

# 'That sickle of the heavenly field': celestial motifs in *The Lay of Leithian*

KRISTINE LARSEN

As a number of authors have demonstrated, there are myriad astronomical allusions in the legendarium, from Tolkien's use of the phases of the Moon to synchronize the chronology of *The Lord of the Rings*, to Earendil as the apparition of the planet Venus (the Morning and Evening Star). This article focuses on astronomical allusions in one particular set of Tolkien's writings, namely the various versions of the tale of Beren and Lúthien. The goal is to whet the reader's appetite for Tolkien's accurate and artistic use of astronomical allusion in his poetry, and invite the reader to seek out similar references whenever one reads Tolkien's works.

Most readers of Tolkien are first introduced to the love story of Beren and Lúthien Tinúviel in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Aragorn sings of their meeting. As he recounts (in *The Fellowship of the Ring*):

And in the glade a light was seen  
Of stars in shadow shimmering.  
Tinúviel was dancing there  
To music of a pipe unseen,  
And light of stars was in her hair,  
And in her raiment glimmering ...

After Beren sees her through the hemlock trees,

... forth he hastened, strong and fleet,  
And grasped at moonbeams glistening ...  
He sought her ever, wandering far  
Where leaves of years were thickly strewn,  
By light of moon and ray of star  
In frosty heavens shivering.  
Her mantle glinted in the moon,

Finally he catches up to her and calls her by name, and

As Beren looked into her eyes  
Within the shadows of her hair,  
The trembling starlight of the skies  
He saw there mirrored shimmering.

Readers who move on to *The Silmarillion*, and make it past the creation of the universe and the fall of the Noldor to Chapter 19 learn the details of the tale of Beren and Lúthien. The narrator of the tale explains that:

It is told in the 'Lay of Leithian' that Beren came stumbling into Doriath grey and bowed. ... But wandering in the summer in the woods of Neldoreth he came upon Lúthien, daughter of Thingol and Melian, at a time of evening under moonrise, as

she danced upon the unfading grass. ... Blue was her raiment as the unclouded heaven, but her eyes were grey as the starlit evening; her mantle was sewn with golden flowers, but her hair was dark as the shadows of twilight. As the light upon the leaves of trees, as the voice of clear waters, as the stars above the mists of the world, such was her glory and her loveliness.

Beren, struck dumb, wanders in the woods for some time, and when he finally catches up to her in the spring he hears her singing "as the song of the lark that rises from the gates of night and pours its voice among the dying stars, seeing the sun behind the walls of world". He finds his voice, calls out to her, and the rest, as they say, is history.

After Beren is captured by Sauron and thrown into the pit, Lúthien comes to his aid, and sings a song "no walls of stone could hinder. Beren heard, and he thought that he dreamed; for the stars shone above him and he sang a song of challenge that he had made in praise of the Seven Stars, the Sickle of the Valar that Varda hung above the North as a sign for the fall of Morgoth. Then all strength left him and he fell down into the darkness." As we all know, Lúthien rescues Beren, they eventually steal one of the Silmarils from Morgoth's crown, Beren dies, un-dies, and he and Lúthien live somewhat happily for some time after before both dying.

Readers of the various *History of Middle-earth* volumes are treated to multiple prose and poetic versions of this famous tale, and learn how central these astronomical motifs are to Tolkien's story. For example, in the earliest extant version, found in *Book of Lost Tales Part 2*, Tinúviel, the daughter of Tinwelint, dances to the music of her brother Dairon every night under the moonlight. Beren comes upon her "dancing in the twilight" with her bare feet "twinkling among the hemlock-stems". Beren is seen by Dairon when the full Moon illuminates his face, and Tinúviel is warned by her brother to run. Instead she hides among the flora, and "she looked in her white raiment like a splatter of moonlight shimmering through the leaves upon the floor". When Beren touches her she runs, and he thereafter searches for her "by dawn and dusk ... but ever more hopefully when the moon shone bright". He does find her one moonlit night, as she allows herself to be seen "for long her fear had departed by reason of the wistful hunger of his face lit by the moonlight". As the character of Sauron is still in development here, the scene with the song of the Sickle of Varda is not present in this first version, but it is an early addition to the lengthy poetic lay versions of the tale.

