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“O’er the Moon, Below the Daylight”: Tolkien’s Blue Bee, Pliny, and the Kalevala

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“O’er the Moon, Below the Daylight”: Tolkien’s Blue Bee, Pliny, and the *Kalevala*

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That the end of the world¹ is concomitant with the final defeat of Melkor is foretold in *The Silmarillion*, when Varda creates the brighter stars and constellations to light the awakening of the Elves. The last two groups of stars she crafts are “Menelmacar with his shining belt, that forebodes the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days” and “seven mighty stars... Valacirca, the Sickle of the Valar and sign of doom” that she set “high in the north as a challenge to Melkor” (*Sil* 48). The former is unambiguously identified within the *legendarium* as Orion, and the latter as the Big Dipper. Orion is given even greater symbolic importance within the tale, because it is when he first “strode up the sky” and the star Helluin “flickered in the mists above the borders of the world” that the elves awoke (*Sil* 48). The star Helluin is Sirius, the brightest star in the night sky, the so-called dog star that dutifully follows his master Orion by rising just after him in the night sky. Is Orion – Menelmacar the Swordsman – supposed to represent a specific individual? If so, who is his dutiful companion Sirius?



Figure 1: Sirius (extreme lower left) relative to Orion as seen several hours after they have risen. The bright red star near the top of the image is Betelgeuse. The pinkish blob below Orion’s belt is M42, the Orion Nebula. The bright star in the lower right side of Orion is Rigel. Public domain, courtesy of NASA/ESA.

¹ A more detailed exploration of Tolkien’s eschatology can be found in Larsen (2015).

In an early iteration of the mythology outlined in the so-called Notebook C, it is recounted how Melkor (here called Melko) breaks the bonds he had long been trapped in and harasses the Elves of Tol Eressëa. The only help that came from Valinor is courtesy of the Vala Tulkas, who “privily” sends his son Telimektar (*BoLT II* 281). Telimektar “of the silver sword” and Ingil, son of Inwë, king of the Teleri, wound Melko and chase him up the great Pine of Tavrobel, a “mighty pine” said to reach the stars (*BoLT II* 281). Telimektar and Ingil afterwards remain in the sky to prevent Melko’s return; in turn, Melko attacks the sun, moon, and stars (through eclipses and meteors). The pine is cut down to stave off Melko’s return as long as possible, but he continues to cause mayhem in the heavens. For example, Urwendi, the pilot of the sun, is killed when her ship is upset by Melko and she falls into the ocean, and an enraged and grieving Fionwë, son of Manwë and Varda, will kill Melko in “the end” (*BoLT II* 281). Details of this final battle are scant, save that Fionwë and Tulkas will face Melko and fight “on the Plains of Valinor” (*BoLT II* 282). The second version of the end of Arda is found in the so-called “Sketch of the Mythology” (composed between 1926-1930). Here Fionwë leads the Sons of the Valar in the “Terrible or Last Battle” where Morgoth is captured and “thrust through the Door of Night into the outer dark beyond the Walls of the World, and a guard set forever on that Door” (*SoME* 40). But it is further explained that in the far distant future

When the world is much older, and the Gods weary, Morgoth will come back through the Door, and the last battle of all will be fought. Fionwë will fight Morgoth on the plain of Valinor, and the spirit of Túrin shall be beside him; it shall be Túrin who with his black sword will slay Morgoth, and thus the children of Húrin shall be avenged. (*SoME* 40)

While this “Second Prophecy of Mandos” (*SoME* 370) somewhat shifts responsibility for Melkor’s ultimate demise, it retains the motif of an eschatological swordsman.

The legend of Telimektar and Ingil in Notebook C suggests² that our constellation Orion “is only the image of Telimektar in the sky? [*sic*] Varda gave him stars, and he bears them aloft that the Gods may know he watches; he has diamonds on his sword-sheath, and this will go red when he draws his sword at the Great End” (*BoLT II* 281). The specific reference to a star appearing red at the end times is perhaps a nod to the erroneous yet popular scientific hypothesis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century referenced in H.G. Wells’ novel

² In his editorial commentary to “The Tale of the Sun and Moon” in Part 1 of *The Book of Lost Tales*, Christopher Tolkien notes that “the story of his [Telimektar’s] conversion into the constellation of Orion was never clearly told” (*BoLT I* 200). I would argue that the excerpts from Notebook C cited here at the very least give us a general outline.

