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Eomer Gets Poetic: Tolkien's Alliterative Versecraft

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The fact that Tolkien had an affinity for Old English and, therefore, Old English impacted his writing style are two contentions which are variously argued and proven throughout Tolkien scholarship. They are well supported enough that they need not be rehashed here, see Shippey, Flieger, Higgins, *et passim*. It is enough for this investigation into Tolkien's use of Old English alliterative verse to note his penchant for leaning heavily on such forms as he enjoyed, and had a professional interest in, is widely accepted in Tolkien scholarship. Additionally, it should be mentioned that Tolkien's use of Old English seems to be at its peak with the Riders of Rohan. In fact, to paraphrase Michael Drout, the Riders of Rohan are Anglo-Saxons except they have horses.¹ Additionally, it has been stipulated that the Riders of Rohan use a specific dialect of Old English known as Mercian. There are two points that should be mentioned to bolster these statements before moving into a more direct examination of Tolkien's use of alliterative meter in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Initially, Tolkien's use of poetry within the contexts of the Rohirric culture is consistent with a Mercian dialect of Old English. Tolkien's appreciation for this dialect is evident from several contexts. The first of these contexts is biographical: Tolkien lived most of his life in the West Midland area of England, and his mother's side of the family had a long history of residence in the West Midland area. Tolkien would naturally have been curious about its history and, as a philologist, its language. This curiosity is well documented in his writings. It follows that it is highly probable that he would develop an affinity for the Mercian dialect. Furthermore, there is textual evidence of Tolkien's use of this and other Old English dialects, as he wrote several texts in various dialects of Old English, including both Mercian and West Saxon excerpts from *The Silmarillion*. Additionally, as the Rowlinson and Bosworth Professor of Anglo-Saxon

¹ Drout, "Whole Worlds out of Single Words: Tolkien and Language"

at Pembroke College, one of his major works was the identification of a dialect of Old English called "AB language". This was a major find in the field of philology because it illuminated a standardized language within the West Midlands at the time of the thirteenth century that showed several key features. This clearly shows his awareness of and detailed study into the West Midlands. In the *The Lord of the Rings* itself there is limited usage of identifiable Old English, some eighty-five names and a couple of phrases, but what little there is suggests a Mercian dialect. This is largely because the Old English used by the Rohirrim seems to exhibit signs of second fronting.

This phonetic shift was unique to the Mercian dialect of Old English. In fact, R.D. Fulk makes the even bolder claim that this shift was specific to "the area of Hereford or southern Shropshire, the presumed provenance of the *Vespasian Psalter*."² To provide some accessible examples of this shift, look at the distinction between the forms of the Old English words for *father* and *day*. One example that testifies to this kind of second fronting is the phrase "Ferthu Théoden hál!" (TT). This is clearly Mercian, because if this phrase were not impacted by second fronting, then the first word would read *férthu* or *farthu*. With this linguistic background in mind, we can now turn to a more direct examination of Tolkien's use of alliterative verse in *The Lord of the Rings*. What follows is a quick overview of Old English meter, followed by a discussion of how Tolkien employs the poetic style in a couple of instances.

Alliterative verse is an integral part of the oral and scribal tradition of Old English and, to a lesser extent, Middle English as well. Alliterative verse is a form of poetry very unlike the forms that are currently popular. It is composed of half-lines that follow a set of rhythmic

² Fulk (2014) *An Introductory Grammar of Old English*. Tempe, Arizona: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, p. 121.

patterns and show alliteration between one or more stressed syllables in the first half line, with the first stressed syllable in the second half-line. The alliteration normally avoids occurrence on the final stressed syllable of the line. At the time that Tolkien was creating his verses, the standard guide for parsing alliterative verse was Eduard Sievers's "Five Types." Tom Shippey gives a brief overview of this system in his essay "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English":

I summarise the Sievers system here, using Tolkien's examples.

(Note: / = full stress, \ = half stress, x = unstressed...Where stress is indicated in quotations below, 12-point capitals mean full stress, 9-point half-stress.)

A / x / x KNIGHTS in ARMour

B x / x / the ROARing SEA

C x // x on HIGH MOUNTains

D // \ x BRIGHT ARCHANGels

or // x \ BOLD BRAZEnFACED

E / \ x / HIGHCRESTèd HELMS

He goes on to explain "resolution," which is the ability for two short syllables to occasionally act as one long syllable, as demonstrated by the word "women" in the third line of Eomer's Lament below. A second trait of Old English meter which is significant is "anacrusis," which is the ability to sometimes have an extra syllable before the first stressed syllable of a line, as demonstrated by "To hope's end I rode" in the third line of Eomer's rallying cry below.³

³ Shippey, "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English", page 4. [sic= In the version I have, there is no underlining to indicate alliteration nor + to indicate anacrusis.]

