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Magic, Matrimony, and the Moon: Medieval Lunar Symbolism in J.R.R. Tolkien’s “The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun” and “The Fall of Arthur”

Kristine Larsen

This paper was delivered at the 2017 International Medieval Congress at the University of Leeds, UK. The handout referred to appears at the end of this paper as an appendix.

In a 1951 letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien wrote, “Light is such a primeval symbol in the nature of the Universe, that it can hardly be analysed...” (*Letters*, 2000, p. 148). Challenge accepted, Professor. The central luminous bodies in the legendarium are, of course, the Silmarils, the ill-fated jewels that preserved the light from the Two Trees of Valinor before they were defiled and killed by Melkor and Ungoliant. The last fruit and flower of the golden and silver trees became the sun and moon respectively, but since, as Tolkien wrote to Waldman, “The Light of the Sun (or Moon) is derived from the Trees only after they were sullied by Evil,” the corrupted nature of these celestial orbs serves as a powerful symbol of the fallen world in which we live (*Letters*, 2000, p. 148).

In our primary world, we witness cycles related to the sun and moon, the most noticeable being their rising and setting and the phases of the moon. The 29.5 day lunar cycle was historically divided into three segments: the full moon, the waxing or growing part of the cycle between new and full, and the waning or shrinking part of the cycle after full and leading back to new. The apparent birth of the moon as new and its death (and rebirth) 29.5 days later led to terms such as young moon and old moon for the waxing and waning crescent phases respectively.

The phases of the moon played an important role in the legendarium from its first versions in *The Book of Lost Tales*, as has been described at length elsewhere. I will merely note that in the 1930s during the writing of *The Hobbit* Tolkien was working under the common misconception that the lunar cycle takes 28 days, not 29.5 days, a fact I pointed out to John Rateliff (2010) based on notes published in *The History of The Hobbit*. But the waxing and waning of the sun has also been central to Tolkien’s vision of the world. For as the ancient Egyptians described in their mythology, sunrise can be viewed as the birth of the sun, its highest point in the sky at local noon is similar to the full moon, and the lowering of the sun towards the western horizon in the afternoon – its waning – leads to its apparent death at sunset. The annual waning of the sun’s noontime angle in the sky in winter (and the opposite in the case of summer) was symbolically represented as the death and rebirth of the sun in various mythologies. Tolkien himself likens the shortening time of daylight in autumn, a signal of the impending winter, to the behavior of men as they age; he writes in “The Fall of Arthur” that “As when the earth dwindles in autumn days/and soon to its setting the sun is waning/under mournful mist, then a man will lust/for work and wandering, while yet warm floweth/blood sun-kindled, so burned his soul” (2013, p. 17).

While Tolkien does not describe the rising and setting of the sun in terms of birth and death in his mythology, the concept of the waxing and waning of light is central to Tolkien’s vision of the perfection of the Two Trees. For example, in *The Book of Lost Tales* the light of the Trees waxes and wanes for 12 hours each in a complementary cycle (1984, p. 73). In “The Quenta” (written circa 1930 and published in *The Shaping of Middle-earth*) we read “In seven hours each tree waxed to full glory and waned. Each followed each, and so twice every day in

Valinor there came an hour of softer light, when each tree was faint and their gold and silver radiance was mingled, for when white Silpion for six hours had been in bloom, then golden Laurelin awoke” (1986, pp. 80-1).

As described by Kisor (2007), Tolkien’s mythology is interesting (but not unique) in connecting the moon with a male attendant and the sun with a female. In classical Greek, Roman, and Medieval writings, the moon explicitly represents not only a divine female, but women in general, a not surprising outcome given the numerical similarity between the lunar and menstrual cycles. The symbolic swelling of the moon to full and its connection to the symbolism of birth also led to the moon being connected with fertility. There are also numerous superstitions regarding the ability of witches to either control the moon or draw power from it. For example, in classical Greece the witches of Thessaly were said to have the ability to “draw down the moon,” a tradition that has continued to be cited in popular literature to this day (Mili 2015). The connection between the moon and women was also used as a metaphor for the perceived inferiority of women in medieval times. Elizabeth Pepper (2002, n.p.) argues that a theme in medieval literature was that the “feminine Moon shines only by reflected light from the masculine Sun,” symbolizing female passivity and male agency.

