

THE TRANSLATOR'S "OFERMOD": RECONSIDERING
MALDON'S "FOR HIS OFERMODE" (89) IN TRANSLATION
THROUGH J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *THE HOMECOMING
OF BEORHTNOth**

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ABSTRACT

J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* (1953) originated as his academic attempt to explain the meaning of Maldon's "ofermod" and established a classic critical referent on *Maldon*. Notwithstanding, although critics have always revisited the meaning of "ofermod," very few attempts have been made—or hardly any—to evaluate how translators of OE poetry have dealt with interpreting "ofermod" in *The Battle of Maldon*. The main aim of this article is to revise how such a task has been accomplished by the main English and Spanish translations of the *The Battle of Maldon* in the light of the interpretative difficulties of "ofermod" established by Tolkien and by the critical tradition that followed his seminal essay. As a conclusion, I will also try to argue that the only way of presenting *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* to the reading audience of any language is by offering them a joint edition/translation that includes both Tolkien's text and *The Battle of Maldon*.

KEY WORDS: *The Battle of Maldon*, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, OE poetry in translation, OE "ofermod."

RESUMEN

The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth (1953) de J.R.R. Tolkien, surgió como su intento académico de explicar el significado de "ofermod" en *Maldon*, y al mismo tiempo se convirtió en un referente crítico clásico sobre el poema. Sin embargo, aunque la crítica especializada siempre ha analizado en repetidas ocasiones el significado del término "ofermod," existen muy pocos trabajos, o casi ninguno, que hayan analizado como los diversos traductores de poesía del inglés antiguo han tratado el tema de la interpretación del término "ofermod" en *Maldon*. El objetivo principal del presente artículo es revisar cómo dicha tarea se ha llevado a cabo en las principales traducciones al inglés y al español de *The Battle of Maldon* a la luz de las dificultades interpretativas de "ofermod" establecidas por Tolkien y por la tradición crítica que surgió de su obra fundamental. A modo de conclusión, trataré de argumentar que la única forma de presentarle *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* al público lector de cualquier lengua es mediante la publicación de una edición/traducción conjunta que incluya el texto de Tolkien y *The Battle of Maldon*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *The Battle of Maldon*, J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*, poesía del inglés antiguo en traducción, OE "ofermod."



1. PRELIMINARY WORDS: LITERARY MUSE AND SCHOLARLY GENIUS

In a recent article on Tolkien's *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth (HB)*, Thomas Honegger stated that "*HB* is one of the rare known instances where it seems that Tolkien's literary muse inspires his scholarly genius—or at least, helps him to develop and clarify his ideas" (11). Those ideas were mainly focused on one of the poem's main key points: the meaning of the word "ofermod." If translating Old English constitutes a thought-provoking process of interpretation and a target language-focused problem-solving task, when translating *Maldon* the rendering of "ofermod" is by all means one of the main cruxes of the poem. Tolkien's ideas on "ofermod" ("Homecoming") established a classic critical referent on *Maldon* (Shippey; Frank 204). Notwithstanding, although critics have always revisited the meaning of "ofermod"—i.e. the "once again" present in Gneuss was very revealing of how traditional such a topic became with the passing of time—very few attempts have been made—or hardly any—to evaluate how translators of OE poetry have dealt with interpreting "ofermod" in *Maldon*.

The main aim of this article is to revise how such a task has been accomplished by the main English (Treharne; Hamer; Rodrigues; Crossley-Holland; Barber; Bradley; Griffiths; and Marsden) and Spanish (Lerate and Lerate; Bravo) translations of the *The Battle of Maldon* in the light of the interpretative difficulties of "ofermod" established by Tolkien and by the critical tradition that followed his seminal essay. Let's begin, then, by briefly revising the latter before dealing with the former in more detail.

