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## Orphic Powers in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legend of Beren and Lúthien

Jane Beal PhD

*University of California, Davis*, [janebeal@gmail.com](mailto:janebeal@gmail.com)

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## Orphic Powers in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legend of Beren and Lúthien

J.R.R. Tolkien's legend of Beren and Lúthien took several forms from 1917 to 1954, five of them distinct:

- 1) the early fairy-tale or beast fable called "The Tale of Tinúviel";
- 2) the verse "Lay of Leithian" (preceeded by prose synopses);
- 3) the prose romance in *The Silmarillion* (preceeded by versions later edited and published by Christopher Tolkien in the *Earliest Silmarillion*, *Quenta Silmarillion*, *Earliest Annals of Beleriand*, *Later Annals of Beleriand*, and *Grey Annals*);
- 4) the retrospective love song Aragorn sings about the two lovers in Book I, Chapter 11 of *The Fellowship of the Rings* (preceeded by the poem "Light as Leaf on Linden Tree" and a medial version with a prose paraphrase);
- 5) and the record of the love story of Aragorn and Arwen itself, included in an appendix to *The Return of the King*, which is a re-telling in a later time of a story quite similar to that of Beren and Lúthien, one which makes direct reference to it.<sup>1</sup>

Tolkien's many re-workings of the love story of Beren and Lúthien, in various genres, both verse and prose, suggest the importance to the mythology of Middle-earth and to Tolkien himself, raising two questions for the curious reader: how did the story take shape in the man's imagination, and why did it matter so much to him? The author's creative process may be a mystery, even to himself, but in the legend of Beren and Lúthien, at least three interwoven strands that shaped the story can be discerned: Tolkien's own experience, the influence of classical mythology and medieval literature, and the hope inherent to the Christian faith, especially for resurrection and eternal life.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Tale of Tinúviel" appears in BL 22, 4-41; the "Lay of Leithian" and prose synopses with commentary by Christopher Tolkien in *Lays*, 154-363; the prose romance "Of Beren and Lúthien" in *S*, chap. 19; "Earliest Silmarillion," Ch 10, in *Shaping*; "Quenta Silmarillion," chap. 10, in *Shaping*; "Earliest Annals of Beleriand" in *Shaping*, 300-01, 307; "Later Annals of Beleriand" in *Lost Road*, 135-35; Aragorn's song in Book I, chap. 11 of *FR*; "Light as Leaf on Linden Tree" in Leeds (1925); the medial version of Aragorn's song with paraphrase in *Shadow*, 179-84; and "The Grey Annals" in *Jewels*, 61-71. See T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boston and New York: Mariner Books, 2003), 356-61, and Richard C. West, "Real-World Myth in a Secondary World: Mythological Aspects in the Story of Beren and Lúthien," in *Tolkien the Medievalist*, ed. Jane Chance (London: Routledge, 2003), 259-267.

Literary critics have paid special attention to the possible sources of (and influences on) Tolkien's legend of Beren and Lúthien. Some have suggested source stories that provide very general parallels – such as the myth of Pyramus and Thisbe or the romance of William of Palerne,<sup>2</sup> the folk-tales “The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs” and “The Griffin,”<sup>3</sup> or the Arthurian tale of Tristan and Isolde<sup>4</sup> – while others have proposed very specific sources and analogues for individual elements of the story. In *The Road to Middle-earth*, after noting the overall framework provided by the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice and the “rash promise” motif from *Sir Orfeo*, T.A. Shippey notes a string of correspondences:

the wizards' singing contests (from the *Kalevala*), the werewolves devouring bound men in the dark (from the *Saga of the Volsungs*), the rope of hair let down from a window (from Grimms' “Rapunzel”), the “shadowy cloak” of sleep and invisibility which recalls the *\*heolothhelm* of the Old English *Genesis B*. The hunting of the great wolf reminds one of the chase of the boar Twrch Trwyth in the Welsh *Mabinogion* while the motif of ‘the hand in the wolf's mouth’ is one of the most famous parts of the *Prose Edda*, told of Fenris Wolf and the god Tyr; Huan recalls several faithful hounds of legend, Garm, Gelert, Cafall.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Jen Stevens, “From Catastrophe to Eucatastrophe. J. R. R. Tolkien's Transformation of Ovid's Pyramus and Thisbe into Beren and Lúthien,” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth. A Reader*, ed. Jane Chance (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 119-132, and Thomas Honneger, “A Note on Beren and Lúthien's Disguise as Werewolf and Vampire-bat,” *Tolkien Studies* 1 (2004): 171-175. Honneger traces such commonalities between Tolkien's legend and William of Palerne's romance as a father opposing the marriage of his daughter to the hero, the antagonist being an enemy sorcerer, and the donning of animal skins.

<sup>3</sup> These folk-tales as possible sources have gained popular attention in the Wikipedia article on Beren and Lúthien and on fan sites, such as “The Silmarillion: Sources” ([http://home.comcast.net/~mithrandircq/Silmarillion\\_sources.htm](http://home.comcast.net/~mithrandircq/Silmarillion_sources.htm) - accessed 2 September 2014).

<sup>4</sup> In her *argumentum ex silencio*, Verlyn Flieger contends that Tolkien purges the dross from the love stories of Lancelot and Guinevere and Tristan and Isolde to create his own ideal love story. Verlyn Flieger, “J.R.R. Tolkien and the Matter of Britain,” *Mythlore* 23 (2000): 47-59, esp. 53. West sees echoes of the Tristan and Isolde story as well, especially in the wandering of the lovers in the woods.

<sup>5</sup> Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Mariner Books, 2003), 294. Shippey criticizes Tolkien's method, saying he “had not yet freed himself from his sources – as if trying to bring in all the older bits of literature that he liked instead of forging a story with an impetus of its own” (293). Shippey revisits this list of sources in *J.R.R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 255.

Richard C. West adds to Shippey's list, noting the influence of fairy-tales such as *Rapunzel* (when Lúthien lets down her hair, but to escape the tower and pursue her lover, not to let a prince in), *Sleeping Beauty* (when Morgoth and his minions are put to sleep by Lúthien's singing), and the *Twelve Dancing Princesses* (when Lúthien uses her cloak of invisibility). He sees further connections between Beren and Robin Hood (and James Fenimore Cooper's Hawkeye), Lúthien and the Irish Dierdre of the Sorrows (and Ishtar, too), Sauron's shape-shifting and Loki's when attempting escape Heimdall (and Nereus' shapeshifting as well).<sup>6</sup> Observing that Randel Helms suggested the Culhwch and Olwen story from the Welsh *Mabingion* as source material (including the possible influence of the hound Cafall on Tolkien's creation of Huan, hound of Valinor, also noted by Shippey), and how this suggestion was questioned later by Brian Dunsire, however, West rightly cautions: "With Tolkien, we can only be confident of a direct source when he has borrowed a feature that is unique to some particular story or he has told us what he has in mind, and both of these circumstances are rare."<sup>7</sup>

Recently, classical scholar Miryam Libran-Moreno has examined the Orpheus and Eurydice myth and Protesilaus and Laodemia myth as analogues to Tolkien's legend, noting similar plot points and motifs, such as the entering the underworld (Hades/Halls of Mandos) while still alive, the crossing of water (Stygian Lake/Grinding Ice) using divine power from the mother, and the undying love that moves the gods to pity and then to restore alive the beloved to the lover.<sup>8</sup> These are useful insights. Yet perhaps the suicide of Laodemia is not a true parallel to Lúthien's choice to give up Elven immortality, at least from the moral viewpoint of Tolkien's Catholicism.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See West, "Real-World Myth in a Secondary World," 259-267.

