

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: TOLKIEN'S TWO FACES OF WAR:
PARADOX AND PARALLEL STRUCTURE
IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AND "THE
HOMECOMING OF BEORHTNOTH"

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J.R.R. Tolkien once referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as a "rather bitter, and very terrifying romance." This paper examines the paradoxical representation of Tolkien's war—one which is at once bitter and romantic—in *The Lord of the Rings* and the dramatic dialogue, "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." Structural comparison of the works suggests that Tídwald and Torhthelm, the two voices in opposition throughout "The Homecoming," in some sense continue their unending debate on the nature of war in Books III-VI of *The Lord of the Rings*. The structures of these works, defined by contrasting visions of war, reflect Tolkien's ongoing struggle to square the two incompatible strands. The tension between these two views of war is a crucial ingredient to Tolkien's work—and a struggle never tidily resolved.

TOLKIEN'S TWO FACES OF WAR: PARADOX AND PARALLEL STRUCTURE
IN *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* AND "THE HOMECOMING OF BEORHTNOTH"

By

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Chapter 1: Introduction

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function." F. Scott Fitzgerald

In a letter written to publisher Stanley Unwin in 1950, J.R.R. Tolkien offers a curious assessment of his so-called “sequel” to *The Hobbit*, a work which, at “about 600,000 words,” had grown far beyond the length and scope of its precursor. Beginning in 1954, this work would be published in three volumes as *The Lord of the Rings*. “I have produced a monster,” he wrote, “an immensely long, complex, rather bitter, and very terrifying romance” (*Letters* 136). It is an oxymoronic description—a romance is seldom considered bitter or terrifying—yet I think an honest one, for it speaks to the deeply conflicted nature of the work. Though far shorter, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” is in this sense no less monstrous, for it too, and in much the same way, produces the contrary effects of bitterness and romance.

Still, many readers of Tolkien’s work (perhaps even a majority of them) would have difficulty classifying the most popular fantasy work of the 20th century as *bitter* romance. For whatever reason, the validity of such a statement is not immediately clear, at least on the surface of things. It is a problem which speaks to questions of how we historicize, how we choose to remember (or misremember). The question plays out on two levels: in the poets and storytellers who recount events and in the responses of readers to these accounts. The problem of selective memory can emerge on either level. As it concerns Tolkien, the issue seems most troubling at the level of the reader.

The popularity of Tolkien's work is undeniably staggering, but it is often read and remembered simplistically, usually as facile (or thrilling, depending on your position as critic or fan) escapist fantasy. "Bitter" and "terrifying" are easily overlooked, leaving only "romance." This seems to be the unfortunate case for Harold Bloom, who, on multiple occasions dismisses Tolkien's work as "tendentious." Vague and baffling though this remark is, it might at least be better suited toward criticism of Peter Jackson's film adaptations. Consider the film version of *The Two Towers*: essentially a showcase for the epic spectacle of battle in Helm's Deep which dominates the final third of the film. Whether the battle is any less epic in Tolkien's book is a matter for debate, but we can say with certainty that it receives far less attention; it is after all only one (the seventh) of twenty-one chapters in *The Two Towers*. The fact that Tolkien's Helm's Deep is only a small part of a very complicated picture of war is a point seemingly lost on Salman Rushdie, who decries a lack of subtlety and sophistication in Tolkien's "stilted" prose, yet considers Jackson's film "an improvement on its source material" (*Guardian* 2003). These short-sighted assessments are symptomatic of the allure of romance and heroic matters and the ways in which it seems to dominate perspective detrimentally—a gravitation which tends to occlude all else.

It is a balanced approach to the interplay of both the bitter and the romantic in Tolkien's work which I wish to take up in this paper. Nowhere is the interplay more crucial or striking than in the author's treatment of war. Tolkien was well aware of the tendency to selectively historicize, of our often overwhelming taste for heroics; his work is more often than not concerned with such issues. We would do well to

recall that many of the memorable battles of *The Lord of the Rings* are not told in the “real-time” of the book but mediated, recounted by characters within the text. Some notable examples of this phenomenon include Gandalf’s battle on Weathertop and duel with the Balrog, Aragorn striving against Sauron in the Seeing Stone, and the entire battle at Isengard—all of which are only recounted after the fact, as stories shared within the larger tale. The mediation of these events is not necessarily intended to call into question their validity, but it is perhaps the greatest reminder that, even in the midst of the most epic moments in Tolkien’s work, we are dealing with questions of storytelling, memory, and perspective—a tricky business, indeed. Misconceptions like those of Bloom or Rushdie are frequent in readings of Tolkien’s war, but a closer look at his treatments of battle may yield a clearer view of the complexities of Tolkien’s writing, where bitterness and romance are intertwined in fascinating ways.

A similar case might be made for Ernest Hemingway, who wrote many things about war but is so often misread as glorifying macho war games and heroics. Upon close reading, these misconceptions become largely untenable:

“They say if you can prove you did any heroic act you can get the silver.

Otherwise it will be the bronze. Tell me exactly what happened. Did you do any heroic act?”

“No,” I said. “I was blown up while we were eating cheese.” (*A Farewell to Arms* 48)

Lieutenant Henry’s refreshingly blunt admission shows us another side of Hemingway on war— and cheesy confessions like this ring of hobbit-wisdom, too.

Though published only a year apart in 1953 and 1954, “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” and *The Lord of the Rings* would appear to have little else in common. “The Homecoming” is a three-part work published in the academic journal *Essays and Studies*, consisting of two short critical essays on heroism and chivalry at the 10th century Battle of Maldon, plus a centerpiece: a brief dramatic dialogue in alliterative verse concerned with a fictional aftermath of that battle. *The Lord of the Rings* is Tolkien’s sprawling heroic romance and sequel to *The Hobbit*, his best-known work and a fundamental text in his mythology for England. Yet the little-known dramatic dialogue and the prose epic actually display a remarkable similarity in their parallel structures, both defined by opposing and incongruous representations of war. It is in these parallel structures that we can explore the complicated paradox of Tolkien’s war—that which readers and critics alike have often overlooked.

In both “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth” and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien simultaneously presents two distinct sides of warfare. Each work has its own interesting subdivisions, but the essential thematic separation pits a romantic view of war against a bitter, realistic one. A fairly rigid separation is maintained between the two faces of war in each work. In fact, this dichotomy defines the basic structure of the quasi-Platonic dialogue in “The Homecoming” and the final two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*. “The Homecoming,” an unofficial “sequel” to the Old English *Battle of Maldon* fragment, recounts a post-battle discussion between a romantic, excitable young poet (Totta) and a grizzled veteran (Tída). They debate back-and-forth, neither seeming to yield to the other’s contrasting disposition. In spite of the

dialogue format, “The Homecoming” is no dialectic exercise; it merely presents two contradictory views of war which coexist but cannot really be squared. Likewise, the final four books of *The Lord of the Rings* shift between romantic war (Book III and Book V) and bitter war (Book IV and the early portion of Book VI). These shifts provide the central tension of Tolkien’s heroic romance. It, too, is a tension which is never tidily resolved, in spite of the sublime muddle of ironic interlacement at the climax of the tale. For this reason, we might consider Tolkien’s two-faced portrayal of war to be defined more by paradox than ambivalence. Tolkien seems not so much to be unable to make up his mind as to be simply of *two* minds.

Structural Precedence

If we consider the ways in which Tolkien perceived the shape of the old works he professed and studied, we might discover some precedence for the parallel structure he develops between his own works, *The Lord of the Rings* and “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth.” Tolkien’s theories on the oft-debated structure of *Beowulf* are of tremendous interest for these purposes. In his essay, “*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics,” first given as a lecture to the British Academy in November 1936, Tolkien proposes a structural model in spatial terms. Neglecting, for a moment, “the many points of minor tactics,” Tolkien thus perceives the poem:

It is essentially a balance, an opposition of ends and beginnings. In its simplest terms it is a contrasted description of two moments in a great life, rising and setting; an elaboration of the ancient and intensely moving contrast between youth and age, first achievement and final death. It is divided in consequence into two opposed portions, different in matter, manner, and

length: A from 1 to 2199 (including an exordium of 52 lines) B from 2200 to 3182 (*Monsters* 28).

Incidentally, Tolkien's binary conception of *Beowulf* still holds an important place in the poem's critical discourse. It is not, of course, without its weaknesses—especially if one were to consider Beowulf's conflict with Grendel's mother (sandwiched between first achievement and final death) as more than a "minor tactic." Though a number of more flexible readings of the poem have been suggested, the binary vision which Tolkien supported retains undeniable value.

Some further explanation of Tolkien's proposed two-part structural reading can be discovered in Tolkien's "On Translating *Beowulf*," another piece included in the *Monsters* essay collection, first contributed in 1940 to an edition of Professor C.L. Wrenn's *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment, A Translation into Modern English Prose*. Near the end of the essay, Tolkien suggests that the poem's binary structure might be understood in terms of synecdoche.

This 'parallelism' is characteristic of the style and structure of *Beowulf*. It both favours and is favoured by the meter. It is seen not only in these lesser verbal details, but in the arrangement of minor passages or periods (of narrative, description, or speech), and in the shape of the poem as a whole. Things, actions, or processes, are often depicted by separate strokes, juxtaposed, and frequently neither joined by an expressed link, nor subordinated (71).

Here again are echoes of Tolkien's preoccupation with structural juxtapositions, reminiscent of his discussion of "balance" and "opposition" previously quoted from the "Monsters" lecture.

He closes "On Translating *Beowulf*" with the same concept, attempting to clarify this structural vision of the whole capable of being glimpsed in the smallest part:

Finally, *Beowulf* itself is like a line of its own verse written large, a balance of two great blocks, A + B; or like two of its parallel sentences with a single subject but no expressed conjunction. Youth + Age; he rose – fell. It may not be, at large or in detail, fluid or musical, but it is strong to stand: tough builder's work of true stone (71).

I hesitate to suggest that Tolkien undertakes in the composition of *The Lord of the Rings* or "The Homecoming" a *direct* adaptation of his notion of structure in *Beowulf*. However, two points of interest can be drawn from this brief sketch. First, Tolkien's ideas about synecdoche in the poem are, I think, retooled to a certain extent in the two works of fiction (more on this later). Suffice to say at this point that it was an attractive notion to Tolkien, and there is a sense both in "The Homecoming" and *The Lord of the Rings* that certain parts echo microcosmically the larger structure of the works. Second, and most important, his analysis of *Beowulf* introduces us to the notion of structure built upon a balance of two opposing themes. These themes, it should be noted, might be said to be in conversation only insofar as they are juxtaposed—a point clarified by the conspicuous absence of a conjunction in Tolkien's "rose – fell" scheme. The poem does not show Beowulf's rise *and* fall or

rise *then* fall; rather, the linking term is left out entirely. Both of these points regarding the shape of *Beowulf*—the balance of oppositions and synecdoche—figure prominently in the parallel structures of his own works.

Tolkien on the Northern Heroic Code

An important piece to the paradox of Tolkien's war depends on an aspect of the literary legacy of Northern European legends: the "theory of courage" often ascribed to the actions of warriors in Old English and Old Norse tales (*Monsters* 18). Tolkien's relationship toward this theory of courage was in itself a complicated one. Clearly, he felt a great deal of admiration for the heroic ethos—he has, on occasion, praised this code as "the great contribution of early Northern literature" and a "supreme contribution to Europe" (*Monsters* 18, *Letters* 55).

But this sort of encomium is tempered elsewhere in his writings by cautious scrutiny, criticism, and even downright fear of the code's misappropriation. In the same letter to his son in which Tolkien praises the code as a "supreme contribution," he indicts Adolf Hitler for "ruining, perverting, misapplying, and making for ever accursed" the selfsame ethos. It is not a radical indictment, surely, but the claim raises some key questions about the ways in which this code is defined and utilized. The letter, written in June 1941 during World War II, is certainly not Tolkien's last word on the code; perhaps his most extended and vigorous critique comes in his short essay "Of ermod," second of the two essays bracketing "The Homecoming" (more on this shortly). Given Tolkien's deeply conflicted stance on the northern heroic code and the well-documented influence which works that channeled this spirit had on his own writing, there is little cause for wonder at its prominent role in the paradoxical

treatment of war at the core of *The Lord of the Rings* and “The Homecoming.” A brief definition of Tolkien’s assumptions and inner-debates on the heroic code is essential to our greater understanding of the complexity of his treatment of war.

