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Tolkien's Penchant for Alliteration: Using XML to Analyze *The Lay of Leithian*

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J.R.R. Tolkien's unfinished poem *The Lay of Leithian*, totalling 4223 lines across 14 cantos, exists in various drafts compiled by Christopher Tolkien and published in *The Lays of Beleriand* (referred to as 'Manuscript A'). *The Lay of Leithian* is written in octosyllabic couplets, following the form of a lay, and is organized into stanzas and cantos of varying length that divide the narrative action. Although written in the style of a lay, a non-alliterative poetic form, *The Lay of Leithian* includes alliteration to the extent that it becomes more than merely 'decorative,' as Christopher Tolkien describes the alliteration in his "Note on the Text" in *The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun* (xii).

This analysis of Tolkien's *The Lay of Leithian* focuses on the inclusion of alliteration in the poem, aided by the encoding of the poem in XML (Extensible Mark-up Language) and the creation of accompanying XSLT (Extensible Stylesheet Language Transformations) documents that transform and represent the encoded data. The data provides the basis for further exploration into how and why Tolkien uses alliteration within the poem. Because *The Lay of Leithian* is a 4223 line poem, encoding it allows for the charting of alliterative pattern types, and the percentage of alliterating lines throughout. By representing the data in more objective ways while looking at the poem as a whole, it becomes possible to identify overarching patterns that may not be discernable at the line or stanza level, considering the substantial length of the poem. My analysis reveals three significant findings: passages with positive descriptions often contain alliteration; narratively significant words alliterate the most (i.e. 'Lúthien,' 'Beren,' 'sing(s)/sang/sung'); and passages with alliteration that describe Beren and Lúthien use plosive and liquid consonants respectively.

The legend of Beren and Lúthien is retold multiple times by J.R.R. Tolkien in various forms, showing "its quintessential importance to him personally and the mythology of Middle-earth generally" (Beal 24). Across these various versions there are echoes throughout them that demonstrate the close relationship they have with one another, and how they have influenced one another in their creation. Over time, the story of Beren and Lúthien has developed and been refined, and its echoes in other texts throughout Tolkien's legendarium reinforce his mythology. Although not explicitly an early version of the Beren and Lúthien legend, a short rhyming poem with an alliterative introduction titled "Light as Leaf on Lindentree" was published in June 1925 and is the original version of the song recounted by Aragon on Weathertop in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (191-193); and exists in part in *The Lay of the Children of Húrin*. This early alliterative writing about Beren and Lúthien demonstrates that Tolkien was thinking about alliteration, as well as experimenting with writing in a combination of alliterative and rhyming verse, during its conception.

Despite its unfinished state, *The Lay of Leithian* remains the longest poetic

version of Beren and Lúthien's story, and was written after *The Lay of the Children of Húrin* was abandoned. *The Lay of the Children of Húrin* is an alliterative poem that contains references to what would become *The Lay of Leithian*, and many of the descriptions and lines from *The Lay of the Children of Húrin* are present in *The Lay of Leithian*. Some of the initial poetic versions and influences of *The Lay of Leithian* were alliterative, and this feature carries through into the lay version despite being written in octosyllabic couplets, a poetic form based on rhyme rather than alliteration.

Literature Review

Tolkien's penchant for alliteration is demonstrated by his extensive study of Old English-style alliterative meter, and his use of alliteration in his poetry and prose. Tom Shippey's article "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English" details Tolkien's alliterative poetry, noting a total of at least twenty-two poems written in modern English following the metrical rules of Old English-style alliterative meter (1). Scholars interested in Tolkien's use of alliterative meter have primarily published metrical analyses of his original Old English and modern English poetry, and his translations of Old English alliterative verse; or discuss Tolkien's alliterative work as a twentieth century alliterative revival (Bold; Hall; Lee & Solopova; Phelpstead; Shippey "Tolkien's Development"; Sudell; Zimmerman). There are a few exceptions that examine Tolkien's use of alliterative verse as having a narrative function (Shelton), but none that analyze the function of alliteration in Tolkien's work.

