**"The Battle of Maldon" by Anonymous -- Old English War Poem**

The following is an anonymous poem that narrowly "survived" a library fire in 1731 (the beginning and the ending are lost forever), translated here into modern English by Jonathan Glenn. The poem is about a real battle of the same name that took place in 991 AD, wherein the Anglo-Saxons tried and failed to prevent a Viking invasion. Note the **alliteration** and **caesuras**. Think about the descriptions and how they shape the mood and **tone.**

… would be broken. [ [1](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note1) ]
Then he commanded each young man
To leave his horse, to drive it far off,
and to go forth, with mind turned
to strong hands and good thoughts.5
Then Offa’s kinsman first discovered
that the great earl suffered no slackness;
he let from his hand, then, loved one fly,
hawk to the holt, and he stepped to battle. [ [2](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note2) ]
So one could know that the lad wished not10
to weaken in war, when he seized weapons.
And as for him, Eadric would follow his prince,
his lord to the fight; he bore forth, then,
spear to the battle. He had good thought
as long as he with hands could hold [ [3](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note3) ]15
board [ [4](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note4) ] and bright sword: his boast he performed
when to the fight he came with his lord. [ [5](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note5) ]

Then Byrhtnoth began to array men there,
rode and gave counsel, taught warriors
how they must stand and that stead [ [6](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note6) ] hold,20
bade them their round-shields rightly hold
fast with hands, not at all frightened.
When he had fairly arrayed that folk,
he dismounted among them where it most pleased him,
where he knew his hearth-band [ [7](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note7) ] most loyal.25

Then on the bank stood a Viking messenger,
called out stoutly, spoke with words,
boastfully [ [8](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note8) ] brought the seafarers’ errand
to that land’s earl where he stood on shore:
“Seamen sent me quickly to you,30
ordered me tell you to send rings at once,
wealth for defense: better for all of you
that you with tribute this spear-rush forgo [ [9](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note9) ]
than that we share so bitter a war.
Nor need we kill each other if you perform it;35
for gold we will fasten a truce with you.
If you determine it, the mightiest here,
that you for your people ransom will pay –
give to the seamen at their own choosing
wealth for a truce and take peace from us – 40
we with that payment shall to our ships,
on ocean fare, hold peace with you.”

Byrhtnoth spoke, lifted shield,
shook slender ash-spear, with words spoke,
angry and one-minded gave him answer:45
“Hear you, seafarer, what this folk says?
Spears will they give you, ash-spears as tribute,
poisonous point, old sword –
an armor-tax useless to you in war.
Seamen’s messenger, bear word back again;50
tell your people much loathlier tale:
that here stands a good [ [10](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note10) ] earl with his war-band,
who will defend this homeland,
Æthelred’s land, land of my prince,
folk and fold. [ [11](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note11) ] At battle, now,55
heathen must fall. Too shameful it seems
that you, unfought, should go to ship
bearing our wealth, now that thus far
you have come into our land.
Not so softly shall you carry off riches:60
point must, and edge, reconcile us first,
grim battle-play, before we give tribute.”

He bade them take shield then, go
so that warriors all stood on the bank.
One band could not to the other for water:65
there came flowing the flood after ebb-tide;
streams locked. Too long it seemed
till they might bear spears together.
With tumult [ [12](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note12) ] they stood along Pante’s stream,
the van of the East-Saxons and the ash-army [ [13](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note13) ];70
nor might any bring harm to the other,
but those who through flane-flight [ [14](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note14) ] took death.

The flood went out. The seamen stood ready,
many a Viking, eager for war.
Then bade men’s protector to hold the bridge75
a war-hardened hero – he was called Wulfstan –
who with his spear slew the first man
who most boldly there on the bridge stepped.
There with Wulfstan stood warriors unfrightened,
Ælfere and Maccus, brave twain,80
who would not at the ford flight work,
but fast against fiends defended themselves,
the while they could wield weapons.
When they perceived and saw clearly
that they found the bridge-wards there bitter,85
those loathly strangers [ [15](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note15) ] began to use guile,
asked for free landing, passage to shore,
to fare over the ford leading foot-troops.

