

Spring 2015

# Bondage and Freedom in Tolkien's Lay of Leithian

Grace Kirk  
*University of Portland*

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_studpubs](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_studpubs)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Kirk, Grace, "Bondage and Freedom in Tolkien's Lay of Leithian" (2015). *English Undergraduate Publications, Presentations and Projects*. Paper 1.

[http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng\\_studpubs/1](http://pilotscholars.up.edu/eng_studpubs/1)

This Student Project is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Pilot Scholars. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Undergraduate Publications, Presentations and Projects by an authorized administrator of Pilot Scholars. For more information, please contact [library@up.edu](mailto:library@up.edu).

# **Bondage and Freedom in Tolkien's Lay of Leithian**

English Senior Capstone

Grace Kirk

Spring 2015

Is it ever possible to be truly free? Within the public sphere, there is always someone or something to watch and judge every move made, but even within the private sphere things such as personal emotions, private relationships, or possibly even larger metaphysical issues such as fate can restrict freedom. Tolkien addresses this issue in his long unfinished poem "The Lay of Leithian: Release from Bondage". Appropriately, given the poem's name, I will examine motifs of bondage within the fourth canto of this poem. By comparing the use of these elements in private interactions between Beren and Lúthien with their use in public interactions at the court of Lúthien's father King Thingol, it becomes clear that Tolkien did view some aspects of public life as entrapping and would maintain that even in private one isn't completely free but would allow that that lack of absolute freedom is not ultimately a bad thing.

The tale of Beren and Lúthien catches the eye because it diverges from the rest of Tolkien's work on what is referred to as the "Legendarium," the grand history he composed for Middle Earth. The *Quenta Silmarillion* tells grand stories about the public struggles between Morgoth and the free peoples of Middle Earth, most of which end badly. In the beginning of the Chapter "Of Beren and Lúthien" in *The Silmarillion*, the narrator acknowledges this overarching elegiac tone in *The Silmarillion* as well as the departure from this tone in the chapter "Of Beren and Luthien" when he says that "among the tales of sorrow and of ruin that have come down to us from those days there are yet some in which amid weeping there is joy and under the shadow of death light that endures. And of these histories most fair still in the ears of the Elves is the tale of Beren and Lúthien" (*Silm* 162). The mere fact that this story ends well distinguishes it from much of what Tolkien wrote about Middle Earth.

Although Beren and Lúthien's story differs from others that Tolkien tells, "it occupies a central place in [the] legendarium: the greatest victory of the Elves in their long struggle against the satanic Morgoth, when they penetrate to the deepest recesses of his stronghold and recover one of the three Silmarils, or Jewels of Power that contain divine light" (West, 259). Tolkien himself was quoted as saying that this is "the chief of the stories of *The Silmarillion*" (*Letter* 131). On a basic plot level this is undeniable: by recapturing the Silmaril, Beren and Lúthien re-inspire hope in those fighting against Morgoth, set off a chain reaction which leads to the intervention of the Valar and eventual victory, and through their descendants the Númenoreans and specifically Aragorn and Arwen of *The Lord of the Rings* influence events that happen thousands of years after their deaths. Because of this, Tolkien once reflected that even *The Lord of the Rings* was after all a sequel to Beren and Lúthien's story (*Letter* 180).

On a thematic level as well, the story of Beren and Lúthien is of great significance. It reveals much about Tolkien's views on social power in public and private situations. While Tolkien's work often focuses on the grander issues of his fictional world and treats the romantic subplot as at best a background motivation, in this story the private love affair is the most important issue and all public goals merely background motivation. Furthermore, the subplot to this love affair becomes the greatest public achievement of the first age - regaining a Silmaril.

In order to provide context for a discussion of Tolkien's use of bondage imagery, I will begin by establishing the greatest evil in Tolkien's writing: imposing one's will on another. After all, in Tolkien's most famous work *The Lord of the Rings*, it is the evil Ring of Power which motivates the plot as those who are good strive to destroy the ring before the evil Sauron can repossess it and dominate everybody in Middle Earth. Even those who are good cannot use the

Ring because it has so much power that in the end they would abuse that power to subjugate others.

When considering Tolkien's views about imposing one's will on another, it is useful to look at his use of the word thrall. It can mean “One who is in bondage to a lord or master; a villein, serf, bondman, slave; also, in vaguer use, a servant, subject; transf. one whose liberty is forfeit; a captive, prisoner of war” (OED, “thrall,” n.1a), or even “oppression, trouble, misery, distress” (OED, “thrall,” n.3). While Tolkien uses thrall to mean slave most of the time, it is implied that this state of unfreedom would be full of trouble, misery, and distress. As if this weren't enough, Tolkien also provides his own definition through the character Sador in *Children of Húrin*. When the child Túrin asks Sador what thrall is Sador tells him it is “a man who was a man but who is treated as a beast...Fed only to keep alive, kept alive only to toil, toiling only for fear of pain or death. And from these robbers he may bet pain or death just for their sport” (*CoH* 73). This definition makes thrall something that is even more explicitly awful than the Oxford English Dictionary defines it as. Not only is a thrall someone without freedom or power, but also without recognition as a member of humanity.

Thralldom and its lack of freedom is to Tolkien something so horrendous that it is in fact better to die than to become a thrall. Looking again at *Children of Húrin*, we find Morwen telling Túrin that “you may die on that road. The year is getting late. But if you stay, you will come to a worse end: to be a thrall. If you wish to be a man, when you come to a man's age, you will do as I bid, bravely” (*CoH* 73). Yet again we see the implication that one without freedom is not human when Morwen says “if you wish to be a man when you come to a man's age.” If Túrin were to stay put then he would most likely live and grow up, but he would be guaranteed to grow

up as a thrall, and therefore he would not become a man even if he reached the age of adulthood in the sense that he would not be a free man.