2. J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S *HOME COMING OF BEORHTNOTH*: EXPANDING HIS "OFERMOD"

Tolkien's *HB* (1953) originated as his academic attempt to explain the meaning of *Maldon*'s "ofermod," a word which held the keys to unlock some of the poem's interpretations. When developing such an attempt Tolkien realized that the best way to shed some light on the term was to complete his academic evaluation with his own literary creation: a dramatic dialogue written in alliterative verse that

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functioned as the poem's sequel, preceded by a prefatory note on the historical and literary background of the text and closed with the famous endnote on the OE term "ofermod." This literary afterthought guided him, as Honegger pointed out quite correctly, to present in a very clear way his own ideas both on "ofermod" and on *Maldon* as a whole.

It is not my intention to offer here an in-depth analysis of *HB*. For the aims of this article, suffice it to say that Tolkien establishes a condemnation of Beorhtnoth's pride based on his interpretation of "ofermod" as a negatively connoted term which brought a new aspect to the understanding of *Maldon* as a whole: the object of *Maldon*'s heroic praise is not Beorhtnoth but his loyal and faithful retainers. As Honegger and Shippey have quite correctly pointed out, Tolkien's endnote and dramatic dialogue focused on "ofermod." Beorhtnoth's failure comes through pride, and pride itself is the thread that builds *Maldon* and links the three parts of *HB*. "Pride" as a term to be defined worried Tolkien very much in the different stages of the writing of *HB*. Draft after draft Tolkien began to focus and refined his ideas on "ofermod" as "pride." Tolkien's critique of pride developed, as it can be seen not only in the dramatic dialogue he built to provide a literary explanation of his ideas but also in both notes: prefatory and ending. "Pride," "proud refusal," "personal pride," "proud" and related words are terms that appear in almost every paragraph in both parts of *HB*. They build the idea that "ofermod" triggers the dramatic outcome of the story and for Tolkien "ofermod" is pride leading to excess. Although it will be discussed later on in more detail, the translation he offered, "his overmastering pride," is somewhat excessive and perhaps goes too far, but maybe it does so out of Tolkien's excessive effort to firmly establish his position as far as "ofermod" was concerned. As he did not find an easy way to explain it, his scholarly genius guided him to the writing of *HB*, as I have just pointed out.

Tolkien's *HB* conceals a deep criticism of the Old English heroic spirit, which cannot be fully dealt with in this article.¹ But it is beyond doubt that "ofermod" and its understanding constitute a capital issue when it comes to translate, render or offer an interpretation of *Maldon*. He established that quite clearly in his 1953 seminal essay. What *The Monsters and the Critics* had been for *Beowulf*'s academic evaluation was offered for *The Battle of Maldon* with *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*. Since "ofermod" is the key let us revise then how the different translators have dealt with the content and structure of *Maldon*'s term.

3. THE TRANSLATORS' OFERMOD: THE FRAGMENT AND THE EPISODE

Using as a metaphor the title of another very known work of Tolkien — *Finn and Hengest: The Fragment and the Episode*—we could say here that we can also

¹ Tom Shippey offers an extensive discussion on this topic.



analyse the renderings of “ofermod” by paying attention first to the fragment, i.e. the word “ofermod,” and then to the episode, i.e. the sentence in which it appears. As it happens with every word or difficult term in Old English poetry, it never appears in isolation. “ofermod” will be as important as its context: the sentence in which the word is inserted that conforms lines 89-90 of *The Battle of Maldon*. Tolkien had seen that already. A good amount of his “ofermod” explanation in *HB* was devoted to revise the whole sentence. Let’s proceed then step by step.

3.1. THE FRAGMENT: THE WORD “OFERMOD” IN ITSELF

First, back to basics. A dictionary, to start with; the first approach when facing a difficult term consists in checking the word up in a dictionary. Bosworth and Toller² defined “ofermod” as follows:

ofer-mód, es ; *n.* I. *pride, arrogance, over-confidence* :— Feala worda gespæc se engel ofer módas, Cd. Th. 18, 12 ; Gen. 272. Ðá se eorl ongan for his ofer módas ályfan landes tó fela láðere þeóde, Byrht. Th. 134, 25 ; By. 89. [Gif hwa nulle for his ouermodð, oðer for his prude ... his scrift ihalden, O. E. Homl. i. 9, 30.] II. *a high style (?)* :— Ofermód *conturnus*, Wrt. Voc. i. 19, 5. [O. H. Ger. ubar-muot *superbia* : Ger. über-muth.] v. ofer-méde, -métto. (734)

Fig 1.

