

Character Biography

Anairë

By Oshun

Among the unsung women of Tolkien's pre-*Lord of the Rings* history of Elves and Men, Anairë is fortunate in that she actually receives a name. She is simply one example of several women, barely mentioned, who must have had great influence in her world. She does not figure in the narrative of the story of the Noldor, despite her status among that people. She is the wife of Fingolfin, the second son of Finwë and High King of the Noldor in Middle-earth, and the mother of Fingon, Turgon, and Aredhel, all of whose stories are interwoven with the major events recounted in *The Silmarillion*. Christopher Tolkien also explains that "[t]he third son of Fingolfin, Arakáno (Argon), emerged in the course of the making of the genealogies."¹

Anairë is not, however, named in Christopher Tolkien's edited version of these stories, which appears as the published *Silmarillion*. It is hard to fault the editor for that, however, because the only place where his father mentions Anairë is not even in any of the alternate drafts of the *Quenta Silmarillion* but in the section of *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* (mainly an etymological treatise) relating to the children and grandchildren of Finwë. Therein it is said that

Fingolfin's wife Anairë refused to leave Aman, largely because of her friendship with Eärwen wife of Arafinwë [Finarfin] (though she was a Noldo and not one of the Teleri). But all her children went with their father: *Findekáno*, *Turukáno*, *Arakáno*, and *Irissé* his daughter and third child; she was under the protection of *Turukáno* who loved her dearly, and of Elenwë his wife.²

One can imagine rich untold stories in this scanty reference. Under what circumstances did Anairë part with her children? Did grief or acrimony, or both, accompany such a leave-taking? In what way was Anairë and Fingolfin's separation or estrangement similar to or different from that of Nerdanel and Fëanor? How did Anairë develop such a close relationship with her sister-in-law that she chose to stay behind in Aman, leaving not only her husband but her three (or perhaps four) children to follow Fëanor into exile "largely"³ because of that friendship? Further, we know little to nothing about the period after the exodus of the vast majority of the Noldor to Middle-earth except that Finarfin assumes the kingship of the splinter of the Noldor remaining in Valinor.

The name *Anairë* is translated as "holiest" in Quenya, with *airë* meaning "holy"⁴ and *an* as a superlative prefix. This is the name of a woman of virtue and renown.

We know nothing of the duties and responsibilities of Anairë as the consort of Fingolfin, the acting king of Noldor at the time of the murder of Finwë and the Darkening of Valinor. Nor do we know what role she might have played, if any, in assisting Finarfin's assumption of the kingship of this contracted people. We do know that the challenges must have been great in the aftermath of the destruction of the Two Trees—an ecological disaster, even in a fantasy world, and certainly an event ushering in a period of hardship and great confusion. The reader is not told enough about the methods of governance of the Noldor in Aman to know what role Indis

might have played before Anairë as Finwë's queen or what Anairë's place might have been, if she had one, in Fingolfin's regime.

It is clear that the wives of the princes of the Noldor who stayed behind—Anairë and Nerdanel—have, in Tolkien's view, taken the higher road, showed wisdom and humility before the Valar while their husbands each manifested pride and a rebellious nature. Among the women of the Noldor who received somewhat more page space and development in Tolkien's writings, Nerdanel is cited as being wise: "With her wisdom at first she restrained Fëanor when the fire of his heart burned too hot; but his later deeds grieved her and they became estranged."⁵ Professor Nancy Enright of Seton Hall University notes on the subject of power and women in Tolkien's work:

The fact that they are female (and thus among the less valued members of the society Tolkien is depicting) emphasizes a larger theme, as clarified by Jane Chance: "Humility in Tolkien is always ultimately successful," as we see in case after case of the triumph of a "marginalized protagonist," whether Hobbit, or female, or other member of a less dominant group (Chance 79 [Jane Chance, *Lord of the Rings: The Mythology of Power*. University Press of Kentucky, Sep 12, 2010.]). Is this kind of power only for females (and others perceived as weaker), somehow relegated to them? Definitely not.⁶

Enright gives the example of males in Middle-earth whose virtue or wisdom is written as being enhanced by their rejection of typical male power in Tolkien's world.

Aragorn, Gandalf, Faramir--to name just a few key male characters--all exhibit this renunciation and enjoy a greater power because of it (as contrasted with Denethor, Saruman, and Boromir, for instance).⁷

Galadriel, the most notable woman among the Noldor to go into exile, is not ultimately redeemed until she rejects pride and the desire for control by refusing the Ring.

Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was *shrunken* [emphasis added]: a slender elf-woman , clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

'I pass the test,' she said. 'I will *diminish* [emphasis added], and go into the West, and remain Galadriel.'⁸

Note the terms of self-effacement (to *shrink* or to *diminish*) are used above to define Galadriel's triumph within the moral context of Tolkien's world, her passing of the final test of wisdom or virtue over pride.

It is arguable that most women reading Tolkien today, however enthralled by the depth and breadth of his created world, its peoples, and its languages, would nonetheless like to have seen more women portrayed with greater power and agency within this world and that women in positions of authority and respect within Tolkien's fictional societies had been developed further.

Author, editor, and artist Terri Windling, while acknowledging a profound debt to Tolkien, eloquently sums up what she felt lacking as a young woman first reading his work.

Darkness spread over Middle-earth, corrupting everything it touched, and yet our hero persevered with the aid of the greatest magics of all: the loyalty of his friends and the courage of a noble heart. I read Tolkien's great trilogy in one gulp and was profoundly changed . . . not, I have to add, because those books truly satisfied me. What they did was to reawaken my taste for magic, my old desire for dragons. But even then, in the years before I quite understood what feminism was, I saw that there was no place for me, a girl, on Frodo's quest.⁹

It is true that the women of *The Silmarillion* as a group, whether they be Elf, Valie, or Mortal, are more active, prominent, and more liberally sprinkled throughout the narrative than the women one encounters in *The Lord of the Rings* that Windling recalls reading as a girl. One may read the earliest texts, containing a far greater number of significant female characters, and notice that women of the likes of Anairë are considerably underreported and, when named, underdeveloped.

Lovers of Tolkien's legendarium and readers of *The Silmarillion* are attracted by the audacity of Fingon the Valiant and his heroism in the face of enormous odds. Many are intrigued, perhaps even awestruck, by Turgon's conception and creation of the wonder that was Gondolin. Still others are intrigued by the boldness of Aredhel, who tells her older brother and king when he tries to control her movements, "I am your sister and not your servant, and beyond your bounds I will go as seems good to me."¹⁰ Surely there are no small number among those readers would like to have known far more about Anairë, the woman who gave birth to these strong characters and reared them.

(For additional information on Anairë's husband and children see the following character biographies on this site: [Fingolfin](#), [Fingon](#), [Turgon](#), [Aredhel](#), and [Arakáno](#).)

Works Cited

1. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor.*
 2. Ibid.
 3. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, footnote 45.
 4. Ibid.
 5. *Morgoth's Ring*, Part 3, Section 2, "Of Fëanor and the Unchaining of Melkor."
 6. Nancy Enright, "Tolkien's Females and the Defining of Power," *Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature*, Winter 2007.
 7. Ibid.
 8. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Mirror of Galadriel."
 9. Terri Windling, "On Tolkien and Fairy-Stories." *Meditations on Middle-Earth*. Ed. Karen Haber. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001.
 10. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin."
-

About the Author

Oshun's *Silmarillion*-based stories may be found on the [SWG archive](#).