As Christopher Tolkien notes in his commentary: "The story of Beren's coming upon Tinúviel in the moonlit glade in its earliest recorded form was never changed in its central

image.” Therefore the astronomical motifs are central to the tale from its earliest forms, and reach their pinnacle in the development of the poetic *Lay of Leithian* (composed during the period 1925–31). In actuality, there are far too many astronomical references in the *Lay of Leithian* to discuss in total here, so I will instead merely focus on several important examples.

In version B of the *Lay*, Beren’s flight from Morgoth’s allies (before he sees Lúthien) reads as follows:

The Moon that looked amid the mist  
upon the pines, the wind that hissed  
among the heather and the fern  
found him no more. The stars that burn  
about the North with silver fire  
in frosty airs, the Burning Briar  
that Men did name in days long gone,  
were set behind his back, and shone  
o’er land and lake and darkened hill

In the earlier version A of the *Lay*, the Big Dipper is described as follows:

About the North with silver flame  
In frosty airs, that men did name  
Timbridhil in the days long gone,  
He set behind his back, and shone  
That sickle of the heavenly field  
That Bridhil Queen of stars did wield  
O’er land and lake and darkened hill

Having the Big Dipper behind his back is consistent with the fact that he is fleeing “the friendless North one autumn night”. Not only does the fact that the Big Dipper is behind him inform the reader that he is turning his back on the North, but is also descriptive of autumn, for in this season, the Big Dipper lies low across the northern horizon in the evening. This is also consistent with the description of the Big Dipper as the “Burning Briar” in the first quotation, a name that Christopher Tolkien admitted in his commentary that he could “cast no light at all on”. In an article published in *Mallorn* (43, 49–52; 2005) I suggested that the name “Burning Briar”, meaning both a burning bush and a burning pipe, depending on the context, describes the Big Dipper as seen with a red aurora in it, an event more likely when the asterism is low in the sky as it is in autumn.

Returning to the fundamental astronomical motifs of the story of Beren and Lúthien, we read of Beren’s first glimpse of Lúthien in the *Lay*:

In sunshine and in sheen of moon,  
With silken robe and silver shoon  
The daughter of the deathless queen  
Now danced on the undying green,  
Half elven-fair and half divine;  
And when the stars began to shine  
Unseen but near a piping woke ...

Lúthien is described as dancing to the music of Dairon from sunset on this summer day, when “the moon was yet behind the hill” and continued as the moon “uprisen slow, and round, and white” shone upon her ivory skin. At this point she began to sing

A song of nightingales she learned  
And with her elvish magic turned  
To such bewildering delight  
The moon hung moveless in the night

Rather than only being meant literally (as a reference to her powers of enchantment), this may also be a reference to the fact that the full moon of summer takes a lower path across the sky, and indeed will seem to be “uprisen slow” and move in a rather leisurely manner across the sky. This is when Beren comes upon her:

He gazed, and as he gazed her hair  
Within its cloudy web did snare  
The silver moonbeams sifting white  
Between the leaves, and glinting bright  
The tremulous starlight of the skies  
Was caught and mirrored in her eyes.

Beren moves towards her, and Dairon spies him, “a shadow in the moon’s pale flame” and Dairon urges Lúthien to flee. She does so, and as in the original prose version of the tale, hides in the hemlocks and the wild roses in her hair “glimmering there/ all lay like splattered moonlight hoar/ in gleaming pools upon the floor”. Afterwards Beren often saw her dancing “on moonlit night” until one night in spring he ran and called to her, naming her Tinuviel, and finally kissing her (and sealing both their fates). Christopher Tolkien notes in his commentary “there are many things that derive from the Tale of Tinuviel” including “the moon rising” and “her hiding under the hemlocks *like splattered moonlight*”. The motifs of moonlight and starlight are afterwards repeated throughout the *Lay* (as the careful reader will note).

The Big Dipper returns as an important symbol in Beren’s life when Lúthien seeks to rescue him from Thu’s (Sauron’s) dungeon. Here Beren dreams of singing

Old songs of battle in the North,  
Of breathless deeds, of marching forth  
To dare uncounted odds and break  
Great powers, and towers, and strong walls shake;  
And over all the silver fire  
That once Men named the Burning Briar,  
The Seven Stars that Varda set  
About the North, were burning yet,  
A light in darkness, hope in woe,  
The emblem vast of Morgoth’s foe.

