
Character Biography

Indis

By Oshun

Indis of the Vanyar is the second wife of Finwë first King of the Noldor. The initial mention of Indis in the first published version of *The Silmarillion* focuses upon exactly that.

Finwë was King of the Noldor. The sons of Finwë were Fëanor, and Fingolfin, and Finarfin; but the mother of Fëanor was Míriel Ærindë, whereas the mother of Fingolfin and Finarfin was Indis of the Vanyar.¹

In one version of the tales, Indis is said to be the sister of Ingwë (the King of the Vanyar and later High King of the Elves in Aman).² In contradiction to that, *The Shibboleth of Fëanor* states that Indis is instead the niece of Ingwë. There is no dispute that Finwë, the man she would seek to marry, was close to her kinsman Ingwë. Finwë and Ingwë, along with Elwë (later known as Elu Thingol), were the three Elves taken to Aman by the Vala Oromë to try to convince the Quendi to leave the dark lands of Middle-earth and live under the protection of the Valar in Aman.

Indis was originally described as "of the kin of Ingwe", and this passage was altered to "sister of Ingwë" (*Morgoth's Ring*, p. 207). Eventually, in "The Shibboleth of Fëanor", Tolkien notes that "she is said to have been the daughter of King Ingwë's sister" (*The Peoples of Middle-earth*, p. 343).³

Whether as the sister or the niece of Ingwë, Indis had a long-standing acquaintance with Finwë.

Indis is remarkable in that, as far as is written in any of the published works of Tolkien, she is the only second wife named for any major figure within the Eldar. The story of how Finwë came to seek a second wife is central to Tolkien's history of Middle-earth and the tale of role of the Elves within that legendarium. After giving birth to the illustrious Fëanor, "the mightiest in skill of word and of hand"⁴ of a mighty and skillful people,⁵ Finwë's first wife Míriel Ærindë declares herself to be unable to go on living. Míriel claims that birthing the magnificent Fëanor, whose "spirit burned as a flame,"⁶ has robbed her of the last of her life energy.

. . . in the bearing of her son Míriel was consumed in spirit and body; and after his birth she yearned for release from the labours of living. And when she had named him, she said to Finwë: 'Never again shall I bear child; for strength that would have nourished the life of many has gone forth into Fëanor.'⁷

The principle problem with Míriel's withdrawal from life is not only that she leaves a young son motherless, but also that she leaves behind her a spouse, to whom she has promised herself in union for all of the ages of Arda. Finwë is described as a vibrant and active ruler who wants both a wife and a consort and has long dreamed of fathering more children. In the beginning, Finwë mourns his beloved and waits, hoping for a change in her condition. One source of the much discussed mores or nature of marriage among the Eldar is based upon this statement from *Laws and Customs among the Eldar*.

The Eldar wedded once only in life, and for love or at least by free will upon either part. Even when in after days, as the histories reveal, many of the Eldar in Middle-earth became corrupted, and their hearts darkened by the shadow that lies upon Arda, seldom is any tale told of deeds of lust among them.⁸

The document itself never received Tolkien's final approval and might be read, as many have noted, a bit like the Ten Commandments, the expression of a moral ideal, rather than the reflection of actual practice. But if there is any legitimacy to the document at all, living under the noses of the Valar, and as the king of one of the largest groupings within the Quendi, Finwë must be seen to have taken the proscription seriously.

What then is left to Finwë, who is not the sort of man to easily settle for living out all of the Ages of Arda alone, without love, and lacking the opportunity to raise a family and build a life for himself? Through great hardship and determination, Finwë leads his contentious people across the vast wilderness and over the mountains of Middle-earth to finally reach the sea. One might say steering the Noldor is a lot like herding cats. Even in starlit woodlands of Middle-earth, despite the ever-present threats and menaces created by Melkor stalking those ancient forests, fully half of the Avari or the Refusers, those who stayed behind and did not even begin the exodus, were made up of Tatyar, the original group whence came the Noldor.⁹

Long and slow was the march of the Eldar into the west, for the leagues of Middle-earth were uncounted, and weary and pathless. Nor did the Eldar desire to hasten, for they were filled with wonder at all that they saw, and by many lands and rivers they wished to abide; and though all were yet willing to wander, many feared rather their journey's end than hoped for it.¹⁰

And yet, Finwë is able to lead what would become the Amanyarin Noldor successfully to the sea. Without a rival for the leadership of the Noldor, he finally brings them to the promised land of peace, plenty, and protection of the Valar, only to find after settling there and constructing their homes that the joy of that new world will be denied to him personally, with Míriel's withdrawal from life, leaving him alone, with a young son.

