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The Unpublished ‘Mód Þryþe Ne Wæg’ by C.S. Lewis: A Critical Edition¹

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1 Manuscript Description

This poem has remained hitherto unpublished, and it can be found in MS 1952/2/17, which is part of the Tolkien-Gordon Collection (MS 1952), preserved at Special Collections & Galleries, Leeds University Library.² The Tolkien-Gordon Collection was acquired in a 2014 Christie’s auction by Leeds University Library at the cost of £150,000.³ Enclosed with the poem is a post-it note by its previous owner, Bridget MacKenzie [née Gordon, daughter of Eric Valentine Gordon (1896–1938) and Ida Lilian Gordon (1907–2002)],⁴ which reads: ‘Another unusual thank-you from ~~J.R.R.~~ C.S. Lewis’. The work is written in black ink with a nib pen on a 17.7 × 11.2 cm (7 × 4.37 in) paper. ‘Magdalen College, Oxford’ is printed on the top right corner. It was folded before the ink dried, so the offprint ‘Magdalen College, Oxford’ can be faintly seen, in reverse and upside down, on the bottom right-hand side of the paper. The poem is written in modern English with the exception of the title, ‘Mód Þryþe Ne Wæg’, the fourth word in line 2a, ‘Þryþ’, and the pen name ‘Nat Whilk’ (line 11a), which are in Old English. This unsigned 12-line alliterative poem written by Lewis, under the pseudonym ‘Nat Whilk’, attempts to recollect the flavour of Old English poetic style such as that of *Beowulf* (each alliterative line containing four lifts divided by a caesura: two in the on-verse [a] and two in the off-verse [b], with a variety of Old English rhythmical types). With regard to the content, this epistolary work is an encomium of Ida Gordon’s hospitality in which Lewis expresses his gratitude for the pleasant sojourn at the Gordon household in Manchester.⁵

¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Dr Rafael J. Pascual and Prof. Leonard Neidorf for their generous assistance. I would also like to thank CS Lewis Pte Ltd. and Special Collections & Galleries (Leeds University Library) for permission to transcribe and publish ‘Mód Þryþe Ne Wæg’. This critical edition was completed under the auspices of a Next Generation EU Margarita Salas postdoctoral grant (MARSA22/19), financed by the Ministry of Universities (Government of Spain) and the European Union, and by the research group REWEST (IT-1565-22), funded by the Basque Government and UPV/EHU.

² MS 1952/2/17 is available for in-person consultation only and can be booked at <<https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/376726>>.

³ Christie’s, *The Gordon-Tolkien Collection: Letters, Poems & Prose* (London: Christie’s [sale catalogue], 2014); additional information is available at <<https://grants.fnl.org.uk/gordon-tolkien-collection-letters-poems-and-prose>> and <https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/376715/tolkien-gordon_collection>.

⁴ For biographical details of E.V. and Ida Gordon, see Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader’s Guide, Part I* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 464–466.

⁵ Since 1931 until his passing, E.V. Gordon was Smith Professor of English Language and Germanic Philology at the University of Manchester. In 1938, Ida Gordon began lecturing at that same university after her husband’s demise. See

2 C.S. Lewis and the Gordons

It is plain from the content of the poem and the invitation to stay overnight at the Gordons' that both wife and husband were more than acquaintances of C.S. Lewis. However, there is no trace of their friendship in Lewis's published biographical details or letters.⁶ Given the little evidence available, the relationship is likely to have begun in the professional sphere, or through a common friend, or both. Carpenter narrates that not long after 1931 (probably 1932 or 1933),⁷ 'Lewis and Tolkien were both doing duty as examiners in the English School [University of Oxford], together with Tolkien's friend and former colleague from Leeds, E.V. Gordon'.⁸ The tone of a taunt in alliterative verse which Lewis addressed to Tolkien and Gordon after that time together hints at genuine camaraderie, with no disregard towards the external examiner, Gordon.⁹ Whether Tolkien played a role in helping Gordon and Lewis bond with each other or whether this happened at an earlier stage is unimportant; Lewis's jibe in verse documents the development of his friendship with the Gordons which led to an invitation to stay at their house in 1935.¹⁰

3 Date of Composition

The poem is undated and, if it was sent by post, no envelope survived. It is only thanks to another piece of contemporary evidence, also in the form of a poem, that an approximate dating of 'Mód Prýþe Ne Wæg' can be given. Such proof is found in an untitled and unpublished epistolary poem by J.R.R. Tolkien written with the aim of thanking E.V. and Ida Gordon for an enjoyable stay at their home.¹¹ Tolkien's poem dates to 26 June 1935, and the initial lines imply that the Gordons

Douglas A. Anderson, "An Industrious Little Devil": E.V. Gordon as Friend and Collaborator with Tolkien', in Jane Chance (ed.), *Tolkien the Medievalist* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 15–25; 18, 20.