Christopher Tolkien notes that the lines cited above are the “first suggestion of the idea that Varda set the Seven

Stars in the sky as an emblem of hope against Morgoth”, these lines having been written (according to Christopher Tolkien) on 1–6 April 1928. This predates by two years the following description of Varda’s creation of the Big Dipper which is found in the Quenta:


And high above the North, a challenge unto Morgoth, she set the crown of Seven mighty Stars to swing, the emblem of the Gods, and sign of Morgoth’s doom. Many names have these been called; but in the old days of the North both Elves and Men called them the Burning Briar, and some the Sickle of the Gods.

The Big Dipper is referenced again in the *Lay*, when Lúthien heals Beren of an arrow shot by Feanor’s sons:

Then sprang about the darkened North  
The Sickle of the Gods, and forth  
Each star there stared in stony night  
Radiant, glistening cold and white.

But on the ground there is a glow,  
A spark of red that leaps below:  
Under woven boughs beside a fire  
Of crackling wood and sputtering briar  
There Beren lies in drowsing deep

Note the use of briar to reference a burning bush in this case, an interesting play on the reference to the Big Dipper, here called the Sickle of the Gods.

In Tolkien’s poetry, as in his prose, we see him paying considerable attention to astronomical artistry and realism, reflecting both his own astronomical knowledge, and what one could expect from the educated reader of his day. However, given the overall decrease of common astronomical knowledge and experience in stargazing found in Western culture today (at least in part due to the rampant light pollution of the modern world), these references in Tolkien’s works are becoming increasingly obscure to his audience. 

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## A recollection of Tolkien: Canon Gerard Hanlon

DANIEL HELEN AND MORGAN THOMSEN

**W**ith the surge in popularity of *The Lord of the Rings* in the 1960s, particularly with its widespread success in America, Tolkien fandom came into its own. But although Tolkien was content that his book had been so well received, he did not understand why people caused such a fuss about him. He found the American cult reaction somewhat perplexing, but the ‘Frodo Lives’ and ‘Gandalf for President’ lapel badges did not nearly bother him as much as the continual stream of visitors to his house, the requests for interviews from journalists, or the inconsiderate times at which his fans would make telephone calls. 76 Sandfield Road no longer held the promise of the peace and quiet that the professor and his wife needed. Indeed the house was too large for the elderly Tolkien and Edith to keep up with all the housework. Therefore in 1968 they decided to leave Oxford and move to a bungalow in Poole, near Bournemouth.

The move was imminent when, on the afternoon of 17 June, Tolkien injured his leg in a fall as he was running down the stairs. He was picked up off the floor and taken to the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre, where even the hospital staff were in awe of his presence. That evening he met a young priest, Father (now Canon) Gerard Hanlon, who had been ordained not long previously on 18 March 1967, and who was serving as a curate at a parish in Headington, Oxford. He was also the Roman Catholic chaplain to the Nuffield and it was under these circumstances that Canon

Hanlon came to meet J. R. R. Tolkien. Daniel Helen asked Canon Hanlon for his recollections.

### **Before you first met J. R. R. Tolkien, what did you know about him? Had you read any of his books?**

Well, not a great deal. While I was a student at Oscott [St Mary’s College, Oscott, is a Roman Catholic seminary in the Archdiocese of Birmingham], Tolkien was the thing to read and those who did that sort of thing read it. I must confess I tried but got nowhere with it, so I didn’t bother. But he was certainly one of the cult people to read in those times.

### **When did you first meet Tolkien?**

I was a curate in a parish in Headington in Oxford, and I was the chaplain to the Nuffield Orthopaedic Hospital, which was a pleasant job. I met him one evening, I think it was the day he arrived, in the hospital. He had a poorly knee and he’d come to have it put right. There was a great commotion, he was in the private ward, and there was a great commotion at the end of the ward. So I enquired of the sister, ‘Who’s that?’

She said, ‘That’s Professor Tolkien,’ in a hallowed tone.

And I said, ‘Oh, he’s one of mine!’ So I went down to see him after all the herds of people had gone and we had a little chat. I asked, ‘Would you like Holy Communion, professor?’

And he said, ‘Oh, yes please.’ And that was the beginning of our very short relationship.

The first night he was there I think I started the