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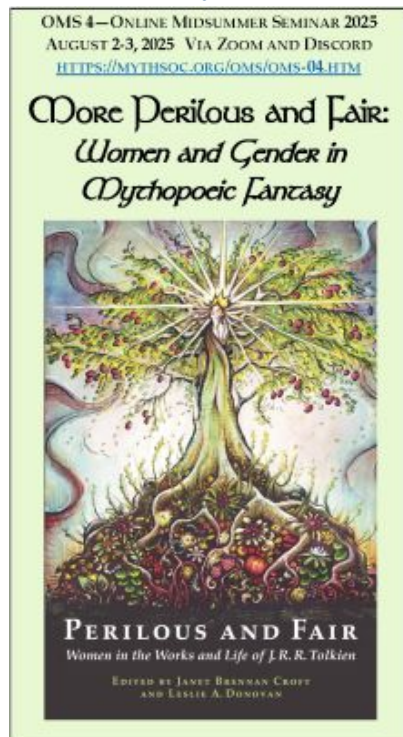
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## Another Opinion of "The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien"

### Abstract

Response to a paper by Melanie Rawls in Mythlore #71. Disagrees with that paper's negative attitude toward Tolkien's poetry, giving detailed technical analysis to support his points.

### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. Poetry; Tolkien, J.R.R. Poetry—Technique

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# ANOTHER OPINION OF "The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien"

PAUL EDWIN ZIMMER



Although Melanie Rawls, in "The Verse of J.R.R. Tolkien" [Issue 71] seems at first to assume the posture of a neutral [critic], making an unbiased, balanced evaluation of Tolkien's verse, she never even attempts to examine the bias of hostile critics; nor does she raise the question of how lasting art can possibly be judged according to standards that are, themselves, less than a hundred years old.

Her own bias appears fairly quickly, in her opposition of "old-fashioned techniques of rhyme and strict meter coupled with alliteration and assonance" to "free verse with modern purpose or technique ... in these modern times exposed for decades to free, unrhymed, personal poetry."

Now, I have myself written a great deal of "free verse," and there are many poets who can and have created fine (and possibly lasting) poetry "with modern purpose or technique." There has also been a great deal of dull, insipid, stupid, rhymed-and-metered verse written, especially in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. (But only historians are aware of it; dull, insipid verse, whether rhymed and metered, or "free," does not survive.)

The great literary struggle (or is it, perhaps, only an advertising campaign?) of this century has been the attempt (largely successful) of the practitioners of "modern poetry" (both the early modernists of the Twenties to the Fifties, whose "free verse" was metrically constructed, and frequently rhymed; and the later moderns, of the past three decades, whose "free verse" is normally unrhymed, un-metered, and "personal") to validate their own work by deriding "traditional" verse with such loaded terms as "contrived," "old-fashioned," "metrical straitjacket," "near-doggerel," "cliches," etc.

It is my own suspicion that many attacks on Tolkien's work should be seen in the context of this struggle, and that those critics who have made the most savage comments were in fact defending the supremacy of "free verse with modern purpose" against a perceived threat.

Unfortunately for this thesis, one of Tolkien's staunchest defenders, W.H. Auden, was a major figure in modern poetry; while the only one quoted here whom I know personally, or whose verse I have seen, L. Sprague de Camp, writes sonnets and other traditional forms. Thus far, I must admit, the evidence is against me, yet I suspect that a survey of the poetry (or expressed poetic opinions) of Bold, Stimson, and Wilson could be revealing.

Rawls seems unaware that "today, in these" [post-]

"modern times [ ] exposed for [3] decades to free, unrhymed, personal poetry" many younger poets find such work itself "old-fashioned." As I said in a poem of my own, first published in 1985: "Aesthetic theories come and go | ... Now rhyme is out, free verse is in — | Has been since I was young ..."<sup>1</sup>

Despite his popularity in the Sixties, Tolkien should *not* be treated as a contemporary of Alan Ginsberg or Michael McClure. Old-fashioned? Tolkien was *old*, born in the same year as Edna St. Vincent Millay and Archibald MacLeish, a year before Wilfred Owen, and three years before Robert Graves. He was only five years younger than Rupert Brooke; only six years younger than Joyce Kilmer; only twelve years younger than Alfred Noyes.<sup>2</sup>

To judge from her comments on "The Little House of Lost Play,"<sup>3</sup> (which is the poem actually quoted, although Rawls gives the title of the earlier version) she must really hate the verbal music of Noyes' "The Barrel Organ"<sup>4</sup>! The richness of sound at which Rawls sneers was part of a literary trend that had begun with Swinburne. It could be argued that Tolkien was, in fact, trying to write "verse with modern purpose or technique" according to the standards of the time — this poem was written in April 1915, two months before "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" was published for the first time.<sup>5</sup>

Literary convention in 1915 demanded a bridge between this workaday world and any other world. This poem, and the chapter it accompanies, were attempts to meet this requirement.