It is also important to note that the idea that the phases of the moon directly affect human behavior – the origin of the term lunacy – dates back to at least Aristotle. Twelfth-century German abbess Hildegard of Bingen wrote that bloodletting was most effective during the waning cycle of the moon and that the phase of the moon at conception affected an individual’s personality (Berger 1999). The lunar cycle was also believed to affect agriculture (specifically the ability of plants to draw water from the soil), and led to customs concerning the planting of crops, sometimes termed agricultural astrology (Zadoks 2013).

With this background in mind, I would like to point out references to these traditions and superstitions in two of Tolkien’s poems, “The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun” (first published in *The Welsh Review* in 1945 and re-released in 2016 in a volume edited by Verlyn Flieger) and the unfinished composition “The Fall of Arthur” (released in 2013 by Christopher Tolkien). I find it interesting that both of these poems were worked on in the early 1930s, soon after Tolkien’s work on “The Quenta” (recall the previous quote about the waxing and waning of the Two Trees) and while he was working on *The Hobbit* (with its increasingly intricate and unfortunately incorrect reliance on the phases of the moon).

“The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun” features a desperate Christian Lord who visits the Corrigan (a witch) in order to procure a fertility drug for his barren wife. The eventual price for the subsequent birth of fraternal twins is the Lord’s life. He refuses to be unfaithful to his wife and dies three days after being cursed. His Lady wife dies of grief and the fate of their ill-begotten progeny is never resolved. The poem is filled with competing motifs of light and dark, including their waxing and waning, such as in Example 1 on the handout where we read of the Lord’s increasingly dark thoughts concerning his lack of an heir.

The rising and setting of sun is noted numerous times in poem. At one level this is an obvious cue as to the passage of time, but as seen in Example 2, the Lord enters the perilous, dark realm of the Corrigan after the sun sets, at the death of day, and travels “Alone between the dark and light,” certainly meant to be a symbolic statement (2016, p. 5). The Corrigan’s realm is so deeply connected with darkness – both literal and metaphorical – that any light in her realm has a decidedly fallen quality: it is cold and grey, as seen in Example 3. The Lord returns to his home under the cover of night (literally in the dark, just as his wife is figuratively in the dark

about what he is about to do to her) and upon rising with the dawn his fears and guilt wane and his hope and joy wax, as seen in Example 4.

After the birth of his children, he asks his wife what she desires, and she recounts a strange, fateful dream that plagues her with a desire for woodland venison. As seen in Example 5, he chases a deer as the sun wanes and comes upon the Corrigan again, now seen in her desirable form in the bewitching light of the moon. The Lord refuses her advances and is doomed to die. Over the days that he lay dying in a stranger's home he dreams of the Corrigan in her old, hag form, and is haunted by her voice singing "beneath the moon." In an earlier version of the poem (in which the fertility plotline had not yet been hatched), the Lord rebukes the Corrigan's advances by saying "rather would I die this hour/Than lie with thee in thy cold bower,/O! Corrigan, though strange thy power/In the old moon singing" (2016, p. 51). This last line obviously references the waning moon, the moon that does not rise until the dead of night.

Meanwhile, seven days have passed since the birth of the twins, and the Lady rises from her bed and informs her attendants that she is going to church. This refers to a ritual known as churching (going to church for the first time after childbirth), but in the case of this poem it occurs much too soon (as normally it occurs 40 days or 6 weeks after a birth). While the Lord's three-day death sentence makes for drama in the poem, and parallels the death of Christ (without the resurrection, of course), Tolkien could have made another choice. The Lord's death could have lingered over 40 days and still have had Christian symbolism (namely the 40 days of Lent). As it is, the seven days of the Lady's confinement have a keen lunar symbolism, as seven days is the approximate passage of time between two consecutive major phases of the moon (for example from full to third quarter). If you are like Tolkien and are under the mistaken impression that the lunar cycle is exactly 28 days long, the symbolism is even stronger.

