J. R. R. Tolkien’s New Legends of the North

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This paper will address two of J. R. R. Tolkien’s works that explore important concerns of medievalism: the tension between medieval and post-medieval material and the separation of scholarly and creative reinterpretations. The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son and The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún borrow stylistically from their Old Norse and Old English sources yet feature content that suggests the influence of the author’s concerns. The medievalism of form over content in the two texts reveals their purpose as creative reinterpretations used as exercises for comprehension, rather than medievalist diversions only for enjoyment. However, the pressure to justify medievalist creativity with sufficient analysis is evident in the substantial critical material provided alongside Sigurd and Gudrún and Homecoming. Yet rather than the antagonism of creative/scholarly dichotomy, I argue that Tolkien engages with the medieval concept of textuality as a continuously constructive process that favours creative reworking as a serious scholarly technique.

The fantasy works of J. R. R. Tolkien have received much attention for their treatment of medieval material and sources. Tolkien’s debt to Norse, Old English and medieval literature and cultures is visible throughout his entire corpus, most notably in his works of medievalist fantasy fiction. This paper will discuss two of Tolkien’s lesser-known medievalist works, which have received very little critical attention, despite the fact that they so perfectly exemplify Tolkien’s ideal of academic medievalist reinterpretation, directly engaging with and reshaping specific pre-modern literary works. The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún is Tolkien’s attempt to unify and reconstruct the stories of Sigurd and the Völsungs. The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son recontextualises the fragmentary Battle of Maldon, providing a sequel to the battle and an extended reflection in both scholarly and creative modes about Beorhtnoth’s ofermod.

1 The idea for this paper was formed while attending a symposium on Medievalism and Popular Culture held at the University of Western Australia in 2011. I would like to acknowledge and thank all those whose papers have indirectly informed this article.
Tolkien once remarked in a lecture at Oxford University that his ‘typical response upon reading a medieval work’ was a desire to ‘write a modern work in the same tradition’. This delight in replying to and actively engaging with pre-modern texts underlies all of Tolkien’s creative work. In *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* and *Homecoming*, Tolkien gives precedence to the reconstructed voice of the past, although concerns of his own time are also present. Tolkien aligns himself with a textual tradition more akin to the medieval culture of rewriting, textual appropriation, textual plurality and oral transmission where a work is not fixed but constantly in flux and constantly constructive. There is no definitive version of a text, but instead a range of possibilities – a cloud of texts – encompassing oral or recited versions, variations created by scribal alterations, differing regional versions or versions that were rewritten or adopted in a later time. Tolkien’s medievalist works enter into a dialogue with the literature of the past, appropriating the stylistic traits of his sources and weaving this together with modern views, expressions and original content. By appropriating Old Norse and Old English texts, Tolkien positions himself as the successor of a long (but not unbroken) line of authors, poets, scribes, performers and compilers stretching back to the roots of these stories and the traditions that they belong to.

Tolkien’s participation in this tradition of appropriation was partially from a desire to eliminate its hallmarks – those features which he felt detracted from the ‘true virtue’ of the texts. He was the self-appointed mediator and editor of these texts and his treatment of the sources reveals much about his own view of texts of the past as a modern author and academic. Tolkien pondered in an essay what the essential virtue of medieval texts was ‘which compensates for the inevitable flaws and imperfect adjustments that must appear, when plots, motives, symbols, are rehandled and pressed into the service of the changed minds of a later time’ – referring to the fundamental change that occurs when oral mythologies are recorded and reappropriated by later written cultures. Tolkien seeks to remove these ‘inevitable flaws’ – such as the multiple oaths of Sigurd and Brynhild in *Völsung saga*. However, since Tolkien is of course rehandling the texts with the ‘changed mind of a [much] later time’ he adds flaws of his own making to the texts. Instead of preserving their original instability and plurality, the texts are reshaped to adhere to a modern concept of authenticity, retaining the poetic features of the texts but stabilising and unifying the content.

