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Tolkien's Lúthien: From Life to Art to Life as Art

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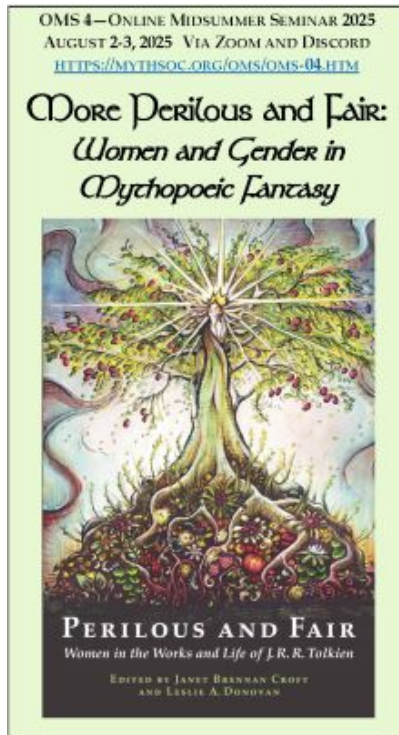
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Abstract

Like other of his Great Tales, the stories of Húrin and Túrin, Tolkien's story of Lúthien grew over time in both verse and prose, moving through various versions from a comic fairy tale with a child narrator reminiscent of Marie de France to a romance in rhyming couplets imitative of Chretien de Troyes. Christopher Tolkien gives an account of his father's development of the story of Lúthien in *Beren and Lúthien*, the third and final volume in his Great Tales series.

My intent here is less sweeping but more focused. I want to dig more narrowly but also more deeply into one aspect of the story: the singular manner in which Tolkien used, fused, and con-fused his real-life wife Edith with his invented character of Lúthien.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, Edith Bratt; Lúthien; Tolkien, J.R.R.

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TOLKIEN'S LÚTHIEN: FROM LIFE TO ART TO LIFE AS ART

VERLYN FLIEGER

LIKE OTHERS OF HIS GREAT TALES, the stories of Húrin and Túrin, Tolkien's story of Lúthien grew over time in both verse and prose, moving through various versions from a comic fairy tale with a child narrator reminiscent of Marie de France to a romance in rhyming couplets imitative of Chretien de Troyes. Christopher Tolkien gives an account of his father's development of the story of Lúthien in *Beren and Lúthien*, the third and final volume in his Great Tales series.

My intent here is less sweeping but more focused. I want to dig more narrowly but also more deeply into one aspect of the story: the singular manner in which Tolkien used, fused, and con-fused his real-life wife Edith with his invented character of Lúthien. "I never called Edith *Lúthien*," he wrote in a letter to his son Christopher, "but she was the source of the story that became [...] the chief part of the Silmarillion" (*Letters* 590, #340). More explicitly he stated unequivocally that "she was (and knew she was) my Lúthien" (*ibid.*). To his son Michael he described Edith as "the Lúthien [...] of my own personal romance" (*Letters* 585, #332). But while this carefully distinguishes the personal from the fictional, I hope to show that for Tolkien the two areas overlapped and influenced one another.

A caveat here about these very personal quotes: while Edith-as-Lúthien is by now a canonical part of the Tolkien mythos, it is well to remember that at the time Tolkien was writing to his sons (1971-72) this was not a widespread view. The names of Beren and Lúthien, still less the story, were only tangentially familiar to readers through references in *The Lord of the Rings* and its

Appendices.¹ The full story would not be published till the 1977 *Silmarillion*, itself a composite and heavily edited text, while the more textually authentic *Books of Lost Tales* that followed it would not come out till six years after that. So to write as Tolkien did that Edith was his Lúthien was not the public declaration that it would be taken for today. It might better be described as a family anecdote confided to a family audience.

