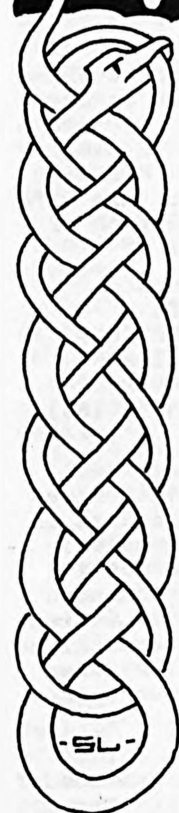


'THE TALE OF BEREN AND LUTHIEN'

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The story of BEREN AND LÚTHIEN is at the very heart of Tolkien's mythology of Middle-earth. In a purely narrative sense it is at the centre of the legends which comprise the Silmarillion, for here it is that the myth considered as a totality reaches its climax with the eventual recapture of a Silmaril. It is also in many ways a turning-point in the mythology for in it many of the various strands of other narratives are brought together and combined to bring about the doom of the Eldar. Indeed I would argue that one of Tolkien's master-strokes in this tale is the irony of the fact that the Free People's greatest achievement against Morgoth - the taking of a Silmaril from the Iron Crown - is the seed that brings about their eventual utter downfall.

Until this point in the history, there has with few exceptions been a considerable degree of unity amongst the Eldar, resulting on the whole in containment of the peril in the North. Admittedly the disaster of the Dagor Bragollach had considerably weakened the Eldar and the Edain, but their unity and cohesion was maintained, allowing them to fight back gradually: "Great though his [Morgoth's] victory had been in the Bragollach and the years after, and grievous the harm that he had done his enemies, his own loss had been no less; and though he held Dorthonion and the Pass of Sirion, the Eldar recovering from their first dismay began now to regain what they had lost" (QS p.160)

Now, however, the reappearance of a Silmaril leads to the awakening of the Oath of Fëanor, with dire results for the Union of Elves. The first direct result is the death of Finrod in his attempt to fulfil his oath to the House of Barahir, and the weakening of Nargothrond as a result of Curufin's words: "So great a fear did he set in their hearts that never after until the time of Túrin would any Elf of that realm go into open battle; but with stealth and ambush, with wizardry and venomous dart, they pursued all strangers, forgetting the bonds of kinship. Thus they fell from

the valour and freedom of the Elves of old, and their land was darkened" (QS p. 170). This itself leads to the estrangement of the sons of Fëanor from the rest of the Noldor, which weakens the Elves and thus contributes to the disaster of Nirnaeth Arnoediad. For instance, Nargothrond will not march in open war, and will do nothing to aid the sons of Fëanor.

It is the finding of the Silmaril which leads also to the death of Thingol and the destruction of Doriath by the Dwarves, and then by the Sons of Fëanor. Finally it leads to the destroying of the final hope of the Eldar, as the Sons of Fëanor come with war to the dwellings near the Mouths of Sirion.

With the reappearance of a Silmaril, the moral degeneration of the Sons of Fëanor due to their Oath becomes obvious, as exemplified especially by the behaviour of Celegorm and Curufin in Nargothrond, and later in the Quenta Silmarillion (e.g. their murder of Dior's sons Eluréd and Elurín). Up to now the Oath has had no great effect on their actions, but now the Doom of Mandos can clearly be seen at work:

"Their Oath shall drive them, and yet betray them, and ever snatch away the very treasures that they have sworn to pursue. To evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall they be for ever" (QS p.88)

From this point onwards nothing seems to go right for any of the Eldar, as doom piles upon doom.



Another extremely important point concerning the Tale of Beren and Lúthien is the place it obviously had in the heart of Tolkien himself. As Professor Tom Shippey says: "He clearly valued 'Of Beren and Lúthien' in some ways above anything else he wrote" (Shippey, 1982, p.192). To understand precisely why it was so important to him personally, one need only look at the early pages of Humphrey Carpenter's *Biography*, and the description of how the story and its main motif came about:

"On days when he could get leave, he and Edith went for walks in the countryside. Near Roos they found a small wood with an undergrowth of hemlock, and there they wandered. Ronald recalled of Edith

as she was at this time: 'her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes bright, and she could sing - and dance'. She sang and danced for him in the wood, and from this came the story that was to be the centre of The Silmarillion: the tale of the mortal man Beren who loves the immortal Elven maid Lúthien Tinúviel, whom he first sees dancing among hemlock in a wood" (Carpenter, 1977, p.97).

It was not as might be expected due to its central position the first part of QS or the 'Book of Lost Tales' as it was then known, to be written down, for two others preceded it: 'The Fall of Gondolin' and 'The Children of Húrin'. But 'Of Beren and Lúthien' was without doubt the tale Tolkien valued most, for on one level he identified himself with Beren, and (more importantly) his wife Edith with Lúthien. For a further example of this feeling the simple inscription on their grave provides the perfect illustration, as does a poignant passage from a letter that Tolkien wrote to his son Christopher shortly after his wife's death:

"She was (and knew she was) my Lúthien . . . For ever (and especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glade and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting" (*Letters*, p.420).