There is also an additional interesting lunar connection in this poem. Although the so-called Maiden-Mother-Crone triad of lunar goddesses popularized by poet Robert Graves was not published until the late 1940s-1950s, it should be noted that Graves largely based his hypothesis on earlier work by Jane Ellen Harrison, Lecturer in Classical Archaeology at Newnham College at Cambridge, first published between 1903-1912 (1922; 1962). For example, Harrison notes that not only were triads of goddesses common in mythology, but that in Stymphalos there were said to be three sanctuaries honoring Hera, in the form of a girl, Zeus's bride, and a widow (referring to her constant quarrels with her philandering husband). In Tolkien's poem, the Lady is also portrayed in three stages of life, a bride (as she and her husband symbolically renew their marriage through a special feast), a new mother, and finally a widow. There is also a triad of female characters, the "infant maid" (as Tolkien refers to the female twin), the Lady, and the Corrigan (who sometimes appears in the form of a hag).

In the precursor poem to "The Lay of Aotrou and Itroun" the Corrigan appears only in her beautiful, seductive form, a fay woman, and as Verlyn Flieger reminds us, "Tolkien himself later applied the term fay to his Guinevere in 'The Fall of Arthur'.... where she is described as being 'fair as fay-woman in the world walking for the woe of men.'" Within this unfinished poem, Guinevere bewitches both Lancelot and Mordred, and in Example 6 we read how she has the power to drive men to madness – to lunacy if you will. She is also a three-fold woman, as reference is made to the waxing and waning of her influence as she passes from Arthur's bride, to Lancelot's lover, and diminished queen who finally flees her castle in order to escape the advances of Mordred. The poem in general recounts the waxing and waning (with the emphasis on the waning) of the individual characters of Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot, as well as their mutual relationships, and Arthur's realm in general, as seen in Example 7. Christopher Tolkien

explains that when Mordred says to Guinevere that “Time is changing;/the West waning, a wind rising/in the waxing East. The world falters,” he is ultimately referring to the fall of Rome and Roman Christendom (2013, p. 88).

Three passages that utilize this waxing/waning motif are included in the handout as Examples 8-10. Example 8 describes Guinevere’s flight from Mordred under the cover of night, and represents her final descent from Queen of Arthur’s land to merely her father’s daughter, in a sense returning to her roots, like the moon, but unlike the moon she will not be reborn from her older and diminished phase into youth and vitality. Here she reminisces about the time of the waxing of her influence, as she rode to marry Arthur. Also note that in this passage we have references to all three of her roles within the poem, as a bride, as Queen, and as Lancelot’s “Lady.”

Example 9 describes the waxing of Lancelot and Guinevere’s relationship. The references to gold and silver can symbolize the precious metals as well as the sun and moon. Note the reference to her witch-like “tender poison” as well as the symbolism of the fading daylight (which could actually be thought of as not just a cloud eclipsing the sun, but the moon, in the form of Guinevere, doing so). Similarly Example 10 recounts the waning of their relationship after what we might refer to as a symbolic full moon – his rescue of her from the fire to which she had been sentenced. Note the language describing the eclipsing of the sun (Lancelot’s love for her) as well as her sorrow at their love’s loss of “her life’s splendor” and the fact that she was “from her self altered” (2013, p. 39). Both lines could easily be used to describe the waning moon.

In contrast to the waning of Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere, Gawain is painted as waxing. Indeed, Christopher Tolkien makes a point to highlight that Gawain is compared to the sun several times in the poem. In Example 11 we see Tolkien painting a sharp contrast between Gawain and Guinevere. In Example 12 Arthur returns to his kingdom at dawn (when the sun begins to wax), and during the battle Gawain is compared to the noon sun, climbing to the peak of its power “ere it fall and fail” (2013, p. 54). This last line is particularly interesting given a note by Christopher Tolkien, who says of Gawain “there is no reference to his strength increasing towards noon and then declining, which was an important element in the story of the siege of Benwick, where Lancelot wounded him grievously when his strength waned” (2013, p. 66). Here he references the tradition of Gawain attacking Lancelot at Benwick for the killing of Gawain’s brothers, a plotline that is absent in Tolkien’s version. In her 1898 work *The Legend of Sir Gawain: Studies Upon Its Original Scope and Significance*, Jessie Laidlay Weston suggests that this waxing and waning of Gawain’s power is proof that the character was, at one time, a solar deity (Cook 1906). While Tolkien left out the Benwick subplot, I would argue that he might not have left out this power, if you read carefully the last line of Example 12. This waxing and waning might indeed refer to the overall strength of Arthur and his army, but likewise specifically to Gawain. It is also said in Example 13 that Gawain’s “glory waxed as times darkened,” which might be a clever twist on this tradition (2013, p. 19).

