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## **The Great Chain of Writing: Tolkien's Story of Beren and Lúthien and the Epic Tradition**

The paper, together with its two predecessors published in the previous volumes of *Acta Philologica*, aims at a presentation of a variety of functions the epic convention of heroic intrusion plays in the literary output of J.R.R.Tolkien. This particular analysis differs from the previous ones in a significant way, as its subject, the episode from Tolkien's posthumously published *The Silmarillion*, functions within a very complicated framework of intertextual and metatextual relationships, thus acquiring both a specifically epic and specifically mythical character.

The complicated history of the composition and editing of the final version of *The Silmarillion* (Lichański 1996: 159-178, Shippey 1992:255-290) is dominated by the struggle of its author for both coherence and uniformity. This process ended in an ironical and tragic way with the untimely death of Tolkien. As a result, the multitude of texts composed over a considerable period of time full of revisions and developments, lacking the authorial "stamp" of finality acquired the status of coexisting versions, which, inadvertently, added to their authenticity as the legendarium of the Olden Days of Tolkien's world. Thus, any analysis of the episodes from *The Silmarillion* must be undertaken in the context of such textual connections <sup>1</sup>(cf. Nagy 2003: 239-258; West 2003: 259-267). At the same time, typically for Tolkien but to an unusual degree even for his standards, the episode is interconnected with the major European epics of Homer, Virgil and Milton.

The first version of the first of the three principal episodes of *The Silmarillion*, the story of Beren and Lúthien, was written as early as 1917-19 as the prose *The Tale of Tinúviel* (*The Book of Lost Tales* 2, 3-144). The same subject reappeared in the unfinished *Lay of Leithian* in octosyllabic couplets written in 1920s (*The Lays of Beleriand*, 1-158;183-431).The same story, again in prose, formed a part of the core of the earliest versions of *The Silmarillion*, composed, or rather sketched, in the 1930s (see "The earliest Silmarillion" and "The Quenta" in *The Shaping of Middle-earth*, 11-218) and has the same prominent place in the version of the *Quenta Silmarillion* as it stood in 1937, when Tolkien began to work on *The Lord of the Rings* (see Tolkien 1993: vii) and in "Later Quentas" of the 1950s. The texts differ in many details, especially place and character names, some episodes may be missing, or may demonstrate an evolutionary development of Tolkien's ideas.

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<sup>1</sup> This differentiates the parts of the so called *History of Middle-earth* which deal with *The Silmarillion* from the early versions of *The Lord of the Rings*.

However, what is especially relevant for the present analysis, the formula of heroic intrusion is both prominent and persistently present in all those versions. In fact it seems that the parts of narration structured around this theme are most stable in the legends, although in some cases they become more elaborate with the passage of time. A very good example of this stability is Beren's first entering the court of Thingol. Although this scene gains in significance and detail in the process of the development of the *Quenta Silmarillion*, its basic structure is already present in the *Tale of Tinúviel*. This stability gains significance if compared with the rest of the story, which undergoes substantial alterations. For example, in the earliest versions Beren spends a considerable amount of time in Morgoth's palace as a thrall of Tevildo Prince of Cats (See *The Book of Lost Tales*, 215- 32) – a character who is not only totally missing in the later versions, but who belongs to a whole class of characters who disappear as Tolkien's artistic vision matures.

The plot of the story of Beren and Lúthien, despite many alterations it underwent, presents a stable framework of the most relevant segments. First, Beren enters the realm of Lúthien's father, the Elvish king Thingol, and quite by chance intrudes upon Lúthien singing and dancing in the woods. This meeting results in his enchantment, which ends when they finally meet and talk. She takes him into the court of her father, where Beren is taunted by the hostile Elves and where he expresses his bold wish to marry her. Shocked and enraged, the king sets a price for Lúthien's hand in an attempt to ridicule and get rid of the intruder. The price is the Silmaril from the crown of Melkor/Morgoth, the Arch-Enemy of Tolkien's world. The task is practically impossible to accomplish, yet Beren takes the challenge. After a number of misadventures, which vary greatly from version to version, he finally finds himself in a completely helpless situation. At this time Lúthien, who has been waiting and worrying for him in a semi-imprisonment in her father's kingdom, contrives to escape and comes to his rescue. Together, with the help of a giant dog Huan, they manage to take the Silmaril from the crown of Morgoth. On their way back they are pursued and attacked by a giant wolf who bites off Beren's hand holding the Silmaril. The king Thingol is moved by Beren's courage and he gives his permission for the couple to marry. Unfortunately, Beren is slain and Lúthien goes before Mandos in Valinor to parley for him. They are reunited, but in later versions Lúthien has to forgo her immortality in order to become equal with Beren. After a short period of happiness in Middle-earth, where their son is born, they both die.