As it may be seen, “pride” comes first, together with “arrogance” and “over-confidence,” and one of the examples quoted for its usage is precisely the key sentence in *Maldon*. Almost all the critical studies that revised and analysed the poem and its translations relied on these meanings (Gneuss 152). After revising all the scholarly tradition on the topic, analysing the five possible groups of meaning³ and

² The standard bibliographical reference of the Bosworth and Toller dictionary is provided in the reference list placed at the end of this article. The contents of the Bosworth and Toller dictionary are also available in different websites to be either used online or downloaded. These are two of the most frequently used B & T websites: <<http://beowulf.engl.uky.edu/~kiernan/BT/Bosworth-Toller.htm>> and <<http://lexicon.ff.cuni.cz/app/list.htm>>.

³ Gneuss offered them as follows: “I am well aware that I am oversimplifying the results of previous work by arranging the various translations in five apparently clear-cut sense-groups. But I hope that the remarks following the list will help to avoid misunderstandings. The five groups of proposed meanings are: 1. pride, great pride, excessive pride, foolhardy pride; arrogance, haughtiness, disdain; overweening courage; 2. overconfidence, superb self-confidence; 3a. recklessness, rashness, rash courage, foolhardiness. Ger. *Übermaut* (=high spirits, wantonness, exuberance?); 3b. over-courage, overboldness; 4. great, high courage; 5. magnanimity, greatness of heart, over-generosity” (150). These groups are very well explained and criticised by Gneuss’ remarks, which as he said “avoided misunderstandings,” as the five groups are not equally valid.

comparing the term with other words, synonyms and languages, Helmut Gneuss concluded in his superb article—another landmark in the history of the critical analysis of “ofermod”—that, “although it seems impossible to assign one definite sense to our OE word with absolute certainty, all evidence we have points to “pride” in particular” (157). Then, he listed a highly-well documented series of arguments to back up his statement.⁴ “Pride,” then, is always the main issue of the discussion.

Still, the question hanged around. When Gneuss re-issued his seminal essay (originally published in 1976) no further “addendum” was included as far as “ofermod” was concerned between 1976 and 1994. I do not know if such exclusion had an academic (no works published in that time span that added something valuable to the discussion) or editorial motive (no space available in the volume to enlarge the articles reissued). Be that as it may, although new sources were available, I think that they simply back up the meanings and explanations already presented since Tolkien first discussed the term. The *Dictionary of Old English* at Toronto⁵ has reached letter G so it is still far from “ofermod”—so, we’ll have to wait and see—and Roberts, Kay, and Grundy’s *Thesaurus of Old English* define it mainly as “Pride, arrogance,” “Proud, arrogant” (419-420, 1224), and as Solopova and Lee appropriately mentioned:

a series of derivations of the word, all implying the same meaning. If we turn to the Old English Corpus and search for ‘ofermod’ we see that the word occurs 360 times in the surviving texts, used in both prose and poetry. In the majority of occasions it clearly seems to be a critical reference to someone’s pride. Therefore, we could argue that the evidence supports the idea that the poet of Maldon was being critical of Byrhtnoth. (225)

Although “ofermod” is a complex term, which allows for fine tuning and subtleties in its interpretation, it seems that its meaning is always focused on “pride” as something negative. But, is it just “pride” or “pride” and something else? Has “pride” to be qualified? Notwithstanding, as Shippey says and everybody knows, “there is no doubt that ‘ofer’ means ‘over’, while ‘mod’ means ‘courage’” (331), but sometimes the whole is not the sum of the parts. These meanings are correct but it is true that many other senses are equally accurate. Despite the fact that the sum of

