The Theory and Practice of Alliterative Verse in the Work of J.R.R. Tolkien

Mark F. Hall
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Abstract

Studies Tolkien's use of alliterative meter in his poetry, both that embedded in *The Lord of the Rings* and that published separately elsewhere.

Additional Keywords

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Mark F. Hall

J. R. R. Tolkien is best known as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and the creator of Middle-earth, but those who look beneath the surface quickly learn that his background lay in the study of philology and of Anglo-Saxon and other Germanic languages and literatures in his position as a professor at Oxford University.

In any more in-depth study of any of these aspects of Tolkien's career it soon becomes clear that all of these activities were integrally related. Much of the existing Tolkien scholarship has focused on the influences of Norse and Germanic mythology in Tolkien's novels, and on the linguistic underpinnings and relationships they share. Less often discussed, but equally apparent upon careful examination, is the stylistic influence of Anglo-Saxon poetry on Tolkien's work. While the influence of imagery and subject manner from works such as *Beowulf* and "The Battle of Maldon" are frequently discussed, the stylistic influences should be equally clear. That they are not is perhaps due to their influence being most apparent in Tolkien's verse, both in that which appeared in small amounts throughout Tolkien's novels and more prominently in some of his lesser known works. Some of these, although published posthumously (through the heroic efforts of his son, Christopher Tolkien), were works to which he had nonetheless devoted a great deal of his life.

That these issues—alliterative poetry and the aura of the Anglo-Saxon era—were important to Tolkien is obvious from the critical and scholarly works that he continued to produce over the course of his career, and from their continual appearance, in varying degrees, in the creative works for which he achieved world renown.

Tolkien notes in the essay "On Translating *Beowulf*" that the *Beowulf* poet likely was consciously using archaic and literary words, words that had already become obsolete in the everyday usage of the language. In the "Lay of the Children of Húrin" and in the "Lay of Leithian" Tolkien, like the

Beowulf poet, is himself using archaic words in order to provide a literary, mythical, and traditional feeling to the work. In the introduction to *The Lays of Beleriand*, Christopher Tolkien notes that the "Lay of the Children of Húrin" "is the most sustained embodiment of his abiding love of the resonance and richness of sound that might be achieved in the ancient English metre" (*Beleriand* 1), as shown in this example:

> He sought for comfort,   with courage saying:
> 'Quickly will I come   from the courts of Thingol;
> long ere manhood   I will lead to Morwin
> great tale of treasure,   and true comrades'—
> for he wist not the weird   woven by Bauglir,
> nor the sundering sorrow   that swept between.
>   ("Húrin" 10, lines 156-161)

Tolkien here is consciously harkening back to the Old English meaning of "weird" or wyrd as it would have been spelled. This is clearly an example of an archaic usage, as every student of Anglo-Saxon has examined the concept of wyrd—meaning fate or doom—and how it differs in meaning and power from its modern cognate.

Perhaps this is a reaction against the rigidity and formality of translating authentic Anglo-Saxon literature. In "On Translating *Beowulf*," Tolkien noted, "Words should not be used merely because they are 'old' or obsolete. The words chosen, however remote they may be from colloquial speech or ephemeral suggestions, must be words that remain in literary use, especially in the use of verse, among educated people" ("Translating" 55). Tolkien was writing these particular works, anyway, mostly for the benefit of himself and perhaps his philological and Anglo-Saxon colleagues— "educated people" in the sense referred to in his description of the audience of the ancient English poets. "Many words used by the ancient English poets had, even in the eighth century, already passed out of colloquial use for anything from a lifetime to hundreds of years. They were familiar to those who were taught to use and hear the language of verse" ("Translating" 54).

