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"TESTING THE WHOLE THING ON TAPE": A PRELIMINARY INSIGHT INTO THE PERFORMATIVE DIMENSIONS OF J.R.R. TOLKIEN'S OWN RECORDING OF 'THE HOMECOMING OF BEORHTNOTH BEORHTHELM'S SON'

Abstract

'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' may not be the best known work of Tolkien, but it has nonetheless managed to provoke a considerable amount of academic discussion, both on account of its literary merits and the critical light it sheds upon the concept of heroism. Apart from that, it is also unusual in that it came to be captured on tape twice within just a year of its publication, first by the author himself, and then, a few months later, by the BBC. The article seeks to examine only the first of these recordings (without, however, disregarding the latter), taking into consideration such performative traits as the use of distinct voices for each of the characters, sound effects produced by use of various domestic appliances and/or elements of furniture, chanting and declaiming funerary songs and prayers, as well as, no less significantly, different household and street noises which could be heard from time to time in the background.

Keywords: Tolkien, *The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son*, *The Battle of Maldon*, audio recordings of Tolkien, oral performance

It may come as something of a surprise, given the writer's alleged dislike of modern technology,[1] but the audio recordings of Tolkien's voice are not, in fact, so rare. True enough, he did not, like his friend and colleague C.S. Lewis, regularly appear on the radio.[2] Nor was he particularly enthusiastic about the tape recorder when it was first shown to him in late August 1952 by his friend George Sayer, the head of the English Department at Malvern College, Worcestershire.[3] The very idea of his voice being taped was, at that time, not a complete novelty to him, though. As early as in April 1930,[4] Tolkien recorded two short audio segments, 'At the Tobacconist's' (3:18) and 'Wireless' (2:50) on side B of the Linguaphone gramophone record English course. On 14 January 1938 he also appeared on the radio, discussing the Old English epic poem *Beowulf* in the sixth instalment of the BBC series *Poetry Will Out*.[5]

[1] It ought to be emphasised, though, that for Tolkien it was very often "the use of a thing [that] determine[d] its worth, not the thing itself" (WOOD 2003, 31).

[2] Between 1941 and 1944, Lewis made a series of talks about the Christian Faith for the BBC. A revised edition of the transcripts was ultimately published in 1952 under the title of *Mere Christianity*.

[3] According to Sayer, he 'had never seen one [i.e. tape recorder] before and said whimsically that he ought to cast out any devil that might be in it by recording a prayer, the Lord's Prayer in Gothic' (quoted in SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 409). Following that, he was, however, delighted to be able to record some of the poems and prose passages from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (409; TOLKIEN 1981, 164). The recordings were ultimately issued on gramophone by Caedmon Records in 1975.

[4] There is some inconsistency concerning the dating of the recordings. In the first edition of their *Chronology*, Scull and Hammond claim that they were made "by June 1930" (SCULL and HAMMONS 2006, 153). This is later corrected by the authors to "July 1929" (http://www.hammondandscull.com/addenda/chronology.html; accessed 6 June 2020). Finally, the second edition of *Chronology* has "April 1930" (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 163, 840).

[5] It was aired on the BBC National Programme at 10.45 p.m. (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 226).

Following the aforementioned introduction to the tape machine in 1952, Tolkien's voice is known to have been recorded at least ten times, including six more appearances on the radio (1953, 1954,[6] 1957, 1964, 1965 and 1971),[7] a speech he gave as a Guest of Honour at a *Hobbit-maaltijd* in Rotterdam (1958),[8] a 1967 session resulting in the production of a gramophone record entitled *Poems and Songs of Middle Earth* [*sic*], and a BBC2 television documentary *Tolkien in Oxford*.[9] Last but not least, we known of some of his private tape recordings, including at least three passages from his own Modern English translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (1953)[10] and the alliterative verse-drama 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son' (by 3 May 1954),[11] the latter of which is the main subject of the present article.

Despite its unusual length,[12] 'The Homecoming' remains perhaps one of the least known recordings of Tolkien, the

[6] Of the first two, the former was an introduction to Tolkien's own translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, aired on 6 December 1953 (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 440), and the latter, broadcast on 3 January 1954, a pre-recorded talk on "the meaning of the poem and its place in the literature of the Chaucerian period" (443), published posthumously (in an abridged form) as part of the introduction to the collection of Tolkien's translations of three major fourteenth-century poems, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (1975).

[7] The last of them was, however, recorded on 20 January 1965 (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 661).

[8] The recording was discovered thirty-five years later by René van Rossenberg. For a valuable insight into all the speeches made on that occasion, see his contribution to the recently-published booklet *Tolkien and the Netherlands* (2018, 40–54), containing a revised edition of the paper that was originally published in 1995.

[9] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 752. The entire interview, parts of which appear in the film, was published by Stuart D. Lee in the form of a transcript in the fifteenth volume of *Tolkien Studies* (2018, 115–176).

[10] SCULL and HAMMOND 2013; accessed 6 June 2020; SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 430.

[11] SCULL and HAMMOND 2013; accessed 6 June 2020; SCULL and HAMMOND 2017c, 1063.

