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Manfred Zimmerman

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### Rendering of Tolkien's Alliterative Verse

#### Abstract

Describes the principles of alliterative verse and corrects some errors which have crept into reprintings 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"



# RENDERING OF TOLKIEN'S ALLITERATIVE VERSE



MANFRED ZIMMERMAN

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 normal 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):

a x / a x  
x a / a x  
a a / a x

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:

Hélp me to héave 'em! It's héavy lábour  
to lúg them alóne: lóng ones and shórt ones,  
the thíck and the thín. Thínk less and tálk less  
of ghósts. Foréet your gléeman's stúff!

7,32-33:

they were fást féllóws, and fáithful to their lórd,  
as clóse to him as kínn.

8,37-9,2:

When your shíeld is shívered, between sháme and déath  
is hárd chóosing. Hélp me with thís one!  
There, héave him óver - the hóund's cárcase,

9,23-24:

his wóth was gréater. Fróm the wórd has pássed

a prínce peérless in péace and wár,

10,16-17:

you can héar the téars through the hárp's twánging.  
Come, bénd your báck. We must béar áway

12,10-12:

if it's fíghting you lóok for; but I can fínd you sóme,  
if you néed it tónight. You'll get nóthing chéaper.

12,19-20:

Bóld héart wóuld you bórrów with Béorhtnoth's swórd?

13,19 (the first word is missing):

mén lie móuldering, and the mánnér of wólves

14,1-2:

Another stépp that wáy, and in the stréam we'd bé  
like fóols flóundering - and the flóód's rúnníng.

15,30-31:

How these w héels do whíne! They'll héar the créak  
for míles áway óver míre and stóne.

16,6-7:

To Máldon and the mónks, and then míles ónward  
to Ély and the ábbey. It'll énd sómetíme;

Ballantine's 'Tolkien Reader' is not the only place where a misrendering of Tolkien's text caused most certainly by unfamiliarity with the principles of alliterative verse appears. Similarly Anne Etkin in 'Eglerio!'<sup>3</sup> gets some important lines confused, curiously enough lines that are quite correct in 'The Tolkien Reader'. The last lines of the quotation on p. 51 should be:

Héart shall be bólder, hárdér be púrpóse,  
more próud the spírít as our pówer lèssens!  
Mínd shall not fáltér nor móód wáver,  
thóugh dóóm shall cóme and dárk cónquer.

These mistakes could easily have been avoided by looking up the original publication, where, needless to say, the alliterative lines are correct.

Notes:

<sup>1</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien: The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhthelm's Son. In: Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, New Series 6, 1953, pp. 1-18.

<sup>2</sup> The Tolkien Reader. New York 1966. My references are to the eighteenth printing 1973.

<sup>3</sup> Anne Etkin: Eglerio! In Praise of Tolkien. Greencastle, Pa. 1978.