Compared to Tolkien's other works, *The Lay of Leithian* is not often the focus of criticism. The legend of Beren and Lúthien, and sometimes specifically *The Lay of Leithian*, is analyzed for its themes and influences from classical mythology, medieval literature, and Tolkien's own life (Agan; Beal; Dawson; Evans; Shippey "All for Love"; West). These criticisms often highlight the female-centered narrative of the legend, and compare the various versions of the legends that exist throughout Tolkien's body of work, but do not include analysis of the meter.

Methodology

Old English-style alliterative meter, in which Tolkien has studied and written extensively, follows strict rules (see Terasawa for a detailed explanation of these rules) that have been adopted, in part, for this analysis of *The Lay of Leithian*. The features of Old English-style alliterative meter that are relevant are that each line contains four stressed syllables, and these stressed syllables are eligible to participate in alliteration. As previously noted, *The Lay of Leithian* is written in octosyllabic couplets, and therefore each line of the poem contains four stressed syllables. Because *The Lay of Leithian* is not written in alliterative meter, expanding

the possibilities for alliterative pattern types to include ones that are not options in Old English alliterative verse was necessary. As a result, there are 14 different alliterative pattern types used throughout *The Lay of Leithian* (see Appendix A for a detailed list of these patterns and their total usage in the poem).

TEI (Text Encoding Initiative)-compliant XML is used to encode the poem's stanza and canto divisions, the presence of alliteration and its place in the line, the alliterative sound, and the rhyming word (see Appendix B for a sample of the XML code, and a brief description of my encoding method). XSLT documents were created and used to identify the alliterative pattern type in each line, as well as visually represent the data in a number of ways: a chart of the alliterative pattern types present in the poem and their totals per canto; a chart of the alliterative pattern types present in the poem and their totals per stanza; a chart of the total lines per canto whose rhyming word also participates in alliteration; a chart of the total of each alliterating sound present in lines with alliteration; and a bar graph of the percentage of alliterating lines per canto.

The benefit of implementing XML into this examination is, in part, due to the length and complexity of *The Lay of Leithian*, and the focus on alliteration. The presence of alliteration becomes noticeable when reading the poem, but an accurate search for patterns, frequencies, and use of alliteration is more difficult to do across 4223 lines. By encoding the lines for these features, it is possible to represent the data in ways that inform new readings of the poem: returning to cantos that have a higher or lower percentage of alliterating lines, or sections that have a higher occurrence of a particular alliterative sound or pattern type. In addition to ease and accuracy, the use of TEI-compliant XML and the creation of XSLT documents also allows for this work to be expanded upon as it provides the foundation for similar analysis across more of Tolkien's work. Future projects could include encoding his other lays, or other non-alliterative work, to corroborate the results from the alliterative analysis of *The Lay of Leithian*, or gain new insight into Tolkien's use of alliteration in his poetry.

Results

Through the use of XML software, the encoded data can be grouped into charts and graphs that provide the foundation for an analysis of the alliteration present in *The Lay of Leithian*. Appendix A depicts the alliterative pattern types and totals throughout the entire poem, revealing that 43.97% of the lines in *The Lay of Leithian* include alliteration. For a detailed list of alliterative pattern types and totals in each canto, see Appendix C.

Throughout his article "Tolkien's Development as a Writer of Alliterative Poetry in Modern English," Shippey repeatedly notes Tolkien's preference for B-type half-lines (using Siever's five types). Written in octosyllabic couplets, each

line in *The Lay of Leithian* is composed of two B-type half-lines per line. Because Old English alliterative meter is being used as a guideline for this analysis, the combination of stressed syllables participating in alliteration is given greater flexibility. In Old English alliterative verse the final stressed syllable is not eligible to participate in alliterative meter, but has been included as an option in my analysis. Due to being written in octosyllabic couplets, the final stressed syllable of each line participates in rhyming with another line, and therefore is emphasized. Of *The Lay of Leithian*'s 4223 lines, 925 (21.9%) have its final syllable participating in both rhyme and alliteration, further emphasizing those particular words.