[12] At 26 minutes and 30 seconds, it is, to the best of my knowledge, the second longest recording of Tolkien reading from a single work of his own authorship, almost as long as the passage from *The Hobbit* (most of the fifth

principal reason for this being, of course, that it has never really been distributed commercially. It was only once released in 1992, as an audio cassette by HarperCollins, to commemorate the centenary of Tolkien's birth (and the near-millennial anniversary of the battle of Maldon).[13] It was then presented as a limited edition gift to the participants of the Tolkien Centenary Conference, held at Keeble College, Oxford (16–24 August).[14] Apart from 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son', the alliterative dialogue/play which forms the central piece of Tolkien's 1953 publication of the same title,[15] it also contains a short, two-minute, introduction by Christopher Tolkien. The writer's youngest son and literary executor can also be heard, reading the two accompanying essays 'Beorhtnoth's Death' (a little more than eight minutes in length) and 'Ofermod' (eighteen and a half minutes).[16] The total playing time of the cassette is thus approximately fifty-five minutes.

Limited as it is in its documentary value (after all, we only get to hear the author's voice; the non-verbal aspects are reduced to just a few additional sounds he makes every now and then), the recording does, however, provide us with an invaluable insight into Tolkien's skills as an oral performer. We might still be a long way from even a roughly complete picture of him as a dedicated lecturer[17] or beloved reader/teller

chapter 'Riddles in the Dark') that he taped in 1952 (nearly thirty minutes of uninterrupted reading; TOLKIEN 2007a). It is also probably the only recording in which Tolkien could actually be heard singing.

[13] The battle of Maldon is reported to have been fought on 10 or 11 August 991.

[14] Also distributed on that occasion was a souvenir booklet (edited by Wayne G. Hammond), aptly titled *Tolkien Centenary Conference 1992*.

[15] Treated as a quasi-literary text, 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' certainly eludes conventional generic classifications. Tolkien himself would call it "a dramatic dialogue" (TOLKIEN 1981, 219) or "a poem" (306).

[16] With one exception, he does not, however, read the footnotes.

[17] According to Carpenter, for instance, "[h]e would come silently into the room, fix the audience with his gaze, and suddenly begin to declaim in a resounding voice the opening lines of the poem [i.e. *Beowulf*] in the original

of tales to his own children,[18] two of the many roles in which he is known to have excelled as a public speaker.[19] Yet, given the scarcity of the recorded material and inevitable deficiency of the sometimes much later recollections of Tolkien's former students or other people in his academic and social circles, this is, perhaps, as close as we can now get to conceiving him as a genuine *homo narrans* (to use the term that probably originated in the works of the German ethnologist and Folklorist Kurt Ranke).

'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' on the BBC

'The Homecoming' was originally published in 1953, in the sixth volume of *Essays and Studies* (New Series), an annual journal devoted to the general study of English Philology.[20] Despite its unusual form, it was accepted as an academic text, doubtlessly on account of its exceptional value as a piece of

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Anglo-Saxon, commencing with a great cry of '*Hwæt!*' […], which some undergraduates took to be 'Quiet!' It was not so much a recitation as a dramatic performance, an impersonation of an Anglo-Saxon bard in a mead hall, and it impressed generations of students because it brought home to them that *Beowulf* was not just a set text to be read for the purposes of an examination but a powerful piece of dramatic poetry" (133).

[18] The earliest memories that John Tolkien (b. 1917) had of his father as a storyteller go back to 1924 and 1925. When the boy was unable to sleep, he "would sit upon the bed and tell him wonderful stories, which he never wrote down" (TOLKIEN and TOLKIEN 1992, 48). Christopher (b. 1924), for his own part, recollects his father sing (to the boy's delight) some of the verses that were later published in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (TOLKIEN 2002, 142). In the 1930s, together with their middle brother Michael (b. 1920), they were also quite regularly invited into their father's study to be read chapters from *The Hobbit* (TOLKIEN and TOLKIEN 1992, 58). Last but not least, some of the narratives known to have started as impromptu tales (in particular, *Roverandom* and *Farmer Giles of Ham*) were ultimately recorded and published (also posthumously), thus testifying to Tolkien's great sensitivity as a father and a sense of humour as a philologist (NEUBAUER 2016b; NEUBAUER 2019).

[19] Throughout his life, Tolkien was also an active member of various debating societies and literary groups.

[20] TOLKIEN 1953, 1–18. Its central part is believed to have been in existence at least since 1945, although the earliest drafts of 'The Homecoming' should, perhaps, be dated to the 1930s. See HONNEGER 2007, 189–199.

literary criticism focusing on the heroic stratum of *The Battle of Maldon*, a now incomplete alliterative Old English poem of unknown authorship.[21] Indeed, its impact upon the subsequent studies of *Maldon* could only be compared with that of the other of Tolkien's famous essays, 'Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics' (1937), a ground-breaking study of the famed Anglo-Saxon epic. Stephen Pollington even argues that, since the publication of 'The Homecoming', the "views of […] Professor Tolkien have been widely regarded as the definite statement on the subject [of *ofermod*],[22] and no treatment of the poem is complete without some references to the professor and his paper".[23] Notwithstanding all that, its central part, the dramatic dialogue in which two fictional retainers, Torhthelm and Tídwald, set out for their nocturnal quest after the battle to retrieve the body of their fallen lord and end up arguing about the nature of heroic commitment, could still be enjoyed as a literary text, which explains the fact why it came to be published a number of times in various collections of Tolkien's shorter pieces: *The Tolkien Reader* (1966), *Tree and Leaf* (1975) and *Poems and Stories* (1980).

