

THE FATHER'S STAR. STAR IMAGERY IN  
VIRGIL'S *AENEID* AND J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE  
LORD OF THE RINGS*

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**Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is the analysis of some resemblances between J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, especially the iconography of the star borne on a ruler's brow as a symbol of royalty and as proof of divine ancestry.

**Keywords:** Tolkien, Virgil, Elendilmir, *Aeneid*, *Sidus Iulium*, Eärendil

LA ESTRELLA DEL PADRE. IMÁGENES DE  
ESTRELLAS EN LA *ENEIDA* DE VIRGILIO Y *EL  
SEÑOR DE LOS ANILLOS* DE J.R.R. TOLKIEN

**Resumen**

El presente artículo estudia algunas semejanzas entre *El señor de los anillos* de J. R. R. Tolkien y la *Eneida* de Virgilio, centradas en la iconografía de la estrella que un príncipe lleva en la frente como símbolo de realeza y prueba de linaje divino.

**Palabras clave:** Tolkien, Virgilio, Elendilmir, *Eneida*, *Sidus Iulium*, Eärendil

# THE FATHER'S STAR. STAR IMAGERY IN VIRGIL'S *AENEID* AND J. R. R. TOLKIEN'S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

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The purpose of this paper is the analysis of some iconographic resemblances between *The Lord of the Rings* and Virgil's *Aeneid*.<sup>1</sup> This is not the place to make an in-depth study of all the Virgilian echoes in Tolkien's work: they are many, and the most salient of them are well catalogued and studied<sup>2</sup>. Rather, I will focus on a single, recurrent aspect from the complex and polysemous star-imagery developed by Tolkien: the iconography of the star borne on a ruler's brow as a symbol of royalty and as proof of divine ancestry. It will be my contention that this particular conception was inspired by Virgil at least in a significant part, although it would be unwise to imply that no other sources are possible: advocating for single sources from single languages in Tolkien is always a risky business (on the necessity for Tolkien's source criticism, and its caveats, see Fisher 2011). Therefore, I will argue that some important aspects in the narrative function of the Elendilmir and Eärendil's star can be traced back to the images of the *sidus Iulium* and Venus's star in Virgil's *Aeneid*.

## 1. Tolkien's command of Latin. His knowledge of Virgil

A few words about Tolkien's command of Latin Language and Literature seem necessary first. Tolkien knew Latin very well and no less Greek. Tolkien had his first contact with Latin in his childhood as the vehicle of the Catholic faith in which his deeply influential mother Mabel

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<sup>1</sup> When quoting from *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 2001), the following citation conventions are followed: *FR*: *The Fellowship of the Ring*; *TT*: *The Two Towers*; *RK*: *The Return of the King*. A previous version of this paper appeared in the website *LoTR Plaza: The Scholars' Forum* (<http://www.lotrplaza.com/forumdisplay.php?40-Scholars-Forum&s=6ee015e47775fc0bef3b3cfb8f609141>). The author wishes to dedicate the present paper to the memory of David Gransby and to thank the anonymous readers from *Littera Aperta* for their kind help in improving this paper.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Morse 1986, Turner 2000: 10-12, Barella 2007: 695-696, with bibliography.

Suffield brought him up. His early childhood experiences of Latin prayer led him to associate this language with sacredness, augustness, and joy (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 66). Although his mother had taught him the rudiments of Latin (Carpenter 1977: 38). Tolkien began learning the classical languages in a formal and structured manner in 1903, when he was eleven years old, at King Edward's School in Birmingham. The staple of the curriculum in this extremely prestigious school was at the time the exhaustive study of Greek and Latin (Carpenter 1977: 45, 53). As such, Tolkien received a thorough education in the Classics (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 172, 213). He began to use Latin creatively at a very early age. He was able to translate poems by famous English poets into Latin, he delivered speeches in Greek and Latin (among other languages) at the Debating Society, and he wrote reports in Latin for the school paper during 1911 (Carpenter 1977: 72-73). As a consequence of his proficiency in his studies, he received an Open Classical Exhibition to Exeter College (Oxford) to read Classics (Carpenter 1977: 73). In 1913, however, after his relatively lacklustre results in Honour Moderations, he left Classics and began to read English (Carpenter 1977: 89-90). Although his linguistic taste used to oscillate among several languages, what he used to call "his particular love of Latin" (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 376, 419) never left him (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 214). In fact, after he became Reader in English Language at the University of Leeds in 1920, he began to devote time once again to the study of other languages, Greek and Latin among them. He himself confessed as much in his Valedictory Address delivered in Oxford in 1959, at the end of Tolkien's last term as Merton Professor of English Language and Literature: "When English and its kindred became my job, I turned to other languages, even to Latin and Greek" (1997: 231).

What concerns us here is not so much his indubitable professional command of the Latin language, as the creative uses he put it to. The most revelatory proof of the role played by Latin in firing up Tolkien's creativity is perhaps the on-going functional and cultural parallelisms he himself established between Quenya, which he called Elf-latin, and Latin. See for instance Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 176: "The archaic language of lore is meant to be a kind of 'Elf-latin', and by transcribing it into a spelling closely resembling that of Latin . . . the similarity to Latin has been increased ocularly. Actually, it might be said to be composed on a Latin basis with two other (main) ingredients that happen to give me 'phonaesthetic' pleasure: Finnish and Greek" (Librán Moreno 2007: 344-345).

What about Virgil, though? The weight of Virgil on the traditional British school curriculum needs no explanation, and his influence on most of the European literatures in the Middle-Ages and in the Renaissance can only be described as colossal (see e.g. the pages devoted to the reception of Virgil in Farrell and Putnam 2010: 121-250, or Highet 1949: 761 under “Virgil”). Virgil would be of interest to Tolkien in two aspects: as a professor of Old English, and of course as a specialist in *Beowulf*, he could just not do without an intimate and thorough command of the *Aeneid*, as he himself showed in the famous Sir Israel Gollancz Memorial lecture *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics*, read to the British Academy in 1936 (1997: 8, 24-5, 27). In this speech, he quotes Virgil often. His quotes are no mere scholarly ornamentation. Rather, they are organically integrated in the context, and most of the times Tolkien does not bother to identify the author or locate the passage. Particularly, he quotes *Aen.* 7.203-7.204 *Saturni gentem . . . sponte sua veterisque dei se more tenentem* (1997: 27), *Aen.* 6.332 *multa putans sortemque animo miseratus iniquam* (1997: 24), 3.658 *monstrum horrendum informe ingens* (ib.) and 6.580-1 *Titania pubes / fulmine deiecti* (1997: 25).

This habit reveals two aspects. First of all, Tolkien was so familiar with the *Aeneid* that he was able to quote by heart lines in the original Latin. Some of those lines, furthermore, are not among the most famous or well-known in the *Aeneid*, then or now. Secondly, he was aware that the audience he was addressing in this particular speech had enough command of Latin and familiarity with the *Aeneid* to appreciate the meaning of his quotes and allusions and locate them within the poem, without need of full identification. If more proof were needed of Tolkien’s contact with Virgil during the long, drawn-out process of writing *The Lord of the Rings*, let us remember that at several points during 1943-1944 C.S. Lewis’s on-going (and unfinished) translation of the *Aeneid* was read and discussed in the meetings of the Inklings (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 93, 440; Reyes 2011: 4-5).