The poem is cloyingly sentimental, and this is not to my taste; nor, indeed, to Tolkien's, which is why this approach was abandoned. But sentimentality was inherent in that particular approach to the literary problem, and therefore appropriate to its subject.

Sentimental, cloying, silly, perhaps even, "maudlin"; but, "mawkish"? "Mawkish" (derived from the same root as "maggot," its original meaning, "nauseating" and with an aural echo of "awkward," with which it is frequently linked as a cliché) is a term of propaganda, not of criticism.

There is no awkwardness here, and no "failure of craft." The poem is skillfully put together, and fulfills its purpose admirably. Although it did not fit the new standard of taste which Pound was then attempting (vainly) to impose, it is well within the standard of the time, and compares favorably with work from the same general period by (for example) Alfred Noyes and William Rose Benet.<sup>6</sup>

The simple fact that this work is so typical of the period should dispose of Alan Bold's absurd comment that Tolkien was "incapable of understanding ... post medieval poetry." This would seem to be justified by Tolkien's public disdain for any writer after Chaucer; yet a study of Tolkien's letters soon reveals familiarity with Keats, with Francis Thompson, with Chesterton, de la Mare, and other "post-medievales." There is no doubt that Tolkien preferred the older writers, but "incapable of understanding" is surely carrying it a bit far.

Again, "Kortirion Among the Trees," also from 1915, suffers more from the attempt to meet contemporary (1915) standards of taste than from any lack of skill. The "decorative words" objected to were still considered a virtue in British (and American) verse of the time. Aesthetic fashions have changed. They will change again. Many common practices in "verse with modern purpose or technique" will seem quite ludicrous seventy-eight years from now.

What can possibly be said about "Tinfang Warble"? Well, to begin with, it lacks the metrical "ticking clock" regularity which Rawls found so annoying in "The Little House of Lost Play" — so she *should* like it better. There are two anapests in the first line; trochee-spondee-anapest in the second; third paeon-spondee-trochee in the third. But is the fourth line (1) a first paeon followed by a monosyllabic foot, (2) a dactyl followed by an iamb, or (3) a trochee followed by an anapest?

The metrical complexity of this poem is truly wonderful, a joy and a puzzlement; alternating iambs and trochees; wild shifts from dactyl to anapest. Basically, it is a musically regulated dancing meter, and I suspect that Tolkien had a specific tune in mind, probably a jig.

As such, it compares quite favorably with Granger's "Phil the Fluter's Ball," with "the toot of the flute and the twiddle of the fiddle." But it lacks the high seriousness that Tolkien's later work has led us to expect of elves. Tinfang Warble is a denizen of a wilder section of Faerie than we are accustomed to.

The "hoot" reminds us of owls: "Tinfang" is too Saxon a kenning for flute, "warble" too appropriate an English word, for ears accustomed to Sindarin and Quenya. Tinfang seems out of place in Tolkien: we might perhaps expect him "where dips the rocky highland / of Sleuth Wood in the lake" or perhaps, "up the airy mountain, / Down the rushy glen." And indeed, the notes tell us that in the earliest version (from 1914, even before "Kortirion" or "Cottage of Lost Play") Tinfang was called a "leprawn" (and Allingham's "The Lupracaun, or Fairy Shoemaker" shows a similar metrical complexity).<sup>7</sup>

As for the "reworking" it is easy to see in "Over Old Hills And Far Away" an attempt to tame the earlier conception into the gentler (and more English) iambic pentameter — but Tinfang Warble is still untamed, and appears in a flurry of wild trochees, spondees, and dactyls. The ending has real power, much like that of Yeat's "The Song of Wandering Aengus," but without its rationalizing suggestion of sex.<sup>8</sup>

Now, what was so difficult about that?

The lines chosen to represent "The Lay of the Children of Hurin" are indeed flawed. Tolkien would no doubt have amended them if he had continued his revision. But why, after saying, "Tolkien worked and reworked" this poem, choose the example from the unrevised section?

I myself would have removed the unnecessary "then" from the first line, so it would read: "In eager anger up sprang Beleg." Whether this revision is one Tolkien would have made cannot, of course, be said, but in the small portion that he did revise, many lines are tightened thus. Consider the shift from:

"For Turgon towering in terrible anger  
a pathway clove him with his pale sword-blade"

to:

"that Turgon the terrible towering in anger  
A pathway clove with pale falchion"

But yes, even these flawed lines, "read aloud with the proper dramatic" skills, will indeed hold an audience spellbound.