The Time Machine (84) that all stars turn into red dwarfs before they die (Eddington 106). The more general description of Orion's sword-sheath being jeweled with stars is quite accurate, as noted in Figure 2 below. The middle "star" (labelled by the Greek letter theta θ) is actually the Orion Nebula, a massive cloud of gas and dust and infant stars that is visible as a fuzzy "star" to the unaided eye.

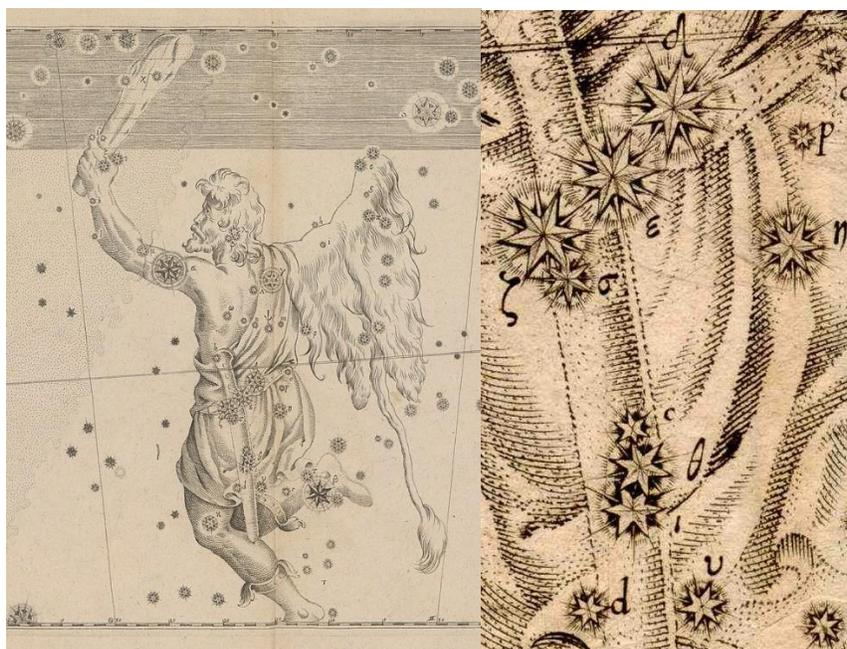


Figure 2: Orion (with a closeup of the belt and sword region) from Johann Bayer, *Uranometria* (1661). Public domain.

The passage in Notebook C continues “But now Telimektar, and Gil who follows him like a Blue Bee, ward off evil, and Varda immediately replaces any stars that Melko looses and casts down” as meteors. The etymological appendix to *The Book of Lost Tales I* quotes the Quenya Lexicon: “*Telimektar* is glossed ‘Orion, literally Swordsman of Heaven... The Gnomish form of it is *Telumaitar*. In the Valar name-list he is called also *Taimondo*.... The Gnomish equivalent is *Daimord* (*dai*, *daimoth* ‘sky, heaven’)” (*BoLT I* 268). The same appendix says of Ingil that in the Gnomish Lexicon his names “are *Gilweth* and *Githilma*; *Gil* is the star Sirius, and is said to be the name of *Gilweth* after he rose to the heavens and ‘in the likeness of a great bee bearing honey of flame followed *Daimord* [*Telimektar*, Orion]” (*BoLT I* 256). As previously noted, Sirius, the brightest star of *Canis Major*, Orion’s larger hunting dog, does faithfully follow its master into the heavens as it rises, and despite the fact that *Telimektar* and *Ingil* disappear in the “Sketch of the Mythology” and are absent from all

subsequent versions of the mythology, the celestial symbolism of Orion and Sirius rising into the sky endures, in the tale of “The Coming of the Elves” identified as Menelmacar and Helluin (as noted in *The Silmarillion*). Therefore Tolkien considered this pair of faithful companions immortalized in the stars to be an important addition to the cosmology, and while he certainly changed the details of the association over the development of his mythology, it is apparent that the vision of Orion heralding Melkor’s doom never left his mind. For example, in the c.1958 work *The Annals of Aman*, Orion (as Menelmakar) is said to be “a sign of Túrin Turambar, who should come into the world, and a foreshadowing of the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days,” the last reference in the main legendarium to the Second Prophecy of Mandos (*MR* 76).³