Following the relative success of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (aired on the BBC in four episodes between 6 and 31 December 1953),[24] Tolkien inquired of the producer (as well as a novelist and critic, later also managing director)

[21] The poem is also of an uncertain date, although scholars are generally unanimous in that it was composed at the turn of the tenth and eleventh centuries. The *terminus post quem* in this case is, of course, the day when the battle was fought.

[22] Variously translated as "overconfidence", "excessive courage", or "overmastering pride", *ofermod* is a key concept to the understanding of the heroic ideal in early Germanic literature.

[23] POLLINGTON 1989, 66. Some intriguing reverberations of the poem may also be found in Tolkien's masterpiece, *The Lord of the Rings* (NEUBAUER 2020).

[24] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 440–443. Tolkien's translation was generally praised, but some (deserved) criticism was levied at the readers by the author himself (441), his aunt Jane Neave (442) and colleague A.P. Rossiter (442).

P.H. Newby, about the possibility of broadcasting his soon-to-be-published 'Homecoming', preferably in August, on the anniversary of the battle of Maldon.[25] He had already made a recording of it – the very recording that this article deals with – and "thinks it sounds very good".[26] Newby was a bit cautious at first, fearing that it would require "dramatic treatment in broadcasting, with sound effects, a choir of monks, etc."[27] Nonetheless, he did eventually send a copy of 'The Homecoming' (i.e. the volume of *Essays and Studies* he had received from Tolkien) to the Controller of the Third Programme, who, he hoped, would be able to "persuade the Features Department to use it".[28]

Throughout his whole life, Tolkien is known to have always been very conscientious about the works that came from his pen, particularly with regard to the narrative and stylistic consistency of his fiction and clarity of argument in the academic publications. While being meticulous in one's attention to details could in itself be a laudable thing, 'niggling' for months – in some cases, even years[29] – over a manuscript could be a trying experience for any publisher. Similarly, before Tolkien finally recorded his talks on *Beowulf* (January 1938) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (July–November 1953), they first had to be discussed and rehearsed at least a few times.[30] Fortunately, when it comes to the planned broadcast of 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth', the preparations did not really take too long (although the initial plans for August proved

[25] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 452.
[26] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 452.
[27] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 455.
[28] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 455.
[29] Most notably, it took him nearly two decades to have *The Lord of the Rings* finally published in 1954–5. *The Silmarillion*, written in stages for much of his life and never really completed, is another case in point. Perhaps the most famous (though not the only) academic work of his never to be brought to an end is Tolkien's Clarendon edition of Chaucer's poetry and prose, on which he is known to have worked from 1922 until 1928 (BOWERS 2019).
[30] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 220, 226 and 425, 437.

to be too optimistic) and, after some correspondence had been exchanged between Tolkien and the producer Rayner Heppenstall,[31] the play was eventually aired on 3 December 1954.[32] The parts of Torhthelm and Tídwald were read by, respectively, Felix Felton and Frank Duncan, two English actors who would also soon be heard in the 1955 adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*. The third voice was that of the Welshman Gareth Jones, probably responsible for all the additional sounds, including the hooting of an owl and the shrieks of the corpse stripper that Torhthelm slays mistakenly taking him for a Danish warrior.[33]

The play did not, however, meet the author's expectations. Ten days later, on 13 December, Tolkien wrote to Heppenstall, pouring words of criticism on the broadcast of his 'Homecoming'. The letter does not survive in the BBC archive, but from the producer's reply Scull and Hammond understand that what Tolkien was principally dissatisfied with was the metric quality of the readers' verse. Apparently, Felton and Duncan ignored the alliterative texture and delivered their lines as if it had been written in iambic pentameter.[34] What a disappointment for the man who had previously "tested [the performative quality of 'The Homecoming'] by recording the whole thing on tape"![35]

[31] The foremost issues raised in the producer's inquiry included his concerns about the visual stage directions, the use of Gregorian chant at the end of the play, and the quality of speech of the two readers (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 461). In his reply (four weeks later), Tolkien assured Heppenstall that he was actually considering "some additional lines" (463) to clarify certain narrative ambiguities. He also explained how the Latin verses should be pronounced and justified his recommendation for Torhthelm and Tídwald to use non-regional accents (463).

[32] According to SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, it was broadcast on the BBC Third Programme at 10.15 p.m. (470). A week earlier, on 26 November, it was announced in the weekly magazine *Radio Times* and described as an 'epilogue' to *The Battle of Maldon* (470).

[33] *Radio Times*, issue 1620, 26 November 1954, 43.

[34] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 470.

[35] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 463.

