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NOTES and DOCUMENTS

A Note on Beren and Lúthien's Disguise
as Werewolf And Vampire-Bat

THOMAS HONEGGER

Source hunting can be a pleasant and rewarding way to pass the time for those Tolkien scholars who plough their strips in the field of medieval literature for professional and/or recreational reasons. The discussion of Tolkien's possible sources and their influence on his conception of Middle-earth has yielded important insights into the meaning of his work.¹ For the time being, however, it looks as if the most important parallels and analogues have been investigated, although a "sources and analogues" volume uniting the most important texts still remains a desideratum. Future scholarly endeavor in this field is therefore likely to yield results that are quantitative ("yet another parallel / source of . . .") rather than qualitative. I do not intend to belittle the scholarly effort and diligence that go into such research,² yet the results are, in my mind, often of minor relevance since they add little that is new to our critical understanding of the professor's writings. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to dismiss "source hunting" altogether since there remain some areas that may profit from the identification of Tolkien's likely models and influences. The following discussion of a possible source for Beren and Lúthien's disguise as werewolf and vampire-bat is intended to provide an example of work in this direction.

Most of Tolkien's fiction is accessible without specific background information, which is especially true of those works that were published during his lifetime. The stupendous popular success of *The Lord of the Rings* would not have been possible if it had not at least halfway met the aesthetic expectations of modern readers or touched upon some half-remembered yet strongly felt desire for non-modernistic modes of narrative. Critics may wrinkle their noses at some of Tolkien's "out-of-date" literary techniques or ideas,³ but such criticism is the consequence of a conscious choice to use a modernistic yardstick. *The Silmarillion*, to consider only the first of the by now numerous posthumous publications, differs insofar as it was not designed to meet the modern reader's expectations to the same degree as the works of fiction completed during Tolkien's lifetime. Christopher Tolkien did his best to present the

material as coherently as possible, yet even so its form and content often offend modern notions of narrative cohesion and structural propriety. It is therefore no surprise that many readers find themselves wondering what the professor might have been thinking when he wrote the texts that went into this volume. Repeated reading helps the reader get used to the style and one eventually learns to accept or even admire many of the initially bewildering elements. Yet there remain some motifs and themes that prove curiously resistant to accommodation and which may not be reconciled with modern aesthetics either by repeated reading or by consulting the usual suspects among medieval “source” texts (*Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, *Ancrene Wisse*, Chaucer, to name the most important). It is in such “hard cases” that the unearthing of possible models can shed light on the workings of Tolkien’s literary imagination.

The instance under consideration comes from the tale of Beren and Lúthien—a tale that was of such central importance to Tolkien throughout his life⁴ that it occurs time and again in his writings.⁵ The tale, as recounted in *The Silmarillion*, reverberates with folk tale motifs and archetypal themes and makes a strong appeal to modern readers’ emotions with its “high” style. Yet not all motifs and themes harmonize with the overall tone of the narrative. One element in particular strikes a discordant note, namely the dressing in skins episode. Beren and Lúthien, in order to avoid detection during their journey to Angband, disguise themselves as a werewolf⁶ and a vampire-bat⁷ respectively.

The basic idea of approaching Morgoth’s stronghold disguised as servants of the enemy seems to have been part of the tale right from its inception, although the narrative motivation for this stratagem is not very convincing and, as is the case in some of the briefer versions, it could be omitted.⁸ The discordance of the motif is felt all the more because it is not, in this form, a common motif in western (medieval) literature.⁹ Interestingly, the earlier versions of the episode are more indebted to the widespread “skin changing” motif¹⁰ than to the one of “dressing in skins.” In *Lost Tales II* (30), Huan, the hound of the Valar, slays the big cat Oikeroi and carries his fell as a trophy. Tinúviel then uses Oikeroi’s fur to disguise Beren. She sews him into the big cat’s fell and with the help of her magic completes the disguise so that Beren comes close to being turned into a real cat.¹¹ Here the skin is obviously more than a simple covering and it functions as an important element in the process of magic metamorphosis. The later versions, however, move further away from the classical skin changing motif, and the putting on of a skin is no longer connected with magical transformation—at least none is mentioned.

We therefore have a replacement of the widespread and familiar “skin changing” motif by the significantly less popular one of “dressing in skins.” Why, we may ask, did Tolkien change this part of the tale for

the “worse” (from a modern point of view, that is)? Did he, as he so often did, imaginatively adapt a motif from medieval literature? More to the point: Is there a couple in medieval European literature who dresses in skins to remain undetected?

Such a couple can be found in the alliterative Middle English romance *William of Palerne* (c. 1350, South-west Midlands), which is a close rendering of the French *Guillaume de Palerne* (c. 1200). Tolkien is likely to have known the Middle English text in the edition by W. W. Skeat, prepared for the Early English Text Society and published in 1867. The romance recounts the life and adventures of William, Prince of Apulia, who, as a baby, is abducted by a werewolf and thus saved from a murderous plot. The child is then found by a cowherd, grows up as his son and is “discovered” by the emperor of Rome, who takes him to his court and appoints him page to his daughter Melior. They fall in love and flee together, making their way to Sicily where William rescues his mother from the king of Spain’s army. The story ends with William and Melior’s marriage and his ascension to the imperial throne of Rome.