Then the earl for his arrogance [ [16](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note16) ]
left too much land [ [17](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note17) ] to a hostile people.90
Then over cold water Byrhthelm’s son
began to call (men listened):
“Now you have room: come quickly to us,
warriors to war. God alone knows
who may master this battlefield.” [ [18](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note18) ]95

Slaughter-wolves waded then, heeded not water;
the Viking band, west over Pante,
over bright water, bore their shields;
seamen to land linden [ [19](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note19) ] bore.
There against anger [ [20](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note20) ] Byrhtnoth stood ready,100
surrounded by warriors. He bade them with shields
build the battle-hedge, hold that troop
fast against foes. Then was the fight near,
glory in battle. The time had come
when fey men must fall there.105
Clamor was raised there. Ravens circled,
eagles, eager for carrion. [ [21](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note21) ] There was uproar on earth.
From hands then they released file-hard spears;
ground spears [,grim ones,] flew. [ [22](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note22) ]
Bows were busy; shield took spear-point.110
Bitter that battle-rush! Warriors fell;
on either hand young men lay.
Wounded was Wulfmaer, chose slaughter-bed,
Byrhtnoth’s kinsman; he was with swords,
his sister-son, badly hewn.115
There to the Vikings requital was given:
I heard that Eadweard slew one
fiercely with sword, withheld not its swinging,
that at his feet a fey warrior fell;
for that his lord thanked him,120
his bower-thegn, when he could.
So the stout-thinkers stood firm,
young men at battle, eagerly vied
who with spear-point soonest might
in fey man life conquer there,125
warrior with weapons. Slain fell on earth.
Steadfast they stood. Byrhtnoth directed them,
bade each young man think on the battle,
who against Danes would win glory in fight.

Then one strode, battle-hard, lifted his weapon,130
his shield as defense, and against that man stepped.
So the earl moved toward the churl:
either to other evil intended.
Then hurled the sea-warrior a southern spear [ [23](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note23) ]
so that wounded was warrior’s lord.135
He shoved then with shield so the shaft burst –
the spear broke and sprang back.
Enraged was that warrior: he with spear stung
the proud Viking who gave him the wound.
Wise was that fyrd-warrior [ [24](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note24) ]: he let his spear wade140
through the youth’s neck, hand guided it,
so that it reached life in the ravager.
Then he another speedily shot
so that the byrnie burst; he was wounded in breast
through the ring-locked mail; in him at heart stood145
poisoned point. The earl was the blither:
the brave man laughed then, said thanks to Metod [ [25](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note25) ]
for the day-work God gave him.
Then a certain warrior let a hand-dart
fly from his hand, so that it went forth150
through that noble, Æthelred’s thegn.
By his side stood an ungrown youth,
a lad in the battle, who full valiantly
drew from the man the bloody spear,
Wulfstan’s son, Wulfmaer the Young.155
He let tempered shaft fare back again:
the point sank in so he on earth lay
who had his lord so grievously reached.
An armed man then went to the earl:
he wished to fetch wealth of that warrior – 160
spoil and rings and adorned sword.

Then Byrhtnoth drew his bill [ [26](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note26) ] from its sheath,
broad and bright-edged, and struck against byrnie.
Too quickly one of the seamen stopped him
when he marred the earl’s arm.165
Then to the ground fell the fallow-hilt sword,
nor could he hold hard blade,
wield weapon. Then yet this word spoke
that hoar battler, encouraged the young men,
bade them go forth with good company.170
He could not stand fast on foot any longer;
he looked to the heavens [ [27](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note27) ]:
“I thank thee, Wielder of peoples,
for all those joys I had in the world.
Now have I, mild Measurer, most need175
that you grant to my spirit goodness,
that my soul may journey now to thee,
into thy wielding, Lord of the angels,
depart in peace. I am entreating thee
that no hell-scathers harm it.”180
Then heathen men hewed him,
and the men who had stood by him,
Ælfnoth and Wulfmaer, both lay there,
when close to their lord they their lives gave.

