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The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien

Abstract

Largely negative criticism of Tolkien as a poet, particularly his early work in *Book of Lost Tales* and *Lays of Beleriand*. Notes, however, that “much of the verse embedded in his prose does indeed fit the purpose for which he intended it.”

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Book of Lost Tales; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lays of Beleriand; Tolkien, J.R.R. Poetry

The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien

Delanie A. Rawls

To review the body of critical commentary on the poetry and verse of J.R.R. Tolkien is to discover a wild variety of critical opinion. For some critics, his poetry is well-crafted and beautiful. Other critics announce that the verse is excruciatingly bad. At times two critics with opposite opinions are referring to the same poem. A reader can scarcely make use of such commentaries as reliable guides — it begins to look like a case of one person's meat being another's poison.

For example, Randel Helms, in his book *Tolkien's World*, speaks of the poem "Errantry" as "a stunningly skillful piece of versification... with smooth and lovely rhythms." (130) But Alan Bold, in his essay "Hobbit Verse Versus Tolkien's Poem," writes: "The poem certainly displays all the sentimental silliness of the early Tolkien with its relentlessly contrived internal rhyming..." and goes on to dismiss Helm's praise as just another example of the lengths to which a "Perfect Tolkienite will go to defend the master." (145)

Edmund Wilson, in his famous review lambasting Tolkien's work, "Oo, Those Awful Orcs," deplored the whole business with the statement, "Prose and verse are on the same level of professorial amateurishness." (313) Catherine R. Stimson saw the verse as "...an inferior cross between Mother Goose and Swinburne." (quoted in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Six Decades of Criticism*, 103) L. Sprague de Camp approved of *The Lord of the Rings* despite the "rather pedestrian poetry." (quoted in *Six Decades*, 156).

Edmund Fuller, however, wrote that Tolkien was "a poet of much skill in the special veins appropriate to the work." (21) Mary Quella Kelly, in her essay "The Poetry of Fantasy: Verse in *The Lord of the Rings*," asserted that:

...many of the verses are charming, imaginative, even evocative and deserve to be enjoyed in their own right... the poetry in the Ring trilogy not only strengthens and enhances the work, but in its diversity and quality testifies to the poetic skill of the author-poet. (170)

Fuller's proviso — appropriate to the work — is important and agrees with the sentiments of the author himself. In a letter to his son Michael, Tolkien wrote,

My 'poetry' has received little praise — comment even by some admirers being as often as not contemptuous (I refer to reviews by self-styled literary blokes). Perhaps largely because in the contemporary atmosphere — in which 'poetry' must only reflect one's personal agonies of mind and soul, and exterior things are only valued by one's own 'reactions' — it seems hardly ever recognized that the verses in L.R. are all dramatic: they do not express the poor old professor's soul-searching,

but are fitted in style and contents to the *characters* in the story that sing or recite them, and to the situations in it." (396)

Alan Bold, who does not think highly of *any* of Tolkien's verse, except the alliterative dramatic poem "The Homecoming of Beorhtnoth Beorhtelm's Son," agrees obliquely: "For a man who was capable of writing superlative narrative and descriptive prose, Tolkien was virtually incapable of understanding the linguistic point of post-medieval poetry." (137)

Indeed, Tolkien preferred the old-fashioned techniques of rhyme and strict meter coupled with alliteration and assonance, and had no use whatsoever for free verse with modern purpose or technique.

Because his Middle-earth opus was *not* written in the style of the modern novel, modern verse would probably have been glaringly inappropriate, out of time and tune with the work in which they were to be embedded. The verses are intended to represent songs. Even today, in these modern times exposed for decades to free, unrhymed, personal poetry, most song lyrics continue to employ, as expressive devices, rhyme, fairly strict meter, and alliteration.

Now that the early writings of Tolkien are being published in such books as *The Book of Lost Tales*, Volumes I and II, and *The Lays of Beleriand*, it is possible to examine Tolkien's development as a poet. In these earlier works we see a writer struggling to convey, in verse, dramatic events and a personal vision incongruent with that of most of his contemporaries. Poetry, to Tolkien, meant alliteration, rhyme, and meter — otherwise it was not poetry. While in his early twenties he attempted to convey the poignant, ineffable beauty of his first conceptions of Valinor and Middle-earth. He was not successful, even judged by the standards of the kind of verse he chose to write.

For example, his poem, "You and Me and the Cottage of Lost Play" contains such stanzas as follows:

We wandered shyly hand in hand
small footprints in the golden sand,
and gathered pearls and shells in pails,
while all about the nightingales
were singing in the trees.
We dug for silver with our spades,
and caught the sparkle of the seas,
then ran ashore to greenlit glades
and found the warm and winding lane
that now we cannot find again,

between tall whispering trees.

