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The Power of Music in the Tale of Beren and Lúthien by J.R.R. Tolkien

Tolkien valued music in his private life, and this is mirrored in his works about Middle-Earth, which owes its very existence to music. It is born out of the song of the Ainur. But the role of music does not end with this creative act, rather, it continues to influence the history of Middle-Earth. The paper aims to analyze the role of music in the tale of Beren and Lúthien in the published *Silmarillion*. The tale of Beren and Lúthien was of personal significance to Tolkien himself. It also includes numerous allusions to music. It is the language of love for both Beren and Lúthien, who make their own songs. Lúthien's music has power which allows her to overcome Sauron and Morgoth and to win a second life for Beren from Mandos, while Finrod uses music in his duel with Sauron. Music affects both positive and negative characters, including Sauron and Morgoth. Its importance is also emphasized by the existence of professional musicians, such as Daeron, Thingol's minstrel. The story „Of Beren and Lúthien” demonstrates the power of music, which has a huge impact on the entire history of Middle-Earth. Without it, many events would never have happened.

key words: Beren, Lúthien, Middle-Earth, music, Tolkien

Music played an important role in the life of J.R.R. Tolkien. He himself came from a musical family: his grandfather produced pianos and his mother was also musically talented. Even though he did not inherit his mother's talent for music, it continued to be present in Tolkien's life, as his wife, Edith Bratt, was strongly connected with it: she played the piano and even wanted to work as a professional piano player (Eden, “Music in Middle-Earth” 444). So Tolkien was surrounded by music all his life. He respected it and admired musicians, and, as his daughter Priscilla put it, “the power of music [in his writings] may represent the feeling of unsatisfied longing in my father”¹ (qtd. in Scull & Hammond 615). Bradford Lee Eden remarked that “he [i.e. Tolkien] so thoroughly and at some level of substance, incorporated so many allusions to music and its power in his writings” (“Music in Middle-Earth” 444). Eden believes that Tolkien's Catholic upbringing inspired him to choose it as the means of creation of Arda, since Tolkien was familiar with the idea of ‘music of the spheres’ which was popular in the Middle Ages. This concept originated from ancient philosophers, such as Plato and Aristotle, and in the Middle Ages it was discussed by Boethius in *De institutione musica* (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 183-84; 187-88).

Taking into account the biographical background of the author, as well as the fact that the most important women in his life, namely, his mother and his wife, were strongly connected with music, it is hardly surprising that musical motifs frequently appear in his fiction. Though he did not make music himself, Tolkien introduced both music as such and musicians into Middle-Earth *legendarium*. The best example of this tendency is the genesis story of his fantastical universe, Arda, in which the world is created out of music. Under the guidance of the creator, called Eru

¹The square bracket “[in his writings]” is present in the quote published in Scull and Hammond, 615.

Ilúvatar, angelic spirits named the Ainur sing the Great Music, which is later brought into existence by Ilúvatar, and the world of Arda comes into being. In the world which was literally sung into existence, music should be of great significance. Indeed, the role of music in the *legendarium* does not end with the creation of Arda, as in the stories of *The Silmarillion*, *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a plethora of characters who enjoy music, sing traditional songs or compose their own tunes. In the article, the significance of music in the tale of Beren and Lúthien, as it is told in the chapter “Of Beren and Lúthien” in the published version of *The Silmarillion*, will be analyzed.