In all the versions of the legend of Beren and Lúthien, after their meeting in the woods they both come to the court of Thingol. This episode, in spite of all the changes in the successive versions, is always structured around crucial elements of the theme of heroic intrusion: the danger of the hero's journey, the guard demanding the identification and the doubting courtier. Moreover, the scene refers to important classical episodes from Homer and Virgil, where the identification is preceded by the hero's meeting with a maiden.

The initial part of the story undergoes various stages of development, but Beren is always unwelcome, although the gap between him and Lúthien widens in the later versions. In *The Tale of Tinúviel* Beren is a Gnome, a term used alternatively for "a second kindred of the Elves", the Noldor. His inferior status is a result of the past influence of Melko (the later Melkor), and the rumour that "all the Gnomes outside Dor Lómin are his thralls" (*The Book of Lost Tales*, 11). There was also in the past some disagreement between Beren's people and king Thingol, who in this version is still

called Tinwelint. In those circumstances Beren's intention to marry Tinúviel, however risky, is not more extraordinary than the similar problem of Romeo. In the subsequent versions, both verse and prose, after a perplexing period of the author's uncertainty and textual confusions (see Tolkien 1986: 54), Beren is a mortal Man. His wish would have been most presumptuous even without the divine descent of Lúthen, whose mother is a Maia. What in *The Tale of Tinúviel* is a result of the pride of the father, in later versions is unthinkable and unprecedented in itself, although the pride of Thingol still plays an important role in the formation of the obstacles for the lovers: "Then the King was filled with anger, for Lúthien he loved above all things, setting her above all the princes of the Elves; whereas mortal Men he did not even take into his service" (*The Silmarillion*, 199).

Beren enters the realm of Lúthien's father after a dangerous passage through the mountains. The journey gets more heroic as his status gets more humble. As almost her peer, he is simply adventurous: (*The Book of Lost Tales 2*, 11). In *The Lay of Leithian*, as a Man and the son of the heroic outlaw Barahir, Beren crosses the dangerous mountains and comes to Dor Lómin after a long period of lonely fighting and wanderings which follows the death of his father and his companions (*The Lays of Beleriand*, 204).

The same passage in *The Silmarillion* gains even more importance. The embellishment of the description of Beren's solitary life after the death of Barahir makes him an extraordinary figure, someone who through the ordeals and solitude enters the state of communion with nature quite unusual for an epic hero. His deeds make him both a famous man and, through Morgoth's appreciation of the danger, he represents a match for the most noble Elves. He is a Man, and as such inferior, but as a hero he is equal with the Noldor (*The Silmarillion*, 196-197). Moreover, the passage through the mountains becomes even more dangerous as the kingdom of Thingol and Melian is encircled with the impenetrable Girdle of deceit which protects the realm. Beren's entering Doriath is no longer a whim of a brave and aimless youth, but almost reaches the status of cathabasis: "That journey is not accounted least amount the great deeds of Beren, but he spoke of it to no one after, lest the horror return into his mind" (*The Silmarillion*, 197).

The meeting with Lúthien Tinúviel is yet another scene where the elements of stability and change are intermingled. *The Tale of Tinúviel* has already all the important elements- the sight of the dancing Elf-maiden, the surprise, the admiration. However, there is no naming scene. In the early version her name is simply Tinúviel. Later, when it is changed to Lúthien, "Tinúviel" gains the new status of endearment and a private code between her and Beren. What in *The Tale* is a light and playful exchange of pleasantries, in the later versions starts as enchantment and ends like a miracle of healing by love. Beren is aged by the horrors of his passage and the sight of the dancing Lúthen fills him with both happiness and longing. In this scene the elements of heroic intrusion are mingled with the fairy story convention of the enchantment of the Perilous Realm (Tolkien 1973: 6). Lúthien evolves from the dancing fairy entrapping the helpless mortal into her deceitful circles into an object of adoration and the source of healing. When she comes back in the spring her song wakes not just Beren, but the whole nature, whose "bonds of winter" she releases (*The Silmarillion*, 198). In *The Tale*, Tinúviel is a spoiled child whose vanity is flattered by the admiration of a strange Elf ("be thou not harsh with him, unless thou desirest to see thy daughter Tinúviel weep, for more wonder has he at my dancing than any that I have known" *The Book of Lost tales 2*, 13). Paradoxically,