While the total number of lines that contain alliteration throughout *The Lay of Leithian* is 43.97%, there is variation across the cantos. Cantos I and XIV have 59.18% and 60.42% respectively, while Canto VIII, the lowest, has 34.76%. Throughout *The Lay of Leithian*, passages containing positive descriptions, such as descriptions of nature, magic, or 'good' characters (Lúthien, Beren, Thingol, Melian, etc.) often contain alliteration; while negative descriptions of senseless violence or 'bad' characters tend to not alliterate. Canto I introduces Lúthien and her home (words with stressed syllables participating in alliteration are bolded and rhyming words are italicized):

Such **lissom limbs** no more shall *run*
 on the green earth beneath the *sun*;
 so fair a **maid** no **more** shall *be*
 from **dawn** to **dusk** , from **sun** to *sea*.
 Her robe was blue as **summer skies**,
 but grey as **evening** were her *eyes*; (23-28)

The description of Lúthien continues for the remainder of the stanza, and the words with stressed syllables participating in alliteration emphasize both Lúthien's beauty and the nature she resides in. Canto XIV is one of the scenes most pivotal in the story:

and Beren desperate then *aside*
 thrust Luthien, and forth did *stride*
 unarmed, **defenceless** to **defend**
Tinuviel until the *end*.
 With left he caught at hairy *throat*,
 with right hand **at** the **eyes** he *smote*-
 his **right**, from **which** the **radiance welled**
 of the **holy** Silmaril he *held*. (4208-4215)

Beren's actions and character in this stanza are further emphasized with alliteration,

as the key words participating in alliteration reinforce his act as honourable, brave, and admirable.

The use of alliteration to highlight positive descriptions is most apparent in Canto VIII, due to only 34.76% of the lines containing alliteration. The stanzas and passages that describe Celegorm and Curufin and their treachery, and the excessive violence of their hunting contain very little alliteration. However, stanzas and passages focused on Lúthien—describing her, her thoughts, or her dialogue (especially when she is thinking or speaking about Beren)—contain substantially more alliteration, which can be seen in table 1.

Stanza	Lines with Alliteration	Brief Plot Description
99	50.00%	Description of Oromë's hounds
100	31.25%	Description of Huan
101	44.44%	Description of present events
102	25.00%	Curufin's negative speech
103	20.00%	Celegorm and Huan lead hunt for silmaril
104	26.47%	Description of Lúthien; Huan captures Lúthien
105	33.33%	Huan brings Lúthien to Celegorm
106	41.67%	Lúthien introduces herself
107	41.67%	Celegorm requests to hear Lúthien's tale
108	37.50%	Lúthien recounts the tale and the urgency of her task
109	12.50%	Celegorm and Curufin lie to Lúthien
110	31.25%	Lúthien is taken to Nargothrond; Huan thinks about Beren and Lúthien
111	26.67%	Lúthien is held captive
112	55.00%	Lúthien speaks to Huan about Beren
113	45.00%	Huan defends Lúthien
114	31.25%	Lúthien escapes with Huan

Table 1: A condensed display of the main plot points and percentage of alliterating lines in each stanza of Canto VIII.

The stanzas with over 40% of the lines alliterating are about positive events, descriptions, or dialogue. The stanza with the highest percentage of lines alliterating (at 55%) is Lúthien speaking to Huan: lamenting her situation, describing Beren's journey to Doriath, and how she is all Beren has left; which strengthens the bond

between Lúthien and Huan. In contrast, the stanzas with less than 25% of the lines alliterating depict negative events: Curufin’s negative speech about his lord, the brief description of Celegorm and Curufin’s hunting expedition, and Celegorm and Curufin plotting to take Lúthien captive by tricking her into believing they will assist her. The remaining stanzas depict a blending of positive and negative imagery, but still adhere to the same structure: alliteration being used in more positive descriptions, or actions directly relating to Lúthien.