Significantly, there is another who observes and feels heartsore for him at this prospect. Waiting in the wings is Indis of the Vanyar, who has long loved Finwë.

There was a fair lady of the Vanyar, Indis of the House of Ingwë. She had loved Finwë in her heart, ever since the days when the Vanyar and the Noldor lived close together. In one of his wanderings Finwë met her again upon the inner slopes of Oiolossë, the Mountain of Manwë and Varda; and her face was lit by the golden light of Laurelin that was shining in the plain of Ezellohar below. In that hour Finwë perceived in her eyes the love that had before been hidden from him.¹¹

When Finwë learns of her love for him, he returns it: "In that hour Finwë perceived in her eyes the love that had before been hidden from him." He then makes the decision to approach Manwë and ask his assistance, desiring, contrary to the precepts and customs handed down to the Eldar of Aman from the Valar, that he be free to renounce his first marriage and take Indis as his wife. The story of the dissolution of the marriage of Finwë and Míriel is recorded in detail within *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*.¹²

This is no simple dissolution of marriage that Indis' desire for Finwë places before him. The Valar will exact a terrible sacrifice in exchange for Finwë's freedom. The possibility of Míriel ever returning to life must be denied her.

It was judged that Finwë's bereavement was unjust, and by persisting in her refusal to return Míriel had forfeited all rights that she had in the case; for either she was now capable of accepting the healing of her body by the Valar, or else her *fëa* was mortally sick and beyond their power, and she was indeed 'dead', no longer capable of becoming again a living member of the kindred of the Eldar.

'So she must remain until the end of the world. For from the moment that Finwë and Indis are joined in marriage all future change and choice will be taken from her and she will never again be permitted to take bodily shape. Her present body will swiftly wither and pass away, and the Valar will not restore it. For none of the Eldar may have two wives both alive in the world.¹³

This is a grim basis upon which to build a new life with another. And Fëanor, Míriel's grieving son, does not take the ruling well. In the form of passionate dislike, he chooses to transfer to Indis all of his grief and rage at his loss of hope that he would ever see or speak to his mother again in life. Despite this, Finwë agrees to accept the condition for the dissolution of his marriage. In the published *Silmarillion*, the contradiction is clearly stated:

'...if Finwë had endured his loss and been content with the fathering of his mighty son, the courses of Fëanor would have been otherwise, and great evil might have been prevented; for the sorrow and the strife in the House of Finwë is graven in the memory of the Noldorin Elves.'

* * * *

But the children of Indis were great and glorious, and their children also; and if they had not lived the history of the Eldar would have been diminished.¹⁴

There we have the contradiction of fate or doom and free will. Finwë is forced to make a terrible choice in order to fulfill the fate of his people.

Now it came to pass that Finwë took as his second wife Indis the Fair. She was a Vanya, close kin of Ingwë the High King, golden-haired and tall, and in all ways unlike Míriel. Finwë loved her greatly, and was glad again. But the shadow of Míriel did not depart from the house of Finwë, nor from his heart; and of all whom he loved Fëanor had ever the chief share of his thought.¹⁵

However, without Finwë's choice to marry Indis, we would not have even have a story--much less a story that included Fingolfin, Finarfin, and their illustrious offspring, not to mention that we would not have the daughters of Indis, Findis and Irimë (more below on Indis' daughters), who did not make it into *The Silmarillion* as edited by Christopher Tolkien.

What can one know of Indis herself aside from her relationship to Finwë and the grand deeds of her progeny? Or the fact that she is fair and golden-haired? The few scattered implications one is able to draw from the surrounding texts indicate that Indis must have been a woman of great resilience and strength and not lacking in importance among her own people and later among

her adopted kinsmen. She is said to be, in the citation from *The Silmarillion* quoted above, “in all ways unlike Míriel.”

Unlike Míriel, whose origins are left obscure in the stories, Indis is of much-vaunted royal blood. Tolkien presents the reader with kings and high kings in the history of his mighty Eldar, which inclines one to believe that governing principles of heredity rulership in our primary world must apply to his created universe. The Eldar are said in the *Laws and Customs* to marry “for love or at least by free will.”¹⁶ That does not necessarily rule out that some matches may be looked upon more favorably than others. Tolkien hints at a more egalitarian society than exists in his primary world, in terms of both gender and class, but does not always give us clear narrative evidence of its actuality. (Therein lies the material for an essay in and of itself.) The existence of Elven magic (art, craft, or skill, which one must presume results in a higher standard of living overall, particularly in Aman) coupled with the preternatural longevity of the Elves could reinforce the possibility of somewhat less rigid class divisions within society, top to bottom. But there is strong reason to believe that with a monarchy comes a hierarchical structure.