The story of Beren and Lúthien was particularly important to Tolkien, as can be seen from the fact of inscribing the names of these lovers on Tolkien’s family grave, as well as the existence of many versions, both in prose and in verse, of this tale. The character of Lúthien was directly inspired by the sight of his wife Edith dancing in the woods. This is why “Lúthien is the character about whom Tolkien cared most deeply and personally” (Seaman 396). Richard C. West believes that the tale of Beren and Lúthien was “probably the favourite of his [i.e. Tolkien’s] stories of Middle-Earth” (259). This story, due to its personal importance to the author, also played a significant role in the history of the entire Middle-Earth, affecting not only the events in the First Age, but also extending its influence to the Third Age. According to Seaman, it was “a fundamental link in the story cycle that begins with *The Silmarillion* and concludes with *The Lord of the Rings*” (396). Verlyn Flieger considers Beren and Lúthien “probably the single most important story in the corpus, apart from *The Lord of the Rings*” (38). The tale of Beren and Lúthien reappears several times in Tolkien’s fiction. It is present in *The Lord of the Rings*, where it is sung by Aragorn to hobbits on Weathertop and in “The Appendices,” during his first meeting with Arwen. Beren and Lúthien also feature in a rejected version of *The Hobbit* (Rateliff). All versions of Beren and Lúthien story are listed by Richard C. West, who states that it is the only tale which appears or is mentioned in all volumes of *The History of Middle-Earth*, edited by Christopher Tolkien (260).

As far as music is concerned, it is a fundamental chapter of *The Silmarillion*, as Eden pointed out “Tolkien’s scholarly and religious conviction regarding the power of music to affect and indeed engender drama in mythology and in real life comes to the fore in the Beren and Lúthien story” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188). According to Eden, music in Middle-Earth “follows an interesting decay and descent in the uses and appearances of music that closely follow Boethius’s model regarding the three types of music in medieval cosmological theory” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 184). These three types, according to Boethius, as referred to by Eden, are as follows: the most important one is celestial music, which in the case of Tolkien is depicted in “The Ainulindalë,” while the lower tiers are occupied by vocal and instrumental music, the examples of which can be found in “Of Beren and Lúthien” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 184; 187-88). Eden states that as the history of Middle-Earth progresses, and the further from the moment of creation we are, the less of cosmological music there is, while vocal and instrumental music dominates and is almost exclusively present (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190). This can be observed in the tale “Of Beren and Lúthien,” where only vocal and instrumental music is depicted. Finally, in the Third Age, “the third and lower type of music” (Eden “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190) dominates.

At the beginning of the chapter “Of Beren and Lúthien,” it is stated that this story itself gave rise to a song called “Lay of Leithian.”² This statement, put at the very beginning of the story, foreshadows its importance as well as its connection to music, since it is a tale which

² This version in verse was actually published in the third volume of *The History of Middle-Earth: Lays of Beleriand*.

became a song. It is also named “most fair still in the ears of the Elves” (Tolkien 194), so it raises the readers’ expectations of the story even before they begin reading it.

Unsurprisingly for a story which is turned into a song, “Of Beren and Lúthien” is full of references to music. Both Lúthien and Beren (though he to a lesser extent) are musicians and can make their own songs. Also minor characters, such as Finrod Felagund, are connected with music. Additionally, the story features a professional musician, Thingol’s minstrel Daeron. From the existence of such a job at Thingol’s court, it can be inferred that Elvish society in Middle-Earth attached a lot of importance to music. Though only two Elvish minstrels are named, Maglor, and Daeron, there must have been more of them, as Eden believes, “given that there would have had to have been many minstrels for one to have been given the title of greatest along with the idea of wandering from place to place” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 190). From a later part of the story, it is clear that the tradition of minstrelsy is not restricted to the positive protagonists, since both Sauron and Morgoth are familiar with it; what is more, both Dark Lords can appreciate beautiful music, as can be seen from Sauron’s reaction to the meeting with Lúthien, when he wants to bring her captive to Morgoth as a boon. In her confrontation with Morgoth, Lúthien tempts the Vala, offering him her services as a minstrel. While appreciation of her song seems to contradict Morgoth’s hateful attitude to the world, it is also a testament to the power of music. In fact, the entire story can be interpreted as a tale of the power of music, since the protagonists, particularly Lúthien, use music to solve problems arising during the quest, often quite successfully. Moreover, music accompanies Beren and Lúthien at every stage of their relationship, cementing it further and bringing the lovers close together after temporary partings. Let us look at the progression of the relationship between Beren and Lúthien and the role music plays in it. It can be noticed that there is a certain kind of gradation in the importance of music, as at the beginning Lúthien enchants Beren by it, then she puts Morgoth to sleep by the means of a song, and finally, she uses her musical talents to win a second life for her beloved as she sings before Mandos, which is her final and greatest musical achievement.