<sup>7</sup> West, "Real-World Myth in a Secondary World," 264.

<sup>8</sup> Miryam Libran-Moreno, "'A Kind of Orpheus Legend in Reverse': Two Classical Myths in the Story of Beren and Lúthien," in *Myth and Magic: Art According to the Inklings*, ed. Eduardo Segura and Thomas M. Honegger (Zollikofen: Walking Tree Publishers, 2007), 143-185.

<sup>9</sup> If so, the Protesilaus and Laodemia myth then appears to be a minor analogue but perhaps not a significant source. As West has implied, this could be said of any number of classical and medieval literary parallels to the legend that critics have identified.

The influence of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth is undeniable, however, for Tolkien calls his legend “a kind of Orpheus-legend in reverse.”<sup>10</sup> Yet it must be emphasized that Tolkien knew the Orphic story not only in classical versions, such as those by Virgil and Ovid, but also understood it in later forms of medieval literature in which it had been Christianized. Perhaps it is fair to say that he knew it best in its full, fairy-tale fulfillment in the Middle English lay, *Sir Orfeo*, which Tolkien rendered in modern English.<sup>11</sup> Unlike earlier classical versions, the Christianized myth of Orpheus from the Middle Ages had hope for restoration from death to new life, and this hope is evident in Tolkien’s legend of Beren and Lúthien. Tolkien further suggested the character of Alcestis as a parallel for Orpheus, and thus for Lúthien,<sup>12</sup> and he drew elements – uniquely – from the myth of Philomela as well when he wrote his story.

So this study provides other lenses through which to read the legend that Tolkien cherished. To begin, taking into account Tolkien’s lived experience and the ways he explicitly stated that it shaped this story, it shows that the legend of Beren and Lúthien can be understood as a psychological allegory, one that presents the author’s interior mental and emotional processes as human characters and events through a kind of literary symbolization. Second, re-opening the treasure-chest of classical mythology, it considers three classical myths critical to the literary formation of the legend: the rape of Philomela (which has not yet been considered thoroughly in scholarship to date), the self-sacrifice of Alcestis, and, of course, the love story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Significantly, all of these were generally familiar to Tolkien not only in Latin originals but in medieval versions and allusions to them in early English literature. Finally, it reviews the Christianization of the Orphic story in the Middle Ages to help better explain the hope of resurrection and new life that is so completely interwoven with the fabric

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<sup>10</sup> *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with the assistance of Christopher Tolkien (London: George Allen & Unwin; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 193.

<sup>11</sup> Tolkien not only created a modern English version of “Sir Orfeo,” but also re-wrote the poem in the South-Eastern dialect of Middle English between circa January 1943- March 1944, when he organized and directed the navel cadets’ course in English for Oxford University. This was published in a booklet in 1944; it is discussed in Wayne G. Hammond and Douglas A. Anderson’s book, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Descriptive Bibliography*. For analysis of these two versions in relation to one another, see Carl F. Hostetter, “*Sir Orfeo*: A Middle English Version by J.R.R. Tolkien,” *Tolkien Studies* 1:1 (2004): 85-123. For analysis of the relationship between *Sir Orfeo* and one of Tolkien’s versions of his Beren and Lúthien legend, see Deanna Delmar Evans, “Tolkien’s Unfinished ‘Lay of Lúthien’ and the Middle English *Sir Orfeo*,” in *Middle-Earth Minstrel: Essays on Music in Tolkien*, ed. Brad Eden (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2010), 75-84.

<sup>12</sup> West was the first to note this in print. See “Real-World Myth in a Secondary World,” 266.

of Tolkien's legend. As we shall see, that Tolkien also interwove Christian symbolism from the Middle English dream vision *Pearl* in his legend makes his story's own symbolism all the more powerful.

***Psychological Allegory: John and Edith,  
Beren and Lúthien Tinúviel***

Tolkien's famous dislike of allegory and his firm resistance to biographical criticism of his own works were both based on his belief that the work of art, especially the literary creation (whether in verse or prose), should not be reduced to component parts, but rather understood whole. Regarding allegory, in the forward to the *Fellowship of the Ring*, he wrote:

I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history – true or feigned– with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse applicability with allegory, but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.<sup>13</sup>

While many readers and literary critics have focused on the phrase “I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations,” few have emphasized why: Tolkien did not want to wield “the purposed domination of the author” over his audience, but instead wanted to invite the interpretative “freedom of the reader.” In fact, his statement about allegory in the forward to the *Fellowship of the Ring* can be contextualized, and its general applicability narrowed, in his recognition of allegory in *Pearl*, the fourteenth-century dream vision that he loved:

To be an allegory a poem must *as a whole*, and with fair consistency, describe in other terms some event or process; its entire narrative and all its significant details should cohere and work together toward this end. There are minor allegories within *Pearl*; the parable of the workers in the vineyard (stanzas 42-49) is a self-contained allegory, and the opening stanzas of the poem, where the pearl slips from the poet's hand through the grass to the ground, is an allegory in little of the child's death and burial.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> FR 7.

In other words, the allegory Tolkien disliked was the complete allegory, such as Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, one which by the author's design was intended to dominate the reader's understanding not with the story itself, but with many arrows pointing to another event or process.

Tolkien wanted his own stories to be understood and appreciated on their own terms, for their own sake. Any allegorical or biographical understanding, then, was secondary, not primary, within the scope of his authorial intention, but permissible, as it were, given the freedom of the reader (which was not, in Tolkien's opinion, license to read any way the reader wanted without regard to common sense, literary convention, or known facts). As a New Critic (even before the New Criticism got thoroughly underway in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), he was very much dedicated to the belief that the work of art, especially the literary work of art, had value independent of anything else – including historical criticism (even if he did prefer history to allegory) – an argument he made most cogently in his famous essay, *Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,<sup>15</sup> where he used an allegory of a man who built a tower to defend his point.

A man inherited a field in which was an accumulation of old stone, part of an older hall. Of the old stone some had already been used in building the house in which he actually lived, not far from the old house of his fathers. Of the rest he took some and built a tower. But his friends coming perceived at once (without troubling to climb the steps) that these stones had formerly belonged to a more ancient building. So they pushed the tower over, with no little labour, in order to look for hidden carvings and inscriptions, or to discover whence the man's distant forefathers had obtained their building material.

