
Character Biography Erendis, the Mariner's Wife

By Oshun

As part of the annual Akallabêth in August¹ celebration of Tolkien's creation of the mythical realm of Númenor and its shocking demise and destruction, it seems appropriate to write a biography of Erendis a Númenórean woman of great determination.

Erendis was born in Andustar, the northwest province of Númenor, to Beregar and Núneth. Her parents appear to have been common people, descendants of the House of Bëor. Sindarin, the language of Andustar, was “. . . spoken by high and low. In that tongue Erendis was nurtured . . .”² The large promontory on the west side of the island where Erendis was born was “largely settled by people of ‘Bëorian’ descent; and the People of Bëor had in Beleriand early abandoned their own speech and adopted Sindarin.”³ It is noteworthy that Andustar is also the home province of the Lords of Andúnië who later in the Second Age became leaders of the Elendili, or Elf-friends, who remained loyal to the Eldar and the Valar under the rush to destruction engendered by Sauron.

Erendis is never mentioned in *The Silmarillion* proper, although her husband and her only daughter are referred to there. Her tale, told in its entirety in *The Mariner's Wife*,⁴ however, provides important additional details to the account of deeds of the great sea-kings of Númenor. As a woman and the wife of the sixth ruler of Númenor, Tar-Aldarion, Erendis rivals the most significant women in Tolkien's legendarium in forcefulness of personality and certainly in sheer number of words expended upon her behalf. Her names include Tar-Elestirnë 'Lady of the Star-brow' which refers to the large diamond which Aldarion had gifted her at their betrothal and which she fashioned into a diadem to wear upon her brow. She is also called the White Lady of Emerië, after the inland settlement of grasslands where she retired with her young daughter, when Aldarion left her to return to the sea. The Lady of the Westlands is an honorific and not a formal title that refers to her northwestern origins, far from the court at Armenelos.⁵

Her husband Aldarion was to become one of the first of the long line of Númenórean nobles and kings who turned to the sea to the east of them to seek adventure and expansion.

[Aldarion] was a great mariner and ship-builder; and himself sailed often to Middle-earth, where he became the friend and counsellor of Gil-galad. Owing to his long absences abroad his wife Erendis became angered, and they separated in the year 882. His only child was a daughter, very beautiful, Ancalimë. In her favour Aldarion altered the law of succession, so that the (eldest) daughter of a King should succeed, if he had no sons.⁶

Erendis's daughter Tar-Ancalimë succeeded her father Tar-Aldarion as the first ruling queen of Númenor and played an important role in the history of Middle-earth in her own right. The story of Erendis herself is a tragic romance filled with passion and intensity and yet any fairytale happy ending is threatened from the onset by circumstances and the implacable wills of the lovers. The tale of *Aldarion and Erendis, or The Mariner's Wife*,⁷ remains incomplete despite its length and detail, like so much of Tolkien's significant work on the history of his world. The main body of the story is well-crafted and has a polished quality to it. The series of notes, collected by

Christopher Tolkien and added to that, would indicate that, had his father completed the tale, it would have been at least another third longer.

The Mariner's Wife as it was first called, however, provides information contained nowhere else concerning, among other things, one the first and arguably the greatest of the sea-kings of Númenor to master the ocean between Númenor and Middle-earth and to thoroughly explore his own coastline. The expression *sea-king* has a lovely epic quality to it and is used prominently to great effect in the description of Aragorn at his coronation, comparing him in stature and bearing to the those great sailors and explorers of Númenor who returned from the West and played a significant part in the history of the Second Age and well into the Third.

Tall as the sea-kings of old, he stood above all that were near; ancient of days he seemed and yet in the flower of manhood; and wisdom sat upon his brow, and strength and healing were in his hands, and a light was about him.⁸

Erendis' husband Aldarion is presented as the pioneer among those intrepid sailors.

Among Tolkien's infrequent romances, the story of Erendis is of the marriage a beautiful young woman of lesser status to a highly born prince, in this case, heir of the throne and of the royal line of Elros--a much-used theme in fairytale romance. But this is no fairytale, containing just enough realism, despite the magical setting, to endear the protagonists to the reader. Erendis and Aldarion are both beautiful but too independent and strong-willed to earn themselves classic denouement.