With this background information in mind, it is much easier to turn to an in-depth exploration into Tolkien's use of alliterative verse. Tolkien uses alliterative verse throughout *The Lord of the Rings*, but this examination focuses on the chapter entitled "The Battle of the Pelennor Fields" in Book V. His clever use of alliterative verse serves several purposes. Initially, it satisfies Tolkien's desire to exhibit his professional and personal passion for language within the context of his subcreation. Since Tolkien claims that this drive was the major motivation for his subcreation in the first place, see his letter 165, it is important not to forget that it is still at work.⁴

To the reader, Tolkien's use of alliterative verse works on several different levels. Just as in traditional alliterative verse, the formatting of the text makes it memorable and it ensures a specific reading because it suggests rhythmical patterns. One example of this occurs just after Théoden dies. Here Éomer expresses his thoughts about the fall of his king by saying:

/	\	X	/	/	X	X	/	X
Mourn	not	overmuch!		Mighty	was	the	fallen,	
/	X	X	/	X	X	/	X	/
meet	was	his	ending.	When	his	mound	is	raised,
/	\	X	/	/	X	/	X	
women	then	shall	weep.	War	now	calls	us!	⁵

Shippey has, correctly, identified this passage as "midway between" a lament and a battle-cry.⁶

Éomer exhibits a desire that his fallen king merits the kind of valiant and glorious death granted

⁴ His "Letter To the Houghton Mifflin Co." states that his languages were "the foundation" of his story (letter 165 from the collection by Carpenter).

⁵ Tolkien, 130

⁶ Shippey, "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English", page 13.

to the kings of old, at least in tales. At the same time, he wants to give due reverence and respect to his uncle by continuing the fight and making his last battle a valiant one. So, this short passage serves to convey two of the major tropes found throughout Old English alliterative verse.

Within the context of a modern book, these excerpts of alliterative verse illuminate an ideal that Éomer is trying to express, and yet allow him to either live up to or fail to reach, the ideal expressed through his own actions in the battle. Immediately after his lament, the narrator notes that Éomer "wept as he spoke" (Tolkien 130). This illuminates the tension between the ideal that Éomer is expressing, and his own inability to live up to that ideal. In a very vivid and poignant example, Tolkien frames several very lofty ideas and emotions in a very small passage. It allows Tolkien to encapsulate an ancient view of the world as harsh and unforgiving, in which there is no need to mourn for those leaving it. Through this, the passage exemplifies "northern courage". This is a phrase used to describe the attitude often found in Norse mythology in which an ill-fated hero knows that he will die or that things will not turn out well, but he perseveres anyways despite that certainty. Notice how Éomer is not saying that there will be time for *them* to grieve later. He does not say that then *we* will weep, but that "*women* then shall weep" (Tolkien 130, emphasis mine). While it is true that women weeping is a trope in northern poetry, the occurrence of this phrase from Éomer creates a second significance because of its literary context. What Éomer leaves unsaid, but perhaps what he means, is that the women will cry for Théoden because there will not be any men left to weep, because they will all have died in the battle.

From a modern perspective, this small excerpt serves to humanize Éomer. He desires so much to do what is honorable, but he finds that he cannot overcome his own emotions in the moment. Here Tolkien creates the façade of a traditional Anglo-Saxon character, has him cast his

ideals and thoughts into verse, and yet shows his inability to live up to the ideal he has just created. What is happening is that this fictitious scenario fleshes out a disconnect between the world in which the modern reader lives and the historical world in which Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse was written. It demonstrates how the ancestors of England were not the unreachable *entas* or giants, but were real humans that had lofty dreams and ideas just like every human. Tolkien humanizes and personalizes his reader's view of the ancient epic hero, but he also humanizes and personalizes the historical creators of alliterative verse and makes versecraft more accessible to a modern audience. It is this major idea that has led some scholars, like Shippey, to cite Tolkien as a one-man alliterative revival.