This moment when Morwen explicitly says that to be a thrall is a worse end than to die on the road proves that Tolkien values freedom above even life itself. Furthermore, during this conversation, Túrin is only eight years old; Morwen is his mother. For a mother to say to her eight year old son that she would rather he died than become a thrall, being a thrall has to be the worst thing ever.

A similar view can be traced through "The Lay of Leithian". King Thingol is angry at Beren for falling in love with his daughter Lúthien, so Thingol wants to kill Beren, or at the least chain him up in the dungeons. Interestingly enough, it is not the threat of death and entrapment within physical dungeons that riles Beren up, but rather an insinuation that he is not who he claims to be: a free man descended from kings fighting in the hopeless war against Morgoth. Beren tells King Thingol that "death thou canst give unearned to me, / but names I will not take from thee / of baseborn, spy, or Morgoth's thrall! Are these the ways of Thingol's hall?" (IV.1092-1095). Here we see that being called a thrall is in fact such an insult that not only is death better than being a thrall, but also death is better than merely being called a thrall.

Tolkien can be seen further scorning a life without freedom in his characterization of evil. The most heinous villain of all Middle Earth is Melkor, also known as Morgoth. Melkor was one of the Valar (or demigods who helped create Arda – the world in which Middle Earth is a continent). During this creation however, Melkor rebelled against Ilúvatar, or Eru, as the main creator god is called. This of course parallels the Christian myth of the fall, setting Morgoth up as the clear devil figure within Arda.

In her article “The Thread on Which Doom Hangs: Free Will, Disobedience, and Eucastrophe,” Janet Brennen Croft observes that “Melkor’s motivation, one we will see again and again in Tolkien’s depiction of evil, is the urge to dominate all other free-willed beings” (Croft 144). Melkor's evil, as well as that of his servants stems from this wish to dominate others. Those who explicitly serve Melkor for example are all too happy to enslave others, but even those supposedly on the side of good sometimes spend time enslaving and looking down upon others.

In Tolkien's universe freedom is very important and denying someone their freedom is the most evil thing that one can do. Patricia Meyer Spacks argues an interesting point in her article "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*" about the role of choice, saying that with this emphasis on freedom, characters must be granted free-will and the ability to choose between good and evil. Spacks traces the choices of Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* and shows how as he continues to choose what's morally good he grows in spiritual stature, and then returns to characters such as Gollum and Sauron to say that "the course of the evil beings is equally well-defined. By using their freedom to choose evil, the wicked destroy freedom: emphasis is consistently upon the essential slavery of the servants of Sauron, who can no longer accept freedom when it is offered them" (92). The evil characters deny others their freedom, but in choosing to subjugate others, these characters also lose their own will and freedom.

Not even Melkor himself is above this diminishment of freedom. Returning again to *The Children of Húrin*, we may notice Húrin say to Melkor, “Before Arda you were, but others also; and you did not make it. Neither are you the most mighty; for you have spent your strength upon yourself and wasted it in your own emptiness. No more are you now than an escaped thrall of the Valar, and their chain still awaits you” (*CoH* 64). Melkor claims to be the ultimate authority in

all of Arda, but Húrin knows about the other Valar. Originally Melkor was in fact the strongest of these demi-gods, but by using his power in a way it was not intended, for his own interests and for domination over the humans and elves, he has diminished that power. Furthermore, he has become a literal prisoner to the other Valar because of his evil choices, and if Spacks' reading is granted as true then he has become a prisoner to those choices themselves as well.

Even Tolkien's famous "cordial dislike" (*LOTR*) of allegory is tied to his hatred of imposing one's will on another. Tolkien acknowledges in the introduction to *The Lord of the Rings* that he is not unaffected by his experiences; certainly aspects of his writing drew inspiration from both World Wars and therefore are applicable to real life. Tolkien is careful to clarify however that "many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author" (*LOTR* xi). While there are certainly parallels to be drawn between his work and his life experience or the life experience of his readers, Tolkien refuses to fall into allegory because he does not want to dominate the reading experience. Even in his own creation, Tolkien refuses to become a tyrant, but instead leaves each reader free to interpret his work as makes the most sense to him or her individually.

One way of interpreting Tolkien which seems to have made sense for many is an examination of metaphysical issues of fate vs. free will. The previously referenced Patricia Meyer Spacks for example reads the free will offered to the characters in Middle Earth as a sort of moral work-out; as characters make the correct choices they grow in moral stature, and as they make incorrect choices they shrink in moral stature. This by itself would be a valid, if simplistic, reading of Tolkien's work, but Spacks also continues to say that the bad choices that characters make eventually robs them of their will power to the point that they actually lose their free will



and become like Gollum. Ralph C. Wood states a similar idea more explicitly when he says that “though Frodo could have turned away from his vocation to become the Ringbearer, Tolkien would have hardly regarded this as a free decision. Such a rejection would have shown that Frodo’s will was imprisoned to its own interest, as the doctrine of original sin teaches” (332). Spacks and Wood both speak about the free will of Tolkien’s characters, but then they say that choosing otherwise but the good is not a free choice but rather enslavement. If there are two options however and one is enslavement, is the other option truly free?

Janet Brennan Croft and Keith W. Jensen would perhaps argue that Spacks and Wood’s view of free-will is not in fact free. They see both the good and the evil choices as free, and see even if it leads to bad choosing they benefit. Individuals may choose something that is contrary to direct orders or even common sense, but the mere act of choosing for oneself is commendable and beneficial to the greater good. Jensen expresses his reasons for this view through musical terms, focusing on the necessity of dissonance in music, and referring to actions of free will that work in contrast to what should be expected as the “dissonance in the divine theme” of Middle Earth.