At first Ms. Rawls' comments on "Turin" seem to be fairly complimentary. But suddenly, in her following comment ("perhaps not. Particularly at such epic length") a suspicion begins to rise that perhaps she has been speaking ironically the whole time, a suspicion rudely confirmed when she denounces "The Lay of Leithian" as "an even greater verse disaster."

Now I might be misreading here. It might be that Ms. Rawls meant "an even greater verse disaster" than "Kortirion" or "Cottage of Lost Play" or "Tinfang Warble." But unless she has either forgotten or chosen to ignore the standard conventions of English prose (or unless there has been a major proofreading error), the comparative should not skip back over two paragraphs, so that she must mean a "greater verse disaster" than "The Lay of the Children of Hurin," implying that she has been indulging in some rather inept irony.

And now (if my reading here is not based on a simple misprint), we begin to approach the crux of the matter. Not that Ms. Rawls suggests that the reader *imagine* these lines read aloud. She does *not* suggest (nor is there any indication that it occurred to her) that a reader might actually *say* the lines aloud.

Nor, I suspect, has she read them aloud herself, save perhaps in a satiric manner.

This is an important omission. The voice in the head, the "reading" speech center, is muted and flat compared to the speaking voice. Poetry read silently (particularly by someone with no dramatic training, or who does not habitually sound out verse) loses much of its power. Poetry, particularly accented poetry, is very much a spoken, aural, art.

Curiously, in her analysis of "Kortirion," she does seem to show some awareness of the oral and aural elements of

poetry; but a closer examination reveals only the commonplaces used in classes designed to teach the writing of "free verse with modern purpose or technique" by teachers who have entirely abandoned (or have never learned) the more scientific classification system of metrical poetry.

Ms. Rawls, I would guess, has no friends like Kipple, knows no one likely to suddenly and spontaneously begin to quote "Lepanto"<sup>9</sup> or "Lament for the Makaris"<sup>10</sup> at three in the morning. She shows no sign of any love for the spoken art of Poetry; nor any real familiarity with the immense body of "pre-modern" verse.

Ms. Rawls seems to consider "thumping meter" in and of itself, a sufficiently damning criticism, naively unaware that the same words can be, and have been, used as a compliment. Nor does she seem to have noticed that the far more "thumping" rhythms of Rap music -- actually rapidly spoken, usually rhymed verse (normatively structured on a line of two dactyls, a trochee, and an iamb) spoken over a drumbeat -- have not prevented it from finding an audience.

She asserts, early in the article, that Tolkien's work is "not successful, even judged by the standards of the kind of verse he chose to write." But she fails to apply those standards, and in fact shows no sign of understanding those standards, or even of knowing what they are. She does not seem to know one meter from another. Or, indeed, to recognize the *same* meter.

In her comments on "the song Aragorn sings at Weathertop"<sup>11</sup> she asserts that "the loosened metrical structure" coupled with the different rhyme pattern "release this verse from the ... metrical straitjacket which ruined the earlier attempt." Yet metrically the two poems are identical (iambic tetrameter, with frequent trochaic and occasional dactylic variation), and if anything, "The Lay of Leithian" is the "looser" of the two.<sup>12</sup>

ˈLɒŋ wɑːl | ðə ˈweɪ | θæt ˈfate | ðɛm ˈbore,  
Oʊər ˈstɒn-l-ɪ ˈmoun-l-táins ˈcold | aɪnd ˈgreɪ,

is metrically identical to:

ɛn-ˈchant | l-mɛnt ˈdid | hiː ˈrealm | ɛn-ˈfold,  
wɛrə ˈmɪht | aɪnd ˈglɔː-l-ɪ ˈwealt | uɪn-ˈtold,  
hɛ ˈweil-l-dɛd ˈfrɒm | hiː ˈiv-l-ɔːrɪ ˈθrone  
ɪn ˈman-l-ɪ ˈpɪl-l-aɪd ˈhalls | ɔf ˈstɒn.

("Ivory" is probably here pronounced "iv'ry"; to maintain the normative iamb.)

Although she notes a similar "cadence" in "Gimli's poem about Moria" and actually compares it with "Aragorn on Weathertop," she somehow manages to miss whole lines lifted bodily from "The Lay of Leithian," and, again, does not seem to recognize iambic tetrameter.

A ˈkɪŋ | hɛ ˈwɑːs | ɒn ˈcar-l-vɛn ˈθrone  
ɪn ˈman-l-ɪ ˈpɪl-l-aɪd ˈhalls | ɔf ˈstɒn  
Wɪð ˈgɔl-l-dɛn ˈruof | aɪnd ˈsɪl-l-vɛr ˈflɔːr,  
Aɪnd ˈrʌnɪs | ɔf ˈpɔw-ɪl ɪp-ɒn | ðɛ ˈduːr.