The "Lay of the Children of Húrin" was among his earlier creative works, begun while he was at the University of Leeds. One may speculate that in addition to its status as an early form of the tales that would later form *The Silmarillion*, the "Children of Húrin" was an attempt to capture the mood and atmosphere of Anglo-Saxon poetry in the Modern English

language while being freed from the constraints of remaining faithful to the works of the Anglo-Saxon canon. Tolkien playfully alludes to this Anglo-Saxon stereotype in "English and Welsh" when describing how an Anglo-Saxon poet would have portrayed a typical tale from Celtic mythology: "ominous, colourless, with the wind blowing, and a *wóma* [noise, alarm, terror] in the distance as the half-seen hounds came baying in the gloom, huge shadows pursuing shadows to the brink of a bottomless pool" ("English" 172). This depiction dovetails neatly with such verse as this from "Children of Húrin":

> Like a throbbing thunder   in the threatening deeps
> of cavernous clouds,   o'ercast with gloom
> now swelled on a sudden   a song most dire,
> and their hellward hymn   their home greeted;
> flung from the foremost   of the fierce spearmen,
> who viewed mid vapours   vast and sable
> the threefold peaks   of Thangorodrim,
> it rolled rearward,   rumbling darkly,
> like drums in distant   dungeons empty.
>   ("Húrin" 40, lines 994-1002)

Unfortunately, Tolkien himself never completed the "Lay of the Children of Húrin." According to Christopher Tolkien, "The alliterative poem was composed while my father held appointments at the University of Leeds (1920-5); he abandoned it for the *Lay of Leithian* at the end of that time, and never turned to it again"(*Beleriand* 1). Were he to have completed it, the "Lay of the Children of Húrin" could well have been one of his most significant works. Certainly it would have taken, and for that matter in its unfinished state does take, the study of Tolkien's work to a level far beyond that of "children's author" or even "novelist." [1]

It is in some ways fitting, however, that the poem remains incomplete and fragmentary like the Anglo-Saxon corpus it attempts to emulate. Tolkien's description in "On Translating *Beowulf*" is an apt description of our knowledge of the "Lay of the Children of Húrin," as well: "Its manner and conventions, and its metre, are unlike those of modern

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[1] Editor's note: As this issue was about to go to press, the Spring 2007 publication of *The Children of Húrin* was announced. Edited by Christopher Tolkien, it will combine the various retellings of the story into a coherent narrative.

English verse. Also it is preserved fragmentarily and by chance, and has only in recent times been redeciphered and interpreted, without the aid of any tradition or gloss" ("Translating" 51). Tolkien's own recollection was that "In Leeds I began to try to deal with this matter in high and serious style, and wrote much of it in verse" (*Letters* 346). He further noted that "verse of this kind differs from prose, *not* in re-arranging words to fit a special rhythm, repeated or varied in successive lines, but in choosing the simpler and more compact word-patterns and clearing away extraneous matter, so that these patterns stand opposed to one another"("Translating" 62). Another aspect of alliterative verse that Tolkien views as important is the metrical function of the alliteration that serves to link the two half-lines together. "Delay would obscure this main linking function; repetition by separating off the last word-group and making it self-sufficient would have a similar effect" which he notes "can be plainly observed in the decadent alliterative verse of Middle English where this rule is often broken" ("Translating" 67, 67n).

Tolkien also published scholarly works translating and analysing some of these decadent alliterative Middle English works, and his comments regarding them are instructive. For example, some of these same themes are discussed in the introduction to the volume of his translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Pearl*, and *Sir Orfeo*. "In short, this poet adhered to what is now known as the Alliterative Revival of the fourteenth century, the attempt to use the old native metre and style long rusticated for high and serious writing; and he paid the penalty for its failure, for alliterative verse was not in the event revived"(*Gawain* 3). Perhaps similar thoughts ran through the mind of the young Tolkien when he began the "Lay of the Children of Húrin," and of the older Tolkien when he abandoned it. "The main object of the present translations is to preserve the metres, which are essential to the poems as wholes; and to present the language and style, nonetheless, not as they may appear at a superficial glance, archaic, queer, crabbed and rustic, but as they were for the people to whom they were addressed: if English and conservative, yet courtly, wise, and well-bred—educated, indeed learned" (*Gawain* 3-4).