The centrepiece, and recurrent theme of the tale, which I shall refer to as the "encounter in the woods" motif, seems to be directly based on Tolkien's memory of his woodland excursions with his wife. Compare Tolkien's description of his wife just quoted with Beren's description of Lúthien when he first sees her:

"Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight" (QS p.165)

Its main occurrence in the tale is of course the first meeting of Beren and Lúthien, as Beren comes to Doriath fleeing from the terror of Sauron, and it is here that the motif is most extensively described and explored. But the motif also occurs in various slightly changed versions later in the tale: when Lúthien and Huan come to Beren as he stands alone in the Vale of Sirion; and earlier when after the rescue of Beren the two wander through the woodlands of Beleriand.

More remarkable is Tolkien's frequent use of the "encounter in the woods" motif throughout his other works. The most obvious occurrence of the motif

outside QS is of course the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen. The "encounter in the woods" here is more or less identical to the original version in the Tale of Beren and Lúthien. I am almost tempted to believe that Tolkien, despairing of ever seeing the Quenta Silmarillion published, deliberately sought to introduce a version of his favourite piece into *LotR* under the guise of the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen. For in fact there are more points of similarity between the two than just simply the use of the "encounter in the woods" motif in both of them. I will not waste space by discussing them in detail but the following list should satisfy any doubts:

- i) Aragorn/Beren - father killed; brought up in/escape to Elvish kingdom;
- ii) "encounter in the woods";
- iii) Aragorn/Beren fall in love with daughter of king, who disapproves;
- iv) setting of task to win bride : gain kingdom/Silmaril
- v) Aragorn/Beren both give up life willingly in the end.

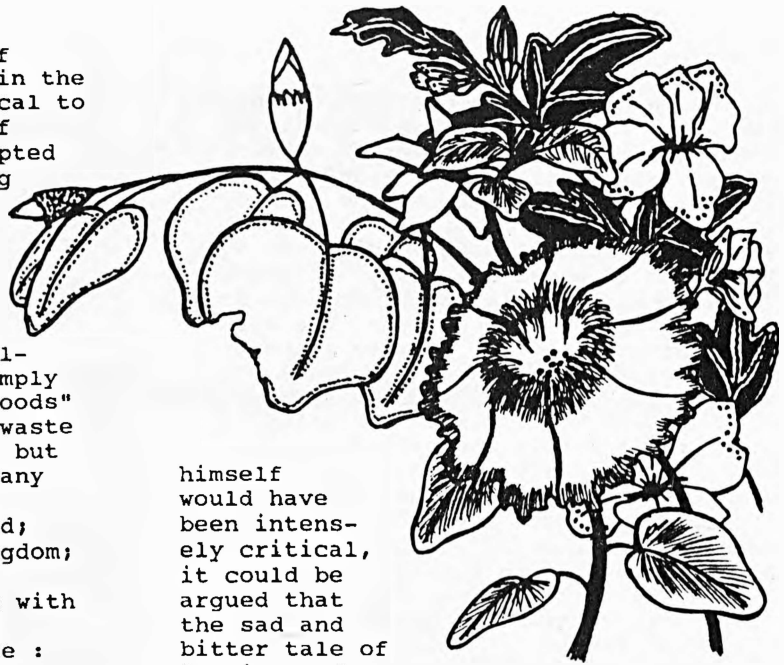
There are of course many points of difference between the two versions. For instance, there is no parallel in the Tale of Aragorn and Arwen of Beren's death and reincarnation. One notable and significant difference also is that whilst Lúthien gives up her life willingly in the end, Arwen does not. Is this due to one version being written in youth, and the other in middle-age?

There are two other uses of the motif in QS itself: these being the meeting of Thingol and Melian in Nan Elmoth, and later the meeting of Eöl and Aredhel, also incidentally in Nan Elmoth. It also occurs twice in Tolkien's minor works: in the first meeting of Smith and the Queen of Faerie in *Smith of Wootton Major*, and in the poem 'Shadow-bride' in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (possibly connected with the legend of Eol and Aredhel).