Tolkien and the Tape Recorder

This brings us back to the recording that Tolkien is believed to have made shortly before the idea of broadcasting his 'Homecoming' was even taken into consideration by P.H. Newby of the BBC. Following the above-related 'session' with George Sayer, he soon came up with an idea of actually using a tape recording machine in his work. On 6 July 1953, he wrote to the Secretary of Faculties, inquiring about the possibility of obtaining a grant towards the purchase of a tape recorder.[36] It could be used, he argued,

> [f]or seminars or small classes [, as such machines] are extraordinarily effective in the exhibition of phonetics and of linguistic change; and for "practical philology", the reconstruction of past forms of speech and literary modes (a department in which [he has] long been especially interested and active) they have become an indispensable assistant.[37]

It would have to be a portable one, "primarily for his professorial use",[38] small enough to be "transported easily to lecture rooms, or lent to other members of the School".[39] On 16 October, Tolkien's application was forwarded to the General Board with a strong support of the English Faculty Board.[40] The request proved to be successful, and, less than three weeks later, on 4 December, he was authorised to purchase a tape recorder with a grant of £100. The machine, a reel-to-reel Ferranti (the size of a small-sized suitcase), was to be lent to Tolkien "on the understanding that when it [was] not in use it [would] be kept in the English Faculty Library".[41] Scull and Hammond notice,

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[36] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 424.
[37] Oxford University Archives FA 4/5/1/2 E(53)24, quoted in SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 424.
[38] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 424.
[39] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 424.
[40] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 436.
[41] Oxford University Archives FA 4/5/1/2, quoted in SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 440.

though, that the "arrangement was not generally followed"[42] and it was not until May or June 1960, almost a year after Tolkien's retirement, that his colleague C.L. Wrenn came to collect it from him to be deposited in the English Faculty Library.[43]

As has been implicitly assumed above, Tolkien's own recording of 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth' cannot be dated with any greater precision. It would have to have been made at some point between the decision of the General Board to purchase the machine was announced at the English Faculty Board meeting on 4 December 1953 and the letter which Tolkien sent on 3 May the following year to P.H. Newby, in which he informs the radio producer that he had already "made [his own] recording of the dialogue [i.e. 'The Homecoming']."[44] This time frame should be somewhat narrower, of course, as it is hard to expect that the tape recorder was instantly delivered to the writer's door and that the first thing he did after that was to rush into his study to have the play put on tape. Nor would, perhaps, Tolkien write his letter concerning the putative broadcast of 'The Homecoming' right after he had pressed the 'stop' button on the tape recorder.[45] Consequently, it is quite fair to assume that the said recording would have been made in the first four months of 1954.[46]

There could be no doubt, however, as to the actual place of the recording. Since 30 March 1953, Tolkien and his wife Edith had been living at 76 Sandfield Road, in the Oxford suburb of Headington,[47] following more than two decades at Northmoor Road (first 22, and then 20; 1925–47) as well as two

[42] SCULL and HAMMOND 2013; accessed 6 June 2020.
[43] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 588.
[44] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 452.
[45] Needless to argue, the latter is obviously much more likely than the former.
[46] In the introduction on the audio cassette, Christopher Tolkien erroneously dates the recording to "some time after" the BBC broadcast of 'The Homecoming', i.e. after 3 December 1954 (TOLKIEN 1992, 0:37). He is also incorrect in saying that it was "his own [i.e. his father's] tape recorder" (0:41).
[47] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 418.

three-year spans at 3 Manor Road (1947–50) and 99 Holywell Street (1950–3). It was, in all likelihood, recorded in his study, in a former garage, at the side of the house,[48] filled, Carpenter recalls, with countless bookshelves, on which crammed were "dictionaries, works on etymology and philology, [as well as] editions of texts in many languages".[49] In other words, an excellent 'recording studio', almost soundproofed from the usual commotion of central Oxford, the accumulated volumes successfully supressing any diffused sound reflections.

Excellent as it was, it was, however, certainly not perfect. To begin with, Tolkien was probably oblivious to the fact that, besides his own voice (as well as the sound effects he intended to make), the microphone would also catch a lot of background noises, such as the constant ticking of a clock,[50] or the usual sounds of road traffic.[51] It should be borne in mind, though, that in the early months of 1954, sound recording was still very much a novelty to him (or, in fact, to most people in the 1950s). The quality of the recording, 26 minutes and 30 seconds in all, is, however, surprisingly good. Tolkien's voice can be heard quite clearly, indeed far more clearly than on the Caedmon gramophone record of 1975 (containing the recordings made by George Sayer in 1952), several years later re-issued on CD as *Essential Tolkien*.[52] Still, if any commercial release of 'The Homecoming' is ever planned, some remastering to eliminate

[48] CARPENTER 1977, 4.

[49] CARPENTER 1977, 4.

[50] It is, perhaps, the same "shiny blue alarm clock" that Carpenter mentions in the opening chapter of his *Biography* (1977, 4).