the diminishing of Beren's status corresponds with the development and growth of the feelings of Lúthien. "Then she halted in wonder, and fled no more, and Beren came to her. But as she looked on him, doom fell upon her, and she loved him" (*The Silmarillion*, 198). What in the early version was just idle curiosity, here is called "wonder", a reaction which is normally attributed to the mortal in the face of the glamour of the Faërie, not a princess of the Faërie facing the mortal. For Lúthien it is the beginning of a very long and painful journey which finally leads her as a suppliant before the thrones of the Valar, where a final choice will be given to her and where her love for Beren will prevail upon any other feeling or bond (*The Silmarillion*, 225).

Their first meeting in the woods of Doriath can be added to the impressive list of encounters between the intruder hero and a beautiful maiden at the initial stage of the intrusion. Its source seems to be the Nausicaa episode from *The Odyssey* where the cunning and at the moment destitute hero, perceiving the potential of the encounter with the daughter of the king of the country he finds himself in, does his best to flatter her and thus ensure a most favourable introduction at her father's court (*The Odyssey*, VI, 182-210). Virgil's rendering of this scene at the beginning of his epic shows his skill as an imitator and at the same time adds irony and pathos to Aeneas' introduction into the land of Dido, as it is in fact not he, but the supposed maiden who is the supreme deceiver (*The Aeneid*, I, 451-460). The significance of this convention for the establishing of the heroic status of the protagonist is very well illustrated both by Virgil's use of the Homeric pattern and, for example, Chaucer's rendering of his two poems featuring Aeneas; *The House of Fame* and *The Legend of Good Women*.<sup>2</sup> Tolkien, however, seems to draw on the tradition of Virgil's Venus or Homer's Nausicaa in order to show the significant difference between those episodes and his.

Unlike his classical predecessors, who, by calling her divine, ingeniously or conventionally create a distance between themselves and the maiden, whom they actually perceive as inferior (in case of Venus it also adds humorous undertones to the episode), Beren is indeed inferior to Lúthien. Without knowing who she is, he recognises her superiority and sees her as a divine being. Her sight brings enchantment upon him (*The Silmarillion*, 198). However, he is unable to address her in any other way than by giving her a name. "In his heart he called her Tinúviel, that signifies Nightingale, daughter of twilight [...] for he knew no other name for her" (*The Silmarillion*, 198). Instead of the pompous and rhetorical address of Aeneas or the cunning of Odysseus, he reacts to her presence with the degree of humility and admiration reminiscent of Adam's first meeting with Eve in *Paradise Lost*:

...so lovely fair  
That what seemed fair in all the world seemed now  
Mean, or in her summed up, in her contained,  
And in her looks, which from that time infused  
Sweetness into my heart unfelt before,  
And into all things from her air inspired

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<sup>2</sup>For the detailed study of Chaucer's use of this type of heroic intrusion see my article "Mette with Venus one day-Virgil and medieval poetry" in *British Drama through the Ages and Medieval Studies*, Łódź, (still) in print.

The spirit of love and amorous delight.  
 She disappeared, and left me dark; I waked  
 to find her, or forever to deplore  
 her loss and other pleasures all abjure;  
 When out of hope, behold her, not far off,  
 Such as I saw her in my dream, adorned  
 With what all earth or Heaven could bestow  
 to make her amiable. On she came,  
 [...] A Woman<sup>3</sup> is her name. (PL, VIII, 471-484;496)

This similarity is not a coincidence. Of all Tolkien's inventions, Lúthien Tinúviel is a character closest to Milton's Eve, even though Doriath, the kingdom of Thingol, is not an earthly Paradise. The only place which could be called so, if only to a certain degree, is Valinor, a promised land of the Elves Thingol forsook for the sake of his love for his divine wife, Melian. However, his kingdom seems to be one of the rare places in Middle-earth where the evil of Melkor does not reach as it is protected by the magical Girdle of Melian. Moreover, he is very reluctant to invite the Noldor who returned because of the feud with Morgoth and are the principal source of turmoil and evil due to the curse laid on them. Lúthien, who was born in Doriath and has never left it, is, if not unfallen as the term does not well apply to the Elves, exceptionally pure and innocent. What is more, she seems to be bound with the nature of her *hortus conclusus*<sup>4</sup> in an inexplicable and mystical way (*The Silmarillion*, 198). Her loveliness is almost supernatural: "As the light upon the leaves of trees, and the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness; and in her face was a shining light" (*The Silmarillion*, 198). What strikes in this passage is the concentration of similes quite unusual for Tolkien's style, which links in more than one way Lúthien's description with the epic tradition.

