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#### Abstract

Proposes a translation for a five-line poem in Elvish published in *The Lays of Beleriand*.

#### Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R. *The Lays of Beleriand*; Tolkien, J.R.R. "Lúthien's Song" (poem)—Translation

# Notes Toward a Translation of "Lúthien's Song"

Patrick Wynne

One of the first literary projects undertaken by J.R.R. Tolkien after completing *The Lord of the Rings* was a revision of "The Lay of Leithian," his retelling in rhyming couplets of the legend of Beren and Lúthien, which had been composed between 1925 and 1931. While this second version, "The Lay of Leithian Recommened," was never completed, the revised version of Canto III contains an item of immense interest to Middle-earth linguists: a five-line poem in Elvish (*The Lays of Beleriand*, p. 354, lines 99-103). In Canto III Tolkien tells how Lúthien danced one starlit summer night to the music of Daeon's flute, and "as slow above the trees the Moon/ in glory of the plenilune/ arose..." she stayed her dance and sang these words:

*Ir Ithil ammen Eruchin* 1  
*menel-vîr síla díriel* 2  
*si loth a galadh lasto dîn!* 3  
*A Hîr Annûn gilthoniel,* 4  
*le linnon im Tinúviel!* 5

No translation is provided in the text, and it is the purpose of this article to propose one.

In what language is this poem written? Clearly it is "Low-elven" dialect of some sort. One might expect Doriathrin, since the singer was the daughter of Thingol, King of Doriath. This is not, however the case. The Doriathrin words for "tree" and "Moon" were *galad* and *Istil*, whereas this poem uses *galadh* and *Ithil*, which were the forms in both Noldorin and Sindarin. Neither is the poem in Noldorin, since the forms *loth* "flower," *lathro* "listen in, eavesdrop," and *glin-* "to sing." The poem is in fact in Sindarin, and the dialect appears to be identical with that used in "A Elbereth Gilthoniel." In his notes on "A Elbereth" in *The Road Goes Ever On* (pp. 64-65) Tolkien states: "The language is Sindarin, but of a variety used by the High Elves (of which kind were most of the Elves of Rivendell), marked in high style and verse by the influence of Quenya, which had originally been their normal tongue," and he goes on to cite *menel* "high heaven" and *le* the reverential 2nd person singular as examples of Quenya loan-words in this variety of Sindarin. Both *menel* and *le* occur in "Lúthien's Song" as well, and there are other similarities with "A Elbereth." Both poems share an identical metrical structure, consisting of lines of four iambic feet without variation:

Îr Í|thîl am|mēn Ê|rûchîn    Ā Ê|bēreth |Gûltho|nîel  
1    2    3    4                    1    2    3    4

Both poems feature rhyme, both in alternate lines and in couplets, and in one instance virtually the same words

are rhymed, *díriel/gilthoniel* in "Lúthien's Song" and *palandíriel/Gilthoniel* in "A Elbereth."

It is difficult to imagine a scenario that would plausibly explain a poem in the Quenya-ized Third Age Sindarin of the High Elves of Rivendell coming from the mouth of Lúthien of Doriath in the First Age. It may be that in the creative rush of composing Canto III Tolkien set aside the demands of internal linguistic consistency in favor of convenience, using the Low-elven dialect which came most easily to mind, i.e. the Sindarin of the just-completed *Lord of the Rings*, and for similar reasons he modelled the new poem very closely on "A Elbereth."

Following is an analysis of the vocabulary of "Lúthien's Song," at the end of which a translation of the whole will be proposed.

Line 1  
*Ir* "When" — This is the Sind. equivalent of Q. *îre* "when," which occurs in lines 11 and 14 of "Fíriel's Song" in *The Lost Road*, p. 72 (for the etymology cf. my analysis of the poem in *Parma Eldalamberon* 8, p. 37).  
*Ithil* "the Moon."  
*ammen* "for us" — This word also occurs in Gandalf's incantation before the West-gate of Moria: *edro hi ammen* "open now for us."  
*Eruchin* "The Children of Erú" — This is the Sind. equivalent of Q. *Eruhini*. The term encompasses both Elves and Men, and its use by Lúthien here is ironic, given the imminent, and entirely unexpected appearance of Beren.

Line 2  
*menel-vîr* "heavenly jewel" — This is a compound of *menel* "the heavens" and *vîr* "jewel" with lenition (i.e. mutation of the initial consonant) of the second element as is usual in Sind. compounds composed of two nouns in which the first modifies the second (cf. *Menelvagor* "Heavenly Swordsman" from *menel+magor*).

*síla* "shines (with a silver light)" — 3rd person singular verb, present tense.

*díriel* "having watched over" — The Sind. active past participle is formed with the suffix *-iel* plus the lengthening of the vowel in the verb stem. Thus *díriel* is the active past participle of *tír-* "to watch over," with lenition of initial *t* to *d*, perhaps because *díriel* acts as an adjective modifying *Ithil* and *menel-vîr*.