## **2. The star on the brow as mark of royalty: the Star of Elendil and the *sidus Iulium***

A star adorning one’s forehead usually marks the bearer as someone who belongs to or traces his descent from the elves. The elves’s own name in Quenya, Eldar, identifies them as “the people of the stars” because of their love of starlight (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 281) (Flieger 1983: 70). *The Lord of the Rings* introduces several elven characters who bear star-

shaped gems on their forehead: such is the case with Nimrodel (*FR* II 6, 330), Elladan and Elrohir (*RK* V 6, 830), Arwen (*RK* VI 5, 951), Elrond (*RK* VI 9, 1005), and most especially Eärendil, who became a star with a Silmaril bound to his brow (*TT* IV 9, 704). Some humans who are very close to the elves bear this distinction as well: we may recall the kings of Arnor, descendants of Eärendil through Elros, Silmariën and Elendil. The Kings of Arnor did not wear an elaborate double crown like the Kings of Gondor did (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 281); rather, they wore a diadem adorned with a single white star-shaped diamond as a symbol of their royal power. This star-shaped jewel is known as the Elendilmir (“Elendil’s jewel”), the Star of Elendil, and the Star of the North Kingdom (e.g. Tolkien 1980: *UT* 271, *RK* V 8, 843, VI 5, 945, App. A 1, 1018). The Elendilmir was a star-like white gem that had belonged to Silmariën, the eldest child of Tar-Elendil, the fourth king of Númenor. Silmariën bequeathed the stone to her descendants, the Lords of Andunië, from whom the kings of Arnor and Gondor were descended. One of Silmariën’s descendants, Elendil, established the custom of binding to the forehead the star-shaped jewel inherited from his ancestors with a slender fillet, to be worn in place of a crown. After him, his son Isildur and afterwards all the kings of Arnor and the chieftains of the Dúnedain of the North kept the custom, giving the name Elendilmir and Star of Elendil to the gem that signifies their descent from Elendil, and by extension Elros, first king of Númenor, through Silmariën.<sup>3</sup>

Is there any trait or feature shared by those that are portrayed with a star on their brows in *The Lord of the Rings*? The simplest answer is that the star on the forehead shows iconographically the bearer’s close affinity with the higher spiritual and cultural dimension represented by the Eldar, the people of the stars:

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<sup>3</sup> Much later, Tolkien wrote a contradictory account of the origin of the custom: in *Aldarion and Erendis* Erendis had the diamond which Aldarion brought her from Middle-earth “set as a star in a silver fillet; and at her asking he bound it on her forehead. For this reason, she was known as Tar-Elestirnë, the Lady of the Star-brow, and thus came, it is said, the manner of the Kings and Queens afterwards to wear as a star a white jewel upon the brow, and they had no crown” (1980: 184, 215 n.18). The Elendilmir was in existence in Númenor before Aldarion brought the jewel from Middle-earth, and “they cannot be the same”, as Christopher Tolkien asserted (1980: 284 n.32).

The hobbits did not understand his words, but as he spoke they had a vision as it were of a great expanse of years behind them, like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow. Then the vision faded. (*FR* I 8,142)

Gimli and Legolas looked at their companion in amazement, for they had not seen him in this mood before. He seemed to have grown in stature . . . and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown. (*TT* III 2, 423)

For now men leaped from the ships to the quays of Harlond and swept north like a storm. There came Legolas, and Gimli . . . But before all went Aragorn with the Flame of the West, Andúril like a new fire kindled, Narsil re-forged as deadly as of old; and upon his brow was the Star of Elendil. (*RK* V 6, 829-30)<sup>4</sup>

He was clad in black mail girt with silver, and he wore a long mantle of pure white clasped at the throat with a great jewel of green that shone from afar; but his head was bare save for a star upon his forehead bound by a slender fillet of silver. (*RK* VI 5, 945)<sup>5</sup>

The heirlooms of his [Aragorn's] house: the ring of Barahir, the shards of Narsil, the star of Elendil, and the sceptre of Annúminas (*App.* A I, 1018). N. 3: The sceptre was the chief mark of royalty in Númenor, the King tells us; and that was also so in Arnor, where kings wore no crown, but bore a single white gem, the Elendilmir, Star of Elendil, bound on their brows with a silver fillet.

The Elendilmir itself, the white star of Elvish crystal upon a fillet of mithril that had descended from Silmarien to Elendil, and had been taken by him as the token of royalty in the North Kingdom. Every king and the chieftains that followed them in Arnor had borne the Elendilmir down even to Elessar himself . . . Elessar took it up with reverence, and when he returned to the

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<sup>4</sup> See “And he commanded that his banner should be furled; and he did off the Star of the North Kingdom and gave it to the keeping of the sons of Elrond” (*RK* V 8, 843).

<sup>5</sup> See “Behold! One has come to claim the kingship again at last. Here is Aragorn son of Arathorn, chieftain of the Dúnedain of Arnor, Captain of the Host of the West, bearer of the Star of the North” (*RK* VI 5, 945-6).

North and took up again the full kingship of Arnor Arwen bound it upon his brow, and men were silent in amaze to see its splendor. (Tolkien 1980: 277)<sup>6</sup>

To sum up the tenor of the passages above, the intangible star that adorns Aragorn's brow in Frodo's and Legolas's visions in *FR* I 8,142 and *TT* III 2, 423 links his nobility, his potential as a ruler, and the hope that has been placed on his birth to his closeness to the Eldar, revealed in his upbringing in Elrond's house and in his descent from Eärendil. On the other hand, the physical manifestation of that visionary star, the star-shaped Elendilmir that adorns Aragorn's brow in *RK* V 6, 829-30, *RK* VI 5, 945, Tolkien 1980: 277, signals him as a member of the royal dynasty established by the Lords of Andunië and, more specifically, designates him as the sole living heir of Elendil.<sup>7</sup> The Star of the North Kingdom is also a reflection of the star of Eärendil, the evening star that guided the ships of Men towards Númenor (*RK* App. A I, 1011). We must not forget that Eärendil, through his son Elros, was the ancestor of the whole line of Kings of Númenor and afterwards Arnor and Gondor (*FR* I 11, 190).

Could Tolkien's creative fashioning of the iconography of the star on the brow have been stimulated by contact with one or several pre-existing sources?

In my opinion, it may very well be. My hypothesis is that one of the literary sources that powers up the image of the star on the ruler's brow is to be found in some passages in Virgil's *Aeneid* where the *sidus Iulium* or Julian Star is described or alluded to. The passages are, in order of decreasing importance, *Aen.* 8.678-8.681, *Aen.* 2.681-2.684, and *Aen.*

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<sup>6</sup> See also "There he (Isildur) assumed the Elendilmir as King of Arnor, and proclaimed his sovereign lordship over all the Dúnedain in the North and in the South" (Tolkien 1980: 271). It is of course well known that there were two Elendilmir in existence, the true, most potent one that came to be in Saruman's power, and the replica made for Valandil at Imladris (Tolkien 1980: 277), but for the purposes of my discussion the differences in function between them are irrelevant.

<sup>7</sup> One of the anonymous readers for *Littera Aperta* suggests that, with reference to Aragorn's association with the star, further thought ought to be given to the notion of Aragorn's star as a signal of election ("the chosen, the anointed"), as well as to his healing powers, which were closely associated with his status as a king. On this topic see Segura 2004: 80-115.

2.692-2.701.<sup>8</sup> I will comment on them and their use in the narrative of the *Aeneid* one by one.