Regarding *Pearl*, Tolkien notes that it is "much the more difficult to translate, largely for metrical reasons; but being attracted by apparently insoluble metrical problems, I started to render it years ago" (*Letters* 317). He goes on to state "NO scholars (or, nowadays, poets) have any experience

in composing themselves in exacting metres. I made up a few stanzas in the metre to show that composition in it was not at any rate 'impossible'" (ibid.). Here again we see evidence that Tolkien is interested not only in preserving the ancient English poetry but the ancient English poetic forms, as well. Although the experiment in the metre of *Pearl* is described as a brief one, he nevertheless felt sufficiently challenged by the metre to attempt to bring it into the modern language, albeit with unsatisfactory (to him) results. Tolkien also comments on the internal alliteration in the lines of *Pearl*, which he attempts to preserve in his translation.

Throughout both his translations and his creative works, a recurring theme is the recovery of things once lost from the olden days, not only the ideas but the words and the forms as well. We see this in the ideas expressed in *The Lord of the Rings, The Hobbit*, and *The Silmarillion*, all of which evolved out of his original effort that he called the *Book of Lost Tales*. In his translations he is interested not only in bringing forward to modern readers the ideas of the ancient poets, but the style and atmosphere of them as well. Stating a preference for archaic, literary words, Tolkien is styling his own works after his interpretation of the stylistic tendencies of the original authors. As the rhythm, metre, and alliteration are essential to the style and mood of the original he attempts to recreate these in his translations from the Middle English. In his original creative works he is freed from the constriction of the ideas and words of the original author, so he is able, to some extent, to better recreate the impact of the original ancient poetry to modern audiences through the telling of tales of his own invention. His themes—heroic exploits of characters in a long vanished world—echo those of his models.

His poem "The Hoard," Tolkien notes, "is the least fluid, being written in [a] mode rather resembling the oldest English verse—and was in fact inspired by a single line of ancient verse: *iúmonna gold galdre bewunden*, 'the gold of men long ago enmeshed in enchantment'"(*Letters* 312) from *Beowulf* line 3052. In its original form this was one of Tolkien's earliest creative compositions to be published, appearing in *The Gryphon* in 1923. Here also, we see perhaps one of the more obvious examples of *Beowulf's* influence on his creative work. For "The Hoard" is a poem, admittedly inspired by a line from *Beowulf*, with an Anglo-Saxon theme. He describes the theme to Pauline Baynes, who was then preparing illustrations for *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* in which the poem was to be included, noting

that "the woes of the successive (nameless) inheritors are seen merely as pictures in a tapestry of antiquity" (*Letters* 312).

> Ere the pit was dug or Hell yawned,
> ere dwarf was bred or dragon spawned,
> there were Elves of old, and strong spells
> under green hill in hollow dells
> they sang as they wrought many fair things,
> and the bright crowns of the Elf-kings.
> But their doom fell, and their song waned,
> by iron hewn and by steel chained.
>
> ("Hoard" 53, lines 5-12)

In reading "The Hoard" one is also reminded of the Anglo-Saxon poem "Deor." Both poems change eras, and to some extent stories, with each verse. "The Hoard" tells of the treasure hoard that lives on through generations of masters and defenders, while "Deor" describes a catalogue of woes that had passed providing the author with hope that his current ones may as well, ending with the refrain "Þæs oferēode; Þisses swā mæg" (That passed away, this also may) ("Deor" 37, line 6). In both cases the theme is the transient nature of the present world.