Although she correctly identifies the (normative) meter of "Far over the misty mountains cold"<sup>13</sup> as "a series of iambs" she does not note that there are four to each line, making, again, tetrameter. She seems to like hammers on anvils better than ticking clocks or "thumping"<sup>14</sup>:

We ˈmʌst | ɹ-ˈweɪ | ɛrɛ ˈbreɪk | ɔf ˈdaɪ  
To ˈseək | ðə ˈpale | ɛn-ˈchant | ɪ-d ˈgɔːd.

She then claims that "a different metrical scheme is employed in the poem about wind recited by the dwarves in Beorn's house."

The ˈwɪnd | wɑːs ˈɒn | ðɛ ˈwɪth-l-ɛfɛd ˈheath  
but ɪn | ðɛ ˈfɔːl-ɛst ˈstɪrɪd | ˈno ˈleaf;  
there ˈʃad | l-ɔvɛ ˈlaɪ | bɪ ˈnaɪt | aɪnd ˈdaɪ,  
aɪnd ˈdɑːk | ˈθɪŋs ˈsɪ-l-ɛn ˈcrept | bɛ-ˈneath.

Once again, a normative iambic tetrameter, with a spondee ending the second line, another spondee in the second foot of the fourth line, and an arguable anapest in the seventh line -- "oʊər ˈʃak-l-ɛn ˈpuːl | uɪnd-ɛr ˈheav-ɛɪs ˈkuːl." This reading depends on whether the stress in "heav-ɛɪs" is sufficiently stronger than the stress in the first syllable of "und-ɛr" to drown it out. The anapest is questionable, and this line could be scanned as -- "oʊər ˈʃak | ɛn ˈpuːl | ˈund-ɛr | ˈheav-ɛɪs | ˈkuːl" -- making a slightly irregular pentameter line ending in a monosyllabic foot the extra stress. Or, "heav-ɛɪs ˈkuːl" could be an amphimacer, the rarest foot in English verse. But the *normative* meter is the same iambic tetrameter as "Far over the misty mountains cold!"

She goes on to describe the "different metrical scheme" she claims to find in this poem: "Short syllables, short vowel sounds and a metrical pattern of many unstressed or lightly stressed syllables."

"Short syllables, short vowel sounds" define the foot in quantitative verse; that is, the number of short syllables attached to each long syllable, determine whether it is a double meter, a triple, or a paeon. Their *location*, in relation to the long syllable, determine whether the foot in question is an iamb or a trochee; a dactyl, amphibrach, or anapest; a first, second, third or fourth paeon.

Similarly, the number of "unstressed or lightly stressed syllables" define the foot in accentual-syllabic meter, which is what we are discussing. The terms are the same, and the definitions differ only in saying "stressed" instead of "long"; "unstressed" instead of "short." A "metrical patten of many unstressed or lightly stressed syllables" would have to be either a triple or paeonic meter, perhaps like the fourth line of "Tinfang Warble."

Yet in "The wind was on the withered heath," as in "Far over the misty mountains cold" (as in all iambic tetrameter), there are four unstressed syllables to each normative line, making "a series of iambs," except of course, for the variations in lines two, four and seven of the lines chosen to illustrate her statement. In lines two and four, the variation is a spondee, in which there are *no* "unstressed or

lightly stressed syllables." In lines two and four, therefore, there are only *three* "unstressed or lightly stressed syllables" to a line. But even if my reading of an arguable anapest in the seventh line is valid, that still adds only five "unstressed or lightly stressed syllables," not "many." And no more than in the first line of "Far over the misty mountains cold," which begins with an amphibrach (or, arguably, a dactyl or a spondee-anapest).

What does Ms. Rawls believe the word "meter" means? And what *does* she think "the standards of the kind of verse he [Tolkien] chose to write" are?

The section that she has chosen to represent "The Lay of Leithian," is once again from the unrevised section, and she appears to confuse the meter with the matter.

Obviously she would have preferred something like this —

"Mommy?"  
The question  
                  bled  
                  from her  
fishhooked  
heart,  
                  jerking  
a muscle in  
her cheek. "Is  
he—" her lip  
twitched, at the fork  
                  of the Y;  
which to ask? — "dead?"  
One eyelid  
fluttered,  
fighting tears.

This is not only a more "modern," but a "cooler," more sophisticated and "naturalistic" Tinuviel, revealing her emotion only by subtle clues, holding back from any such display as that which Ms. Rawls describes as "an effusion ... suggestive of silent movie acting ... see our poor heroine dramatically clapping her hands to her bosom and wildly batting her eyes."

Ms. Rawls, it would appear, finds the mimetic language of the silent film "unintentionally and inappropriately comic." That is to say, she finds an *entire art-form* "comic."

