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Beren and Lúthien (2017) by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien

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Beren and Lúthien, by J.R.R. Tolkien, edited by Christopher Tolkien. Illustrated by Alan Lee. London: HarperCollins, 2017. 288 pp. £20.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9780008214197. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017. 288 pp. \$30.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781328791825. [Also available in ebook formats.]

Beren and Lúthien is a book that consists entirely of excerpts of material written by J.R.R. Tolkien (with some additional editorial commentary) that had been published previously in virtually the exact same form in various volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, as edited by Tolkien's son Christopher. This methodology differs from *Beren and Lúthien's* predecessor, 2007's *The Children of Húrin*, which was Christopher Tolkien's first effort at editing and publishing a stand-alone book of one of what his father called the Great Tales and which represented the most important stories of the Elder Days.¹ While *The Children of Húrin* does also consist largely of material that had been published before in some form (in volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, the earlier *Unfinished Tales of Middle-earth and Númenor*, and/or the published *Silmarillion* itself) the material is edited differently in the stand-alone book than it was in the previous iterations. Most significantly, in *The Children of Húrin* the material written by J.R.R. Tolkien is edited into one continuous story (with certain editorial liberties taken in order to achieve that goal). In contrast, in *Beren and Lúthien* no effort is made by Christopher Tolkien to edit the material written by his father into one continuous stand-alone story. Instead, various versions of the story of Beren and Lúthien are presented in the forms that they were previously published (either in full, or in many cases excerpts extracted from the original published version intact), in order to show the evolution of the Great Tale that arguably was nearest and dearest to J.R.R. Tolkien's heart.

This raises an obvious question: what value does presenting material that had already been published in previous volumes have for any potential audiences of the new book? Before answering that question, those potential audiences must be defined. The most obvious audience includes those who are also the most likely to be reading this review: the devoted Tolkien fanbase that tends to read everything that they can get their hands on. This potential audience has already read *The History of Middle-earth* and thus already has encountered the material that appears in this book in the same form. Thus, the question with this potential audience is why they would need or want the same material again? The second potential audience consists of the less fanatical fans of Tolkien's work, who have

¹ Tolkien had on at least one occasion expressed a desire to include full versions of the three Great Tales (or four if you include the never-drafted "Earendil the Wanderer," aka "The Rising of the Star") as supplementary material to the main text of *The Silmarillion* (see *Letters* 150; *Morgoth's Ring* 373; *Peoples* 357, n. 7; Noad, "On the Construction," 67; and Kane, *Arda Reconstructed* 249–250).

read *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* and perhaps read *The Silmarillion* itself long ago, but only have a passing remembrance of the story of Beren and Lúthien. The third potential audience is the general public at large, who either never has read any of Tolkien's books or perhaps read *The Lord of the Rings* and/or *The Hobbit* long ago, but whose knowledge about Tolkien's created secondary universe comes, if at all, mostly from seeing Peter Jackson's bastardized adaptations of *The Lord of the Rings* and/or *The Hobbit*. With these latter two groups, the question is a completely different one than with the first group. There is no issue about having encountered the material previously (other than the brief mention of the tale of Beren and Lúthien in the *The Lord of the Rings* or the even briefer reference in Jackson's films). The question for these groups is instead whether presenting this material as a series of excerpts of different versions of the same story in different formats (both prose and verse) as it evolved and changed over many years is simply too confusing to hold the attention of any but the most devoted Tolkien fans.

Being firmly a member of the first group, I am most qualified to address that first question, as it is difficult for me to put myself in the mindset of someone who has *not* obsessively read everything that Tolkien has written many times. Moreover, even within the first group there is likely to be a large variance of opinion (Tolkien fans are famously argumentative about a host of issues ranging from whether Balrogs have wings to what material should truly be considered Tolkien "canon"). Nonetheless, my conclusion is that the book does have value to all three potential audiences. This is both because the story itself is such an emotionally compelling tale (reflecting as it does Tolkien's own love for his wife Edith, though that aspect can be overstated) and because the glimpse into the creative process of one of the great minds of the twentieth century as the story evolved from the sometimes absurd (but still compelling) version in its infancy to the more mature (but unfinished) later versions is itself fascinating. This is certainly not a book for everyone, not even every devoted Tolkien fan. But it is one that many will find satisfying, regardless of their previous familiarity with the material.