⁶ Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Biography* (London: William Collins Sons & Co Ltd., 1974); Walter Hooper (ed.), *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume I: Family Letters 1905–1931* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004); Walter Hooper (ed.), *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume II: Books, Broadcasts, and the War 1931–1949* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2004); Walter Hooper (ed.), *The Collected Letters of C.S. Lewis, Volume III: Narnia, Cambridge, and Joy 1950–1963* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006); Walter Hooper, *C.S. Lewis: A Companion and Guide* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996). In Hooper's three volumes of *Collected Letters*, E.V. Gordon is mentioned only in relation to academic affairs, and Ida Gordon is alluded to only once, regarding a personal matter. Concerning the latter, we learn only that in 1959, after Lewis's visit to Elizabeth and Eugène Vinaver in Manchester, he expressed: 'I wish this lyric close to my trip had not been crossed by the tragic matter of poor Mrs. Gordon and her son; yet I was very glad to meet her too' (*CL* III.1050).

⁷ The date is projected according to the information made available by Humphrey Carpenter, *The Inklings: C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams, and Their Friends* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006), 55: 'Shortly after the new [Oxford English School] syllabus was put into effect'. For the date the new Oxford English School syllabus was implemented, see Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond, *The J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide: Reader's Guide, Part II* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 954.

⁸ Carpenter, *Inklings*, 55. For the relation between Tolkien and Gordon, see Anderson, 'Industrious', 15–25.

⁹ See Carpenter, *Inklings*, 55, for Lewis's eight-line jibe.

¹⁰ As further proof of Lewis's affection, one of Tolkien's unpublished letters reveals that Lewis was among those who offered financial assistance to Ida Gordon and her children after the untimely death of E.V. Gordon in 1938. See letter from J.R.R. Tolkien to Ida Gordon (11 Aug. 1938), ref. MS 1952/1/3, Special Collections & Galleries, Leeds University Library <https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/376721/letter_from_j_r_r_tolkien_to_ida_gordon>.

¹¹ See poem by J.R.R. Tolkien sent to Eric and Ida Gordon (26 June 1935), ref. MS 1952/2/18, Special Collections & Galleries, Leeds University Library <https://explore.library.leeds.ac.uk/special-collections-explore/376727/poem_by_j_r_r_tolkien_sent_to_eric_and_ida_gord>.

had welcomed Lewis sometime earlier. Tolkien’s remark on his hope that Lewis’s thank-you verses have already reached the Gordons suggests that Lewis’s ‘Mód Þrýpe Ne Wæg’ and Tolkien’s untitled 1935 poem were written in the same year. No other thank-you poem by Tolkien or Lewis survives, and the Gordons seem to have kept all such correspondence. It is not possible to ascertain the exact date when Lewis wrote the verses, though early 1935 appears to be the most likely date of composition owing to the wintry weather portrayed by the poem. The impeccable metrical scheme of ‘Mód Þrýpe Ne Wæg’ introduced in the last section of this edition also points towards 1935, the year Lewis published his theoretical essay on adapting Old English alliterative lines to modern English versification.¹²

4 Old English and *Beowulf*

Although Ida Gordon did not start teaching at university until 1938,¹³ she held a PhD from the University of Leeds (1930)¹⁴ and was a philologist by training, as her later publication record and lecturing show.¹⁵ She would have understood the Old English title, proper noun in line 2a, and pen name in line 11a with ease, and grasped the references with delight, but these elements may appear obscure to the lay reader. With regard to the pseudonym ‘Nat Whilk’, it is a modernised version of the Old English *nāt-hwylc*, an indefinite pronoun meaning an unknown person, ‘someone’, or in this case simply ‘anonymous’. The meanings of ‘Mód Þrýpe Ne Wæg’ and ‘Þrýp’ are not so transparent. Before his undergraduate years, Lewis had read *Beowulf* with enthusiasm but in translation.¹⁶ Once a tutor, his knowledge of the text evolved to the point of convening ‘Beer and *Beowulf*’ sessions on Tuesday/Wednesday evenings for students at Magdalen College, Oxford.¹⁷ This explains the allusion to line 1931b in the *Beowulf* manuscript ‘mod þryðo wæg’,¹⁸ which in the standard edition of *Beowulf* is interpreted as ‘Mōðþrýðo wæg’.¹⁹ However, the editors of this edition admit in the introduction that the interpretation of *Mōðþrýðo* as a dithematic name whose meaning is distilled from the sum of its elements ‘is built upon shifting ground, for it seems likely that the letters *mod þryðo* in the MS do not represent a name, after all’.²⁰ Scholars have proposed a plethora of interpretations over the years for this highly contentious half-line, though none have