Hinc Augustus agens Italos in proelia Caesar  
 cum patribus populoque, penatibus et magnis dis,  
 stans celsa in puppi, geminas cui tempora flammās  
 laeta uomunt patriumque aperitur uertice sidus. 680  
 (*Aen.* 8.678-8.681)

(On one side Augustus Caesar stands on the high stern, / leading the Italians to the conflict, with him the Senate, / the People, the household gods, the great gods, his happy brow / shoots out twin flames, and his father's star is shown on his head).

We are in the middle of the famous description of Aeneas's shield. Vulcan, Aeneas's god step-father, persuaded by his wife the goddess Venus, has fashioned a divine shield for Aeneas, with which Aeneas is ready to go to the fated war to conquer Latium (*Aen.* 8.608-8.625). The immortal shield is decorated with a long series of vignettes taken from crucial points in the future history of Rome, just as the war that is destined to lead to its foundation is about to begin (*Aen.* 8.626-8.731). The centrepiece of those vignettes represents the decisive naval battle of Actium (31 BC) (Eden 1975: xx), where Octavian's navy clashed against that of Mark Antony. Vulcan portrays Octavian standing like a Roman captain on the stern of his flagship, just as Aeneas will in *Aen.* 10.261 (Eden 1975: 182; Harrison 1991: 142), leading his ships in the minutes immediately prior to the beginning of the naval battle. The battle of Actium was the turning point in the civil war waged by the two remaining Roman triumvirs, Octavian and Mark Antony. In the previous months, Octavian's powerful propaganda machinery had deftly convinced Romans that Octavian's true enemy was not fellow Roman Mark Antony and his Roman troops and supporters, but rather his foreign wife Cleopatra and her Oriental allies (Dio Cassius 50.4-6). Therefore, Octavian's later propaganda successfully portrayed this crucial naval battle as the final clash of the whole of Italy, repository of the forces of civilization, against a barbarian, amorphous monstrosity risen out of the East (*Aen.* 8.696-8.713; see Serv. *Aen.* 8.698) (Eden 1975: 180-181; Gransden 1990: 50; Harrison 1991: 142). I wish to call attention to line 681,

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<sup>8</sup> All translations of the *Aeneid* are by A. S. Kline and can be found at <http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Latin/Virgilhome.htm>



which portrays a breath of fire that spreads through Octavian's temples and the star of his adoptive father Julius Cesar rising on his forehead. We shall have occasion to return to that image.

Namque manus inter maestorumque ora parentum  
 ecce leuis summo de uertice uisus Iuli  
 fundere lumen apex, tactuque innoxia mollis  
 lambere flamma comas et circum tempora pasci.  
 (*Aen.* 2.681-2.684)

See, between the hands and faces of his grieving parents, / a gentle light  
 seemed to shine from the crown / of Iulus's head, and a soft flame, harmless  
 in its touch, / licked at his hair, and grazed his forehead.

In Book II of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas tells Queen Dido about the fateful night in which Troy fell. The situation is desperate. The city has been razed to the ground and is now in flames, there is slaughter, screaming, peril everywhere. King Priam has been killed vilely (*Aen.* 2.506-2.560). Aeneas, in despair, sees no alternative other than going out against the victorious Greeks in a suicide charge, and hope to die killing, or at least try to (*Aen.* 2.655-2.670). Then, in the middle of the hopeless catastrophe, the crown of Iulus's head (Aeneas's young son) bursts into harmless flames. Iulus's frightened parents try desperately to put out the sacred flames that burn on the crown of their child. But the boy's old grandfather Anchises, whom his old lover Venus had blessed with the gift of interpreting portents and omens, immediately perceives that the fire that burns without being consumed is a god-sent sign. Following usual Roman practice, Anchises asks the gods to confirm that his interpretation of the portent is correct. Right in that moment, a shooting star crosses the sky and points them the way out of the apparently hopeless slaughter:

Vix ea fatus erat senior, subitoque fragore  
 intonuit laeuum, et de caelo lapsa per umbras  
 stella facem ducens multa cum luce cucurrit.  
 illam summa super labentem culmina tecti  
 695  
 cernimus Idaea claram se condere silua  
 signantemque uias; tum longo limite sulcus  
 dat lucem et late circum loca sulphure fumant.  
 hic uero uictus genitor se tollit ad auras  
 700  
 adfaturque deos et sanctum sidus adorat.  
 'iam iam nulla mora est; sequor et qua ducitis adsum'. (*Aen.* 2.692-2.701)

The old man had barely spoken when, with a sudden crash, / it thundered on the left, and a star, through the darkness, / slid from the sky, and flew, trailing fire, in a burst of light. / We watched it glide over the highest rooftops, / and bury its brightness, and the sign of its passage, / in the forests of Mount Ida: then the furrow of its long track / gave out a glow, and, all around, the place smoked with sulphur. / At this my father, truly overcome, raised himself towards the sky, / and spoke to the gods, and proclaimed the sacred star. / “Now no delay: I follow, and where you lead, there am I”.

Thus, in Troy’s bitterest hour, when all appears to be lost and the city is a ruined slaughter-house, a blaze of fire and the apparition of a star reveal, by the will of the gods, the royal destiny of the child Iulus. Iulus will be the founder of Alba Longa, the mother-city in which the future founders of Rome, Romulus and Remus, will be born, and the forefather of the glorious *gens Iulia*, a family line that will engender Julius Caesar and Augustus as well (*Aen.* 1.267-1.288). According to traditional Roman religious beliefs, the flames that burn on the temples of Augustus (*Aen.* 8.681), Iulus, and afterwards Aeneas (*Aen.* 10.270-10.274) without burning them herald the future greatness and royalty of the person they appear on (Henry 1889: 769-70; Fordyce 1977: 278). The most paradigmatic instance of this miraculous event is the fire that kindled on the head of the infant Servius Tullius, the future king of Rome (Liv. 1.39.1). Servius brought up Servius Tullius’s example in his note to *Aen.* 2.683 in order to illustrate the meaning and significance of the fire that crowns Iulus in *Aen.* 2.681-2.684. Romulus (*Aen.* 6.777-6.780) and Lavinia (*Aen.* 7.73-77) are other persons in the *Aeneid* for whom flames bursting forth from their heads signal their coming royal ascension (Williams 2003: 8-10, 13-4; Eden 1975: 182).

Let us look deeper into the meaning of the fire and the star in *Aen.* 8.681 and *Aen.* 2.681-2.684. The scholarly consensus is that the father’s star that shines on Augustus’s head in *Aen.* 8.681 must be identified with the so-called *sidus Iulium* or Julian star (Henry 1889: 769-770), the famous comet that for three days and nights blazed in the northern sky during a sacrificial festivity held in honour of Venus Genetrix (Venus as the ancestor of the *gens Iulia*) or during Julius Caesar’s funeral games, in both cases at Octavian’s prompting.<sup>9</sup> Those who witnessed the celestial apparition took the portent to mean that Caesar had been deified (Scott 1941: 257). Guided

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<sup>9</sup> There is no consensus about which festival Octavian was celebrating when the comet appeared. See Carswell 2009: 9.

by that reason, Caesar's heir Octavian commanded that a star be added to the heads of the three statues of Caesar he had erected in the Capitoline, in the *templum Divii Iulii* in the Julian forum, and in Venus's temple in Rome (Scott 1941: 257-258; Carswell 2009: 46). Octavian himself took to wearing helms engraved with Caesar's star, his father's star, in order to confirm his blood ties to him and to reinforce his role as his only heir.