In her argument, Croft focuses on Tolkien’s concept of eucastrophy, a term which he describes as “a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on to recur. It does not deny the existence of dyscatastrophe, of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance: it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat and in so fair is evangelium, giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (*Miscelany*, 136). A eucastrophy is a sudden turn of events and the joy that happens when one was expecting defeat but instead triumphs. Croft sees disobedience and free will as

necessary to this because if everybody functioned logically and according to orders at all times, there would be no room left for the unexpected joy of eucastrophe.

Croft and Jensen are perhaps closer to a complete understanding of Tolkien's thought on free will than Spacks and Wood, but each of the above articles falls short. An examination of Tolkien's personal notes on free will reveals a type of "soft determinism" as it is framed in philosophical discussions of the problem of free will, meaning Tolkien believes and presents a logical way in which free will and determinism, or fate, can coexist. Furthermore, I argue that Tolkien's particular views of fate and free will are in no way the focus of his fiction but rather one more piece of the complex and highly developed back-drop he has created for the history of Middle Earth. In fact, Tolkien's discussion of fate and free will supports my primary thesis that Tolkien values private interactions over public by granting more freedom to private individuals than to public figures in his fiction.

Tolkien's writings on fate vs. free will were not written as explicitly his own views. Rather, Tolkien was interested in the linguistic evolution of the concept of fate in his invented elvish languages. Explicit discussion of fate is only found in Tolkien's unpublished linguistic notes, which supports my argument that the problem of free will was merely a secondary concern for Tolkien. If Tolkien were truly interested in Fate and Free Will for its own sake, he could have identified the views as his own, written more than the 10 paragraphs edited and published by Carl F. Hostetter, or even potentially published his thoughts, but he did not do any of these things. While Tolkien's personal views definitely show through, the point of this work was to flesh out details in what was Tolkien's primary hobby and interest: the creation of languages, not to tackle the problem of free will for its own sake.

In both Quenya and Sindarin, the most prevalently spoken elvish languages of Middle Earth and most fully developed of Tolkien's fictional languages, the word meaning fate is very similar to the word meaning world. In Quenya *ambar* means world and *umbar* means fate, and in Sindarin *amartha* means world and *amarth* means fate because in both cases the word fate shares a linguistic base with the word world: *mbar* in Quenya and *amar* in Sindarin. Tolkien glosses his own notes on the root words *mbar* and *amar* with the comment that "the full implications of this word cannot be understood without reference to Eldarin [elvish] views and ideas concerning 'fate' and 'free will.'" (Hostetter 183). By exploring the linguistic evolution, we will here attempt to arrive at a fuller understanding of these concepts of free will.

*Mbar* originally meant to settle or establish, but came to mean more specifically to permanently establish a home or to erect permanent buildings. This sense of permanence in *mbar* overflowed into both *ambar* (world) and *umbar* (fate), meaning that this concept of fate that Tolkien discusses is a concept of something fixed and permanent. He says that "for all Elves and Men the shape, condition, and therefore the past and future physical development and destiny of this 'earth' was determined and beyond their power to change, indeed beyond the power even of the Valar to alter in any large and permanent way" (Hostetter 184). Based on this, Tolkien, or at least the elves he creates, seem to be deterministic when it comes to the problem of free will.

There is, however, a distinction between how fate works for the overall world and how it works for individuals within that world. The *umbar* of *ambar* (fate of the world) is something that cannot be changed but can be redirected. It's as if the fate of the world set out by Eru is a river and the individuals are like a stone within that river. No single stone may change the river and make it run backwards, but every stone does redirect the water around it. This is not perhaps a situation of absolute freedom for the individual, but it is a freedom to do anything conceivably

possible within the confines of the world in which one lives, so for all practical purposes it is in fact absolute freedom.

Looking specifically at examples from within Middle Earth history, Tolkien writes that:

"Bilbo was 'fated' to find the Ring, but not necessarily to surrender it; and then if Bilbo surrendered it Frodo was fated to go on his mission, but not necessarily to destroy the Ring - which in fact he did not do. They would have added that if the downfall of Sauron and the destruction of the Ring was part of Fate (or Eru's Plan) then if Bilbo had retained the Ring and refused to surrender it, some other means would have arisen by which Sauron was frustrated. Just as when Frodo's will proved in the end inadequate, a means for the Ring's destruction immediately appeared - being kept in reserve by Eru as it were" (Hostetter 185)

For Tolkien, fate is fixed for the world at large, but not for individuals. Individuals are placed in specific circumstances, but what they do with those circumstances is up to them. The outcome for the world at large may be the same, but the individual may have a very different experience. If Bilbo never chose to surrender the Ring for example, he would slowly become a creature like Gollum instead of a loveable scatterbrained old poet. The Ring would eventually have been destroyed, as that seems to have been its fate, but it would most likely have been destroyed by somebody other than Frodo, which would mean that Frodo would have been left to lead a simple happy life in the Shire. Or even if Frodo had been passed the Ring, he could still have chosen to stay in the shire.

Ultimately Tolkien's views of fate create a world in which the individual is free while the larger public world is inflexible. Even these metaphysical issues of freedom support a focus on

social freedom within Tolkien's work because there is a distinction between the public and the private even in discussions of fate which values the private sphere over the public.

Recognizing this valuation of private over public even in discussions of fate, I argue that Tolkien's characters are not entrapped by fate but instead by society. Even if fate does hold power over private individuals within middle Earth, it is through their involvement in the public sphere because what is public is more likely to be part of the immovable and permanent fate of the world set out by Eru. Individuals are free to choose their own way in the world, but if they choose to live in a very public position which would affect many of those around them with free-will, their choices are more likely to be conscribed by fate or to at least be in conflict with the free-will of others.

The power play of these conflicting free-wills and the entrapment and scrutiny that seems rife within the public sphere brings to mind the work of Michel Foucault. While Tolkien wrote the "Lay of Leithian" before Foucault began writing, Foucault's general views of power and society can illuminate some of Tolkien's arguments concerning public vs. private spheres.