Perhaps the most beloved alliterative passage from Tolkien's story is Éomer's final denial of cowardice when all seems lost as reinforcements for Sauron's troops sail up the Anduin. In the very heart of despair itself, Éomer begins to rally himself and the men around him and he refuses to give in. He gives voice to his thoughts in some of Tolkien's most powerful verses. He says:

X X / X X / X X / / X
Out of doubt, out of dark to the day's rising
X X / X X X / / X / X
I came singing in the sun, sword unsheathing.
X / / X \ X X / / X
To hope's end I rode and to heart's breaking:
X X / X X / X X / / X
Now for wrath, now for ruin and a red nightfall!⁷

⁷ Tolkien, 134

This is a great example of the "northern courage" mentioned previously. This is one of the passages that Shippey characterizes as a battle-cry.⁸ Éomer sees no more hope and has given up on the idea of staying alive through the battle. A cursory glance at this passage may lead the reader to assume that Éomer is as crazed as Denethor, but upon a closer inspection, the narrator explicitly states just prior to this that "Stern now was Éomer's mood, and his mind clear again" (Tolkien, 134). Éomer is not insensible, rather he decides in the face of unbeatable odds not to cower and not to flee, but to stand and fight and, as the narrator says, "do deeds of song...though no man should be left in the West to remember the last King of the Mark" (Tolkien 134).

Because of Éomer's failure to live up to his last ideal expressed in alliterative verse, the reader is predisposed to believe that he will be unable to live up to this new poetic statement of intent. However, this time Éomer fulfill his ideal. He stands his ground and tests the full mettle of his resolve, though unexpected help does come. The impact that this has on the reader is extraordinary. By establishing a pattern of underperformance, the reader undergoes a huge shift in expectation when Éomer finds true northern courage. In this instance Tolkien uses the alliterative verse to show the heroic ideal and has Éomer live up to that ideal. This elevates the action within the story to a heroic/mythic level and, with that, the reader's view of Éomer is elevated as well. The reader gets the sense that they are witnessing a true hero in a truly heroic moment because of the use of alliterative verse.

Tolkien's almost revisionist impulse to re-contextualize an ancient heroic ethos in a modern context fits well with the observations of Tolkien scholars. Many scholars have observed Tolkien's desire to use the hobbits to modernize the concept of the hero alongside a portrayal of a more archaic heroism in Aragorn and other men. In her analysis 'Frodo and Aragorn: The

⁸ Shippey, "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English", page 13.

Concept of the Hero', Verlyn Flieger defines Aragorn and Frodo as two different types of medieval hero:

In *The Lord of the Rings* Tolkien has written a medieval story and given it both kinds of hero, the extraordinary man to give the epic sweep of great events, and the common man who has the immediate, poignant appeal of someone with whom the reader can identify. (Flieger, 2004, p.124)

The fact that Aragorn and Frodo represent two different types of hero has become a staple of Tolkien criticism. Following on from this observation, scholars have suggested that the two story lines which break apart beginning in *The Two Towers* up until the re-joining of the Fellowship in *The Return of the King* represent a medieval and modern plot.

One example of such an approach is John Garth's 'Frodo and the Great War.' In this chapter, Garth explores how *The Lord of the Rings* 'presents versions of old-style heroism side-by-side with new versions that show the impact of the Great War' (Garth, 2006, p.42). He depicts how the hobbits are modern characters, and that they are mundane people who are forced into extraordinary circumstances, and contrasts this with the portrayal of the Three Hunters. He claims that Aragorn, Legolas, and Gimli are 'heroic figures on the edge of myth' whereas the hobbits are 'sub-heroic' and 'trudge past the limits of their endurance' (Garth, 2006, p.44). He goes on to explain that the concern for secrecy exhibited by the hobbits is a fairly modern approach to confrontation; the old heroic ethos, though, is found in the brazen marching out demonstrated by those fighting in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields.

What few scholars have addressed, however is the fact that Tolkien's use of alliterative verse throughout the Battle of Pelennor Fields does not serve to bolster characters as Germanic tropes but indicates the extent to which these characters differ from those depicted in ancient

tales. While other characters demonstrate a defiance of the ancient heroic ethos, the use of alliterative verse shows how Éomer feels this conflict within himself.

Throughout Tolkien's professional career he dealt with a great number of texts that had varying views on the heroic, the romantic, the everyday world, and the role of Faerie. One consistent tendency among them, though, is to treat the past, and particularly Anglo-Saxon heritage, with a great deal of respect while trying to find ways to incorporate themes or ideas from that time into his own imaginative subcreations. Tolkien's use of alliterative verse serves to re-contextualize an ancient heroic ethos in a way that shows how heroism has changed, and must change, for the modern world. Shippey has claimed some of the alliterative passages in *The Lord of the Rings* represent "Tolkien's finest achievement in alliterative verse"⁹ but this contention simply does not go far enough. Given this perspective on the quality of Tolkien's versecraft and the fact that Tolkien is consistently credited as one of the most popular authors of the twentieth century, one should contend that Tolkien's alliterative verse is the most important and impactful alliterative verse written in modern English.

⁹ Shippey, 15

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