⁴ Gneuss: “1. ‘ofermod’ (noun) can only mean ‘pride’ in *Genesis B, Instructions for Christians*, and a glossary, i.e. wherever it occurs; 2. the phrase ‘for his ofermode’ is found in *Maldon* and ‘Instructions’; 3. the OE adjective ‘ofermod’ denotes ‘proud’ in more than 120 instances; nowhere can it be shown to have a sense like ‘bold, courageous, magnanimous,’ etc; 4. the Old Saxon and Old High German equivalents of OE ‘ofermod’ (noun and adjective) are always used with the sense of ‘pride, proud’ in extant written records; 5. there is no evidence whatsoever to prove that ‘ofermod’ (noun) could have a signification like ‘recklessness,’ ‘over-courage,’ ‘great courage,’ ‘magnanimity’; 6. the context in which ‘ofermod’ appears in *The Battle of Maldon* makes it likely that the word is a term of criticism, if not of reproach; ‘lytegian’ (86) and ‘alyfan landes to fela’ (90) clearly point to an error of judgment committed Byrhtnoth” (157).

⁵ Available online at <<http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/>>.



both parts may be found in the origin of the term, scholars have clearly set that there is no evidence whatsoever to prove that in the noun “ofermod,” has the extra meaning of “great” or “over.” Agreement in this is almost worldwide. Even Tolkien’s “overmastering pride,” as I’ll revise later on, is meaningful. In any case, “overmastering pride” is not “overpride,” “excess of pride” or “overcourage,” something which is totally unacceptable according to philological evidence. As Gneuss (158) concludes very appropriately “on the whole, “pride” with its various shades of meanings seems the best solution to a philological puzzle that had its origins almost a thousand years ago.”

In 1976 Gneuss quoted 36 translations of *Maldon*. Since then, until the reprinting of its article in 1994, it is most certain that a very good number of translations have been published, and since 1994 up till now many more renderings have seen the light of day in printed form or through electronic media. The corpus of translations I have used in here has been compiled with the main English and Spanish translations, those that have been more frequently quoted and used by scholars and critics in recent times. As far as I have been able to trace, exception made of Hamer’s, not a single one had been revised in previous works on *Maldon*’s “ofermod.” These various shades of meanings are always the key to interpret and render the term. Let us, then, consider what shadows and meanings are unveiled in the translations I want to revise, as table 1 shows:

It seems that we are faced with two main basic trends: those translators who stick to “ofermod” as “pride” (T, R, S) and those who qualify “pride” with some sort of heavy adjectival modification (H, CH, B, G, M). The former group offers a correct approach—in fact the same phrase in the three of them—with the adequate sense “ofermod” has to present, as we have seen. The latter group, though qualifying “pride,” presents that modification in different ways. Hamer, Griffiths and some of the options noted by Marsden emphasize what Gneuss marked as not attested: “there is no evidence whatsoever to prove that ‘ofermod’ could have a signification like over-courage, great courage” (157). That is why the “over-confidence”/“overpride” options will not be appropriate at all. Bradley, as he opts for prose, is prone to excessive expansion; his “extravagant spirit” constitutes by all means an example of what I mentioned before when highlighting that on certain occasions the whole was not the sum of the parts. Certainly, one of the most frequent meanings of “mod” is “spirit”; but in “ofermod” that meaning is absent. Something different is to keep “pride” and offer some sort of adjectival modification. Tolkien’s own “overmastering pride” will be ascribed to this trend, also followed here by Crossley-Holland; his “foolhardy pride,” though, is—as you may check by revising other translations he made—also typical of his being prone to expansion and exaggeration as a translator. The Spanish case is most curious because can be ascribed to neither trend. Bravo, in his characteristic explanatory prosaic style, present the reader with the phrase “debido a su confianza,” which looks more an adaptation of the Modern English sense of “over-confidence” than a translation from Old English. Lerate and Lerate, with their “valeroso en exceso,” will be rendering the “excess of courage” that Marsden pointed out as one of the many possible options; but following the evidence attested by the scholarly tradition, Gneuss and Tolkien (“Home-