A quick glance at any internet Tolkien discussion site reveals that many Tolkien fans were hoping for a book more in line with *The Children of Húrin*. In theory, I agree that this would have been desirable, but in practice, any attempt to create a single continuous stand-alone narrative of the tale of Beren and Lúthien would have required editorial intervention on a scale beyond anything that Christopher Tolkien had previously attempted. In his discussion of the "Of the Ruin of Doriath" chapter of the published *Silmarillion* Christopher has expressed regret that he failed to avoid "overstepping the bounds of the editorial function." (*War of the Jewels* 356; see also Kane, *Arda Reconstructed*, 207–208.) Any attempt to create such a narrative of the tale of Beren and Lúthien would have

required “overstepping the bounds of the editorial function” on a scale far, far beyond that which Christopher Tolkien (and Guy Gavriel Kay, who assisted with the preparation of the published *Silmarillion*) did with regard to the chapter “Of the Ruin of Doriath.”

Charles Noad has observed that “the process of producing a finished narrative requires a slightly different set of skills than those required for producing an edited text of initially ‘inchoate’ papers. The latter needs a great deal of analytical intelligence together with specific skills in understanding the relationships between texts, the ability to decipher handwriting sometimes verging on illegibility, a sensitivity of judgement, and the like, qualities which, I feel, any reasonable judge would concur that Christopher Tolkien abundantly displays in *The History of Middle-earth*. But producing a finished narrative from the results of having edited the texts into legibility and comprehensibility is a slightly different matter.” (Noad, “Three Tolkien Reviews.”) Noad goes on to observe that Guy Gavriel Kay has demonstrated in the years since the publication of *The Silmarillion* that he very much has the skills required to produce a finished narrative, though neither Christopher Tolkien nor Kay have indicated how much of a role Kay really had in producing the final narrative of *The Silmarillion* (*Ibid.*).² However, no one with the skills of a Guy Gavriel Kay was engaged in this project, and even if there had been, the end result would have been something very different than “J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Beren and Lúthien*.”

It should be noted that the approach taken with this book is consistent with the original approach that Christopher Tolkien had apparently planned to take with the *Silmarillion* itself. Charles Noad reports that Kay stated in a talk he gave that when he first came to assist Christopher Tolkien in the editing of the *Silmarillion*, Christopher was preparing a much more scholarly work in which each chapter consisted of a compilation of different versions of that portion of the First Age tales, along with commentary about each version. According to Noad, Kay stated that it was Kay himself who suggested that instead they take the approach of preparing a single continuous text (Noad, “A Tower in Beleriand,” 4). While I believe that that was the correct decision for the publication of *The Silmarillion* (and for *The Children of Húrin*, which presented a different set of problems beyond the scope of this review), I also believe that it ultimately would have been the wrong decision with this work.

The book opens (after a brief commentary by Christopher Tolkien that includes the same synopsis of the Elder Days that he included in *The Children of Húrin*) with a complete reprinting of the original version of the story, *The Tale of*

² In all of *The History of Middle-earth*, the only specific comment that Christopher makes about Kay’s role was crediting him with the idea of including the short excerpt from the Lay of Leithian regarding the contest of Sauron and Felagund in songs of power in the chapter on Beren and Lúthien (see *Silmarillion* 170-171; *Lost Road* 302; Kane, *Arda Reconstructed*, 152).

Tinúviel, appearing exactly as it does in the second volume of *The Book of Lost Tales*, but without the linking passages that tie it to the rest of the Tales and the Lost Tales' framework. As Christopher notes in his commentary, there are many fundamental differences between this version and the version that ultimately appeared in *The Silmarillion*. The primary difference is that in this original Tale (which along with the other Lost Tales was written when Tolkien returned to England after serving in the trenches of France in World War I), Beren is not a Man, he is one of the Noldoli (later the Noldor), and Tinwelint's (later Thingol) hostility towards him is due to the fact that he and his people considered the Noldoli treacherous, cruel and unfaithful, not due to Beren being of a different or lesser race. This shows that the aspect of the tale of a love that bridge the gap between two different races with radically different destinies is not so important as the fact that the love itself defeats all obstacles. Other differences include the fact that the character that ultimately became Sauron, Morgoth's chief lieutenant and successor, began as Tevildo, a giant evil cat (the chief antagonist of Huan, the great hound who remained an integral character in the story as it developed after Tevildo was long gone) and that major characters including most importantly Finrod Felegund do not yet appear in the tale.

