

# The Children of Húrin – Its Use for Tolkien Scholarship

Thomas Fornet-Ponse (Bonn)

Every time a new text by J.R.R. Tolkien is published or an already published text is republished, Tolkien scholars may ask what use it can have for their occupation. In the last years, there are, above all, two works to be mentioned because of their importance for a wider public<sup>1</sup>: Michael Drouot's excellent edition of the different drafts of Tolkien's lecture on *Beowulf* and Verlyn Flieger's extended edition of *Smith of Wootton Major*. Both are important contributions for Tolkien scholarship insofar as hitherto (in their full length) unknown texts are now published and offer helpful insights not only for the interpretation of the two works but are relevant also for scholars who are dealing with Tolkien's thought in general.

Now, a new narrative text or rather a new edition of a known narrative is published by none less than Christopher Tolkien (CT): *The Children of Húrin*, a legend which in the time following the publication of LotR became for his father "the dominant story of the end of the Elder days" (*Evolution* 281). Especially because of the compilatory character of *The Silmarillion* and the fragmentary character of the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* in *Unfinished Tales* (75-209), there were great expectations. The more so as CT's editing qualities are known from the twelve volumes of *The History of Middle-earth* – indispensable for Tolkien scholars. Thus, what use has *The Children of Húrin* for Tolkien scholarship?

First and foremost, it has to be acknowledged that the question about the usefulness for Tolkien scholarship seems to be a misleading one since this was not the guiding principle of CT. Rather, it was the wide public of the many readers of LotR who do not know the legends of the Elder Days which let him to present

my father's long version of the legend of the Children of Húrin as an independent work, between its own covers, with a minimum of editorial presence, and above all in continuous narrative without gaps or invention, despite the unfinished state in which he left some parts of it. (Preface 7)

1 In most cases a wider public is not interested in the documents published in *Vinyar Tengwar* because they are dealing with matters of his elvish tongues or are translations of e.g. Christian prayers into Quenya. An important exception is the *Osanwe-Kenta* with its information concerning psychological, philosophical and theological questions.

The focus on this audience is stressed by the presence of an introduction about “Middle-earth in the Elder Days”, in which CT refers to some relevant passages of LotR (Elrond’s mentioning of the Elder Days and Beleriand at the Council of Elrond, Treebeard’s remembering of time in Beleriand and the mentioning of Fëanor in App. A) for giving some remarks concerning the malice and might of Morgoth, the geography of Beleriand, the Noldor and their possessions in Beleriand, and Men and their relations to the Noldor. Furthermore, the first of the two appendices has to be mentioned in this context, because there CT explains his “father’s attempts to achieve a final form for the three tales” (Preface 11), meaning *Beren and Lúthien*, *The Children of Húrin* and *The Fall of Gondolin*. His attempt to form a continuous narrative of *The Children of Húrin* is due to the importance the story had for his father in his last years and their narrative power and immediacy. Seen from this perspective on a wide public which is not well informed about Tolkien’s works, it is not surprising that neither of the two texts contains new information for a well-informed reader of *The History of Middle-earth*.

But what about the narrative itself? For a correct reading it is crucial to read the second appendix because therein CT recounts his editing work on this text. First, he mentions some differences of the present version to the version in the *Unfinished Tales* which arose from the scope of this compilation. On the one hand, these concern omissions of large parts like the sojourn of Húrin and Huor in Gondolin or the account of the Battle of Unnumbered Tears since they were known out of *The Silmarillion*. On the other hand, there are differences between the two texts, inter alia because of CT’s insight of then having “allowed myself more editorial freedom than was necessary” (Composition 285). Many of these editorial changes were now restored according to the original text. The differences do not only concern the words and sentences but also the structure of the text because CT reached the conclusion that the narrative of the published *Silmarillion* conforms to the sequence his father did achieve before abandoning it – “but with one difference” (286), concerning the giving of Anglachel and Lembas to Beleg.

The greatest difference regards the major lacuna in *Unfinished Tales* (from Mím to the Fall of Nargothrond), which is now filled with new text. Whereas CT tried to write a ‘Silmarillion’ version of the story in Chapter 21 of *The Silmarillion*, he now used the same original materials, but with a different purpose (and according to him with “a better understanding of the labyrinth of drafts and notes and their sequence” [288]): much of the omitted or compressed material now remains available. Nevertheless, it is an artificial text because he “had to introduce bridging passages here and there in the piecing together of different drafts” (289). He mentions another two details in which he has emended the original texts: a geographical one concerning the position of the path to the Crossings of Teiglin and the second one “concerns the story

of the slaying of Glaurung at the crossing of the ravine” (291), where he notes an incoherence in the final version of the position of Túrin and Hunthor. Such emendations, bridgings and corrections were unavoidable since the great body of manuscripts and the different stages of evolution make a compilation necessary if one wants to form an uninterrupted narrative as it is the declared aim of CT. Although it is an artificial text, he tried to form “a continuous narrative from start to finish, without the introduction of any elements that are not authentic in conception” (Evolution 282).

Thus, there are many unidentifiable (minor) changes and additions of CT to the text, which is reader-friendly but limits per se the usefulness for scholarship even regarding the claimed authenticity in conception. But this authenticity is a reason why *The Children of Húrin* is not only worth reading for a broad public but also for Tolkien scholars. Furthermore indeed

*The Children of Húrin* in its latest form is the chief narrative fiction of Middle-earth after the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*; and the life and death of Túrin is portrayed with a convincing power and an immediacy scarcely to be found elsewhere among the peoples of Middle-earth. (Evolution 282)

But exactly because of this I have to mention an important point of critique which I regard as a vital one. Neither in the narrative itself nor in the introduction nor the appendices does Christopher Tolkien mention the ‘author’ of this legend, Dírhaven. While this seems of no great importance at first sight, it may explain differences in tone and conception between it and the stories of the *Quenta Silmarillion* because “the *Narn i Hîn Húrin* was the work of a Mannish poet, Dírhaven, who lived at the Havens of Sirion in the days of Eärendil” (UT 187, cf. WJ 312-315). With regard to the explicitly stated elvish point of view of nearly all stories of Tolkien’s *legendarium*, it should not be underestimated that such an important text was designed as the work of a Man who “gathered all the tidings and lore that he could of the House of Hador” (WJ 311) and was himself of this house (cf. 313).

A detailed analysis of the differences between the *Narn* and the other legends may reveal discrepancies concerning the conceptions of freedom, heroism or death which can be explained by an elvish or a mannish authorship, respectively, and therefore may underline Tolkien’s skill in adapting his texts to the claimed authorship and his diligence in carefully elaborating the fictional frame of the stories and legends. This would not be the case if we had to assume that there does not exist any difference in the authorship as *The Children of Húrin* suggests by not mentioning the fictitious author. However, because of the continuity of the latest versions to the earlier ones it seems more than probable that Tolkien

does not intend a change of authorship of this legend and that Christopher Tolkien just set it aside in view of the readership he aimed at.

Concluding, while *The Children of Húrin* is aimed at and most interesting for a broader public which until now did not come in close contact with the stories of the Elder Days, it can also be of interest and importance for Tolkien scholars because of its narrative power and continuous and coherent narrative, if they have in mind its fictitious ‘mannish’ origin.

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