What exactly is the northern heroic code? Tolkien defined the code and his stance toward it in various ways over the years in his critical works and letters. A fine introduction to his intriguing grasp of the code can be gleaned from his seminal essay, “*Beowulf*: the Monsters and the Critics,” which also provided us with rich ideas of structural precedence for Tolkien’s own works. In the essay, he argues that this “creed of indomitable will” occupies a “central position...in the North.” *Beowulf* itself illustrates this centrality; for Tolkien, the “poet has devoted a whole poem” to the expression of the “paradox of defeat inevitable yet unacknowledged” (18). Noteworthy, for our purposes, that *paradox* is part of the very core of Tolkien’s definition of the tenets of northern heroics.

The ambiguity which Tolkien sees in the *Beowulf* poet’s treatment of the heroic code helps reflect his own conflicted views. It also serves as an important reminder that there is indeed complexity in “old” portrayals of war, too—Tolkien, at least, firmly believed this. Whatever might be said of the *Beowulf* poet’s treatment of war, it was not one of facile glorification. The poet plainly displays great “faith in the value of doomed resistance” and the “worth of defeated valor” (23). However, Tolkien presumes that this poet’s feelings, as a Christian not contemporary to the old tales which are his subject, are, in a sense, both heightened and changed “because he was himself removed from the direct pressure of its despair” (23). The harsh beauty of “martial heroism as its own end” is not lost on the *Beowulf* poet, but neither is its

recompense—he “saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death” (26). “The Monsters and the Critics” provides a fascinating window into Tolkien’s interest in the paradox of the northern heroic code.

Harsh beauty is a quality Tolkien sought in his fiction, a key component to his romantic war, though we glimpse it also in the *Beowulf* essay. In arguing for a return to a close-reading of the poem unadulterated by anthropological or historical pursuits, Tolkien describes his own romantic expression of the heroic code with almost feverish excitement: “whereon, as in a little circle of light about their halls, men with courage as their stay went forward to that battle with the hostile world and the offspring of the dark which ends for all, even the kings and champions, in defeat” (18). It is a scene of harsh beauty indeed—tempered, but perhaps not entirely extinguished, by the weight of inevitable defeat.

Tolkien’s “little circle of light” and his belief in *Beowulf* as an exemplar of the centrality of the “exaltation of undefeated will” in early Northern literature are adequate expressions of his own take on the code. However, he also echoed the popular sentiment that the code is captured best in the Old English fragment *The Battle of Maldon*, where it “receives doctrinal expression in the words of Byrhtwold” (18). In “Beorhtnoth’s Death,” a brief exordium to Tolkien’s dramatic “sequel” to *The Battle of Maldon*, Tolkien reproduces and translates “the famous words, a summing up of the heroic code”:

*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' (79).

Critical commentary on these, "the best-known lines of the poem, possibly of all Old English verse," follows in "Of ermod," the other essay which brackets Tolkien's mini-drama (102). In spite of Tolkien's acknowledgement of these famous lines, he claims that there is another, more interesting moment within the poem, often obscured by the gleam of Beorhtwold's proclamation of the heroic spirit: "*ða se eorlongan 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'" (102). The lines refer to Beorhtnoth's prideful, sporting gesture toward the Viking invaders at the Battle of Maldon, allowing them free passage along a narrow (and strategically crucial) causeway, to join in "fair" battle on the mainland. They are also, according at least to Tolkien's translation, quite clearly critical of the earl's decision, one which eventually led to disastrous defeat and the death of all his men. As in the mediation of battles in his own works I mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Tolkien's analysis here shows once again his awareness of the difficulty of balanced memory, the tendency to lean too far in one way or another—a tendency which has shaped the course of *Maldon* criticism.

The next comment in "Of ermod" is a crucial one, both to our understanding of the heroic code and to Tolkien's conception of the interplay between contradictory elements within the structure of a particular work. "At any rate," he says, "the full force of the poem is missed unless the two passages are considered together." They feed off one another in opposition, creating tension and offering a fuller picture of both the seductive beauty and the danger of the heroic code. Here, as in Tolkien's

writing on the “A+ B” constitution of Beowulf, structural contrast and interplay are of great importance. And, as we will see later, Tolkien makes strikingly similar comments about the juxtapositions in the structure of his masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings*.

In “Ofermod,” Tolkien goes on to question some of the perplexing elements at work in the Northern heroic spirit as seen in *The Battle of Maldon* or *Beowulf*. He makes the important point that the code “is never quite pure; it is of gold and an alloy,” this alloy being the inextricable element of “the desire for honor and glory” (103). In some cases, this desire becomes an unhealthy motivator, “driving a man beyond the bleak heroic necessity to excess—to chivalry” (103). When the proper combination of heroism and chivalry becomes imbalanced, a warrior “not only goes beyond need and duty, but interferes with it” (103). Such excess, Tolkien argues, is especially grievous in the deeds of leaders, who bear added responsibility toward subordinates.

Tolkien cites Beowulf’s two battles against Grendel and the dragon in order to illustrate the difficult distinctions at stake. His chivalry in eschewing aid and sword against Grendel is (to an extent) pardonable because he is only a young upstart, having “no responsibilities downwards” (103). Later, as king, his rash attempt at single-combat against the dragon proves a calamitous error of judgment, depriving his people of their king in the vain pursuit of sporting battle. While this distinction in degree of error has its merits, I would argue also for the importance of the more obvious factor separating the two battles: the first is won and the second lost. Would we condemn, or even question, his behavior had he slain the dragon in single-

combat? Of course the point may be moot; Beowulf falls against the dragon and we must judge his actions accordingly. Still, the dangers of this chivalrous excess seem also to point to its appeal—Beowulf is nothing if not aware of what makes a great tale. He panders to our taste for selective memory and history, already actively concerned with his legacy.

According to the standards Tolkien sets forth for the chivalrous conduct of a leader, Beorhtnoth's "fair" gesture is of course condemned; "it was wholly unfitting that he should treat a desperate battle...as a sporting match, to the ruin of his purpose and duty" (104-105). Nevertheless, Tolkien, I think, recognizes the difficulty (or perhaps the impossibility) of completely escaping from our appetite for the chivalrous. Beorhtnoth, at any rate, "moulded also by 'aristocratic tradition,' enshrined in tales and verse of poets now lost save for echoes," could not escape his romantic desires. Tolkien, too, hedges a bit in his criticism. He censures Beorhtnoth's epic blunder firmly, yet the hint of sympathy seeps through—"magnificent perhaps, but certainly wrong" (105).

In spite of Tolkien's own emphasis on the poet's rebuke of the earl, a point which might be said to be the primary aim of this essay, he acknowledges (on some level, empathetically so) that such critiques have been "little regarded, or played down" (105). Also, Tolkien argues that this "severe criticism" is yet "not incompatible with loyalty, and even love" (105). Likewise, he does not rule out the possibility of "songs of praise" being offered at the earl's funeral, though, once again, he is quick to qualify this in the other direction with the suggestion that such dirges "may have ended on the ominous note struck by the last word of the greater poem:

lofgeornost ‘most desirous of glory’” (106). Working our way through this kind of “hedge maze,” it becomes difficult to make sense of Tolkien’s point. On the other hand, the ambiguity might actually demonstrate the point: he is deeply divided. At the very least, we might recognize once more Tolkien’s awareness of the difficulty to efface the heroic, the recurring issue of selective memory involved in those crucial criticisms “little regarded.”

Were the issue not of such dire importance to Tolkien, we might actually consider his tone playful at times. His discussion of the intricacies and shortcomings of the heroic code comes to its climax in a curious moment of tangled juxtaposition and wordplay in “Ofermod”:

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 (106 Emphases mine).

As in the previous passage, we need look no further than the number and variety of hedges and qualifications at work in this passage to get a sense of Tolkien’s dividedness on the problems of the heroic code. Coy, if not playful, is the tone we perceive in these twisting lines. Tolkien knows very well that there is a world of difference as stake between a “noble error” and the “error of a noble,” yet he does not

want to clarify the ambiguity he raises. He feels the vacillating pull of both interpretations.

Three distinct levels of opinion on this conundrum actually unfold for our examination here. In each case Tolkien tries to highlight the complexity (even the irony) of the heroic code. The characters of the poem, Beorhtnoth's *heorðwerod*, might very well have believed Beorhtnoth to be blameless, in spite of the (possibly) needless defeat collectively suffered. The poet, Tolkien suggests, is capable of distancing himself, which might afford him a stance of some critical depth *even in spite of* himself. Over these positions looms Tolkien's personal take on the issue, one likely similar to that which he ascribes to the poet, though his playful prose and willingness to imagine a potentially sympathetic response from both the *heorðwerod* and the poet also grant some insight into his own tangled thoughts on the heroic code.

Even when Tolkien's rebuke of the heroic code seems straightforward enough, there remains a complicating element of praise for the conduct of courageous subordinates and "little fellows." While Tolkien questions the rash heroics of leaders like Beorhtnoth, he simultaneously exalts the courage and loyalty of their unfortunate subordinates. It is a theme which he often remarked of as being close to his heart and central to his work, at one point going so far to as to call *The Lord of the Rings* "primarily a study of the ennoblement...of the humble" (*Letters* 237). In this way I think we can discern another layer in the ominous warning Tolkien uses to conclude "Oferrmod," a lament borrowed from Wiglaf of *Beowulf*: "*oft sceall eorl monig anes willan wraec adreogan*, 'by one man's will many must woe endure'" (109). Beneath the obvious rebuke of the one is the heroic and redemptive possibility of the

“many”—Wiglaf’s dragon-slaying can certainly attest to it. Tolkien closes his “Of ermod” essay by suggesting that the *Maldon* poet “might” have adopted this line as an epigraph to the poem. Of course, he did not do so. Whether he was himself torn on some of the perplexing issues surrounding the heroic code is left to us to wonder.

Chapter 2: Discordant Voices: Tolkien's War Paradox in "The Homecoming"

"These were of course contradictory attitudes; but here as in so many areas of his personality Tolkien was a man of antitheses" – Humphrey Carpenter (102)

While "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth" has not received a great deal of scholarly attention relative to Tolkien's other works, some important Tolkien scholars have addressed it, most notably Tom Shippey in a piece called "Tolkien and 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'" collected in *Roots and Branches*. Shippey makes a number of insightful points about the drama which I will discuss in my own analysis. Nevertheless, I do not wholly agree with the stance he takes in the essay. Shippey suggests that "The Homecoming" is essentially Tolkien's harsh indictment of Old English heroic poetry. He claims that the character of Torhthelm is nothing more than a cowardly, murderous stooge to be "blackened" at every turn in the service of this indictment, for "in this dialogue there was no doubt about who was right and who was wrong" (338). By setting up this lop-sided debate, Shippey reasons, Tolkien commits "an act of ceremonial sacrifice" toward the northern heroic spirit. The symbolic "parricide" reflects Tolkien's troubled feelings about the allure of the pagan heroic code and its threat to a Christian spirit even in the present day (338). All of these points I will address and refute in my own analysis.

In many ways, the flaws in Shippey's argument exemplify the flip side of the trend I comment on in the introduction to this paper. The facile criticisms of Bloom and Rushdie and the simplified film treatment of Peter Jackson only seem to catch one side of Tolkien's project—the romantic side. Perhaps in an effort (probably well-intentioned) to overcompensate for these rash criticisms or come to Tolkien's

defense, Shippey seems to come down squarely on the *other* side. Both miss the larger picture.

Shippey actually seems to be on the right track as he introduces his argument. He discusses “The Homecoming” as one of Tolkien’s works of “authorization,” an exercise in justifying his dedication to writing fantasy and myth. It is an interesting notion, especially when combined with another point Shippey makes early on in the essay, regarding the apologetic tone Tolkien seems to take in explaining the dialogue’s place in a journal of critical studies. By the end of Shippey’s essay, he begins to explore the importance of the “spiritual tension” involved in these two conflicting ideas of apology and authorization, one “which creates at once insecurity, apology and power” (339). But these very interesting concluding remarks seem to belie much of his preceding analysis, which suggests a reading of “The Homecoming” as a harsh, unwavering critique more than an artful exploration of some very difficult tensions at work in our perception of war.

Tolkien offers an introductory sketch of the drama with a few notes near the end of the prefatory essay, “Beorhtnoth’s Death”:

They took a wagon, and were to bring back Beorhtnoth’s body....Torhthelm (colloquially Totta) is a youth, son of a minstrel; his head is full of old lays concerning the heroes of northern antiquity.... Tídwald (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.... Torhthelm is found alone in a part of the field where the dead lie thick (79).

