A Definitive Identification of Tolkien’s “Borgil”:
An Astronomical and Literary Approach

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As the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of *The Fellowship of the Ring* passes, it is especially appropriate that academics and fans alike reflect on the singular richness of the mythology encompassed in J. R. R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth. In his role of “sub-creator,” Tolkien crafted a “Secondary World which your mind can enter.” While immersed in this other place, the reader believes in the truth of it “while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed” (*MC* 132). Tolkien’s unsurpassed ability to invent such a self-contained universe was a reflection of his own widely varied interests. Science fiction writer L. Sprague de Camp noted that Tolkien was “one of those people who have literally read everything, and can converse intelligently on just about any subject” (Carter 25).

Among the subjects which interested Tolkien, and thus helped shaped Middle-earth, was astronomy. His daughter, Priscilla, verified that her father “had a general interest in” astronomy (Quiñonez and Raggett 5). Several authors¹ have summarized the remarkable breadth of astronomical allusions contained in Tolkien’s work, but a sufficient taste may be found in Tolkien’s published letters. For example, in a 24 April 1944 letter to his son, Christopher, Tolkien recounted how he “struggled with recalcitrant passage in ‘The Ring.’ At this point I require to know how much later the moon gets up each night when nearing full, and how to stew a rabbit!” (*Letters* 74). In another letter to Christopher dated 14 May 1944, he further explained that his writing was being “hindered by… trouble with the moon. By which I mean that I found my moons in the crucial days between Frodo’s flight and the present situation (arrival at Minas Morghul) were doing impossible things, rising in one part of the country and setting simultaneously in another” (*Letters* 80). In a letter to Naomi Mitchison dated 25 September 1954, Tolkien explained the Númenorean story of the rounding of the world by the fact that “So deep was the impression made by ‘astronomy’ on me that I do not think I could deal with or imaginatively conceive a flat world…” (*Letters* 197).

It is in the context of these and numerous other examples from Tolkien’s own notes and letters that the following passage from the chapter “Three’s Company” in *The Fellowship of the Ring* should be understood:

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The night grew on, and the lights in the valley went out. Pippin fell asleep, pillowed on a green hillock.

Away high in the East swung Remmirath, the Netted Stars, and slowly above the mists red Borgil rose, glowing like a jewel of fire. Then by some shift of airs all the mist was drawn away like a veil, and there leaned up, as he climbed over the rim of the world, the Swordsman of the Sky, Menelvagor with his shining belt. \(FR\), I, iii, 91

Tolkien’s own description of the history of Middle-earth as “a period of the actual Old World of this planet” \(Letters\ 220\), coupled with the importance of “real” astronomy in his process of sub-creation lead one to at least seriously consider the possibility that the tableau described was meant to mirror the real night sky. In addition, the chronology originally laid out in The Return of the Shadow and published in Appendix B of The Return of the King specifies that the hobbits' night with Gildor and the other elves occurred on 24 September \(Shadow\ 160\). This allows one to specify with relative certainty the identity of Remmirath, Borgil, and Menelvagor. This paper will briefly summarize the evidence for the undisputed identifications of the first and the third of these, then concentrate on the much-disputed identity of Borgil, utilizing both literary and astronomical analysis to reach a definitive identification.

Appendix E of The Return of the King explains the etymology of Remmirath as from the Quenya “rem ‘mesh’, Q. rembe, + mēr ‘jewel’.” \(RK\), Appendix E, 393 n. 1) consistent with its nickname of “Netted Stars” found in the quoted passage. There is an apparently universal interpretation of this as the open cluster M 45, commonly known as the “Seven Sisters” or the Pleiades.\(^2\) This identification is even cited in the seminal encyclopedia of observational astronomy, Burnham’s Celestial Handbook \(III\ 1868\). Tolkien’s description of these stars as having a netted appearance is consistent with another description found in the pre-1937 form of the poem “Kortirion among the Trees”:

They know the season of the brilliant night,
When naked elms entwine in cloudy lace
The Pleiades, and long-armed populars bar the light
Of golden-rondured moons with glorious face.