What is most important, however, is the dramatic choice which her meeting with Beren compels her to make and which will introduce the perspective of death into her immortal state:

the choice was this: that she might return to Middle-earth, and take with her  
 Beren there to dwell again, but without certitude of life or joy. There she would

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<sup>3</sup> Obviously Milton's "Woman" refers to the Hebrew word derived from the word 'man', which both indicates Eve's organic unity (and equality) with Adam ("This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh" Gen. 2: 23a) and is her name given her by her husband in this supreme moment of recognition ("she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man" Gen, 2; 22b). Note desperate attempts to convey this idea in some of the Polish translations of the Bible: "A powiedział: – Teraz to człowiek jest kość z kości moich i ciało z ciała mojego! Ona zwać się będzie mężową, ponieważ z męża jest wzięta" (Biblia Poznańska)

<sup>4</sup> Although the term is usually applied to the specific presentation of the Virgin Mary in art (Jacniacka 1993:1237-1238), no effort to draw the parallels between Mary and Lúthien is attempted, although she is seen by some critics as a symbol of grace (Caldecott 1999: 25). Another figure of the queen of the enclosed realm, Galadriel from *The Lord of the Rings*, has indeed been compared to the figure of the Virgin, but in a different context (Carpenter 1981: 172; Pearce 1999: 103, 117; Coulombe 1999: 58) Another character comparable to Virgin Mary is Elbereth (Varda) – here the parallel seems more justified (Coulombe 1999: 58).

become mortal, and subject to a second death, even as he; and ere long she would leave the world for ever, and her beauty become only a memory in song. This doom she chose. (*The Silmarillion*, 225)

The scene of the meeting of Beren and Lúthien corresponds, alongside with the scene presenting the initial stage of the temptation of Eve in *Paradise Lost*, to a common antecedent in the works of the classics. In *Paradise Lost* it is one of the components of the “inverted intrusion” of Satan as the anti-hero. His first address forms a part of this strategy. The dose of flattery in Odysseus address is harmless enough, he simply needs help which is not going to hurt either Nausicaa or her father’s kingdom. Satan addresses Eve as a goddess in order to destroy her.

Beren is most emphatically not a Satan figure in this or any other scene. However, Lúthien Tinúviel, Tolkien’s Eve, by her voluntary act of love not only enters the realm of doom – in Tolkien always connected with Providence or retribution – but also chooses death. What for Eve is a punishment and the beginning of “all our woe”, for Lúthien is a paradoxical reward. The narrator of the legend treats her choice as an unimaginable sacrifice of love, but from the larger perspective of the theology of Tolkien’s work, Lúthien is rewarded with true immortality of the soul when she enters the mystery of the gift of Illúvatar for Men (see *The Silmarillion*, 47-48). Moreover, a direct consequence of Lúthien’s choice will be the birth of her son, Dior Eluhil and her grandson, Eärendil, the saviour of Middle-earth, the mediator between the Children of Illúvatar in exile and the Valar. Thus, the salvation is connected with this poignant moment in the woods in a much more straightforward way than the *beata culpa* of Adam.

The parallels with Eve and *Paradise Lost* do not end here. The moment of Lúthien’s choice is presented as the reversal of the famous presentation of the fatal moment in Paradise: “from her husband’s hand her hand/ Soft she withdrew” (*PL IX*, 385-386): “Beyond his hope she returned to him where he sat in darkness, and long ago in the Hidden Kingdom she laid her hand in his” (*The Silmarillion*, 199).

Lúthien’s reaction to Beren, her scorn turning into amusement in *The Tale*, but more emphatically, her total neglect turning into love of the later versions, is a specific variation of the doubt and recognition motif in the theme of heroic intrusion. Quite untypically Beren’s intrusion starts with the encounter with the doubting courtier figure and the usual first segment – the assertion of identity is here moved to the second position. The reason for this reversal becomes clear in the scene of the introduction. They both arrive before the throne of Thingol, where Lúthien is not just a herald presenting a strange hero to the king. She leads him to the court of her father “as if he were an honoured guest”. When Thingol asks Beren the typical and inevitable question “Who are you?” in his scorn he denies the gesture of his daughter adding “that come hither as a thief, and unbidden dare to approach my throne” (*The Silmarillion*, 199). By those words Thingol recognises, albeit unwittingly, the fact that Lúthien and Beren are united in purpose, which already separates them from the interests of the kingdom. That they are already one is apparent in the fact that it is, quite unusually, Lúthien who answers him, not the hero himself. Beren as an individual is overpowered by the splendour of the court. His heroic status is saved in this scene only if we consider Lúthien as someone even closer to

him than a companion. Although the actual marriage takes place much later, the symbolic gesture of “laying her hand in his” is already an act of union.