In dealing with Tolkien's views of social spheres, some have asserted that Tolkien is primarily concerned with community. Ralph C. Wood went so far as to say that "there is nothing individualist to be found anywhere in Tolkien" (320). Wood supports this claim with examples from *The Lord of the Rings*, particularly in reference to the nine members of the Fellowship of the Ring. Even within *The Lord of the Rings* Wood's claim is shaky, but in the scope of everything that Tolkien wrote it becomes impossible to support an argument that Tolkien never writes anything individualistic.

Looking specifically at *The Lord of the Rings*, other critics have also tried to show Tolkien's interest in the communal over the individual experience. Devin Brown for example

argues that the significance of the quest to destroy the Ring is in fact saving the hobbit and ring-bearer Frodo Baggins from a life of seclusion. If this were true however, one would expect Frodo to be more involved in his community after this quest, but in reality he only seems more secluded than ever.

GINNA WILKERSON responds to Brown's point in her article "So Far from the Shire: Psychological Distance and Isolation in *The Lord of the Rings*" by saying that it is in fact the Ring which is causing Frodo's isolation. Frodo's increased isolation at the end of the novel could in this case be interpreted as a side-effect of having been in possession of the Ring for longer by the end, but at the destruction of the Ring, most of its effects were also destroyed, so one would expect for Frodo to recover if isolationist tendencies were in fact a negative side effect of the Ring.

The Ring did certainly hold a negative power over Frodo, but an analysis of the Ring's effects on the ring-bearers Bilbo, Frodo, and Sam, shows that this power has the strongest negative effects when these characters are put in the most public positions. Bilbo and Sam both are able to give the Ring away, while Frodo never can of his own will. I argue this happens because Frodo's situation was the most public and therefore presented him with the least freedom.

Bilbo didn't understand the significance of the Ring until he had already passed it on to his nephew Frodo; to him it was merely an odd trinket that he could use sometimes to avoid nosy neighbors and annoying relatives. In other words, Bilbo used the Ring's power to make its wearer invisible primarily as a way to maintain his privacy. While Bilbo is warned that the Ring is not something to be used lightly, and he does have some difficulty letting it go, he is never presented in an evil light for desiring privacy. In fact, his desire to live his life as a simple Hobbit

is perhaps what saves him in the end because he never tries to, or even desires to, subjugate others with the power of the Ring.

Frodo and Sam on the other hand are fully aware of the significance of the Ring in the larger concerns of Middle Earth. Sam still has a much easier time giving up the Ring than Frodo, which I argue is because of their differing goals. Frodo undertakes the Ring quest out of a sense of duty to all of Middle Earth, while Sam is more concerned with his private duty of friendship to Frodo. It is because of this that he is able to resist the Ring when it tempts him with visions of himself as ruler of the kingdom of Mordor, a place which he would then turn into one giant garden. Sam knows that “the one small garden of a free gardener was all his need and due, not a garden swollen to a realm; his own hands to use, not the hands of others to command” (*LOTR* 177). While the Ring supposedly gives Sam the power to take his own greatest private joys as a gardener and expand that to a kingdom, Sam does not want to take on the role of ruler. He doesn't believe that such a thing would even be possible.

Furthermore, Sam only ever possesses the ring because he believes Frodo to be dead and believes it to be his duty as Frodo's friend to carry on with the quest. It's because of private duty to Frodo as opposed to a grander obligation to the entirety of Middle earth that Sam is able to so easily hand the Ring back to Frodo when he must. It is perhaps this adeptness at avoiding entrapment in the public concerns of the story that Tolkien calls him the "chief hero" of *The Lord of the Rings* (*Letter* 131).

Turning to "The Lay of Leithian", this valuation of private over public in Tolkien's writing becomes even more apparent. After half of canto four is spent with Beren and Lúthien's private happiness, the reader is pulled back to King Thingol's hall, the wider world, and Beren and Lúthien's place in this world and reminded that there will be public consequences for their

private happiness. The entire poem is rife with images of bondage and entrapment, and by analyzing the differences between these images in the context of Beren and Lúthien's private time spent in the forest and the time they spend in the public sphere once Lúthien's father finds out about them, I plan to demonstrate Tolkien's distrust of the public.

The very act of analyzing these images of entrapment brings to mind Foucault, particularly his book *Discipline and Punish* wherein this idea of entrapment is demonstrated by Foucault to be a relatively new historical development. Before the eighteenth century, it was not incarceration but public torture and execution which rulers used most often as their punishment of choice for criminals. While some look at Tolkien's scholarly work as a medievalist and focus on the medieval influences on his work, the proliferation of entrapment in *The Lay of Leithian* demonstrates instead the influence of modernity in his work.

Foucault's analysis of power in society can be easily applied to "The Lay of Leithian." For Foucault it is not individuals who hold power, not even kings because "even if we reach the point of designating exactly all those people, all those "decision-makers," we will still not really know why and how the decision was made, how it came to be accepted by everybody, and who it is that it hurts a particular category of person, etc" (Kritzman 103-104). Even if there were only one decision-maker to know, it is still much more complex to fully understand the workings of power. Not to mention the fact that even these public decision-makers do have in some way shape or form a private life.

King Thingol as a character shows this complex interplay of the public and the private life. As Lúthien's father he would be well within his rights to be concerned about her personal well-being as she falls into a relationship with Beren, but instead he chooses to focus on his concerns as king. Upon learning that Lúthien has a suitor, Thingol asks the musician Dairon who



had witnessed their meeting “who is he / that earns my wrath? How walks he free / within my woods amid my folk, / a stranger to both beech and oak?” (“Leithian” IV.922-925). Beren has presumably earned Thingol’s wrath by being in love with his daughter, but it is not the budding romance that Thingol directly comments on but instead Beren’s very presence in his kingdom and among his people.