Aldarion, for so he is called in all tales, grew swiftly to a man of great stature, strong and vigorous in mind and body, golden-haired as his mother, ready to mirth and generous, but prouder than his father and ever more bent on his own will. From the first he loved the Sea, and his mind was turned to the craft of ship-building.⁹

His future wife is exotic and fascinating to him, being darker than the descendants of Elros and apparently different in aspect and manner from the women he is accustomed to seeing around the court in Armenelos.

To the feasting in Armenelos came one Beregar from his dwelling in the west of the Isle, and with him came Erendis his daughter. There Almarian the Queen observed her beauty, of a kind seldom seen in Númenor; for Beregar came of the House of Bëor by ancient descent, though not of the royal line of Elros, and Erendis was dark-haired and of slender grace, with the clear grey eyes of her kin.¹⁰

So the son of the King of Númenor, of golden locks and impeccable bloodline, attracts a beautiful, but darker, woman of a lesser house of the Edain. But the House of Bëor is an ancient one and of great historic significance: not only are they said to be the first of the Edain to enter into Beleriand, but they are the people to whom Finrod Felagund first revealed himself.

Felagund dwelt among them and taught them true knowledge, and they loved him, and took him for their lord, and were ever after loyal to the house of Finarfin.¹¹

The attachment and loyalty of the House of Bëor to Elvenkind does not only last through the First Age in Middle-earth, but has an historic effect upon the future politics of the island of Númenor and well beyond its demise.

Direct descent from Elros presumes the presence of Eldarin and Maiarin traits, although greatly diluted over time, and the gift of far greater longevity that was granted to Elros and his descendants when he agreed to accept mortality and act as a king of the Edain in the new land to the West of Middle-earth. But Erendis' line is illustrious in its own way, although her father is not noble by Númenórean standards.

'The Men of that House [i.e. of Bëor] were dark or brown of hair, with grey eyes.' According to a genealogical table of the House of Bëor, Erendis was descended from Bereth,¹² who was the sister of Baragund and Belegund, and thus the aunt of Morwen mother of Túrin Turambar and of Rían the mother of Tuor.¹³

Erendis is famous for her beauty, as is another woman of the House of Bëor in the tale of *The Children of Húrin*. The beauty of Morwen, the wife of Húrin, is compared to that of the Eldar while Erendis is compared to Morwen: "[n]one were more fair than Erendis, and they said that her eyes were bright as were the eyes of Morwen Eledhwen of old."¹⁴

There are, however, other differences of far greater significance than superficial differences of status or dissimilarity of physical type. Erendis is remarkably strong-willed. Perhaps this demeanor and attitude distinguishes her from many gentle women of higher birth Aldarion might have known in his youth. The implication is that she was not raised to sublimate her desires to those of a man nor is she entirely at ease in a courtly setting.

Aldarion's duty as his father's heir is difficult to reconcile with his consuming passion for seafaring before he meets and falls in love with Erendis. His obsession with ships and long-distance voyages becomes a principle point of friction between him and his father. Long before he is first drawn to Erendis, Aldarion's desire to leave the island on years-long voyages brings dissonance to his relationship with his father. His desire to sail, explore, and concentrate on building a fleet of bigger and better ships, rather than devoting himself to issues of governance within the island and preparing himself to take on the responsibilities of the heir to the Sceptre of Númenor, is to cause repeated breaches with his father.

Erendis is attracted to the handsome prince, despite the fact that her interests and affinities are land-bound. Neither does she have any particular affinity for the courtly life of Armenelos. Thus, the seeds of the differences which would lead to the estrangement of Erendis and her future husband are planted early in the account of their first signs of mutual interest.

No woman will ever be able to compete with Aldarion's love of the sea. Neither his father's wishes nor the Scepter of Númenor itself overcomes his sea longing, which is viscerally described as bordering upon illness throughout their story. Tolkien expresses his reaction to remaining upon the land for extended periods of time more gently near the beginning of the tale when he writes of Aldarion's return from his first voyage to Middle-earth.

For Aldarion had become enamoured of the Great Sea, and of a ship riding there alone without sight of land, borne by the winds with foam at its throat to coasts and havens unguessed; and that love and desire never left him until his life's end.¹⁵

Of course, what is an epic fantasy romance without the element of love at first sight? It is Erendis who first sees and falls in love with Aldarion.

But Erendis looked upon Aldarion as he rode by, and for his beauty and splendour of bearing she had eyes for little else. Thereafter Erendis entered the household of the Queen, and found favour also with the King; but little did she see of Aldarion, who busied himself in the tending of the forests, being concerned that in days to come timber should not lack in Númenor. Ere long the mariners of the Guild of Venturers became restless, for they were ill content to voyage more briefly and more rarely under lesser commanders; and when six years had passed since the proclamation of the King's Heir Aldarion determined to sail again to Middle-earth. Of the King he got but grudging leave, for he refused his father's urging that he abide in Númenor and seek a wife; and he set sail in the spring of the year. But coming to bid farewell to his mother he saw Erendis amid the Queen's company; and looking on her beauty he divined the strength that lay concealed in her.¹⁶

And so the actors take to the stage and the scene is set for the unraveling of what is perhaps the most novelistic in detail of Tolkien's tales of love.

The author achieves in this tale the tonal quality of an age passed already into memory, and yet he still reveals vibrant and believable characters whom the reader perceives as wholly human, fallible but sympathetic. This quality of relatability is one that Tolkien sometimes misses in the earlier tales written in *The Silmarillion*, which are often composed in a lofty, epic style that perhaps adds grandeur but also distances the reader.

In *Aldarion and Erendis*, one is treated to long introspective reflections of these lovers one upon the other and their concerns relating to the possible outcome of their relationship. Dialogue between them allows the reader to look further into the hearts and minds of the couple.

Riding one day in the forests of the Westlands he saw a woman, whose dark hair flowed in the wind, and about her was a green cloak clasped at the throat with a bright jewel; and he took her for one of the Eldar, who came at times to those parts of the Island. But she approached, and he knew her for Erendis, and saw that the jewel was the one that he had given her; then suddenly he knew in himself the love that he bore her, and he felt the emptiness of his days.

Erendis seeing him turned pale and would ride off, but he was too quick, and he said: 'Too well have I deserved that you should flee from me, who have fled so often and so far! But forgive me, and stay now.'

They rode then together to the house of Beregar her father, and there Aldarion made plain his desire for betrothal to Erendis; but now Erendis was reluctant, though according to custom and the life of her people it was now full time for her marriage. Her love for him was not lessened, nor did she retreat out of guile; but she feared now in her heart that in the war between herself and the Sea for the keeping of Aldarion she would not conquer.

Never would Erendis take less, that she might not lose all; and fearing the Sea, and begrudging to all ships the felling of trees which she loved, she determined that she must utterly defeat the Sea and the ships, or else be herself defeated utterly.¹⁷

When Aldarion finally asks Erendis to marry him, she finds, after loving and desiring him for so many years, that she has grown uncertain of the wisdom of their union.

'I will not share my husband with the Lady Uinen,' said Erendis.

'That is a twisted saying,' said Aldarion. 'As well might I say that I would not share my wife with the Lord Oromë of Forests, because she loves trees that grow wild.'

'Indeed you would not,' said Erendis; 'for you would fell any wood as a gift to Uinen, if you had a mind.'¹⁸

She recognizes their depth of their differences: he loves the sea and she loves the land and its forests. She wishes to show him things about the country he will someday rule that he does not know, to instill in him a love of the land and its people which, according to her judgment, he understands but shallowly.

'I have journeyed with you by ship, lord. Before I give you my answer, will you not journey with me ashore, to the places that I love? You know too little of this land, for one who shall be its King.'

Therefore they departed together, and came to Emerië, where were rolling downs of grass, and it was the chief place of sheep pasturage in Númenor; and they saw the white houses of the farmers and shepherds, and heard the bleating of the flocks.

There Erendis spoke to Aldarion and said: 'Here could I be at ease!'

'You shall dwell where you will, as wife of the King's Heir,' said Aldarion. 'And as Queen in many fair houses, such as you desire.'

'When you are King, I shall be old,' said Erendis. 'Where will the King's Heir dwell meanwhile?'