Some suspecting a deposit of coal under the soil began to dig for it, and forgot even the stones. They all said: "This tower is most interesting." But they also said (after pushing it over): "What a muddle it is in!" And even the man's own descendants, who might

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<sup>14</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (New York, N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1975), 11.

<sup>15</sup> For the scholarly edition of the text, see J.R.R. Tolkien, *Beowulf and the Critics*, ed. Michael D.C. Drout (Tempe, Ariz.: ACMRS, 2002).

have been expected to consider what he had been about, were heard to murmur: “He is such an odd fellow! Imagine using these old stones just to build a nonsensical tower! Why did not he restore the old house? He had no sense of proportion.” But from the top of that tower the man had been able to look out upon the sea.<sup>16</sup>

In his allegory, the man who built the tower is the *Beowulf*-poet, the tower is the *Beowulf* epic, and the man’s descendents are English literary critics obsessed the poet’s use of historical details in a historically inaccurate – but in Tolkien’s view, very artistically coherent – way.

It is notable that none of the various versions of legend of Beren and Lúthien looks either like a traditional, complete allegory or Tolkien’s own “allegory in little” of the man who built the tower. But his legend does “describe in other terms some event or process”: the love he had for his wife, and she for him, and the trials and tribulations they faced. Indeed, a case could be made for the legend that “its entire narrative and all its significant details should cohere and work together toward this end.” It does so not as a simple allegory, but a complex one. As Ann Meyer observes in our co-authored essay about complex allegory, especially in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and *Pearl*:

Some readers may be inclined to associate allegory with representation of abstract thought through personification. This is wholly inaccurate in complex medieval allegory. A character’s name called “Avarice,” or “Greed,” does not require interpretation. Personification of an idea requires little reflection on the meaning to be conveyed. Complex allegory, however ... requires the reader to participate as pilgrim, as dreamer in constant movement toward beatitude.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, Tolkien’s legend is not a complete allegory for there is no one-to-one correspondence between a character and a virtue (or a vice), such as we see in *Piers Plowman*, or between the plot and a concluding moral pronouncement, such as we see in *Everyman*. Rather, as Tolkien wrote of the elegiac dream vision,

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<sup>16</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, “*Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics*,” in *The Tolkien Reader*, 105-106.

<sup>17</sup> Beal, Jane and Meyer, Ann, “Symbolism and Allegory in *Pearl*,” *Approaches to Teaching the Middle English Pearl*, ed. Jane Beal and Mark Bradshaw Busbee (New York, N.Y.: MLA, forthcoming).

*Pearl*, key parts of the legend have an allegorical quality. In the case of the legend of Beren and Lúthien, the complex allegory is a psychological one.

Psychological allegory is a term that has been used in literary criticism to describe such well known but radically different masterpieces as the *Romance of the Rose* and *The Lord of the Flies*. Neither of these two works has much in common with the other or with Tolkien's legend, in terms of style or content or meaning, yet each performs like a literary veil. Lifting the veil may reveal the face of the real-world story, the authorial experience, which inspired the psychological allegory. The legend of Beren and Lúthien certainly emerges from the author Tolkien's own lived experiences and his emotional responses to them. This is readily seen in his own letters, in which he reveals that his wife, Mary Edith Bratt Tolkien, was the basis for his creation of the character of Lúthien.

It is well known that the moment when Beren sees Lúthien dancing in the wood is based on a time when Tolkien watched his own wife dancing for him in the woods. This dance happened near the village of Roos, north of the Humber estuary in Yorkshire, late in 1917 in a glade where hemlock grew.<sup>18</sup> Tolkien had returned on sick leave from the Great War, and being with his wife at this time helped to bring him healing.

After his wife's death, Tolkien wrote to his son Michael about meeting Edith when they were both teenagers in 1909: "I met the Lúthien Tinúviel of my own personal 'romance' with her long dark hair, fair face and starry eyes, and beautiful voice. And in 1934 she was still with me, and her beautiful children. But now she has gone before Beren ..."<sup>19</sup> Only six months after writing this to his eldest son, still grieving and planning the inscription for Edith's tombstone, he wrote to his youngest son Christopher, "She was (and she knew she was) my Lúthien."<sup>20</sup> Tolkien asked that the name "Lúthien" be inscribed on his wife's headstone; after Tolkien's own death, his children had the name "Beren" inscribed on the same stone, in honor of their father, who was buried beside their mother. As Tolkien himself said of his wife, "She was the source of the story that in time became the chief part of the *Silmarillion*."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 420. This letter is dated 11 July 1972.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 417. This letter is dated 24 January 1972.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

The iconic vision of his wife dancing stayed with him, and he wrote about it many times, apparently first incorporating it in a poem, “Lightly as Leaf on Linden Tree,” published in *The Gryphon* in 1925. The first stanza of this poem is remarkably similar to the opening of the song Aragorn sings about the lovers in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, published more than thirty years later.<sup>22</sup> But Edith was not the only source, and the dance not only the inspiration, for Tolkien’s legend. As he wrote to Christopher, Tolkien felt that his entire life with Edith informed the elements of the legend, which Tolkien suggested was autobiographical:

For if as seems probable I shall never write any ordered biography – it is against my nature, which expresses itself about things deepest felt in tales and myths – someone close in heart to me should know something about things that records do not record: the dreadful sufferings of our childhoods, from which we rescued one another, but could not wholly heal the wounds that later often proved disabling; the sufferings that we endured after our love began – all of which (over and above our personal weaknesses) might help to make pardonable, or understandable, the lapses and darkneses which at times marred our lives – and to explain how these never touched our depths nor dimmed our memories of our youthful love. Forever (especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glades, and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting.<sup>23</sup>

Tolkien reveals many things in this letter to son, in the midst of grief over his wife’s loss, including the important fact that rather than writing a biography, he expresses his own nature about things he feels deeply through story and myth. He goes on to explain how the legend of Beren and Lúthien is what in this study is called *psychological allegory*, one replete with arrows pointing from the legend to the Tolkiens’ life, especially with regard to suffering – in childhood, in love, and after love began. There is the memory of happiness implied in the “rescue” from childhood suffering, but a confession of a deeply felt sorrow in the truthful acknowledgement that the rescue “could not wholly heal the wound that later often proved disabling,” could not prevent “the lapses and darkneses which at times marred our lives.” To what is Tolkien referring specifically? Perhaps he alone knew.

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<sup>22</sup> West compares these two stanzas. See West, “Real-World Myth in a Secondary World,” 260-61.

<sup>23</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 421.

But there is in the legend of the love of Beren and Lúthien a consistent theme of vulnerability and woundedness. Beren is traumatized by his father's death and the violence of war. Lúthien repeatedly faces threats of sexual assault and imprisonment. Evil forces – the dark spiritual powers of Middle-earth – conspire against their freedom, their love, and their very lives. Beren is an orphan, without mother or father to love, protect, support, or affirm him, while Lúthien faces a father hostile to her choice to love a Man (and thus to mature from childhood to womanhood, acting apart from her father's authority) and a mother who, while magical and far-seeing, is passive compared to her daughter. Beren and Lúthien do indeed overcome these and many other challenges, rescuing one another and meeting “in the woodland glade” to go “hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death.” As John Garth has written, Tolkien “makes despair or ‘disenchantment’ the prelude to a redemptive restoration of meaning” and dramatizes “the joy of victory against all odds in Beren and Tinúviel.”<sup>24</sup>

So it is accurate to say that the legend of Beren and Lúthien is a psychological allegory. But that is not all that it is.

***Classical Mythology: The Rape of Philomela, the Self-Sacrifice of Alcestis, and the Love Story of Orpheus and Eurydice***

Tolkien wrote that his nature expressed things most deeply felt through story and myth. These tales were not only ones he created, but ones that he knew and reworked from the real world, specifically from his study of classical mythology and its later medieval re-tellings. Although Tolkien loved medieval English literature, his first study at Exeter College, Oxford was of Greek and Latin languages and literatures, to which he had already been introduced at King Edward's school. Tolkien wrote, “I was brought up in the Classics and first discovered the sensation of literary pleasure in Homer.”<sup>25</sup> Among the stories he knew from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as well as other sources, were the tales of Philomela, Alcestis, and Orpheus, and these influenced the creation of his legend of Beren and Lúthien.

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<sup>24</sup> John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (New York, N.Y. and Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 303.

<sup>25</sup> Tolkien, *Letters*, 172.

The Ovidian tale of the suffering of Philomela is one of the most brutal told in the *Metamorphoses*. In it, Tereus, the King of Thrace, marries Procne, daughter of Pandion, King of Athens. Their marriage is ill-omened from the beginning, when neither Juno nor Hymen nor the Graces attend, but instead, the Furies hold sputtering torches, brought from a funeral, at their bedside as a screech owl broods over their chamber. Procne conceives and later gives birth to a son, Itys, but his fate is a tragedy waiting to happen.

Five years later, Procne asks her husband to bring her sister, Philomela, to visit her. So he returns to Athens and seeks the permission of her father, Pandion. But once Tereus sees Philomela, he is overcome with lust and plans to rape her, which he does once they return to Thrace. He cuts out her tongue and leaves her imprisoned in the woods, under guard, unable to speak or escape. But she weaves the story of the assault into a tapestry and sends it secretly by a servant-girl to her sister, Procne, who, when she learns what has happened, is enraged with a desire for revenge.

Under cover of a Bacchanalian festival, Procne spirits her sister out of the woods and brings her to the palace, where she murders her son Itys with Philomela's help. She then boils his body and feeds it to the unknowing Tereus. When her husband's belly is full, she reveals that he has eaten his son – by throwing the boy's severed head in his father's face – and the reason why: the rape of Philomela. Tereus, enraged now in turn, pursues his wife and her sister to kill them, but they cry out to the gods, who transform all three into birds: Philomela to a nightingale, Procne to a swallow, and Tereus to a hoopoe.<sup>26</sup>

At first glance, the horrifying (but unforgettable) plot bears little resemblance to the legend of Beren and Lúthien, but the Ovidian tale is influential in several respects. Of foremost consideration is Philomela's contribution to the character of Lúthien. The tragic heroine's transformation into a nightingale permanently associated her name – in classical, medieval, Renaissance, and modern literature – with the bird and the bird with the role of the poet-singer.<sup>27</sup> “Nightingale” and “Philomela” have even been used interchangeably in English poetry, in which the bird often stands for the power of poetry and art to express

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<sup>26</sup> See Ovid, *Metamorphoses* VI.401-674.

<sup>27</sup> See Albert R. Chandler, “The Nightingale in Greek and Latin Poetry,” *The Classical Journal* 30:2 (1934): 78-84, who notes: “The nightingale plays a more important role in European literature than any other bird. References to it are found all along the way from Homer to T.S. Eliot” (p. 78).

and even overcome the suffering of the past.<sup>28</sup> So it is striking that Beren calls Lúthien “Tinúviel,” which means “daughter of twilight,” a kenning for nightingale. Tolkien writes in the *Silmarillion*, after Beren saw Lúthien for the first time, “In his heart, he called her Tinúviel, that signifies Nightingale, daughter of twilight, in the Grey-elven tongue, for he knew no other name for her.”<sup>29</sup> What is it about Lúthien Tinúviel that is so like Philomela that Tolkien makes an association, by means of a shared name, between these two legendary women?

Ovid interpreted the name “Philomela” etymologically to mean “lover of song.”<sup>30</sup> The foremost quality of Lúthien Tinúviel is her ability to sing and the power of her song over nature. The first time Tolkien writes about this song in the *Silmarillion*, he says: “Keen, heart-piercing was her song as the song of the lark that rises from the gates of night and pours its voice among the dying stars ... and the song of Lúthien released the bonds of winter, and the frozen waters spoke, and flowers sprang from the cold earth where her feet had passed.”<sup>31</sup> While Beren associates Lúthien with the nightingale, the singer at nightfall, Tolkien associates her also with the lark, the singer at daybreak, and so he expands the power of Lúthien’s song over both day and night. Her song has power to release the bonds of winter, too, and cause that which is frozen and voiceless to speak. Whereas Ovid’s Nightingale (Philomela) is silent, Tolkien’s Nightingale (Lúthien) has one of the most powerful voices in all of Middle-earth: a eucatastrophe in little.<sup>32</sup>

Other elements from the Ovidian tale are linked to the Tolkienian legend as well: the (threat of) sexual violence against a beautiful but vulnerable woman, the imprisonment of the female protagonist in the woods, and the shape-shifting of the Nightingale and her attacker (though of course Lúthien is transformed into a hellish bat and Sauron to many different kinds of creatures). These motifs are

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<sup>28</sup> See also John P. Donovan, *The Myth of Philomela in English Literature* (Lawrence, Kans.: University of Kansas Press, 1965) and Milton Moore, *Philomela and Procne in English Literature* (1969).

<sup>29</sup> Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien and illustrated by Ted Nasmith (New York, N.Y. and Boston, Mass.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), 162.

<sup>30</sup> Etymologically, the Greek probably means “lover of apples” or “lover of fruit,” but Ovid’s interpretation has been influential.

<sup>31</sup> Tolkien, *Silmarillion*, 162.