In his efforts to reshape the texts, Tolkien imposes unity of plot and causality, and also introduces modern perspectives and concerns. Although the demands of stability and unity of narrative and plot are specifically modern within these two works, what is Tolkien doing if not continuing the efforts of the tenth-century Saxon poet or thirteenth-century Icelandic compiler? And, indeed, is not the same true of his son Christopher, who in turn unified and edited his father’s work for posthumous publication?

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Although this textual editing occurs after a significant period of time, Tolkien seems to see himself as a true inheritor of the literary tradition – revelling in the richness of the originals but at the same time bringing to his reworkings his own culturally specific influences. By faithfully imitating medieval literary styles, despite the intrusion of modern content, Tolkien allows the medieval and the modern to coexist constructively, in a mutual dialogue where the present can learn from and relate to the past and the past can inform and comfort the present.

The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún and The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son are primarily philological examinations into the workings of Old Norse and Old English literature that seek to look academically at the source texts from the inside, that is, using a creative medium. The two texts attest to Tolkien’s dedication and reverence for pre-modern texts throughout his life. The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún was written sometime in the 1930s, while Tolkien was working at Oxford University as professor of Anglo-Saxon. In the period from 1926-1939, Tolkien was also lecturing on Old Norse language and literature and The Legend of Sigurd and Gurdn was perhaps written in lieu of any scholarly publications on the subject. Following Christopher Tolkien’s editing and glossing, it was eventually published in 2009, no doubt taking advantage of the surge in Tolkien’s popularity following the film adaptations of The Lord of the Rings. Homecoming is a much later work: it was possibly written sometime before 1945 but published in 1953, shortly before Tolkien’s retirement from Oxford in 1959.

Creative reinterpretation of the texts – as opposed to more serious scholarly examination – was an approach that Tolkien advocated in his lecture ‘Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics’: ‘The significance of a myth is not easily to be pinned on paper by analytical reasoning. It is at its best when it is presented by a poet who feels rather than makes explicit what his theme portends’. For Tolkien, his identity as a poet (as well as an academic) allows him to forge a genuine connection with the poets of the past. Analysis through creation of poetic content is, in this view, more valuable and – most importantly – more ‘authentic’ than unartful critique.

The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún and Homecoming also further the Old Norse and Old English cause against the predominant Classical focus of Tolkien’s contemporary scholarship and culture. In a 1941 letter Tolkien recalled: ‘I have spent most of my life...studying Germanic matters (in the general sense that includes England and

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Scandinavia)...I was much attracted by it as an undergraduate...in reaction against the “Classics”. 9

Where the Classics were seen as refined and civilised, Old English and Old Norse were barbaric and irreconcilably flawed. Take, for example, F. W. Bourdillon’s particularly scathing assessment of early literary performance (here regarding a late-twelfth/early-thirteenth century romance, but equally applicable to Tolkien’s sources):

In earlier stages of mental growth than our own it is plain that such a monotonous repetition of the same set of sounds has an emotional influence of a pleasurable kind, producing perhaps on the auditory nerves some hypnotic effect similar to that produced on the nerve-centres of vision by continual gazing at a special bright object. 10

Tolkien’s medievalist works attempt to iron out some of the perceived flaws of Old English and Old Norse literature and prove that they are more than ‘monotonous repetition’ – by allowing modern influences to permeate and by editing out flaws, inconsistencies and gaps.

However, academia was – and still is – nervous about deeming medievalist texts worthy of scholarly attention. The need to justify medievalist content – as legitimate academic inquiry (and, all too often, to explain Norse and Germanic literary texts to an audience unfamiliar with them) generates texts like the The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún and Homecoming, where paratextual material (such as editorial notes or introductions) becomes a necessary part of the text itself. Homecoming is preceded by Beorhtnoth’s Death, which contextualises the piece, and followed – somewhat grudgingly – by Tolkien’s short essay on ofermod. Tolkien writes that ‘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).’ 12 However, his introductory and concluding essays merely restate academically what the creative part of Homecoming explores.