Finally there appears to be a curious juxtaposition in the relationship between the Lord and the Corrigan and Mordred and Guinevere. Mordred, whose “bed was barren” (2013, p. 27) explains to Guinevere (Example 14) that her own barren bed shall be filled by him. When she refuses his offer, he threatens to take what he wishes. Consider this in light of the Lord’s machinations to bring life to his wife’s barren womb and the Corrigan’s threats when he rebukes her advances. I suggest Tolkien was (perhaps subconsciously) making connections of some sort

between these two works in his mind, beyond the direct connection of Guinevere as a fay-woman, perhaps unavoidable as these works were written at about the same time.

While Tolkien never finished “The Fall of Arthur”, it is fitting that the last Canto is entitled “Of the setting of the sun at Romeril,” where we read that “Thus Arthur abode on the ebb riding.... There was woe in Britain and the world faded...” (2013, pp. 55-6). “The Fall of Arthur” ultimately describes the waning of both the king and his world, and is perhaps a greater metaphor for both Arda Marred and the fallen world in which we currently reside.

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Appendix: Handout; Italics added for emphasis of key phrases

Example 1: [*The fall of the Lord*]

“there dwelt, till dark his doom befell,
as still the Briton harpers tell....
Thus pondering oft *at night* awake
his *darkened mind* would visions make
of lonely age and death; his tomb
unkept, while strangers in his room
with other names and other shields
were masters of his halls and fields;
Thus counsel cold he took at last;
his hope from light to darkness passed.”
(A&I, lines 11-12; 19-26, pp. 3-4)

Example 2: [*Entering the forest*]

“*The sun was fallen* low and red,
behind the hills *the day was dead*,
and in the valley formless lay
the misty shadows long and grey.
Alone between the dark and light
there rode into the *mouth of night*
the Briton Lord, and creeping fear
about him closed.”
(A&I, lines 47-54, p. 5)

Example 3: [*The deal with the Corrigan*]

“In his hand she laid
a phial of glass so fairly made
‘twas wonder in that houseless place
to see its *cold and gleaming* grace;
and therewithin a philter lay
as *pale as water thin and grey....*”
(A&I, lines 69-74, pp. 5)

Example 4: [*Lord returns home*]

“Arising then to *greet the sun*,
and *day with a new thought begun*,

that lord in guise of joy was clad,
and masked his mind in manner glad....”
(A&I, lines 111-14, p. 7)

Example 5: [*Lord returns to forest*]

“The *sun was falling*. In the dell
deep in the forest silence fell.
No sight nor slot of doe he found
but roots of trees upon the ground,
and trees *like shadows waiting stood*
for night to come upon the wood.
The sun was lost, all green was grey....
He saw her then, *on silver chair*
before her cavern, *pale her hair*,
slow was her smile, and *white her hand*
beckoning in Broceliande.
The moonlight falling clear and cold
her long hair lit; through comb of gold
she drew each lock, and down it fell
like the fountain falling in the dell.”
(A&I, lines 277-83; 289-96, p. 13)

Example 6: [*Early version of Mordred thinking about Guinever*]

“To Guenaver the *golden*, with gleaming
limbs
that *minds of men with madness filled*,
his thought was turned, *thirst-tormented....*
[quickly rewritten]
His thought was turned, *thirst-tormented*,
to Gwenaver the *golden*, whose gleaming
limbs
the *minds of men with madness filled*,
so fair and fell, frail and stony,
true and faithless.”
(FoA, earlier versions, p. 214)

Example 7: [Arthur musing after Lancelot returns Guinever to him]

“and his house him seemed,
though fairest woman in her *fell beauty*
in the *golden courts* was queen again,
now *less in gladness*, and its *light*
minished.”