To describe Beren, Thingol uses the word “stranger,” which is often used to mean somebody with whom one isn’t very well acquainted, but this is in fact the fourth definition listed in the OED. This more personal sense of the word is preceded by the more public-centric definition: “one who belongs to another country, a foreigner; chiefly (now exclusively), one who resides in or comes to a country to which he is a foreigner; an alien.” (OED, “stranger,” n.1a). While Thingol could perhaps be referring to Beren’s lack of deeper acquaintance with Beech and Oak trees, it makes more sense in context to read this as a way of saying that Beren is an alien.

Because they are after all in the middle of a war, it is perhaps understandable that Thingol wouldn’t be happy to find out that an unknown foreigner has been in his kingdom, but he doesn’t stop there. Thingol’s concern for public safety goes so far that he is prepared to take away the freedom of not only foreigners such as Beren, but also anybody who may even seem to encroach upon the interests of the group. He says to Lúthien that “none unbidden seek this throne / and ever leave these halls of stone!” (“Leithian” IV.1020-1021). If any individual tries to exercise even minimal private power over the public sphere by taking their concerns to the king without first being summoned, then the king reasserts his power as public ruler by entrapping them forever in his hall. The physical descriptions of this hall itself further demonstrate Tolkien’s concern for and unease with public power.

From its very first introduction, Thingol's seat of power is described in ominous terms. The first description tells us that "she [Hirilorn the beech tree] stood above Esgalduin's shore, / where long slopes fell beside the door, / the guarded gates, the portals stark / of the Thousand echoing Caverns dark" ("Leithian" IV.874-877). The Thousand Caverns, also called the Thousand Caves or Menegroth, is King Thingol's capital. As a defensive position during times of war, it is natural to prefer an enclosed space, but even during peaceful times, Thingol maintains this oppressive space for his court.

Furthermore, the way into and out of these caves is described not once, not twice, but three times, first as simply door, then as "guarded gates", then as "portals stark." A door is a fairly innocuous way to describe the entrance; it is almost reminiscent of a private space such as a home. Gates however ensure that the space is definitively closed off, especially when they are described as guarded gates. Portal seems to add a certain grandeur to the space; it is defined as "a door, gate, doorway, or gateway, of stately or elaborate construction; the entrance to a large or magnificent building" (OED, "portal," n.1a). The word stark however delineates that any grandeur here is of a type that is still hard and unyielding. Especially with Thingol's desire to keep Beren captive in Menegroth, this reiteration of door, gate, portal leads one to dwell upon the entrance-way, and perhaps to even wonder if it is also an exit or merely an entrance and will trap anyone who ventures into the halls.

This wondering if there is an exit is of course backed up by Thingol himself several times over. Not only does he threaten to incarcerate anyone who approaches his throne without him first asking them to, but also he warns Beren that "captive bound by never a bar, / unchained, unfettered, shalt thou be / in lightless labyrinth endlessly / that coils about my halls profound / by magic bewildered and enwound; / there wandering in hopelessness / thou shalt learn the power of

Elfinesse!” (“Leithian” IV.1073-1079). Even after swearing to Lúthien that he would not physically harm Beren or chain him up, Thingol wants to use the very nature of Menegroth to keep Beren entrapped.

When set against the freedom of the nearly uninhabited forest surrounding them, these caves and their questionable doorways support the notion that a public political existence is by its very nature one that fosters entrapment. This distinction between the surrounding forest where one has the opportunity to be a free private individual and Thingol’s public entrapping court is furthered by examining the juxtaposition of Hirilorn the birch tree and Menegroth. Hirilorn the tree is placed above the entrance to Menegroth, which supports an assertion that Tolkien similarly places private interests above public ones.

A consideration of Thingol as representation of the public sphere is perhaps complicated by the actual condition of his kingdom. While most of Beleriand is busy fighting a war of epic proportions against Morgoth, Thingol has simply locked himself in his kingdom and used magic to keep out anybody who is not a part of it. This of course explains his confusion when Beren winds up among his people in Doriath. As established above however, Beren's status as an alien is not the only thing Thingol has against him because Thingol does not distinguish between Beren and his own subjects when saying that nobody may approach him with their private concerns without his explicit summons.

Thingol in fact begins to appear just a little selfish because of this refusal to hear any of his citizens’ concerns. The act of hiding his kingdom also suggests selfishness if examined through the lens of Christopher Scarf’s article about kingship within Middle Earth and specifically the role of religion and hope in for Tolkien's kings. The most honorable kings, such as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings* inspire hope in their subjects, even if they do not personally

feel any hope. Thingol does not live up to this however. Though many of his subjects may still have hope for the war against Morgoth and want to fight, Thingol himself doesn't have any hope and therefore hides his entire kingdom behind his wife's magic.

Because he is hidden from Morgoth and the wider concerns of Middle Earth, it may seem that King Thingol is as private as any king can be, but even the decision to hide his kingdom was in fact a public one. Thingol had previously been helping fight against Morgoth, but was forced to choose between the good of Middle-earth in general and the good of his own people when his armies suffered heavy losses. He chose to pull back and to keep outsiders from entering his kingdom at all, which as a public decision had repercussions for the rest of Middle-earth. As King, Thingol is trapped in a situation where he must make decisions for many, and these situations cannot go well for all affected.

Ultimately, the secrecy and magical barriers around Doriath only add to the feelings about the potential for oppressiveness in the public sphere. While the Girdle of Melian and Menegroth are meant to save the elves of Doriath from harm, they can also be means of entrapment. Despite this seeming desire to isolate himself from the concerns of Middle Earth, however, Thingol's response to Beren's declarations of love for Lúthien is to command that Beren bring him a Silmaril as a bride-price. This turns one of the most private moments of Thingol, Beren, and Lúthien's mutual interaction, Beren's proposal to marry Lúthien, into an immense public event. In order to marry Lúthien, Beren now has to face the evil Morgoth, against whom everybody has been fighting for centuries, and to steal a Silmaril, a gem so valuable that it has inspired these centuries of war.