Looking at an overview of the alliterating pattern types used throughout *The Lay of Leithian* provides the foundation for exploring how Tolkien deliberately uses alliteration to enhance aspects of his story. Another way to analyze Tolkien’s use of alliteration, drawing inspiration from Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels article “Deformance and Interpretation,” is to look at the words that participate in alliteration. Because the poem is 4223 lines long, and 43.97% of the lines include alliteration, there are over 1500 different words (not including plurals, tense variations, etc.) that participate in alliteration. Looking, however, at the most used words that participate in alliteration can also provide additional information when assessing how and why Tolkien uses alliteration in *The Lay of Leithian* (see table 2).

Word	Total	Alliterate	Percentage
Luthien('s)	102	36	35.29%
all	121	28	23.14%
sing(s)/sang/sung	44	28	63.64%
eye(s)	80	25	31.25%
long	76	25	32.89%
Beren('s)	102	24	23.53%
sudden	33	21	63.64%
love(d)	56	20	35.71%
stone(s)	40	19	47.50%
Elfinesse	19	19	100.00%
feet	69	17	24.64%
one	58	17	29.31%
fell	50	17	34.00%
wild	30	17	56.67%
Tinuviel	22	17	77.27%
dark	91	16	17.58%
Huan('s)	48	16	33.33%
before	48	15	31.25%
song(s)	49	15	30.61%
Earth	38	14	36.84%

Table 2: A chart depicting the top 20 most used words for alliteration.

The word that participates in alliteration the most (excluding *in*, *of*, and *and*) is *Lúthien*, and the top 10 words include *all*, *sing(s)/sang/sung*, *Beren*, and *love(d)*, which is quite fitting for a poem about Beren and Lúthien. Interestingly, Beren and Lúthien are each named 102 times, but Lúthien's name alliterates more throughout (35.29% compared to 23.53%). As well, Tinuviel, the name that Beren gives her, is said 22 times, 77.27% of which participate in alliteration. Many of the words listed in table 2 fall into two categories: describing Lúthien or describing nature; the majority of which are used in a positive or complementary way. Another notable word, and its variations, that participates in alliteration is *sing(s)/sang/sung*. Given that Tolkien's mythology is musically centered, the repeated use of *sing(s)/sang/sung* in alliterating lines further emphasizes its significance in both the poem and Tolkien's legendarium.

Similarly, there is a preference in the types of alliterative sounds used throughout *The Lay of Leithian* (see Appendix D for a detailed list of the sounds participating in alliteration). The sounds that participate in alliteration most often are *F, L, S* (all variations), and vowels, which together make up 55.7% of the sounds used in alliteration. Passages describing Lúthien use more liquid, fricative, and glide consonants, whereas passages describing Beren use more plosive consonants. This use of liquid and plosive consonants corresponds with the starting consonant (and first stressed syllable) of their names, and creates a stronger connection between the description and whom it describes.

Conclusion

By using TEI-compliant XML to analyze *The Lay of Leithian*, focusing specifically on alliteration, the data revealed that 43.97% of the poem's lines contain alliteration. From here, one can begin thinking about Tolkien's use of alliteration. Additionally, through the creation of TEI-compliant XML, and using the XSLT documents already created, encoding Tolkien's other poetic works will also provide the opportunity to cross-examine his use of alliteration, or chart his use of alliteration over time.

Although more analysis is required to fully confirm and corroborate the data gathered about *The Lay of Leithian* and Tolkien's use of alliteration, the XML-encoded poem provides a foundation for this analysis, and reveals patterns relating to alliteration that had not been previously noticed or confirmed. Tolkien uses alliteration when describing particular scenes (using alliteration during positive scenes, and little-to-no alliteration during negative scenes); favours narratively significant words in alliteration; and uses plosive and liquid consonants in alliteration when describing Beren and Lúthien respectively. Alliteration, for Tolkien, is a poetic device that heightens language, and imbues extra meaning within the lines of his poetry and prose; which in turn makes his work complex and

compelling to both read and study. In addition, alliteration is used to reinforce positive or negative aspects of the plot. A more in-depth analysis of *The Lay of Leithian*, with the information provided through XML and XSLT, is needed to further confirm these hypotheses, but this preliminary analysis demonstrates how XML provides a basis for pattern analysis that can inform new readings of Tolkien's poetry.

