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Rendering of Tolkien's Alliterative Verse

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Abstract
Describes the principles of alliterative verse and corrects some errors which have crept into reprints of Tolkien’s “Homecoming.” Shows the proper stress of syllables in the verse as it should be read aloud.

Additional Keywords
Alliterative verse; Tolkien, J.R.R. “The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm’s Son”
On the Rendering of Tolkien's Alliterative Verse
of 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth'
in Ballantine's 'Tolkien Reader'

The year 1953 saw the appearance of Tolkien's 'The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son', a dramatic scene in the alliterative mode of ancient Anglo-Saxon poetry, accompanied by an essay. This piece was included with 'Tree and Leaf', 'Farmer Giles of Ham', and 'The Adventures of Tom Bombadil' in 'The Tolkien Reader' published by Ballantine in 1966 and reprinted a number of times. In this edition the alliterative verse of the original has suffered seriously and is frequently much garbled.

To give an idea of what we are talking about, let me state in a few words, without going into the niceties, the main principles of Germanic alliterative verse in its classical form:

Two or more words alliterate, if they begin with the same consonant, 'sp', 'st', and 'sk' counting as a single unit; they alliterate also, if they begin with a vowel, regardless which. A long line of alliterative verse consists of two half-lines. Each half-line carries two main stresses that must agree with the general accentuation of speech. The alliterating words must be in such stressed positions. In the first half-line either the first stress, or the second, or both can carry the alliteration, in the second half-line only the first one. So there are three possible structures for a line of alliterative poetry ('a' denotes an alliterating stress, 'x' a non-alliterating one):

\[
\begin{align*}
& a x / a x \\
& x a / a x \\
& a a / a x
\end{align*}
\]

For the benefit of those not very much acquainted with this ancient form of Germanic poetry the verses of 'The Homecoming' as they should read are given below. Identification is by page-number and line of 'The Tolkien Reader'; the lines are counted as they appear in print, without the stage directions. The main stresses referred to above are marked with an accent.

6,17-20:
Help me to heave 'em! It's heavy labour
to lug them alone: long ones and short ones,
the thick and the thin. Think less and talk less
of ghosts. Forget your gleeman's stuff!

7,32-33:
they were fast fellows, and faithful to their lord,
as close to him as kin.

8,37-9,2:
When your shield is shivered, between shame and death
is hard choosing. Help me with this one!
There, heave him over — the hound's carcase,

his worth was greater. From the world has passed

Notes:

