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Beren and Lúthien. J.R.R. Tolkien. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Alan Lee

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Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

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Beren and Lúthien. J.R.R. Tolkien. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Alan Lee

R REVIEWS

BEREN AND LÚTHIEN. J.R.R. Tolkien. Edited by Christopher Tolkien, illustrated by Alan Lee. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. ISBN 9781328791825, \$30.00.

But this book does not offer a single page of original and unpublished work. What then is the need, now, for such a book? (*Beren and Lúthien* 11)

THAT, AS A DANISH PRINCE ONCE SAID, IS THE QUESTION. There are, indeed, no words of J.R.R. Tolkien here that have not already appeared in *The Silmarillion* or *The History of Middle-earth*, and there are many which have been left out. As Christopher¹ points out in the preface, this particular tale changed dramatically over the years, becoming more and more drawn into the overarching history of the Silmarils, and “to follow the story of Beren and Lúthien, as a single and well-defined narrative, in *The History of Middle-earth* is therefore not easy” (12). Nevertheless, Tolkien once called this “the chief of the stories of the *Silmarillion*” (12), and so Christopher has undertaken to give Beren and Lúthien a ‘single and well-defined’ book.

In order to understand what Christopher is about, one only needs to look at the ‘Contents’ page of the book. The reader is given a ‘List of Plates,’ a ‘Preface,’ ‘Notes on the Elder Days,’ and then ‘BEREN AND LÚTHIEN.’ One might think from the Contents that ‘BEREN AND LÚTHIEN’ would be a ‘single and well-defined narrative,’ but it is not. It is, rather, a history of the evolution of the story of Beren and Lúthien, which is not, in itself, an unworthy project. Is it necessary? Is it useful? We shall see.

‘Notes on Elder Days’ covers the character of Morgoth, a description of the land of Beleriand, and the history of the Elves from their awakening by Cuivienen to *Dagor Bragollach*, the Battle of Sudden Flame. This material comes directly from *The Silmarillion*, using the forms of names as found in that book. This section also includes quotes from Elrond and Treebeard from *The Lord of the Rings*, tying the Beren and Lúthien story directly to *The Lord of the Rings*.

¹ In the service of brevity and clarity, throughout this review ‘Tolkien’ shall refer to J.R.R. Tolkien and ‘Christopher’ to Christopher Tolkien.

However, the first version of the Beren and Lúthien story which we read is set in a world with a slightly different history from *The Silmarillion*, and so Christopher must explain the background to *The Book of Lost Tales*, from which "The Tale of Tinúviel" is drawn. A casual reader could easily proceed directly to the Tale proper, which begins on page 40 of the hardcover, stopping only to note that early Beren was a Gnome, not a Man, and Tinúviel had not yet acquired the name Lúthien.

This portion is one of the loveliest of the book, for "The Tale of Tinúviel" is a 'single and well-defined narrative,' one which reads like a true fairy tale. There are spells of enchantment and an escape from a high prison through magically long hair; our hero Beren is a great hunter and bold trickster who is forced to become a scullery maid before being rescued by his true love and her faithful talking dog. Readers new to the tale will be astonished, and I hope delighted, at the introduction of Tevildo, Prince of Cats, the evil nemesis of Huan the hound. The bones of the later story are here, but it is a tale which needs to be appreciated on its own merits. It has a lightness even during its darkest moments that is reminiscent of *The Hobbit*, and this is a Tinúviel whom one could imagine singing "Tra-la-la-lally." Christopher has removed the occasional interjections by the narrators from *The Book of Lost Tales*, so that the story flows smoothly from beginning to (almost) end, when the narrators are brought back to discuss the lovers' return from the halls of Mandos. We see that Tolkien is not entirely sure about how to end his story, but it is, nevertheless, a complete tale.

One might expect that having given "The Tale of Tinúviel" in full, Christopher would follow with the full "Lay of Leithian," the next iteration of the story which Tolkien undertook, but Christopher gives no other complete, uninterrupted narrative of the story of Beren and Lúthien in this entire volume. Rather, having given the baseline, first-inspiration story, Christopher sets out to present, chronologically, the new elements which drove the story towards its final form as set out in *The Silmarillion*.