<sup>32</sup> Tolkien coined the term “eucatastrophe,” the opposite of catastrophe, in his essay, “On Fairy-Stories.” The essay is widely available, but especially notable as reprinted in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, where it is a suitable afterword to five of Tolkien’s own fairy-stories.

shared with other classical and medieval stories, but the name of Nightingale is unique. Strikingly, Tolkien transforms the Ovidian Nightingale from victim to victor in his own legend.<sup>33</sup>

Like Philomela, Alcestis also contributes to the creation of the character of Lúthien. Alcestis is first alluded to in Homer's *Iliad*, and later referenced in a lyrical fragment from Sappho; her self-sacrifice is summarized in Plato's *Symposium* and Apollodorus' *Library*.<sup>34</sup> But the fullest version of her story is found in the eponymous play of the Greek playwright, Euripides (5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE). In the play, Admetus, King of Pherae in Thessaly, is given a strange blessing: the god Apollo, in recompense for Admetus' hospitality (shown to him when he was in disguise as a shepherd), convinces the Fates to allow Admetus to live if someone is willing to give his or her life in place of his. But no one wishes to step forward to die early, neither Admetus' elderly parents nor his loyal friend Creon. However, his wife, Alcestis, offers to die for him because of her great love for him, though she is the mother of two young sons left behind by her choice. The gods take pity, and send Hercules, who goes down into Hades to retrieve Alcestis and brings her back, silent but alive.

This astonishing tale resonated with Latin poets, especially Ovid, who alludes to it in his *Tristia*, *Ex Ponto* and *Ars Amatoria*.<sup>35</sup> In *The Art of Love*, he writes: "Alcestis, his wife, redeemed Admetus's life with her own: / the wife, for the man, was borne to the husband's funeral."<sup>36</sup> Later in the Middle Ages,

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<sup>33</sup> It is worth noting that the widely-read Tolkien knew the myth of Philomela not only from its fullest classical version related by Ovid, and via allusions in Greek and Latin literatures, but also from medieval re-tellings, such as those by Chaucer (in *Legend of Good Women* and as alluded to in *Troilus and Criseyde*) and Chretien de Troyes, and from later Renaissance literature, such as Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*.

<sup>34</sup> Plato writes in the *Symposium* (ca. 360 BCE): "Love will make men dare to die for their beloved-love alone – and women as well as men. Of this, Alcestis, the daughter of Pelias, is a monument to all Hellas. For she was willing to lay down her life on behalf of her husband, when no one else would, although he had a father and mother. But the tenderness of her love so far exceeded theirs that she made them seem to be strangers in blood to their own son and in name only related to him. And so noble does this action of hers appear to the gods, as well as to men, that among the many who have done virtuously, she is one of the very few to whom, in admiration of her noble action, they granted the privilege of returning alive to earth. Such exceeding honor is paid by the gods to the devotion and virtue of love" (trans. Benjamin Jowett, available at <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1600> - accessed 22 September 2014). The allusion to Alcestis appears in the *Iliad* II.711-15.

<sup>35</sup> See Ovid, *Tristia* V.55 and XIV.37, *Ex Ponto* I.106, and *Ars Amatoria* III.19-20. A.S. Kline's translations these poems are available online.

Christian writers were naturally drawn to the story of Alcestis, too. For Alcestis' love, her self-sacrifice to save another's life, and her resurrection from the dead have distinct parallels to the life of Christ. Chaucer re-tells her story as a fitting part of *The Book of the Duchess* and makes her a major character in his *Legend of Good Women*, both of which were well known to Tolkien.

Like Alcestis, Lúthien offers her life in place of her beloved. Lúthien gives up her immortality to share a mortal life and human death with Beren. This self-sacrifice is not, however, a suicide but rather a choice which she is granted by the Valar. Lúthien's story has a complexity, a circularity, and a pattern of repetition to it that differs from Euripedes' play of Alcestis, and more closely resembles a medieval romance (like the Constance legend retold in Chaucer's Man of Law's tale and Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, for example), but it does share the basic plot: the self-sacrifice of the woman, motivated by great love, to save the life of a man. This is a key aspect of Lúthien's character.

If Tolkien takes the name Nightingale from the Philomela myth, and the willingness of a woman to sacrifice herself for her beloved from the Alcestis story, he draws even more so on the classical myth – and medieval interpretation – of Orpheus and Eurydice when crafting his own legend of Beren and Lúthien. It is worth noting that Orpheus, like Alcestis, descended to the underworld of the dead to save his beloved and returned alive. As Richard West has observed, “Tolkien himself drew a parallel between this episode and the Greek myth of Alcestis, who bravely and nobly volunteered to die in place of her husband ...”<sup>37</sup> So the plots of these two myths are related, and the influence of both is discernable in Tolkien's legend.

According to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Orpheus was born in Thrace, the son of a muse, and he had the gift of music. When he played the lyre, all of nature responded by listening, as if captivated by a spell. Animals that were usually enemies, like predatory lions who seized upon lambs for prey, would make peace with one another at the sound of Orpheus' lyre. It so happened that this Orpheus fell in love and sought to marry his beloved Eurydice. On the day of their wedding, however, she stepped on an adder that bit her ankle, and from the poison of the snake-bite, she died. Orpheus, grieving from this loss, went nearly mad. He went throughout the world until he found an entrance into Hades. He descended to the underworld, and there, playing his lyre, he made his way—a living being—

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<sup>36</sup> Ovid, *Ars Amatoria* III.19-20, trans. A.S. Kline (2001).  
(<http://poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/ArtofLoveBkIII.htm> - accessed 22 September 2014).

<sup>37</sup> West, “Real-World Myth,” 266.

into the realms of the dead. He won an audience with Hades himself and his dark queen, Persephone, whose hearts were somehow softened by his music. They agreed to give Eurydice back to Orpheus on the condition that he not look back at her until both had emerged from hell. But at a certain point, Orpheus did look back, and he lost his love a second time. Nevertheless, when the soul of Orpheus descended into Hades after his death, he was reunited with Eurydice in Elysium.<sup>38</sup>

Tolkien adapted elements from the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice for his own purposes. Most notably, he divided the Orphic powers between Beren and Lúthien, gave the Orphic role of redeemer from the dead to Lúthien, and then “reversed” the plot so that the goal of the lovers is not to live together in Middle-earth, where they would be separated eventually because of their contrasting racial destinies – Beren’s human mortality, Lúthien’s Elven immortality – but rather to die together, under Iluvatar’s doom for Men, and so be reunited beyond death. Unlike the classical myth, the lovers are reunited in both life and beyond death. This new eucatastrophic ending is influenced by medieval versions of the Orphic myth.