'With his wife,' said Aldarion, 'when his labours allow, if she cannot share in them.'¹⁹

They appear for a time to have reached a stalemate in their intimate negotiations.

One might see within Aldarion and Erendis a personification of the dichotomy between the striving to mold, create, explore, and change the world versus the desire to preserve and act as guardians, which is a continuing theme in Tolkien's works from *The Silmarillion* through *The Lord of the Rings*. Aldarion sees a forest and thinks of timber for shipbuilding, while Erendis see the same woods and cannot bear the thought of the loss of a single tree.

Aldarion builds a fleet of bigger and stronger ships and explores the wide world, while Erendis wants only to remain grounded and rooted in the solid earth of her homeland, watching over grazing sheep and protecting the native forests. This is much like the conflict of the building, inventing, and exploring Noldor versus the inward-looking forest-dwelling Sindar or Nandor. It is not entirely dissimilar from the worldly and political Men of Gondor, brave warriors and builders of great cities, armies and fleets, versus the simple rustic and home-centered Hobbits of the Shire.

One may or may not read in the tale of Aldarion and Erendis a prejudice for or against one side or the other. Written much later in Tolkien's life he seems to be better able to look at both sides of the conflict. He presents with a sense of inevitability the seafaring Númenóreans' desire to look beyond the confines of one island, however pleasant and perfectly designed for their comfort. One cannot but see, however, that if they had not traveled back to Middle-earth and befriended Elf and Men alike in that far land, they all would have been destroyed along with the island of Númenor. The absence of their support in Gil-galad's fight against Sauron would have called into question the ultimate survival of Men and Elves in Middle-earth. And yet, the striving of Aldarion in this tale is reminiscent of the inability of the Noldor to dwell content in Aman within the gilded cage of Valar, blessed with every gift except the independence to determine their own fate.

It is the mother of Erendis who gives the clearest explanation of the obduracy of her daughter and her refusal to compromise in order to form a partnership with Aldarion, even after she has loved him for years and clearly won his heart.

'All or nothing, Erendis,' said Núneth. 'So you were as a child. But you love this man, and he is a great man, not to speak of his rank; and you will not cast out your love from your heart so easily, nor without great hurt to yourself. A woman must share her husband's love with his work and the fire of his spirit, or make him a thing not loveable. But I doubt that you will ever understand such counsel.'²⁰

Marriages, as often as not, do not fare well in Tolkien's larger legendarium outside of *The Lord of the Rings*. Therein we have the stories of Faramir and Éowyn, Aragorn and Arwen, and Sam and Rosie, who all marry and remain together in happiness for the rest of their lives. But within the narratives of *The Silmarillion* and the volumes of *The History of Middle-earth*, there are several notable failed marriages, beginning with Finwë. His first marriage is dissolved by the Valar at his request when Miriel Serindë lapses into what appears to be a terminal case of post-partum depression.

After the involvement of the Valar in the dissolution of Finwë's first marriage, the second one ends unhappily as well. Indis refuses to accompany him when he follows Fëanor into exile in Formenos. The highest princes of the Noldor were not successful in persuading their wives to come with them to Middle-earth. Anairë the wife of Fingolfin stays behind in Valinor, as does Finrod's betrothed Amarië. Of course, Nerdanel was already estranged from Fëanor before the exodus of the Noldor. Most readers presume that Maglor and Curufin left wives behind them as well, since their names are never mentioned in the accounts of the passage out of Aman into Middle-earth.

These separations are interesting in light of the fact that some ninety percent of the Noldor left Valinor within the ranks of Fëanor or Fingolfin. Other failed marriages in *The Silmarillion* include Túrin with his unfortunate marriage to his sister Nienor. The separation of Aredhel and Eöl could be seen as the first stage of the fall of Gondolin. Even the couples who succeed often endure their own unique tortures in order to stay with the ones they love, as in the case of Lúthien, who renounces her nature and quasi-immortality to stay with Beren, and Elwing and Eärendil, who sacrifice their children and anything approaching a normal existence.

Given the long and complicated introduction to the coming together of Aldarion and Erendis, dragging their seemingly irreconcilable differences along with them, not many readers will expect a happy ending for this pair. Tolkien has only a few examples of those and they look

nothing like this. After compromises and misunderstandings, delays and reconciliations, Erendis and Aldarion finally marry.