In The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún Tolkien’s lays are surrounded by Christopher Tolkien’s meticulous editorial commentary, catering for a readership brought to the complexities of Norse mythology by a fondness for hobbits. In Tolkien’s eyes, his creative material is just as legitimate a means of analysis as his scholarly articles. (Indeed, much of Tolkien’s academic work reads like a creative piece, notably the analogy of the tower from ‘Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics’. 13) The careful balance of the creative and the academic in the two works when published serves to continue the successful Tolkien brand by cultivating the image of Tolkien the Oxford

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11 Ibid.
don and to ensure that in Umberto Eco’s famous taxonomy of medievalism that Tolkien stays firmly on the side of ‘responsible philological examination’.14

*The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* retells the story of the house of Völsung, chiefly focused on the deeds of Sigurd. Sigurd, son of Sigmund is fostered by Regin, a skilled smith. Regin urges Sigurd to kill the dragon Fáfnir, which Sigurd accomplishes armed with his father’s reforged sword Gram and assisted by his horse Grani. Sigurd claims the dragon’s cursed treasure and is doomed to woe. He meets Brynhildr and they are betrothed. While seeking his fortune, Sigurd is enchanted and forgets his oaths. He marries Gudrún, and her brother Gunnar eventually marries Brynhild. Sigurd remembers his oaths too late and is eventually murdered by Gunnar’s bastard brother Gotthorm. Brynhild burns next to Sigurd and Gudrún walks mad with grief.

Tolkien described the work that was later published as *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* in a 1967 letter to W. H. Auden as ‘a thing I did many years ago when trying to learn the art of writing alliterative poetry: an attempt to unify the lays about the Völsungs from the Elder Edda, written in the old eight-line *fornyrðislag* stanza.’15

To fully appreciate the difficulty of this task, let us look more closely at this stanza structure. *Fornyrðislag*, meaning ‘metre of ancient words’, is the most common of the two metres used in eddic poetry. It tended to be used for narrative poetry (such as *Hymiskviða, Völsúpa* and *Þrymskviða* in the *Elder Edda*16), whereas *ljóðaháttr* (‘metre of chants’) was used for dialogue. Tolkien does make use of *ljóðaháttr* stanzas when Sigurd hears the speech of the birds while he is roasting the heart of Fafnir.17 In *‘Fáfnismál’* from the *Elder Edda*, these ‘bird verses’ are a mixture of *ljóðaháttr* and *fornyrðislag* stanzas, while the rest of the poem uses *ljóðaháttr*.18 Tolkien suggests that the *fornyrðislag* stanzas in the *Edda* were drawn from another work.19 It is a mark of his intention to order and unify that Tolkien uses the *fornyrðislag* stanza-form exclusively throughout this section of *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*: a significant diversion from his source that does somewhat diminish the diversity of its textual heritage.

As with much early alliterative verse, the most important poetic unit is the half-line. Each stanza is four lines – or eight half-lines in Tolkien’s format – and the two corresponding half-lines are separated by a caesura (indicated below by the vertical lines). In the *fornyrðislag* metre, each half-line has two stresses. The first stress of the second half-line must alliterate with one or both stresses in the first half-line and the

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17 Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, pp. 113-117.
18 *Ljóðháttr* stanzas are comprised of two groups of three lines. The first two lines of each group alliterate in much the same way as *fornyrðislag* but the third line had three stresses and two or three alliterating syllables. Russell Poole, ‘Metre and Metrics’, in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, Rory McTusk (ed.) Oxford, Blackwell, 2005, pp. 269 & 276.
19 Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*, p. 212.
second stress of the second half-line must not alliterate.\textsuperscript{20} Hence, in the fifth line below, the first stress of the second half-line (‘-gan’) alliterates with the two stresses in the first half-line (‘Great’ and ‘Gods’). The second stress in the second half-line (‘toil’) does not alliterate with the other stresses in its line. All vowels alliterate with each other, but consonants must match, at least phonetically (as in ‘wrought’ and ‘roofed’). In the example below, the stresses are underlined and the alliterative syllables are in bold.