In Europe of the Middle Ages and in more prosperous periods and locations in the ancient world--imperfect models for the society of the Eldar, but models understood by both Tolkien and his readers--marriage was a means of joining disparate peoples and ethnicities one to another, of forming or cementing alliances.

Marital ties among the nobility were based on class, economic and political calculations. Marriage ties with the right family could lead to links between lineages and help to create alliances and agreements.¹⁷

The usual form of a noble marriage in fantasy or real life rarely reflects the same degree of freedom of choice that might exist within the common folk of a people. Despite all the talk of love, the idea of Indis, as a niece or sister of the High King Ingwë, marrying Finwë King of the Noldor, must seem like an excellent idea to the ruling classes of those peoples, near to one another, but separate, with shared interests and the wish to strengthen alliances. Incidentally, Tolkien presents us with another political-sounding marriage when he pairs Finwë's third son Finarfin with Eärwen the daughter of the Telerin King Olwë. Indis' grandson by Fingolfin, Turgon, also marries a Vanya.

(Parenthetically, Fëanor does not come anywhere close to any presumption of an arranged marriage, showing up after long travels with a *fait accompli*: a young wife, a craftsman herself and the daughter of a blacksmith. There is even their baby son Maedhros, with the father name of Nelyafinwë [Third Finwë], clearly chosen to ensure there will be no confusion about his place in the royal blood line of Finwë. [While this seems of dubious importance at that point in “deathless” Aman, history proves Fëanor to have reason for concern. Not only does Finwë lose his life in Aman, but Kings of the Noldor follow one another in fairly rapid succession in Middle-earth, slowing down only after the War of Wrath, with Gil-galad's reign significantly out-lasting those of his predecessors.] Largely absent and pursuing his own interests, Fëanor, nonetheless, has *no* intention of being supplanted or allowing his heir to be displaced by any son or grandson of Indis. The diplomatic dance is never one that Fëanor cares to master.)

Returning to Indis' qualifications as a consort of the King of the Noldor, one might speculate that lacking the arty and crafty skills of certain remarkable Noldorin women, Indis might have brought into the marriage her own set of competencies fostered by the unique cultural biases of the Vanyar. Perhaps she was musical (two of her grandsons, Finrod and Fingon, were). We do

have indications that she took language questions seriously. (See notes below on the use of the thorn.) Coming from the family of the High King of the Vanyar, perhaps she possesses diplomatic and administrative skills, which could be of use to Finwë. (It might be hard for some, perhaps unfairly so, to imagine Míriel Perindë abandoning an ambitious project to discuss dull details of Finwë's less than inspiring day-to-day work with him or offer counsel.)

The modern reader might detect couched within that statement "unlike Míriel" both positive and negative ways in which they differ.

Unlike Míriel, Indis is a breeder—the foremost qualification for the wife and consort of a hereditary monarch. She is able to bear Finwë two sons, although neither may be compared to the inexplicable genius of the unmatched Fëanor, who is described in terms that rival those bestowed upon heroes and demigods of the pagan mythologies with which Tolkien would have been familiar. On the other hand, Indis' sons are not lacking Elven wisdom and, at least in the case of Finarfin, possess a more measured and moderate temperament. Indis gives birth to daughters as well as sons in some versions of the legendarium, although only Fingolfin and Finarfin are mentioned in the published *Silmarillion*. In *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, Indis' first child is called Findis, Fingolfin is next, then Irimë, and, last of all, Finarfin. The name Findis is described as a combination of the parents' names. Findis stays with her mother, after Finwë is killed and they lived among the Vanyar, grief-stricken, "until such time as it seemed good to Manwë to restore Finwë to life."¹⁸

The fate of her second daughter, named here Irien and in other places Îrimé, is more interesting:

His second daughter was named Irien and her mother-name was Lalwendë (laughing maiden). By this name, or in shortened form Lalwen, she was generally known. She went into exile with her brother Fingolfin, who was most dear to her of all her kin; but her name was not changed, since Lalwen fitted the style of Sindarin well enough.¹⁹

The idea of a lively, laughing daughter of Indis, fitting into the deeds of the Noldorin princes in the First Age is appealing. (She sounds like a good aunt for the irrepressible Fingon the Valiant.) Relating to the exact number and names of the daughters of Indis, a further footnote to *The Shibboleth of Fëanor*, appears to contain the final version:

In all these tables [Elvish genealogies] there are still three daughters of Finwë and Indis: Findis, Faniel, and Îrimé (see X.207, 238, and also X.262, where Finvain appears for Îrimé), and no correction was made. In the *excursus* Faniel has disappeared, and the younger daughter appears both as Îrimé and Irien.²⁰

Thus, Indis succeeds in the biggest way that Míriel fails Finwë: she is able to give him the big family that he always wanted.