Other examples of the Anglo-Saxon poetic style in the work of Tolkien can be found in Aragorn's song for the Departure of Boromir:

> 'Beneath Amon Hen I heard his cry. There many foes he fought.
> His cloven shield, his broken sword, they to the water brought.
> His head so proud, his face so fair, his limbs they laid to rest;
> And Rauros, golden Rauros-falls, bore him upon its breast.'
> 'O Boromir! The Tower of Guard shall ever northward gaze
> To Rauros, golden Rauros-falls, until the end of days.'
>
> (*Towers* 20)

Certainly this passage reflects the influence of the accounts in *Beowulf* of the funerals of Scyld Scefing:

> Þær wæs mādma fela
> of feorwegum frætwa gelǣded;
> ne hȳrde ic cȳmlīcor cēol gegyrwan
> hildewǣpnum ond heaðowǣdum,
> billum ond byrnum; him on bearme læg

mādma mænigo, þā him mid scoldon
on flōdes ǣht feor gewītan.
                    (*Beowulf* 2, lines 36-42)
          (There was much treasure
from faraway ornaments brought
not heard I of more nobly a ship prepared
war-weapons and war-armour
sword and mail; on his lap lay
treasures many then with him should
on floods' possession far departed.) [2]

and of Beowulf himself :

          Geworhton ðā Wedra lēode
hl(ǣw) on [h]līðe,   sē wæs hēah ond brād,
(wǣ)glīðendum wīde g(e)sȳne,
ond betimbredon on tȳn dagum
beadurōfes bēcn, bronda lāfe
wealle beworhton, swā weorðlicost
foresnotre men findan mihton.
                    (*Beowulf* 119, lines 3156-3162)
(Made then the Weather-Geats men
a mound on Cliffside that was high and broad
seafarers   widely saw
and built in ten days
for the bold in battle a monument of burning ashes
a wall built around   also worthily
clever men   found strength.)

Not only *Beowulf*, but also other alliterative verse works from the Anglo-Saxon period, such as "The Battle of Brunanburh" and "The Battle of Maldon," show their influence in Tolkien's alliterative works. Tolkien's "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" reads as though Tolkien was imagining himself channelling the missing lines of the fragmentary "The Battle of Maldon." "The old poem [Maldon] is composed in a free form of the alliterative line, the last surviving fragment of ancient English heroic minstrelsy. In that measure, little if at all freer (though used for dialogue) than the verse of *The Battle of Maldon*, the present modern poem is written" ("Homecoming" 5). For example:

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[2] Translations are by the author.

"His head was higher than the helm of kings
with heathen crowns, his heart keener
and his soul clearer than swords of heroes
polished and proven: than plated gold
his worth was greater. From the world has
passed a prince peerless in peace and war,
just in judgement, generous-handed
as the golden lords of long ago.
He has gone to God glory seeking,
Beorhtnoth beloved."   ("Homecoming" 9)

This passage fits thematically and stylistically with the original, to the point that one wonders if buried somewhere in Tolkien's notes or in his mind there once existed an Anglo-Saxon translation of "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son" that would complement these lines from "The Battle of Maldon":

Þā wearþ afeallen   þaes folces ealdor,
Æðelrēdes eorl;   ealle ġesāwon
heorþ-ġenēatas   þaet hira hearra læġ.
Þā þǣr wendon forþ   wlance þeġnas,
unearge menn   efston ġeorne;
hīe woldon þā ealle   ōðer twēġa:
Līf forlǣtan   oþþe lēofne ġewrecan.
                    ("Maldon" 22, lines 203-208)
(Then it happened that fell   these people's leader
Aethelred's noblemen   all saw
their hearth-sharer   that here lay.
Then there went forth   proud thanes
undaunted men   hastened eagerly
for him would then all either of the two:
Their lives abandon   or their beloved avenge.)

Tolkien tends to view *Beowulf*, "The Battle of Maldon," and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as three works from different ages that each examine in-depth the notions of heroism and chivalry. Although written in Middle English during a later era, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* "is a poem with many inner likenesses to *Beowulf*, deeper than the use of the old 'alliterative' metre, which is none the less significant" ("Homecoming" 23).

