Doworst is an alliterating poem by J.R.R. Tolkien, about 2200 words long, written as a parody on Piers Plowman, a narrative from the late 14th century. In the mediaeval poem the author, William Langland, describes the search for the allegorical characters Dowel, Dobet and Dobest (“Do-well”, “Do-better” and “Do-best”).

J.R.R.’s work shows up with irony the errors committed by anxious students facing an English-language oral examination, in 1932, by four dons including Tolkien himself, C.S. Lewis and also professors C.L. Wrenn (Anglo-Saxon) and H.F.B. Brett-Smith (English Literature). The poem calls these scholars Plato, Britoner, Regulus and Grim (not necessarily in this order). Each of the students examined could probably deserve, by analogy with Piers Plowman, the epithet Doworst.

Tolkien sent the manuscript of his poem as a Christmas gift to Prof. R.W. Chambers, of University College in London, with a letter dated 21 December 1933. The work was handwritten with illuminations, bound in vellum and encased beautifully. Chambers left the poem to his secretary Winifred Husbands, who in 1957 gave it to Prof. Arthur Brown, of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. The current whereabouts of the manuscript is unknown.

Doworst is still unpublished as a whole. Two passages were published in the July 1975 issue of Monash Review, a magazine of the Australian university. The first page was reproduced in A Elbereth Gilthoniel!, n. 1, from 1978, a fanzine of the group The Fellowship of Middle Earth [sic] archived at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, USA, the institution where a great part of J.R.R. Tolkien’s manuscripts are kept.

In the extracts below, the first reproduces text and punctuation of the manuscript, expanding the abbreviations (in mediaeval style) employed by Tolkien. It shows the examinees waiting to be called for the test. The second has been extracted literally from Monash Review, with the reservations due to a secondary text, and describes the vigorous reactions of the examiners at one of the students’ nonsense.

Visio Petri Aratoris de Doworst.

DOWORST

In a summer season when sultry was the sun
with lourdains and lubbers I lounged in a hall,
and wood in his wits was each wight as meseemed:
on his [head] was a hat as hard as a board,
on his neck was there knotted a noose all of white
with bow big and broad as a butterfly’s wings.
Most of that meiny had on mantles of stuff,
shrouds short as shrift and shapeless as sacks
that never covered their tails nor their touts either.
The clamour of that company was like the cackle of hens,
till a bell rang brazenly – that abated their noise.
They were summoned it seemed to an assize to be held
by four clerks very fell whom few could appease
that should judge them ungently with jesting unkind.
Then I went in their wake walking slowly,
as they passed down a passage paved all with marble
to a double doorway in a dim corner.
An usher it opened, and we entered in fear,
filling in like footmen or folk of the street.
[…]

DOWORST BY J.R.R. TOLKIEN: A DISAPPEARED POEM
Ronald Kyrmse
Independent scholar – São Paulo, Brazil – kyrmse@gmail.com
Sir Plato turned pale as with pang at the heart,
cast his hood o’er his head and hid up his face.
Sir Britoner bawled forth, “The bastard is mad!”
Sir Regulus retched and wrinkled his nose,
Sir Grim rent his gown and gulped in his throat,
then spinfoot he sprang and sprinted to the bell.
An usher then entered and asked what he wished,
and the clerks with a clamour all cried out together:
‘Hale forth this harlot and hew him with staves!
Kick him from these cloisters to Carfax and further,
then plough him in pieces with ploughshares keen,
as red-hot as wrath – no ruth he deserves!’
[…]

First page of the manuscript
Tolkien’s letter to R.W. Chambers

My Dear Chambers,

Thank you for your note. I am sorry you are – or were – unwell. My very best wishes for a happy feast and for all blessings in 1934.

Yrs very sincerely,
J.R.R. Tolkien

I send you – it may possibly amuse you – a report on last year's Examinations in Oxford: held by myself, Wrenn, Brett-Smith & C.S. Lewis (whose Pilgrim's Regress you may have read). The howlers are genuine except the nonsense about Percy S.

Yrs
J.R.R.T.

References


A Elbereth Gilthoniell, n. 1, p. 3, 1978,

Letter to R.W. Chambers. Tolkien Gateway,