## Line 3

*si* "now" or "here" — If the word is *si* "here," I can't explain the lack of a long vowel; if the word is *hi* "now," I can't explain the lack of lenition.

*loth* "flower."

*a* "and."

*galadh* "tree."

*lasto* "listen!" — This imperative form also occurs in Gandalf's word before the West-gate: *lasto beth lammen* "listen to the words of my tongue." The imperative -o could be used for all persons and here in line 3 is used as a 3rd person plural imperative: "let flower and tree listen" (to the song Lúthien is singing).

*dîn* "silently" or "below" — In *Parma* 8 (p. 55, note 28) Chris Gilson writes that *dîn* in this line might be connected "with *Amon Dîn* 'Silent Hill' (and maybe *dî-nguruthos* 'overwhelmed in dread of death, beneath death horror.' The sense of *lasto dîn* would be something like 'listen in awe'." The gloss "listen in silence" is quite plausible, especially given the emphasis on quietness in the description of the glade in lines 58-62: "...the wind was stilled,/ the twilight lingered faint and cool/ in shadow-shapes upon the pool/ beneath the boughs of sleeping trees/ standing silent..." Also, Lúthien's song has the effect of casting a spell of silence: "On Neldoreth was laid a spell;/ the piping into silence fell,/ for Daeron cast his flute away,/ unheeded on the grass it lay,/ in wonder bound as stone he stood/ heart-broken in the listening wood" (lines 112-117).

The gloss "listen below" is also possible, referring to the location of Lúthien and the subjects of her command — the flowers and trees — relative to the Moon overhead.

## Line 4

*A* "O!"

*Hîr* "Lord."

*Annûn* "of the West" — As Tolkien writes in *RGE* (p. 67): "In S[indarin] the simple genitive was usually expressed by placing the genitive noun [*Annûn*] in adjectival position (in S. after the primary noun [*Hîr*])." The meter would indicate that unlike the majority of bisyllabic Elvish words, *annûn* is stressed on the final syllable.

*gilthoniel* "star-kindling" — The Sind. present participle, like the active past participle, is formed with the suffix -iel, but without the lengthening of the vowel in the verb stem — hence *palandiriel* "gazing afar" vs. *palandiriel* "having gazed afar." So here we have the present participle of *gilthon-* "to kindle stars," which modifies *Hîr Annûn*, "the star-kindling lord of the West." Varda's name *Gilthoniel*, while also derived from *gilthon-*, ends in the feminine suffix -iel seen in numerous names such as *Fíriel*, *Níníel*, *Lothíriel*, etc.

As for the logic behind referring to the Moon as "Star-kindling," if I may again quote Chris Gilson from *Parma* 8 (p. 55, note 25): "We know ... it is only the relative intensity of the Moon that seems to dim the nearby stars and that it passes between us and those stars that it completely obscures. But to Lúthien perhaps it seemed that the Moon 'rekindled' the stars after snuffing them as it passed."

## Line 5

*le* "to thee" — in Sind. an indirect object could be indicated by word order alone, as in *Önen i-Estel Edain* "I gave hope to the Dúnedain." So *le* in and of itself may be "thou," the dative sense "to thee" being indicated by its position in the sentence, which in all three recorded uses is directly before the verb: *le linnon* "to thee I sing," *le linnathon* "to thee I will chant," *le nallon* "to thee I cry."

*linnon* "I sing" — 1st person singular verb, present tense.

*im* "I" — as on the Doors of Dúrin: *Im Narvi hain echant* "I, Narvi, made them."

*Tinúviel* "Nightingale" — In the earliest form of the Beren and Lúthien legend, "The Tale of Tinúviel" written in 1917, the name of Tinwelint's (i.e. Thingol's) daughter is Tinúviel from birth, and the name Lúthien does not occur. But beginning with "The Sketch of the Mythology" (1926) and continuing on through all subsequent versions of the mythology, the story is that the birth-name of Thingol's daughter is Lúthien, and she is later given the name Tinúviel by Beren. Why then, in "The Lay of Leithian Recommended," written c. 1950, does Lúthien refer to herself as *Tinúviel* before meeting Beren?

The explanation may lie in line 95 of Canto III, where it is said that the song Lúthien sings is one "that once of nightingales she learned." Given this, it is not odd that Lúthien should whimsically refer to herself as "The Nightingale." The implication may be that overhearing this song was what first inspired Beren to call her by that name.

\* \* \*

Taking all the above into account, a bare bones literal translation of "Lúthien's Song" might be as follows:

When the Moon, for us, the Children of Eru,	1
a heavenly jewel shines silver, having watched,	2
Here/now let flower and tree listen in	
silence/below!	3
O Lord of the West, star-kindling,	4
to thee I sing, I, the Nightingale!	5

A less literal but more graceful rendition might be:

"When the Moon shines like a silver jewel set in the heavens for us, the Children of God, and has

watched over us, let the flowers and trees now listen in silence! O Lord of the West who kindles the stars, I, the Nightingale, sing to thee!"