If you have ever had the misfortune to observe in real life ordinary people in moments of great personal stress, suffering extremes of grief or fear (say, during some major disaster, such as an earthquake or a major fire, or, perhaps, if you have seen someone who has just lost several friends in a messy traffic accident), you may have observed that even ordinary, middle-class Americans tend to do odd things with their hands. Among other things, they may wave them about, or twist them — "wring them" in the old phrase — or even, yes, clasp them to their "bosom." You may have also observed various facial tics and spasms, among them irregular, jerky fluttering of the eyelids.

These are involuntary, instinctive human gestures, which most contemporary Americans try to repress. Yet, except occasionally on news programs during interviews of survivors who have not been given time to ready themselves for the camera, such emotional gestures are never seen on television.

Now, there is neither time nor room here to go into the history and evolution of stage gesture. But the point to it all would be that Ms. Rawls has never made the imaginative leap necessary to appreciate silent film on its own terms.

I think Ms. Rawls has the same difficulty in making the imaginative leap necessary to appreciate an epic written in iambic tetrameter. Or, perhaps, in any meter.

She quotes Bold's comment about Tom Bombadil: "the poem drags its trochaic feet." In quantitative meter, of course, a trochee would "drag"; in accentual meter, however, the added sharpness of tone should not affect the speed of the verse. Many in the older generation (and this comment makes me suspect that Bold is one) were trained in a style of dramatic reading in which stressed syllables are always lengthened, and verse always read in a slow and stately manner, regardless of the subject. Such a reading would tend to mute the complex music here.

The meter associated with Bombadil is in fact very complex, and filled with what Tolkien called "metrical tricks."

'Hey `dol! | `mer-ry | `dol | ring | ä `dong! | `dil-lö!  
'Ring ä | `dong! | `hop | ä-`long! | `fal |al | the `wil-löw!  
'Tom 'Bom, | `jol-ly | 'Tom, 'Tom | 'Bom-bä | - `dil-lö!

Thus, the leitmotif heralding Tom's first appearance in *The Lord of the Rings*. If read as quantitative verse, it makes a slow and pompous dirge indeed! But it is accentual verse, and those are drumbeats, not long-held notes!

My tentative and inadequate (and wrong) scansion above should reveal that "spondaic" is at least as descriptive as "trochaic." Worse and worse, for anyone reading accentual verse as though it were quantitative! But if we listen to the recording of Tolkien himself reading,<sup>15</sup> we hear no dragging of feet. We will hear a triple, not a duple, meter.

'Old 'Tom | 'Bom-bä-`dil | `was ä `mer | -ry `fel-löw;  
'bright blue | his `jack-ët | wäs änd his | `boots were | yel-löw

These verses are built on amphibrachs and amphimacres, two of the most obscure and seldom-seen tools in the poet's workshop.

One syllable long, with one short at each side,  
Amphibrachys hastes with a stately stride; —  
First and last being long, middle short, Amphimacer  
Strikes his thundering hoofs like a proud high-bred Racer.  
(Coleridge, "Mrical16 Feet")<sup>16</sup>

The correct scansion for Bombadil's first appearance should have been:

'Hey `dol! | `mer-ry `dol! | `ring ä `dong! | `dil-lö!

'Ring ä 'dong! | 'hop ä-'long! | 'fal 'lal | thë 'wil-löw!  
'Tom 'Bom, | 'jol-ly 'Tom, | 'Tom 'Bom | -bä-'dil-lö!

The normative line begins with a spondee followed by two amphimacers followed by an amphibrach, with both trochees and spondees used for variation. But Tolkien frequently complicates the scansion with "metrical tricks," using, for example, ambiguous stresses, stresses placed near still heavier stresses, so they are partly "drowned," but then immediately contrasted with a fully unstressed syllable.

But *all* Bombadil's dialogue follows this meter, not just that printed as "verse," and much of the supposed "prose" in this section is metrically regulated. "Whoa! Whoa! | 'stead-ý 'there! | ... 'Now my 'lit!-tlë 'fel-löws, | 'where 'be | 'you ä-'go | -i-ñg | 'to | 'puff-i-ñg | 'like | ä 'bal-lows?..."

Indeed, much of the power of Tolkien's "prose" comes from the fact that its written by a poet of high technical skill, who carried his metrical training into his fiction. Consider, for instance: "'Horse-mén we'e | 'gal-löp-i-ñg | öñ thë 'grass | öf Rö-'han; | 'wolves 'poured | 'f'rom | 'Is | -eñ-'gard." Dactyl, dactyl, anapest, anapest, for the galloping riders; the sudden spondee of the wolves. That was chosen at random from hundreds of possible examples.

In her comments on the alliterative verse of the Rohirrim, Rawls appears to confuse grammar and punctuation with metrical skill. Given a choice between music and over-nicety on points of grammar, I suspect any of our great poets would have jettisoned grammar without a moment's hesitation, just as Tolkien has done here.

