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2022

## Love Conquers Death: Mythological Subversion and Emotional Triumph in “The Tale of Beren and Luthien”

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### Recommended Citation

Baughn, Sam, "Love Conquers Death: Mythological Subversion and Emotional Triumph in “The Tale of Beren and Luthien”" (2022). *4610 English: Individual Authors: J.R.R. Tolkien*. 26.

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12/16/2022

ENGL 4612

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## **Love Conquers Death: Mythological Subversion and Emotional Triumph in “The Tale of Beren and Luthien”**

Though *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* sit at the forefront of J.R.R. Tolkien's expansive legendarium, there is one work that sits at the center of his expansive world. Published as chapter 19 of *The Silmarillion*, *Of Beren and Luthien*, also referred to as *The Tale of Beren and Luthien* is the beating heart of Tolkien's mythology. It is perhaps his most important work, consistently developed over the course of his life. It is a true mythological epic, a story of good and evil, monsters and heroes, great treasure and constant peril. More than anything it is a powerful and moving tale of love, a showcase of its power, and a written testament to Tolkien's own love. *Of Beren and Luthien* subverts traditional mythological expectations, and acts as a powerful thread that stretches beyond *The Silmarillion*, into *The Appendices of The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's life itself.

*The Tale of Beren and Luthien* follows the two titular heroes, Luthien, a half maiar elven princess, and Beren, a wayfaring man who stumbles into the elven kingdom within which she resides. The two set out on a quest to reclaim a Silmaril from the Dark Lord Morgoth, a task which has been set upon Beren by Luthien's father to prove his worth. The story incorporates elements from both traditional and contemporary mythology such as *Rapunzel* and *The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice*, using these elements to subvert the mythological tragic love story, and craft a tale that showcases the power of love to conquer even death.

Understanding the developmental history of The Tale is important when unpacking its literary ramifications. First conceived in 1917, the basic story has remained somewhat stable since its first iteration, with some significant elements undergoing change and development over its three main versions. One of the largest changes, and perhaps the change with the most significance to the overall legendarium, was the development of Beren as a character. Originally conceived as an elf, Beren, with some trepidation, was changed to a mortal man, an aspect of his character that is incredibly important to the narrative. Other characters were changed to fit better into his legendarium as it developed, the best example being the secondary antagonist of the tale. Originally conceived as a giant demonic cat, this character was later developed into Sauron, the principal antagonist of *The Lord of the Rings*, and lieutenant to Morgoth. The most significant change however is the role of Luthien, who in the earliest versions of the tale was a passive protagonist, acting as little more than a damsel in distress. As the narrative evolved, she gained power and agency, and developed into the true hero of the story, surpassing the great heroes of Tolkien's legendarium with her acts.

Luthien stands out among a cast of almost all male characters. While our most prominent male characters of Thingol and Beren fail because of their adherence to masculine heroism, Luthien's subversion of traditional feminine mythological roles lets her character shine. In "The Tale of Tinúviel," the earliest version of the Tale, her actions are often characterized by fear and vulnerability. When confronted by the demonic cat, we are told "she had no plan more [...] indeed had she been able she would have fled." In contrast, the following version of the story entitled *The Lay of Leithian* presents a much different Luthien. In confronting the necromancer (the antagonist formerly presented as a cat, now Sauron in all but name), Lúthien announces herself, and not out of fear. She stands openly and declares her presence, to command the attention of the necromancer with the intention of drawing him out. When the necromancer is ultimately restrained, she demands his submission:

"O demon dark, O phantom vile

of foulness wrought, of lies and guile,  
here shalt thou die, thy spirit roam  
[...] this shall be  
unless the keys thou render me  
of thy black fortress”

Standing at the door of the tower, Lúthien commands it to fall, and at the will of her power the tower collapses. This is no longer a timid maiden in distress, this is a character confident in her strength.

Luthien’s subversion of traditional feminine mythological roles continues through her use of specific elements from contemporary mythology. *Rapunzel*’s best known element is the use of her hair. In the tale, Rapunzel, who is trapped in a tower, uses her long hair as a rope, allowing the male hero of the story to climb up and save her. It’s a famous example of a maiden in distress narrative, using aspects of her femininity to aid the traditionally masculine hero to save her. Luthien uses similar feminine elements, but in a much more empowering way, using traditionally feminine traits to aid in her own heroic acts.

“It is told in the Lay of Leithian how she escaped from the house in Hírilorn; for she put forth her arts of enchantment, and caused her hair to grow to great length, and of it she wove a dark robe that wrapped her beauty like a shadow, and it was laden with a spell of sleep. Of the strands that remained she twined a rope, and she let it down from her window; and as the end swayed above the guards that sat beneath the house they fell into a deep slumber. Then Lúthien climbed from her prison, and shrouded in her shadowy cloak she escaped from all eyes, and vanished out of Doriath.”

In this passage from the final version of the Tale, Luthien uses her hair in a way that is directly comparable to the way in which Rapunzel uses it. However, she uses it to her own benefit, solidifying herself, not a masculine figure, as the hero of this scene.