One is not able to draw any indication from the texts that Indis manifests any particular expertise in art or craft. One cannot help but think of the famed artists among the crafty Noldor closest to Finwë, like, for example, Míriel Perindë before her, who is credited with

. . . a marvellous dexterity of hand. This she employed in embroidery, which though achieved in what even the Eldar thought a speed of haste was finer and more intricate than any that had before been seen.²¹

Nor does Indis resemble Nerdanel, the spouse of her stepson Fëanor, who was regarded as a uniquely noteworthy artist, even among the Noldor famous for their creative gifts.

Of Mahtan Nerdanel learned much of crafts that women of the Noldor seldom used: the making of things of metal and stone. She made images, some of the Valar in their forms visible, and many others of men and women of the Eldar, and these were so like that their friends, if they knew not her art, would speak to them; but many things she wrought also of her own thought in shapes strong and strange but beautiful.²²

But Indis was a more than suitable queen and consort for Finwë. She bore him beautiful children who, along with their progeny, played a significant role in these epic tales. She apparently had the potential to smooth over relations between the Vanyar and the Noldor, not to mention to bring a certain piety lacking within her adopted people because of that particular native Noldorin pride, which tended to make them view themselves in a less than subservient role in relation to the Valar.

And, of great import, within Tolkien's legendarium, she had golden hair. Tolkien scholar Verlyn Flieger speaks to Tolkien's obsession with the Vanyar and their golden hair:

Their epithet, Fair Elves, refers to their golden hair, the only such coloring among the otherwise dark-haired Elves. The stem for this name is listed in "The Etymologies" under BAN-, while "Quendi and Eldar" cites Vanyar "from an adjectival derivative *wanja from the stem *WAN and notes that the name "was probably given to the First Clan by the Noldor" and that it referred to the color of their hair (*War of the Jewels* 382– 83). While as with Moriquendi, the name describes the perception of one group by another, it seems reasonable to suppose that both the epithet and the coloring are also meant to associate the Vanyar with the light and their readiness to seek it. Once in Valinor, these Elves never leave the light but dwell always near it and in it. Perhaps because of their implied spirituality, the Vanyar play little or no part in the subsequent turbulent history of the Elves. Excitement and tension, after all, come out of opposition, forces pushing against one another.²³

The implications in the texts surrounding Indis are that she possessed the gifts of the Vanyar, yet had the courage and flexibility to embrace her husband's people in her role as consort. She manifests this quality when she takes a position on the use or abandonment of the letter Þ in favor of the letter S. Fëanor chooses, while using linguistic arguments, to make the choice a sign of personal loyalty to him and respect for his mother Míriel Perindë, whose name included it and had always used it during her lifetime. Interestingly, as a conservative and traditional spelling the Vanyar used the "thorn" or letter Þ. Aligning himself with the majority of his people, Finwë drops the "thorn" after the death of Míriel.²⁴

Indis, as a show of support to her spouse and of her willing assimilation into the habits and customs of her adopted people, chooses to drop it as well, explaining, "I have joined the people of the Noldor, and I will speak as they do." Fëanor, not surprisingly, adds Indis' decision to his list of reasons for resentment.²⁵

It appears that Tolkien would have sided with Fëanor here, unless politics overcame his linguistic sensitivities:

Into the strife and confusion of loyalties in that time this seemingly trivial matter, the change of P to s, was caught up to its embitterment, and *to lasting detriment to the Quenya tongue*. [Emphasis added.]²⁶

Indis sincerely did, according to the texts, try to accommodate herself to and serve the Noldor and extend her personal love for Finwë to her fealty due her king. It is difficult to fault Indis for taking opportunistic advantage of Míriel's recalcitrance and offering to love and cherish Finwë. She clearly is better wife material by most traditional standards.

Of course, there was nothing Indis could do to win the favor of Fëanor. It is fairly obvious, from all accounts, although one might imagine there were moments in time of greater and lesser stress, that Fëanor, who continued to come first with Finwë ("his eldest son remained nearest to Finwë's heart"²⁷), never forgave Indis for replacing his mother.

At the pinnacle of Noldorin creativity and the golden age of Valinor, already the seeds for a great fall lie only temporarily dormant within in that society.