Besides the essential characterizations Tolkien outlines above for Torhthelm and Tídwald, there is something more to be taken from the setting and the larger context of this peculiar drama. “The Homecoming” consciously and explicitly revisits the literary territory of *The Battle of Maldon* fragment, which, as I stressed earlier, is held to be one of the chief heroic works of Old English. Situating his drama within the context of the great Old English heroic verses is, in some sense, a nod to their power and excellence. But Tolkien’s choice of material—the fictional event he chronicles in his drama—is odd, and therefore quite striking. To call this dramatic dialogue a “sequel” to the Old English poem would be somewhat ingenuous, considering its inglorious plot: two poor workers who were not “actually in the battle” toil through the wreckage in the aftermath, searching for Beorhtnoth’s mangled corpse—surely, an atypical matter for heroic verse, and one which seems at odds with the work which inspired it.

Tolkien emphasizes the complexity of these heroic matters from the very outset with the unorthodox intertextual relationship he draws between *Maldon* and his short drama. The title of the drama itself shows Tolkien engaged in a process of simultaneously building up and undermining heroic matters; there is of course irony in the grim reality of the manner of Beorhtnoth’s “homecoming.” It is a title more befitting a story of the duke’s triumphant victory procession or at least a stately funeral. But neither of these is the subject of Tolkien’s piece; instead, he tells how Beorhtnoth’s headless corpse is carted home by two exhausted and frightened peasants. The irony of the title reminds us that Tolkien himself is well aware of the lesson quoted earlier from his *Beowulf* essay; assessing the consequences of

Beorhtnoth's chivalric gesture, Tolkien, too, "saw clearly: the wages of heroism is death" (26). To sum up the story so far: Tolkien writes a "sequel" to what is remembered as the finest example of Old English heroic verse, gives it a fitting title for its epic context, then ironically undercuts both of these by focusing on the inglorious task of Tída and Totta. Even before the drama has begun, we are unable to avoid the tension between two incongruous spirits.

The Interplay between Tída and Totta

The stark contrast between the perspectives of Tída and Totta carries on the work begun by the irony of the drama's title and historical context, expressing the paradoxical nature of Tolkien's war: one which maintains both the grizzled, wary cynicism of Tída as well as the incompatible (but unavoidably present nonetheless) romance and heroic sentiment of Totta. Their two-sided debate provides the basic structure of Tolkien's drama, reflecting Tolkien's scholarly discussions of balance and opposition and also exhibiting parallels with the structural divisions in *The Lord of the Rings*.

While it is useful to refer to "The Homecoming" as a kind of Platonic dialogue or debate, it is, however, also important to note that this central "debate" between the two characters is not really between them at all. By "debate," I speak instead of the implicit clash running through Tolkien's own mind. In any case, it is not as if Tolkien is writing an expository treatise on the representation of war. Part of what makes "The Homecoming" so interesting is that Tolkien consciously chose to make the centerpiece of this tri-part work (also including the short essays "Beorhtnoth's Death" and "Ofermod") on the nature of heroism and chivalry a

fictional drama—a work of art more so than scholarship. Indeed, from his remarks following the drama at the beginning of the “Ofermod” essay, there is even a sense that Tolkien only grudgingly includes the two scholarly pieces which bracket “The Homecoming” in its publication.

This piece, somewhat larger than the Old English fragment that inspired it, was composed primarily as verse, to be condemned or approved as such. 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 (102).

Tacit in these remarks is the implication that the imaginative drama expresses the fundamental issues at stake far better than any essay could. As Shippey notes by the very end of his essay, “the only way [Tolkien] could explain one poem was by himself writing another” (339). Perhaps Tolkien’s preference for the artistic medium speaks to the fundamental paradox he addresses. Logical critiques of our conflicted views of war may come up short where (maybe) art proves the more effective instrument.

The opening few lines of “The Homecoming” establish the two distinct characterizations of Tída and Totta. It is no surprise that the scene is set with the two voices having been separated in the darkness before engaging in the dialogue which follows—“*The sound is heard of a man moving uncertainly and breathing noisily in the darkness. Suddenly a voice speaks, loudly and sharply*” (81). It is a striking visual metaphor for the clash of opposing themes which occurs in the drama, illuminating for a moment our conflicted understanding of war like a flash of lightning in the night.

Torhthelm's fanciful, unbounded imagination is introduced immediately; lost among the dead he imagines the wind sighing like "waking ghosts" (81). He reveals his supposed bravery in being quick to issue a challenge with an opening threat of "Hell take you" (81)! Tída, like the grizzled veteran he is, swiftly cuts the young dreamer down to size, recognizing him in the dark by the telltale signs of his fright—he hears Totta's "teeth rattling" (81). Tída mocks the liveliness of his young partner's imagination, his visions of "barrow-wights and bogies"—mere "fancies" which make "foes of nothing" (81). Always focused on the task at hand, Tída offers the first of his incessant reminders to Totta of the gritty physical and material realities of their situation.

Help me to heave 'em! It's heavy labor
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 (81-82)!

It does not take long for the two disparate voices to clash as the two men toil away at their task.

Torhthelm is the poet or "gleeman" as Tída refers to him (often pejoratively). He is the voice of literary war and romance in "The Homecoming." Torhthelm brings to the conversation frequent references to the legends and lays of old heroes. He looks upon Beorhtnoth's death always with a glance back at the larger-than-life heroic legacy which he believes in. Totta's lines of alliterative verse are clearly the more poetic of the two, not only in their homage to old legends but in his own taste for song, and a tendency toward euphemism and hyperbole.

The above paragraph should suffice as a general sketch of how Tolkien presents and manipulates the epic voice—Totta’s voice—of war in “The Homecoming.” However, I risk being overly reductive in simply unmasking in Totta’s voice a particular side of Tolkien’s argument. It is important to recall once more that Tolkien preferred to approach this conflicting sense of war through fiction. Totta is, after all, a character in the drama, not merely a figurehead for one side of Tolkien’s mind. Indeed, his characterization colors what we understand about his romantic voice in interesting ways. He is the younger of the two, naïve and inexperienced; looking at a body, he believes it looks back at him, likening its eyes to “Grendel’s in the moon,” suggesting that he has never yet seen a dead man, though he has read, or heard, *Beowulf* (86). Though Tolkien has experienced both, I do not think he grudges the young man the one—a valuable experience in its own right. We come to know Totta through these crucial, but sometimes subtle moments in the drama. The excitement he expresses upon properly identifying Beorhtnoth’s sword—“I could swear to it by the golden hilts”—reflects his interest and love for legends, even those yet to be made.

Most importantly, we should recognize (contrary to Shippey’s reading) that Torthelm is no fool, no matter how many times Tída refers to him as such. His impressionable reliance on the old lays does not make him unthinking, and this fact is perhaps best reflected in his pensive statement after remembering the rules of mead hall vows as they are told in songs: “But the songs wither, and the world worsens” (85). It is a testament to Torthelm’s honesty, though of course there is, in his mind, a causal relationship between these two entropies.

Tída's voice might generally be said to ally itself with a voice of reason—not necessarily that of “reality,” as Shippey puts it, too great a burden for either of these voices to bear on its own. Totta can have his poetic flourishes; Tída prefers “plain language” (98). He chides Torthelm for his ornamental language, calls into question the nature and value of the old lays and heroes, and remains always fixed on the grim material and logistical reality of their task. If Totta's voice soars at times to the heavens, Tída's remains grounded in the dirt. Full of conventional wisdom and strong work ethic (“If you spent less in speech, you would speed better”), he sets the pace and keeps Totta honest (“Now start again, and in step with me! A steady pace does it”) (89). Given his disposition, it is unsurprising to learn that he is the aging veteran who cannot be blamed if, after long years of toil and bloodshed, he grows skeptical of the taste for romancing the heroic which his partner exemplifies. But, like Totta, when pressed, Tída is capable of words which seem to ring true and transcend their otherwise rigidly separate voices. After Totta expresses his disgust at the sight of all the bloodshed, Tída remarks:

Aye, that's battle for you,
and no worse today than wars you sing of,
when Froda fell, and Finn was slain.
The world wept then, as it weeps today:
you can hear the tears through the harp's twanging (88).

They are lines which in many ways seem so essentially in accord with the basics of Tída's voice, yet they also acknowledge, in the suggestion that we might “hear the tears through the harp's twanging,” some fleeting sense that even to Tída, the songs express poignance, honesty, and worth undiminished. A closer look at this line, however, complicates what seems at first straight forward. The complication stems

from Tolkien's choice of "twanging"—certainly an odd description for a harp's sound. It is not the most musical of terms, connoting harshness, discord and vibration over harmony. The vibration and discord of the twang itself might reflect the tensions at play in Tolkien's work, let alone the added difficulty twanging might create in our efforts to "hear the tears." Once more, Tolkien poses questions of how to remember and interpret the songs. The truth is not self-evident or one dimensional; the tears may be there to be heard, but doing so may prove difficult.

Once we recognize the tension between the two voices in "The Homecoming," we begin to get a sense of the paradox in the drama's structure, which plays out in the interplay between the two characters. These interactions, which both delineate the incompatible, individual voices and illuminate the wider problem Tolkien addresses, occur in varying degrees—from otherwise unremarkable one-line exchanges to lengthy poetic disquisitions. Whichever variation these interplays take on, the pattern is always the same: the two are engaged in a tug o' war, as it were.

In the expansive collection of variations upon the central theme, we can recognize some of Tolkien's notions of balance (A+B) both overall, and in the part-to-whole relationship. Each individual exchange (of varying length, circumstance, and delivery) essentially conveys the equilibrium of the whole: two contradictory faces of war measured against one another.

An early indicator of the simplest of these meaningful exchanges comes when Tída and Totta hear an owl's hoot. Tída responds to the noise first, calmly identifying it while dismissing any potential portent—"It's only an owl" (82). Totta's immediate response challenges this notion: "An ill boding. / Owls are omens" (82).

This brief, seemingly inconsequential exchange nonetheless conveys the defining tension of “The Homecoming.”

Moments later, Tída identifies a fallen comrade familiar to the two:

TÍDWALD: Here! lend a hand! This head we know!

Wulfmær it is. I'll wager aught
not far did he fall from friend and master.

TORHTHELM: His sister-son! The songs tell us,

Ever near shall be at need nephew to uncle.

TÍDWALD: Nay, he's not here – or he's hewn out of ken.

It was the other I meant, th' Eastsaxon lad (82-84)

Once again, Tída voices the physical toil they endure and the bare description of body parts—often enough described in a detached manner because they are found thus.

Totta mistakes this Wulfmær for another, letting out an almost triumphant cry, remembering the sacred bond of sister-son, and assuming he will have died in a privileged space by his lord. But Tídwald relishes his role of spoiler and iconoclast, and his reply first crushes Totta's hope outright, only to hedge a bit in the most macabre of concessions—if the sister-son *is* here, he is mutilated beyond recognition—before finally clearing up the confusion (there are two Wulfmærs) that leads to Totta's sentimental, yet touching mistake.

As the two continue their search for Beorhtnoth, they begin to chatter about the other nobles they might find dead on the battlefield. Totta then expresses his longing to have had a role in the battle.

I wish I'd been here,
Not left with the luggage and the 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 (85).

Apart from his evidently fey mood in desiring this fatal opportunity, Totta expresses here Tolkien's favored sense of the heroism of the little fellow—the bravery he refers to as “most moving” in “Of ermod” and attempted to capture also in the behavior of the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings*. This moment provides a fine example of a moment where Tolkien shows clear sympathy for the character Shippey dismisses as a “stooge.” Totta's words may be boastful, naïve, even absurd—nevertheless, they are redolent of a kind of noble spirit Tolkien thought absolutely crucial to his own work.

Of course, no matter the value of Totta's words, Tídwald proves ever-ready to counter, this time with prudent council and words of warning to the untested, battle-hungry poet.

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 (85-86)!

He underscores the difference between song and lived battle, describing the “bitter” truths of combat. A secondary division between the two voices, which Shippey devotes most of his analysis to, emerges here for the very first time in the Pagan versus Christian undertones—Totta ends his lines with reference to the pagan Woden, while Tída counters with an invocation of the Christian God. While it is an important

distinction, it does little toward settling the debate, which remains essentially a question of the difference in romantic and bitter representations of war.