The following are the main Greco-Latin texts that describe the apparition and political effects of the *sidus Iulium*:

Julius Caesar died in the fifty-sixth year of his age, and was numbered among the gods, not only by a formal decree, but also in the conviction of the common people. For at the first of the games which his heir Augustus gave in honour of his apotheosis, a comet shone for seven successive days, rising about the eleventh hour, and was believed to be the soul of Caesar, who had been taken to heaven; and this is why a star is set upon the crown of his head in his statue. (Suet. *Caes.* 88, tr. J. C. Rolfe)

During the day a comet was seen while they were performing sacrifices for Venus Genetrix and funeral games for Caesar were held. For three days a star appeared in the north. It was believed, by Augustus's persuasion, that it was Caesar's star. For on that account Augustus added this star to all the statues he had set up to the divinity of Caesar. And Augustus himself began to have a star represented on his helmet in honor of his father. (Serv. Verg. *Aen.* 8.681)

When, however, a certain star during all those days appeared in the north toward evening, which some called a comet, claiming that it foretold the usual occurrences, while the majority, instead of believing it, ascribed it to Caesar, interpreting it to mean that he had become immortal and had been received into the number of the stars, Octavius then took courage and set up in the temple of Venus a bronze statue of him with a star above his head. (D.C. 45.7.1, tr. E. Cary)

Rome is the only place in the whole world where there is a temple dedicated to a comet; it was thought by the late Emperor Augustus to be auspicious to him, from its appearing during the games which he was celebrating in honour of Venus Genetrix, not long after the death of his father Caesar, in the College which was founded by him. He expressed his joy in these terms: "During the very time of these games of mine, a hairy star was seen during seven days, in the part of the heavens which is under the Great Bear. It rose about the eleventh hour of the day, was very bright, and was conspicuous in all parts of the earth. The common people supposed the star to indicate, that

the soul of Cæsar was admitted among the immortal Gods; under which designation it was that the star was placed on the bust which was lately consecrated in the forum.” This is what he proclaimed in public, but, in secret, he rejoiced at this auspicious omen, interpreting it as produced for himself; and, to confess the truth, it really proved a salutary omen for the world at large. (Plin. *nat.* 2.93-94, tr. J. Bostock and H. T. Riley)

We may conclude from the texts quoted above that the star that was added to the head of Caesar’s statues marked his links to the supernatural world as well as his inclusion in the number of formerly mortal men who had reached immortality through apotheosis. Besides, the placement of a star on Octavian’s helmet brought legitimacy to his claims as the sole heir of Caesar just at a time when Octavian’s position and *auctoritas* as the lawful continuator of Caesar’s political tasks and head of the Caesarian party was not as solid and stable as it became later (see e.g. Suet. *Aug.* 68) (Carswell 2009: 4-7, 31). Afterwards, Augustus and his circle of supporters carried through a carefully executed propaganda plan to cement his authority; one of the items in this plan was coinage that depicted the iconographic association of the *sidus Iulium* with Caesar’s divinity and Augustus’s rule (Scott 1941: 261-262). Some of the leading poets of the day such as Virgil himself (*Ecl.* 5.56-9), Horace (*carm.* 1.12.46-48) and Propertius (3.18.31-34) supported Augustus’s endeavour to establish and reinforce such a connection (Williams 2003: 7; Carswell 2009: 13-5, 51-2). Virgil himself played—at least initially—some part in Augustus’s plan to exalt in the *Aeneid* the *gens Iulia* to whom Augustus and Caesar belonged. As Servius noted, the same network of ideas based around Caesar’s star appeared in the *Aeneid*: the father’s star that adorns Augustus’s head in *Aen.* 8.678-8.681 is identical to the augural and salvific star that saves the Trojans by showing them the way out of the burning city in *Aen.* 2.682-2.684 and 2.692-2.697, and the same as the shooting star that highlights Aeneas’s entry into war in *Aen.* 10.270-10.275 (Williams 2003: 4, 8; Carswell 2009: 53).

It is hard to miss the relevance of the previous passages (*Aen.* 8.678-681, 2.682-684, 692-697, 10.270-275) for some of Tolkien’s own writing. Let us consider in particular two key moments in the narrative of the *Lord of the Rings*. In the first scene, Aragorn reveals his majesty and high lineage before the hostile eyes of the riders of Rohan, and hints at his great future destiny. We see through Legolas’s sharp and perceptive eyes that a white flame shines on Aragorn’s brow as if it was a kingly crown:

He seemed to have grown in stature . . . and in his living face they caught a brief vision of the power and majesty of the kings of stone. For a moment it seemed to the eyes of Legolas that a white flame flickered on the brows of Aragorn like a shining crown. (*TT* III 2, 423)

In the second scene, just when the battle seems lost for the people of the West, Aragorn jumps out of one of the Corsairs of Umbar's black ships to lead the allied forces of the West towards victory over the evil forces of the East. Earlier, a supernatural crown-like white flame had burst out from Aragorn's head, a presage of his coming ascension to the throne. Now, the star of his ancestor Elendil shines upon the Man who carries in his hands the Flame of the West, the re-forged sword Andúril. The star of his forefather, the token that marks his bearer as Elendil's legitimate heir, adorns the brow of the hero just as he prepares to enter the fray for the fateful, crucial battle:

But before all went Aragorn with the Flame of the West, Andúril like a new fire kindled, Narsil re-forged as deadly as of old; and upon his brow was the Star of Elendil. (*RK* V 6, 830)

Virgil's Augustus and Aragorn both sail to the decisive naval battle against the monstrous armies of the East, "which is to establish peace and civilization" (Harrison 1991: 142). They do so while bearing on their head their fathers's star, which confirms them as sole rightful heirs and descendants of an ancient and divine royal line. Both are marked for victory and for a glorious reign they must acquire only after long toil and a great deal of intelligence and planning.

There is another text, closely related in both imagery and theme to *Aen.* 8.678-8.681, 2.682-2.684, 692-697 that I wish to consider. The flames, the star and Aragorn's resolute, grim attitude in *TT* III 2, 423 and *RK* V 6, 830 can be compared with the Virgilian lines that describe Aeneas's entry into the war against the Latins, which is a mirror-image of Augustus's intervention in Actium (Harrison 1991: 142, 145). The fires that blaze on Aeneas's head and the comet portent are iconographically and thematically linked to the flames that burned on Iulus's crown, the star that confirmed Anchises's interpretation of the prodigy, and the *sidus Iulium* (Williams 2003: 9; Eden 1975: 182):

Ardet apex capiti cristisque a uertice flamma	270
funditur et uastos umbo uomit aureus ignis:	
non secus ac liquida si quando nocte cometae	

sanguinei lugubre rubent, aut Sirius ardor  
 ille sitim morbosque ferens mortalibus aegris  
 nascitur et laeuo contristat lumine caelum.  
 (*Aen.* 10.270-10.275)

Aeneas's crest blazed, and a dark flame streamed from the top, / and the shield's gold boss spouted floods of fire: / just as when comets glow, blood-red and ominous in the clear night, / or when fiery Sirius, bringer of drought and plague / to frail mortals, rises and saddens the sky with sinister light.<sup>10</sup>