Of course Tolkien could easily have made these lines -- "We heard the horns in the hills ringing | Saw swords shine in the South-kingdom" -- but this, as he notes in his Appendix to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, makes "an excess, a rum-ram-ruf-ram, that soon cloyes the ear."<sup>17</sup>

And of course, seeing the swords at the same time as hearing the horns is not strictly accurate anyway. Perhaps what the line should have been was "We heard the horns in the hills ringing | To tell us that swords were shining in the South-kingdom." And there goes the meter.

I suppose one could get by with: "We heard the horns in the hills ringing | Swords were shining in the South-kingdom," but the "were" slows down the phrase, dismounts it, so to speak.

There is no "failure of craft" here. On the contrary, there is great craft in the deft dumping of superfluous grammar. Many a poet writing "with modern purpose or technique" has distorted grammar far more than this for effect.

The point of grammar that Tolkien evades in this poem is important only for the sake of clarity; and the poem is perfectly clear without it. The shift in verb is accomplished without confusion, producing a vivid image which the reader sees (or the hearer sees, if the stave is spoken aloud) producing a sudden swift shifting of scene and of sense. This was a deliberate effect, and it works. Note also the

music in the near-rhyme of "ringing" with "shining."

I will agree that these staves are smoother than those in "The Lay of the Children of Húrin," but Rawls' attempt to explain this confuses typography with phonetic measure, demonstrating once again that she has not read these poems aloud, and that she does not understand the actual meaning of the caesura.

The printed gap between the half-lines in the "Lay of the Children of Húrin" is simply one convention for representing the *spoken* pause between the half-lines. The *spoken* pause is the caesura, and it is still there, as she would realize if she had spoken the stave aloud: "We heard the horns | | in the hills ringing."

Old Teutonic verse forms, including both the Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse (though some of later Icelandic meters are strange mutations) are built on matching sets of paired stresses. The caesura is an inherent feature of this, whether it is represented typographically or not.

Indeed, some have claimed (Robert Hilleyer, for example) that there is a pause (caesura) at the center of *every* line of verse, from "My love is like | | a red, red rose" to "Nine times the space | | that measures Day and Night | To mortal men, | | he with his horrid crew" etc.

But no, the verses are smoother, caesura and all, because Tolkien in the years between the two poems, has developed new ways to deal with the extra syllables imposed by the grammatical particles that have replaced the old genitive, dative, etc. For this is the chief difficulty in writing alliterative poetry in Modern English. Old Norse, Anglo-Saxon and even Middle English have a wonderful compression, due to inflection, which is very hard to achieve in Modern English, with all its "of the's and other complicating extra syllables.

Consider the compression in the famous verse from the *Havamal*:<sup>18</sup>

Veit [elk at hekk | | vindga meipi ä  
Naetr allar niu,  
geiri undaþr | | ok gefinn Öþni  
sjalfr sjölfum mér

Most people are familiar with some translation that begins "I know that I hung | | on the windy tree" which is pretty literal. But count the extra syllables. "Nine whole nights" or "nights all of nine" or even "nine whole days and nights" have all been given as translations of "Naetr allar niu," although these words come from the same roots as the English words. Choose any translation you please, extra syllables creep into the English: "geiri" is "with a spear," and "Öþni" is "to Odin"; "sjalfr" and "sjölfum" are inflected forms of the same root-word that became "self" in English. The grammar in this line becomes terribly wordy in most translations.

Poul Anderson is almost the only alliterative poet in modern English to whom Tolkien can be compared; most others who have attempted it have failed badly. John

Myers Myers succeeds mostly because the humorous tone in "The Death of Bowie Gizzards-bane"<sup>19</sup> covers his occasional confusions in pattern. Pound's pseudo-translation of "The Seafarer"<sup>20</sup> is seriously flawed, though there are some good lines.

My own work with this form is far from perfect; and whatever small success I have achieved has been largely due to Tolkien & Anderson's example. I think the same is probably true of all the perhaps half-dozen younger writers I know of who have experimented with this form, with varying results. Tolkien and Anderson are our masters.<sup>21</sup>

I would say that "The Children of Húrin" is somewhat below the high standard that Anderson sets, but that the verse in *The Lord of the Rings* matches and in some cases may surpass it. But such a judgement would call for a more thorough and technical survey than I have time for now.

In most dialects of English, "fountains" and "mountains" are normally pronounced as trochees, not as spondees. ("Champagne" is sometimes pronounced as a spondee, but more often as an iamb. If you pronounced "mountain" to rhyme with "cham-pagne," or "sham 'pain," I suppose it would be a spondee. But in the U.S., at least, I have usually heard "mount-ĭn" or "mound-ĕn.")