Then they turned from battle who wished not to be there:185
there were Odda’s sons first in flight:
Godric turned from battle and left that good one
who many a horse often gave him.
He leapt on a horse which his lord owned,
on those trappings where he had no right,190
and his brothers both ran with him,
Godwin and Godwig, heeded not battle
but turned from that war and the woods sought,
fled to that fastness, their lives saved,
and more men than was fitting195
if they all remembered those favors
that he for their profit had done.
So Offa earlier that day had said to him
in the methel-stead, [ [28](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note28) ] when he held moot, [ [29](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note29) ]
that many spoke boldly there200
who after, at need, would not endure.
Then was the folk’s prince fallen,
Æthelred’s earl. All saw there,
his hearth-companions, that their lord lay. [ [30](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note30) ]
Then valiant thegns went forth there,205
men undaunted eagerly hastened:
they all wished, then, one of two things –
to leave life or loved one avenge.
So the son of Ælfric boldened them forth,
winter-young warrior words spoke,210
Ælfwine spoke then, valiantly said:
“Remember the speeches we spoke at mead,
when we our boast on the bench raised,
heroes in hall about hard fight:
now I may test who is keen. [ [31](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note31) ]215
I will make my nobility known to all,
that I was of great kin among Mercians;
my old-father [ [32](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note32) ] Ealhhelm was called,
wise aldorman, [ [33](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note33) ] world-happy.
Nor among the people shall thegns blame me220
that I from this fyrd wish to flee,
seek home, now that my prince lies
hewn at the fight. That harm is most to me:
he was both my kin and my lord.”
Then he went forth, mindful of battle,225
with spear-point pierced one,
a seaman among the folk, that he on fold lay,
destroyed with his weapon. His friends he exhorted,
friends and companions, that they go forth.
Offa answered, shook ash-wood:230
“Indeed, you, Ælfwine, have all thegns
exhorted at need. [ [34](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note34) ] Now that our lord lies,
earl on earth, to all of us need is
that each of us embolden the other,
warrior to war, the while he weapon may235
have yet and hold, hard blade,
spear and good sword. Us Godric has,
Odda’s craven son, betrayed altogether.
When he on horse rode, on proud steed,
too many men thought that it was our lord.240
Therefore here on field the folk was divided,
shield-defense broken. Fail his beginning! [ [35](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note35) ]
since he so many men put to flight.”
Leofsunu spoke and his linden raised,
shield for safety; to Offa he said:245
“I vow it, that hence I will not
flee a foot’s length, but will advance,
avenge in strife my lord-friend.
Steadfast heroes need not reproach me
with words around Sturmere, now my friend fell, [ [36](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note36) ]250
that I journeyed home lordless,
turned from the battle; but weapon must take me,
spear-point and iron.” He went full angry,
fought stoutly, flight he rejected.
Dunnere spoke then, brandished a dart,255
the humble churl [ [37](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note37) ] over all called,
bade that each man avenge Byrhtnoth:
“He may not flinch, who thinks to avenge
his lord among folk, nor for fear mourn.”
Then they went forth, recked nothing of fear.260
Household retainers began to fight stoutly,
fierce spear-bearers, and prayed God
they might avenge their lord-friend,
and a fall [ [38](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note38) ] work on their foes.
The hostage began eagerly helping them;265
he was of brave kin among the Northumbrians,
Ecglaf’s son; Æscferth was name to him.
He flinched not at battle-play,
but again and again shot forth arrow:
sometimes he shot against shield, sometimes a man tore;270
ever and anon he inflicted some wound
while he could weapons wield.

Then yet in the van stood Eadweard the Long,
ready and eager, vaunting words spoke,
that he would not flee a foot-space of land,275
bend at all back when his better lay slain.
He broke the shield-wall and fought with those warriors,
until on those seamen his wealth-giver
he worthily wreaked, before he with the slain lay.
So did Ætheric, noble companion,280
eager and forth-yearning, fought earnestly, [ [39](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note39) ]
Sigebyrht’s brother, and many others,
clove cellod [ [40](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note40) ] shield, keenly defended them.
Shield’s rim burst, and the byrnie sang
a terrible song. [ [41](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note41) ] Then Offa at battle285
struck the seaman, that he on earth fell,
and there Gadda’s kinsman sought ground.
Quickly at fight Offa was hewn;
he had, though, furthered what he promised his lord,
as he boasted before with his ring-giver,290
that they should both into burg [ [42](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note42) ] ride
hale [ [43](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note43) ] home or in battle fall,
on the corpse-field with wounds perish.
He lay thegnly, his lord near.

Then there was shield’s clash. [ [44](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note44) ] Seamen advanced,295
burning with battle-rage. Spear often pierced through
a fey one’s soul-house. Forth then went Wistan,
Thurstan’s son, fought against warriors.
He was in throng the bane of three of them,
before Wig(h)elm’s son lay slain with him. 300
There was a harsh meeting. They stood fast,
warriors in conflict. Warriors fell,
weary with wounds. The slain fell on earth.
Oswold and Eadwold all the while,
both those brothers, strengthened the men,305
with words bade their kin-friends
that they should endure at need,
unweakly use weapons.
Byrhtwold spoke, raised his shield –
he was an old retainer – shook his ash-spear;310
full boldly he taught warriors:
“Thought must be the harder, heart be the keener,
mind must be the greater, while our strength lessens. [ [45](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note45) ]
Here lies our prince all hewn,
good one on grit. He may always mourn315
who from this war-play thinks now to turn.
My life is old [ [46](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html%22%20%5Cl%20%22note46) ]: I will not away;
but I myself beside my lord,
by so loved a man, think to lie.”
So Æthelgar’s son emboldened them all,320
Godric to battle. Often he let spear,
slaughter-spear, speed into those Vikings;
so among folk he went first,
hewed and humbled, [ [47](https://lightspill.com/poetry/oe/maldon.html#note47) ] until he in fight fell.
(That was not the Godric who fled from battle.)325