The last example of Tolkien's use of the "encounter in the woods" motif is the story of Anarion and Erendis, although here the context is somewhat different since it is not their first meeting:

"Riding in the forests of the Westlands he saw a woman, whose dark hair flowed in the wind, and about her was a green cloak clasped at the throat with a bright jewel; and he took her for one of the Eldar, who came at times to those parts of the Island" (*UT* p.181)

I find it extremely significant that Tolkien uses this motif in the only one of his stories to examine the dark side of male/female relationships. To use a form of criticism of which Tolkien



himself would have been intensely critical, it could be argued that the sad and bitter tale of Anarion and

Erendis represents a darker side of Tolkien's marriage, which is glossed over in the tale of Beren and Lúthien. As Humphrey Carpenter relates in his *Biography* (ch. 5), whilst the Tolkiens' marriage was on the whole very happy, there were whole areas of Tolkien's life into which his wife Edith could not enter. He guarded jealously his male friendships, and she responded with envy. Also of course there were areas of his academic work which her untrained mind could not appreciate. There was also the sensitive matter of Tolkien's Catholicism. To all this may be compared Anarion's insistence on maintaining his seafarer's travels despite Erendis' complaints, and her jealousy and fear of the Sea in return. Tolkien's attitude on such things is summed up in a letter to his son Michael:

"There are many things that a man feels are legitimate even though they cause a fuss . . . if worth a fight: just insist" (*Biog.* p.156)

Such words might well have been said by Anarion. I have no doubt therefore that the drawing of these parallels between Tolkien's own life and his fiction is justifiable whatever his own views on such matters, if only because of his own admission that the recurrent "encounter in the woods" motif is based on a true event. If Beren and Lúthien are identifiable with himself and his wife, then by analogy so may be other characters who act out the motif.

One of the most striking features of the Tale of Beren and Lúthien is the use that Tolkien makes here of his mythological sources. The main source, as in the *Narn i Hin Húrin*, would seem to be the Finnish Kalevala. The basic theme of Beren's quest for the Silmaril in order to win the hand of Lúthien is reminiscent

of the task set Väinämöinen of making the Sampo in order to gain the maid of Pohja, but this is a universal theme in several mythologies. More significant is that the actual form of the journey is reminiscent of Lemminkäinen's journey to Pohjola with Väinämöinen and Illmarien to steal the Sampo, in which Väinämöinen's singing casts the whole of Pohja into a deep slumber. The wizards' singing-contest is also a theme used several times in the Kalevala and used by Tolkien in his story. Around this central core Tolkien has piled a plethora of mythic themes and motifs. The striking image of a hand in a wolf's mouth is straight from the Prose Edda: Fenris and the god Tyr. Lúthien with her escape via a rope of her own hair from prison is of course Rapunzel from Grimms' Fairy Tales. The hunting of Carcharoth recalls the great quest for the Twrch Trwyth in 'Culwch ac Olwen' whilst the great hound Huan reminds me strongly of that most faithful of wolfhounds: Gelert in the old Welsh legend.

Professor Shippey in his excellent book *The Road to Middle-Earth* has I think erred in describing the general effect as "garish where it ought to be spare" (p.192). It is certainly garish in one sense of the word, but this I believe was the effect Tolkien was trying to create. This tangle of half-seen and dimly remembered motifs give the tale a 'Celtic' touch which is missing in Tolkien's other works. Whilst very few of the themes are actually drawn from the Mabinogi, this is the only tale in QS which reminds me of that cycle to any great extent. This aura of familiarity mixed with novelty which Tolkien inspires here must I feel be similar to that felt by medieval Welshmen hearing the cycles of the Mabinogi recited for the first time: recognising the ancient themes for what they were and welcoming them as old friends, yet marvelling at the author's genius placing them in a new and original context.

In conclusion I would just simply like to say that having read the prose version I would now like to get my hands on the verse, which I suspect is how Tolkien really meant it to be read. I hope that Allen & Unwin's intend to publish it. Soon!

References

- H. Carpenter: *J.R.R. Tolkien, A Biography*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1977.
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[REVIEW of *FINN AND HENGEST*,
continued from p.13]

intervals over a period of about thirty years and which were "in disorder". When one thinks how incomprehensible some of one's own notes become after a passage of time, and then examines the lucid and efficient edition that Professor Bliss has produced, one can only wonder, admire and be grateful.

Kathleen Herbert



[REVIEW of *THE MONSTERS AND THE CRITICS*,
continued from p.18]

Best of all, we get here some early Elvish poems, together with Tolkien's word-by-word translations - a feast for Elvish linguists!

The final piece is the "Valedictory Address to the University of Oxford", delivered in 1959. Differing slightly from the version given in Salu and Farrell's *In Memoriam*, this is a review of Tolkien's career at Oxford University, together with some of his own strongly-felt views on the relationship of language to literature, as practised at Oxford.

As a collection of Professor Tolkien's more accessible lectures and papers, this book is a handy and convenient repository. Christopher Tolkien has very ably edited the collection, providing a Foreword, with Notes for each of the papers. Because some of them bear so deeply on Tolkien's views on language and its relationship to the creative imagination, this collection is essential reading for those who find both pleasure and stimulation in his fiction.

Charles Noad