(*Lost Tales*, vol.1,30)

"Golden sands," "Nightingales... singing in the trees," "tall whispering trees" are all clichés. The meter, almost as regular as a ticking clock, provides no alternate source of interest. The tone of the poem is quite mawkish. This bit of verse recalls the notions of Nokes the cook in *Smith of Wootton Major*, who was also trying to reconstruct a glimpse of Faery: "...it should be very sweet and rich; and he decided that it should be entirely covered in sugaring." (14)

The phrase "gathered pearls and shells in pails" is an unfortunate touch of alliteration and internal rhyme calling to mind the tongue twister "She sells seashells."

"Kortirion among the Trees," a poem Tolkien labored over for years is managed somewhat better, but is still weighed down with clichés and self-consciously decorative words:

O spiry town upon a windy hill
With sudden-winding alleys shady walled
(Where even now the peacocks pace a stately drill,
Majestic, sapphire and emerald),
Behold thy girdle of a wide champain
Sunlit and watered with a silver rain,
And rich wooded with a thousand whispering trees
That cast long shadows in many a bygone noon,
And murmured many centuries in the breeze.
Thou art the city of the Land of Elms,
Alalminore in the Faery Realms.

(*LT*, vol.1, 33)

"Windy hill," "silver rain," "thousand whispering trees" that "murmured ... in the breeze" — again, a collection of clichés. The poem is laden with sibilants, aspirants and liquids, as well as short, high, front vowels, particularly the short "i" all of which introduce a breathy quality, an effect Tolkien was probably trying to achieve. But he succeeded all too well: the devices call attention to themselves.

And what can possibly be said about "Tinfang Warble" and its reworking, "Over the Hill and Far Away"?

O the hoot! O the hoot!
How he trillups on his flute!
O the hoot of Tinfang Warble!

Dancing all alone,
Hopping on a stone,
Flitting like a fawn
In the twilight on the lawn...

(*LT*, vol.1, 108)

It was Tinfang Warble that was dancing there,
Fluting and tossing his old white hair,
Till it sparkled like frost in a winter moon;
And the stars were about him, and blinking to his tune
Shimmering blue like sparks in a haze,
As always they shimmer and shake when he plays.

(*LT*, vol.1, 109)

In *The Lays of Beleriand*, Tolkien turned to epics, in alliterative mode and rhymed couplets. Even Bold states that Tolkien had a much better grasp of alliterative poetry. (146) In over 200 lines, Tolkien worked and reworked "The Tale of the Children of Húrin." The reader can imagine such lines as these achieving some dignity and power if read aloud with the proper dramatic flourishes:

In eager anger then up sprang Beleg
crying and calling careless of Flinding:
"O Turin, Turin, my troth-brother,
to the brazen bonds shall I abandon thee,
and the darkling doors of the Deepes of Hell?"
(*LB*, 37)

Then again, perhaps not. Particularly at such epic length.

"The Lay of Leithen," the tale of Beren and Luthien, was an even greater verse disaster. Strictly metered rhymed couplets did not lend themselves to a graceful telling of a tale of high passion and tragedy. The inevitable, unimaginative, predictable, and relentless rhymes, as well as the thumping meter, overwhelmed the text. The poem was riddled with expediency and cliché. The effect was at times unintentionally and inappropriately comic.

'O mother Melian, tell to me
some part of what thy dark eyes see!
Tell of thy magic where his feet
are wandering! What foes him meet?
O mother, tell me, lives he still
treading the desert and the hill?
Do sun and moon above him shine,
do rains fall on him, mother mine?
(*LB*, 199)

Such an effusion is suggestive of silent movie acting. One can almost see our poor heroine dramatically clasping her hands to her bosom and wildly batting her eyes in typical silent movie fashion. Unfortunately, the rest of the poem fares no better.

Tolkien never gave up, however. And he did improve with age, as the poems came to be absorbed into his prose works as song lyrics. For example, the song Aragorn sings at Weathertop is quite an improvement over "The Lay of Leithen," though they are about the same tale:

Long was the way that fate them bore,
O'er stony mountains cold and grey,
Through halls of iron and darkling door,
And woods of nightshade morrowless.

The Sundering Seas between them lay,
And yet at last they met once more,
And long ago they passed away
In the forest singing sorrowless.

(*The Fellowship*, 260)

Tolkien still employs the devices of meter, rhyme, alliteration, and assonance for effect. But the loosened metrical structure and an alteration of one syllable (masculine) and

two or more syllable (feminine) rhyme, particularly the three-syllable end rhyme of the fourth and eight lines of all nine stanzas, release this verse from the rhyming, metrical straitjacket which ruined the earlier attempt.

