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 **The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth: Philology and the  
Literary Muse**

Thomas Honegger

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

***The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth:  
Philology and the Literary Muse***

*Thomas Honegger (bio)*

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*The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, first published in volume six of *Essays and Studies* in 1953, was—and still is—an oddity.<sup>1</sup> The dramatic dialogue<sup>2</sup> in alliterative long lines, which constitutes the centerpiece of the essay, is a work of (informed) literary fiction rather than a philological or scholarly study. Its inclusion in a scholarly journal was thus most likely due to the fact that Tolkien had added a prefatory note (headed "(I) Beorhtnoth's Death") on the historical and literary background of his poem, and, most importantly, an endnote (headed "(III) Ofermod"), discussing the Old English term *ofermod* ("pride")<sup>3</sup> and what the poet of the Old English *The Battle of Maldon* might have implied by its use in his characterization of Beorhtnoth.

Tolkien's acquaintance with *The Battle of Maldon*, to which *Homecoming* is a "sequel," must go back to his days as an undergraduate, if not to his time at grammar school. However, the first clear indication for his in-depth study of this poem is provided by the *Oxford University Gazette* (LIX 1928-29, 55) which lists Tolkien as lecturing on "The Battle of Maldon, Brunanburh, and verse from the Chronicle" during Michaelmas Term 1928 (beginning October 16).<sup>4</sup> He was also involved in E. V. Gordon's edition of the poem, published in 1937. Gordon specifically mentions Tolkien in his "Preface" as one of the two readers "who read the proofs of my edition and made many corrections and contributions. [. . .] and Professor Tolkien, with characteristic generosity, gave me the solution to many of the textual and philological problems discussed in the following pages" (Gordon vi).<sup>5</sup>

The earliest drafts connected with what would eventually become *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* are dated to circa 1930-33 (Hammond 303), and part of an early precursor has been published in *The Treason of Isengard* (106-107). Numerous early drafts, together with close-to-finished versions and the final typescript that was sent to the printers, are kept among the Tolkien Papers at the Bodleian Library (MS Tolkien 5; all references and quotations are to the Bodleian folio-pagination). However, the notes and drafts for Part III of *Homecoming* (i.e. the "endnote" on OE *ofermod*) are not among these materials. It is very

unlikely, in view of what we know about Tolkien's way of working, that the text was typed without **[End Page 189]** prior drafts, and it is to be hoped that they may eventually surface. Yet in spite of this arguable "missing link," we can re-construct some of Tolkien's chain of thought from the extant materials.

The notes and drafts in the Bodleian have been filed in chronological order, although the individual pieces cannot be dated definitively. I will refer to the individual drafts by letters of the alphabet, i.e. version 'A' being the oldest extant draft,<sup>6</sup> 'B' the second oldest, etc., and 'I' the most recent complete draft.<sup>7</sup> 'K' refers to the final typescript sent to the printers. To this I have added '■' referring to a brief dramatic dialogue featuring Pudda and Tibba that is not included among the manuscripts in the Bodleian, but which has been published in *Treason* (106-107). Christopher Tolkien dates it to the late 1920s or early 1930s (*Treason* 106).

I cannot go into a detailed description and discussion of all the ten (or, if one counts the fragment J, eleven) drafts and typescripts (A to K) in the Bodleian since the focus of this paper is on Tolkien's use of "pride" only. Suffice it to say that the drafts present a continuous elaboration of the text, without sudden breaks or gaps,<sup>8</sup> from a short dialogic core piece, to which later versions add scene settings, to the full dramatic text with historical and interpretative commentaries.

## How came they thus to win over the Bridge?

The earliest drafts are relatively short (four pages) and consist of the dialogue between the two Anglo-Saxons who have come to search for their lord's body among the dead on the battlefield. The two speakers are, in the versions...

## Notes and Documents

### *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth:* Philology and the Literary Muse

THOMAS HONEGGER

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