To Lúthien, Tolkien gave the Orphic power of music and song, which can affect (as we have seen) both the natural world of Middle-earth and (as we shall see) the supernatural worlds of the Valar. When Lúthien accompanies Beren into enemy lands, her voice first puts the wolf-guard of Angband, Carcharoth, to sleep, and then her song defeats Morgoth and his entire court:

And out of the shadows began a song of such surpassing loveliness, and of such blinding power, that he [Morgoth] listened perforce and a blindness came upon him, as his eyes roamed to and fro, seeking her [Lúthien]. All his court were cast down in slumber,

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<sup>38</sup> See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, X.1-111 and XI.1-84. For a facing-page edition of the Latin and translation into English, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library Vol. II (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1916, rpt. 1939) or for a fine English translation, see Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IL: Indiana University Press, 1955, rpt. 1983). The myth is also retold in Virgil and Boethius. See Virgil, *Georgics*, translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 63 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Boethius, *Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson, Loeb Classical Library Vol. 74 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973). For detailed discussion of the later reception of the myth of Orpheus, see John Block Friedman, *Orpheus in the Middle Ages* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000). His analysis includes a beautiful passage from the medieval commentary of Pierre Bersuire, who allegorically interpreted Orpheus as a type of Christ and Eurydice as the Bride of Christ, described in terms that compare her to both the classical Persephone and the biblical Song-Bride of the Song of Solomon.

and all the fires faded and were quenched ... Then Lúthien, catching up her winged robe, sprang into the air, and her voice came dropping down like rain into pools, profound and dark. She cast her cloak before his eyes, and set upon him a dream, dark as the Outer Void where once he walked alone. Suddenly he fell, as a hill sliding in avalanche, and hurled like thunder from his throne, lay prone upon the floors of hell. The iron crown rolled echoing from his head. All things were still.<sup>39</sup>

As Tolkien writes, “Thus he was beguiled by his own malice.”<sup>40</sup> The song of Lúthien saves the life of Beren, who can now cut the Silmaril from the crown.

At the story’s end, Lúthien will again sing before a god, before the Mandos, the Valar in whose halls “are the appointed places of the Eldalië, beyond the mansions of the West upon the confines of the world.”<sup>41</sup> Hers is “the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear” and “unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and listening the Valar are grieved.”<sup>42</sup> But Mandos does not have power to restore Beren to Lúthien, so Manwë, Lord of the Valar, seeks the will of Iluvatar, who gives Lúthien a choice. She chooses mortality.

To Beren, in a brief passage, Tolkien gave the Orphic power of taming the animals and making them be at peace with him: “for four years more Beren wandered still upon Dorthonion, a solitary outlaw, but he became the friend of birds and beasts, and they aided him, and did not betray him, and from that time forth he ate no flesh nor slew any living thing that was not in the service of Morgoth.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, Beren has the ability to live in peaceful relationship with the creatures of the natural world. The significance of living at peace with creatures of the natural world extends to the culmination of the story, when Beren’s friendship with Huan, hound of Valinor, inspires the loyal beast to sacrifice his life to defeat Morgoth’s wolf, Carcharoth. But it is particularly

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<sup>39</sup> Tolkien, *Sil*, 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179. This exemplifies the “Beguiler beguiled” motif common in medieval literature.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

significant given Lúthien's identification with the nightingale and her later transformation into Thuringwethil, literally a bat out of hell.

Lúthien's avian and chiropteran abilities to sing and fly reveal her to be very much like a wild bird. As woman, Elf, and Nightingale, she seems to have a wild heart: desiring to be free, vulnerable to capture, vanishing easily at evening even when she is being watched. Beren, gazing intently upon Lúthien from the beginning, is the ultimate bird-watcher. Yet he calls her not to capture her, but to live in a peaceful relationship (at least, there is peace between them even if there is not peace around them) that they mutually choose for the purpose of loving one another and, as it turns out, defeating evil in their age. Of course, both of the lovers are singers, but Beren's song primarily has the power to call Lúthien to him,<sup>44</sup> while Lúthien's song enchants all who hear it: Daeron, Beren, Carcharoth, Morgoth, Sauron, and Mandos as well as, it seems, Manwë, and perhaps even Iluvatar who made her.

The conclusion of Tolkien's legend clearly differs from the classical version of the myth in part because of the influence of the Middle English romance, *Sir Orfeo*, on his imagination. Tolkien loved this romance from the West Midlands, and he translated it into modern English verse.<sup>45</sup> There are many differences between the Ovidian and the English versions of the Orphic myth, many ways in which the medieval poet transforms the classical story. A few of these are:

- Orpheus becomes Sir Orfeo, a courtly knight and king of Winchester,
- Eurydice becomes Heurodis, a courtly lady and Sir Orfeo's queen,
- the role of the snake becomes the role of the "ympe-tree" (grafted tree),
- Mercury (the messenger-god who conveys the souls of the dead to Hades) becomes Heurodis' Faërie kidnappers,

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<sup>44</sup> "Then being now alone and upon the threshold of the final peril, he made the Song of Parting, in praise of Lúthien and the lights of heaven, for he believed that he must now say farewell to both love and light ... And he sang aloud, caring not what ear should overhear him, for he was desperate and looked for no escape. But Lúthien heard his song, and she sang in answer, as she came through the woods unlooked for" (Tolkien, *Sil*, 176).

<sup>45</sup> See J.R.R. Tolkien, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Pearl and Sir Orfeo* (New York, N.Y.: Ballantine Books, 1975).

- Hades (the place) becomes Faërie, the Celtic otherworld,
- Hades (the god) becomes the Faërie King,
- the loss of Eurydice becomes the redemption of Heurodis,
- and the new poem concludes with the testing of the loyal steward.

Notably, the ending is different: it is happy. It includes the restoration of the beloved, Eurydice, to Orpheus, but the story does not end there. It continues with a restoration of the medieval social order in Winchester – much as Odysseus' return to Ithaca included not only a reunion with Penelope, his beloved wife, but also a restoration of his whole household and proper governance of unruly lords and servants.

Likewise, Tolkien's legend of Beren and Lúthien does not truly end with the reunion of the lovers. Rather, it continues to unfold in subsequent episodes, celebrating the deeds of their children and their children's children, which will eventually lead to the righting of wrongs for the whole of Middle-earth: the defeat of Morgoth, and, centuries later, the defeat of his servant, Sauron. This much grander vision of the bold purpose of true love, one that defeats evil and changes the course of history, is naturally tied to Tolkien's Christian hope.

### ***Christian Hope: Pearl and Silmarils, Resurrection and Immortality***

Tolkien was a confirmed Catholic, and his commitment to his Christian faith was assured, as he himself wrote, by his mother's death and by her will, which placed Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary in the care of Father Frances Xavier Morgan, a Catholic priest and Tolkien's legal guardian.<sup>46</sup> Tolkien's understanding of the historical development of the Church and Catholic theology was profound; the way he wove that understanding into his mythology of Middle-earth was subtle. His stories were not, of course, complete allegories – as we would expect, given his view of allegory (reviewed above). But there are within his tales resonances with aspects of Christianity and Christian symbolism.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> For an overview of these events, see Humphrey Carpenter, *Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977, 1978, 1987 and 2000), 31-32, 34-39. Tolkien wrote in a letter, "My own dear mother was a martyr indeed, and it is not to everybody that God grants so easy a way to his great gifts as he did to Hilary and myself, giving us a mother who killed herself with labour and trouble to ensure us keeping the faith" (qtd. in Carpenter, 39).

