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# Character Biography

## Námo Mandos

By Dawn Felagund

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Back in February 2009, the writer scheduled to write the character biography had a family emergency at the last minute, and I dashed off in about two hours a very brief, shallow biography on Námo Mandos, just so we had something to fill that space in the newsletter. He's always been a character that I find fascinating, both as a student of Tolkien's writings and a writer of transformative works based on them, and he deserved better than what I had the time to give him. It's always been my intention to expand on the original, perfunctory biography, and I finally have the opportunity to do so. [The original biography of Námo Mandos can be found here.](#)

### Námo, a.k.a. Mandos

Námo is one of the pantheon of gods, known as the Valar, that enter Arda to build and govern a world for the Children of Ilúvatar to occupy. In the *Valaquenta*, Námo is named fifth in terms of power in relation to others of the male Valar and is one of the eight Aratar or High Ones of Arda. He is often called *Mandos*, a name that more correctly refers to the halls where he dwells.

Námo is one half the Fëanturi, or masters of spirits. His brother Irmo--also known as Lórien, again after his dwelling place--serves opposite him and acts as a foil character. We are also told that Námo has a sister, Nienna, and a wife, Vairë.

Námo's role is one typical of polytheistic mythologies: He is the god of the dead. "He is the keeper of the Houses of the Dead, and the summoner of the spirits of the slain," according to the *Valaquenta*, but Námo is assigned roles in addition to this. He is something of a Valarin recordkeeper, possesses extraordinary foresight, and acts as a judge: "He forgets nothing; and he knows all things that shall be, save only those that lie still in the freedom of Ilúvatar. He is the Doomsman of the Valar; but he pronounces his dooms and his Judgements only at the bidding of Manwë."<sup>1</sup>

Through Námo, we enter the thorny problem of free will in Tolkien's works. Tolkien was adamant that the beings in his world possessed free will; it was essential to him, as a Christian, that all beings in his story have the ability to choose between good and evil. Of Elves and mortal humans, he said,

they were not therefore in any sense conceived or made by the gods, the Valar, and were called the Eruhíni or 'Children of God', and were for the Valar an incalculable element: that is they were rational creatures of free will in regard to God, of the same historical rank as the Valar, though of far smaller spiritual and intellectual power and status.<sup>2</sup>

Yet Námo's ability to see the future--something he demonstrates on multiple occasions in *The Silmarillion*--also suggests an element of predestination; even the caveat that Námo cannot see things in the future "that lie still in the freedom of Ilúvatar" suggests that Ilúvatar--not individuals--

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-controls the outcome of unforeseeable future events. Given Christopher Tolkien's attested meddling with the *Valaquenta* the interest of achieving consistency with the other texts,<sup>3</sup> I'm not sure how to reconcile this detail about Námo with the importance of free will throughout the rest of the works: It seems an oversight too large for Christopher to have missed. My personal preference--taking the texts as works of myth and history--is to credit Rúmil's fictional authorship of the *Valaquenta* early in the history of the Elves (before mortal humans or Hobbits even arrived on the scene) with its more pagan emphasis on predestination. Later works like *The Lord of the Rings* were authored much later in history and by Hobbits, whom Tolkien felt closer to and perhaps more closely shared his views on predestination versus free will.

Námo's name means *ordainer* or *judge*,<sup>4</sup> and it is in this capacity--reading as we are the tales of the living--where we see him most often in the published *Silmarillion*. Manwë frequently calls on Námo to reveal his foresight. Námo predicts the coming of the Elves to Middle-earth, their love of the stars, their devotion to Varda, the arrival of the Elves in Valinor,<sup>5</sup> the fate of the Silmarils,<sup>6</sup> Finwë's murder,<sup>7</sup> Fëanor's death, the closing off of Aman to the Noldor,<sup>8</sup> and the Fëanorions' loss of the high kingship,<sup>9</sup> all before we readers follow the Noldor into exile and receive radio silence from Námo and the other Valar. As the judge, it is he who passes the sentence on Fëanor, exiling him from Tirion for twelve years.<sup>10</sup>

Námo's most famous instance of acting as a judge occurs when he pronounces what is known as the Doom of Mandos or the Prophecy of the North. As the Noldor proceed north to Araman, having willingly exiled themselves from Aman and slain their Telerin kin in the process, Mandos speaks from atop a high rock, in a voice "solemn and terrible" and powerful enough to halt the willful Noldor in their tracks:

'Tears unnumbered ye shall shed; and the Valar will fence Valinor against you, and shut you out, so that not even the echo of your lamentation shall pass over the mountains. On the House of Fëanor the wrath of the Valar lieth from the West unto the uttermost East, and upon all that will follow them it shall be laid also. Their Oath shall drive them, and yet betray them, and ever snatch away the very treasures that they have sworn to pursue. To evil end shall all things turn that they begin well; and by treason of kin unto kin, and the fear of treason, shall this come to pass. The Dispossessed shall they be for ever.