TABLE 1: ENGLISH AND SPANISH “OFERMODE”

	TRANSLATIONS	OE “FOR HIS ‘OFERMODE’”
<i>English</i>	Treharne (T)	“because of his pride”
	Hamer (H)	“in his over-confidence”
	Rodrigues (R)	“because of his pride”
	Crossley-Holland (CH)	“in foolhardy pride”
	Bradley (B)	“because of his extravagant spirit”
	Griffiths (G)	Lit. “on account of his over-confidence” Verse. “from over-confidence”
	Scragg (S)	“because of his pride”
	Marsden (M) ⁶	“over-pride”
		“too much pride”
“over-exuberance”		
“excess of courage”		
<i>Spanish</i>	Lerate & Lerate (L)	“valeroso en exceso”
	Bravo (Br)	“debido a su confianza”

coming”) among others, this meaning will be out of place. Both Spanish translators avoid the word “orgullo,” which will be a more fitting option in any Spanish version that wanted to abide by the original “ofermod.”

In any case, I have already mentioned that it is difficult and most absurd to discuss any meaning in isolation. Those who kept “pride,” will they complete its meaning by twisting the sense of the whole sentence? Those who have already qualified “pride” with an extra heavy adjective, what options will they select next? It is

⁶ Marsden’s magnificent book is not a translation but an OE reader. It offers texts in Old English with an introduction, glosses and explanatory footnotes. Since it is a very recent work and the footnote on “ofermod” is most interesting, I have decided to include it in my revision. As you may read, Marsden’s footnote offers the “ofermod” translatorial/interpretative debate in a very convenient, though not very adequate, nutshell: “89 ‘ofermode’: usually trans. as ‘overpride’ or ‘too much pride,’ but ‘over-exuberance’ or ‘excess of courage’ may be more apt. Although Byrhtnoth’s decision to allow the Vikings across the causeway turns out to be a tactical error, the vaunting courage and belligerence which he has already displayed, and of which this present behaviour is an extension, cannot be faulted either within the conventions of heroic story or in the context of a dire period in English history, when cowardice in the face of the enemy was the norm. In his general demeanour, Byrhtnoth is proud but not arrogant” (258).

necessary to revise, then, the whole sentential context. Let us analyze the episode in its entirety.

3.2. THE EPISODE: SENTENTIAL CONTEXT (89-90)

The translators of both target languages have presented the structure of the sentence contained in lines 89-90 in the arrangement shown in table 2:

TABLE 2: ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS (57-59)		
		OE <i>Maldon</i> (89-90)
	TRANSLATIONS	“ða se eorl ongan for his ofermode alyfan landes to fela laþere ðeode.”
<i>English</i>	Treharne (T)	Then the earl, because of his pride, began to allow too much land to a more hateful nation.
	Hamer (H)	Then in his over-confidence the earl Yielded to the invaders too much land.
	Rodrigues (R)	Then because of his pride the “eorl” began to allow the loathsome people too much land;
	Crossley-Holland (CH)	Then, in foolhardy pride, the earl allowed those hateful people access to the ford.
	Bradley (B)	Then the earl, because of his extravagant spirit, yielded too much terrain to a more despicable people.
	Griffiths (G)	Then the earl from over-confidence gave too much room to that ruthless band of men.
	Scragg (S)	Then because of his pride the earl set about allowing the hateful race too much land;
	Marsden (M)	“No translation offered”
<i>Spanish</i>	Lerate & Lerate (L)	Demasiado terreno el “eorl” cedió, valeroso en exceso, a la odiosa gente.
	Bravo (Br)	Entonces el caudillo, debido a su confianza, comenzó a ceder terreno a toda aquella odiosa turba.