Of \underline{old} was an \underline{age} | when was \underline{emptiness},
there was \underline{sand} nor \underline{sea} | nor \underline{surging waves};
\underline{unwrought} was \underline{Earth}, | \underline{unroofed} was \underline{Heaven} –
an \underline{abyss yawning}, | and no \underline{blade} of \underline{grass}.

The \underline{Great Gods} then | \underline{began} their \underline{toil},
the \underline{wondrous world} | they \underline{well builded}.
From the \underline{South} the \underline{Sun} | from \underline{seas rising}
\underline{gleamed} down on \underline{grass} | \underline{green} at \underline{morning}\textsuperscript{21}

As you can see in lines like ‘unwrought was Earth, | unroofed was Heaven’ or ‘an abyss yawning, | and no blade of grass’, modern English often struggles to fit the metrical and alliterative patterns that were designed for Old Norse. Tolkien is aware of this imperfection, and this is perhaps why The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún did not gain wider circulation in his life-time. Tolkien also took pains to recreate the lyric immediacy of Old Norse verse, as he states:

Old Norse aims at seizing a situation, striking a blow that will be remembered, illuminating a moment with a flash of lightning – and tends to concision, weighty packing of the language in sense and form, and gradually to greater regularity of form of verse’.\textsuperscript{22}

In its attempt at poetic authenticity, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún significantly expands on its literary precursor – William Morris’ modern verse retelling of the story of Sigurd.\textsuperscript{23} Whereas Morris translated Völsung saga into the prose of his own time laden with archaisms, Tolkien appropriates elements of the literary style of eddaic poetry and saga texts to retell the stories in their own words.

\textsuperscript{20} Poole, ‘Metre and Metrics’, pp. 266 & 275.
\textsuperscript{21} Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 59. Annotations and emphases are my own. In Tolkien’s text, each half-line has its own line. I have set the half-lines side-by-side so that the alliteration is clearer. I should also note that my identification of the alliterating syllables in the fourth line is open to interpretation. The line itself is imperfect, so the alliteration could be ‘an \underline{abyss yawning}, | and no \underline{blade} of \underline{grass}’; ‘an \underline{abyss yawning}, | and no \underline{blade} of \underline{grass}’ or even ‘an \underline{abyss yawning}, | and no \underline{blade} of \underline{grass}’.
\textsuperscript{22} Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 48.
The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún pays homage not only to the legends themselves, but to the literary and linguistic culture that immortalised them. The desire to repair the gap in the Elder Edda caused by the loss of pages in its manuscript, the Codex Regius drives the reconstruction. Although Tolkien specifically sets out to rework the Elder Edda’s lays of Sigurd, he draws more extensively on Völsung saga. However, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún often departs from its source materials as Tolkien normalises and unifies the story, filling in enigmatic gaps through references to other versions of the story (such as the thirteenth-century German Das Nibelungenlied or the Younger Edda) or through the introduction of original ideas. Völsung saga has this to say of Sigurd: of all the famous kings and men ‘it is Sigurd who must come first in strength and ability, in eagerness and courage, of which he had far more than any other man in Europe.’

However, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún vastly expands the role of Sigurd. He is now the prophesised hero ‘who death hath tasted/and dies no more/the serpent-slayer/seed of Ódin’.

It is Sigurd’s presence at Ragnarok and his slaying of the Midgard Serpent, Surt and Fenrir that will allow the world to be made new. Sigurd is simultaneously pagan hero and Christ-like figure, who is able to renew the world because he has lived and died in the mortal realm.