<sup>47</sup> Many studies have considered the influence of Tolkien's faith on his writing. One recent book on the subject is Craig Bernthan, *Tolkien's Sacramental Vision: Discerning the Holy in Middle-earth* (Oxford: Second Spring Books, 2014). See also Ralph C. Wood, *The Gospel*

Relevant for the purposes of the literary analysis of the legend of Beren and Lúthien is the way Tolkien used the symbolism of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price and treated the themes of resurrection and immortality.

The parable appears in the teachings of Jesus about the kingdom of heaven as recorded in the gospel of Matthew:

“iterum simile est regnum caelorum homini negotiatori quaerenti bonas margaritas. inventa autem una pretiosa margarita abiit et vendidit omnia quae habuit et emit eam”

(Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking good pearls. Having found a precious pearl, he went and sold all that he had and bought her.)<sup>48</sup>

In this parable, the pearl symbolizes the kingdom of heaven: its preciousness, its value, its worthiness of pursuit and purchase, though it cost a man all he has. This parable was of fundamental importance to an anonymous, fourteenth-century poet who wrote the poem known as *Pearl*, which Tolkien later rendered in modern English.

*Pearl* is a poem about loss and transformation through the process of grieving. It begins with a man who reports that he fell asleep in a garden in August and his pearl slipped from his hands and was lost in the grass. The manner in which he describes the pearl strongly suggests that the pearl is a symbol for the body of a beloved woman who has died and been buried. The poem unfolds in three stages, ascending from the *hortus conclusus* to a dream vision, in which he encounters and converses extensively with the Pearl-Maiden, and eventually to a *clara visio* of the heavenly Jerusalem.

These stages are like rungs on a ladder of contemplation, allowing the reader to climb up with the Dreamer into increasingly rarified spiritual realms and finally behold the Lamb of God, whose white side is pierced and pouring forth blood, but whose countenance is full of gladness in the midst of suffering because of the joy set before him. When the narrator wakes, he records that emotional

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according to Tolkien: *Visions of the Kingdom in Middle-earth* (Louisville, K.Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) and Peter Kreeft, *The Philosophy of Tolkien: The Worldview behind the Lord of the Rings* (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius Press, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Matt. 13:45 (Vulgate). The translation given here is my own.

change has taken place within him, and he now perceives God not only as his Lord, but also as his Friend. At the conclusion of the poem, his final meditation is on the Eucharist, the memorial of Christ's death. The significance of Eucharist for the late-medieval Christian believer cannot be overstated: within its symbolism is, of course, the promise of resurrection from the dead and life everlasting with God in heaven.

Tolkien had a complex understanding of *Pearl*, a poem which had been rediscovered in the mid-nineteenth century and had inspired a good deal of controversy among scholars regarding its interpretation since being edited for the Early English Text Society by Richard Morris. In Tolkien's nuanced view, the poem was an elegy, not a complete allegory, though of course it contained allegories within its narrative. He saw the Dreamer as a bereaved father; the Pearl-Maiden, as his beloved daughter, who had been transformed, following her death, in the light of heaven. Furthermore, Tolkien believed the story reflected the poet's own experience, and that the poem was, at some level, autobiographical.

Tolkien's view of *Pearl* relates to his retellings of the legend of Beren and Lúthien in at least three ways. First, Tolkien frequently compares Lúthien not only to birds (as discussed above), but also to gems and jewels, and so the Pearl-Maiden (like her classical female antecedents) contributes to the representation of her character. Second, Tolkien imagines Thingol's pride and loss in terms that resonate with the Pearl-Dreamer's own resistance to the will of God and his redolent sense of sorrow and loss. Third, and most significantly, he takes the central symbol of the pearl from the elegiac poem and transforms it in his own legend.

The language of jewels and gems used to describe Lúthien occurs in the prose version of the legend included in *The Silmarillion*, but is more frequent in "The Lay of Leithian," *The Release from Bondage*. Lúthien never compares herself to a pearl, jewel, gem or Silmaril, but is instead described in these related terms by her father Thingol, her lover Beren, and her enemy, Thu/Sauron,<sup>49</sup> as well as the hound Huan. This is significant because the desire to have Lúthien, and the equivocation of her value with that of a jewel, is part of male discourse and male possessiveness, which Tolkien critiques through his narrative as an impulse of the fallen nature fundamentally flawed by corrupted paternal love, in Thingol's case, and utter wickedness in Thu/Sauron's case. Only Beren's impulse is redeemed by self-sacrificing love, but even he comes to curse his oath and the

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<sup>49</sup> In the "Lay of Leithian," the character known as Sauron, in the tale included in the *Silmarillion*, is instead known as Thu. I refer to the character by both names to keep the connection clearly in the minds of readers.

agreement he made with Lúthien's father. It was a rash promise that trapped him and his beloved in the corrupted perception of those around them, rulers in positions of power over them, who saw Lúthien as an object of desire to be owned rather than a woman of free-will able to make her own choices.

Early on in "The Lay of Leithian," Tolkien describes how Thingol "had and loved" the treasures in his hoard less than Lúthien, whom he prized. So from the very beginning Lúthien is pictured, from Thingol's point of view, as a beautiful possession.

There beryl, pearl, and opal pale,  
and metal wrought like fishes' mail,  
buckler and corslet, axe and sword,  
and gleaming spears were laid in hoard –  
all these he had and loved them less  
than a maiden once in Elfinesse;  
for fairer than are born to Men  
a daughter had he, Lúthien. (ll. 15-22)

Later in the lay, when Beren confronts Thingol to demand Lúthien's hand in marriage, he does so in language that reveals his desire for the beloved as problematized by possessiveness as well. He says to Thingol:

"Thy dearest treasure I desire,  
nor rocks nor steel nor Morgoth's fire  
nor all the power of Elfinesse  
shall keep that gem I would possess.  
For fairer than are born to Men  
a daughter hast thou, Lúthien." (ll. 1050-55)

In response, Thingol sets Beren a nearly impossible task, a Herculean labor: "Bring me one shining Silmaril / from Morgoth's crown, then if she will, / may Lúthien set her hand in thine; / then shalt thou have this jewel of mine." (ll. 1128-31). To this, Beren agrees. Only through the trials and tribulations of experience will Beren come to realize the folly of this kind of thinking. But at the time he faces Thingol's expectation, he mocks it: "'For little price do elven-kings / their daughters sell – for gems and rings / and things of gold! If such thy will, / thy bidding I will now fulfill" (ll. 1164-67). Already in these words, Beren reveals that he begins to see the problem of treating a person like a possession. But his own pride and desire have gotten the better of him.

Tolkien's devastating critique of such possessiveness becomes crystal clear when he shows Thu/Sauron considering Lúthien in the same terms her father did, as a jewel, but this time one to be added to the hoard of Morgoth. That he also compares Lúthien to a "foolish fly," trapped in a web of his own making, shows just how wicked and ugly this line of thinking truly is.