As regards constituent order, there is no much difference. While some translators opt for focalizing the first line on “ofermod” (H, R, CH, S), others (T, B, G)

keep it in its sentential place just adding the “eorl” reference at the front of the line. Perhaps, those who put “ofermod” first in the line highlight the relevance of the term, which constitutes a valid option if you keep “pride” as its meaning. This is only done by Rodrigues and Scragg. Hamer and Crossley-Holland, with their respective “over-confidence” and “foolhardy pride,” are already amplifying the sense of “ofermod,” so that focalization will only offer a double qualification of the term that is by all means excessive. Having a look at the rest of the cases, only Treharne abides by a certain poetic sense. In this respect there is not much difference. In the Spanish renderings this issue is completely irrelevant, as we face with two different styles: one prosaic (Br), poetic the other (L), though subject to a very rigid and hard verse structure which forces the translation to be more focused on the land loss than on the incorrect “ofermod” that follows.

However, it is much more interesting to go on, finish the sentence and with it the meaning of the whole episode. The scholarly tradition on *Maldon* has always agreed with the fact that Byrhtnoth was criticized by the poet because he allowed the Vikings too much ground to fight the battle, doing so “for his ofermode.” If “ofermod” is problematic, perhaps the action in itself is established with more clarity. Revising the translation of the actions which shaped what I have called “the episode” will certainly give us more elements to judge the renderings properly. In this respect Fred Robinson pointed out that

Byrhtnoth is clearly stated to have made an error when he committed his troops to a battle in which the enemy were allowed to have free passage across the river and take up positions before the Englishmen could begin their defense. One may argue over the meanings of “lytegian” and “ofermod” (although Professor Helmut Gneuss has provided virtually certain evidence that the latter word means “pride” and the poet’s use of “ofermod” signals a criticism of Byrhtnoth’s generalship), but the phrase “landes to fela” admits no doubt. Byrhtnoth erred. (435)

If “ofermod” designates Byrhtnoth’s intention and criticises his actions, the verb used in the main sentence is also marking, modifying or qualifying his intentions; the way the Vikings are treated will qualify the whole sentence too. And in this we do have some differences among translators, as it may be checked in the preceding table.

It is not the same to consider “alyfan” as “allow,” “yield” or “gave.” “Yield” constitutes an excessive option, as in a military context the word has a very clear negative sense; the battle seems to have been already lost. It is true that Byrhtnoth’s actions lead to that, but this line of text does not say so. That fact is criticised by the poet later on in the text. The poet’s criticism lies on what Byrhtnoth does and why he does it. To translate “alyfan” as “yield” is a clear distortion of the gradation the poet is giving to Byrhtnoth’s actions. Hamer and Bradley use “yield” and this fact combined with their “over-confidence” and “extravagant spirit” provides their translations with a rather extravagant and excessive style. Those who offer “allow” (T, R, CH, S) and “gave” (G) opt for a more neutral sense; they just describe the fact, as “alyfan” does, so these are far more accurate options. It is very interesting to note



that, exception made of Crossley-Holand, those who opted for “allow” are the same translators who respected the meaning of “ofermod” as “pride,” obtaining a perfect and accurate fusion of the fragment with the episode. In Spanish the “ceder” solution, which both translators offer, is not incorrect, but in a military context I think it is perhaps more negatively marked than what “alyfan” means. Other options would have to be considered.