The verses of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* ably reflect the races and individual characters who sing them. The elves, for example, employ much feminine rhyme. In English, words of two or more syllables often have the accent on the first syllable, which produces a falling or fading effect. Thus feminine rhyme is congruent with the “fading” of the elves in Middle-earth.

Long are the waves on the Last Shore falling,
Sweet are the voices in the Lost Isle calling,
In Eressea, in Elvenhome that no man can discover,
Where the leaves fall not: land of my people forever!
(*Return of the King*, 289)

A Elbereth Gilthoniel,
silivren penna míriel
o menel aglar elenath!
Na-chaered palan-diriel
o galadhrimmin ennorath,
Fanuilos, le linnathon
nef aear, sí nef aearon!

(*The Fellowship*, 312)

Feminine rhyme appears even in the near-doggerel verse sung by the elves of *The Hobbit*, where Tolkien was presenting his elves as not very dignified creatures who lurked in trees and startled travellers, a far cry from the splendor of Elrond and Galadriel:

O! What are you doing
And where are you going?
Your ponies need shoeing!
The river is flowing!

(*The Hobbit*, 57)

Sing all ye joyful, now sing all together!
The wind's in the treetops, the wind's in the heather;
The stars are in blossom, the moon is in flower,
And bright are the windows of Night in her Tower.
(*The Hobbit*, 281)

Of the hobbits, Bilbo composes most of the verse, to the scandal of his neighbors. Hobbits, Tolkien wrote in the preface to the poetry collection *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, “are fond of strange words, and of rhyming and metrical tricks — in their simplicity Hobbits evidently regarded such things as virtues or graces...” (9) Bilbo, in fact, is Tolkien's alter ego. Alan Bold says that Tolkien had a hobbit writing verse in his head long before he penned the first words of his first book about hobbits. (143) Tolkien, too, had a fondness for strange words and metrical and rhyming tricks. This predilection pleases some readers and critics, displeases others, and creates comic, interesting effects or annoying, ridiculous effects, depending on the reader's taste.

The hobbit verse in *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* is very much in keeping

with Tolkien's characterization of hobbits. The verse is cosy, comic, simple, sometimes simpleminded, meant to entertain, easy to memorize, and much given to descriptions of food and other creature comforts. A few examples follow:

Ho! Ho! Ho! to the bottle I go
To heal my heart and drown my woe.
Rain may fall and wind may blow,
and many miles be still to go,
But under a tall tree I will lie,
And let the clouds go sailing by.

(*The Fellowship*, 131)

Sing hey! for the bath at the close of day
That washes the weary mud away!
A loon is he that will not sing:
O! Water Hot is a noble thing!

(*The Fellowship*, 145)

He'd have seas of blues, and the living hues
of forest green and fen;
And he yearned for the mirth of the populous earth
and the sanguine blood of men.
He coveted song, and laughter of long,
and viands hot, and wine,
Eating pearly cakes of light snowflakes
and drinking thin moonshine.

(*Bombadil*, 36)

The last example is a stanza from “The Man in the Moon Came Down Too Soon,” Tolkien's elaboration of an old nursery rhyme. It was ostensibly written by Bilbo. Under the influence of the elves, Bilbo's verse technique supposedly improved, though it still retained much hobbit flavor. But he could compose a pleasing, straightforward poem, as he did in his Road song and in “I Sit Beside the Fire.”

I sit beside the fire and think
of all that I have seen,
of meadow flowers and butterflies
in summers that have been;

Of yellow leaves and gossamer
in autumns that there were,
with morning mist and silver sun
and wind upon my hair.

(*The Fellowship*, 364)

The dwarf songs of *The Hobbit* have a strongly accented meter which echoes the fall of dwarvish hammers:

Far over the misty mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold.

(*The Hobbit*, 27)

Ti tum-tum ti-tum ti-tum ti-tum — a series of iambs — is the metrical pattern, a light stress followed most of the time by a heavy stress. The poem also contains many hard consonants — k, hard c, v, f, d, and b, and these often in

accented positions. This increases the hammer-on-anvil effect, and is in direct contrast to the aspirants, sibilants and liquids employed in elvish poetry.

A different metrical scheme is employed in the poem about wind recited by the dwarves in Beorn's house. Short syllables, short vowel sounds and a metrical pattern of many unstressed or lightly stressed syllables hasten the pace of the poem most effectively:

The wind was on the withered heath
but in the forest stirred no leaf;
there shadows lay by night and day,
and dark things silent crept beneath.

The grasses hissed, their tassels bent,
the reeds went rattling — on it went
o'er shaken pool, under heavens cool
where racing clouds were torn and rent.
(*The Hobbit*, 128)

Dwarvish poetry also employs and AABB rhyme scheme more often than does the poetry of other races, a distinguishing characteristic.