Even this intensely personal moment however could never be purely private. Even without the Silmarils, and even without Thingol, Beren and Lúthien can never be completely

private as long as they are in love because love is, by nature, something which must be shared between two people. Foucault has been said to “show that there is power everywhere, even in the fibers of our bodies, for example, in sexuality” (Kritzman 104), and he is not wrong. Even in something as personal as a romantic relationship between two people, there will always be power dynamics to contend with.

Perhaps one way of contending with this inescapable power is what we see in movies such as romantic comedies. within this genre there is a common trope where one of the couple is afraid of commitment, perhaps is in general a player or frequently has one night stands, but then the perfect person comes into the picture and cures them of their fears. Our modern society values romantic relationships very highly, but there is still power and entrapment to face within these relationships. Considering Tolkien’s hatred of that which entraps, we will examine his views on the romantic relationships through his depictions of entrapment within Beren and Luthien’s private relationship.

For Beren in particular, loving Lúthien is referred to as his doom. Doom of course can be defined as “fate, lot, irrevocable destiny,” which as a denotation would be fairly neutral if the OED did not deem the negative connotations strong enough to include the parenthetical, “Usually of adverse fate; rarely in a good sense” (OED, “doom,” n.4a). Not only is the love for Lúthien appearing less and less to be anything Beren could have controlled, but also it is set up as a very negative thing.

Understanding doom as destiny here would however contradict Tolkien’s own understanding of fate vs. free-will which gives agency to the individual. Examining other aspects of Beren’s life which would be controlled by fate, such as his arrival in Doriath, shows that Beren is after all free from fate. When King Thingol asks about his arrival in Doriath, Beren

answers with “My feet hath fate, O King,... / ‘here over the mountains bleeding led,” (“Leithian,” IV.1046-1047). If Beren thinks fate brought him to Doriath, this would be a good place to say so because Thingol doesn’t want him there and fate could at least be his scapegoat, but there is another way to read these lines.

The key point is the claim that Beren’s feet themselves have fate. They’re not said here to be controlled by fate, but instead to possess fate, so crossing the mountains into the hidden forest kingdom of Doriath was in fact his own accomplishment. In other words, Beren himself is creating his own fate. Calling Beren’s love for Lúthien his doom should not therefore be seen as something commenting on whether or not this was fated, but rather simply upon Beren as socially entrapped by his love affair.

Looking at Lúthien on the other hand, it is interesting to consider how one who is considered the most beautiful creature to ever live in Middle Earth, one who is the daughter of an elvish king and a divine being and therefore extraordinarily powerful, would choose a simple human to love. The argument could be made that she didn’t in fact choose to love Beren, especially looking at the lines saying that “in [Beren’s] doom was Lúthien snared, / the deathless in his dying shared;” (“Leithian,” IV. 790-7921). Objectively this is true in that Lúthien does in the end trade her own immortality for Beren’s life and therefore die as no other elf had done, but the word snare is important to look at here. It is linked by rhyme to the word share, which mitigates its effectiveness in communicating a true involuntary entrapment by connecting it to a word that connotes a voluntary and positive action.

Even more important however is an examination of three lines that come very soon after the claim that Lúthien is snared in Beren’s doom. It is said that “no pursuit, / no snare, no dart that hungers shoot, / might hope to win or hold [her]” (“Leithian,” IV800-802). Of course on a

purely surface level this could be taken to simply show Lúthien's great power as daughter of the elf-king and a Maia (semi-divine being of angelic stature within Tolkien's mythology) – she has enough power to evade any physical pursuit, snare, or dart that she may for any reason encounter within her home (the forest kingdom Doriath). Within the context however, it is obvious that Tolkien is referring to a romantic pursuit, snare, or dart.

Pursuit may be read as a romantic courtship or suit, and this shows that Lúthien is not vulnerable to flattery or persistence in lovers. Snare of course in this romantic context would indicate that Lúthien is also safe from trickery and entrapment by lovers. 'Dart' in fact brings to mind thought of Cupid and the darts that he shoots at people to make them into lovers. This final invulnerability of Lúthien's falls in line with what was previously established about Tolkien's view of fate in Middle Earth because she's safe from the gods themselves and the fates that these gods would try to weave for her. She is free from any obligation to love and to commit herself to any one person.

Beren gives her a new name, Tinúviel, and it is when he does this that she finally turns to him and falls in love. This suggests a certain power that Beren holds over Lúthien, perhaps he has stolen some of her agency and that is why she falls in love with him because after all "he has named her – and no one knew better than Tolkien the power of names or the significance of being able to assign names. But it is misleading to suggest that Tolkien has 'power over' Luthien other than their reciprocal love (each puts the other before all else, even life): rather what he has done is recognize her mythic 'true name' and shown it to her" (West, 263). Even though naming holds power, as has already been shown, Lúthien is in and of herself a powerful being and is impervious to traditional attempts to elicit her love.

It is therefore a free choice on Lúthien's part to love Beren. The turning point when she finally reveals her love is described as: "she came / at the sweet calling of her name; / and thus in his her slender hand / was linked in far Beleriand;" ("Leithian," IV.802-805). Her name is not called in a powerful or manipulative way as should be expected if Beren's naming her had any sort of magical hold over her, but rather in a sweet way. Furthermore, the description of their hand-holding implies a certain egalitarian quality to their relationship because the use of passive voice prevents either Beren or Lúthien from becoming the easily recognizable object of affection. While her hand is located inside of Beren's hand, which could suggest that he holds power, her hand is in fact grammatically the subject of the phrase.