The most famous Tolkienian reference to Orion is perhaps the scene in *The Fellowship of the Ring* in which Frodo watches Orion rise while he, Sam, and Pippin spend the night with the elven company of Gildor Inglorion. Here the constellation is called by its Sindarin name, as he “climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt” (*FotR* 91). Tolkien’s description of the stars is consistent with the view from Oxford in late September around midnight, as described in the story. For example, compare this with the beginning of Robert Frost’s 1923 poem “The Star-Splitter”: “You know Orion always comes up sideways. Throwing a leg up over our fence of mountains...” (Frost 27). Christopher Tolkien explains that in the drafts of this scene, it is the moon that is observed, not the constellations, so the later addition of Orion to this scene was deliberate, perhaps a subtle way of tying the events of *The Lord of the Rings* to both the earlier history of Middle-earth as well as its overall mythology (*RotS* 325).

It is therefore notable that during the writing of *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien toyed with making significant changes to his mythology in order to align it with actual astronomical facts, such as making the sun and moon coeval with the earth rather than later creations as the last fruit and flower of the Two Trees. In one such cosmological model (published in *Morgoth’s Ring* as “Myths Transformed text II”), Melkor is driven out of the earth by the Valar and returns in secret under the cover of cold and darkness, “mostly at night and especially to the North in winter” (*MR* 376). Tolkien then notes that it is after the battle that drove out Melkor that Varda “set certain stars as ominous signs for the dwellers in Arda to see” (*MR* 376). While Tolkien does not name specific constellations in this particular essay, in a contemporaneous work (dubbed text IV by Christopher), the constellations Orion and “*the Plough... the Valacirca* or ‘The Sickle of the Gods’” are specifically mentioned as the handiwork of Varda (*MR* 388). Interestingly these two constellations are visually compelling in winter, as Orion

³ Christopher Tolkien notes that the “last reappearance” of the prophecy in *any* form is in one of his father’s notes to the late 1960s essay “The Problem of *Ros*” (*PoME* 374-5).

is high in the sky during winter evenings, and the Big Dipper is raised up on its handle, looking like a scythe. Thus, as Melkor sat in his camp in the north, he would be faced with the sword-bearing warrior before him (looking south) and a raised scythe to his back (in the north), as seen in Figure 3. Tolkien may have adapted this tableau from Manilius's *Astronomica* Book 1, lines 501-5, suggested by Emma Gee (66) to refer to Orion presiding over the Trojan War:

Already when the Greeks overthrew Troy the Bear and Orion moved with fronts opposed, she content to describe her gyrations at the pole, he rising to face her in opposition as she wheels on the other side and to transverse forever the whole sky.



Figure 3: The Big Dipper (seen on the right) as a scythe in the northern sky. Photograph by Cecille Engle Kennedy (CC BY-SA 4.0).

A final reference to Orion can be found in *The Notion Club Papers*, when Lowdham and his colleagues try to discover the meaning of the name *Éarendil*. In the first version of the unfinished tale, the fictional academics connect the name with “a star-name for Orion, or for Rigel” (SD 236), Rigel being the brightest star in Orion, marking one of his feet.⁴ A later version makes the direct connection with the Norse legend of Aurvendil's frostbitten toe being thrown into the sky by Thor (SD 301).⁵

Like Orion, the bright star Sirius also reappears in the various revisions of the legendarium, most obviously in the published *Silmarillion* in Varda's making of the great stars and constellations and the subsequent awakening of the Eldar.

⁴ While Betelgeuse is technically Alpha Orionis, it is a variable star, and is generally dimmer than Rigel, Beta Orionis.

⁵ Christopher Tolkien further explains this connection in an editorial note (SD 307-8).