Now even while Fëanor and the craftsmen of the Noldor worked with delight, foreseeing no end to their labours, and while the sons of Indis grew to their full stature, the Noontide of Valinor was drawing to its close.²⁸

One cannot blame Fëanor alone for his resentments either. The medieval method of declaring a uncomfortable royal marriage invalid (while perhaps obtaining a papal dispensation for remarriage) and banishing the first wife to a nunnery seems almost kind and gentle compared to the Valar declaring Míriel dead through the end of Arda and beyond, ostensibly to entertain the idea that Finwë wanted a new wife. Among these all-but-immortal Elves, there should be no death in Valinor and even in the dark forest of Middle-earth, when the spirit left the body of one of the Firstborn, they had learned from the Valar that there was a possibility of rebirth. It seems to many modern minds a harsh interpretation of marriage laws and/or an idealistic one of the lasting endurance of all marriage bonds.

Tolkien said quite clearly how he viewed this situation. Finwë's choice not only threatened his new marriage, causing strife within his immediate family and extending that among his people. Melkor fanned the flames of discord between the supporters of Fëanor, the greatest of the Noldor, and those who might have looked to his brothers by his stepmother as a less arrogant and more moderate model, all the while hoping for guidance for their people from King Finwë.

When Fëanor threatened his brother Fingolfin with a deadly weapon, however, the Valar did not trust Finwë to restore the peace among the Noldor and intervened. The banishment of Fëanor was the death toll of the marriage of Indis and Finwë. Once again Finwë had a choice to make and this time he chose Fëanor over Indis. We are not told whether he asked Indis to accompany him into exile with Fëanor. In any case, she did not go.

With him into banishment went his seven sons, and northward in Valinor they made a strong place and treasury in the hills; and there at Formenos a multitude of gems were laid in hoard, and weapons also, and the Silmarils were shut in a chamber of iron. Thither also came Finwë the King, because of the love that he bore to Fëanor; and Fingolfin ruled the Noldor in Tirion.²⁹

Perhaps Indis lived out those years of Finwë's self-imposed exile in Formenos in the hope of reconciliation at their end, despite his lifelong favoritism of Fëanor over her and the children she had borne him. If she was indeed waiting for him as some of the texts state, she was waiting in vain. It was in exile in Formenos, standing between his beloved son's Silmarils and the Dark Vala, that Finwë met his death. In the darkness following the destruction of the Two Trees, Indis retired in grief to wait even longer. The last comfort to Indis is her eldest child.

She [Findis] did not go into exile, but went with her mother after the slaying of Finwë and they abode among the Vanyar in grief until such time as it seemed good to Manwë to restore Finwë to life.³⁰

When ninety percent of the Noldor rise up to abandon Aman and return to Middle-earth,³¹ all of Indis' grandchildren leave and, along with them, both of her sons and her youngest daughter. Finally, when Finarfin turns back and returns to Valinor, he finds that his mother and sister have already decided upon retirement in Valmar.

According to an after-the-*Silmarillion* version of the story of Indis and Finwë printed in the collection of documents in *Morgoth's Ring*, Finwë is permitted to speak with Míriel in the halls of Mandos after his death. He discovers that she wishes to return to her body; overwhelmed with remorse and pity, he desires to help her. He asks Vairë to support him with his proposed solution, which is to offer himself to Mandos forever in exchange for Míriel.

'Dost thou hear the prayer and desire of Míriel? Why will Mandos refuse this redress of her griefs, that her being may not be void and without avail? Behold! I instead will abide with Mandos for ever, and so make amends. For surely, if I remain unhoused, and forgo life in Arda, then his Doom will be inviolate.'

'So thou may deem,' answered Vaire; 'yet Mandos is stern, and he will not readily permit a vow to be revoked. Also he will consider not only Míriel and thee, but Indis and thy children, whom thou seemest to forget, pitying now Míriel only.'

'Thou art unjust to me in thy thought,' said Finwë. 'It is unlawful to have two wives, but one may love two women, each differently, and without diminishing one love by another. Love of Indis did not drive out love of Míriel; so now pity for Míriel doth not lessen my heart's care for Indis. But Indis parted from me without death. I had not seen her for many years, and when the Marrer smote me I was alone. She hath dear children to comfort her, and her love, I deem, is now most for Ingoldo. His father she may miss; but not the father of Feanaro! But above all her heart now yearns for the halls of Ingwe and the peace of the Vanyar, far from the strife of the Noldor. Little comfort should I bring her, if I returned; and the lordship of the Noldor hath passed to my sons.'³²

Finally, Finwë's wish is granted. Míriel dwells in the House of Vairë, weaving and observing. Perhaps Indis dwells still in city of many bells at the feet of Manwë seeking peace and relief from the grief and disquiet she brought upon herself during her years of attempting to live as a Noldo.

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About the Author

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