An alternative rendition of line 3 could be "let the flowers and trees listen here below!"

Such is one Elvish linguist's view of "Lúthien's Song," and it is not intended to be the final word on the subject. No doubt better glosses could, and will, be contrived. It is merely hoped that this article will serve as a stimulus for discussion and provide a starting point for the work of other translators.

This article was first printed in a slightly different form in issue 9 of *Vinyar Tengwar*, the publication the Elvish Linguistic Fellowship. Pat is quoting from an article by Chris Gilson that appeared in *Parma Eldambersen* 8.

**Following The Middle Way**, (continued from page 36) knowing. When involved in a discussion with them about TLW or related matters, I find these labels of little importance.

It should be noted that there are others in the Society who are neither in SF organized fandom or academia. At least two groups occur to me here: those in various religious communities who are primarily interested in the spiritual values found in mythopoeic literature, and the individual reader who is not in organized fandom, not in academia, and not affiliated with a religious community, but enjoys Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams and their related genres.

You may be one of these individual readers referred to, or you may see yourself as identifying with one of the other three camps, or you may see yourself as belonging to two or all three of the groups (as many do). In any case, the Society seeks to serve all who find value and interest in its purposes. Instead of creating dichotomies, let us recognize and respect the spectrum that does in fact exist, not magnifying it but keeping it in its secondary importance to the Society's real purpose.

If we are to fulfill our purpose and follow the Middle Way, we should not seek to please one group above and beyond another. In this context, it is ironic that the overwhelming majority — something like 97% from what I detect — of both academia and SF fandom have very small interest in the purpose of the Mythopoeic Society.

It is also curious that *Mythlore*, in the way it has evolved and its present status, is criticized by some as being towards the scholarly side of the road. There are two things to note about this. First, *Mythlore* seeks to carry out the definition of the Society found both in its Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws:

The specific and primary purpose is to educate persons in the study, discussion, and enjoyment of myth, fantasy, and imaginative literature, especially the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams. [emphasis added]

*Mythlore* focuses in on the word *study*, taking it seriously, while at the same time through its letters, columns, reviews, and artwork, considers *discussion* and *enjoyment* in their sequential order. If we use the commonly accepted tools and modes of scholarship in this study, I do not see why this should give offense to anyone. Some point to the fact that many of our paper writers are instructors and thus members of academia, as if being a professional in the field

of one's interest somehow discredits a person. There is the claim that these people are under the gun of "publish or perish," and that publication of this material gives them "brownie points" in their profession. Be it as it may, *Mythlore* does not take either the credentials or lack of credentials of a writer of a particular paper into account, only the merit of the paper itself. Indeed the juried system we have reinforces this. Our material comes from many sources.

Secondly, while the above should be true under any circumstances, I see the so-called "scholarly emphasis" of *Mythlore* as a balance weight to other several facets of the Mythopoeic Society. Taken as a whole, I think the Society has the chance of achieving a balance between "fans" and "scholars." Of course, there is a question of taste, and here no one is a winner with all the people all of the time.

The Mythopoeic Society is a "fan" group in a certain sense, but it is meant to be much more — broader and deeper. It is intended to be a learned literary organization, but one that infuses its scholarship with real personal interest and creativity.

The letter I quoted in the last issue made me at the time stop and think seriously on the danger of focusing on the Society itself at the expense of where it is supposed to be going. It is like looking at a beautiful container instead of what it contains. Of course we want a good organization, and it is something we must constantly work on improving, but the content must *not* be ignored or glossed over. If we do, we will not only lose the Middle Way, we will be off the road with no sense of direction. The Middle Way keeps us on the course, moving forward.

Some people who read *Mythlore* feel only like observers, who only want the information, with no personal involvement. I say, come and join the Dance. Others are truly glad to be united and to have a sense of identity with others people that share their keen and devoted interests. To you, I say, participate in a way that effects what you want to see done, and be aware of potential problems that would have us abandon the Middle Way, which has served us so well.

There will probably always be people who will seek to take advantage of what is there, using the established resources, sometimes with little concern as to what the structure is intended to accomplish. This is our current and ongoing danger, that people using the Society with little regard of its purpose, will change it beyond recognition for the rest of us now and for those who come later. Members should not assume there is perfect concord within the Society. It is disheartening to encounter people who want this kind of change, and sometimes I ask myself is this all to be for naught? But then I come upon a person through a letter, a submission, or by meeting them at a Mythopoeic Conference, who is so thankful that they have at last found a group of people who share their same love of Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams and their genres, and how for years they thought they were nearly the *only* one. This, in addition to knowing so many good people through the Society, makes it all worth while and gives me the motivation and indeed the joy to continue my involvement with it.