"A! Little Lúthien! What brought  
the foolish fly to web unsought?  
Morgoth! A great and rich reward  
To me thou wilt owe when to thy hoard  
This jewel is added." (ll. 2690-94a)

In the course of the lay, Lúthien has been reduced from beautiful bird (in Beren's naming) to a hellish bat (her own disguise) to a foolish fly (Thu/Sauron's estimation of her). She will overcome all of these perceptions to become fully her free self in due course. But at this low point in the perception and representation of Lúthien, the jewel metaphor remains, as does the fundamental problem inherent to that metaphor.

Still later, Tolkien shows Beren realizing the error of his own rash promise as he speaks to Lúthien.

"'Not rock nor steel nor Morgoth's fire  
nor all the power of Elfinesse,  
shall keep the gem I would possess':  
thus swore I once of Lúthien  
more fair than any child of Men.  
My word, alas! I must achieve,  
Though sorrow pierce and parting grieve." (ll. 2961-67)

It will not be until the loyal Huan, hound of Valinor, challenges Beren that he will see he must mature into a new way of thinking. Huan declares: "Of one fair gem thou must be thief, / Morgoth's or Thingol's, loath or lief: / Thou must here choose twixt love and oath!" (ll. 3416-18).

The taking of the Silmaril itself, pried from the iron crown of Morgoth after it has rolled from his head, is described in terms that contrast the purity of the jewel with the grasping of the hand that holds it:

The claws of iron that held that gem,  
it bit them through and sundered them;

a Silmaril he clasped and held,  
and the pure radiance slowly welled  
red glowing through the clenching flesh. (ll. 4150-54)

Tolkien three times in this short passage indicates the fierce hold Beren has on the Silmaril that he “clasped” and “held” with the “clenching flesh.” Beren is fulfilling his oath, but perhaps it is a vow he never should have taken.<sup>50</sup>

That Beren does not get to keep the Silmaril – the fact that the very hand that reached out to take it was severed by the jaws of the wolf Carcharoth – is Tolkien working, through the plot, to show that Lúthien’s worth is *not* equivalent to that of a jewel: it is far greater. She is not a possession, but a person, someone who, of her own free-will, chooses to love Beren and stay with him, and whom he chooses to love and stay with in return. Beren does get to “have” Lúthien, but not because he seized her with “the clenching flesh,” but rather because he was continually willing to release her for her own sake, and she was continually willing to recommit her life to him. It is paradoxical, but reveals a deeper spiritual truth. Beren cannot have what he takes – and neither can Thingol or Thu – but only what he is given. The beloved gives herself to him, and that is what makes the difference in the story. For her choice to love and give her life for the sake of love is affirmed by the Powers of Middle-earth, by the Valar before whom she pleads, and by Iluvatar, the one who made both her and Beren, whom she loves.

But this is not the end of their story. For their children, and their children’s children, will have a role in defeating evil in Middle-earth. The legend of Beren and Lúthien continues through Dior, their son; and Elwing, Dior’s daughter, who marries the mortal Man Earendil, and it is Earendil who persuades the Valar to return from Valinor to oppose Morgoth. It is Earendil who recovers a Silmaril, which is then placed in the heavens as a star.

Centuries later, it is that Morning Star whose light is captured in the jewel that Galadriel gives to Frodo. With that light, both Sam and Frodo defeat Shelob in the Pass of Ciriath Ungol. So that light shines down through the history of Middle-earth and, as it once aided in the defeat of Morgoth, later aids in the defeat of his servant, Sauron. Even Aragorn himself, the mortal man who loves the

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<sup>50</sup> At the level of psychological allegory (which is not necessarily opposed to medieval literary source criticism), this vow could be a thin veil for the oath Tolkien himself took not to contact Edith until he was twenty-one. He apparently realized over time, as Beren does, the folly of agreeing to such a promise – and how hard it was on Edith herself. As he wrote to his son Michael, “it was hard on my lover ...” (*Letters*, p. 53).

immortal Arwen, calls upon the power of this star to help defeat evil as he wages war in defense of Minas Tirith – and of course both Aragorn and Arwen are descendents of Beren and Lúthien.<sup>51</sup>

It is no coincidence that Tolkien calls this star the Morning Star, which in the New Testament is a name for Christ.<sup>52</sup> That Tolkien also drew Earendil's name from two lines of the Old English poem, *Christ*, is surely not a coincidence:

*éala éarendel engla beorhtast / ofer middangeard monnum sended*  
(“Hail Earendel, brightest of angels, over Middle-earth to men sent”). (line 104)

For Christ, the Morning Star, is the apotheosis of Tolkien's faith and his shining vision of the power of love to transform the broken world.

### Conclusions

The legend of Beren and Lúthien is sourced in Tolkien's own experience, classical mythology and medieval literature, and the hope inherent to Tolkien's Christian faith, especially for resurrection and eternal life. His multiple re-writings of the legend show its quintessential importance to him personally and the mythology of Middle-earth generally. It also shows that Tolkien was fascinated with Orphic powers.

In the multiple versions of his story, he repeatedly returned to portray the power of song that tamed beasts, charmed the gods of the underworld, and enchanted the suffering soul so as to lead it from death to life. He gave these powers to both Beren and Lúthien, though perhaps more so to Lúthien. She used them for good by saving Beren's life, sacrificing her own immortality on account of her love for him, and ultimately passing on the strength of her example to later generations of Men and Elves in Middle-earth.

Beyond Orphic powers, Tolkien's imagination was at play among a series of semiotic pearls. He transplanted the central symbol of *Pearl*, the Pearl of Great Price, and transformed it in his own legend. There it shines forth not only in the magical Silmarils, but in the beloved lady of the legend, the jewel of Beren's

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<sup>51</sup> The importance of shining star imagery recurs in one of Tolkien's works of shorter fiction, “The Smith of Wootten Major.” The story is included in diverse collections, including *Tales from the Perilous Realm*.

<sup>52</sup> Rev. 22:16.

heart, Lúthien Tinúviel herself. Ultimately, however, the symbolism of Tolkien's legend points beyond itself and the mythology of Middle-earth to the apotheosis of Tolkien's own faith: Christ.

**Jane Beal, PhD** is a literary scholar. She is the author of *John Trevisa and the English Polychronicon* (ACMRS, 2013), editor of *Illuminating Moses: A History of Reception from Exodus to the Renaissance* (Brill, 2014), and with Mark Bradshaw Busbee, co-editor of *Translating the Past: Essays on Medieval Literature in Honor of Marijane Osborn* (ACMRS, 2012) and *Approaches to Teaching the Middle English Pearl* (MLA, forthcoming). She has served as a professor at Wheaton College and Colorado Christian University, teaching literature and creative writing. She currently teaches at UC Davis, where she is working on a book about love and redemption in the mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien. To learn more, please visit <http://sanctuarypoet.net>.