Thingol’s reaction in this scene makes him both a figure of a very hostile guard and later a very prominent doubting courtier. Lúthien’s powerful assertion of Beren’s heroic status “[h]e is Beren son of Barahir, lord of men, mighty foe of Morgoth, the tale of whose deeds is become a song even among the Elves” is countered by Thingol’s response: “What would you here, unhappy mortal, and for what cause have you left your own land to enter this, which is forbidden to such as you? Can you show reason why my power should not be laid on you in heavy punishment for your insolence and folly?” (*The Silmarillion*, 199). Later he will call Beren “baseborn mortal, who in the realm of Morgoth has learnt to creep in secret as his spies and thralls” (*The Silmarillion*, 200).

The real, not just territorial dimension of Beren’s intrusion is announced fully in his audacious declaration: “And here I have found what I sought not indeed, but finding I would possess for ever. [...] For Lúthien your daughter is the fairest of all the Children of the World” (*The Silmarillion*, 200). The gist of Thingol’s reaction – setting a Silmaril from Morgoth’s crown as the price for Lúthien’s hand – is present in all the versions of the story. In *The Tale of Tinúviel*, in accordance with the general tone of the opening scenes, there is an element of jest in the condition. Later, as hostility and resentment gain prominence over amused indignation, the condition becomes in fact a concealed trap (Caldecott 1999: 23). Thingol promised Lúthien not to hurt Beren before they entered his court. The task he sets before Beren is practically impossible to accomplish. When Beren announces that “neither rock, nor steel, nor the fires of Morgoth, nor all the powers of the Elf-kingdoms, shall keep from me the treasure that I desire” (*The Silmarillion*, 200), he both expresses the magnitude of his love for Lúthien and plays the role of a typical boastful primary hero. The hyperbole is so obvious that the irony of Thingol’s counterstroke seems only too natural: “I too desire a treasure that is withheld. For rock and steel and the fires of Morgoth keep the jewel that I would possess against all the powers of the Elf-kingdoms. Yet I hear you say that bonds such as these do not daunt you” (*The Silmarillion*, 201). In this scene Thingol is firmly categorised as the bad king so characteristic for heroic intrusion. His private jealousy and prejudices “wrought the doom of Doriath and [...]ensnared [it] within the curse of Mandos” (*The Silmarillion*, 201). In his attempt to get rid of an unwanted suitor he reveals his heart’s desire – his lust for the Silmaril. The Girdle of Melian has not been able to protect the kingdom as evil threatens it not only from the outside. The real danger is Thingol’s rash declaration which involves him in the conflict of the Noldor with Morgoth – a conflict which originated from pride, greed, envy, suspicion and the desire for power. It is Thingol’s fault that Beren’s coming to Doriath produces results so typical for the heroic intrusion. The conflict between the hero and the king is here caused by the notoriously incompetent epic king who acts not in a royal but in a private and disgraceful manner. The subsequent events result in a complete ruin of Doriath and Thingol’s ignoble death in the dwarf mines, where he is hacked to pieces by the greedy hosts.

Beren’s reaction to Thingol’s condition is extremely significant. A natural, heroic response would be to take up the challenge and treat the now inevitable quest for the Silmaril as a test of his prowess. He, however, proves superior to such primitive motives. If he agrees to bring the jewel it is rather to prove that the man Lúthien loves is worth the esteem of her people. Yet she and her hand cannot be bought, she is not just another king’s daughter bartered for something her father wants. His laugh

and his comment “For little price [...] do Elven-kings sell their daughters: for gems, and things made by craft. But if this be your will, Thingol, I will perform it” (*The Silmarillion*, 201) is more than an epic boast. The predominant feature of this utterance is well deserved scorn for the pettiness of the king. The contrast between Beren’s magnanimity and Thingol’s small-mindedness dominates the rest of the story of Beren and Lúthien.

The structural and thematic importance of the convention of the heroic intrusion in this legend surpasses all other instances of its use in Tolkien’s works and seems unprecedented in the epic tradition. Normally useful in providing a framework for the story and/or establishing, augmenting, or diminishing the heroic status of the protagonist, the formula is used here as a principal motive power for the whole story.

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