The manner in which the two react upon finding Beorhtnoth's body at last reinforces the disparity in their voices. Torhthelm begins to chant, performing an elegiac verse on the spot for their lord: "just in judgement, generous-handed / as the golden lords of long ago. / He has gone to God glory seeking, / Beorhtnoth beloved" (87). Tídwald offers some uncharacteristic praise of the young man's verse: "The woven staves have yet worth in them / for woeful hearts." But this encomium is immediately followed by practical reminders more typical of his character. He plainly has no intention of allowing Totta to get carried away with more sentimental verse. After all, he reasons, "there's work to do, / ere the funeral begins" (87).

This last moment begins a pattern in their interplay in which Totta's verse is met with grudging praise from Tída, praise which is then swiftly countered or at least qualified, the young man's poetry stifled by the older man's no-nonsense attitude. Torhthelm's next effort at a dirge for Beorhtnoth plainly reveals the influence of pre-Christian legends and lays, especially the "Lay of the Last Survivor" from *Beowulf*—an elegy Tolkien surely found moving. Totta chants:

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 (88).

Tída's response mixes praise of the verse with thinly-veiled criticism of its making:

Good words enough, gleeman Totta!
You labored 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 (89).

The heathen undertones of Totta's verse have not gone unnoticed by Tída, prompting more words on this secondary division in their perspectives. Tída undercuts Totta's romantic notions with his reminders of their Christian allegiances: "Beorhtnoth we bear not Beowulf here: no pyres for him, nor piling of mounds; / and the gold will be given to the good abbot" (89).

The scuffle with Totta's "troll-shapes...or hell-walkers," while narrated as always through dialogue, pits the two voices against one another in a scene of action, playing out in miniature the subject of their debate. Totta, sensing a fight is at hand, hastily attempts to make good on the opportunity to fulfill his earlier wish to taste battle.

Ho! Tída there!
I've slain this one. He'll slink no more.
If sword he was seeking, he soon found one,
by the biting end (91).

His heroic boast rings of the understated litotes of Old English verses like *Beowulf*, as if making light of the obvious pride he takes in the slaying. But as is often the case throughout the drama, battle is not what it seems. To illustrate this point, Tída hails Totta sarcastically—"My bogey-slayer" (91)! Tída rightly guesses that these shadowy figures are not warriors picking a fight but impoverished scavengers

reduced to living off the scraps of the battlefield. He counters Totta's heroic understatement by belittling the conflict, reducing it almost to the level of disciplining a child—"You wanted no weapon: a wallop on the nose, / or a boot behind, and the battle's over / with the likes of these" (91). More importantly, he argues, "Why kill the creatures, or crow about it? / There are dead enough around" (91).

At this point, Totta still does not understand the reason for his partner's sarcasm, and Tída offers another mock-heroic rejoinder, referring to Totta as "my brave swordsman" (92). He then attempts to bring Totta back down to earth from his "epic" slaying, explaining that "these are hungry folk / and masterless men, miserable skulkers. / They're corpse-strippers" (92).

Another showcase of the interplay between voices comes when the pair reaches the causeway. Their crossing is a crucially symbolic moment in the drama; in a sense they bring their discordant voices to the scene of the crime which is the subject of Tolkien's critical essays on *Maldon*—the place of Beorhtnoth's sporting gesture. A baffled Totta first raises the subject:

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 (95).

As we expect by this point, it is Tída who breaks the difficult news: "Alas, my friend, our lord was at fault....He let them cross the causeway, so keen was he / to give

minstrels matter for mighty songs. Needlessly noble” (95). Whether he is unable to process this harsh criticism, or simply unwilling to engage with his conflicted feelings on the subject, Totta seems to let the issue slide, responding with the air of a minstrel-chronicler, “so the last is fallen of the line of earls,” as if such a disastrous heroic gesture is fated to occur (95).

When Totta ends his whimsical speech with a kind of call to arms—“And now from the North need comes again: / wild blows the wind of war to Britain!”—he receives a crushing reality check from Tída. For Tída, this wind of war is far from favorable.

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... (96)

He has no illusions about the glory and excitement of war, only the cold facts of the suffering it will mean for poor folks.

A Third Voice and a Dream, but no Resolution

I suggested earlier that this debate between Tída and Totta is intentionally left unresolved. This point notwithstanding, the experience of reading through this tug-of-war in the speech of the two workers prompts us irresistibly to ask: Who wins? In some sense, they both do. Glib as this may at first sound (like the words of a youth sports coach), it is a point that should be made. Implicit in the structure of “The Homecoming” is the sense that both characters lend a hand—and a voice—in

bringing their task to fruition. It is small consolation perhaps—yet meaningful nonetheless.

If, even against our better judgment, we must pursue the question further, we may also be tempted to give the nod, as Tom Shippey does, to Tída and his voice of reason. It is true, Tída seems often enough to get the better of his young counterpart, and his is the last word in many of their exchanges—fitting, given the way his disillusioned, no-nonsense demeanor seems in accord with the gritty nature of their task.

In Totta's defense, he keeps talking. And this is important. The presence of his voice—his refusal to be silenced—is significant, and cannot be downplayed. Nor can the fact that, in spite of Tída's sensible rebukes, Totta holds fast to his romantic ideals.

To examine this question of winning and losing more closely, we must look to the central ironies of "The Homecoming," manifest in two problematic moments: the unidentified voice in the dark (page 101), and the dream (pages 88-89). In the ironies expressed by these key scenes, we glimpse most clearly the intricacies of Tolkien's war paradox.

Winning is of course a matter of perspective. While Tída and Totta differ completely in their understanding of war, they remain on the same "side"; their allegiance is with the fallen duke. The "voice in the dark" near the end of "The Homecoming" offers its own distinct perspective.

The intrusion of this third voice is both a striking and a crucial moment in the drama. The fact that Shippey neglects this peculiar moment in his essay speaks to

one of the larger points he seems to ignore: the question of historicizing which seems to be crucial to Tolkien's dialogue. Apart from the Latin chants of the monks bracketing its few lines, the voice in the dark is the only other character in the drama. Its lone contribution goes thus: "Sadly they sing, the monks of Ely isle! / Row men, row! Let us listen here a while" (101)! In "Beorhtnoth's Death," Tolkien offers a small clue about the identity of the voice, whose "lines are an echo of some verses" regarding the Viking King Canute (80). This hint, coupled with the knowledge that these men are speaking from sea, suggests that the voice represents the Viking invaders who slew the man Tída and Totta now bear home—it is the voice of the "winners" of the Maldon battle.

Another glaring disjunction created by this strange voice is that the interjection is made using rhymed verse, while Tída and Totta always converse in alliterative lines. It is a decision Tolkien mentions in the introduction as "presaging the fading end of the old heroic alliterative measure" (80). The symbolic use of rhyme of course reflects the very literal extermination of Beorhtnoth and his *heorðwerod*—the heroes are slain, and heroic verse dies with them.

Irony begins to complicate this point though, when we consider that Beorhtnoth might be gone, but the tale of his needlessly heroic gesture and desperate stand has survived—even flourished. Beorhtnoth's chivalrous deed has captivated generations, immortalized in Beorhtwold's famous expression of heroic will.

Moreover, what gives these men of the sea pause as they row? A song—more verse. The Christian *dirige* is not the same as alliterative heroic verse, but the fact that these slayers of the heroic are taken aback by a song is nonetheless meaningful.

It affirms a kind of universal power in the art; regardless of what side one is on, or what part one had to play in a tale, one lends an ear.

Of course, this is only one way of reading the admittedly vague and problematic intrusion of the Viking voice into the balanced debate between Tída and Totta. This third voice may reflect the universal bond of song. Then again, less sublime readings are equally plausible. The victors could be completely oblivious to the woe they have caused, simply reveling in their victory and callously taking pleasure in the monks' entertainment. As is often the case in Tolkien's work, these questions are left open.

However we choose to read the voice in the dark, we are dealing with questions of perspective, of how we historicize and look back upon war. These questions relate back to the trend I mention in the introduction to this paper: the tendency to be carried away by the heroic, overlooking the other, equally important elements of a text. We glimpse it in one-dimensional readings of Hemingway, and of Tolkien's own work. And we see Tolkien calling into question these myopic readings by addressing in his essays the critical stance he believes to be underlying even the *Maldon* poet's motivations. The ironies of Totta's dream within "The Homecoming" likewise speak to the allure of the heroic while providing a key to that unavoidable question— who wins the debate?

Totta's dream vision comes late in the drama, as he takes some troubled repose on the bumpy wagon ride to the monastery, with only Beorhtnoth's body for a pillow. The dream, like the drama itself, appears to reflect a basic, two part balance. Indeed, most of the issues at stake in the larger work are contained also within this

sleepy subsection. Italicized stage direction claiming that Totta's "*voice becomes louder, but it is still the voice of one speaking in a dream*" clearly marks the division between the two sections of the dream.

The first movement in Totta's dream presents elements more characteristic of Tída's war perspective. The separation of Christian and Pagan ideals is crucial here as Totta "hears mass chanted for master's soul," but the voices are "cold" among the "candles in the dark" (98). The world we glimpse in the beginning of the dream is noticeably dark and pessimistic. Totta seems to travel through time leading only toward darkness, decay, and silence.

So men flicker and in the mirk go out.

The world withers and the wind rises;

the candles are quenched. Cold falls the night (99).

It is a curious, even ironic fusion, this juxtaposition of Christian imagery with a fey mood—but one certainly in line with the overall structure Tolkien builds. The curious combination might also be explained through perspective, if we take Totta's as the lens through which this dream vision is generated.

The concluding half of Totta's dream stands in opposition to the pessimistic view expressed by the preceding vision. As this is Totta's dream it is fitting that it should end with a hopeful invocation of the northern heroic ethos, one which combines Tolkien's own expression of the code with a reworking of Beorhtwold's iconic line from *The Battle of Maldon*. Totta sets a scene reminiscent of that which Tolkien describes in the *Beowulf* essay (mentioned on page 9 of this paper).

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 (99).

It is clearly Tolkien's "little circle of light" kindled here in Totta's dream. Just before a "great bump and jolt of the cart" awakens Totta, he concludes this second piece to his dream vision with a refiguration of Beorhtwold's "summing up of the heroic code" which Tolkien promised in the exordium, "Beorhtnoth's Death" (79).

(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 (99).

With Totta clearly speaking the famous Maldon lines here, the question becomes: how far do we (not to mention Tolkien) wish to take this conceit? Are we to read Totta as the *Maldon* poet himself?

It would not be uncharacteristic of Tolkien; this kind of historical authentication of fictional texts was a serious play in which he often engaged. It is a matter somewhat ambiguous (and left so intentionally), and thus open to interpretation. Tolkien's suggestion in "Beorhtnoth's Death" that these lines "were not 'original', but an ancient and honoured expression of heroic will" (79-80) only adds to the ambiguity in that Totta's feverish chant does not necessarily identify him as the origin of the expression or, by extension, the poetic fragment *Maldon*. Still, it is an interesting notion to entertain: a brash young poet with a romantic temperament,

not present at the battle, but paying his dues in the “clean-up,” writes this now-legendary heroic verse (not uncritical of Beorhtnoth). It raises once more the questions of historicizing and perspective.

More important than such speculation is the great irony Tolkien wields by suggesting that this supreme expression of the northern heroic code is the product of a feverish dream. It is a delusion, a phantasm—but a beautiful one. The point is made doubly ironic in the fact that these critical lines come from Totta’s voice, further complicating the problematic question of winners and losers in the debate. In a sense, it is Totta who “wins” with this dreamy trump card—he has the last word with these now-famous lines, and the romantic spirit of his character is that which later generations have taken from the *Maldon* poem and cherished.

If we concur on little else about “The Homecoming,” I would at least echo Tom Shippey’s view that it is “a work on insecurity” (338). Tolkien’s dramatic dialogue presents a balance of two perspectives on war through the banter of Tída and Totta. It reflects the deep division in Tolkien’s mind about what war is and how it should be represented in art. It also asks questions of memory and historicizing—even if a poet offered a balanced account of battle, could we “hear the tears through the harp’s twanging?” Shippey’s notion of the drama “clearing up a doubt” or “sorting something out” seems like wishful thinking. For such an activity, a dramatic dialogue full of poetry, ambiguity and irony would be a strange vehicle indeed. But such is “The Homecoming,” and we may find Tolkien comes no closer to resolving his paradox of war than in the simple fact that both Tída and Totta have a say in

bringing Beorhtnoth home. If nothing else, Tolkien asks us to hear both voices and draw our own conclusions.

