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# Character Biography

## Eärwen

By Oshun

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Eärwen is one of the numerous female characters of *The Silmarillion* who are not given a long or complex independent storyline within the major texts. In the Index of Names to *The Silmarillion*, Eärwen's entry reads:

Daughter of Olwë of Alqualondë, Thingol's brother; wedded Finarfin of the Noldor. From Eärwen Finrod, Orodreth, Angrod, Aegnor and Galadriel had Telerin blood and were therefore allowed entry into Doriath. (1)

This noble lady is considered significant by her creator for her connections on all sides: as a mother, wife, aunt, daughter and friend of various characters found to be centrally involved in greatest events of Tolkien's fictional history. Eärwen's background links her personal story back to the original trek across the mountains to the sea when her father Olwë takes up the summons of the Valar, abandoned by his older brother Elwë (Elu Thingol), to lead their people to Aman. Tolkien does not tell us exactly when or where Eärwen was born, although Alqualondë might seem more logical than Tol Eressëa, principally because of her probable age in relation to that of her husband. Her marriage to Finarfin, the third son of Finwe king of the Noldor in Tirion, places her at the apex of the conflicts involving the Teleri and the Noldor in that last eventful period of the Years of the Trees in the Undying Lands.

The progeny of Eärwen play roles in the tales of the Eldar all the way up through the events recounted in *The Lord of the Rings* ushering in the Fourth Age of Arda. However, little is told of Eärwen's personal deeds or character traits, and yet there is no question that she embodies a central narrative importance. That the influence of her heritage upon her offspring determines certain events in Beleriand in the First Age is stated uniquely in the version in the *Unfinished Tales*.

He wedded Eärwen, the daughter of King Olwë of Alqualondë, and his children were thus the kin of King Elu Thingol of Doriath in Beleriand, for he was the brother of Olwë; and this kinship influenced their decision to join in the Exile, and proved of great importance later in Beleriand. (2)

Christopher Tolkien notes that the account in the *Unfinished Tales* introduces aspects not developed in other texts, most interestingly for this essay ". . . several features of which there is no trace in *The Silmarillion*: the kinship of Finarfin's children with Thingol as a factor influencing their decision to join in Fëanor's rebellion" (3).

Her significance as the mother of the children of the Golden House of Finarfin, who have a role as a group of particular importance within the scope of Tolkien's legendarium, cannot be overstated. Were it not for their relationship through her side of the family to Thingol, their grandfather Olwë's older brother, the offspring of Eärwen and Finarfin would have been no more welcome in Doriath than any of their other cousins were.

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Alone of the princes of the Noldor those of Finarfin's house were suffered to pass within the confines of Doriath; for they could claim close kinship with King Thingol himself, since their mother was Eärwen of Alqualondë, Olwë's daughter. (4)

Much is made of the Vanyarin heritage of the children of Eärwen, but the bloodline connecting them to the Teleri is a significant factor in their story as well. The children of Eärwen are often noted as the wisest and most moderate of the Noldorin rebels. (See the list of the SWG character biographies [here](#) for the deeds and influences of Eärwen's noble children.) Their father and Eärwen's husband, Finarfin is the single one of Finwë's three sons who turns back upon hearing the Curse of Mandos and returns to assume the leadership of the much depleted Noldor in Valinor.

Doris Myers, one of the earliest critics of Tolkien's handling of the status of women in his work (5), "[n]otes that although in Williams' world (6) men and women are equals, in Lewis' and Tolkien's they are subservient to men" (7). One could argue that Tolkien does not necessarily view the women in his world as subservient to the men in strict sense that this is observed in the history of our primary world, but simply unworthy of detailed note in most cases. A reader could question the roles of the wives of significant Noldor at the time of flight from Aman. They are allowed to exercise their choice to stay or go when the decision is made by the vast majority of their people to leave Valinor for Middle-earth. Tolkien, however, is not forthcoming with any interesting anecdotes or developed reasoning relating to those choices. It is interesting to speculate how Eärwen might react to Finarfin's decision to accompany his older brothers. Even more fascinating might be an exposition of how Eärwen greets him upon his return to Valinor and whether she has heard about the kinslaying of Alqualondë by the time her husband arrives back in Tirion. The reader is left to speculation. Tolkien provides no information. He did explain earlier in the text of *The Silmarillion* something of the quality of her husband.

Finarfin was the fairest, and the most wise of heart; and afterwards he was a friend of the sons of Olwë, lord of the Teleri, and had to wife Eärwen, the swan-maiden of Alqualondë, Olwë's daughter. (8)

One does not learn whether or not Eärwen welcomes her errant husband back to Tirion. Does she encourage him to take upon himself the kingship of his people? And, if so, does she help him heal the terrible rift between their peoples caused by the kinslaying at Alqualondë? One might assume some part of these scenarios might be true since there is no story of an estrangement. At very least, one might assume that Finarfin is supported by his wife in taking upon the kingship of the Noldor in the absence of its majority and his older brothers.

One is presented with only one detail of the appearance of Eärwen and that is mentioned in connection with a description of the hair of her illustrious daughter Galadriel, which is said to have been

. . . golden like the hair of her father and her foremother Indis, but richer and more radiant, for its gold was touched by some memory of the star-like silver of her mother; and the Eldar said that the light of the Two Trees, Laurelin and Telperion, had been snared in her tresses. (9)

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One does not learn if Eärwen is slight or tall, or even particularly beautiful. She is described as having the silver hair attributed also to her uncle Elu Thingol (10) and his kinsman Celeborn (11).

Tolkien also gives us a glimpse into the personality of Eärwen in *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*. Speaking of Finrod, Tolkien remarks that "he had also from his Telerin mother a love of the sea and dreams of far lands that he had never seen" (12). Apparently, Eärwen had a hankering for adventure, not so dissimilar from that of her intrepid daughter Galadriel. We also might assume some strength of character on the part of Eärwen because of the influence she holds over Fingolfin's wife. It is told in one account that "Fingolfin's wife Anairë refused to leave Aman, largely because of her friendship with Eärwen wife of Araminwë (though she was a Noldo and not one of the Teleri)" (13). In brief, Eärwen is yet another unsung heroine in Tolkien's legendarium with the potential for a fascinating life story, if the author had sought to tell it.

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### Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
2. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth, The History of Galadriel and Celeborn*.
3. *Unfinished Tales of Númenor and Middle-Earth, The History of Galadriel and Celeborn*, introductory comments by Christopher Tolkien.
4. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Return of the Noldor."
5. Myers Doris T. "Brave New World: The Status of Women According to Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams." *Cimarron Review* 17, October, 13 - 19.
6. Referring here to the famous Oxford Inklings: Charles Williams, C.S. Lewis, and Tolkien, among others.
7. Judith A. Johnson, *J. R. R. Tolkien: Six Decades of Criticism* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986) 114, Questia, Web, 2 Nov. 2010.
8. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië."
9. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
10. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Thingol and Melian": "he appeared as it were a lord of the Maiar, his hair as grey silver, tallest of all the Children of Ilúvatar; and a high doom was before him."
11. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Mirror of Galadriel": "the hair of the Lord Celeborn was of silver long and bright."
12. *The Peoples of Middle-earth, The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.
13. Ibid.
14. See the [Character Biography of Finrod Felagund](#), "Wisdom among The Elves," on this site for a discussion of the concept of the Wise among the Eldar and specifically how this term applies to Aegnor's eldest brother.
15. *Morgoth's Ring, Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth*.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.

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## **About the Author**

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