In the eight hundred and seventieth year of the Second Age Aldarion and Erendis were wedded in Armenelos, and in every house there was music, and in all the streets men and women sang. And afterwards the King's Heir and his bride rode at their leisure through all the Isle, until at midsummer they came to Andúnië, where the last feast was prepared by Valandil its lord; and all the people of the Westlands were gathered there, for love of Erendis and pride that a Queen of Númenor should come from among them.²¹

Interestingly enough, there is a scene actually set in their bedroom. (How many bedroom scenes have you seen in Tolkien that did not involve multiple Hobbits?) They observe the arrival of Elven emissaries to attend their wedding feast in the Westlands.

In the morning before the feast Aldarion gazed out from the window of the bedchamber, which looked west-over-sea. 'See, Erendis!' he cried. 'There is a ship speeding to haven; and it is no ship of Númenor, but one such as neither you nor I shall ever set foot upon, even if we would.' Then Erendis looked forth, and she saw a tall white ship, with white birds turning in the sunlight all about it; and its sails glimmered with silver as with foam at the stem it rode towards the harbour. Thus the Eldar graced the wedding of Erendis, for love of the people of the Westlands, who were closest in their friendship.²²

After decades (seventy years!) of courtship, separations, and reunions, for a short time the couple live together at peace. After two years Erendis gives birth to their first and only daughter. Then, when their daughter reaches the age of four, the urgency to return to his voyaging on the high seas seizes Aldarion with a vengeance he cannot shake off. Erendis refuses to accept his decision to leave and argues desperately with him about it. In turn, he tries to convince her that he will return in two short years, but she complains that she feels the difference in their life spans greatly, that the time passes more quickly for her. At last he departs in anger and she watches him leave with bitterness.

All that day Erendis sat in her chamber alone, grieving; but deeper in her heart she felt a new pain of cold anger, and her love of Aldarion was wounded to the quick. She hated the Sea; and now even trees, that once she had loved, she desired to look upon no more, for they recalled to her the masts of great ships. Therefore ere long she left Armenelos, and went to Emerië in the midst of the Isle, where ever, far and near, the bleating of sleep was borne upon the wind.

'Sweeter it is to my ears than the mewing of gulls,' she said, as she stood at the doors of her white house, the gift of the King; and that was upon a downside, facing west, with great lawns all about that merged without wall or hedge into the pastures. Thither she took Ancalimë, and they were all the company that either had. For Erendis would have only servants in her household, and they were all women; and she sought ever to mould her daughter to her own mind, and to feed her upon her own bitterness against men.²³

Should it appear to the casual reader that Tolkien intends us to believe that Erendis is fighting the wrong fight at the wrong time, the following footnote might prove otherwise. Christopher Tolkien points out that Erendis is well within her rights and expectations that Aldarion should delay his next major sea voyage until Ancalimë is older.

It is stated that the Númenóreans, like the Eldar, avoided the begetting of children if they foresaw any separation likely between husband and wife between the conception of the child and at least its very early years. Aldarion stayed in his house for a very brief time after the birth of his daughter, according to the Númenóreans' idea of the fitness of things.²⁴

By the time that Aldarion returns, years later than the two he had promised, Erendis' anger has chilled and hardened. His leaving had broken her. He, on the other hand, is angered that she has clearly ceased to wait for his return. Taking his daughter to Armenelos he raises her as his heir, never seeing Erendis again. The relationship of the estranged parents with their daughter is not a happy one either. She becomes also bitter and manipulative, playing one against the other. Erendis is abandoned in her sheep fields, until the very end of her life, when she finally seeks the company of Aldarion again, who is said to be due to shortly return from what is to be his final voyage.²⁵

Of Erendis it is said that when old age came upon her, neglected by Ancalimë and in bitter loneliness, she longed once more for Aldarion; and learning that he was gone from Númenor on what proved to be his last voyage but that he was soon expected to return, she left Emerië at last and journeyed unrecognised and unknown to the haven of Rómenna. There, it seems, she met her fate; but only the words "Erendis perished in water in the year 985" remain to suggest how it came to pass.²⁶

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About the Author

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