\(Lost\ Tales\ I\ 35\)

This is similar to the description in Sadi’s “Rose-Garden,” a thirteenth-century Persian poem: “The ground was as if strewn with colored enamel, and necklaces of Pleiades seemed to hang upon the branches of the trees...” \(Burnham\ III\ 1864\). Likewise, the seventh-century Arab poet Amr al Kais wrote in the \textit{Mu allakāt}, “It was the hour when the Pleiades
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appeared in the firmament like the folds of a silken sash variously decked with gems" (Allen 394). Tolkien's description may have been influenced by the poetic Arab references, or more likely by European folklore, as the "Finns and Lithuanians likened them to a Sieve with holes in it; and some of the French peasantry to a Mosquito Net...." (Allen 397).

The identity of Menelvagor is likewise undisputed as the constellation Orion. In Appendix E of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien identifies Telumelthar as Orion, but in a footnote explains that the constellation is "Usually called in Sindarin Menelvagor, Q. Menelmacar" (RK, Appendix E, 391 n. 1). Orion appears in far too many places in *The History of Middle-earth* volumes and elsewhere to fully recount its mythological significance in Middle-earth in this paper, but one classic example is found in *The Silmarillion*, where among the stars created by Varda to herald the awakening of the elves was "Menelmacar with his shining belt, that forebodes the Last Battle that shall be at the end of days" (48). *Burnham's Celestial Handbook* humorously explains, "that foremost authority on Hobbit-lore, J. R. R. Tolkien, tells us that the constellation was known in the Third Age of Middle-earth as Menelvagor, "The Swordsman of the Sky"" (II 1281). The identification of Orion as a swordsman with a jeweled belt cuts across many cultures and it is thus no surprise that Tolkien adopted the common mythological interpretation.

The overall passage accurately reflects the night sky of late September as seen from Oxford, and Tolkien himself may have witnessed such an alignment of the sky on more than one occasion. Jim Manning notes that Orion and the Pleiades "rise a little before midnight (Standard Time) at that time of year—at least in modern day. (Given that the scene is set in a remote age, we must forgive Tolkien the lack of any precessional effect)" (Manning 15). The entire passage is reminiscent of Lord Tennyson's "Locksley Hall":

Many a night from yonder ivied casement, ere I went to rest,  
Did I look on great Orion, sloping slowly to the west.  
Many a night I saw the Pleiads, rising thro' the mellow shade,  
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies tangled in a silver braid.  

(Brunham III 1281)

There now remains one final astronomical item to identify—the red star Borgil, which has been the source of serious disagreement. Given the region of the sky described in the passage, coupled with the color of the object, there are only three candidate objects given serious consideration: two stars—Aldabaran in Taurus and Betelgeuse in Orion—and the planet Mars, which spends some time in the constellation Taurus. Various authors have argued for their particular favorite correspondence, supplying
a wide range of evidence in support of their points of view. The remainder of this paper will analyze these arguments from an astronomical and literary perspective, and supply additional evidence as well in an attempt to pinpoint the identity of Borgil.

The etymology of the name has been used by some authors to tie Borgil to one object or another. Jim Allan tentatively translates it as “‘Steadfast-star’???, the star Aldebaran” (73). How he ties the translation and the identification together is not explained. J.E.A. Tyler gives the meaning “red ‘War-star’” and states that it is “probably the planet Mars” (68). Although there is a natural connection between a ‘war-star’ and Mars, the translation itself is suspect. Ian Stone notes that he could not “find Tyler’s reason for translating Bor- as ‘war’. The same root appears in Boromir translated “jewel of war”—and I wonder whether Boromir’s character has any bearing on the matter” (6). Ruth S. Noel translates Borgil as “Star of the Hand,” and identifies it with “probably Aldebaran” (121). Naomi Getty agrees with the identification, and attempts to explain further that “Menelvager might be confronted some creature concerning possession of the Nettled Jewels” (1). Getty’s attempt to tie in Menelvager with the idea of Borgil as a hand actually weakens her argument that Borgil is Aldebaran. Betelgeuse, the red star commonly seen as one of Orion’s shoulders, takes its name from the Arabic “yad al-jauza,” “The Hand of al- yad al-jauza” (Kunitzsch and Smart 45). However, all of the previous translations are rendered moot by the publication of Tolkien’s letters, as one clearly gives the translation “born ‘hot, red’ + ġil to borġil” later morphed to borgil (Letters 426-27). Tolkien’s definitive translation of the name unfortunately does nothing to narrow the field of contenders, since Aldebaran, Betelgeuse, and Mars are all reddish objects.