(Intermediate form; *FoA* p. 192)

Example 8: [Guinever escaping from Mordred]

“Night came slowly. The *naked moon*
slipped sudden forth from swathing clouds
torn by tempest, in a tarn of stars
swam serenely....
So fled she now,
Guinever the fair in *grey mantled*,
cloaked in darkness, from the courts
stealing.
Few faithful men her flight aided,
folk that followed her in *former days*,
when from Leodegrance to Logres rode
bride to bridegroom brave and golden
in mighty Arthur’s morning glory.
Now to lonely Leodegrance once long ago
at the Round Table regal feasted,
she hastened home to harbour cold,
hiding uncertain. In her heart *darkly*
she thought of Lancelot, should he learn afar
of her woe and wandering by wolf hunted.
If the king were conquered, and the crows
feasted,
would be come at her call, queen and lady
riding to rescue?”
(*FoA*, Canto II, lines 178-81; 193-210, pp.
33-4)

Example 9: [Guinever ensnaring Lancelot]

“But *cold silver*
or *glowing gold* greedy-hearted
in her fingers taken fairer thought she,
more lovely deeming what she alone
treasured

darkly hoarded. Dear she loved him
with love unyielding, lady ruthless,
fair as *fay-woman and fell-minded*
in the world walking for the woe of men.
Fate sent her forth. Fair she deemed him
beyond gold and silver to her grasp lying.
Silver and golden, as the sun at morning
her smile dazzled, and her sudden weeping
with tears softened, *tender poison*,
steel well-tempered. Strong oaths they
broke.

Mordred in secret mirthless watched them
betwixt hate and envy, hope and torment.
Thus was bred the evil, and the *black*
shadow
o’er the courts of Arthur as a *cloud growing*
dimmed the daylight darkling slowly.”
(*FoA*, Canto III, lines 49-67, p. 37-8)

Example 10: [The end of Lancelot and Guinever’s affair]

“but little liked her lonely exile,
or for love to lose her life’s splendour.
In sorrow they parted. With searing words
his wound she probed his will searching.
Grief bewrayed her and greed thwarted;
the shining sun was sudden shaded
in storm of darkness. Strange he deemed her
from her self altered.”
(*FoA*, Canto III, lines 100-7, p. 39)

Example 11:

“Now Gawain’s *glory, golden riding*
as the *westering sun* that the world kindles
ere he red sinketh by the rim of the ocean,
before Arthur blazed, while the *East*
darkened.
Guinever hiding in the *grey shadow*
watched and waited, while the *world*
faltered;
grimhearted grown as gladness waned
danger weighed she in her *dark counsel*,
her hope in havoc, in her mind’s thinking

men's fate to mould to her mind's purpose.”
(*FoA*, Canto III, lines 177-86, p. 42)

Example 12: [Arthur returns to his kingdom at dawn]

“Thus came Arthur *at early morn*
at last returning to his lost kingdom....
The *sun mounted* and the sails whitened.
Far over the sea faintly sounding
trumpets heard they. Towering upward
from Arthur's side eager hastened
a mighty ship in the morn gleaming
high, white-timbered, with hull gilded;
on its sail was sewn *a sun rising*
on its broidered banner in the breeze floated
a fiery griffon *golden flaming*.
Thus came Gawain his king guarding....
Thus came Arthur to his own kingdom
and the sea's passage with the sword
conquered,
Gawain leading. *Now his glory shone*
as the star of noon stern and cloudless
o'er the heads of men to its height climbing
ere it fall and fail....”
(*FoA* Canto IV, lines 124-5; 136-145; 221-6,
p. 50-1; 54)

Example 13:

“Greatest was Gawain, whose *glory waxed*
as times darkened, true and dauntless,
among knights peerless ever anew proven,
defence and fortress of a falling world.”
(*FoA*, Canto I, lines 52-5, p. 19)

Example 14: [Mordred addresses Guinever]

‘Hail! Lady of Britain! It is long sitting
alone lordless in loveless days,
a kingless queen in courts that echo
to no noise of knighthood. Yet never shalt
thou
on earth hereafter *thine hours barren*
and life find loveless. Nor less than queen
with *dimmed glory* thy days revile
though chances change – if thou choose
aright....
Now never again from northern wars
shall Arthur enter this island realm,
nor Lancelot du Lake love remembering
to thy tryst return! Time is changing;
the *West waning*, a wind rising
in *the waxing east*. *The world falters....*
Thou at my side shall lie, slave or lady,
as thou wilt or wilt not, wife or captive.
This reassurance take I, ere towers crumble,
and thrones are o'erturned, thirst first will I
slake.”
(*FoA*, Canto II 125-32; 144-9; 154-6, pp. 31-
2)