[51] There are at least two such instances, clearly audible for a few seconds and beginning at about 10:42 and 24:41 of 'The Homecoming' (TOLKIEN 1992). There is also an unidentifiable single sound at 12:14, resembling a phone or doorbell ring. It is quite ironic that, in one of his letters (25 August 1954), Rayner Heppenstall actually mentions the possibility of adding a specially recorded Gregorian chant to the BBC production and asks Tolkien whether he knows of any monks in Oxford "whose grounds are not plagued by the sound of motor horns" (SCULL and HAMMOND, 2017a, 461).

[52] TOLKIEN 2007a. According to Sayer, in 1952, the writer's voice was so poor that he had to put "the microphone very close to him really" (SAYER

the numerous recording flows which can be heard on the tape should certainly be considered.

Voices in the Dark

Tolkien's endeavours to make it sound 'professional' can be heard very clearly from the very first minute of the recording. He was, of course, only testing it "by recording the whole thing on tape",[53] but it is certainly not an impromptu reading with no clear purpose in mind. Amateur as they were, his performative skills are remarkably good, not in the least because, as a youth, he would appear on stage at least a number of times, most memorably, perhaps on account of the photograph reproduced by John Garth in his booklet *Tolkien at Exeter College*,[54] as the god Hermes in the *Peace*, the savagely satirical play of Aristophanes, acted in the original Greek to bid the students' farewell to King Edward's School in Birmingham on 16 July 1911.[55] As an audio recording, 'The Homecoming' does not obviously rely so much upon acting and stage movement, nonetheless certain measures had to be taken by Tolkien to somehow enliven the narrative and the most important of them was the voices of the two protagonists.

The older, and thus far more experienced, of the two retainers, Tídwald is a voice of pragmatism in 'The Homecoming'.[56] He is the one to pick holes in the way in which his youthful companion envisions the glory of combat, the "fears" and "fancies" of the ardent gleeman.[57] Not surprisingly, then, the

1980, 2). Two years later, perhaps after a few trial recordings, Tolkien was much more confident with the recording equipment and its basic functions.

[53] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 463.

[54] GARTH 2015, 6.

[55] GARTH 2004, 18. SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 32. A good summary of his other public performances and recitations, both as a youth and as a mature man may be found in SCULL and HAMMOND 2017c, 315–317.

[56] For a brief but hopefully informative analysis of the onomastic symbolism in 'The Homecoming', see my contribution to *Hither Shore* (NEUBAUER 2016a, 56–66).

[57] TOLKIEN 1953, 4.

voice that Tolkien adapts for him is significantly 'older', somewhat slower and perceptibly deeper, not unlike, perhaps, "the voice of Gandalf" that W.H. Auden recalls to have heard many a time as an undergraduate.[58] Torhthelm, on the other hand, is a young "son of a minstrel"[59] (and, as can be inferred, himself an aspiring poet), "whose head is full of old lays concerning the heroes of northern antiquity".[60] As may be expected, the voice which Tolkien chose to use in his vocal impersonation of Torhthelm is markedly, though not excessively, different. It is not quite the kind of voice one would normally expect to hear from a man in his late teens or early twenties, of course, the writer's vocal range being, in fact, rather narrow, ranging from low tenor to baritone. Nonetheless, a slightly higher pitch and more rapid, emotional manner of articulation of Torhthelm is, perhaps, as close as Tolkien could get to perceptibly rejuvenating the timbre of his voice without sounding ridiculous.[61]

Another vital piece of the puzzle which might have been taken into consideration prior to the recording of 'The Homecoming' (or, as for that matter, any recording of it) was the possible differences in speech patterns between the two principal characters. These could mean either certain regional dialectal discrepancies, or differences in social standing.[62] Not surprisingly, it would be rather difficult for just a single, non-professional reader to replicate even some of them, constantly switching between one variation to the other. Besides, it should be borne in mind that 'The Homecoming' was primarily meant to be a piece of argumentative discourse, and

[58] It was, Auden wrote to Tolkien many years later, "an unforgettable experience [to hear him] recite *Beowulf*" (quoted in CARPENTER 1977, 133).

[59] TOLKIEN 1953, 2.

[60] TOLKIEN 1953, 2.

[61] It should be observed, though, that on at least a few occasions Tolkien does not quite manage to adjust his voice on time, as he shifts from one character to another without, at first, any audible difference.

[62] Both of them would be detectable to a philologically-trained ear around the time of the historical battle of Maldon (FENNELL 2001, 85–93).

no dialectal and/or social distinctions were probably ever intended to be given much prominence by the author. Indeed in reply to Heppenstall's letter concerning the dialects that the radio readers should adopt, Tolkien replied that no such "tone or rural quality [was] required at all"[63] and that one of them, Torhthelm "requires a younger lighter voice, [while] the other [Tídwald,] an older and deeper [one]".[64] As for the dialectal differences, the author said, "any modern East Anglian characteristics would be anachronistic, since […] the fusion of the Danish and English elements that eventually produced them [had not yet been] accomplished"[65] by the last decade of the tenth century. Finally, the social standing was not meant to be marked in any notable way, the major "difference between [Torhthelm and Tídwald being] one of temper, and matter, [rather] than 'class'."[66]