And so, following the Tale, Christopher turns to another work, "The Sketch of the Mythology." Tolkien called the "Sketch" "the original Silmarillion" (89), written to provide background for a reader of the alliterative "The Lay of the Children of Húrin." The Sketch gives in brief the new history of Beren and Lúthien which Tolkien had devised while writing the new Túrin poem. Beren has become the son of Barahir, "a famous chieftain of Men" (90), and his captor is now Thû the hunter, who is Morgoth's chief minion, but not a cat. Otherwise, it appears, the basic plot is the same as that of the Tale.

Christopher follows this summary with most of Canto II of the "Lay of Leithian," which tells how Barahir was betrayed and Beren became a solitary outlaw before being escaping into Doriath. This is a completely new element to

the story: a tragic episode that shows the cruelty of Morgoth and the steadfast courage of Beren, a trait which is sometimes overlooked against the heroics of other characters. One can also see elements which later show up in Strider/Aragorn—the solitary, brave ranger, friend to all but the servants of the Enemy.

Following Canto II, Christopher jumps ahead to a later piece of writing, “The Quenta Noldorinwa,” which was written during 1930, when more than two-thirds of the Lay had been written—“the only complete and finished version of ‘The Silmarillion’” (103). Christopher gives an extract from the Quenta which tells how Felagund first discovered Men, how Barahir saved his life, how Felagund established the cavernous city of Nargothrond, and the entire story of Beren and Lúthien up to the point where Beren, Felagund and his companions are captured by Thû. This Nargothrond/Felagund thread is the second new element, and Christopher follows with Cantos VI and VII of the Lay, which introduce Felagund and Nargothrond, and draw Beren’s quest into the larger epic history of the Silmarils. The Quenta was, as far as we know, written after this portion of the Lay, so it appears that Christopher must have thought that the prose summary was necessary to understanding the poem. I cannot fault him for giving Canto VII in full, for it includes one of the most moving parts of the Lay: the duel in song between Thû and Felagund.

Christopher then returns to the Quenta to tell in prose the remainder of Beren and Lúthien’s story, right through to their return from Mandos. Again, the summary is followed by the same story in verse, from Canto VIII of “The Lay of Leithian” to the final written lines of Canto XIV. Tolkien abandoned the Lay at the moment when the great wolf Carcharoth bit off the hand of Beren and devoured the Silmaril. The actual end of the story of Beren and Lúthien, therefore, can only be found in the various ‘Silmarillion’ drafts written between 1931 and 1937, when pressure from Allen and Unwin for a ‘new Hobbit’ prompted him to put *The Silmarillion* aside. The only truly new element added in those writings was the story of the rescue of Beren and Lúthien from the gates of Angband by the Eagles; Christopher gives this episode in the words of *The Silmarillion*, after which he says “The story of Beren and Lúthien has now been told as it evolved in prose and verse over twenty years from the original Tale of Tinúviel” (224).

But, but, but: Christopher has not finished with his book. After briefly reviewing the ways in which their story became enmeshed with the greater story of the Noldor and the Silmarils, Christopher gives a separate account of the development of ‘The Fate of Beren and Lúthien.’ He discusses Tolkien’s earliest ideas about the death and potential rebirth of elves in order to explain the special dispensation granted to elven Beren and Tinúviel in “The Tale of Tinúviel.” In “The Quenta Noldorinwa,” the fate is imposed by Mandos on

Beren the Man and Lúthien daughter of Melian, but later *Silmarillion* drafts turn that fate into a choice—first for Beren and Lúthien together, later for Lúthien alone. The ‘Choice of Lúthien’ is echoed in the choice of Arwen, and so it is valuable to be able to see its development set out in one place.

The return of Beren and Lúthien, however, was not the end of their involvement in the history of Middle-earth, despite the fact that no living Man ever saw them again. Christopher returns to “The Quenta Noldorinwa” to tell us what happened in the years after their return: Thingol has the dwarves set the Silmaril in a beautiful necklace (the Nauglamir), and the dwarves slay him in order to steal it. Beren leads a company of Green Elves to waylay the Dwarves and take back the Nauglamir, which he gives to Lúthien. Christopher includes a colorful extract from *The Book of Lost Tales* which tells of the fight between Beren and Naugladur, the lord of the Dwarves of Nogrod, together with the Lost Tale version of the ultimate fading of Beren and Lúthien, brought about by a curse on the dwarven necklace. It is a bit disconcerting to return to the tone of the Lost Tales, but it is clear that Christopher had to draw on the oldest history in order to create a coherent story when he assembled *The Silmarillion*.