I would say that, "judged by the standards of the kind of verse he chose to write," Tolkien does very well indeed. His meter flows smoothly and the verse always makes sense. He shows good control of both simple and complex meters, and a great deal of metrical originality in the complexity of the meters of "Tinfang Warble," "Tom Bombadil," "Errantry," and of course, "Earendil." His use of iambic tetrameter shows considerable mastery, and he maintains a steady rhythmic regularity (whether "thumping," "ticking clock," or "hammering") which is considered a virtue under "the standards of the kind of verse he chose to write."

His only questionable practice according to those standards is his use of "feminine" rhyme. There was a great deal of controversy about "feminine" rhymes in the early part of the century. I know that Pound seems to have considered them — well, effeminate, I guess. Pound on occasion seems to be almost as obsessed with "masculinity" as Hemingway. (Perhaps they were both forced to dress like Little Lord Fauntleroy as children?)

"The feminine rhymes are sluggish" according to Bold. Robert Hillier, in *First Principles Of Verse*, says that "in rhyming a feminine ending, both syllables must ... rhyme, not merely the last one ... we could rhyme together with feather, but never with stir."<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Rawls approves of the "alternation of one syllable (masculine) with two or more syllable (feminine) rhyme."

This practice is the basis and distinguishing characteristic of the Irish *debide* meter,<sup>23</sup> and has also a long and distinguished history in English verse.<sup>24</sup> Chaucer, for example, rhymes "beginning" with "thing," in "The Knight's Tale."<sup>25</sup> There are several other examples in Chaucer ("goddesse" with "gesse," and "red" with "forehed"), in

Spencer ("eyelids" with "bids"),<sup>26</sup> and many, many others. Hillier was writing in the Thirties. So I do not think this "standard" has any long tradition behind it, and need not be taken too seriously.

Just what standard Rawls is attempting to apply seems unclear. She objects to the "thumping" iambic tetrameter in one poem, praises it in another, and, failing to recognise it, insists it is a different meter in a third. She criticizes an epic poem for its "epic length," but attempts no comparisons with any other epic. She complains about the "strict meter," but when Tolkien moves to a looser and more complex meter (in "Tinfang Warble") she throws up her hands, and asks an absurdly rhetorical question. She appears to believe that a fancied resemblance to a "tongue twister" is sufficient reason to condemn the alliteration and internal rhyme of "Cottage of Lost Play." She utterly ignores possible comparisons to Poe, Swinburne, Hopkins, and Steven Vincent Benet, and seems unaware of the long history of similar techniques in Welsh and Gaelic verse-forms. It never seems to occur to her that this might be considered a virtue rather than a fault.

Her most serious accusation is that various noun-adjective combinations are "cliches," a charge which the Twentieth Century obsession with originality has weighted with overtones of insincerity, plagiarism, and careless writing. I doubt that she is aware just how recently this term has entered the English language, (look it up in the O.E.D.) or that originality was not always considered the primary virtue of poetry.

What she appears to mean by it is that the descriptive adjectives actually describe, and have therefore been used before. I think she is faulting Tolkien for not using the jarringly original and vivid images which have become the stock-in-trade of "verse with modern purpose or technique," since Eliot's "patient etherized upon a table" started the fad in 1915, two months after "The Cottage of Lost Play" was written.

She would have preferred, I am sure, "sand packed like honeybees," "nightingales squeaked like soprano floorboards," "between grossly erect, hoarse-breathing trees," "air-tormented hill," "chrome-colored sky drool," "A tenth of a Mongol *Tuman* of scandalmongering trees ... were saxaphoned by air-currents until they sounded like tarot decks being shuffled by Vegas cardsharps."

Hundreds of poets across the U.S. and Britain are undoubtedly, even as you read this, clawing at their brains to unearth some new or startling image of this kind, trying to make themselves "see in a new way." Most cannot tell an anapest from a trochee, and this is the only poetic technique they know. Will it bring them fame and fortune? Will anyone other than friends and family, and other poets belonging to the same coterie, read the poem if it is published? Will anyone bother to defend their work if it is attacked in print? For that matter, will anyone bother to attack it in print? The terrifying thing is how much alike



their "startlingly original" images will be.

I myself find "golden sands" jarring, not only because it has been used before, but because it is so often used in advertising (and also because sand on beaches is as often "leaden" as "golden"). But nightingales do sing, and are often in trees when they do; the wind in the trees does often sound like a human voice whispering; hills usually do have more wind than flatlands; and rain does look like silver in certain lights. These are simple, descriptive statements, immediately accessible to any reader. Of course, there are many in the literary/academic establishment who consider "accessibility" itself to be a serious fault.

Great poetry (or fiction or drama) lasts because it builds an audience that loves it, and passes that love on to future generations. Poetry in particular tends to survive by means of memory and quotation -- an oral process that is amplified, not replaced, by literacy.