### 3. The star of Venus, Eärendil's star, and the Land of the West

Those are not the only Virgilian echoes I believe are to be associated with the *sidus Iulium*. A second set of associations clusters around the image of the star on the brow. Virgil's modern commentators have concluded that in the *Aeneid* the *sidus Iulium* is closely connected with the imagery of the evening and morning star, whom Romans called Lucifer and Vesperus, Venus's most beloved star (Williams 2003: 3-5). The propaganda disseminated by the *gens Iulia* considered Venus the ancestral mother of their lineage through Aeneas and his son Iulus, the future king of Alba Longa. Caesar himself benefitted greatly from the political use of Venus's star as his own symbol (Scott 1941: 26-27; Williams 2003: 5). Julius Caesar had stressed the descent of the Julian family from the goddess Venus (Suet. *Caes.* 6.). At the battles of Pharsalia and Munda, his watchword was Venus Victrix, and he represented Venus's star in his coinage (Scott 1941: 268-269). The association was dear to Caesar and strengthened after his death by his heir Octavian, and by writers who were sympathetic to the Julio-Claudian family (Scott 1941: 268). The previously mentioned 44 B.C. comet fell in with a sacrifice to honour *Venus Genetrix* and with the funerals for Iulius Caesar. As such, Augustus's intervention ensured that it became well known that the comet that had revealed Caesar's deification was one and the same celestial body as his foremother Venus's star (Scott 1941: 259; Williams 2003: 3-6): Venus herself ratified her "son" Caesar's apotheosis by sending her own star to announce the news to the world (see Verg. *Ecl.* 9.47: "Behold the star of Caesar born of Dione<sup>11</sup> has passed

<sup>10</sup> Compare these lines with the description of the Elendilmir: "But the Elendilmir of the West could not be quenched, and suddenly it blazed forth red and wrathful as a burning star. Men and Orcs gave way in fear" (Tolkien 1980: 274).

<sup>11</sup> Dione was a name of Venus. See e.g. *Ov. fast.* 2.461, 5.309, Verg. *Aen.* 3.19.

across [the sky]”, *Ecce Dionaei processit Caesaris astrum*). Likewise, Augustus legitimized his political ambitions by claiming for himself the iconographic symbol of his “father” Caesar’s star. Vesperus, the evening star that is ideologically and iconographically linked to the *sidus Iulium* that adorns the heads of Caesar and Augustus, is precisely the same star Venus sent to show Aeneas the way from Troy towards the promised land of Italy (Williams 2003: 4; Eden 1975: 158):

Italiam quaero patriam et genus ab Iove summo. 380  
 Bis denis Phrygium conscendi navibus aequor,  
 matre dea monstrante viam, data fata secutus;  
 (*Aen.* 1.380-1.382)

I seek my country Italy, and a people born of Jupiter on high. / I embarked  
 on the Phrygian sea with twenty ships, / following my given fate, my  
 mother, a goddess, showing the way.

Servius’ note on line 382 deserves special mention, as it preserves a precious fragment by the learned antiquarian M. Terentius Varro, who wrote extensively on the Trojan origins of some Roman family lines:

In book II of his work *Antiquitates rerum humanarum et divinarum*, Varro says: “From the very same moment Aeneas left Troy, he constantly saw Venus’s star during the day until he arrived at the Ager Laurens, where he was no longer able to see it: this was the reason why he knew he had arrived at the land that had been destined for him”. That is the source of Virgil’s line “following my given fate, my mother, a goddess, showing the way” (*Aen.* 1.382) and “And now Lucifer was rising above the heights of Ida” (*Aen.* 2.801).

Let us review the context of Varro’s quotation adduced by Servius. In *Aen.* 2.780-2.784, the ghost of Aeneas’ lost wife, Creusa, appears before Aeneas and announces him that his destiny is to leave Troy and arrive, after much hardship, in Hesperia, ‘the land of the West’ (the Greek name for Italy):

Longa tibi exsilia et uastum maris aequor arandum, 780  
 et terram Hesperiam uenies, ubi Lydius arua  
 inter opima uirum leni fluit agmine Thybris.  
 illic res laetae regnumque et regia coniunx  
 parta tibi.

Yours is long exile, you must plough / a vast reach of sea: and you will come to Hesperia's land, / where Lydian Tiber flows in gentle course among the farmers' / rich fields. There, happiness, kingship and a royal wife / will be yours.

In *Aen.* 2.801-2.804 Aeneas, obeying much against his will the divine orders voiced to him by Creusa's ghost, carries his old invalid father on his shoulders, grabs little Iulus by the hand, and sadly goes away following Venus's star, which shows him the way out of the slaughter-house that is now Troy:

Iamque iugis summae surgebat Lucifer Idae  
ducebatque diem, Danaïque obsessa tenebant  
limina portarum, nec spes opis ulla dabatur.  
cessi et sublato montis genitore petiui.

And now Lucifer was rising above the heights of Ida, / bringing the dawn, and the Greeks held the barricaded / entrances to the gates, nor was there any hope of rescue. / I desisted, and, carrying my father, took to the hills.

His destiny, unknown to him at the time at the time, is to reach Italy, build a new Troy there, and afterwards be raised to the heavens, where the stars live:

Cernes urbem et promissa Lavini  
moenia, sublimemque feres ad sidera caeli  
magnanimum Aenean.

(*Aen.* 1.258-260)

You'll see the city of Lavinium, and the walls I promised, / and you'll raise great-hearted Aeneas high, to the starry sky.

So much for Virgil. Let us now compare the previous lines with two passages from Tolkien. The first, briefer one describes the voyage through the sky carried out by Eärendil, the ancestor of the Númenorian royal line who had become the morning and evening star:

He that sailed his ship out of the mists of the world into the seas of heaven with the Silmaril upon his brow. And of Eärendil came the Kings of Númenor (*FR* I 11, 190).



My second text describes the sea voyage undertaken by the descendants of Eärendil, guided by their father's star towards the land of promise to the West of the world, where they will found the realm of Númenor. After the destruction of Beleriand and the radical change of Middle-earth, the Valar withdrew their protection from the Men of Middle-earth, who were entirely at the mercy of the hosts of Morgoth and suffered great terror and pain on account of that. But the Valar took pity and rescued the descendants of the Three Houses of Elf-friends who had taken part in the war against Morgoth, and guided them to an island they raised from the ocean just for them. The new isle was extremely rich and bountiful. The star that guided their course to the land of promise was Eärendil, the planet Venus. They called the fertile island Númenor, the Land of the West, and their first king was Elros, a son of Eärendil who had chosen to count himself among mortals:

Then the Valar forsook for a time the Men of Middle-earth who had refused their summons and had taken the friends of Morgoth to be their masters; and Men dwelt in darkness and were troubled by many evil things that Morgoth had devised in the days of their dominion . . . and the lot of Men was unhappy. . . . To the Fathers of Men of the three faithful houses rich reward was also given. Eönwe came among them and taught them; and they were given wisdom and power and life more enduring . . . a land was made for the Edain to dwell in . . . it was raised by Ossë . . . and established by Aulë and enriched by Yavanna; and the Eldar brought thither flowers and fountains out of Tol Eressëa. That land the Valar called Andor, the Land of Gift; and the Star of Eärendil shone bright in the West as a token that all was made ready, and as a guide over the sea; and Men marvelled to see the silver flame in the paths of the Sun. Then the Edain set sail upon the deep waters, following the Star . . . and so bright was Rothinzil that even at morning Men could see it glimmering in the West, and in the cloudless night it shone alone, for no other star could stand beside it. And setting their course towards it the Edain came at last over leagues of the sea and saw afar the land that was prepared for them, Andor . . . shimmering in a golden haze. Then they went up out of the sea and found a country fair and fruitful, and they were glad. And they called the land Elenna, which is Starwards; but also Anadûnê, which is Westernesse, Númenórë in the High Eldarin Tongue. (*Silmarillion* "Akallabêth", 321-2)<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> See also: "As a reward for their sufferings in the cause against Morgoth, the Valar, the Guardians of the World, granted to the Edain a land to dwell in . . . Most of them, therefore, set sail over Sea, and guided by the Star of Eärendil came to the

The Akallabêth narrative shows some correspondences with the circumstances that attended Aeneas's escape from Troy: throughout book II of the *Aeneid*, we are vividly shown that the gods have withdrawn their protection from Troy (*Aen.* 2.2.351-352, 610-623) (Gransden 1990: 74), either out of anger at the perjury of Laomedon (see Virgil, *Georgics* 1.501-1.502), Priam's father, or out of hatred for the Trojans. The Trojans are now entirely at the mercy of the Greeks, who benefit from the situation and burn Troy to the ground. In the middle of the carnage, and in accordance with Jupiter's and the fates's will, Venus sends her star, the evening star, over the heights of Mount Ide (*Aen.* 2.801-2.804). The star gives hope back to the Trojans, guides the steps of Aeneas Venus's son, and leads the Trojan refugees by a safe path in the middle of the destruction of the city. After Aeneas and his followers take to their ships in safety, Venus's star guides the course of the Trojan ships towards the land Fate has appointed as their new home: Italy, called Hesperia, "the Land of the West".