The second element of the fragment—i.e. the treatment of the Vikings and the “laþere ðeode”—establishes the degree of accuracy or inadequacy of its translation. Both “lað” and “ðeode” have different translatorial possibilities but the way we combine both terms marks a very clear sense of gradation. The Spanish case is again quite clear: both renderings present “odioso” and perhaps “gente” is more accurate than “turba,” which has a sense of lack of definition and exaggeration that excessively highlights something already covered by “lað.” In English, Griffiths, Bradley and Hamer will be placed out of the general trend. Griffiths’s “ruthless band of men” is a very excessive phrase that combined with the rest of his options give as a result a not so satisfactory tone. Bradley’s “despicable people” is correct but its insertion in a prose sentence and the excessive “extravagant spirit” and “yield” turn the final result into something that bears little resemblance to the original Old English tone. Hamer opts for a reduced “invaders,” which again gathers what the Vikings were but do not maintain what the text expressed in “laþere ðeode.” With “over-confidence,” “yielded” and “invaders,” Hamer fails to offer an acceptable sentence. The rest of translators display acceptable variations within the most accepted meanings of lað and “ðeode” in different combinations: “hateful nation” (T), “loathsome people” (R), “hateful people” (CH), “hateful race” (S). It is very curious to see again how the same translators who used “allow” opt now for a correct and accurate rendering of the Vikings (T, R, CH, S).

Thus, revising all the elements analyzed in the fragment and the episode, Crossley-Holand offers a very adequate version that perhaps is somewhat excessive by using “foolhardy” and by displaying some contextual rewriting—e.g. “access to the ford” explains the original rather than translating it. Undoubtedly, Treharne, Rodrigues and Scragg offer the renderings that not only translate more effectively the Old English verse of *Maldon* in lines 89-90 with the meanings they have in that precise moment of the text but also gather what has been explained by the scholarly tradition of the last decades that sprung mainly from Tolkien’s essay. To that work I want to go back briefly before offering some final remarks.

At the beginning of this article I pointed out that in *HB* Tolkien (“Homecoming”) provided a translation of *Maldon* 89-90 in the endnote devoted to explain “ofermod.” It read as follows: “then the earl in his overmastering pride actually yielded ground to the enemy, as he should not have done.” As I said earlier, this rendering is somewhat excessive and goes to far as it presents the three problems/mistakes that have been dealt with so far (“overmastering pride” for “ofermod,” “yield” for “alyfan” and “enemy” for “laþere ðeode”) and adds a new one: a coda, created by Tolkien, which does not appear in the Old English text: “as he should not have done.” However, I think all this contains the reasons that explain why *HB* is not only a magnificent literary work but also a seminal essay to understand

“ofermod” and *Maldon*. To describe those reasons, as a sort of conclusion to what has been stated so far, will be the aim of the following final words.

4. FINAL WORDS. “MOD SCEAL ÐE MARE, ÐE URE MÆGEN LYTLAÐ”

Discussing Tolkien’s “more than liberal translation” of these key lines and its philological inaccuracy, Honegger stated the following:

Tolkien was, of course, aware of this and defends his rendering some pages later (TL 146) as “accurate in representing the force and implications of his words” and this anticipating the conclusion reached by his discussion of the central term “ofermod.” (6-7)

Tolkien is not translating the whole poem. I think he renders these key lines 89-90 with this explanatory translation precisely to highlight the tremendous difficulty presented in understanding “ofermod” and the sentence it is included in. I agree with Honegger in the aforementioned statement. Not only Tolkien anticipates his conclusions with the rendering he offers but also illustrates the impossibility to translate with the accuracy the term needed—in his opinion—by offering a rendering that presents three very clear inaccuracies in the three problems I have defined as the main keys to unlock lines 89-90 of *Maldon*, plus a fourth one: a sentence which has no equivalent whatsoever in the Old English text.

As the expert in Old English he was, Tolkien was well aware of what he was doing. By presenting these mistakes he was justifying his ideas, defending the need to compose a new poetic text, a dramatic dialogue free from academic regulations and standards, to explain the whys and wherefores not only of Byrhtnoth’s fatal decision but of the implications of that mistake in the overall text of *The Battle of Maldon*. Tolkien explains the fragment and the episode contained in lines 89-90 not in his translation but through the words of Tidwald, one of the speakers of his poetic dialogue *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth*:

Tidwald.
(...)
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. (*Tree* 137)