Tom Shippey notes the increased role of Tolkien’s Ódin as the mastermind of the entire story. Ódin needs Sigurd (the chosen hero) in preparation for Ragnarok and thus manipulates the tale to first ensure that Sigurd is qualified for the task and then to hasten Sigurd’s death. It is Ódin who brings about the death of Sigmund (Sigurd’s father) in battle and shatters his sword (‘His spear he raised:/sprang asunder/the sword of Grímnir,/singing splintered’), Ódin who gave the horse Grani to Sigurd (‘In the stud of Sleipnir,/steed of Ódin,/was sired this horse’), Ódin who deceives Sigurd and directs him to marry Gudrún (‘a bride calls thee/over billowing seas’ and Ódin who sets up the wall of fire around Brynhild’s hall so that only Sigurd can enter. In each instance Ódin is described formulaically (usually some variation on ‘mantled darkly,/hoary-bearded,/huge and ancient’), each repetition amplifying the characteristic forcefulness of Old Norse verse. These occurrences of Ódin’s guidance (except for the latter) are present in the Norse myth but Tolkien amplifies them and uses Ódin’s manipulation as a metanarrative for the legend – just as the fight between Gandalf and Sauron is the true metanarrative of The Lord of the Rings.

Tolkien’s alterations conveniently pander to the realist desire for unity of plot – for a common thread of plot and causality to link the episodic structure of the saga and eddur and the disparate sources of the tale. For all its carefully constructed verse forms,

25 Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 63.
26 Shippey, p. 306.
27 Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 95.
30 Ibid, p. 76.
condensed Old Norse-like mode and use of Norse poetic features (alliteration, abbreviation, kennings, formulas) these stylistic factors create a somewhat esoteric work that must be read with either detailed prior knowledge of the Sigurd legends or with copious flipping in between the text and Christopher Tolkien’s editorial notes.

By adopting the formulaic repetition of the Old Norse poetic style, Tolkien pays homage to his Norse sources but also draws attention to key aspects of his narrative and intensifies the action.

For example, as Sigurd rides to slay first Fáfnir and then Regin, this formula is repeated:

‘Ride now! ride now! 
rocks and mountains, 
horse and hero, 
hope of Ódin!’

The short alliterative lines build momentum, mirroring the intensity of Sigurd’s pursuit of his doom. Furthermore, the repetition of this formula reminds the reader of the similarities of the deaths of Fáfnir and Regin, who are, after all, brothers. Such passages best demonstrate the concentrated power and energy of Old Norse verse. Formulaic expressions engage the reader by drawing them into the reception and understanding of the text; formulas may be repeated or varied to emphasise a particular point or to draw attention to a certain element of the narrative. In recognising formulas, the listener or reader-aloud has the benefit of distinguishing familiar patterns of speech. The reader, on the other hand, may only notice formulaic repetition in their most extreme instances, after re-reading or may have to be informed by Christopher Tolkien’s editorial commentary. This quality of ‘audibility’ (for want of a better term) is a fortunate result of the Old Norse poetic style, which Tolkien emphasises, once again giving precedence to the form and original medium of his sources.

The Norse verse form is, by its nature, condensed and often asyndetic. Tom Shippey details the poetic techniques of compression used by Tolkien. For example, ‘causal parataxis’, which describes ‘short main clauses with connecting conjunctions left to be inferred’ as in this passage:

‘With stone struck him, 
stripped him naked, 
Loki lighthanded, 
loosing evil. 
The fell they flayed 
fared then onwards; 
in Hreidmar’s halls

_Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrun_, pp. 107 & 115. The second instance of this formula has ‘road and woodland’ for ‘rocks and mountains’.

Shippey, p. 316.
housing sought they."