The second mythological subversion of *Of Beren and Luthien* comes on a broader scope, and focuses on the ending of the Tale. Before unpacking the ending of the Tale, it's important to review a traditional piece of mythology that has the most narrative ties to this tale. *The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice* is a classic Greek myth, and one of the best known tragic love stories. There are several elements which connect the myth to Tolkien's text. First is the idea of love at first sight. As Orpheus and Eurydice fall for each other at first meeting, Beren and Luthien's hearts become intertwined at their first meeting. The power of song is an important narrative element in both tales. In *The Myth of Orpheus and Eurydice*, following Eurydice's death, armed with nothing but his lyre and voice, Orpheus approaches Hades and demands entry into the underworld. Standing in front of the rulers of the dead, Orpheus played his lyre and sang out that Eurydice was returned to him. No one could neglect the hurt in his voice. Hades openly weeps, Persephone's heart melts and even Cerberus, the gigantic three-headed hound guarding the entry to the underworld, covers his many ears with his paws and howls in despair. The voice of Orpheus was so moving that Hades promised to this desperate man that Eurydice would follow him to the Upper World, the world of the living. Song plays an important role in Tolkien's world, and its power is displayed in many ways throughout *The Tale of Beren and Luthien*. The display most directly comparable to the Greek myth comes in the form of the ending, where the masculine and feminine roles are reversed. At the conclusion of their quest to retrieve the Silmaril, Beren has passed, however his spirit remains in the halls of Mandos (Tolkien's underworld type place, where the spirits of elves await reincarnation, and the spirits of men depart beyond the world). Luthien travels to the halls, and stands before Mandos, the indomitable figure representing death and fate, and sings her song.

“The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall ever hear. Unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and the listening of the

Valar grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda, the Kingdom of Earth amid the innumerable stars. And as she knelt before him her tears fell upon his feet like rain upon stones; and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since.”

As Orpheus’ does, Luthien’s song moves the gods, and Beren’s fate is averted. It is here that The Tale subverts Greek tragedy. For while Orpheus ultimately fails, Luthien does not, and though there is sorrow in the Tale’s ending, despair is avoided, and death, in a way, is overcome.

Luthien is given a choice to let Beren go, and for all memory of their time together to be wiped from her mind. Or she may go with him into his second life, stripped of immortality, doomed to suffer the fate all mortals suffer. She chooses this doom, and returns to middle earth alongside Beren. On the surface it is a tragic ending, both doomed to die. But within this tragedy there is profound beauty. “whatever grief might lie in wait, the fates of Beren and Lúthien might be joined, and their paths lead together beyond the confines of the world.” This line presents the power of love, and shows its final triumph. Beren and Luthien’s love has pushed them through this tale, through this epic and mythological quest. It has conquered great evil, moved gods, and changed fate in a way that should, by the rules of Tolkien’s world, be impossible. One might think that immortal life and love would be the ultimate triumph, but this is not a triumph that man can attain. In resigning both Beren and Luthien to the doom of man, Tolkien shows us the power we have in our capacity to love. We may die, but the testament of our love remains. Love takes us into the great beyond, and as the final lines say, two lover’s paths may be conjoined to lead beyond the confines of the world. It is a powerful reminder that love can confront the greatest challenges man might face and overcome them, a force too great for the forces of this world to hold back. Beren and Luthien’s exact fate is left unrevealed. Their greater life following the tale is left unexplored, save for their legacy of love in the family line they leave behind. For their

bloodline leads through the legendarium to two parallel figures in *The Lord of the Rings*, that being Aragorn and Arwen.

Aragorn and Arwen's story acts as a parallel to Beren and Luthien's tale. Though not as grand in scope, the romance between an elf and a man that results in the eventual mortality of both is similar. In *The Appendices* the couple's final moments are revealed, and in Aragorn's death he utters powerful words. "In sorrow we must go, but not in despair." At this moment Aragorn dies, confronting his fate with open arms. Arwen outlives Aragorn, and her ending is decidedly more tragic than the ending of *Of Beren and Luthien*. She wanders the decaying forests of the elves, and fades from life until she ultimately passes. It's a profound contrast to Aragorn's dying words, as it seems that she does succumb to despair. But in tandem with *The Tale of Beren and Luthien's* ending, it's a reminder that though ultimately love can tie two individuals' fates together beyond the confines of the world, there is still tragedy in death.

Tolkien projected many of the myths he read and myths he himself made up onto his own private life, including the myth by which he symbolized his marriage to Edith Bratt and the courtship that preceded it. *The Tale of Beren and Luthien* is a clear testament to his love of Edith, a fact which is supported by the inscription that lays upon the two's headstones. Edith is labeled as Luthien, Tolkien as Beren, and the tale's relationship to his own relationship is detailed in his letters to his son.

"I never called Edith Lúthien – but she was the source of the story that in time became the chief pan of the Silmarillion. It was first conceived in a small woodland glade filled with hemlocks at Roos in Yorkshire (where I was for a brief time in command of an outpost of the Humber Garrison in 1917, and she was able to live with me for a while). In those days her hair was raven, her skin clear, her eyes brighter than you have seen them, and she could sing – and dance. But the story has gone crooked, & I am left, and I cannot plead before the inexorable Mandos."

The sorrow of Aragorn and Arwen's tale is echoed in Tolkien's own life, as he has lost his great love. Yet the power of their love remains, a fact which Tolkien reflects upon just lines later.

“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. For ever (especially when alone) we still met in the woodland glade, and went hand in hand many times to escape the shadow of imminent death before our last parting.”

Love in Tolkien's life always fell beneath the shadow of death. He and Edith married before his deployment in World War One, which he fully expected to never return from. The tale was conceived during his time in the trenches, and looking back at its development, the influences his own relationship had on the tale become exceedingly clear. As he states, he and Edith rescued one another. It was this love that helped them escape the shadow of imminent death. Despite their parting, this legacy of their own love's conquest of hardship remains, immortalized through a tale that uplifts these ideas to epic proportions.

Aragorn and Arwen's fate reminds us of the sorrow in death. It is a fate that none of us can avoid, and it is a fate that inevitably leaves traces of sadness in the world. But *The Tale of Beren and Luthien* shows us love's ability to confront the greatest hardships in the world, and overcome them. It is an epic testament to this power, rooted in the life and love of the author's own life. The tale's subversion of traditional and contemporary mythological elements and expectations enhances this message, crafting a new mythological tale that uplifts tragedy beyond despair.