It ought to be stressed that the above recommendations were solely concerned with the planned BBC production, Tolkien's own reading having, by that time, already been taped.[67] It might be quite safely assumed, though, that, consciously or not, they had also been taken into consideration at the time when he was only 'testing' it on tape. The key features of Tolkien's recording are, after all, in the main consistent with what, a few months later, the author wrote in his letter to Rayner Heppenstall. Moreover, some of them – particularly the adoption of different voices for different characters – could already be heard in the recording made two years earlier by George Sayer, when, without any prior consideration, Tolkien acted out the parts of Bilbo and Gollum with great enthusiasm and vigour, hissing and whining almost as convincingly as Wolfe Morris

[63] TOLKIEN 1981, 187.
[64] TOLKIEN 1981, 187.
[65] TOLKIEN 1981, 187.
[66] TOLKIEN 1981, 187.
[67] The letter is dated 22 September 1954, four and a half months after the one Tolkien sent to P.H. Newby, claiming to have already made his recording (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 452).

and Peter Woodthorpe in the BBC Radio dramatisations of, respectively, *The Hobbit* (1968) and *The Lord of the Rings* (1981).

It is also hard to resist the impression that this very technique of reading – particularly as regards using different vocal registers for different characters – must have featured rather prominently in Tolkien's repertoire, both as a father and as a teacher. When it comes to the former, it would doubtlessly be employed on a regular basis, during the evening reading sessions in the writer's study.[68] As for the latter, it was, it appears, used every now and then to facilitate the students' understanding of *Beowulf*, *The Battle of Maldon*, or other narrative poems he would read in the original Old English.[69] It should come as no surprise then that, not only on account of Tolkien's performative skills, he would sometimes be likened to a wizard, by his own children and by the students.[70]

The Sound Effects

Perhaps the most intriguing of all the performative features of Tolkien's own reading of 'The Homecoming' are the additional sounds he makes from time to time to lend more sonorous realism to this 'monological dialogue'. In a more or less explicit way, they could all be found, of course, in the text that first came out in print in 1953. What is more, they are perhaps

[68] Apart from his own writings, *The Hobbit*, *Farmer Giles of Ham*, *Mr. Bliss*, or *Roverandom*, Tolkien appears to have also entertained his children with some of the already established classics of children's literature (such as those of Kenneth Grahame or Edith Nesbit, both of whom are mentioned and/or referenced in his academic writings and personal letters).

[69] In the opinion of Professor John McKinnell, a former student of Tolkien, his intention was to give his listeners a sense of what it would have been like in live performance. "Pausing for translation," McKinnell claims, "would have ruined the natural flow of it [and] he was [indeed] a very gifted performer of it. His delivery was rapid and exciting" (private correspondence).

[70] Shortly after the death of his father, Michael Tolkien wrote an article for *The Sunday Telegraph* (9 September 1973), quite appropriately titled 'J.R.R. Tolkien – The Wizard Father'. The opinion of W.H. Auden, claiming that the Professor's voice was very much like that of Gandalf, has already been quoted.

so obvious to the reader (and only the reader) that their being integral, and thus significant, part of the narrative could easily go unnoticed to an amateur performer, still relatively new to the latest developments in audio technology. These are (in the order of appearance): the hooting of an owl (twice), the sounds of heaving (when the two characters move and lift the bodies of their fallen companions) and shuffling of feet (several times when Torhthelm and Tídwald are heard carrying the body of Beorhtnoth), unintelligible voices (clearly more gibberish than any meaningful utterance) and chuckling of the corpse strippers, thuds of a sword and cries of one of the scavengers, Tídwald gulping down some liquid (not explicitly stated in the 'stage directions', but perfectly clear from the context), cracking of a whip (once the body of the lord has been put on top of the waggon), as well as creaking and rattling of the vehicle and clapping of the hoofs (while the whole expedition is on their way to the abbey at Ely).[71]

Quite intriguing might also be the nature of these sounds, as some of them are uttered by Tolkien himself, either vocally (e.g. hooting, chuckling, screaming) or by means of some bodily activity (shuffling of feet or finger snapping). Other sounds are produced using all sorts of props, neither of which would probably be part of standard theatrical equipment. According to Christopher Tolkien, for instance, "the creaking and bumping of the waggon wheels [were] achieved by moving a piece of furniture in his [father's] study."[72] It is not in the least clear what the said 'piece of furniture' was in real life. Even the two long sequences (fifteen seconds at about 17:28 and more than half a minute at 19:36) without any words spoken by the characters are not particularly revealing as to what actually produced the sounds. Those of the bumping waggon could have

[71] With very few exceptions, all of them are rather explicitly announced in the text.

[72] TOLKIEN 1992.

been indeed anything from an armchair to a writing desk,[73] but the somewhat exaggerated creaking of the wheels remains quite a mystery. It does not seem to be the sound of an old pushchair, shopping trolley, or bicycle. Nor is it very likely that this, in the long run, irritating noise was actually produced by any piece of movable furniture that the Tolkiens kept at home. That is to say, it may well have been some significantly smaller device (e.g. a planetary pencil sharpener or a meat mincer) that could be operated manually while simultaneously moving a larger piece of furniture.

