost, who art in life so noble!
To meet his match among men. Marry, 'tis not easy!
To behave with more heed would have behoved one of sense,
and that dear lord duly a duke to have made,
illustrious leader of liegemen in this land as befits him;
and that better would have been than to be butchered to death,
beheaded by an elvish man for an arrogant vaunt.
Who ever heard tell of a king such courses taking,
as knights quibbling at court at their Christmas games!*

Beowulf is a rich poem; there are of course many other sides to the description of the manner of the hero's death; and the consideration (sketched above) of the changing values of chivalry in youth and in age and responsibility is only an ingredient. Yet it is plainly there; and though the author's main imagination was moving in wider ways, criticism of the lord and owner of the allegiance is touched on.

Thus the lord may indeed receive credit from the deeds of his knights, but he must not use their loyalty or imperil them simply for that purpose. It was not Hygelac that sent *Beowulf* to Denmark through any boast or rash vow. His words to *Beowulf* on his return are no doubt an alteration of the older story (which peeps rather through in the egging of the *snotere ceorlas*, 202-4); but they are the more significant for that. We hear, 1992-7, that Hygelac had tried to restrain *Beowulf* from a rash adventure. Very properly. But at the end the situation is reversed. We learn, 3076-83, that Wiglaf and the Geatas regarded any attack on the dragon as rash, and had tried to restrain the king from the perilous enterprise, with words very like those used by Hygelac long before. But the king wished for glory, or for a glorious death, and courted disaster. There could be no more pungent criticism in a few words of "chivalry" in one of responsibility than Wiglaf's exclamation: *oft sceall eorl monig anes willan wraec adreogan*, "by one man's will many must woe endure". These words the poet of *Maldon* might have inscribed at the head of his work.

⁴ It is probably the first work to apply the word "letters" to this metre, which has in fact never regarded them.