¹² See ‘The Alliterative Metre’ section in the present edition.

¹³ See footnote 6.

¹⁴ See <https://leeds.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=44LEE_INST:VU1&search_scope=My_Inst_CI_not_ebsco&tab=AlmostEverything&docid=alma991009436179705181>.

¹⁵ For illustrative purposes only, see <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ida_Gordon>.

¹⁶ Green and Hooper, *Biography*, 45.

¹⁷ Green and Hooper, *Biography*, 124; *CL* I.732; Hooper, *Companion*, 749. In *Companion*, Hooper does not mention the raison d’être for the ‘Beer and *Beowulf*’ evenings: impromptu translations and interpretations of short passages from the poem. See also Robert Boenig, *C.S. Lewis and the Middle Ages* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2012), 65–66, 72. For further information on the ‘Beer and *Beowulf*’ sessions, see Simon Horobin, *C.S. Lewis’s Oxford* (Oxford: Bodleian Publishing, 2024), 55.

¹⁸ The two underscores Lewis wrote at the end of his poem’s title ‘Mód Þrýpe ne wæg __’ indicate that this is an enjambed half-line in the source.

¹⁹ R.D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 65. Note that Lewis uses the acute accent, ‘, as in *ó* and *ý*, to mark long vowels instead of the standard macron, ¯, as in *ō* and *ȳ*.

²⁰ Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (eds), *Beowulf*, cliii.

been unanimously accepted,²¹ and Lewis is following an unconventional reading in his poem. Tolkien made a case ‘[i]n defence of the emendation “*mód Drýðo [ne] wæg*”’.²² Three pieces of evidence suggest that Lewis is embracing Tolkien’s unusual interpretation: the use of the proper name *Drýð(e)*,²³ the diacritics *ó* and *ý* employed to mark vowel length, and the insertion of the negative particle *ne*.²⁴ This results in the following reading in agreement with Tolkien’s,²⁵ a loose rendition of which is evident in Lewis’s poem: the sense of the title, ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’, is conveyed in lines 1b and 2a, ‘whose heart knows not / The temper of Þrýþ’. The forms *Drýþe/Þrýþ* are not arbitrary; *Þrýþe* in the title in Old English is in the genitive case, which accounts for the *-e* ending, an inflected form which is replaced in line 2a in modern English by *of* and the form *Drýþ*. At any rate, since *Þrýþ* was wicked and her mood was fierce, according to Tolkien’s interpretation and translation that Lewis seems to agree with,²⁶ the negative phrase in the title of the poem can only be read as a compliment to Ida Gordon.

5 The Alliterative Metre

In May 1935, Lewis’s ‘A Metrical Suggestion’, later reprinted as ‘The Alliterative Metre’, was published,²⁷ an essay he later described as ‘a work of attack rather than of defence; but probably I should not have written it if I had not been stimulated by the contempt sometimes expressed for Anglo-Saxon poetry’.²⁸ Before Lewis wrote ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’, he had been working on his landmark essay on alliteration, which provided clear guidance for poets who wished to employ this traditional metre in modern English compositions.²⁹ He took his own advice that those who ‘preach’ on a specific metre should produce their own sample as a prescription,³⁰ or perhaps as a

²¹ For a detailed summary, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (eds), *Beowulf*, 222–226. See also R.D. Fulk, ‘The Name of Offa’s Queen: *Beowulf* 1931–2’, *Anglia* 122, no. 4 (2005), 614–639; Leonard Neidorf, *The Transmission of Beowulf: Language, Culture, and Scribal Behavior* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 79.

²² J.R.R. Tolkien (trans.) and Christopher Tolkien (ed.), *Beowulf: A Translation and Commentary together with Sellic Spell* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014), 315. For Tolkien’s engagement with the poem, see Tom Shippey, ‘Appendix: Tolkien and *Beowulf*—A Lifelong Involvement’, in Tom Shippey (trans.) and Leonard Neidorf (ed.), *Beowulf: Translation and Commentary* (London: Uppsala Books, 2023), 349–369.