If we go back to Tolkien's long poem *Eärendil was a mariner* (*FR* II 1, 227-230), its final verse describes Eärendil as "the Flammifer of Westernesse". Flammifer is an intriguing word. It is a direct loan from the Latin adjective *flammifer*, which is, in its turn, a transparent compound of *flamma* (flame) and *fero* (to carry), similar in both form and meaning to other compounds from the same root like *ignifer*, *flammiger*, *lucifer*. *Flammifer* would therefore mean "bringer of flame". *Flammifer* as an adjective is documented often enough in Latin poetry (*OLD s.v. flammifer*), but as far as I know it was never used as a substantive, as Tolkien did by calling Eärendil *the* Flammifer. Jason Fisher (2008) rightly suggested that "Flammifer" was simply a substitute for Lucifer, "bringer of light", a proper

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great island of Elenna, westernmost of all Mortal lands. There they founded the realm of Númenor" (*RK* App. A I, 1011). Eärendil's star as the guide of his descendants towards Númenor appears also in the earliest version of the Akallabêth, called *The drowning of Anadûnê*, written ca. 1946 (Tolkien 2002: 147, 353): "And the Eruhil on the shores of the sea beheld the light of it; and they knew that it was the sign of Earendil. And hope and courage was born in their hearts; and they gathered their ships, small and great, and their goods, and set sail upon the deep waters, following the star. . . . And the Eruhil came to the land that had been set for them, and they found it fair and fruitful, and they were glad. And they called that land Andôrë, the Land of Gift, though afterwards it was mostly named Nûmenôrë, Westernesse" (Tolkien 2002: 343).

name which as a substantive named the planet Venus in Latin.<sup>13</sup> Tolkien would certainly wish to avoid using the name Lucifer on account of the satanic connotations of the term for a Christian. Another possible reason for the substitution of Lucifer by Flammifer may be that the name Lucifer refers to the planet Venus as it appears in the eastern sky before dawn, whereas the same planet is called Hesperus when it shines in the western sky after sunset (Eden 1975: 158). As we know, Eärendil's light shone both in the morning and in the evening,<sup>14</sup> so it stands to reason that Tolkien might have wished to choose a name that would not leave out the evening star aspect of Eärendil. In any case, the step from Lucifer to its near-synonym Flammifer would be facilitated by the Ovidian lines in which the soul of the recently dead Caesar kindles in Venus's arms and becomes the *sidus Iulium* or Caesar's star. The *sidus Iulium* was, as we know, identified iconographically, literarily, and ideologically with the star of his ancestor Venus, who is taking him to the skies in her arms (Ov. *met.* 15.843-15.8450):

Constitit alma Venus nulli cernenda suique  
 Caesaris eripuit membris nec in aera solvi  
 passa recentem animam caelestibus intulit astris  
 dumque tulit, lumen capere atque ignescere sensit  
 emitque sinu: luna volat altius illa  
 flammiferumque trahens spatioso limite crinem  
 stella micat natiq̄ videns bene facta fatetur.

He had barely finished, when gentle Venus stood in the midst of the Senate, seen by no one, and took up the newly freed spirit of her Caesar from his body, and preventing it from vanishing into the air, carried it towards the glorious stars. As she carried it, she felt it glow and take fire, and loosed it

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<sup>13</sup> Cic. *nat.* 2.53 *Stella Veneris, quae φωσφόρος Graecae "Lucifer" Latine dicitur* (the star of Venus, which is called Phosphoros in Greek and Lucifer in Latin). See also Hyg. *Astr.* 2.42 *Quarta stella est Veneris, Lucifer nomine . . . Hanc eandem Hesperum appellari, multis traditum est historiis. Hic autem omnium siderum maximus esse videtur. dicit eum hac de causa Veneris appellari, et ex oriente sole et occidente videri. Quare . . . iure hunc et Luciferum et Hesperum nominatum* (The fourth star is that of Venus, Luciferus by name . . . In many tales it is recorded that it is called Hesperus, too. It seems to be the largest of all stars . . . It is visible both at dawn and sunset, and so properly has been called both Lucifer and Hesperus).

<sup>14</sup> *Silmarillion*, "Of the voyage of Eärendil", 309: "Most often was he seen at morning or at evening, glimmering in sunrise or sunset".

from her breast: it climbed higher than the moon, and drawing behind it a fiery tail (*flammiferumque . . . crinem*), shone as a star (tr. A. S. Kline).

Why use such a direct loan from Latin to describe Eärendil, when this name is clearly Anglo-saxon in both mythological and philological terms?<sup>15</sup> Let us remember first that the star of Eärendil is the planet Venus, and a sign of hope (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 385, *FR* II 7, 355).<sup>16</sup> As has been seen, Lucifer (the doublet for Flammifer in Tolkien) was also the Latin name which translated φωσφόρος (“bringer of light”) and ἔσπερος (“the one in the west”), the Greek names for the planet Venus, in its aspect as the herald of the sun and the evening.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, the land that is destined to receive the Trojan refugees is called Hesperia. ἔσπερος is the Greek name of Venus’s star which led the Trojans out of Troy and towards Italy, which in Creusa’s words is called Hesperia. Hesperia means in Greek “Land of the West” (LSJ ss.vv. Ἑσπερία, ἔσπερος). Both western lands, Hesperia and Númenor, are wonderfully rich and plentiful. The god-given fertility and richness of the promised land of Italy, so beloved by Virgil, is praised profusely throughout the *Aeneid* (e.g. *Aen.* 2.781-2.784, 3.163-3.166). On its part, Númenor was so enriched by the loving actions of the Valië Yavanna that it became the fairest and most fruitful of mortal lands (*Silmarillion* “Akallabêth”, 321).

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<sup>15</sup> See e.g. *Letters* 385-386.

<sup>16</sup> The reader is encouraged to consult Larsen 2011 on the Ovidian and astronomical aspects of the Eärendil myth.