The love between Beren and Lúthien starts with music, as when Beren sees Lúthien for the first time, she is dancing, that is, doing something strictly connected with music. It is not stated directly in the story, but from what transpires later on, it can be inferred that Lúthien dances to the music played by Daeron the minstrel. Also, though at first he does not hear her singing, Beren gives Lúthien a nickname which is related to music, calling her “Tinúviel, that signifies Nightingale, daughter of twilight, in the Grey-Elven tongue” (Tolkien 198). Nightingale is a well-known songbird, moreover, in Tolkien’s Middle-Earth, a creature connected to Lúthien’s mother, Melian, who “taught them [i.e. the nightingales] their song” (Tolkien 64). However, Eden contrasts Melian’s song with that of her daughter Lúthien, in spite of her being named “Nightingale” by Beren, associating her song with another bird and calls it “the song of the lark and of springtime regeneration” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 186). According to West, by giving Lúthien the nickname *Tinúviel*, Beren “recognize[s] her mythic ‘true name’” (263).

It is later in the story that Lúthien is depicted as a singer for the first time. After Beren sees her dancing, he yearns to meet her again, but she never comes close. However, as winter ends and spring begins, he can hear Lúthien’s song. Her singing is the most beautiful music ever heard; not only does it awaken love in Beren and enables him to call out to his beloved: “the spell of silence fell from Beren” (Tolkien 198), but it also makes spring appear. It seems that Lúthien can control nature itself with her song, and in comparison to other Elvish characters, her song possesses a great power, which can be described as magical. However, it should be borne in mind that Lúthien is not just an ordinary Elf-princess: her mother Melian is a Maia, so Lúthien inherited part of her mother’s divine nature. Her superpowers, which she displays in the tale, can

be traced down to her nature as a daughter of a Maia. Lúthien's special power resting in music relates to her ancestry, too, as Melian not only "taught them [i.e. the nightingales] their song" (Tolkien 64), but also enchanted Thingol, Lúthien's father, with her music. When Thingol was in the woods of Nan Elmoth, "an enchantment fell on him, and he stood still; and afar off beyond the voices of the *lómelindi* he heard the voice of Melian, and it filled all his heart with wonder and desire" (Tolkien 64). When Melian is still living in Valinor, she is as renowned for her song as Lúthien is for hers in Middle-Earth: "the Valar would leave their works, and the birds of Valinor their mirth, that the bells of Valmar were silent and the fountains ceased to flow, when at the mingling of the lights Melian sang in Lórien" (Tolkien 64). By using music as a means of manifesting her power, Lúthien is thus truly her mother's daughter. What is more, she is, in fact "one of the most powerful singers of any age in Tolkien's world" (West 263).

For Lúthien, music and especially singing is the language of her love for Beren. When the man leaves Menegroth to do Thingol's bidding, Lúthien stops singing and "from that hour she sang not again in Doriath" (Tolkien 202). This sentence foreshadows what is to happen: Lúthien never sings in Doriath, since she leaves it to save Beren, and when they go back to Thingol, there is no mood for singing, as the country is under attack by Carcharoth.

Music as an expression of love for Beren also has saving power, since it is thanks to the song she sings in front of Sauron's prison that Lúthien can find Beren and ascertain that he is alive. The song sung by Beren in reply enables Lúthien to locate her beloved and rescue him. This is not the last time when music reunites the lovers. When Beren decides to leave Lúthien in the safety of her homeland Doriath and go for the quest alone, he composes a song about her, which Lúthien hears and answers from afar. It is also Lúthien's singing that Beren hears as the first thing when he recovers from his sickness, caused by Carcharoth's venomous fangs. So it can be seen that music is present every time when the lovers overcome trouble and meet again.