Gimli's poem about Moria is interesting in that it has cadence reminiscent of some elvish-influenced poetry:

The world was young, the mountains green,
No stain yet on the moon was seen,
No words were laid on stream or stone,
When Durin woke and walked alone.
(*The Fellowship*, 411)

Compare these lines with the following first verse about Beren and Luthien sung by Aragorn on Weathertop:

The leaves were long, the grass was green,
The hemlock umbels tall and fair,
And in the glade a light was seen
Of stars in shadow shimmering.
(*The Fellowship*, 258)

Of course the poems do not exactly correspond, but two of the rhymes are identical and there are similarities in cadence and imagery. Can this be a poetic foreshadowing of Gimli's eventual status as an elf-friend? (Gimli is not said to have composed the Moria poem, but it is the only song he sings, with the exception of his contribution to the lament for Boromir. But that stanza was composed to Aragorn's specifications and cannot be considered a dwarvish song.)

Of the verse of Tom Bombadil, Mary Kelly claims that "the irregular and non-rational rhythm of his song suggests Tom's motion as he hops and dances down the lane toward home." (180) Bold, however, says that "Tolkien's metrical limitations interfere with the execution of the idea. The feminine rhymes are sluggish and the poem drags its trochaic feet." (149)

None ever caught old Tom in upland or in dingle,
walking the forest-oaths, or by the Withywindle,
or out on the lily-pools in boat upon the water.

But one day, Tom, he went and caught the River-daughter.
(*Bombadil*, 15)

As a character, Bombadil is controversial — some readers like him and others find him excessively irritating. It is not surprising, therefore, that the verse about him and attributed to him should rouse similar controversy. The verse does accurately reflect the character, as Kelly claims.

Most of the poetry of men comes in the Anglo-Saxon alliterative form sung by the Rohirrim:

We heard the horns in the hills ringing,
the swords shining in the South-kingdom.
Steeds went striding to the Stoningland,
as wind in the morning. War was kindled.
(*Return*, 152)

There is a failure in craft in that second line, which, unfortunately may also be read as if the Rohirrim heard shining swords as well as horns.

Theoden's exhortation to his riders just before their participation in the breaking of the siege of Gondor fits neatly and completely into the text:

Arise, arise, Riders of Theoden!
Fell deeds awake: fire and slaughter!
spear shall be shaken, shield be splintered,
a sword-day, a red day ere the sun rises!
Ride now, ride now! Ride to Gondor!
(*Return*, 137)

There is a smoothness to these alliterated lines absent in the earlier effort of "The Tale of the Children of Húrin." The elimination of the caesura — the gap at the center of the lines in that poem — helps.

The song the Lakemen sing to celebrate the return of the dwarves in *The Hobbit* combines masculine and feminine rhyme. Short iambic lines with a metrical variation provided by the spondees — two stressed syllables together — at the ends of the first and third lines of the stanzas, demonstrate that the Lakemen are different from the Rohirrim, but are not any closer to the elves or dwarves:

The King beneath the mountains,
The King of carven stone,
The lord of silver fountains
Shall come into his own!

(*The Hobbit*, 190)

There is an ambiguity in line two, which can be read as if the king's substance was of stone.

Aragorn's tribute to the fallen Boromir, however, shows elvish influence in its longer lines and less emphatic meter. However, the end rhyme is masculine, not the feminine rhyme common to elvish poetry. (Not every elvish verse employs feminine rhyme. The song sung by Gildor and his companions (*The Fellowship*, 117) and Legolas's song about Nimrod (440) both employ end rhyme of one syllable. So also does Galadriel's farewell to

the Fellowship (482). Feminine rhyme is not inevitable to elvish poetry, but the elves certainly employ it more than do any other group.)

Through Rohan over fen and field where the long grass grows
The West Wind comes walking, and about the walls it goes.
What news from the West, O wandering wind, do you
bring to me tonight?

Have you seen Boromir the Tall by moon or by starlight?
(Two Towers, 23)

Aragorn, of course, was raised among the elves and had elvish blood.

So how does a reader regard Tolkien as a poet? He was strong-willed in his choice of mode and would not be influenced into abandoning his pre-twentieth century style. But he was modest about the results. In a letter to Pauline Baynes, illustrator for some of his books, he referred to the verses as "...small things... which are light-hearted, and (I think) dextrous in words, but not profound in intention." (*Letters*, 312)

He was not always skillful in using his favorite techniques and he could be repetitious, as his many references to wind-in-the-trees demonstrate. On the other hand, much of the verse embedded in his prose does indeed fit the purpose for which he included it. The verses add another dimension to his invented world and are another method of dramatic presentation of his tale.

He was a better writer of prose than of verse. However, if the reader can overlook some minor lapses of craft and does not expect a result the author had no intention of delivering, the verses of Middle-earth can be enjoyed as auxiliaries to a great prose tale.

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