Any power Beren has over Lúthien is purely a power based on their love for each other. Even just this however is not an insubstantial power; when Beren leaves to reclaim the Silmaril, "welling tears / sprang in her eyes, and hideous fears / clutched at her heart" ("Leithian," IV 1184-1186). Because she is afraid that she may lose Beren, her heart is seized by, or in a way in the control of, fear. Even if the power is not wielded by the other within the relationship, there is still a certain power in the emotions themselves.

If Tolkien's main concern is freedom from any sort of bondage at all, this would mean that it's necessary to avoid not only public interactions with others, but also the private romantic interactions. This would mean however that Tolkien values absolute individualism of one person on their own, which is not the case. In Lúthien's case, the fear which clutches at her is in fact a fear of the "dark doom and wandering wild" which would be her time completely alone. Furthermore, Beren is the only character we ever actually see in a situation of being completely alone, and during this time he becomes weakened physically and emotionally.



In any kind of relationship there will inevitably be some form of power dynamic and loss of freedom. This may seem to be a reason to remain solitary if it wasn't for the example given of Beren's time spent alone after his people are killed. While he was surrounded by his father and friends Beren was known as fearless, but once he's alone "sorrow now his soul had wrought / to dark despair, and robbed his life / of sweetness, that he longed for knife, / or shaft, or sword, to end his pain, / and dreaded only thraldom's chain" ("Leithian," III.332-336). Being alone makes Beren so depressed that he even has suicidal thoughts and only cares about maintaining his freedom.

While this particular part may be explained by Beren's sadness at his companions' death, the overall journey is described as "lonely fare, / the hunger and the haggard care, / the awful mountains' stones he stained with blood of weary feet, and gained / only a land of ghosts and fear / in dark ravines imprisoned sheer" ("Leithian," III.563-568). Even while Beren is absolutely alone he is imprisoned, and in a way far worse than when he is with Lúthien. Alone Beren is lonely, hungry, haggard, weary, and bloody, and he has nobody to lean on during these hard moments, so it is undeniably better to be with at least one person than to be completely alone. Either way one will face some sort of entrapment, so at least the entrapment of a romantic relationship is a pleasant type of entrapment.

It is with the case of Beren that we see most definitively that Tolkien considers private relationships the highest ideal. While there is of course the potential for some kind of entrapment within romantic relationships, for Beren the beginning of his relationship with Lúthien is at core a freeing experience. Tolkien writes that "In Doriath Beren long ago / new art and lore he learned to know; / his limbs were freed; his eyes alight, / kindled with a new enchanted sight; / and to her dancing feet his feet / attuned went dancing free and fleet" ("Leithian," IV 828-833). After being

alone for so long, it is the experience of making a profound personal connection that frees Beren and imparts him with new knowledge and abilities. In dancing with Lúthien it may have been possible to say that Beren has wandered into a sort of entrapment in the moves of the dance, but Tolkien forestalls this argument by specifying that while Beren is attuned to Lúthien's dancing, following it is something which he does freely.

There is still some form of power in this relationship because power relations are unavoidable, but the power found within romantic relationships is not an evil. Here again Tolkien falls into line with Foucault's work because while he specialized in power, Foucault was careful to specify that not all power is an evil. In fact Foucault says of romantic relationships that "to wield power over the other in a sort of open-ended strategic game where the situation may be reversed is not evil; it's a part of love, of passion, of sexual pleasure" (Foucault 284). This is what we see in Beren and Lúthien's relationship in a way that we don't in any of the power plays within the public sphere. Beren and Lúthien do in certain ways hold power over one another, but that is the key: they each hold power over the other instead of one being in charge of the other. Power in private romantic relationships should never be a dictatorship but rather a give-and-take, even a game as Foucault terms it.

In both love and friendship, the bonds which Tolkien shows us are beneficial rather than entrapping. As seen above, despite the hardships which come, the love of Lúthien is a healing and freeing experience for Beren. In the end this love even saves him from the bondage of death. In Lúthien's case over and over she uses her power to escape from those who would entrap her because of her love of Beren.

Even friendship is shown as a beneficial bond; Beren's father once saved another Elvish King, King Felagund of Nargothrond, and because of this that King gives Beren's father a ring as

“the token of a lasting bond / that Felagund of Nargothrond / once swore in love to Barahir, / who sheltered him with shield and spear / and saved him from pursuing foe / on Northern battlefields long ago” (“Leithian,” IV. 1085-1095). This ring is representing a bond, but it is a bond of friendship freely sworn in gratitude for this act of saving a life. It is because of this friendship that Beren is able to attain King Felagund’s help in his quest for the Silmaril.

Ultimately bondage is inescapable. Whether one is in the public sphere, interacting privately with others, or completely alone, there is always something which will infringe upon freedom. In the public sphere this is generally a bad thing and is in fact the greatest evil in much of Tolkien’s work, but like Foucault, Tolkien does not condemn all power as evil. In the private sphere losing one’s agency can in fact be a benefit because it leads to mutual cooperation and help. In fact, losing one’s agency in private can in fact be a benefit because it helps one avoid the evils of complete solitude.

Even Tolkien’s view of Fate backs up this valuation of private over public because while there is an overarching fate for Middle Earth, that fate only puts people in opportunities to use their free will and choose anything that they want to. Just as the metaphysical world is trapped within a fate while individuals are free, the social world that Tolkien creates is trapped in the public sphere and freed in the small-scale individual level.