I know a great many people who can quote the opening lines of Ginsberg's "Howl" by heart.<sup>27</sup> I suspect I must know at least a half-dozen or so who can quote the whole thing. But they have never done so in my presence, so I do not know for certain that I know anyone who can. But I do know that I know dozens of people who can quote at least one, and usually more, of the poems from *The Lord of the Rings* by heart, and a fair number who have memorized the poems from *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* also.

In eighty or ninety years, our grandchildren will know which works of Twentieth Century poetry have survived. All we can do is guess. But I think there are some indications. The mere fact that we are debating in 1990, the value of some poems written in 1914, 1915, and between 1925 and 1930 is in itself indicative. Why are we, after all, discussing Tolkien rather than Edwin Muir, Thomas McGreevy, or John Wheelwright?

Earlier I mentioned that Tolkien was born in the same year as Archibald MacLeish and Edna St. Vincent Millay, in perfect confidence that readers would at least recognise the names. I did not, however, have confidence that they would similarly recognise John Peal Bishop, or even Vita Sackville-West, who were also born that year. Does anyone today still discuss the work of Trumbull Stickney? Lyle Donaghy? George M. Brady?

But whether Tolkien's verse would last is not the question which Melanie Rawls asks at the end of this paper. Instead she asks, "how does a reader regard Tolkien as a poet?"

Her answer -- the conclusion of the paper -- seems to me to have many peculiar implications. First, she appears to imply that Tolkien would somehow have been a better poet had he been "influenced into abandoning his pre-twentieth century style." Although she does use the favorable expression "strong willed," instead of more derogatory terms, her grammar seems to blame Tolkien for this choice. She then presents Tolkien's modesty in such a manner as to make it seem an excuse for some grave fault.

There are a number of strange implications here. For one thing, metrical verse has not ceased to exist, nor has there ever been a period in the Twentieth Century when Tolkien was the only person writing it.

She then claims, again, that Tolkien "was not always skillful," (obviously unaware that, far from demonstrating this, she has instead demonstrated an astonishing ignorance of the technical aspects of metrical verse, as well as "the standards of the kind of verse he chose to write") and then asserts that Tolkien's "many references to wind-in-the-trees" make him "repetitious." Do T.S. Eliot's many references to fog and cigarette ends make him "repetitious"? Do Stephen Spender's many references to houses and towns make him "repetitious"? Do Dylan Thomas' many references to age, flowers, and time make him "repetitious"? Is there any poet, living or dead, who does not have some characteristic touch of imagery which many references make "repetitious"?

Having failed to notice the ways in which Tolkien's metrical skills influenced his prose, she pronounces him "a better writer of prose than of verse," and then (after warning us of "lapses of craft" and invoking the author's intention) she concludes that the verses in *The Lord of the Rings* "can be enjoyed," but only as "auxiliaries."

What if she had concluded they could not be enjoyed?

In her first paragraph, after describing the existence of the controversy, she states that no reader could "make use of such commentaries as reliable guides." The implication that poetry "can be enjoyed" only with "reliable guides" strikes me as elitist, condescending, and arrogant.

It is the reader's *natural* reaction to literature which determines whether or not it survives. All questions of "skill" or "craft" ultimately turn on the ability to evoke such a natural reaction in the reader. "Standards" in literature are (or should be) descriptive, not prescriptive.

To whom is Rawls giving permission to enjoy Tolkien's verse? Are there readers who are not affected by the poetry, one way or the other? Are there readers who have been waiting for someone to give them permission to enjoy the verse in *The Lord of the Rings*? Readers who wanted to like it, but were afraid to, because someone told them that poetry that rhymes isn't "hip"? If so, I suppose this article is justified.

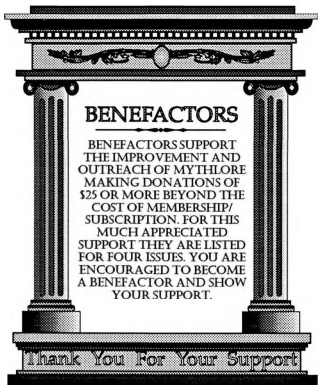
Is it, perhaps, Rawls herself who needs permission?

[Melanie Rawls was sent a copy of this article, giving her the opportunity of making a response. She is writing a response, but as of press time it has not been yet received. It should be printed in the next issue.  
— The Editor]

#### Notes and References

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- Association, Berkeley, CA), most recently reprinted in *Howl*, vol.3, number 1, Spring, 1992 (San Francisco, CA).
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  7. The line, "Slueh Wood in the lake. . ." is from Yeats' *The Stolen 1000 Years of Irish Poetry*, N.Y.: Universal Library, 1962. "Up the airy mountain, down the rocky glen. . ." comes from Allingham's "The Fairies", p. 509. "The Lepracaun(sic) or Fairy Shoemaker" is on p. 513.
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