But the jewels created by Fëanor are also compared to Sirius (here named Helluin) in *The Silmarillion* (64). Besides appearing as the stelliferous version of Ingil in *The Book of Lost Tales*, the star is also noted as among those most beloved by the Elves and Valar, there called Nielluin, “who is the Bee of Azure... whom still may all men see in autumn or in winter burning nigh the foot of Telimektar son of Tulkas” (*BoLT I* 182). The appendix in *The Book of Lost Tales I* (262) simply reiterates that Nielluin means blue bee and refers to Sirius without explaining why this name is specifically applied to the star. Sirius is a white star that can indeed seem blue-white to some eyes. However a direct association of Sirius with bees is nowhere explained in the *legendarium*, and was initially a mystery to this astronomer. It was therefore decided to investigate classical mythology connected with the star.

In many cultures, the name of Sirius and its larger constellation are synonymous. Sirius was an important celestial signpost for the ancient Egyptians, as its heliacal rising – the date it first rises just prior to the sun – was associated with the annual flooding of the Nile, an important event which guaranteed the success of the next harvest (Allen 124). The combined light of Sirius and the sun were often blamed for the hot weather of summer, leading to the common phrase *the dog days of summer* (Allen 118). Sirius has a checkered personality in classical mythology, as it is often associated with plagues and other ills. In the *Aeneid* Book X, lines 273-5, we read “the dog star, that burning constellation, when he brings drought and diseases on sickly mortals, rises and saddens the sky with inauspicious light” (Virgil 331). For example, Emma Gee (67) notes that, according to Manilius, Sirius “causes war and brings back peace,” what she refers to as the “violent and vacillating” nature of this star. This is an interestingly accurate description of how Sirius appears in the sky, as, due to its relatively low altitude, it can twinkly madly, especially as seen from far north latitudes, varying in both color and brightness. In his poem “Lycidas,” John Milton refers to Sirius as the “swart Star” (519, Line 138) and used as a sign of what Karl Wentersdorf (276) terms “immodest lust,” being said to increase the sexual desire of both men and women; its appearance would result in sexual debauchery (Wentersdorf 277). For example, in his 1589 work *Menaphon*, Robert Greene wrote that children cannot be sure that they “know their owne fathers, especially if they be begotten in Dogge daies, when their mothers are franticke with love, and yong men furious for lust” (qtd. in Wentersdorf 277).

While this is all interesting, and speaks to the relative importance of Sirius in classical literature, there is little here thus far that ties Sirius to bees. However, there are direct apian correlations in classical mythology that Tolkien would have probably been familiar with. For example, Aristaeus, a minor god and son of

Apollo associated with shepherds, cheese-making, bee-keeping,⁶ honey, and olive growing, is said by Apollonius Rhodius (*The Argonautica* Book II) to have saved the Minoans from the extreme heat of Sirius by creating the seasonal Etesian winds that prevail during the summer months (69-70). A more direct connection to bees and honey can be found in Pliny's *Natural History* Book XI. In Chapter 12, "The Qualities of Honey," it is said "this substance is engendered from the air, mostly at the rising of the constellations, and more especially when Sirius is rising" (Pliny 12). Chapter 14, "The Kinds of Honey Peculiar to Various Places," includes "summer honey" which is made "while Sirius is shining in all its brilliancy" (Pliny 13). If it does not rain after the appearance of a rainbow, and

the dew becomes warmed by the sun's rays, a medicament, and not real honey, is produced; a gift sent from heaven for the cure of diseases of the eyes, ulcers, and maladies of the internal viscera. If this is taken at the rising of Sirius, and the rising of Venus, Jupiter, or Mercury should happen to fall on the same day, as is often the case, the sweetness of this substance, and the virtue which it possesses of restoring men to life, are not inferior to those attributed to the nectar of the gods. (Pliny 13)

A similar connection between honey and medicine can be found in a work that is known to have greatly influenced Tolkien, the *Kalevala*. In Runo 11-15 we read of the adventures of Lemminkäinen. After quarreling with his wife, Kyllikki, he leaves her and seeks to woo one of Louhi's daughters. Louhi demands that Lemminkäinen perform a number of tasks, but he fails and is killed, thrown into the river of the death-god Tuoni and dismembered. Lemminkäinen's mother retrieves the pieces of her son's body and manages to reassemble them, but he is weak and nonverbal. His mother entreats a bee, here twice called the "active hero" (Kilby 160, lines 437 and 455), to collect different varieties of honey in order to make medicine to help her son revive and regain his strength. After two varieties of honey fail, the bee is asked to go to heaven, to the special forest where the Creator dwells. At first the bee is apprehensive, doubting his own ability to accomplish this important task, saying "How can I perform thy bidding, I a man so small and helpless?" (Kilby 161, line 491). Perhaps we see here a presaging of the following famous lines from *The Fellowship of the Ring*:

This quest may be attempted by the weak with as much hope as the strong.
Yet such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world:

⁶ Aristaeus's connection with bees is rather complicated; his pursuit of Eurydice results in the destruction of his hives; the bees are restored after he has atoned for his sins. See G.T. Thomas (1978) and R.F. Thomas (1991) for more discussion.

small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere. (*FotR* 283)

But as the mother explains, the bee will certainly succeed if only he will

Fly aloft with easy effort,
O'er the moon, below the daylight
And amid the stars of heaven.
Flying windlike on the first day
Past the borders of Orion,
On the second day thou soarest
Even to the Great Bear's shoulders,
On the third day soaring higher.
O'er the Seven Stars thou risest. (Kilby 161, lines 494-502)

As predicted, the bee accomplishes his appointed task, and Lemminkäinen is restored. Note that since Sirius lies just to the lower left of Orion in the sky, its normal position is, indeed, on the “borders of Orion,” as previously noted in the *Kalevala*. Given these mythological connections between Sirius, bees, and Orion it is no wonder that Tolkien's Ingil became morphed into a bee when he is transported to the heavens and takes his place beside Orion.

Not only are there references to Orion and the Big Dipper in this passage from the *Kalevala* (the primary constellations in Tolkien's eschatology),⁷ but also another group of stars that Tolkien references in several works,⁸ the Seven Sisters or the Pleiades. As described in the *Kalevala*, the Pleiades (part of Taurus the Bull) travel the night sky higher than Orion.⁹ This celestial trio is referenced in the final lines of Tolkien's essay “On ‘The Kalevala’ or Land of Heroes”, as the “Great Bear to play with and Orion and the Seven Stars all dangling magically in the branches of a silver birch enchanted by Väinämöinen”¹⁰ (*SoK* 87).

⁷ Tolkien's decision to use certain constellations and asterisms (e.g., Pleiades) in his legendarium is interesting when considered in parallel to specific groups of stars cited in the Old Testament. See Larsen (2021) for a detailed discussion.

⁸ Most notable among these is the early poem “Kortirion Among the Trees.” See Larsen (2018) for discussion of the astronomical allusions in this poem.

⁹ The placement of the Big Dipper/Great Bear is more complicated; during some times of the night (depending on the time of year), this group of stars is indeed very low on the northern horizon, but this is not a consistent placement.

¹⁰ Note that Tolkien differentiates between the “Great Bear” and the “Seven Stars,” as is fitting when contemplating the journey of the bee in the *Kalevala*. However, the reference to the stars seen in the tree branches refers to another passage in the *Kalevala*, in Runo 10, The Forging of the Sampo. Here Väinämöinen sings into being a wondrous tree, with the moon lighting the top and a

In addition, Tolkien reminds us that in the *Kalevala* we should seek

the delight of Earth, the wonder of it; the essential feeling as of the necessity for magic; that juggling with the golden moon and silver sun (such are they) that is man's universal pastime. (*SoK* 87)

It is indeed not surprising that we find such magic, wonder, and appreciation of the heavens in Tolkien's writings as well.

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group of stars in the branches. Translations by Kilby (94), Martin (n.p.), and Magoun (55) unanimously identify the constellation as the Great Bear (the Big Dipper), in contrast to Tolkien, who seems to suggest here that it is the Pleiades (or at the very least leaves the interpretation ambiguous). Such ambiguity is understandable, as the Big Dipper has seven bright stars, and the Pleiades is known as the Seven Sisters (although only six stars are easily visible to most observers; a satisfactory, universally accepted scientific explanation for the apparent error in the traditional name has thus far eluded astronomers, and is well beyond this present discussion). The shape of the Pleiades is also "dipper-like," leading many casual observers of the night sky to confuse it with the Little Dipper. See <https://earthsky.org/sky-archive/november-is-the-month-of-the-pleiades/> for more information. As a side note, it is possible that Väinämöinen's celestial tree was a motivation behind the creation of the aforementioned Pine of Tavrobel in *The Book of Lost Tales*.

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