<sup>17</sup> The lovely Virgilian lines at *Aen.* 8.589-591 *qualis ubi Oceani perfusus Lucifer unda, / quem Venus ante alios astrorum diligit ignis, / extulit os sacrum caelo tenebrasque resoluit* (the Morning-Star, whom Venus loves above all / the other starry fires, when, having bathed in Ocean’s wave, / he raises his sacred head in heaven, and melts the dark) may have partially inspired Tolkien’s conception of Galadriel’s phial. Eärendil is described like this: “Eärendil, the Evening Star, most beloved of the Elves, shone clear above” (*FR* II 7, 355). His starlight is captured and preserved in liquid inside Galadriel’s star-crystal (“in this phial . . . is caught the light of Eärendil’s star, set amid the waters of my fountain”, *FR* II 8, 367), and once invoked, “it glimmered, faint as a rising star struggling in heavy earthward mists, and then its power waxed, and hope grew in Frodo’s mind, it began to burn, and kindled to a silver flame, a minute heart of dazzling light, as though Eärendil had himself come down from the high sunset paths with the last Silmaril on his brow. The darkness receded from it” (*TT* IV 9, 704). Note that Venus’s star and Eärendil are the most beloved stars of two supernatural forces, both celestial bodies are bathed or submerged in water, and when they rise in the sky they dispel the dark.

The resemblances between Aeneas's escape and that of the Men who sailed to Númenor do not stop at the phonetic or phrase level. In both the *Aeneid* and the *Silmarillion*, as we have seen, the gods withdraw their protection from previously cherished mortals, a decision that causes much hardship for them. In both cases, a star that is linked to an ancestor of the family, Eärendil in the case of Elros and his followers, Venus's star in the case of Aeneas and the Aeneads, guides the survivors towards a new land of extraordinary promise that is called simply "Land of the West" (Hesperia, Númenor).

The resemblances extend further. The word Númenóre is composed of the roots *númen*, "the direction or region of the sunset", and *nóre*, "land as an inhabited area", to be translated as Westernesse (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 361). On its part, Hesperia is derived from the Greek adjective ἑσπερίος, "proper of the region where the sun sets" (see LSJ II s.v.). Ἑσπερία is, as has been seen, the Greek name for what the local population called *Italia*,<sup>18</sup> whereas Númenóre is the Quenya form for the adûnaic Anadûnê (*SSilmarillion* "Akallabêth", 321). In both cases, the promised land bears two names: one in the vernacular tongue, a second one in a more prestigious, foreign language. Both lands are not, despite their name, the westernmost part of the world. The fabulous Iberian Peninsula, land of gods and mosters,<sup>19</sup> is west of Italy (Serv. *Aen.* 1.530), just as Tol Eressëa and Valinor are of Númenor ("Westernesse . . . which was most westerly of all mortal lands, and almost in sight of Elvenhome", Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 204). The Iberian Peninsula is named *Hesperia ultima* ("westernmost land"),<sup>20</sup> whereas Italy is just *Hesperia* ("land of the West"); compare the contrast between Westernesse (Númenor) and the name "True West" as a collective designation for the Undying Lands (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 94, 410-1). In their promised westerly land, the refugees of old establish a kingdom destined to rise to an extraordinary greatness and to achieve an

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<sup>18</sup> *Aen.* 3.163-3.166 *est locus, Hesperiam Grai cognomine dicunt, / terra antiqua, potens armis atque ubere glaebae; / Oenotri coluere uiri; nunc fama minores / Italiam dixisse ducis de nomine gentem* (There is a place the Greeks call Hesperia by name, / an ancient land powerful in arms and in richness of the soil: / There the Oenotrians lived: now the rumour is that / a younger race has named it Italy after their leader).

<sup>19</sup> Of course, this would be true in mythological terms from the vantage point of a contemporary of Aeneas; in Virgil's own time Hispania was a thoroughly demythologised country which was completely conquered by Rome in 19 BC.

<sup>20</sup> See e.g. Hor. *carm.* 1.36.4, Serv. *Aen.* 1.530.

overwhelming military, commercial, and political supremacy (*Aen.* 3.163-3.166, 1.257-1.296, 6.851-6.853, see Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 154-155) The sovereigns of the land, members of the royal lineage founded by Eärendil and by Venus, mark the nobility of their blood and their rightful claim to the royal title by exhibiting a jewel that symbolizes their ancestor's star: the Star of Elendil in one case, the stars added by Augustus to Caesar's statues and to his own helm in the other.

What motivation might have moved Tolkien to re-interpret Virgil's lines about the *sidus Iulium*, Venus's star and Hesperia and weave them into the great fabric of his legendarium? Doubtlessly, the Virgilian lines that I have adduced would be among the most studied and analysed by Tolkien, inasmuch as, according to Servius's testimony, they store a precious piece of information about earlier Latin epic poems and annalistic traditions concerning the Trojan origins of Rome. This was a matter that was of the utmost interest to Tolkien. In point of fact, in his great speech *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* Tolkien himself had mourned for the loss of those pre-Virgilian epic traditions, of which only scant shadows remain in Virgil, in the following terms: "Alas for the lost lore, the annals and old poets that Virgil knew, and only used in the making of a new thing!" (Tolkien 1997: 27-28).

#### **4. Aragorn, Augustus, the father's star, and the coming of the new age**

The general resemblances between Aeneas and Aragorn have been sufficiently studied elsewhere; I would like to focus on the Augustus /Aragorn parallelism to which the complex network of ideas woven around the concept and image of the star on the brow seems to point. To appraise the real worth of that parallelism I will adduce a further passage by Virgil which we know for certain was in Tolkien's mind, if only because he quoted it, without identification, in *Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics* (Tolkien 1997: 25):

Hic Caesar et omnis Iuli	
progenies magnum caeli uentura sub axem.	790
hic uir, hic est, tibi quem promitti saepius audis,	
Augustus Caesar, diui genus, aurea condet	
saecula qui rursus Latio regnata per arua	
Saturno quondam, super et Garamantas et Indos	
proferet imperium.	

(*Aen.* 6.789-6.795)

Now direct your eyes here, gaze at this people, / your own Romans. Here is Caesar, and all the offspring / of Iulus destined to live under the pole of heaven. / This is the man, this is him, whom you so often hear / promised you, Augustus Caesar, son of the Deified, / who will make a Golden Age again in the fields / where Saturn once reigned, and extend the empire beyond / the Libyans and the Indians.

Servius on 6.790 clarifies that line 789-790 (“Here is Caesar, and all the offspring / of Iulus destined to live under the pole of heaven”) implies a reference to Caesar’s comet, as well as a more overt one to Caesar’s and Augustus’s deification (Williams 2003: 16). As we may recall, Servius, in his note on 10.272, had remarked that the comet that appeared when Augustus obtained power heralded the arrival of a time of prosperity and good fortune for all the nations (Williams 2003: 9, 23). Therefore, the Virgilian image of the *sidus Iulium* over Augustus’s head and the twin flames on his temples just as he enters the battle of Actium in *Aen.* 8.678-8.681 predicts two future events: the end of a bloody century for Rome, frightful for the many civil wars that had bled Rome nearly dry, and the beginning of a new Golden Age, similar to that brought together by the reign of the old god Saturn (*Aen.* 8.319-8.325) (Scott 1941: 259; Williams 2003: 20-23). The star and the flames on Augustus’s head recall the augural, salvific fires that burned on the head of the boy Iulus Ascanius without consuming him, as well as the comet that portended the future birth of Rome even right in the middle of the ruin of Troy (*Aen.* 2.682-684, 692-697, 801-804). The father’s star on Augustus’s brow marks him as Caesar’s true heir, and therefore as the sole person able and willing to complete his political tasks. The fire and the stars that accompany Iulus, Aeneas, and Augustus foretell the end of an old terrible age and the beginning of the new, hopeful one. Just as the flames and the star of Iulus predict that great future Rome will rise out of the ashes of old Troy, the apparition of the *sidus Iulium* prophesies the coming of a new age of blessedness brought by Augustus’s peaceful and prosperous reign, which was identified by Augustan propaganda with a return to the Golden Age (*Aen.* 6.789-6.794, *Ecl.* 9.47-49) (Gransden 1990: 2-4; Carswell 2009: 17-20). Virgil locates the change of ages and the arrival of the new Golden Age in a very specific point of time: Augustus’ victory at Actium against the monster-like hosts of the East (Gransden 1990: 2). The symbol and signal for that change is the *sidus Iulium*, the father’s star that adorned Augustus’s helm and brow in that battle (*Aen.* 8.678-8.681) (Scott 1941: 266; Carswell 2009: 68-69).