These lines constitute Tolkien’s correct translation of *Maldon*’s episode. His previous “more than liberal translation” also justifies the need to complete his poetic creation with the academic endnote as a way to validate his ideas on “ofermod.” As Tom Shippey mentioned: “The only way he could explain one poem was by himself writing another” (339). For Tolkien, *Maldon* and “ofermod” can only be ex-



plained through *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* in its entirety. Tolkien's literary muse inspired his scholarly genius with a piece that became a fundamental and seminal work for the scholarly tradition that came after him.⁷

John D. Niles once said that one of the possible ways to read *Maldon* was as an example of mythopoeisis (445)—a very Tolkienian term⁸—in late Anglo-Saxon England. When explaining lines 89-90, Niles stated the following:

Byrhtnoth offers “too much land” to the Vikings (“landes to fela,” 90), and the Norsemen advance as a direct result of his pride, or excess of courage (“for his ofermod,” 89). The meaning of the key term “ofermod” has been fought out in the critical literature, and there is no point in reiterating this debate here. M.R. Godden has pointed out that the semantic field of the word “mod” frequently encompasses the idea of a “dangerous, rebellious inner force” in Anglo-Saxon literature; the intensifying prefix “ofer-” clearly magnifies this sense here. Few readers today doubt that in the context of the narrator’s negative judgment concerning the wisdom of allowing the whole Viking army to advance, the term carries at least some pejorative force. (446)

If we disregard the “excess of courage” meaning of “ofermod” mentioned here, which has on the whole been discountenanced within the scholarly tradition, Niles summarises quite appropriately the requirements for rendering lines 89-90 of *Maldon* into any language. I have explored the three main problems or cruxes in the lines. We have seen how the success or failure of the renderings I have examined depended on the exact solutions applied. The road opened by Tolkien and followed by many scholars since the publication of his seminal essay has proved to be one of the guides to understand *The Battle of Maldon*. That is why I have always thought that the only way of presenting *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* to the reading audience of any language is by offering them in a joint edition/translation that includes both Tolkien’s text and *The Battle of Maldon*.⁹

⁷ As Tom Shippey has pointed out: “*HB* totally reversed previous opinion of *The Battle of Maldon*, especially that of Tolkien’s earlier collaborator E.V. Gordon, and has been swallowed absolutely whole—see, for instance, the edition of *Maldon* by D.G. Scragg, printed to supersede Gordon’s, where the Tolkien view is utterly dominant.” Shippey mentions in the lines that followed his disagreement with some of the ideas contained in Tolkien’s *HB*, although in general terms the importance of Tolkien’s *HB* as a key work of fiction and academic scholarship is very well assessed in his book.

⁸ Tolkien wrote a poem with the title *Mythopoeia*, which has been published since 1988 in *Tree and Leaf*, together with “Leaf by Niggle” and “On Fairy Stories.” In the most recent edition of *Tree and Leaf*, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth* was added to the collection.

⁹ It is most necessary to provide the Spanish readers with a new translation of *Maldon* that solves all the problems discussed in this article. The author of this article is presently engaged in a project to publish a bilingual Spanish-English edition of Tolkien’s *HB* together with a Spanish verse translation of *Maldon* faced with an edition of the OE text. The book will be published by Editorial Minotauro.

Translating Old English is always a complex but rewarding task; however, despite the plentiful cruxes found in the extant texts and regardless of the lack of strength suffered sometimes by translators and scholars all, it is our duty—as anglosaxonists engaged in spreading the richness of Anglo-Saxon poetry—to work hard in such a task and to follow the advice given by Byrhtwold in *Maldon*: “mod sceal þe mare, þe ure mægen lytlað,” (313) or, as Tolkien himself adapted in the lines of *HB* through the voice of Torhthelm: “more proud the spirit as our power lessens” (*Tree* 141). In this thought-provoking problem-solving process of interpretation we call translation from OE, there is a lot of work to be done, and its road, as Tolkien would say, goes and will go ever on and on.

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