That said, it is a not-unusual human reaction to associate a real-life figure with a fictional one. Tolkien's contemporaries Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald both used real women from their own experience as fictional characters, though neither carried the idea as far as Tolkien, who worked it in both directions. Real sources and fictive characters, while related, are, or should be, distinct categories, but to Tolkien Edith was both real and fictive at the same time. Not only did she inspire his Lúthien, he then retro-actively re-imagined her as the real-life version of the Lúthien she had inspired. Such a circular path from life to art and back again to life as art had the effect of making the real and invented figures become not just similar but reciprocal, the same individual in two different worlds. It is axiomatic that to create fiction out of life takes talent. To re-create the same life in terms of the fiction requires something more—a bi-focal vision such as Tolkien clearly possessed, capable of viewing the same object through two different lenses simultaneously.

Of course he knew the difference between them—on one level. But on another level he clearly felt a need to see both the wife and the invented character as images of one another, as if imagination and reality could share one frame, a double exposure in which each shadowed the other. And there was, of course, a second reciprocity. If Edith was Lúthien, it followed that Tolkien had to be Beren. It was a scenario that sustained him until Edith's death in 1971, when life overtook fiction and events escaped his control. In his fictional world love triumphed over death when Lúthien pleaded for Beren's life before Mandos. But in real life this fairy tale scenario collapsed when Edith (a.k.a. Lúthien) died and the survivor, Tolkien/Beren, had no recourse. He wrote to Christopher, "the story has gone crooked & I am left, and I cannot plead before the inexorable Mandos" (*Letters* 590, #340).

This sentence is remarkable not just for the depth of grief it exposes but for the evidence it offers of how deeply the story was rooted in Tolkien's imagination. Three phrases—"gone crooked," "I am left," and "I cannot plead"—command attention for the way they toggle between reality and fiction. The story went "crooked" because the wrong character died—the real-life

¹ These included Sam's epiphany on the stairs of Cirith Ungol that he and Frodo are in the Beren and Lúthien story (and that it is still going on), and the essentially annalistic material in Appendix A at the end of *The Return of the King* (1954-56).

Lúthien (Edith) instead of the fictive Beren. Another wrong person—the real-life Tolkien instead of the fictional Lúthien—was then “left” to mourn the death, not of Beren, as in the story, but of Lúthien’s real-life personification—that is to say, Edith. If you find this confusing you are in good company. So did Tolkien. His inability to “plead” before Mandos arose from the very practical circumstance that he was real and Mandos was imaginary. Yet the fact that a real death sent Tolkien to his own fiction to find a context for his grief is evidence of the hold the story had on his mind and his emotions.

That the hold was rooted in his real life can be seen from the story itself. Extracted from the matrix of the surrounding mythology it consists of the following episodes: 1. Beren’s love at first sight of Lúthien dancing, 2. her father King Thingol’s hostility to their union, and his demand in exchange that Beren bring him a Silmaril from Morgoth’s Iron Crown (intended instead to eliminate him), 3. the lovers’ successful theft of a Silmaril, 4. Beren’s killing by the wolf Carcharoth, 5. Beren’s return to life at the pleading of Lúthien before Mandos, Tolkien’s imaginary god of judgment, 6. and finally, the lovers’ successful reunion and subsequent life together. To a remarkable degree and allowing for translation from life to fantasy, the scenario followed the trajectory of Tolkien’s own emotional life, especially with regard to two specific elements. The dancing episode was based on Edith’s dancing for Tolkien among hemlocks when they were living at Roos. The condition imposed by a father-figure was in real life his, not hers. The agent was Tolkien’s guardian, Father Francis Morgan, who had been his mother’s spiritual guide in her conversion to Roman Catholicism, and became her sons’ as well.

With the best of intentions and clearly concerned that his ward not neglect his academic studies, Father Francis extracted a promise from the young Tolkien that he would neither see nor communicate with Edith until he was twenty-one, perhaps hoping, not unlike Thingol with Beren, that the passage of time would discourage his ardor as well as improve his studies. As might have been expected, it had the opposite effect. Tolkien barely passed his exams, and on the day of his 21st birthday wrote to Edith, who, understandably feeling neglected during the period of isolation, had in the meantime become engaged to someone else. No whit deterred, Tolkien promptly went directly to where she was then living and talked her out of her engagement to the other man and into marriage with him.