According to Serv. Verg. *Ecl.* 9.46-47, the Etruscan soothsayer Vulcanius had declared publicly that the comet that appeared at Caesar's funeral games signified the end of the ninth age and the beginning of the tenth. In the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl of Cumae had herself predicted that Aeneas would fulfill his destiny and become the ruler of the new Troy in Italy, but at the cost of much blood and a very frightful war.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that, in Aragorn's case, his future greatness, his ascension to the throne of his ancestors, the hardship he would have to endure in his quest and his laborious victory in the War of the Ring were predicted by a dead man as well as by an old woman: Malbeth the seer, and Aragorn's foresighted maternal grandmother Ivorwen.

Malbeth the seer had foretold Aragorn's anguished passage through the Paths of the Death in a dire hour of need,<sup>22</sup> whereas Ivorwen had hinted at Aragorn's kingly future, the perils he would have to brave, and the coming of a new age.<sup>23</sup> This will bring to mind ghostly Anchises's prophetic admonition to his son Aeneas to travel through the Underworld before attempting to conquer Latium,<sup>24</sup> just when Aeneas's fortune seemed at its

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<sup>21</sup> *Aen.* 6.83-97 *o tandem magnis pelagi defuncte periclis / (sed terrae grauiora manent), in regna Lauini/ Dardanidae uenient (mitte hanc de pectore curam), / sed non et uenisse uolent. bella, horrida bella, / et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno . . . tu ne cede malis, sed contra audentior ito, / qua tua te Fortuna sinet. uia prima salutis / (quod minime reris) Graia pandetur ab urbe* (Oh, you who are done with all the perils of the sea, / (yet greater await you on land) the Trojans will come / to the realm of Lavinium (put that care from your heart): / but will not enjoy their coming. War, fierce war, / I see: and the Tiber foaming with much blood. / . . . / Do not give way to misfortunes, meet them more bravely, / as your destiny allows. The path of safety will open up / for you from where you least imagine it, a Greek city).

<sup>22</sup> *RK V 2, 764*: "Who shall call them from the grey twilight, the forgotten people? / The heir of him to whom the oath they swore. / From the North he shall come, need shall drive him: / he shall pass the Door to the Paths of the Dead".

<sup>23</sup> *RK App. A v, 1032*: "The days are darkening before the storm, and great things are to come. If these two wed now, hope may be born for our people; but if they delay, it will not come while this age lasts".

<sup>24</sup> *Aen.* 5.729-5.735 *lectos iuuenes, fortissima corda, / defer in Italiam. gens dura atque aspera cultu / debellanda tibi Latio est. Ditis tamen ante infernas accede domos et Auerna per alta / congressus pete, nate, meos . . . tum genus omne tuum et quae dentur moenia disces.* (Take chosen youth, and the bravest hearts, to Italy. / In Latium you must subdue a tough race, harshly trained. / Yet, first, go to the infernal halls of Dis, and in deep / Avernus seek a meeting with me, my son. / . . . / . . . Then you'll learn all about your race, / and the city granted you).



lowest point and his spirit was nearly in despair (Gransden 1990: 31, 75). That was the case with Aragorn also: only the uttermost need compelled him to heed Malbeth's words and take the Paths of the Dead, after not inconsiderable struggle.<sup>25</sup> Aeneas's voyage through Hades will fortify his courage and strengthen his faith in his fate just after landing in Italy and getting a taste of the daunting task that had been destined for him. Travelling through Hades will prepare him for the incoming decisive war and for the burden of his destiny (Heinze 1993: 225-226; Gransden 1990: 75). The voyage through Hell will turn the exiled wanderer into a leader, endowed with a refreshed sense of mission and responsibility (Gransden 1990: 31). Aragorn's passage through the Paths of the Dead will similarly give him the necessary strength and speed to be the victor in the last, final battle. In both cases, heeding the counsel of a dead man brought Aragorn and Aeneas both to the Underground. It may not be too far-fetched to think that the Sibyl's bittersweet prophecy of pain and hope underlies Ivorwen's far-seeing words about Aragorn's great future and the difficulties of the time ahead.

## 5. Conclusion

The influence of the Virgilian passages discussed on Aragorn's portrait seems obvious. Aragorn, the true heir of the kings of Númenor, Arnor, and Gondor, the descendant of immortal ancestors through Lúthien and Eärendil, carries on his brow a flame in the shape of a crown, and afterwards his forefather's star. This confirms him as a member of a royal dynasty: the Star of Elendil reflects the light from the star of Aragorn's ancestor Eärendil, the evening star. Just as Augustus's victory at the naval battle of Actium ushered in a new Golden Age, Aragorn's jump from the Corsairs's black ships and his victory in the battle of the Pelennor Fields against the monstrous evil from the East bring forth the end of the Third Age and the arrival of the Fourth Age (*RK App. A v*, 1036-7), marked by the departure of the Keepers of the Three Rings following Sauron's defeat (*RK App. B*, 1071, *RK VI* 9,1006). Just as the oracular Sibyl of Cumae did for Augustus (*Aen.* 6.789-6.794), Ivorwen, Aragorn's prophetic grandmother, had predicted the restoration of Elendil's line in Aragorn's person and glorious reign (which we see, e.g., in *RK VI* 5, 947). Aragorn's

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<sup>25</sup> *RK V* 2, 758: "Great indeed will be my haste ere I take that road", 763: "There is only one way through the mountains that will bring me to the coastlands before all is lost. That is the Paths of the Dead".

victory ensures the instauration of the so-called King's Peace (Carpenter and Tolkien 1991: 419) and the coming of the Fourth Age, whereas Augustus's rule established the famous *Pax Augusta* (*Aen.* 1.291) (Gransden 1990: 2-4), and ushered in the Etruscan Tenth Age (Serv. *Ecl.* 9.46-47). Therefore, the father's star in Aragorn's brow fulfills the same three roles that the *sidus Iulium* does: first, it signals that the bearer has been raised above the mortal plain thanks to his descent from a semi-divine lineage. Secondly, it marks the closeness of both to superhuman elements, gods in the case of Augustus, immortal Elves in the case of Aragorn. Thirdly, both leaders are portrayed as optimal rulers, liquidators of an old Age of the world full of pain and hardship, and guarantors of a new time of prosperity that had been predicted by dead men and by old prophetic women. Tolkien once called Virgil "the great pagan on the threshold of the change of the world" (Tolkien 1997: 24). T. S. Eliot considered the poet "the classic of all Europe". I posit that Virgil, who was consistently named "the father of the West" in the interbellum years,<sup>26</sup> is one the strongest inspirations that helped to originate Tolkien's image of the star on the brow, and its subtle but powerful role in the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*.

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<sup>26</sup> *Virgil. Father of the West* was the title of a widely successful essay published in 1931 by the famous German writer (and anti-nazi intellectual) Theodor Haecker. It was translated into English in 1934 (Th. Haecker, *Essays in Order*, London: Sheed and Ward).

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