The approximately 5500 lines of the romance accommodate many a fantastic event, one of which is of special interest for our present purpose. The situation is as follows: Melior is supposed to marry the son of the emperor of Greece the next day, but is determined to remain true to her beloved William. They decide to make their escape, and their servant Alisaundrine advises them to disguise themselves in polar-bear skins. The result seems to be quite convincing if we are to believe Alisaundrine, who comments on their new appearance: “Ye arn so grisli a gost a gom on to loke, / that I nold for al the god that ever God made / abide you in a brod weic bi a large mile, / so breame a wilde bere ye biseme nowthe!” (ll. 1730-33).¹² Melior and William make off as “white bears” and, after their scheme has been discovered by the kitchen staff who notice the missing pelts, they change tactics and don the skins of hind and hart—hides provided by the ever helpful werewolf (who happens to be a bewitched Spanish prince in exile).

William of Palerne and the tale of Beren and Lúthien have, besides the dressing in skins motif, several other elements in common. Both narratives feature father figures who are opposed to a union between daughter and hero, both tales present helpful canines that possess special powers, and the opponents in both works are sorcerers. On their own, these parallels would be of little importance since there are enough tales that contain the same elements that their occurrence in *William of Palerne* and the tale of Beren and Lúthien would seem fortuitous. Yet the fact that they occur together with the dressing in skins motif in both tales provides them with additional relevance and may be interpreted as evidence that Tolkien indeed knew and, in his own way, used elements from *William of Palerne*

for his tale.

The account of dressing in skins in the Middle English romance does not lack a certain humorous note—which is absent in *The Silmarillion*. The earlier versions, however, use the motif in a way that is closer to the “popular” spirit of the romance. The dressing in skins motif fits well the overall “folk tale” tone of the aetiologial fable explaining the enmity between cats and dogs, which occupies a prominent place in the earliest version of “The Tale of Tinúviel” (c. 1917). The transfer of this folk tale motif to a less folksy context, as the later versions of the tale of Beren and Lúthien tend to be, lies at the bottom of the estrangement of this episode from the dominant heroic-romantic tone of the rest of the tale. Tolkien may have welcomed the fact that part of the original “popular” tale was still recognizable here and there—testifying to the long and varied history of the narrative material. Yet from a purely aesthetic point of view, the motif has become an element that must strike modern readers as odd and rather jarring.

The unearthing of a parallel and possible thematic source cannot remedy this flaw, but it may help to soothe modern readers’ irritation at the “non-fit” of this element.

NOTES

- 1 The best and most comprehensive study in this area is still Tom Shippey’s *The Road to Middle-earth*.
- 2 See, for example, the papers in Clark and Timmons, many of which discuss Tolkien’s possible sources.
- 3 See Patrick Curry’s essay for a comprehensive critique of the critics.
- 4 The gravestone of Edith Mary and John R.R. Tolkien bears, next to their Christian names, the inscription “Lúthien” and “Beren.” See Carpenter (105), for an assessment of the biographical importance of the story for Tolkien.
- 5 See the brief version told by Aragorn on Amon Sûl (*FR*, I, xi, 203–06), the reference to the full version the hobbits later listened to at Rivendell (*FR*, II, iii, 290), and the various versions as found in *The Book of Lost Tales II* and *The Lays of Beleriand*.
- 6 Beren “was arrayed now in the hame of Draugluin” (*S* 179), i.e., Sauron’s incarnation as wolf.
- 7 Lúthien used the winged fell of Thuringwethil, the messenger of Sauron who flew to Angband in the form of a vampire.

- 8 The shorter versions, as found in *Lost Tales II* ("The Tale of Tinúviel") or *Lord of the Rings*, omit this episode.
- 9 See the entries in Thompson (K 521.1, K 521.1.2 and K 649.7.2).
- 10 See Thompson (D 530 and D 531) for examples of "transformation by putting on skin (clothing, etc.)" in folk-literature.
- 11 The tale also exists in a typescript version that shows some changes and revisions (see *Lost Tales II* 41-48), but none which would affect the disguising plot.
- 12 Quoted from the edition by Bunt. I have replaced the letters "yoke" and "thorn" by "y" and "th" respectively. Translation: "You are so terrifying an apparition to man to look at, that I would not want, for all the goods that God ever made, to meet you on a highway by a mile, such fierce and wild beasts you seem now to be." Beren, when looking for the first time at Lúthien in her bat-shape, is similarly frightened: "and horror was in his glance as he saw upon his flank a bat-like creature clinging with creased wings" (S 179).

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