It seems clear that the youthful Tolkien had viewed this prohibition and ordeal as the quasi-chivalric requirements of a standard medieval romance, albeit grounded in a twentieth-century view of the Middle Ages. However, in later life he appears to have had second thoughts, dismissing the chivalry as an “unreal romantic code” and the life-changing romance as “a boy-and-girl-affair” (*Letters* 73, #43). From its earliest conception, then, this story of love at first sight,

tested by ordeal and consummated against the odds, was a deeply interwoven yet emotionally problematic part of the fabric of Tolkien's outer as well as his inner life.

Which makes it all the more interesting that, as if to cement this bi-focal identification, Tolkien had the name *Lúthien* etched in stone directly below Edith's on the latter's grave-marker, sending the message to a world that at that time barely knew the story, that the two were one. Edith became a palimpsest, a modified and overwritten text. The message was later ratified by their children, who at Tolkien's death added Beren's name beneath his on the now-shared headstone. But instead of setting the matter straight, this had the effect of raising an inevitable question. Edith was Tolkien's *Lúthien*. Was he her Beren? He implied that the answer was yes. But with all due respect, this gives only a one-sided view of a two-sided subject. It tells his story but not hers, which then must be pieced together from the few available sources.

The earliest source, Humphrey Carpenter's 1977 biography of Tolkien, devotes two chapters, "Private lang'—and Edith" (pp. 31-43) and "Reunion" (pp. 61-71) to the friendship-cum-courtship of the orphaned John Ronald and the orphaned Edith Bratt who had the room below him in Mrs. Faulkner's boarding-house at 37 Duchess Road in Birmingham. Carpenter includes a human-interest anecdote of the two teenagers (he was sixteen, she nineteen) sitting on the balcony of a teashop pelting passers-by with lumps of sugar. He writes with sympathy about their enforced separation by Father Francis. This may have provided a chivalric conclusion to what Tolkien later referred to as a "boy-and-girl-affair" (see above), but real life requires more pragmatic accommodation. Carpenter's biography, while it was considerably shortened at the behest of Christopher Tolkien, who required that some material be excised, does nevertheless observe that while "their letters were full of affection" nevertheless, "when they were together their tempers would often flare" (67). In his companion book *The Inklings* Carpenter cites the "broken childhoods they had both endured in Birmingham" (32) and the "strain" caused by Tolkien's life "with his male friends" (168) which made "the atmosphere in the later Tolkien household [...] difficult" (169).

In their exhaustively-researched *J.R.R. Tolkien Companion and Guide* Christina Scull and Wayne Hammond confine their long entry on Edith to reporting facts without comment or interpretation (Scull and Hammond *Guide* Pt. II, 1304-09). A more recent biography of Edith, Nancy Bunting and Seamus Hamill-Keays's *The Gallant Edith Bratt*, is built largely on circumstantial evidence and conjecture. The authors' frequent use of cautionary words as "probably," "may have," "could have," "it is likely that," undermine their authority and make it risky to draw firm conclusions. These authors speculate about a possible

pre-marital sexual relationship between Tolkien and Edith, but their conjecture about how far it might have gone is guarded.

The bare facts are stark. Edith Bratt was the illegitimate daughter of a Birmingham businessman, Alfred Warrilow, through his illicit liaison with a woman named Frances Bratt, his own daughter's governess. That Edith bore her mother's name, that she never spoke to her own children about her father, and never "passed [his name] on" to them (Carpenter, *Biography* 38-39) is unspoken testimony of her understandably awkward and sensitive feelings around the subject. It is evidence, too, of the Edwardian opprobrium attached to illegitimate birth, a painful circumstance to set beside Carpenter's sugar-lump anecdote, Scull and Hammond's bare facts, and Bunting and Hamill-Keays's unsupported speculations.