No such domestic ingenuity would obviously be called into exercise during the poetic performances of Greek *rhapsoidoi* or Anglo-Saxon *scopas*. Nonetheless, the dynamics of their performative acts are generally believed to have gone beyond the mere words, as they often accompanied themselves on some stringed instrument,[74] modulating the tone, pitch, and rhythm of their voice, and/or making all sorts gestures to accentuate certain elements of their versified discourse.[75] Tolkien was surely aware of all that, and, while he was in a lecture room, in front of his students, or at home, in the company of his own children, he may have even thought of himself as a kind of treasurer of the ancient poetic craft. It is just as likely, though, that the ideas he had for any of the aforelisted paratextual components of his recording may have been modelled

[73] One such desk, or, in fact, a writing bureau with drop down lid and green baize inset, was to be seen at the Tolkien exhibition in Oxford in the summer of 2018 (*Tolkien. Maker of Middle-earth*). It is reproduced in the catalogue on p. 283. According to Catherine McIlwaine, "[t]here were numerous desks and writing tables in the Tolkien family home. Some were in the study and others were in his bedroom […]. His main writing desk, given to him by his wife Edith in 1927, is now housed at the Wade Center in Wheaton College, Illinois but other desks and chairs have been kept by the family" (2018, 283). Perhaps one of them can now be heard on the recording, playing the part of the waggon.

[74] PURVES 2019, 29–32; NIST 1967, 27–43.

[75] An excellent demonstration of all these performative techniques (as well as general poetic stagecraft) could be seen in Benjamin Bagby's live performances of *Beowulf* (BAGBY 2007).

upon some contemporary performative practices, such as the radio plays that Tolkien heard on air, or dramatic pieces he saw on stage.

The Office of the Dead

The improvisational elements in Tolkien's own recording of 'The Homecoming' are naturally scarce, since, for the most part, he restricts himself to only reading the lines spoken by Tídwald and Torhthelm. Nevertheless, by the end of it, he appears to have been carried away and adds a few lines of text, chipping in words which are not to be found in the published version of his work. These are not, however, the "additional lines"[76] that Tolkien writes about in his correspondence with Rayner Heppenstall, the otherwise unrecorded supplementary material to make up for the obvious absence of any stage directions, so vital in the audio rendering of what is, after all, only a 'philologically-inspired' dialogue with very limited action.[77] Moreover, the said words are not even in English, but Latin, and should be familiar to anyone acquainted with the pre-conciliar Office of the Dead.[78] They are, of course, the mournful words of the monks of Ely, whither, according to the *Liber Eliensis*, the body of Beorhtnoth was taken after the battle, and where his tomb may still be found today, behind the presbytery of what is now the Anglican Cathedral.[79]

Tolkien's *addendum* is thus of an essentially 'liturgical' character and it is only improvisational in the sense that the lines are not *expressis verbis* in the published version of

[76] SCULL and HAMMOND, 2017a, 463.

[77] Besides, as has been observed, the above-referred letter was sent on 22 September 1954, at least five months after 'The Homecoming' had been taped.

[78] Tolkien was generally unwilling (to say the least) to welcome the liturgical reforms that were implemented in the Roman Catholic Church in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. See, for instance, his letter to son Michael (TOLKIEN 1981, 393–395).

[79] KENNEDY 1991, 65; DEEGAN and RUBIN 1991, 289–292.

'The Homecoming'. They are, in fact, merely alluded to (albeit indirectly) in the stage directions. First, we are told that, once the rambling of the cart has died away, '[t]here is complete silence for a while [but slowly] the sound of voices chanting begins to be heard. Soon the words, though faint, can be distinguished".[80] After a while, the group of monks passes across the scene and "the chanting fades away into silence".[81] This means that whatever is supplemented (by Tolkien, or, indeed, any other performer) must be consistent with the information provided by the author. That is to say, they ought to be the chanting voices of the monks, barely distinguishable at first, and, after a while, "fad[ing] away into silence".[82] Accordingly, the choice of words is hardly optional and must strictly comply with what can actually be 'heard' in the published text.

In Tolkien's recording, the initial words are indeed rather hard to be distinguished. Soon, however, the melodic line turns into that of the *Dies irae*, at least from the second tristich of the sequence and the words *Quantus tremor est futurus*.[83] This continues uninterruptedly until *Iudicandi responsura* (the end of the fourth tristich), and then cuts to some of the following stanzas (usually in pairs): *Rex tremendæ maiestatis…* (8), *Iuste iudex ultionis…* and *Ingemisco, tamquam reus* (11, 12), *Preces meæ non sunt dignæ…* and *Inter oves locum præsta…* (14, 15), and, finally, *Lacrimosa dies illa…* together with *Pie Iesu Domine…* (18, 18).[84] All this is followed by a chiefly inaudible recitation (doubtlessly, though, from the *Officium Defunctorum*) and culminates with the two compositions (both

[80] TOLKIEN 1953, 12.

[81] TOLKIEN 1953, 13.

[82] TOLKIEN 1953, 13.

[83] The words *dies irae* "the day of wrath" or *dies illa* "that day", both from the opening line of the sequence, could be heard at the very beginning of the monks' chant. What follows, though, is anyone's guess, but it does not seem to be the any of the following two lines: *Solvet saeculum in favilla* / *Teste David cum Sibylla*.