Chapter 3: *The Lord of the Rings* as “The Homecoming” Writ Large

“It’s strange how the human mind swings back and forth, from one extreme to an other. Does truth lie at some point of the pendulum’s swing, at a point where it never rests...” – Graham Greene, The End of the Affair (110)

Questions of dating drafts and discrepancies in length and form complicate efforts to classify the connection between “The Homecoming” and *The Lord of the Rings*. For the purposes of this paper, I prefer to consider these works side-by-side, as two movements (whatever the order) in a cycle concerned with the paradox of war—so much so that they are structurally defined by the contradiction. Between “The Homecoming” and *The Lord of the Rings* there are some very interesting points of continuity and discontinuity. The voices of Totta and Tída represent romanticized and bitter war, respectively. *The Lord of the Rings* offers far more than dialogue, but though I would term the disparate threads here “faces” rather than “voices”—the essential division remains between idealized and disillusioned representations of war. Tensions surrounding literary influences like the northern heroic code, central to “The Homecoming,” are present in *The Lord of the Rings* as well.

If the constraints of “The Homecoming” limit its scope to the bare bones of the conflict at stake, *The Lord of the Rings* magnifies the situation, staging the debate between Tída and Totta on a grand scale. *The Lord of the Rings* is free of historical and religious parameters; a far longer work of prose, it is no longer bound to alliterative dialogue, either. A refiguring of Tolkien’s structural conception of *Beowulf* may best describe the connection: *The Lord of the Rings* is “The Homecoming” writ large.

The move from small to large does, of course, provide some shifting subdivisions worth mentioning. Perhaps the most striking of which is the fact that the northern heroic code is channeled and invoked in both faces of war in *The Lord of the Rings*; the dogged perseverance of Sam and Frodo is just as indicative of the code as the more traditional heroic stand of the Captains of the West. The fact that the controversial code transcends the often rigid boundaries of Tolkien's wars suggests to me that he admired it so much that he simply could not keep it out. I will delve deeper into Tolkien's idealization of the code throughout my analysis. In spite of this mini-reconciliation, *The Lord of the Rings* maintains the same basic division between romantic and bitter war—between Totta and Tída.

While criticisms like those of Bloom or Rushdie I mention in the introduction to this paper are helpful in illustrating the widespread issues of historicizing and misreading Tolkien, certainly more constructive criticisms have been made of Tolkien, specifically in terms of his treatment of war. But even accomplished Tolkien scholars still seem to miss out on something critical in their examination of Tolkien's war, being content to examine the effects of a particular influence while failing to grasp a more comprehensive picture of violent conflict in Tolkien's fiction. Perhaps they, like Shippey in his "Homecoming" essay, also fall prey to a kind of overzealous scholarship in the often contentious effort to legitimate Tolkien's work as serious literature.

John Garth's "Frodo and the Great War" is a good illustration of this problem. The essay explores the potent influence of Tolkien's World War I experience on his heroic romance. It does so successfully, but when Garth claims that Tolkien's "work

presents versions of old-style heroism side-by-side with new versions that show the impact of the Great War,” he does not know just how right he is. It becomes clear that in “side-by-side” Garth attempts to juxtapose Tolkien’s earlier works with his later ones—a difficult task, as we have seen. In the stories of Beren, Túrin, and Tuor of *The Book of Lost Tales*, Garth sees Tolkien’s old-fashioned, heroic style at work. Set against these tales is *The Lord of the Rings*—“far from the heroic pattern” which Garth sees operating in Tolkien’s earlier stories (42). While Garth admits Tolkien “allows a taste” of the heroic war perspective in his sequel to *The Hobbit*, he considers the dispirited, unglamorous influence of World War I to be the decisive one in Tolkien’s treatment of war in *The Lord of the Rings*.

But there is much more than a taste of the heroic in *The Lord of the Rings*. Surely, as Garth argues, Beren, Túrin, and Tuor “are equal to all but the most outrageous challenges”—but the same might be said of Gandalf, Aragorn, and Éomer (42). This is not to say that the work done in Garth’s article is invalid; his illumination of certain World War I influences is very useful. Downplaying the significant presence of another side of war, however, misses the very interesting (and troublesome) variety in the treatment of war in *The Lord of the Rings*. An early review by C.S. Lewis comes closer to the mark. Lewis recognized the peculiarity and power in the way war is structured in Tolkien’s book:

On the one hand, the whole world is going to the war; the story rings with galloping hoofs, trumpets, steel on steel. On the other, very far away, miserable figures creep (like mice on a slag heap) through the twilight of Mordor. And all the time we know the fate of the world depends far more on

the small movement than on the great. This is a structural invention of the highest order: it adds immensely to the pathos, irony, and grandeur of the tale (115).

The final four volumes are divided between romantic and bitter war. The romantic war (Totta's war) of Books III and V is characterized by hyperbolic heroics, an idealized vision of "literary" war, and the portrayal of battle as the province of song and sport. Books IV and the early portion of VI counter with a far different view of war (Tída's); the agonizing experiences of Frodo and Sam in Mordor reveal an altogether inglorious and unglamorous side of battle, one, just as Garth argues, surely informed by Tolkien's own bitter war experience. Certain moments do, of course, complicate this structure. I will attempt to address them as best I can. At any rate, these contradictory moments appear seldom enough so as not to seriously interrupt the overarching structure.

The pronounced disparity between these two strands reflects a great deal of Tolkien's ongoing struggle to "rationalize" war through his writing (*Letters* 78). There is a palpable tension between the two threads, and Tolkien has no intention of resolving it easily. Tolkien's own comments on the book's construction shed light on how crucial the structural separation of these two narrative threads is to the tale as a whole. In a biting critique of an early film script which garbled the design of *The Lord of the Rings*, he has this to say:

The narrative now divides into two main branches: 1. Prime Action, the Ringbearers. 2. Subsidiary Action, the rest of the Company leading to the 'heroic' matter. It is essential that these two branches should each be treated

in coherent sequence. Both to render them intelligible as a story, and because they are totally different in tone and scenery. Jumbling them together entirely destroys these things (*Letters* 275).

Practicality, too, plays its part in the structural makeup of the book. The threads were written separately. The “Prime Action” proved the more difficult of the two, if Tolkien’s remarks in the Foreword are to be taken seriously—he had to force himself “to tackle the journey of Frodo to Mordor” (xxiii). Whatever the reason, it is clear that Tolkien intended two distinct faces of war to be present—but largely unmingled—in his heroic romance.

In “The Riders of Rohan,” an astonished Éomer poses an existential question to Aragorn: Do we “walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?” (434). Aragorn’s pointed reply is that “a man may do both” (434). He means it, and so does Tolkien; the author’s paradoxical portrayal of war reflects this belief. The disconnect between Tolkien’s two faces of war is also one of the central tensions in the book—one never fully reconciled.

One of my primary aims here is to demonstrate that the structure of *The Lord of the Rings* is in many ways “The Homecoming” writ large. The structure of my analysis, however, will differ somewhat from the first chapter of the paper. My section on “The Homecoming” emphasized the frequent interplays in the dialogue between Tída and Totta. Because of the added complexity and length (sometimes an entire “book” as opposed to a few lines of dialogue from Tída or Totta) of the contrasting sections in *The Lord of the Rings*, I will deal with each “face” discretely, beginning with that of romantic war.

Romantic War in Books III and V: Hyperbolic Heroism and Literary Legacy

The Company's split in "The Breaking of the Fellowship" coincides with Tolkien's diverging visions of war which divide between them the final four books of *The Lord of the Rings*. While Frodo and Sam flee alone to attempt the journey through Mordor, the more heroic figures of Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli welcome the reader into Tolkien's epic side of battle. The tone for what is to unfold in Book III (and later, Book V) is set at the end of this first chapter, as the Three Hunters set off to pursue the great host of Orcs who have captured Merry and Pippin. Before the legendary chase begins, Aragorn declares:

But come! With hope or without hope we will follow the trail of our enemies.
And woe to them, if we prove the swifter! We will make such a chase as shall
be accounted a marvel among the Three Kindreds: Elves, Dwarves, and Men.
Forth the Three Hunters! (420)

Aragorn's brief pep talk sets forth several of the hallmarks of Tolkien's epic representation of war: deeds of bravery no matter the odds (representing an idealized adaptation of the northern heroic code) as well as an awareness of the songs and tales that might later recount such deeds. Tolkien seeks also to fit style to content in the romantic war of *The Lord of the Rings*; he intentionally treats the prose of this face of war in an elevated manner. What Rushdie mistakes for "stilted" is indeed deliberately archaic, intended to hearken back to the literary works which are refigured in Tolkien's epic war and further emphasize the stark disparity between the two contending faces of war.

Fantastic individual feats of arms—moments of hyperbolic heroism—constitute one of the most striking aspects of the violent conflicts which take place in Books III and V. These epic deeds occur most often through the exploits of characters such as Aragorn, Gandalf, or Éomer. It is perhaps the most romantic notion in Tolkien’s varied portrayal of combat: that one man—armed only with valor, strong will, and maybe a legendary sword—might singlehandedly turn the tides of battle. Heroics of this sort are a staple of romance, myth, and legend, but they were surely called into question more than ever by the events of the war Tolkien served in personally. World War I saw thousands of men wasted daily like so many pawns on a chess board, and to Tolkien, it was clear that not heroes but “Machines” would in the end be “triumphant” (*Letters* 111). Tolkien’s epic vision of war refigures this experience, romanticizing combat and transforming it through fantasy into a noble, if illusory enterprise. In particular, Tolkien’s brand of hyperbolic heroics highlights the exaggerated, almost quantifiable value of both heroes and their weapons.

Aragorn and his mythic sword Andúril are particularly indicative of Tolkien’s hyperbolic heroism. While some at the Council of Elrond doubt the Ranger’s heroic pedigree, his weapon is still spoken of as a potential trump card in the wars against Sauron. Boromir posits: “Mayhap the Sword-that-was-Broken may still stem the tide—if the hand that wields it has inherited not an heirloom only, but the sinews of the Kings of Men” (268). In Books III and V, Aragorn, with his sword re-forged, proves up to the task.

In the Three Hunters' meeting with Éomer, Tolkien employs elaborate, elevated prose to build up a sense of Aragorn's tremendous martial capability.

Aragorn explains his mission to Éomer thus:

The Orcs whom we pursued took captive two of my friends. In such a need a man that has no horse will go on foot, and he will not ask for leave to follow the trail. Nor will he count the heads of the enemy save with a sword. I am not weaponless. (433)

This impressive declaration perfectly demonstrates the unwavering courage of the northern heroic code. Aragorn's boastful assurance of his skill as a swordsman is immediately followed by a formal introduction of his lofty lineage:

I am Aragorn son of Arathorn, and am called Elessar, the Elfstone, Dúnadan, the heir of Isildur Elendil's son of Gondor. Here is the Sword that was Broken and is forged again! Will you aid me or thwart me? Choose swiftly!
(433)

His companions are not unaware of the high shift in tone and style which takes place; to Legolas and Gimli "he seemed to have grown in stature while Éomer had shrunk; and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone" (433).

A hero's weapon in Tolkien's romantic war carries with it a powerful reputation; mere sight of a blade like Andúril both inspires allies and sends foes fleeing. During the battle at Helm's Deep, Aragorn and Éomer lead their small forces against overwhelming numbers of enemies, but the presence of their swords brings hope.

Charging from the side, they hurled themselves upon the wild men. Andúril rose and fell, gleaming with white fire. A shout went up from wall and tower: ‘Andúril! Andúril goes to war. The Blade that was Broken shines again!’ (534)

The awe-inspiring atmosphere of the scene is established by the incendiary (in more ways than one) properties of Aragorn’s sword and the rousing battle cries of the men. Amid the presumed chaos of the battle, Tolkien isolates striking images of his protagonists to accentuate their heroism.

A broad stairway climbed from the Deep up to the Rock and the rear-gate of the Hornburg. Near the bottom stood Aragorn. In his hand still Andúril gleamed, and the terror of the sword for a while held back the enemy... (537)

In a narrative otherwise noted for a surprising realism, Aragorn and his sword are truly larger-than-life, seemingly ripped from the pages of myth and legend.