In considering the nature of Old English metre Tolkien, in "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," points out that it is frequently misinterpreted. "In it there is no single rhythmic pattern progressing from the beginning of a line to the end, and repeated with variation in other lines" ("Monsters" 29-30). Further, the construction of Old English verse is founded on different principles than more "modern" verse. "The lines do not go according to a tune. They are founded on a balance; an opposition between two halves or roughly equivalent phonetic weight, and significant content, which are more often rhythmically contrasted than similar. They are more like masonry than music" ("Monsters" 30).

Certainly there are many passages in Tolkien's poetry that resemble, in terms of mood and sound, passages from several of the Anglo-Saxon works we've discussed. Another example in the same manner is a snippet of Tolkien's original Old English verse included in *The Annals of Beleriand*:

> Þá cóm of Mistóran   méare rídan
> Finbrand felahór   flánas scéotan;
> Glómundes gryre   grimmum strǽlum
> forþ áflíemde.
> > (*Shaping* 406)
> (Then come from Mistoran   horse riders
> Finbrand many brave arrows shoot
> of Glomund terrible grim arrows
> put forth to flight..)

Similarly, in "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields" in *The Return of King*, the poem "The Mounds of Mundburg," lines 20-27:

> Death in the morning and at day's ending
> lords took and lowly. Long now they sleep
> under grass in Gondor by the Great River.
> Grey now as tears, gleaming silver,
> red then it rolled, roaring water:
> foam dyed with blood flamed at sunset;
> as beacons mountains burned at evening;
> red fell the dew in Rammas Echor.   (*Return* 125)

This verse, describing the aftermath of a great battle, seems to echo "The Battle of Brunanburh":

Hetten crugon
Scotta lēode   and scip-flotan,
fǣġe fēollon.   Feld dennode
secga swāte   siþþan sunne upp
on morgen-tīd,   mǣre tungol,
glād ofer grundas,   Godes candel beorht,
ēċes dryhtnes,   oþ sēo æðele ġesceaft
sāg tō setle.   Þǣr læġ secg maniġ
gārum aġīeted, guma norðerna
ofer scield scoten,   swelċe Scyttisc ēac,
wērig, wīges sæd.
                    ("Brunanburh" 5-6, lines 10-17)
                    (Enemy pressed
of Scots people   and pirates
doomed to die fallen.   Battlefield became moist
with blood of men,   afterwards sun-up
on morning   the famous star
glad over ground,   God's candle bright
eternal Lord   until was the glorious creation
set to seat.   In that place lay many men
destroyed by spears,   Northern warriors
over shields shot,   also Scottish as if,
weary, warriors sated.)

We have seen here a representative selection of excerpts from some of Tolkien's alliterative and Anglo-Saxon verse. While there has been much discussion of, and little dissension from, the notion of the influence of *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon works in the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien, the bulk of this discussion has centred on the subject and thematic aspects of his work. It is clear that his professional work in Anglo-Saxon studies, as well as his work in Old Norse mythology and Germanic philology, were very influential on his Middle-earth writing.

What has been less often discussed is how the forms of medieval poetry, particularly alliterative verse, influenced his work as well. While it is his novels that are the best known, the poetry within them represents some of their most significant and characteristic moments. In addition, given the many years that he devoted to the unfinished "Lay of the Children of Húrin," for example, or the many revisions of *"Iūmanna Gold Galdre Bewunden"* ("The Hoard") it is clear that these poems remained important to him. They were important in that they were integral parts of *The Lord of the*

Rings and that they were a major part of his other original works such as *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* and "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son." Further, his translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Sir Orfeo*, and *Pearl*—not to mention his legendary *Beowulf* writings—all demonstrate the importance of alliterative verse to Tolkien. It thus is important to recognize that his use of these ancient styles, rhythms, and subjects reflect the inspiration Tolkien derived from reading them and his desire—seen in both his scholarly and his creative works—for bringing to modern readers that which was best in the ancient literature.

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