The compressed and allusive Old Norse style extends not just to poetic expression, but also to the condensed plot, which contributes to Tolkien’s unifying aim. In Völsung saga, Sigurd and Brynhild are betrothed and swear oaths to each other twice. On both occasions, Sigurd more or less abandons Brynhild without explanation. However, in The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún Tolkien condenses this to one meeting in which vows are exchanged and then rationalises Sigurd’s departure by having Brynhild send him away until he has won honour and a kingdom. Even Tolkien’s Brynhild is an amalgamation of characters from conflicting sources. In ‘Sigrdrífinul’ from the Elder Edda, the Valkyrie Sigurd encounters is not Brynhild, but Sigrdrífa, yet in Snorri Sturluson’s Younger Edda and also Völsung saga, the Valkyrie is named Brynhild. Tolkien unites what may have been two separate characters into his Brynhild, noting of ‘Sigrdrífinul’ that ‘this poem, more than almost any other in the Edda is a composite thing of more or less accidental growth, and not as one poet left it."

Despite its faults (and the difficulty of writing alliterative verse in modern English) The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún is ultimately successful in bringing a Norse story and poetic style to a wider audience by eliminating confronting elements of medieval textuality and thus normalising and rationalising the Sigurd legends. Any translation or adaptation will lose the vibrancy and exact meaning of its source, yet Tolkien manages to preserve the poetic effect of his Old Norse sources. Although the inconsistencies, which make historical sources so exciting, are removed, Tolkien’s reworking nonetheless retains the spirit of the original in the adopted form and style, and showcases the passion and abilities of its author and editor.

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son is Tolkien’s dramatic verse sequel to The Battle of Maldon. This Old English poem recounts the deeds of a battle near Maldon in Essex in 991. Beorhtnoth is the leader of an English army who are defending the mainland from a Danish invasion. The Norsemen have landed on an island and seek permission to cross the causeway to the mainland so that they might meet the Saxon forces on even ground. Beorhtnoth agrees and his army is slaughtered. The poem is noted for its depiction of the heroic ethos of the remains of an army who follow their leader unquestionable to death and glory.

Tolkien’s short play – written in alliterative verse – describes the aftermath of the battle through voices not normally privileged in Old English poetry: those of the servants of great men. In contrast to the compression and dense allusion that characterises Old Norse verse, Tolkien believed that ‘in Old English breadth, fullness, reflection…were aimed at.’ As with The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, Tolkien adapts the

34 Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 67.
36 Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 220.
37 Tolkien, The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún, p. 7.
verse-form of his sources, although here he takes more liberties with stress and alliterative syllables. For example:

As he would have wished it. | In work or play/they were fast fellows | and faithful to their lord | and ‘Bold’ heart would you borrow | with Beorhtnoth’s sword?/Nay, wipe it clean! | And keep your wits!

Where the first example keeps to the pattern of alliteration, the second fails to fully alliterate and the stresses are less distinct. It seems that loftier statements that fit the heroic mode (such as ‘Bold heart would you borrow | with Beorhtnoth’s sword?’) also fit the Old English metrical patterns more smoothly, whilst phrases that slip into a more modern tone struggle to uphold the verse structure (‘Nay, wipe it clean! | And keep your wits!’).

Tolkien described his work as an ‘extended comment’ in both literary and critical forms on Beorhtnoth’s ofermod (which he interprets to mean ‘overmastering pride’). In his reluctant analysis, Tolkien puts forward a significant new approach to the term ofermod (a term from lines 89-90 of The Battle of Maldon: ‘Da se eorl organ 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']) Beorhtnoth yields the ground to the Norse invaders because of an excess of heroic boldness, a direct result of the Germanic hero tradition which romanticised death in battle. In Homecoming, Tolkien is attempting to explore how the pagan heroic culture was understood and represented by the Christian writers of The Battle of Maldon and the Liber Eliensis. Tolkien’s argument in ‘Ofermod’ is that the Saxon poet fully understood the extreme condemnation that the term ‘ofermód’ entailed. Unlike other critics, for example W.P. Ker, who glossed the term as ‘overboldness’, Tolkien’s definition of ‘overmastering pride’ comes closer to acknowledging its inherent criticism. Tolkien notes also that the term is only found twice in Old English verse: once to refer to Beorhtnoth and once in relation to Lucifer. However, the use of this term confers praise as well as blame for Beorhtnoth’s hunger for glory (he is ‘lofgeornost’ – ‘most desirous of glory’, a term also used of Beowulf). The Battle of Maldon and, in turn, Homecoming celebrate the loyalty of Beorhtnoth’s heorðwerod (household retainers) who for the most part continue to fight valiantly after the Earl falls.