[84] Some of the stanzas are (partly) recited (1?, 2, 3, 11, 12, 14, 15), and some chanted (3, 4, 8, 18, 19).

of them quite competently chanted) that can be found in the published version of 'The Homecoming'. The first of them is the *Dirige, Domine*, the antiphon sung at the beginning of the Matins of the Office for the Dead,[85] and the second the so-called Minor (or Trinitarian) Doxology *Gloria Patri*,[86] a requisite part of several liturgical practices, usually performed at the conclusion of psalms and prayers, public as well as private.[87]

Singing liturgical songs was not in the least a novelty to Tolkien. Shortly before her untimely death in 1904 (when the future writer was less than two months short of his twelfth birthday), his mother Mabel assigned her two sons to the guardianship of Father Francis Morgan, with the intention to have them brought up as Catholics.[88] The Birmingham Oratory, where 'Uncle Curro' (as he was known to the young Tolkiens) lived, soon became a second home to the boys, and they would habitually begin the day by serving the morning Mass as altar boys. Together or separately, they would also attend other services, including funerals. No doubt, half a century later, the words of the *Officium* were still deeply ingrained in the writer's heart, particularly that, in his later years, Tolkien is also known to have provided regular altar service.[89] It would have been quite natural for him, then, to expand on the 'original' chanting of the monks, bringing new life into the unavoidably constricted stage directions of the published 'Homecoming'.

[85] *Dirige, Domine, in conspectu tuo viam meam. Introibo in domum tuam: adorabo ad templum sanctum tuum in timore tuo. Domine, deduc me in institutia tua: propter inimicos meos dirige in conspectus tuo viam meam* (TOLKIEN 1953, 13).

[86] *Gloria Patri, et Filio, et Spiritui Sancto, Sicut erat in principio, et nunc, et semper, et in saecula saeculorum* (TOLKIEN 1953, 13).

[87] Both the *Dirige, Domine* and the *Gloria Patri* would normally be heard during the funeral rites in the early Middle Ages. Tolkien's use of the *Dies irae* in connection with the events of 991 is, however, largely anachronistic, the sequence being almost unequivocally dated to the thirteenth century.

[88] CARPENTER 1977, 32.

[89] He did, for instance, serve at the memorial Masses for his friends and fellow Inklings Charles Williams (19 May 1945) and C.S. Lewis (26 November 1963) (SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 310 and 644).

Of course, whether it was a premeditated act upon his part or not will probably never be known. If it had indeed been planned in advance, it would mean that Tolkien undertook quite a serious effort to make his recording sound as authentically as possible (regardless of the anachronistic inclusion of the *Dies irae*). If, on the other hand, this intriguing textual expansion had been a wholly spontaneous act, a spur-of-the-moment addition to what suddenly seemed to him insufficient, it would provide an intriguing testimony to his ingenuity as a teller of tales, the 'narrative' flexibility that could otherwise be detected in some of Tolkien's earlier works, written with his own children in mind.[90] This way or the other, it can clearly be seen that he thoroughly enjoyed the process of recording 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth', regardless of whether he was, at that time, only testing "the whole thing on tape"[91] or not.

Conclusion

On many grounds, 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son' is one of the most unusual works ever penned by J.R.R. Tolkien. One of the main issues which could be taken into consideration is, of course, the fact that it cannot be so easily classified as a work of fiction, not only on account of the two short essays preceding and postceding the central dialogue. Yet even as a quasi-literary text – or, as Thomas Honegger calls it, a "work of informed literary fiction"[92] – it is still quite odd in that it is completely deprived of any elements of fantasy. It is all the more intriguing that so soon after its publication in *Essays and Studies* (less than fourteen months, in fact) it came to be recorded twice, first by the

[90] See, for instance, some of the metatextual additions in the earliest known version of *Farmer Giles of Ham* ("What is a blunderbuss, Daddy?"; TOLKIEN 1999, 82), or even *The Hobbit* ("what is a hobbit?"; TOLKIEN 2007b, 4), which may have well been inspired by some genuine questions asked by the writer's own children during their bedtime reading rituals.

[91] SCULL and HAMMOND 2017a, 463.

[92] HONEGGER 2007, 189.

author himself and then, probably a few months later, by three professional readers on the BBC. Obviously, at that time, the latter was of a far greater impact, having been broadcast twice on the national radio (3 December 1954 and 17 June 1955) and written about in the national press (*Radio Times*, 26 November 1954). In comparison, the former was then only a piece of private recording, chiefly experimental in its character and not expected to be heard by the general public.[93] Now, almost seven decades later, their roles have been reversed. Not many people actually remember the two broadcasts, and it is not quite certain whether they are still to be found in the BBC archives. Tolkien's own recording, on the other hand, has considerably grown in significance (despite its limited availability) and become an invaluable source of information with regard to the writer's skills as a performer, a notable feature in itself, but also a good point of reference for any further discussion concerning his teaching career and family life.

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[93] As has been mentioned, it still remains (as of June 2020) to be released commercially, its audience thus being very limited in number.

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