The end of Christopher's book has a poignancy which is directly related to his father's artistic vision and his “apparently eccentric mode of composition” (11). In his preface, Christopher refers to what Tolkien called the three Great Tales of his history: the story of Túrin, the story of Beren and Lúthien, and the Fall of Gondolin. Tolkien wrote epic poems about the first two stories, but the Fall of Gondolin—the first “Lost Tale” written down—never received a retelling outside the summaries of the Quentas and Annals. Beren and Lúthien were not involved in the Fall of Gondolin, but their granddaughter Elwing married Eärendil son of Tuor and Idril, and, through the power of the Silmaril released from Morgoth's crown, Eärendil was able to find his way to Valinor. Christopher concludes the story of Beren and Lúthien with the story of Elwing and Eärendil, thereby bringing their story full circle to Frodo and Sam on the stairs of Cirith Ungol, where Sam exclaims, “Why, to think of it, we're in the same tale still! It's going on. Don't the great tales never end?” (*LotR* IV.8.712).

And that is, perhaps, an answer to the original question—whether there is a need for this book. The target audience for this book is not the serious Tolkien scholar who has pored over the entire *History of Middle-earth*. But for those who are looking for a way into the “great tales” Sam Gamgee talks about, without having to dare the forbidding mountains of those twelve volumes, this is a good resource. The List of Names and Glossary in the back are useful tools for the new reader of these earlier stories, and the Appendix gives a portion of the revised “Lay of Leithian” that Tolkien began working on after the completion of *The Lord of the Rings*. Christopher includes revisions to Canto II of the Lay, which is the version is told in *The Silmarillion*, casting Sauron in the

place of Morgoth as the tormentor of Gorlim. Comparing this version to the original also shows the development of Tolkien's poetic skill.

Of course, one cannot leave a review of this book without a mention of the illustrations by Alan Lee. I ordered the Kindle version so that I could read the book on the day it was released, but I immediately realized that my Kindle Fire could not do justice to Lee's illustrations, and so I ordered the hardcover edition. Lee has done a pencil sketch for the heading of each section, as well as nine colored plates. I say colored, but his color palette is subdued, as one can see from the dust jacket. I am particularly fond of the illustration of the cat Tevildo in his fortress stalking towards Tinúviel, and the one which shows Celegorm riding off with Curufin, who has just let fly an arrow towards Beren and Lúthien. Any aficionado of Tolkien illustrations would want this volume in her collection.

It is no secret that the names Lúthien and Beren are inscribed on the tombstones of Edith Mary Tolkien and J.R.R. Tolkien, and at the end of his preface Christopher acknowledges his parents' personal connection to the story. My major criticism of this book lies in what Christopher has omitted from the history. The only full telling of the meeting of Beren and Lúthien is that told in "The Tale of Tinúviel," and I was sorely disappointed not to find the version from "The Lay of Leithian." To be sure, the very barest bones of the plot are the same in each, but Beren's change from Gnome to Man fundamentally changes the nature of their relationship, which is reflected in their words and actions in Cantos III and IV of the Lay. Perhaps Christopher felt that the episode told in *The Silmarillion* was sufficient. Perhaps he was unwilling to walk again into territory which was so personal for his parents and, so, for himself. It is a choice which I can respect. But still: after you have met poor Gorlim, please find "The Lay of Leithian" and read Cantos III and IV—you will more deeply appreciate why the rest of the story takes place at all.

—Katherine Neville



TOLKIEN'S THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY: MAJESTY, SPLENDOUR, AND TRANSCENDENCE IN MIDDLE-EARTH. Lisa Coutras. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. xvii + 279 p. 9781137553447. \$95.00.

LISA COUTRAS'S *Tolkien's Theology of Beauty* is an important addition to Tolkien Studies, and worthy of being read by more than just those interested in religious readings of the *Silmarillion* *legendarium* or *The Lord of the Rings*. She