Appendix A

The alliterative pattern types are displayed as a combination of four letters that represent the four stressed syllables in each line. ‘A’ (or ‘B’ in cases of two sets of alliteration) represents a stressed syllable participating in alliteration, while ‘X’ and ‘Y’ represent stressed syllables not participating in alliteration (and ‘WXYZ’ represents a line with no alliteration on stressed syllables).

Alliterative Patterns	Pattern Totals	Percentage of Pattern in Total Alliterating Lines	Percentage of Pattern in Total Lines
AAAA	11	0.59%	0.26%
AAAX	57	3.07%	1.35%
AABB	36	1.94%	0.85%
AAXA	32	1.72%	0.76%
AAXY	330	17.77%	7.81%
ABAB	44	2.37%	1.04%
ABBA	24	1.29%	0.57%
AXAA	43	2.32%	1.02%
AXAY	295	15.89%	6.98%
AXYA	213	11.47%	5.04%
XAAA	26	1.40%	0.62%
XAA Y	250	13.46%	5.92%
XAYA	218	11.74%	5.16%
XYAA	278	14.97%	6.58%
WXYZ (No Alliteration)	2368		
Total Alliteration	1857		
Total Lines	4223		
Percentage Alliteration	43.97%		

Appendix B

Using Old English-style alliterative meter as a foundation, the stressed syllables were encoded with ‘seg’ tags, noting the following data: place in the line (as there are only four stressed syllables per line, the only options would be between one and four), whether there are one or two sets of alliterating sounds (default ‘A,’ would note ‘B’ to differentiate if two), and what the alliterative sound is; and encode each rhyming word or syllable with ‘rhyme’ tags. The first XSLT document takes the stressed syllable information from the XML document containing the encoded poem and runs through a series of ‘when/otherwise’ statements to determine the alliterative pattern type of each line, which then produces a new XML document that includes the alliterative pattern type next to each line number (see Appendix A for a detailed list of the possible alliterative pattern types).

The following lines from *The Lay of Leithian* show three different alliterative patterns (and one line with no alliteration). To visualize the alliterative patterns, each pattern type is identified in square brackets before each line, stressed syllables are underlined, and stressed syllables participating in alliteration are bolded:

[AAXY] Such lissom **limbs** no more shall run
 [WXYZ] on the green earth beneath the sun;
 [XAAY] so fair a **maid** no **more** shall be
 [AABB] from **dawn** to **dusk**, from sun to sea. (23-26)

The XML code for these four lines (after the initial XSLT transformation identifying the alliterative pattern type) would look as follows:

```
<l n="23" real="AAXY">Such <seg n="1" type="A"
  real="#L">lissom</seg> <seg n="2" type="A"
  real="#L">limbs</seg> no more shall
  <rhyme>run</rhyme></l>
<l n="24" real="WXYZ">on the green earth beneath the
  <rhyme>sun</rhyme>;</l>
<l n="25" real="XAAY">so fair a <seg n="2" type="A"
  real="#M">maid</seg> no <seg n="3" type="A"
  real="#M">more</seg> shall <rhyme>be</rhyme></l>
<l n="26" real="AABB">from <seg n="1" type="A"
  real="#D">dawn</seg> to <seg n="2" type="A"
  real="#D">dusk</seg>, from <seg n="3" type="B"
  real="#S">sun</seg> to <rhyme><seg n="4" type="B"
  real="#S">sea</seg></rhyme>.</l>
```

Each line is numbered and its pattern noted, and within each line the details pertaining to the alliterating stressed syllables are indicated in a ‘seg’ tag. With this

information in one XML document, XSLT documents are able to transform this data into various charts and graphs for analysis.