Her love for Beren motivates Lúthien to use music in her confrontations with the two Valar: Morgoth and Mandos. As Eden put it, through her music, Lúthien can control "even the emotions of Valar themselves" ("The 'Music of the Spheres'" 188). These confrontations are prefigured and foreshadowed by the music she performs in front of Sauron; like in the later part of the story, Lúthien uses her musical talent as a weapon, which allows her to overcome the enemy. Her song can pass through stone and thus reach the incarcerated Beren: "she sang a song that no stone could hinder" (Tolkien 209). This is an example of music being used as "a manifestation of power" (Scull and Hammond 618). Lúthien's might is made apparent by her music and song; she frees her beloved Beren and commands Sauron to surrender the island to her. Her song is the emanation of her mastery, greater than that of other characters' in the tale due to her Maia ancestry. The first song in front of Sauron's isle is meant only to help contact Beren, yet it is already very powerful; and the second one, after Beren's reply, is even "of greater power" (Tolkien 209). This fragment is an excellent example of the range of Lúthien's prowess, since here she succeeds in what Finrod Felagund fails: she subdues and defeats Sauron. This helps to further emphasize her special, exceptional nature as a daughter of a Maia: she is victorious over Sauron, which is not possible for Felagund, even though he is the King of Nargothrond. Lúthien is not a mere Elf, rather, she is a half-Maia, which makes her musical exploits possible in the first place.

In her meeting with Morgoth, Lúthien again uses her musical talent as a weapon against the might of the evil Vala. Unlike Beren, who continues to don his werewolf disguise, Lúthien reveals her identity to the Dark Lord and "offer[s] her service to sing before him, after the manner of a minstrel" (Tolkien 217). She was already known far and wide not only for her beauty, but also for her talent as a singer, as it is explained in her meeting with Sauron, who plans

to give her to his overlord. Because of her renown, Morgoth readily agrees to her suggestion. Her courageous and risky decision turns out to be the right one, since Lúthien puts Morgoth's entire court and the Vala himself to sleep with her song. Lúthien's music is both exquisitely beautiful and extremely powerful: "a song of such surpassing loveliness and of such blinding power, that he listened perforce" (Tolkien 217). With the help of her sleep-inducing robe, Lúthien makes Morgoth fall into slumber, which enables Beren to cut off the Silmaril from the Iron Crown. Without Lúthien, Beren would not be able to complete his quest. And Lúthien enchants Morgoth with her music, which emphasizes the central role of music in this story. What is also noteworthy is that the Silmarils give light in answer to Lúthien's song, as if to support and legitimize her actions.

Lúthien's greatest musical achievement is her song in front of Mandos. Here, Beren's life is at stake, and it is the most important and daunting task which Lúthien has to face. Yet, thanks to her love for Beren, and with the use of her musical talent, Lúthien achieves what might have seemed impossible: she wins a second span of life for Beren and herself, "and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has since been" (Tolkien 224-25). Mandos is moved by her song's beauty and sadness, and the song itself is considered "the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall hear" (Tolkien 224). Furthermore, it is preserved in Valinor "[u]nchanged, imperishable" (Tolkien 224), and constantly performed there, saddening the Valar. What is special about this song is also the fact that in some way it resembles the Music of the Ainur in that it unites different themes: that of Elves and of Men: "for Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrows of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda" (Tolkien 224). Edén believes that Lúthien's song before Mandos expresses something even more potent, namely, "the power of her music even over death" ("The 'Music of the Spheres'" 189). The story of Lúthien ends again with the reminder that she will die and herself become a subject of a song, which serves as a sort of a bracket closing the tale which begins with the information that Beren and Lúthien's story is turned into a song. Here, it has a slightly negative overtone, since it serves to emphasize the Elves' feeling of loss, as Lúthien is no longer alive and with them, but rather "only a memory in song" (Tolkien 225).

Beren, Lúthien's beloved, is a mortal man, though he is just any man, but the son of the important leader of Men, Barahir, who is befriended by Finrod Felagund. One could expect huge cultural differences between the Man and the Elvish princess, but this is not the case. Here again, music fulfils a unifying function. Beren is sensitive to music, a characteristic which he shares with Lúthien. Not only does he love listening to Lúthien's singing, but he also makes his own songs. He is thus a musically talented person, not only a passive recipient of music sung by Lúthien, but also a creative participant. His exchange of songs with Lúthien forms a musical dialogue between the lovers.