²³ Christopher Tolkien reveals that his father ‘took *Drýðo* to be the name *Drýðe* with the Anglian (Northumbrian) ending *-o* in oblique cases [...] “retained by the scribe since he was at sea as to the sense of the passage”’, Tolkien and Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 314–315. Lewis replaces *ð* with *þ* in *Drýðe* (in addition to dropping the final *e*: *Þrýþ*), since in Old English these consonants are used interchangeably. All the thorns (*þ*) in the manuscript are identical, making capitals and small cases undistinguishable. Capitalisation has been emended to conform with the supported reading.

²⁴ For the full justification of this emendation, see Tolkien and Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 314–315.

²⁵ Tolkien and Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 315. This might not be the last time that Tolkien’s views on *Beowulf* had an impact on Lewis’s creative writing. It is possible that Tolkien’s interpretation of the origin of the dragon in *Beowulf* also influenced the way Eustace transforms into one of these creatures in Lewis’s *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (1952); see Shippey, ‘Appendix’, 349–351, 368.

²⁶ Tolkien and Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 69, 313.

²⁷ C.S. Lewis, ‘A Metrical Suggestion’, *Lysistrata* 2 (1935), 13–24; C.S. Lewis, ‘The Alliterative Metre’, in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 117–132. All subsequent references direct readers to the 1939 reprint because it is more widely available than the 1935 original.

²⁸ C.S. Lewis, preface to *Rehabilitations*, vii.

²⁹ There is a record of Lewis’s technical definition of the alliterative line which dates as far back as August 1930; see Hooper, *Companion*, 156. However, Lewis had probably mulled over this issue since his student days and especially after he began tutoring in Oxford.

³⁰ Lewis, ‘Alliterative Metre’, 128. ‘The Planets’, with Lewis’s own analysis of the half-line types employed, is a longer sample; see Lewis, ‘Alliterative Metre’, 129–132. For a commentary on Tolkien’s alliterative creations, see Nelson

most befitting metrical pattern for certain creations and readerships. This is the case of ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’, a poem from a medievalist to another with clear allusions to *Beowulf*, the style in which the verse epic was written, and its metre. In order to be even more precise, ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’ observes to the letter the metrical principles enunciated by Lewis in ‘The Alliterative Metre’.³¹ This last claim can be proven by the following metrical analysis of ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’, which complies with Sieversian principles:³²

Line 1	A1 B1
Line 2	B2 A1
Line 3	A1 C1
Line 4	A1 A2b
Line 5	B1 C1
Line 6	+A2k B2
Line 7	B1 A2b
Line 8	D4 A1
Line 9	B1 A1
Line 10	B1 C1
Line 11	E C1
Line 12	A1 C1

Goering, ‘*The Fall of Arthur and The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún*: A Metrical Review of Three Modern English Alliterative Poems’, *Journal of Inklings Studies* 5, no. 2 (2015), 3–56.

³¹ Lewis, ‘Alliterative Metre’, 119–128. This fact differentiates ‘Mód Þrýþe Ne Wæg’ from Lewis’s earlier alliterative poems. For example, see Dennis Wilson Wise, ‘Carved in Granite: C.S. Lewis’s Revivalism in *The Nameless Isle*’, *Journal of Inklings Studies* 13, no. 2 (2023), 151–179. See especially 159–161. See also Dennis Wilson Wise, ‘Dating “Sweet Desire”: C.S. Lewis’s Education in Alliterative Poetics’, *English Text Construction* 16, no. 1 (2023), 82–108; 97–98.

³² Dr Rafael J. Pascual suggested this analysis. The + symbol indicates anacrusis. For the principles of metrical analysis and its terminology, see John C. Pope and R.D. Fulk (eds), *Eight Old English Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000) 129–158; Rafael J. Pascual, ‘Appendix 3: A Glossary of Metrical Terms’, in Rachel A. Burns and Rafael J. Pascual (eds), *Tradition and Innovation in Old English Metre* (Amsterdam: ARC, Amsterdam University Press, 2022), 257–262; Rafael J. Pascual, ‘*The Fall of the King* and the Composition of Neo-Old English Verse’, in Rachel A. Fletcher, Thijs Porck, and Oliver M. Traxel (eds), *Old English Medievalism: Reception and Recreation in the 20th and 21st Centuries* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2022), 209–222.