41 Ibid, p. 19.
44 Ibid, p. 22.
Tolkien’s analysis in *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son* thus parallels what he sees as the function of *The Battle of Maldon* itself – to provide an ‘extended comment’ on Beorhtnoth’s retainer Beorhtwold’s famous statement of the heroic code:

‘Hige sceal þe heardra, heorte þe cenre,
Mod sceal þe mare þe ure maegan lytlað’
[Will shall be the sterner, heart the bolder,
Spirit the greater as our strength lessens].

Although the Earl has been slain and the English face certain death, the loyalty and steadfastness of those who remain to fall gloriously in battle is worthy of commemoration.

Beorhtnoth is the epitome of the heroic culture, proclaimed as a glorious leader by both the military and the ecclesiastical spheres. The twelfth-century *Liber Eliensis*, which provides a somewhat fanciful description of the events surrounding the Battle of Maldon, describes him:

He was fluent in speech, robust in strength, of great stature, assiduous in military service and war against the enemies of the kingdom, and full of courage beyond the normal measure, without respect or fear of death. Moreover, he honoured the holy church and the servants of God everywhere, and he conferred the whole of his own patrimony to their use: also, he always placed himself as a bulwark for religious communities against those who tried to disturb holy places.

Tolkien rationalises the creative part of *Homecoming* by connecting it to the *Liber Eliensis*, which records that the Abbot of Ely retrieved Beorhtnoth’s body from the battlefield. Tolkien’s work follows the two servants of Beorhtnoth who are sent to the battlefield by the abbot to recover the hero’s body. The two characters encapsulate the division at the heart of what Tolkien examines in *Homecoming*. Torhthelm, the young son of a minstrel, represents the heroic tradition and Tídwald, an old farmer and jaded fighter, the voice of reality and pragmatism. The mood is contemplative, using the dialogue of the two servants to contrast the high poetic mode of *The Battle of Maldon* and the heroism of

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48 Ibid, p. 182.
Beorhtnoth. Torhthelm chants staves, demonstrating the oral consciousness of the heroic culture. He commemorates Beorhtnoth:

From the world
has passed a prince peerless in peace and war,
just in judgement, generous-handed
as the golden lords of long ago.\textsuperscript{49}

However, the heroic mode is repeatedly silenced: Tídwald hushes Torhthelm’s chant: ‘Brave words, my lad!.../But there’s work to do,/Ere the funeral begins.’\textsuperscript{50} Similarly, Tolkien’s essay on ofermod suggests that \textit{The Battle of Maldon}, despite its heroic tone, condemns Beorhtnoth’s actions. Beorhtnoth’s deeds result from the desire for glory in battle – to ‘give minstrels matter for mighty songs’\textsuperscript{51} – but his actions unjustly endanger the lives of his followers.

The treatment of war in \textit{Homecoming} immediately suggests the influence of Tolkien’s own experiences of war. The desolation of the battlefield is emphasised over the glorious deeds done there. ‘I find the mirk gruesome/among the dead unshrouded. It’s like the dim shadow/of heathen hell’ and ‘What murder it is,/this bloody fighting!’\textsuperscript{52} The colloquial speech of the servants allows the reader (or listener) to transfer the critique of ofermod and the desire for glory to a critique of modern warfare.

Torhthelm’s cowardice despite his romanticised view of battle points to the incomprehensible futility of the heroic code when viewed at a later time in light of the horrors of modern warfare. The devastation is compounded by the needless death of a looter, slain by Torhthelm with his master’s golden-hilted sword in a cruel parody of the heroic deeds of Beorhtnoth.