Appendix C

The alliterative pattern types are displayed as a combination of four letters that represent the four stressed syllables in each line. ‘A’ (or ‘B’ in cases of two sets of alliteration) represents a stressed syllable participating in alliteration, while ‘X’ and ‘Y’ represent stressed syllables not participating in alliteration (and ‘WXYZ’ represents a line with no alliteration on stressed syllables).

Cantos I - VII

Alliterative Patterns	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
AAAA	0	0	2	0	3	1	0
AAAX	1	6	7	2	4	5	6
AABB	7	2	5	3	1	3	2
AAXA	0	3	0	4	2	4	4
AAXY	12	27	35	26	32	27	21
ABAB	0	5	2	2	5	6	4
ABBA	0	2	2	8	2	3	4
AXAA	1	3	5	9	2	1	3
AXAY	7	20	23	38	30	26	25
AXYA	6	15	11	11	30	24	14
XAAA	1	5	3	2	2	0	1
XAA Y	8	19	21	36	17	12	18
XAYA	7	13	22	20	14	14	15
XYAA	8	29	27	34	10	18	21
WXYZ (No Alliteration)	40	152	192	253	224	196	176
Total Lines	58	149	165	195	154	144	138
Total Alliterating Lines	98	302	357	448	378	340	314
Percentage of Alliterating Lines	59.18%	49.34%	46.22%	43.53%	40.74%	42.35%	43.95%

Cantos VIII - XIV

Alliterative Patterns	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	XIV
AAAA	0	2	1	1	0	1	0
AAAX	7	2	5	3	4	5	0
AABB	1	3	6	2	0	1	0
AAXA	4	2	3	0	4	2	0
AAXY	18	29	28	25	15	34	1
ABAB	1	3	6	2	2	4	2
ABBA	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
AXAA	3	1	6	3	1	3	2
AXAY	16	19	24	26	20	17	4
AXYA	11	18	20	21	15	15	2
XAAA	1	0	2	3	1	4	1
XAA Y	16	17	17	20	25	19	5
XAYA	21	8	22	18	13	24	7
XYAA	15	21	31	16	23	20	5
WXYZ (No Alliteration)	214	165	218	153	179	186	19
Total Lines	114	125	172	140	124	150	29
Total Alliterating Lines	328	290	390	293	303	336	48
Percentage of Alliterating Lines	34.76%	43.10%	44.10%	47.78%	40.92%	44.64%	60.42%

Appendix D

In alliteration, it is the sounds of the stressed syllable (not just the first sound in a word) that participate in alliteration.

Sound	Total	Percentage
B	101	05.45%
CH	3	00.16%
C-off	12	00.65%
D	114	06.15%
F	196	10.58%
G	60	03.24%
H	118	06.37%
K	62	03.35%
L	160	08.63%
M	94	05.07%
N	41	02.21%
P	37	02.00%
S	82	04.43%
SH	10	00.54%
SK	1	00.05%
SL	3	00.16%
S-off	275	14.84%
SP	5	00.27%
ST	21	01.13%
SW	5	00.27%
TH	33	01.78%
T-off	67	03.62%
TR	2	00.11%
TW	1	00.05%
V	1	00.05%
Vowel	273	14.73%
W	138	07.45%
Y	1	00.05%

A letter followed by ‘-off’ refers to alliteration with similar sounds that would not adhere strictly the rules of Old English-style alliterative meter, such as a *SH* sound alliterating with a *SP* sound:

There bow was bent and **shaft** was **sped**, (85)

Sound	Percentage
Fricatives (F, H, S, SH, TH, V, Z)	23.75%
Plosives (B, CH, D, G, K, P, T)	20.35%
Liquid (L, R)	08.68%
Glide (W, Y)	07.50%
Nasal (M, N)	07.28%
Fricative & Plosive (SK, SP, ST)	01.45%
Liquid & Glide (SW)	00.27%
Fricative & Liquid (SL)	00.16%
Plosive & Liquid (TR)	00.11%
Plosive & Glide (TW)	00.05%

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