Built up in this epic vein, it is no surprise that these massive battles are often referred to as contests not between vast, impersonal armies but great individual heroes. Aragorn believes that merely showing himself and his weapon in the palantír is enough to frighten Sauron and provoke a “hasty stroke” from the Dark Lord’s armies (780). In “The Siege of Gondor,” Denethor speaks of a previous defense of Osgiliath as a one-on-one contest—“when Boromir denied [Sauron] the passage” (816). Large-scale combat is again treated this way during the desperate attack on the Black Gate, when “little time was left to Aragorn for the ordering of *his* [my emphasis] battle” (891). Though the battles in Books III and V are often massive,

Tolkien's epic portrayal of war is one where captains can make all the difference in leading the charge rather than directing from a safe distance.

Tolkien leaves little room to gainsay the feats of his heroes, practically quantifying their exaggerated worth at several points. In "The King of the Golden Hall," Théoden mocks Gandalf for not bringing an army with him to aid the people of Rohan. Gandalf offers a telling rebuke:

Has not the messenger from your gate reported the names of my companions?
Seldom has any lord of Rohan received three such guests. Weapons they have
laid at your doors that are worth many a mortal man, even the mightiest.
(513).

The heroes of Tolkien's epic war are no inexperienced conscripts, nor do they wield standard issue weapons. By the time Gandalf declares in "The Last Debate" that "there are names among us that are worth more than a thousand mail-clad knights apiece," we believe him (882).

Heroes like Aragorn not only wield magic weapons and exhibit superhuman prowess, they seem to bear charmed lives as well. As combat rages across the Pelennor Fields the narrator takes a moment to describe a friendly meeting: "And so at length Éomer and Aragorn met in the midst of the battle, and they leaned on their swords and looked on one another and were glad" (848). So doughty are these heroes, they seem capable of slowing time in battle, pausing the action to set up striking images reminiscent of those previously mentioned in Helm's Deep. After the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Aragorn, Éomer, and Prince Imrahil emerge "unscathed, for such was their fortune and the skill and might of their arms, and few

indeed had dared to abide them or look on their faces in the hour of their wrath” (849).

In many of these examples of hyperbolic heroism, we can also recognize the influence of the literary works Tolkien admired and professed. Because Tolkien believed that these works also exhibit a kind of balance—their authors employed a critical eye and perhaps an ambivalent stance toward the heroics they are remembered for expressing—these instances of direct influence are here idealized and made to serve the aims of his romantic war. The appropriation of the northern heroic code is of course one example. Tolkien once wrote that his work attempts to paint the northern code “in its true light”—in *The Lord of the Rings* we receive it at least in its purest Tolkienian light (*Letters* 56).

Other instances can be noted, both in terms of style and content. Aragorn’s understated boast that he is “not weaponless” builds up the legend around his sword, but it is also, I think, indebted to the “heroic irony” of the litotes so prevalent in *Beowulf* (Chickering 10). Like *Beowulf*’s glib assurance that he does not intend to “boast about” slaying sea-beasts during his swimming contest with Breca, Aragorn’s understatement is downright humorous—we know quite well how deadly is the sword he wields (*Beowulf* 585-586).

Tolkien once claimed that “Old Norse poetry aims at seizing a situation, striking a blow that will be remembered, illuminating a moment with a flash of lightning” (*Sigurd* 7). This seems to be the spirit in which Tolkien envisioned and wrote some of his own battle scenes—the elemental images of Aragorn in Helm’s Deep are a fine example of this Old Norse influence. Aragorn and Éomer leaning on

their weapons captures a similar sense of the almost archetypal battle-imagery of Old Norse poetry, and it might also be said to look back to a specific literary predecessor by echoing the posture of Achilles as he leans upon his spear in the *Iliad*. Even the moment when Gandalf attempts to express the worth of the weapons laid at Théoden's door might be read in conversation with the literary ancestors of *The Lord of the Rings*; it calls to mind Beowulf's arrival at Hrothgar's hall, when he and his men are ordered to leave their arms at the door—"let shields stay here, tightened war-wood / your battle-shafts wait the result of words" (397-398). Tolkien refigures elements of the works he studied in order to bolster the hyperbolic heroics of his romanticized war.

Given the importance of the influence these old poems and tales had upon Tolkien, it is unsurprising that the characters of his epic war express a desire to craft songs and stories through their own heroics. There are many reasons why Tolkien's heroes attempt daring feats, but one is most certainly the hope of becoming a legend, of achieving something fit for a song. After hearing of the distance covered during the Three Hunters' pursuit of the Orcs, Éomer assures them that "this deed of the three friends should be sung in many a hall" (436). During the battle at the Hornburg, Théoden asks Aragorn to charge with him when the dawn arrives, at which time "maybe [they] shall cleave a road, or make such an end as will be worth a song—if any be left to sing of us hereafter" (539). Théoden's desire to be remembered in song is rewarded, as their mounted charge helps win the crucial battle.

The romantic war of *The Lord of the Rings* also draws upon the notion of battle as sport. Aragorn's grim claim that he only counts his enemies with a sword

offers a glimpse of this sporting aspect of war, but the real games begin in “Helm’s Deep,” where, in the midst of battle, Gimli and Legolas develop a light-hearted rapport over their friendly wager as to who might slay the most Orcs. A kind of perverse pleasure is taken in tallying these heroics, as Gimli begins his count while “patting his axe” fondly (535). The language of sport permeates the companions’ chatter throughout the battle; they talk of their “count,” and the “score” of the “game” (536, 543). At one point Legolas wishes to inform Gimli that his “tale is now thirty-nine” (538). Whether he intends “tale” to mean a count or a story, he once more reflects the consciousness of sporting metaphors and desire for tales being told about heroics (538).

This all seems somewhat disturbing; however I do not think Tolkien intends to be too hard on Legolas and Gimli. This is Tolkien’s epic side of war, and it is good to remember that these are Orcs they are fighting, and they do so largely out of self-defense. In a letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien once wrote of the virtue to reshape situations through writing fiction—for instance, writing of a war against Orcs while real war experience suggests that there are “a great many Orcs on our side,” too (*Letters* 78). His point about the potential comforts in refiguring experience in a mythic or fantastic mode goes a long way toward explaining the idealization which can be mistaken for outright glorification in Tolkien’s epic side of war.

Indeed, it would be unfair to read Books III and V or his major influences as blindly or irresponsibly glorifying battle. For Tolkien’s epic war is not devoid of sorrow and loss—nor, it should be noted, are his chief literary influences. If, as we have seen, Tolkien recognized critique and ambivalence in the Old English poets,

surely tragedy and sadness would be no stretch at all. We should remember that the division between these two threads of romance and bitterness is not necessarily one of sadness, though it may surely play a part. Previously, I drew on Tída's crucial line—"you can hear the tears through the harps twanging"—in discussing the essential division between romance and disillusion. But here, it might be useful to consider in its more literal sense. One can indeed "hear the tears" even in Tolkien's romantic war—but this fact does not diminish the epic quality of the representation.

In some sense, the old tales which inspired Tolkien were all dirges. In spite of its grandeur and heroism, *Beowulf* is a sad poem about pride and inevitable death. *The Battle of Maldon* was (for Tolkien, anyway) just as much about *ofermod*—the excessive pride of Beorhtnoth which leads to so many deaths—as it is a "pure" expression of a Northern heroic code (102). Tolkien admired this code, but he was critical of it, too. This complicated relationship plays into the tension at work in "The Homecoming" as well as the two discordant faces of war which tug against each other in *The Lord of the Rings*.

At any rate, there is, in fact, a great measure of sorrow and death in the epic Books III and V, though it may take a careful reader, someone like Tídwald, to detect it. Immediately following the passage which tells of Aragorn and his companions emerging unscathed from battle, we learn that "many others were hurt or maimed or dead upon the field" (849). A plaintive list of some of the notables slain follows.

The axes hewed Forlong as he fought alone and unhorsed; and both Duilin of Morthond and his brother were trampled to death when they assailed the *múmakil*, leading their bowmen close to shoot at the eyes of the monsters.

Neither Hirluin the fair would return to Pinnath Gelin, nor Grimbald to Grimslade, nor Halbarad to the Northlands, dour-handed Ranger. No few had fallen, renowned or nameless, captain or soldier; for it was a great battle and the full count of it no tale has told. (849)

While this account of the slain is undoubtedly a sad one, it maintains the epic style of the surrounding material. In fact, it displays clear ties to the epic catalogues of Homer's *Iliad* and other myths and legends. The men accounted for here were not heretofore unnamed either; they appear earlier in a similar, if more upbeat, catalogue in "Minas Tirith," as they march into the city to great fanfare from the crowds. The two catalogues themselves provide a balance of oppositions, and the final list of the slain is all the more poignant for its relation to the first. The epithets, formal listings, and assurances that these men died valiantly in combat help to reinforce the fact that heroism and sadness are not mutually exclusive.

Théoden's death at the Battle of the Pelennor Fields is another moment of poignant, but heroic sadness within the grand portrait of battle. His fall from Snowmane is referred to as a noble end; he has "fallen in the midst of his glory," but still manages to speak with Merry before he dies (842).

'Farewell, Master Holbytla!' he said. 'My body is broken. I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed. I felled the black serpent. A grim morn, and a glad day, and a golden sunset!' (842)

Their parting is tragic, but Théoden is pleased with the end he has made and the deeds he has done during the battle. His last charge will be remembered, and so too will his resting place. Théoden's grave will not be that of an unknown soldier. Rather, in the

midst of the battle, “men now raised the king, and laying cloaks upon spear-truncheons they made shift to bear him away towards the City” (844). By the end of the chapter, we learn that “long afterward a maker in Rohan” composes a song to honor Théoden and the others who fell in the battle (849). The epic conventions of his fall take nothing away from its sadness.

Though tragic moments like the ones mentioned above are not discordant with the epic style and content and Books III and V, other incidents do complicate the picture, which is inevitably an oversimplification for such a long and complex work. These moments jar readers from the otherwise homogeneous heroic frame. Pippin and Merry, so self-consciously out of place in these great wars, are generally the vehicles through which Tolkien suddenly wrenches the epic tale of Books III and V. Chapter 3 of Book III, “The Uruk-Hai,” is one example of Tolkien’s occasional departures from the epic. It follows on the heels of the Three Hunters’ heroics, but deals with less glamorous matters of war, being a prisoner-of-war account told mostly from Pippin’s perspective.

Neither Pippin nor Merry remembered much of the later part of the journey. Evil dreams and evil waking were blended into a long tunnel of misery, with hope growing ever fainter behind. They ran, and they ran, striving to keep up the pace set by the Orcs, licked every now and again with a cruel thong cunningly handled. If they halted or stumbled, they were seized and dragged for some distance. (450)

The hungry, exhausted hobbits obviously seem out of place in Tolkien's epic scheme. Perhaps this is why Tolkien treats the matter as an entirely separate chapter, providing a chapter-to-chapter juxtaposition which mirrors the structure of the whole.

Still other contradictory moments find their way into Tolkien's epic thread without the buffer of a discrete chapter. During an audience with Pippin, Lord Denethor asks of Boromir's death: "And how did you escape, and yet he did not, so mighty a man as he was, and only orcs to withstand him" (755)? Pippin responds plainly: "The mightiest man may be slain by one arrow" (755). Though Pippin's tone may be somewhat high and aphoristic, his answer rings of the sad truth, and shows Tolkien unwilling to let readers become overly comfortable in the realm of hyperbolic heroism.

A further puzzling departure from the heroic comes in "The Siege of Gondor," while Pippin and Beregon await orders for the defense of Minas Tirith.

In some other time and place Pippin might have been pleased with his new array, but he knew now that he was taking part in no play; he was in deadly earnest the servant of a grim master in the greatest peril. The hauberk was burdensome, and the helm weighed upon his head. (808)

This passage captures Pippin's anxiety on the eve of battle. But what is really remarkable is the revelation that the young hobbit "in some other time and place" had perhaps dreamed of just such a situation. His epiphany gets to the heart of the discrepancy between fantasizing about war and *being* in war—the taste for the heroic which we seem incapable of satiating. It is a wonderful moment, though it does not accord well with the epic content of its surrounding material. Tolkien includes these

problematic moments to emphasize the echoes of a part-to-whole structure and to set up moments which only complicate the picture further, when the little folk do, in a sense, rise to these epic occasions. Both Merry and Pippin do ironically hold their own in battle; Merry's "slow-kindled courage" is awakened in the fight against the Witch King, and Pippin, almost echoing the game between Legolas and Gimli, hopes to smite his enemies at the Black Gate, to "draw level with old Merry" (841,892).