Private concerns are in fact shown through this poem to be the most important concerns which one could pursue. In this case of Beren and Lúthien, following the most logical route for what the larger population of Middle Earth wants would in fact accomplish less towards these public goals than Beren and Lúthien’s seemingly reckless pursuit of their private concerns. I call their pursuit reckless because of the apparent hopelessness of the quest coupled with the illogical risks that they take in pursuit of it. For example, while King Felagund of Nargothrond should

most logically stay with his people and lead them in well-planned battle against Morgoth, Beren instead uses his ring and the oath that Felagund swore upon it to recruit Felagund and a small company of his best warriors to help him in this hopeless quest. As any logical person would have predicted, Felagund and his warriors all die, but unlike would have been predicted, this sacrifice is not in vain. Against all hope, Beren and Lúthien accomplish their goal in a moment which Tolkien calls eucastrophe. Because Beren and Lúthien dismissed all public concerns in their private quest, they were in fact able to accomplish the greatest public good of the first age: the recovery of a Silmaril.

Appendix A:  
Glossary of Middle Earth Names, locations, vocabulary, etc

Beren	Human man of noble birth, falls in love with Lúthien
Lúthien (also Tinúviel)	Daughter of Elf King Thingol and Maia Melian
Legendarium	Term for all things written by Tolkien about Arda
Middle Earth	Technically a continent within Arda, but often used to mean Tolkien's fictional world.
Quenta Silmarillion	Collection of legends and myths of Middle Earth
<i>The Silmarillion</i>	The version of the Quenta Silmarillion published by Christopher Tolkien
Morgoth (or Melkor)	The Satanic figure of Middle Earth; a Valar who rebelled against Eru
Silmarils	Jewels made from divine light, called the gems of fate
Númenoreans	A dynasty of humans descended from Beren and Lúthien
Aragorn	Human King of Gondor in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i> , descendent of the Númenoreans.
Arwen	Elf descended from Beren and Lúthien, marries Aragorn and becomes Queen of Gondor
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>	Tolkien's most famous work.
The Ring (of Power)	Ring imbued with all of Sauron's power and evil
Sauron	Servant of Morgoth, becomes the main antagonist in <i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
Sador	Servant to Húrin's family
<i>Children of Húrin</i>	Posthumously published prose version of one of Tolkien's stories
Túrin	Protagonist of <i>Children of Húrin</i> . Supposedly cursed.
Morwen	Túrin's mother, Húrin's wife
Eru (or Ilúvatar)	Eru means "the one." This is the main deity of Tolkien's mythology
Arda	The name of the world in which Middle Earth is a continent
Gollum	Hobbit-like creature that had the Ring of Power for centuries
Valar	Demi-gods, helped create Arda. Live on the continent Aman during the first age
Eucastrophe	sudden turn of events; joy when one was expecting defeat but instead triumphs
Quenya	High elvish. The language of the elves who travelled to Aman.
Sindarin	The Elvish spoken by the elves who travelled halfway to Aman (spoken in Doriath)
Ambar	Quenya for world
Umbar	Quenya for fate
Amartha	Sindarin for world
Amarth	Sindarin for fate
Dairon	Musician of Doriath. Was once a suitor to Lúthien.
Hirilorn	Huge Birch tree near the gates of Menegroth. Thingol traps Lúthien in it at one point.
Esgalduin	Primary River of Doriath
Thousand Caverns/ Thousand Caves/ Menegroth	City in Doriath, Thingol's seat of power (alternate name of above) (alternate name of above)
Beleriand	Northwestern region of Middle Earth, setting for most of <i>The Silmarillion</i>
Doriath	Thingol and Melian's hidden forest kingdom
Girdle of Melian	Magical barrier around Doriath
Melian	Maia wife of Thingol and mother of Lúthien
Maia	semi-divine being, helper to Valar (more or less like an angel)
Tinúviel	Name Beren gives to Lúthien, it means "Nightingale" in Sindarin
King Felagund	Also called Finrod, Exile (one of the Elves who lived in Aman) who ruled a cave city
Nargothrond	King Felagund's hidden underground fortress (cave city)

## Works Cited

- Croft, Janet Brennan. "The Thread on Which Doom Hangs: Free Will, Disobedience, and Eucastrophe." *Mythlore* x.x (2010): 131-149. Web.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1988*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley *et al.* New York: New York Press, 2000. Print.
- , and Lawrence D. Kritzman. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. New York: Routledge, 1988. Print.
- Hostetter, Carl F. and J. R. R. Tolkien. "Fate and Free Will." *Tolkien Studies*. 6.1 (2009): 183-188). Print.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. "Power and Meaning in *The Lord of the Rings*." *Tolkien and the Critics: Essays on J.R.R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*.ed. Neil D. Isaacs and Rose A. Zimbaro. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968. Print.
- Tolkien, J.R.R. "The Lay of Leithian: Release from Bondage." *The Lays of Beleriand*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. New York: Ballantine Books, 1994. Print
- and Humphrey Carpenter. *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000. Print.
- . *The Lord of the Rings*. 2nd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986. Print.
- . *Narn I Chin Húrin: The Tale of the Children of Húrin*. Ed. Christopher Tolkien. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007. Print.
- . "Of Beren and Lúthien." *The Silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977. Print.
- . *A Tolkien Miscellany*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 2002. Print.
- West, Richard C. "Real-World Myth in a Secondary World: Mythological Aspects in the Story of Beren and Lúthien." *Tolkien the Medievalist*. Ed. Jane Chance. London: Routledge, 2003. 259-267. Print.
- Wood, Ralph C. "Conflict and Convergence on Fundamental Matters in C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien." Title. (ed.x). City:Publisher, 19xx. Print.

Abbreviations:

"Leithian"	for	"The Lay of Leithian: Release from Bondage"
<i>Letters</i>	for	<i>The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien: A Selection</i>
<i>LOTR</i>	for	<i>The Lord of the Rings</i>
<i>CoH</i>	for	<i>Children of Húrin</i>
<i>Silm</i>	for	<i>The Silmarillion</i>
<i>Miscellany</i>	for	<i>A Tolkien Miscellany</i>