At the conclusion of \textit{Homecoming} a third voice rises – the lamenting chant of the monks – drowning out the voices of the heroic tradition and Tídwald’s realism. There will be no barrow for Beorhtnoth like the heroes of old. Instead, ‘let the monks mourn him and mass be chanted!/With learned Latin they’ll lead him home.’\textsuperscript{53} Torhthelm laments – ‘the songs wither/and the world worsens’.\textsuperscript{54} The lament is not just for Beorhtnoth but for the heroic age and perhaps for the loss of innocence of Torhthelm (and, it is tempting to think, of Tolkien himself), who can no longer romanticise death in war. In place of the ‘songs’ of the heroic tradition, the song of the church – here the Latin ‘Dirige’ (a funeral lament) – concludes \textit{Homecoming} and also provides a retrospective note of finality for \textit{The Battle of Maldon} itself. Beorhtnoth in the afterlife belongs to the church rather than the funeral pyre. Instead of his glorious deeds being immortalised in

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Tolkien, ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son’, p. 6.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid, p. 10.
\item Ibid, pp. 4 & 6.
\item Tolkien, ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son’, p. 7.
\item Ibid, p. 5.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}

By connecting the medieval and the modern through the literary heritage of *Homecoming* and *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien sets up a dialogue between the past and the present, attempting to explain the heroic ideals of the past in light of the experiences and scholarship of the modern.

The medieval and the modern have always had an uneasy relationship and are often set in opposition to each other. However, Tolkien in *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* and *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son* seeks to bridge this gap between the past and his present, connecting the two through literary heritage and through shared experiences. To continue the analogy from ‘On Fairy Stories’, Tolkien is returning to the Old Norse and Old English ‘Cauldron of Story’ and dipping the ladle in once more.\(^55\) Yet for all the shared literary experience, the present is often still not sure about how to relate to the past.

Bookstores that marketed *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* – the ‘new Tolkien book’ – seemed unsure of how to treat the work. It awkwardly straddles fantasy and history, serious and fantastical, creative and scholarly. Equally, customers were unsure what to make of the work and its poetic style. One particularly irritated reviewer on *amazon.co.uk* commented ‘It’s basically endless poetry related to Norse material, which in itself would probably have been an interesting tale, if it had been in standard novel form’.\(^56\) I think this comment ultimately attests to the success of the work, that it so effectively embraces the style of its Norse sources: poetic, compressed, episodic and decidedly pre-novel. As for ‘The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son’, its area of publication meant that it was initially only available for a limited audience. However, it was broadcast as a radio play in December 1954\(^57\) and can now be found in collections of Tolkien’s work.

Although Tolkien does attempt to bring the texts to his own context (so that he may better access and appreciate the past and the texts that inspired him), there is no reciprocal collaboration of the past and present in the experiences of non-academic readers. Paratextual commentary attempts to provide a substitute for background knowledge but cannot fully replace the source texts.

The modern readership demands that medieval material be justified and stabilised – by enforcing unity of form and plot and surrounding the medievalist texts with scholarly commentary. Tolkien’s attempt to create a reimagined authentic experience of the texts by maintaining their original poetic styles is indicative of their

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\(^{57}\)*Phelpstead, p. 284.
initial purpose as philological exercises for comprehension and as a creative medium through which to conduct academic inquiry. With both texts Tolkien continues the long textual tradition of their pre-modern sources. In *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* Tolkien parallels the textual editing and collating of legends by the thirteenth-century Icelandic compilers of the sagas and eddur. Similarly, he links *Homecoming* to the literary lineage of *The Battle of Maldon* and the earlier heroic legends that inspired it. The combination of medieval and modern attitudes to textuality creates two works where the creative mode becomes legitimate academic inquiry and in which a modern reader can be brought closer to pre-modern literary culture. Although the worlds that produced *The Battle of Maldon* and the story of Sigurd and the Volsungs are lost to the modern age, Tolkien’s medievalist works demonstrate his attempt to recapture what he can of the medieval world by adopting its literary forms and situating his works within its long textual heritage.

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