On top of these contradictory moments, there is an overarching irony to Tolkien's epic face of war, one clarified as early as the Fellowship's split, tempering all the heroics to follow. This is, of course, that "with [Frodo] lies the true Quest," as Aragorn declares plainly enough, "ours is but a small matter in the great deeds of this time" (426). Gandalf, in "The Last Debate," reminds the Captains (and readers) similarly: "Victory cannot be achieved by arms" (878). In spite of all its heroics, glorious battles, and thrilling songs, Tolkien seems to rob his epic thread of ultimate purpose. More than any other contradictory moments in Books III and V, this basic fact undercuts all that Tolkien builds in Books III and V, questioning the value of its fantastic (and perhaps phantasmic) heroism.

Bitter War of Books IV and VI: Drudgery and Disillusion in Modern War

A far different face of war is shown when the narrative returns to Frodo and Sam in Book IV. The staples of Tolkien's epic war—the hyperbolic heroics of fearless leaders, the joy and sadness expressed through song and sport in open battle, and the elevated prose style to match these deeds—drop away during Frodo's journey in Book IV and the early part of Book VI. The traumatizing influence of World War I usurps the place of idealized "literary" war; it seems as if Totta's voice is replaced

by Tída's. Tolkien's gritty face of war counters the conventions of his epic war, depicting a side of war demythologized and unglamorous.

Although Frodo's journey can be considered the crux of the tale, and is indeed the overarching Quest, Tolkien rids it of the heroic and literary conventions which make up the narrative of Books III and V. Elrond, at the Council, muses as if this were not so surprising: "such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere" (269).

The conditions, as it were, of the Quest are laid out before the departure from Rivendell in Book II. Elrond claims that a "host of Elves in armour of the Elder Days...would avail little" on the way to Mordor (275). As they appoint the members of the Fellowship, Gandalf reminds Elrond that "even if [he] chose for us an Elf-lord, such as Glorfindel, he could not storm the Dark Tower, nor open the road to the Fire by the power that is in him" (276). It is a Quest based on secrecy, not heroics. The war effort, for Frodo and Sam, just as it was for Tolkien and millions more in Europe, is not the glorious game they hoped it might be.

In understanding the influence of World War I on Tolkien's flip side of war, a return to John Garth's article proves most useful. Here I will mention but a few of the fascinating corollaries Garth sees between the war's terrors and those of Frodo's journey, chiefly in regards to the Nazgûl, the passage through the Dead Marshes, and the ever-worsening condition of Frodo. The terrifying shrieks of the Nazgûl which Sam and Frodo hear overhead leave them in fits of abject horror. Of course, they do not square off in combat against the wraiths, as the heroes of Tolkien's epic side of

war might (and as Éowyn and Merry do indeed). Instead, they must cower and squirm with fear, powerless to do anything but hope for the swift passing of the winged terrors. As Garth says, “the urgent need to hide is pervasive” in the journey to Mordor (45). Garth suggests a connection between the cries of the Nazgûl and the experience of artillery shelling in World War I, judging by the similarity between Tolkien’s fantastic accounts and the ways Wilfred Owen and other war writers described the very real sensory fears of shelling (46).

Garth makes some interesting observations about the Dead Marshes, too, where Tolkien’s war experience is perhaps most transparent. In a rare confession of this sort, he admits as much himself—“The Dead Marshes...owe something to Northern France after the Battle of the Somme” (*Letters* 303). The mud, grime, and slime which the hobbits accumulate on their miserable trek through the Marshes naturally call to mind the devastated landscape of the Somme. So, too, the macabre visions of countless bodies beneath the boggy waters. Garth argues that some of the strangeness in Frodo’s perception of the bodies as being seen through “some window, glazed with grimy glass” is redolent of the view through a World War I gas helmet (47). The grotesque journey through the Dead Marshes provides another key departure from the epic of Books III and V: Sam and Frodo see nothing of the glorious battle that might have led to this swampy mass grave, but they must trudge through the rotting remains. Tolkien clearly found this suggestion effective; he creates a similar scene in the battlefield clean up reserved for Tída and Totta in “The Homecoming.”

One other point of interest in Garth's paper is his discussion of the "parallels between Frodo's condition and shell shock" (50). Garth recognizes Frodo exhibiting several of the symptoms of shell shock, as they were described by a medical correspondent in 1915. Frodo's inexplicable blindness in the Eryn Muil is one example. Other signs of the disorder include his uncontrollable twitching and failing memory. The evidence suggests a compelling link between Frodo's condition and that of the shell shocked soldier in "real" war.

Should this be surprising? Frodo's war is one of harsh realities, however fantastic the setting. Where direct links between the war of Book IV and early Book VI and Tolkien's Great War experience are less obvious, we can at least see this face of war in discordant conversation with Tolkien's epic war—the other half of the book. Whereas Books III and V present epic battle glorified through song and sport, the journey of Sam and Frodo colors war in an unglamorous hue.

During the passage through the Dead Marshes, Sam voices his frustration with the filth and muck of their expedition. He barks at Gollum: "The stink nearly knocks me down with my nose held. You stink, and master stinks; the whole place stinks" (629). Gollum rightly appends Sam himself to the noxious list, though it does nothing to improve morale. The hobbits are entrenched in the war's dirty, thankless work.

As the journey lengthens and food and water supply lessens, rationing what is left becomes one of the chief concerns for the war effort of Frodo and Sam. By the time they reach the desolate lands about Mount Doom, the humble rabbit stew had in Ithilien is no more than a wistful memory (and not even so much as that for Frodo).

While the careful rationing of their precious lembas alleviates much of the risk of famine, finding fresh water is always an obstacle. At one point, Sam risks leaving Frodo alone in Mordor, in search of a spring or even a few muddy drops, declaring: “Water we must have, or we’ll get no further” (928). While the figures of Tolkien’s epic war have little concern with food between battles (save, of course, Merry and Pippin), daily sustenance is of the utmost importance to these weary hobbit foot soldiers.

Tolkien’s claim regarding the palliative potential of refiguring war through his fiction—putting all the orcs on one side, for instance—seems particularly apposite to the romantic side of things. But it does not hold for Sam and Frodo’s war. After Sam rummages about for gear which might offer them disguise in the Tower of Cirith Ungol, he outfits Frodo and critiques his new look—“a perfect little orc, if I may make so bold” (913). One cannot help but think that, unlike the idealized combat of the opposing face, there *are* orcs on both sides of the bitter strand of war. Of course, this moment functions in some more obvious ways as well. The hobbits’ Quest is so inglorious that they must resort to espionage by donning filthy orc rags. There is no room on the journey to Mordor for the trappings of epic war; no horns, or banners, or recognizable weapons to be worn openly and proudly.

The orcs themselves are hardly better off in the confines of Tolkien’s gritty face of war. Judging by the conversation the hobbits overhear in “The Land of Shadow,” these orcs are a far cry from the menacing adversaries besieging Gondor. If these enemies in Books III and V function primarily as foils for heroes to vanquish, the closer look we are granted on the bitter side of war merely adds to the base

crudity of this contrasting representation. We glean from the eavesdropped exchange between the tracker and fighter that morale is low, as infighting and desertion become common place in the orc ranks, a filthy and disorganized mob without the Nazgûl about to master and lead them by fear (924-925).

Some degree of order is maintained in the company Frodo and Sam fall in with, but it is bought with whips and slave-drivers, not by trust or love of those who lead. The hobbits are driven on with brutality and derision.

‘Where there’s a whip there’s a will, my slugs. Hold up! I’d give you a nice freshener now, only you’ll get as much lash as your skins will carry when you come in late to your camp. Do you good. Don’t you know we’re at war?’
(931)

They do indeed—and it is not the epic war of Books III and V.

Gone also are the romanticized heroics of Tolkien’s epic war. The exceptional leadership and superhuman individual feats seem almost parodied along the way in Mordor. The guide who leads Frodo and Sam through the dangers of Mordor is Gollum, whose qualities of leadership say a great deal about the divide between Tolkien’s epic war and his gritty one. Treacherous, malnourished, and altogether wretched, Gollum’s dubious credentials have very little in common with the beloved Captains of the West. The best advice he can offer Frodo and Sam is: “Follow Smeagol very carefully, and you may go a long way, quite a long way, before He catches you, yes perhaps” (625). He fails to inspire the confidence we come to expect from Gandalf or Aragorn.

There is a distinctly suburban quality to the power structure of Frodo and Sam's war, starkly contrasted with the grandiose heroics of the war against which it is juxtaposed. On some level, class and lineage still exist in Tolkien's gritty war, yet the chief relationship established on the Quest is not of long-lost kings to stewards or sister-sons, but of homeowner to gardener. This odd, essentially bourgeois relationship factors into the element of randomness—even absurdity—which colors much that occurs along the way in Book IV and the early portion of Book VI.

The feeling has its roots as far back as Bilbo's finding of the Ring, a moment which Gandalf calls "the strangest event in the whole history of the Ring so far" (55). Though the wizard hints that some powers may be at work besides dumb luck or the malice of the Ring, he can only describe its hobbit discoverer as "the most unlikely person imaginable" (56). Throughout Tolkien's romantic strand, the idea of randomness or absurdity in a war whose outcome is determined more by luck than by valor or greatness is staunchly resisted. But here, this disillusioned notion is made manifest. Tolkien seems unable to escape from the influence of World War I, what John Garth calls in his book, *Tolkien and the Great War*, "the crisis of disenchantment that shaped the modern era" (xiii).

One cannot help but make a connection between some of the absurd, anti-heroic, and random events in Book IV and early Book VI and the war experiences of Tolkien and his friends. In particular, they call to mind the random nature of shelling deaths, like those "slight," seemingly inconsequential shrapnel wounds incurred by Tolkien's great friend G.B. Smith *after* the Somme—wounds which, infected with gangrene, ended his life just a few days later (Garth 211).

Tolkien's gritty face of war is not without its moments of exception. Like the epic side of war portrayed in Books III and V, the picture of Frodo and Sam's war is not wholly consistent. These moments offer readers the quick bursts of interplay between threads that is common in the dialogue of "The Homecoming," while also expressing in miniature the structure of the whole. We might also read these contradictory moments in terms of the breakdown of the overarching structure—they suggest that, at times, the construction buckles under its own weight, unable to maintain discrete balance.

Sam's somber experience of a battle in "Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit" is one such contradictory moment. Initially, his reaction conforms to Tolkien's unglamorous face of war.

It was Sam's first view of a battle of Men against Men, and he did not like it much. He was glad that he could not see the dead face. He wondered what the man's name was and where he came from; and if he was really evil at heart, or what lies or threats had led him on the long march from his home; and if he would not really rather have stayed there in peace (661).

But this meditation on the very real horrors of war is "quickly driven from his mind" when, "to his astonishment and terror, and lasting delight," he sees a massive, mythic Oliphaunt joining the fray (661).

In describing the Oliphaunt's earth-shaking arrival, Tolkien shifts into ornate, descriptive prose, discussing the origin of the beast and its gear of war. The Oliphaunt wreaks tremendous havoc; many of the Men whom Sam has been musing plaintively about are "crushed to the ground" beneath the creature (661). Yet Sam is

absolutely thrilled to watch the spectacle. A latent desire, maybe, is wakened in him. He takes undeniable, if momentary, pleasure in seeing this thrilling beast in action. It is a jarring juxtaposition, taking place just sentences after Sam's war-weary ruminations. Typically, Tolkien is careful to maintain a rigid structural separation between these two disparate views of war, but this contradictory moment makes a strong point about our paradoxical understanding of war. Even Sam, in the midst of his nightmarish journey, can at times gasp for breath and be caught up in the excitement and enchantment of battle.

Sam's inability to fully overcome the allure of heroics is demonstrated once more in "The Stairs of Cirith Ungol," when he and Frodo carry on a reflexive discussion on the nature of storytelling. "Stuck in the worst places" of their own story, Frodo suggests that readers would wish that they could shut the book, but Sam disagrees, asserting: "I wouldn't be one to say that. Things done and over and made into part of the great tales are different" (713). Even after experiencing the horrors of war first-hand, Sam maintains his taste for the heroic, expressing the paradox both in our relation to war and our understanding of storytelling.

Other moments in Books IV and VI pierce the veil of Tolkien's gritty war, too. His epic mode seeps into the account of Sam's battle with Shelob as well as his rescue of Frodo in the Tower of Cirith Ungol. Shelob's physical presence in "The Choices of Master Samwise" is described in terms uncharacteristic of Tolkien's unglamorous war.