A third story, that might qualify as neither his nor hers but theirs, is suggested by Tolkien himself in the same passage of the above-quoted letter to Christopher. Here Tolkien wrote of wanting to share with this son "the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling," and of "the lapses and darkneses which at times marred our lives" (*Letters* 590, #340). Loaded words—"dreadful sufferings," "wounds," "darkneses"; negative terms like "marred," "disabling," "lapses," "could not heal"—tend to substantiate Carpenter's cautious allusions to strain and flaring tempers and difficult atmosphere and broken childhoods. Both Tolkien's letter and the biography suggest real human behavior in a real human marriage, one that seems to have had some pretty rocky passages. Tantalizing as these hints are, however, they must remain mere hints; corroborating details of Edith's life that might have fleshed out the picture are hard to come by and even harder to extract from the few sources available.²

To add to that, Tolkien's thought-provoking statement to Christopher that he and Edith "rescued" one another calls to mind his description in another letter, this to Michael, of lovers as "companions in shipwreck" (*Letters* 68, #43). "Shipwreck," like "wounds" and "darkneses," is a loaded word, evoking images of stress, desperation, desolation, bare survival, and abandonment in lifeboats. The physical situation brought about by shipwreck inevitably throws its survivors into claustrophobically close quarters, conditions guaranteed to exacerbate differences and ignite conflict, even as those same conditions foster dependence one on another. Tolkien's phrase can be misleading, however. By "shipwreck" he did not mean the relationship itself but rather the circumstances in which it occurs. That is to say, the ordinary everyday conditions of human

² A useful overview of work concerning Edith through 2019 can be found in duPlessis.

existence, which for a practicing Catholic would be life after the Fall, therefore of necessity in an imperfect world.

I suggest this is what Tolkien meant by the word *shipwreck*. I also suggest that he may have had his own marriage (described in the letter to Christopher as a mutual rescue from sufferings) in mind when he wrote the phrase. Whatever he had in mind, the phrase itself is a shocker—bleak, bare and unequivocal. It is, moreover, clear evidence of its author's often-ignored or underestimated pessimism. It cannot help but recall the opinion expressed by his friend Father Robert Murray that he was "a very complex and depressed man," whose "imaginative creation" (i.e. The Silmarillion of which *The Lord of the Rings* was an integral part) "project[ed] his very depressed view of the universe" as much as his Catholic faith (qtd. in West 135). Humphrey Carpenter's description of Tolkien as "a man of antitheses" seems in harmony with this. Throughout Tolkien's life these antitheses: his "very depressed view of the universe" and his religious faith co-existed in uneasy tension, a continuously tilting balance that never came to rest either way. The same tension can be found among such disparate word-clusters as "an unreal romantic code," "she was my Lúthien," "a boy-and-girl affair." The phrases seem at odds with one another, or perhaps their writer was at odds with himself, much as Father Murray described.

What can be learned from such revelations? Could it have been to counterbalance his vision of human existence as a shipwreck that Tolkien transformed a crucial episode in his life into a fairy-story and re-identified its central characters as real people, only to see the whole construct go "crooked" when what had been a fictional death was no longer a fiction but an all too real circumstance in his actual life? Tolkien's emotional tie to the figure of Lúthien—to the story he created about her, and to the mixed and blended sets of relationships which that story established in his mind—is plain to see. It was the real-life corollary to the many-times retold tale of love and death that he made his personal identity-saga and signature-piece.

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"I'M STUDYING *BEOWULF* WITH *BEOWULF* HIMSELF"

MATTHEW THOMPSON-HANDELL

READING SUCH AN ENTHUSIASTIC REACTION TO A *BEOWULF* COURSE, one might recall the story that W.H. Auden told, of being "spellbound" when attending a Tolkien lecture and hearing the Professor recite "magnificently, a long passage of *Beowulf*." Tolkien's significance in the history of *Beowulf* studies is assured, with his 1936 lecture "*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*" being widely viewed as having had a profound effect on critical approaches to the poem. Just how profound is explained by Professor Drouot in his 2002 critical edition *Beowulf and the Critics*, in which he says that "while it does not mark the moment that *Beowulf* was first studied as literature [...], it does begin the study of the poem and its workings as legitimate in their own right, as something worth studying to see how it worked rather than simply comparing it (unfavorably) with other literature" (Tolkien 1). The quote that opens this Note does not, however, come