The Silmarillion mentions two songs written by Beren. The first one is sung during his imprisonment by Sauron, and it is with this song that he answers Lúthien's singing when she is looking for him. Lúthien's song is described as one with great power, which can pierce the stone fortress. Beren's song is not about love, but rather about stars created by the Valar, namely, "the Seven Stars, the Sickle of the Valar that Varda hung above the North as a sign for the fall of Morgoth" (Tolkien 209). Thus, in effect, the song he sings is about the victory of good over evil and eventual defeat of Morgoth, and, by extension, also his lieutenant Sauron. Unlike Lúthien's song, this composition does not possess any magical power, nevertheless, it can be considered Beren's own challenge to Sauron. Singing such a song while imprisoned by Sauron proves not only Beren's musical skills, but also his great courage. In this way, Beren shows how much he

has in common with his beloved Lúthien and proves himself to be a worthy partner for her. The song also indicates Beren's familiarity with the stories about the Valar and the creation of the stars, which are an important part of the Elvish tradition.

What is noteworthy is the fact that nothing in particular is told about Lúthien's songs; we know only that they are beautiful and have power over their listeners, but no information is given concerning their lyrics or content. The only thing akin to a summary of a song is told in connection with Lúthien's song to Mandos, where it is described as a tale of the sorrows of both Elves and Men. But as to other songs, their text or message is unknown. It is different with Beren's songs. The first song of Beren is summarized, but the second one is quoted in the text of *The Silmarillion*, so that the reader knows not only the content of the song, but its exact wording, while the entire text of the song is published in "Lay of Leithian" in the third volume of *The History of Middle-Earth: Lays of Beleriand*. It is entitled "the Song of Parting" (Tolkien 214), because Beren sings it after he leaves Lúthien in Doriath to go on his quest alone, and he believes that they would never meet again. The song praises Lúthien's beauty and gives thanks to the world in which her existence is possible, even if only for a while: "yet were its making good, for this - / the dusk, the dawn, the earth, the sea - / that Lúthien for a time should be" (Tolkien 214). Though at the time of his composing and singing Beren believes the parting with Lúthien to be final, he is nevertheless grateful for having met and loved her. This song, much more than the previous one, is a proof of his love for Lúthien. Though it does not have any magical power in itself, the song brings the lovers together when Lúthien hears it.

The eponymous protagonists of "Of Beren and Lúthien" are not the only characters who perform music. Finrod Felagund uses music in a way similar to Lúthien's; for him, music possesses magical power, a fact to which he refers in his confrontation with Sauron. The Elf and the Dark Lord duel, but it is a duel that is carried out with music, not with weapons; the music is called "the songs of power" (Tolkien 205). Though finally Sauron wins the duel, Finrod is capable of resisting him for some time, which proves his musical abilities. The musical confrontation is also a clash of ideologies: Sauron's song is full of aggression and negativity, subjects such as black magic, betrayal. The last subject matter turns out to be Finrod's undoing. The Elf sings about the bliss and beauty of Valinor, but it is in Valinor where the first treachery and spilling of Elvish blood occurs. Reminded of the Kinslaying at Alqualondë, Finrod is aware that the Elves' moral advantage over Sauron is not so great, and this realization allows his opponent to achieve victory.

This fragment establishes Sauron as yet another character using music to achieve his aims. Though there are no details about the kind of music Sauron makes, only hints as to the subject matter, it is supposedly very different from Lúthien's song or music performed by positive characters. Sauron's music is for him one of the forms or expressions of his magic, and like it, this music is used to subdue and enslave. Yet, Sauron's attitude to music is another proof of the power of music and of the importance it has in Middle-Earth, since its crucial role transcends the boundaries between good and evil characters. Sauron can perform powerful music, and knows that Lúthien, famous for her beautiful singing, would be a great gift for his master. Morgoth is familiar with the notion of a courtly minstrel and is interested in the prospect of hearing Lúthien's songs.

