
Character Biography

Elenwë

By Oshun

This biography could be entitled: “Another Wife, Another Untold Story.” There is little detail, and a certain measure of confusion, relating to the biography of Elenwë, the wife of Turgon and mother of Idril Celebrindal. Among the few things we know of her from the narrative of the events of the First Age and earlier are that she married Turgon and bore him a daughter, and is alone named among the wives of the Princes of the Noldor as having followed her husband to Middle-earth. The first reference we have to her in the published *Silmarillion* is the following:

they dared to pass into the bitterest North; and finding no other way they endured at last the terror of the Helcaraxë and the cruel hills of ice. Few of the deeds of the Noldor thereafter surpassed that desperate crossing in hardihood or woe. There Elenwë the wife of Turgon was lost, and many others perished also; and it was with a lessened host that Fingolfin set foot at last upon the Outer Lands. (1)

Elenwë is next spoken of when Aredhel recounts the stories of her people to her son Maeglin before they leave Eöl to come to Gondolin.

All these things he [Maeglin] laid to heart, but most of all that which he heard of Turgon, and that he had no heir; for Elenwë his wife perished in the crossing of the Helcaraxë, and his daughter Idril Celebrindal was his only child. (2)

The version of the story that Turgon had a wife, named Elenwë who left Aman with the Noldor and was lost on the ice, has a complicated history. Christopher Tolkien says that his father had made a handwritten note in *The Annals of Aman* saying

that in the crossing of the Helcaraxë 'Turgon's wife was lost and he had then only one daughter and no other heir. Turgon was nearly lost himself in attempts to rescue his wife and he had less love for the Sons of Fëanor than any other'; but Turgon's wife is not named. (3)

The account used in the published *Silmarillion*, cited above (4), follows from a 1951 manuscript discussed in *The War of the Jewels*. A newer typed copy of that same manuscript, dating to approximately 1970, along with a carbon of the same, was also consulted by Christopher Tolkien. (Both the original and the carbon of that 1970 manuscript contained markings, occasionally identical and at other times different.) In the 1951 manuscript Tolkien states that “Elenwë his [Turgon’s] wife perished in the crossing of the Helcaraxë” (5). Christopher cites the later typed copy of the same document, with notation, as follows:

Turgon . . . had no heir: for his wife, Alairë, was of the Vanyar and would not forsake Valinor'. On the page of jottings that concludes the abandoned later Tale of Tuor (see Unfinished Tales p. 56) a note which I did not include says that 'Alairë remained in Aman'. That this was the case because she was a Vanya is reminiscent of the story of

Amarië, beloved of Felagund, who was a Vanya, 'and was not permitted to go with him into exile' (p. 44, §109). (6)

Christopher Tolkien says that on the two of the three copies of this document, the name Alairë is changed to Anairë (7). He goes on to note that the final determination and substitution of Elenwë as the name of Turgon's wife in the published version of the *Silmarillion*

was based on the Elvish genealogies of 1959 (see pp. 229, 350), where Anairë (defined as a Vanya 'who remained in Tuna') was later corrected to 'Elenwë who perished in the Ice'; on the same table at the same time Anairë was entered as the wife of Fingolfin, with the note that she 'remained in Aman'. (8)

The general assumption by most readers that Elenwë, Turgon's wife, is Vanyarin is still somewhat confusing in light of the multiple shifts and trades of the names and the descriptions of Alairë, Anairë, and Elenwë. The presumption in the published *Silmarillion* that the wife of Turgon was named Elenwë actually dates back to an earlier document than the one in which she is named Anairë. This is an example of the difficult decisions, based upon multiple, varying and contradictory documents, which Christopher Tolkien had to make to determine the storyline of the published *Silmarillion*.

A detail often cited in discussions of Elenwë and her demise is that Turgon struggled to rescue her and failed, while succeeding in the rescue of their daughter Idril. This comes from *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.

She perished in the crossing of the Ice; and Turgon was thereafter unappeasable in his enmity for Fëanor and his sons. He had himself come near to death in the bitter waters when he attempted to save her and his daughter Itaril, whom the breaking of treacherous ice had cast into the cruel sea. Itaril he saved; but the body of Elenwë was covered in fallen ice. (9)

Itaril in the above paragraph refers to Idril, the daughter of Elenwë and Turgon, and the mother of Eärendil. Christopher Tolkien states in a footnote to *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* that Turgon's saving of their daughter Idril had not been referred to earlier (10).

Finally, Elenwë is remembered as the grandmother of Eärendil the Mariner and great-grandmother of Elros and Elrond. The marriage of Turgon and Elenwë links, through their daughter Idril, the House of Finwë of the Noldor to the royalty of the Sindar and the main Houses of the Edain to form the line of the Half-elven, so significant in the history in Tolkien's mythology. One branch of this line forms part of the ancestry of the Kings of Númenor, which many generations later is linked back to their Elven ancestry through the union of Elrond's daughter Arwen with Aragorn at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Flight of the Noldor"
2. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
3. *The War of the Jewels*, *Maeglin*
4. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Maeglin"
5. *The War of the Jewels*, *Maeglin*
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*
10. Ibid., footnote 40

About the Author

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