Knobbed and pitted with corruption was her age-old hide, but ever thickened from within with layer on layer of evil growth. The blade scored it with a

dreadful gash, but those hideous folds could not be pierced by any strength of men, not though Elf or Dwarf should forge the steel or the hand of Beren or of Turin wield it. (728)

Both style and content here resemble that of Books III and V, especially in the allusions to the old heroes and their legendary weapons. Sam miraculously bests that which these heroes supposedly cannot, “fending off that ghastly roof” of Shelob’s girth as she tries to smother him (729). It seems a deed worthy of a song, and a place in Tolkien’s epic vision of war.

And yet, here as in his rescue of Frodo later in the Tower, there is a distinct element of the *mock-heroic*, much like Tída’s condescending gibes toward Totta in “The Homecoming.” For it is Shelob’s own misstep, landing on Sam’s blade with the “driving force of her own cruel will,” which inflicts the wound, not some moment of doughty swordplay by the hobbit (729). Likewise, the successful raid in the Tower of Cirith Ungol is, though by all means a brave deed, due more to the in-fighting between the Orcs than the heroics of the hobbit-turned-rescuer.

Tolkien parodies Sam’s mock-heroics by building up ridiculous rumors of his deeds among the Orcs. Examining the signs of the battle with Shelob, Gorbag reckons “there’s a large warrior loose, Elf most likely, with an elf-sword anyway, and an axe as well maybe” (739). This humorous situation serves as a kind of ironic counterpart to the very real threat to enemies posed by Aragorn’s blade in the romantic side of war. Sam is well aware of the irony, later referring to himself as “the great big Elvish warrior” (742). The running joke is again picked up in “The Land of Shadow,” when the soldier Orc refers to the confusing spread of rumors

about spies in Mordor: “First they say it’s a great Elf in bright armour, then it’s a sort of small dwarf-man, then it must be a pack of rebel Uruk-hai; or maybe it’s all the lot together” (925). Although the grimy war of Book IV and early Book VI is not altogether streamlined, some of its complications maintain this air of irony verging on the comical.

“The Cool Middle”: Eucatastrophe through Interlacement

“Even war has something sublime about it...” Kant

It would be wishful thinking to say that Tolkien can neatly square this paradox; arranging for the peaceful coexistence of his own atrocious experience of modern war with the excitement, hope and grandeur of the literary legacy of war is a tall order indeed. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien stages a kind of dialogue—like the one between Tída and Totta—on a massive scale. The question now is what Tolkien hopes to achieve by such a structure. Does he resolve the conflict here? Perhaps—but not neatly, at any rate.

In my “Homecoming” analysis, the key moments I discuss which seem to reach beyond the pattern of the central debate (Totta’s dream, the intrusion of the third voice) only further complicated the issues at stake. However, I do refer to a fleeting sense of resolution implied in the structure of the drama and its basic set-up: the fact that, through the cooperative efforts of Tída and Totta in bringing Beorhtnoth home, both voices of war have a part to play in seeing a task through to the end—they complete a kind of quest. Tolkien suggests something very similar—again on a much larger and more complex scale—in the elaborate interlacements which lead up to the

fulfillment of Frodo's quest in the climactic "eucatastrophe"—"the sudden joyous 'turn'"—of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Monsters* 153).

In the concluding moments of John Garth's *Tolkien and the Great War* (a book-length study of WWI influence on Tolkien and his fiction), he draws from a quote by C.S. Lewis, who referred to *The Lord of the Rings* as "a recall from facile optimism and wailing pessimism alike...the cool middle point between illusion and disillusionment" (312). The notion of balance in this quotation makes it very interesting for our purposes. Garth's use of it at the end of his book suggests that he has perhaps come closer to understanding the paradox of Tolkien's war than he demonstrates in the article I discussed earlier. Yet Lewis, and Garth quoting him, still mistakenly imply that *Rings* is presenting a single, prevailing vision. The terms "illusion" and "disillusionment" might fairly describe Tolkien's romantic and bitter war, respectively. However, as this paper has shown, Tolkien's work occupies the two distant poles more often than it does the "cool middle." For the present lack of a better term, it is at least useful in beginning to consider the eucatastrophic interlacement which takes place between the two as Frodo's quest is completed.

Lewis' assessment refers in particular to the way the heroics of the Elder Days are described by Gandalf in "The Shadow of the Past" as "not wholly vain" (52). It is an important line, providing a kind of remote consolation and capturing the curious tone of the climactic interplay between the two faces of war in the book. Given the irony and overflow of emotion involved at the end of Frodo's quest, it is easy to overlook the crucial part played by the war of Books III and V. But upon closer look,

there is no doubt: the quest could not be achieved without the timely intrusions of romanticized war.

Instead of Lewis' "cool middle," I propose another term to describe the bizarre and wonderful interlacements at play: a sublime muddle. As the desperate plan to assault Mordor is considered in "The Last Debate," Aragorn, in favor of this last stand, proclaims: "We come now to the very brink, where hope and despair are akin" (880). His claim signals the sublime collision of the two opposing threads which have for so long been woven separately.

Perhaps the purest expression of Tolkien's idealized northern code is outlined as Gandalf offers tactical advice to the Captains:

We must walk open-eyed into that trap, with courage, but small hope for ourselves. For, my lords, it may well prove that we ourselves shall perish utterly in a black battle far from the living lands; so that even if Barad-dûr be thrown down, we shall not live to see a new age. But this, I deem, is our duty (880).

The subordinates, too, follow this idealized code, pledging to follow Aragorn and Gandalf even on this deadly venture.

As Frodo and Sam toil on in Book VI, hints are dropped regarding the encroaching influence of the other strand. The hyperbolic heroics of Aragorn in the Seeing Stone which would presumably prove ineffectual here transcend the borders between the two representations of war, interceding in Frodo's journey through Mordor—Sauron's "Eye turned inward, pondering tidings of doubt and danger: a

bright sword, and a stern and kingly face it saw, and for a while it gave little thought to other things” (923).

Besides the implications this sublime muddle has within the tale, there is an added satisfaction for the reader, enjoying a kind of dramatic irony in revisiting scenes we already know from a different perspective or in being kept abreast of the events transpiring in the opposing strand. These are moments when the tension, normally so tightly wound in narrative deferral from Book to Book unravels to powerful effect.

Frodo’s war has been one determined in large part by random chance and luck. But in the escape from the orc marching lines, Tolkien leaves no doubt about the role romantic war has played in affording this opportunity to slink away and continue the quest, “for the Captains of the West were advancing and the Dark Lord was speeding his forces north. So it chanced that several companies came together at the road-meeting” (931).

Periodic reminders of the crucial interventions of romantic war come throughout “Mount Doom.” Fear of Sauron’s Eye preys on Sam and Frodo, but we are reminded that “the Eye was not turned to them: it was gazing north to where the Captains of the West stood at bay, and thither all its malice was now bent” (942). When Frodo claims the Ring, “all the devices of Sauron’s enemies [are] at last laid bare” and he recognizes (too late) the “thread upon which his doom now hung” (946). In truth, it is not one thread but the crossing of the two threads which brings about Sauron’s downfall.

If the language of “threads” in the description of Sauron’s comprehension is telling, Frodo’s remark to Sam is even more so. “The Quest would have been in vain” but for Gollum’s treachery, he tells Sam, “even at the bitter end” (947). It is not surprising to hear Frodo invoke the words “vain” (harking back to Gandalf’s “not wholly vain”) and “bitter,” two of the crucial terms at stake in this issue of paradox in Tolkien’s war. And though, isolated as he is, Frodo cannot fully grasp the reasons for his ironic “success,” Tolkien has made it clear to careful readers: the Quest is achieved through a bizarre series of interlacements; victory is delivered through the sublime muddle of Tolkien’s two faces of war.

It is a curiously satisfactory mixture, foreshadowed even in the continuity expressed in certain chapter titles: “The Black Gate is Closed” for Frodo in Book IV during the early stages of his hopeless Quest, but “The Black Gate Opens” for the heroes of romantic war, later in Book V. While the outcome of the quest is not determined by the status of the Gate, I think it is suggestive nonetheless of the cooperative nature of Tolkien’s sublime muddle, as well as the kind of narrative pleasure it evokes. At least in storytelling, in fantasy, Tolkien can argue the importance of balancing these contradictory views: they each have a hand in bringing something positive to fruition.

Beyond this sublime moment of interlacement, however, the two threads unravel. There is a sense that the heroes return to being heroes, while Frodo, like the disillusioned soldier of World War I, remains wounded, no longer able even to feel at home in his beloved Shire. Tolkien’s two faces of war express a deeply-felt ambivalence, one that runs through much of his work. *The Lord of the Rings* bears

witness to two utterly disparate stances on war, ones which seem to belie coexistence. And yet, paradoxically, they do coexist. In a way, *The Lord of the Rings* testifies to the ever-present attempt to square such views of war. But I do not argue that it moves beyond the attempt into a tidy, completed effort. Tolkien, with his literary loves on the one hand and his bitter war experience on the other, understood better than most the difficulty—perhaps the impossibility—of such a task. Like Sam at his Oliphaunt sighting, most of us can bemoan the horrors of battle at one point, and be thrilled by it the next.

When Frodo tells Sam at their parting at the Havens, “You cannot always be torn in two,” he refers to Sam’s need to live his own life, not always be concerned with serving his Master. Yet we know the advice is futile, and it resonates also with the deeply torn ambivalence toward war which defines the structure of the latter two volumes of Tolkien’s bitter romance.

Chapter 4: Wrapping Up

“The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son” and *The Lord of the Rings* exhibit parallel structures; the latter might be said to be the former written large. The common structure is defined by paradox: they present a balance of romantic and bitter representations of war. Through these parallel structures, Tolkien engages not only the complexities of war but general concerns about perspective and historicizing as well. Irony plays an important role in both faces of war. The tension created between these opposing strands is never fully resolved, yet in each work there is a suggestion that in the interplay between the two representations, some end—some sublime muddle—might be achieved. Whether this quasi-resolution transcends the irony at work or merely extends it is unclear.

Tolkien understood better than most the paradox of war. He knew well the allure and the danger of the heroic temperament, but he refused also to give in utterly to the disillusionment which seemed an inevitable reaction to living through the Great Wars. For Tolkien, it was a matter of balancing these opposing ideas as best he could, a project we can see him undertaking in both “The Homecoming” and *The Lord of the Rings*. But the incompatibility of these two representations, perhaps coupled with our own myopia, makes such a task difficult. For this reason, Tolkien offers a kind of hint, a key to reading the balance he intended to portray in *The Lord of the Rings*. This key can be found in allusions to the Last Alliance of Elves and Men—the historic battle of the Second Age, which frames the action to follow in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The Last Alliance stands as perhaps the greatest reflection of the part-to-whole structural relationship Tolkien utilizes. It is an historic battle within the text, a matter of vague legend for all but a few. The ancient Alliance is, as sage Gandalf puts it: “a chapter of ancient history which it might be good to recall; for there was sorrow then too, and gathering dark, but great valour, and great deeds that were not wholly vain” (52). We are back again at the words which Lewis gravitated toward. Gandalf’s assessment of that event embodies the kind of balance Tolkien sought between the bitter and the romantic. Elrond, who fought in the battle and remembers it first-hand, echoes Gandalf: “Fruitless did I call the victory of the Last Alliance? Not wholly so” (244). It is tempting indeed to call this the “cool middle,” however short our stay there.

This helpful hint is not without its complications. For the story of the Last Alliance is in some ways itself a phantasm, like Totta’s dream. Gandalf suggest to Frodo that he may “hear it told in full,” but that moment seems distant, until he meets Strider, who in turn defers, claiming that in Elrond’s house he might “hear it there, told in full” (52, 191). Expectations are dashed there as well, as Elrond has only a few words to say, apart from those previously mentioned.

I was at the Battle of Dagorlad before the Black Gate of Mordor, where we had the mastery: for the Spear of Gil-galad and the Sword of Elendil, Aeglos and Narsil, none could withstand. I beheld the last combat on the slopes of Orodruin, where Gil-galad died, and Elendil fell, and Narsil broke beneath him; but Sauron himself was overthrown, and Isildur cut the Ring from his hand with the hilt-shard of his father’s sword, and took it for his own (243).

Reading this terse summation, we find ourselves eerily back within the realm of romanticized war, replete with Old Norse-inspired images of combat. And, were it not for Gandalf's words fresh in our minds, we might mistake the Last Alliance for what many critics have mistaken Tolkien's work: mere (thrilling) heroics.

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