Mars can be effectively removed from the list of candidates thanks to manuscript 3/9/36 housed in the Marquette collection of Tolkien’s papers. Jorge Quiñonez and Ned Raggett explain that among a list of star names, Carnil (also spelled Karnil) was identified with Mars. This is in keeping with the translation of the root carn- as red (8). Christopher Tolkien notes in his index to Morgoth’s Ring that “Karnil was surely always Mars....” (435) It is possible that Mars had more than one name in Middle-earth (as was true of Orion and the Big Dipper, for example), but further analysis will demonstrate that Mars is far from the best candidate.

Using the erroneous translation “steadfast-star” of Allan, Stone argues that Borgil must be a star rather than a planet because the name is “not likely to refer to a wandering star (although it could conceivably refer to a planet’s steady light)” (7). In an editorial note to the same article, Michael Faxon argues for Mars as Borgil based on the same translation, stating it refers to the fact that it is “steadfast in the sense of not twinkling” (8). The idea that planets do not twinkle is a common astronomical
misconception. It is true that planets are less likely to twinkle due to their much larger apparent size than a star, but under conditions of atmospheric turbulence, even planets will twinkle. The likelihood of twinkling is inversely proportional to the apparent angular diameter of the planet. Jupiter's apparent size varies from 30.5-49.8 seconds of arc, Saturn from 14.7-20.5 seconds of arc, Mars from 3.5-25.1 seconds of arc, and Venus from 9.9-64.5 seconds of arc (Dijon, Dragesco and Néel 188). It is therefore distinctly possible for Mars to twinkle, under adverse seeing conditions when Mars is relatively distant from the Earth in its orbit and displaying a small angular diameter.

Although the reddish tinge of both Betelgeuse and Aldebaran, the two stellar candidates, cannot be disputed, it is instructional to verify that the color of both has been equitably noted. Betelgeuse has been called "The Martial Star" due its tint (Burnham II 1281), and "as if enraged at Orion's taurine enemy, Betelgeuse glows with a somber red color. The naked-eye observer sees a warm, bright point of light tinged with a slightly roscate or coppery cast" (Motz and Nathanson 85). Aldebaran was named Subruffa in the 1603 edition of Bayer's Uranometria "in recognition of its 'rose-red' tint" (Burnham III 1807). William Roscoe Thayer poetically wrote:

I saw on a minaret's tip  
Aldebaran like a ruby aflame, then leisurely slip  
Into the black horizon's bowl. (Motz and Nathanson 137)

It is therefore demonstrated that color cannot be used to differentiate between Betelgeuse and Aldebaran as candidates for Borgil.

Quiñonez and Raggett argue that "Aldebaran, while plausible, is not as intense as the comparatively brighter Betelgeuse" (7). It is true that Betelgeuse, at a listed visual magnitude of 0.50, is brighter than Aldebaran, at 0.85. However, the difference of 0.35 magnitudes corresponds to a difference in apparent brightness of only 38%, similar to the difference between the apparent brightness of Betelgeuse and Rigel, the brightest star in Orion. There is an additional complication in using the human eye to estimate the apparent brightness. It is a well-known fact that red light builds up on the human retina, making red stars appear brighter than other color stars. This "Purkinje effect" can be countered by using "quick glances" to study red stars (Levy 182).

In his recent work on Sindarin, David Salo equates Borgil with Betelgeuse, apparently on the basis of Tolkien's definitive translation of the name (360). Stone also identifies Borgil as Betelgeuse "with a fair degree of certainty" (7). However, coupling this with his favored translation as 'steadfast-star,' he notes that there is an apparent contradiction, as Betelgeuse is a variable star—a star whose apparent brightness changes with