When writing about *The Battle of Maldon*, George Clark warned against “analogical error,” or comparing *Maldon* “by conscious analogy or unconscious assimilation with other literary texts.” Made to support a heterodox reading of *Maldon* that contradicted a prevailing interpretation, this extravagant protest alienated the poem from its heroic corollaries: *The Song of Roland*, for example, or *Niebelungenlied*. Few today would seriously credit the “analogical error” that Clark sensed in *Maldon* criticism, and many would in fact argue for (and have argued for) the most congruent parallels. Here I propose an analogue in Beowulf’s dragon fight. For most readers the accusation of Beowulf’s *oferhygd* will recall Byrhtnoð’s *ofermod* in *Maldon*, even though the words are etymologically (but not morphologically) distinct. Not only are the mental categories identical, I will argue, but the mises-en-scène of both works correspond in analogical detail. Simply put, *Maldon* replicates the dragon fight in *Beowulf*.

While critics past and present have compared *Maldon* and *Beowulf*, J. R. R. Tolkien alone made a convincing case for a generic affinity. Unfortunately, his oft-cited study of *ofermod* which confirms Byrhtnoð’s rashness, is mostly disregarded in favor of positions that make the ealdormonn sound less culpable. Some of these opposing positions are implausibly flamboyant. The Christian allegorists like W. F. Bolton or, most recently, Richard Hillman propose that Byrhtnoð represents a type of Christ, either (for Bolton) a reflection of Christ in the wilderness or

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1 “Heroic Poem” 56.
2 Sophus Bugge proposed parallels between *Beowulf* and *Maldon* in his *Studien über das Beowulfepos*, but these were rebutted by Phillpotts in “Danish Affinities.” On some mostly trivial comparisons, see Bessinger 31. My own views concern genre rather than lexicon.
3 “Homecoming.” One senses that the common view of Tolkien’s idiosyncratic essay is that espoused by Doane: “For all their authority and charm, Tolkien’s remarks on *Maldon* amount to little more than this [that Byrhtnoth was ‘playing it down, in order to depict Germanic heroism with the more purity’]” (42 note 8), where Doane is quoting Cecily Clark, “Byrhtnoth and Roland” 292).
(for Hillman) Christ on the cross. Bolton’s remarks that “[Byrhtnoð] was called upon to show his strength by undertaking an exploit of foolish and irrelevant hazard” imparts the tangled logic of the Christological argument. The poet’s criticism of Byrhtnoð’s ofermod gets reinterpreted as the human view of self-sacrifice. Furthermore, most studies like these focus on the hero-as-saint, but none effectively addresses that Byrhtnoð’s “sacrifice” imperiled his own men. One immediately sees in these propositions the corresponding portrayal of Beowulf as savior, or (in triggering the heathen curse) Beowulf in forfeit of his life to end the dragon’s wrath.

Regardless of multiple incongruities, Beowulf’s dragon fight and Byrhtnoð’s defense can be profitably compared, the former exemplifying a conceivable noble failure, the latter a certain one. Considering what few heroic poems survive from the whole Anglo-Saxon period, two of them fragmentary (“Waldere” and “Finnsburg”), this conclusion would seem remarkable. It seems more natural to assume that Maldon exemplifies the “heroic code” tout pûr, as so many have alleged. Edward B. Irving, Jr. once summarized the attitude of his day: “…this fragment of medieval journalism…has often been placed beside Tacitus’s Germania as the classic statement, the pure essence, of the Germanic heroic ideal.” The “pure essence” could signify two conditions: 1. the unyielding defense of a defenseless position, and implacable courage in defiance of death; 2. making an appalling, if righteous or dutiful choice, of two ignoble alternatives. Bertha Phillpotts elucidated the ideal in a famous article from 1929: “Fame is for the man who has the courage to choose: whether he chooses resistance to the uttermost against hopeless physical odds, knowing that his death is ordained, or whether he chooses one course rather than another of two that are hateful to him, and makes something magnificent of it by a single-minded pursuit of it.” In both senses Irving’s generous assessment is true. Byrhtnoð decides to fight, not disengage, and the retainers to avenge, not flee.

But Phillpotts described heroes acting alone, not lords and retainers on whose lives the welfare of a nation depended. By these terms, the “pure essence” of Germanic heroism that Irving attributes to Maldon

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4 Bolton, “Wilderness”; Hillman, “Defeat and Victory.” On others who have held similar views, see the remarks in Bolton 481 and Hillmann 385–6.
5 Bolton, “Wilderness” 483.
6 “Heroic Style” 458.