Daeron, Thingol's court minstrel, is the only professional musician in the story. Eden considers him a representative of instrumental music, rarely depicted by Tolkien, who focused on vocal music. According to the scholar, the use of instruments is implied by Daeron's status as a minstrel (Eden, "The 'Music of the Spheres'" 190). He is first introduced into the story as yet another person who wants to win Lúthien's heart: "Daeron the minstrel also loved Lúthien"

(Tolkien 199). Thus, being a minstrel and loving Lúthien are his two defining qualities. However, his love for Lúthien prompts him to betray her and reveal her relationship with Beren to Thingol. This results in Beren being sent on the hopeless quest to get a Silmaril. Thus, initially Daeron is depicted negatively, as a force trying to sever the lovers. He is yet another obstacle that Beren and Lúthien must overcome on their road to happiness. Daeron betrays Lúthien for the second time when he informs Thingol about her planned escape from Doriath. However, it is implied that Lúthien trusts him, since he is the person she shares her plans with: “she sought the help of Daeron” (Tolkien 206). This deed of Daeron’s also has disastrous effects, since it leads directly to Lúthien’s imprisonment in the treehouse on Hírilorn.

Later in the story, the depth of Daeron’s love for Lúthien is revealed, and he is no longer depicted as a hindrance to the protagonists. Rather, it is emphasized that his devotion to her is genuine. He is the only person who goes in search of Lúthien when she manages to escape from Doriath. Daeron cannot accept life without her and is determined to find his beloved. Though he fails, his love inspires him to create great music, music that is dedicated to Lúthien and praises her beauty. This music, which sprung from true but unrequited love, makes Daeron the best musician among the Elves, even better than Maglor: “[h]e became the greatest of all the minstrels of the Elves east of the Sea, named even before Maglor, son of Fëanor” (Tolkien 220). In this way, music-loving Lúthien not only makes music herself, but is also a source of inspiration for other talented characters.

The story of Beren and Lúthien, as told in the published version of *The Silmarillion*, is full of music. Both main protagonists are singers, Finrod Felagund’s song demonstrates the use of music for magical purposes, while at the same time it proves that even the embodiments of evil, such as Sauron and Morgoth, can react to music. The existence of such a person as a court minstrel shows the importance of music in the everyday life of the Elves. The fact of listing Daeron as the best minstrel further emphasizes the importance of music in the Elvish culture: music is appreciated and treasured and the most talented musicians honoured long after they are gone.

Music also plays a crucial role in the story, since it is present during almost all significant events, beginning with the first meeting of Beren and Lúthien, their reunion and liberating Beren from Sauron’s prison, through the winning of a Silmaril from Morgoth, ending with Lúthien gaining a second life for Beren from Mandos. The most renowned deed of Beren and Lúthien could not have been possible without music. Without music, and so without Lúthien, Beren would never have completed his quest. Also, without her performance before Mandos, her union with Beren would have ended quickly with his death, and their marriage would not have given birth to the new generations of mixed Elvish and Mannish ancestry, which, in turn, would have influenced the entire history of Middle-Earth. Also, the Silmaril they win from Morgoth is the one which lights Eärendil’s way to Valinor and later becomes a beacon of hope in the sky. Without Beren and Lúthien’s achievement, which they owe to music, the history of Middle-Earth would have looked totally different.

Finally, Beren and Lúthien’s lives become a material for a song, “Lay of Leithian,” one of the most beloved songs among the Elves. Their lives, so full of music, provide inspiration for further musical compositions which survive generations and generations of Elves and Men, giving new hope and strength to those who sing them. In Middle-Earth, music does not end with the creation of Arda, but is a constant presence, resonating around Middle-Earth and shaping characters’ lives. It is a power to be reckoned with. As Bradford Lee Eden put it, “music is the ultimate power in the cosmological history of Middle-Earth” (“The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188)

whose “sorrows and triumphs emanate from music” (Eden, “The ‘Music of the Spheres’” 188). The story of Beren and Lúthien is a perfect example of the power of music in Middle-Earth.

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