



TOLKIEN THE RHYMER.

by

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I

wonder how many people who read 'The Lord of the Rings' bother to read the poems, at any rate the Elvish and longer ones. You know the way it goes, you're reading a passage and come to a long, uninteresting and irrelevant-looking poem, you read the first line or two (which maybe confirms your first uninformed opinion) and then skip to the end to continue your interrupted story.

These poems generally tell some story out of long past history, frequently Elvish history. This is not surprising considering only they and the Elfophilic Númenóreans had arrived at the level of culture (sometimes, not always inaccurately, called stagnation), when their poets wrote much on the glories of the past, great and small. We hear of the minglings of the two races, Elves and Men, in poems such as "The Song of Lúthien and Beren", which Aragorn chanted to the Hobbits on Weathertop.

This song, nothing at all to do with the main story, is a good example of the combination of three aspects of Tolkien's Middle-earth writing in one; firstly attractive word-pictures of plant nature.

The leaves were long, the grass was green,
The hemlock-umbels tall and fair, ... (The Fellowship of the Ring)

... Woven woods in Elvenhome ... "

Whispering fell the beechen leaves
In the wintry woodland wavering. "

Secondly, one point the Hobbits would have enjoyed, since they were "fond of rhyming and metrical tricks" (Adventures of Tom Bombadil), was the structure of each stanza, abac babc, where c is a three-syllable word just to make it that bit more difficult.

The third aspect is that of the far longer history than the year or so of 'The Lord of the Rings'. Tolkien brings in details of older stories with implications that the characters concerned could never have known, but we with our hindsight (well, the Professor's writing), can see.

To illustrate these two points, read where Beren's pursuit of his adored Elven main Tinúviel is finally successful.

Again she fled, but swift he came.

Tinúviel! Tinúviel!

He called her by her elvish name;

And there she halted listening.

One moment stood she, and a spell

His voice laid on her: Beren came,

And doom fell on Tinúviel

That in his arms lay glistening.

(The Fellowship of the Ring)

So they were joined and from their union Elwing who kept the Silmaril her parents had taken from Morgoth. She married the offspring of the second union of the two races: Eärendil the son of Idril and Tuor. Eärendil succeeded in reaching the Uttermoost West to obtain the help to destroy Morgoth but was not permitted to return. His story (somewhat retouched) is told in Bilbo's song at Rivendell, which is a further example of the three points I mentioned above. Its rhyming scheme is perfected in "Errantry", abcb with a word in the centre of every second line rhyming with the terminal word of the previous one. For something extra, the rhyming words have three syllables each.

Since the scope of the "Song of Eärendil" is far wider than that of Beren and Tinúviel, the descriptions of nature are not just of leaves and plants but oceans and lands and spaces;

From gnashing of the Narrow Ice
where shadow lies on frozen hills
from nether heats and burning waste
he turned in haste, ...

(The Fellowship of the Ring &
Tom Bombadil)

Through Evernight he back was borne
on black and roaring waves that ran
o'er leagues unlit and foundered shore
that drowned before the Days began, ...

(The Fellowship of the Ring &
Tom Bombadil)

He fell in love in the passage describing not only the light of the Silmaril;

There flying Elwing came to him,
and flame was in the darkness lit;
more bright than light of diamond
the fire upon her carcanet.

(The Fellowship of the Ring)

The song ends with Eärendil as a symbol of hope in the sky before dawn, when the light of the Silmaril on his brow shone out to encourage the people in Middle-earth below;

...
for ever still a herald on
an errand that should never rest
to bear his shining lamp afar,
the Flammiifer of Westernessee.

(The Fellowship of the Ring)

Not all the far history poems are long like those two and the story of Amroth and Nimrodel. There exist snippets hither and thither in the book, some taken from longer poems, such as the piece describing Gil-galad, and some which are complete in their own right, such as the poem in which is enshrined the whole theme of the "Lord of the Rings":

Three Rings for the Elven-kings under the sky,
Seven for the Dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,
Nine for Mortal Men doomed to die,
One for the Dark Lord on his dark throne,
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie.
One Ring to rule them all, One Ring to find them,
One Ring to bring them all and in the darkness bind them
In the Land of Mordor where the Shadows lie. (LOTR, p.64)

Tolkien wrote poetry in at least two other languages, Elvish and the Black Speech. Admittedly, the Black Speech verse is just a fragment of the poem just quoted, but it does have rhyme and meter and does make sense:

Ash nazg durbatulûk, ash nazg gimbatul, ash nazg thrakulûk
agh burzum-ishi krimpatul.

The Elvish poetry has been well-examined and translated, and published by first of all the Professor himself, especially in 'The Road goes Ever On', and secondly with some very clever translation from the Sindarin to English, and to Quenya, by Neil McLeod in the last Mallorn, and Jim Allan in this.

But I still think lovely the "Namárië" of Galadriel, and its Gregorian-chant style tune set to music by Donald Swann and Tolkien.

Ai! Laurië lantar lassi súrinen,
Yëni unótimë ve rámar aldaron! (The Road goes Ever on, p. 22)

Ah! Like gold fall the leaves in the wind,
Long years numberless as the wings of trees! (LOTR, p. 398)

For myself I favour poems which rhyme and scan, but there is even poetry in just the translation of "Namárië".

Tolkien with his talents for language and poetry and his knowledge of (among other things) the various stages of English in its development has made a fascinating translation into modern English of various mediaeval alliterative poems, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight' among them. He has also combined these talents to produce several poems in the same style through the pens of Rohan songwriters. My knowledge of this type of poem is far too scant to be able to comment on them. I like them, anyway.

We heard of 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.
There Théoden fell, Thengling mighty,
to his golden halls and green pastures
in the Northern fields never returning ... (LOTR, p. 882)

No essay on the poetry of 'The Lord of the Rings' would be complete without the Hobbits' poetry. Their songs are generally light and airy and inconsequential, and they have a great fondness for metrical tricks which is well illustrated in Tolkien's books, Sam's song of "The Stone Troll", sung to a tune (there are several) of "Fox went out on a Saturday night". "Errantry" I've mentioned in connection with Bilbo's song of Eärendil.

So now he must depart again.
and start again his gondola,
for ever still a messenger,
a passenger, a tarrier,
a-roving as a feather does,
a weather-driven mariner. (Tom Bombadil, p. 28)

I think I shall finish this essay with a suitable song, a song of adventure when it is finished and done.

The Road goes ever on and on
Out from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
Let others follow it who can!
Let them a journey new begin,
But I at last with weary feet
Will turn towards the lighted inn,
My evening-rest and sleep to meet.

(LOTR, p. 82)