After giving the full original Tale, Christopher then provides excerpts from several different versions written over the following decades to trace both the evolution of the details of the story and the style Tolkien used to tell it. He first gives a brief passage from "the Sketch of the Mythology," the first attempt to tell the Elder Days stories in synopsis form, which was written in 1926. In the *Sketch*, Beren is now a man, the son of Barahir, and instead of Tevildo the giant evil cat we see the introduction of Thû, a great chief of Morgoth's and the precursor of Sauron. Christopher then gives a passage from the original verse version of the Tale, the *Lay of Leithian*, one of several attempts that Tolkien made to put the original Lost Tales in verse format in the 1920s. This passage further develops the story by describing the treachery of Gorlim the Unhappy, who betrayed Barahir and his companions to Morgoth. This is followed by an extract from the *Quenta Noldorinwa*, the most complete version of what would become "the Silmarillion," which Tolkien wrote in 1930. Here we see the introduction of the Noldorin prince Felegund (later Finrod Felegund) as a major character in the Tale. After providing an excerpt from the *Quenta Noldorinwa* that briefly describes of how Felegund came to be in Barahir's debt (leading to him ultimately assisting Barahir's son Beren in his quest to obtain one of the Silmarils), he then provides another excerpt from the *Lay* that tells the same story in verse, and in much more detail. Christopher then returns to the *Quenta Noldorinwa* to show how the story of Lúthien's rescue of Beren (with the help of the great hound Huan) from Thû had developed at this point in the evolution of the story. He then provides a very long excerpt from the *Lay* that brings the story to its conclusion as it existed at that

time. Then he turns to a new prose version of the Elder Days stories, the *Quenta Silmarillion* (which was written in around 1937, and which included several different drafts of the Beren and Lúthien story) to show the development of the portions of the story that tells of Beren and Lúthien's return to Doriath, Beren's fatal wounding by the wolf Carcharoth, and Lúthien's pleading with Mandos, resulting in Beren's return to Middle-earth with Lúthien to live as a mortal couple. He then completes the evolution and the cycle of the story of Beren and Lúthien with excerpts from both the *Quenta Noldorinwa* and another of the *Lost Tales*, the Tale of the Nauglafring describing what happens after Beren and Lúthien's return to Middle-earth, and eventually both die. Finally, Christopher gives as an appendix an excerpt from the revision to the *Lay of Leithian* that his father began a quarter of century after the original version, that again tells of the treachery of Gorlin the Unhappy. This excerpt amply demonstrates how much more mature and evocative Tolkien's verse had become in this abortive effort (but also demonstrates how unfortunate it is that Tolkien was unable to complete this revision).

This description makes it sound like a highly confusing and convoluted approach, particularly with Christopher's commentary scattered throughout (though far less extensive than in any of the volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*). However, I found that with just a few exceptions the book flows fairly well and is not difficult to follow. Christopher's decision to include only certain excerpts at each stage of the evolution of the Tale (after the original Tale) rather than all of the full versions was a wise one, and allows the evocative power that permeates Tolkien's writings about Beren and Lúthien to shine through, while still demonstrating the evolution of both the details of the tale of the two lovers and of Tolkien's style in writing about them. It is the latter that is the true value of this volume for the most devoted Tolkien fan who already has encountered this material, but spread out over many different volumes. Having it all in one book, tied together by Christopher's cogent commentary, does more clearly illuminate that evolution. At the same time, those readers who have not obsessed over Tolkien's work to the extent that they have pored over multiple volumes of highly scholarly works are likely to be pleasantly surprised at how evocative Tolkien's writing about a pair of desperate lovers is, even in this somewhat choppy format. Indeed, a quick perusal of reviews of the book in mainstream publication supports this supposition.³

³ See, for instance, reviews from Publisher's Weekly, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-1-328-79182-5>, NPR <http://www.npr.org/2017/05/31/529749053/beren-and-luthien-reflects-tolkiens-real-life-love-story>, Entertainment Weekly <http://ew.com/books/2017/06/05/jrr-tolkien-beren-and-luthien-review/>, and Kirkus Reviews <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/jrr-tolkien/beren-and-luthien/>.

If by publishing this book Christopher Tolkien succeeded in exposing a wider audience to his father's greatest love story, that in and of itself is more than sufficient justification, regardless of the response by the cloistered Tolkien community. At 92 years old, Christopher Tolkien acknowledges that *Beren and Lúthien* is likely to be his final attempt to bring his father's work to light. If that proves to be true, he will have completed his efforts with a successful work, and one that it is unlikely anyone else would have been able to achieve.

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