'Ye have spilled the blood of your kindred unrighteously and have stained the land of Aman. For blood ye shall render blood, and beyond Aman ye shall dwell in Death's shadow. For though Eru appointed to you to die not in Eä, and no sickness may assail you, yet slain ye may be, and slain ye shall be: by weapon and by torment and by grief; and your houseless spirits shall come then to Mandos. There long shall ye abide and yearn for your bodies, and find little pity though all whom ye have slain should entreat for you. And those that endure in Middle-earth and come not to Mandos shall grow weary of the world as with a great burden, and shall wane, and become as shadows of regret before the younger race that cometh after. The Valar have spoken.<sup>11</sup>

The pronouncement is frightening enough to cause some of the Noldor to turn back and seek pardon from the Valar. The setting shifts at this point from Aman to Middle-earth, and we hear little of the Valar henceforth, both because they have shut out the Noldor and because they no longer share physical space with the Elves, as they did in Aman. The narrator changes also from Rúmil to Pengolodh, one of Turgon's people born in Middle-earth, who wouldn't therefore

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have even memory of living among the Valar to encourage him to see their hands in the events that transpire among the Noldor in Middle-earth.

But through the Doom of Mandos, we are regularly reminded of *Námo's* presence in their lives. After the Noldor flee from Aman, we see Námo only two more times: during his encounter with Lúthien (discussed in detail below) and when Eärendil arrives in Valinor. Searching references to his name in the published *Silmarillion* nonetheless reveals his presence throughout the First Age in the form of his curse: Nearly every bad deed is ascribed to the Doom of Mandos. (In this instance, though, Námo's powers of foresight aren't particularly impressive. Who, after all, would doubt that the kinslaying of the Teleri, followed closely by the desertion of Fingolfin and his people by the House of Fëanor, would sow distrust among the Noldor? One wonders if the Elves were seeing the hand of the "Doom of Mandos" in events that actually proceeded logically from their own behaviors.)

Námo's omnipresence casts a pallor over the recounted events of the First Age, however. Arguably the coldest and most forbidding of the Valar, his name is most often invoked, save the name of Ulmo, in the latter portion of the *Quenta Silmarillion*: not Manwë with his innocence and power; not Varda with her stars meant to encourage and guide the Elves; not Aulë, their erstwhile teacher; not Irmo or Nienna, the gentler, merciful siblings of Námo; not Oromë, the initial protector of the Elves.<sup>12</sup> Death hovers at every hero's heels in the First Age, along with the guilt that has come with their judgment, in the form of the oft-uttered name *Mandos*. Námo presides over both death and judgment; it makes sense that his name should be invoked more than almost any other of the Valar.

With the exception of his interaction with Lúthien, we see Námo only one more time in the published *Silmarillion*: When Eärendil arrives in Valinor to plead on the behalf of both Elves and Men, it is Námo who urges death for violating the ban of the Valar. He says,

'Shall mortal Man step living upon the undying lands, and yet live?' But Ulmo said: 'For this he was born into the world. And say unto me: whether is he Eärendil Tuor's son of the line of Hador, or the son of Idril, Turgon's daughter, of the Elven-house of Finwë?' And Mandos answered: 'Equally the Noldor, who went wilfully into exile, may not return hither.'<sup>13</sup>

Depictions of Námo in Tolkien-based transformative works run the gamut from a cruel jailer and torturer of souls to a grandfatherly, kind spiritual healer. Although I strongly believe that internal consistency and conviction trump close adherence to the texts when writing Tolkien-based stories, I'd also contend that the texts don't uphold either extreme of characterization, although they certainly reflect the former depiction of Námo more so than the latter. (Admittedly, if we take the texts as works of history, there are also major historiographical issues that prevent us from ever truly "knowing" Námo, and just about any characterization becomes acceptable.)

With the exception of the story of Námo's encounter with Lúthien, we are never shown Námo as kind, warm, or merciful. When Melkor sues for pardon, Nienna aids his prayer, but Námo is silent. It may be that he foresees the later disastrous consequences of Melkor's release and doesn't want to be implicated later in having abetted them--no matter their inevitability--or it may be that he is simply not interested in showing mercy or forgiveness.<sup>14</sup> His words to the Noldor, likewise, show no inclination toward pity and forgiveness. It could be argued again, however, that they more than deserved these just deserts.

But the speed with which he recommends death for Eärendil seems especially callous. Eärendil had certainly committed no wrongdoing of the caliber of Melkor or even the Noldor; his breaking the rules was a risk he took upon himself for the benefit of all the free peoples of Middle-earth. Námo's insistence on blind obedience—including Eärendil's bowing without protest to a fate brought upon him by the bad deeds of ancestors in a time long before his birth—his unwillingness to show even an iota of mercy, and the severity of the punishment he recommends show a character of exceeding coldness. There is only one instance in the published story where we see Námo as other than heartless and unfeeling.

### Námo and Lúthien

One of the most discussion-provoking incidents in Námo's story occurs in the chapter "Of Beren and Lúthien," when Námo encounters Lúthien, the ethereally beautiful and fantastically talented daughter of Elu Thingol and Melian the Maia. Lúthien's beloved, Beren, has just died following his fight with the great wolf Carcharoth. Deep in grief, "the spirit of Lúthien fell down into darkness, and at the last it fled, and her body lay like a flower that is suddenly cut off and lies for a while unwithered on the grass." She arrives in the halls of Mandos, where she sings a song of her grief to Námo:

The song of Lúthien before Mandos was the song most fair that ever in words was woven, and the song most sorrowful that ever the world shall ever hear. Unchanged, imperishable, it is sung still in Valinor beyond the hearing of the world, and the listening Valar grieved. For Lúthien wove two themes of words, of the sorrow of the Eldar and the grief of Men, of the Two Kindreds that were made by Ilúvatar to dwell in Arda, the Kingdom of Earth amid the innumerable stars. And as she knelt before him her tears fell upon his feet like rain upon stones; and Mandos was moved to pity, who never before was so moved, nor has been since.<sup>15</sup>

Námo is moved but—bound as he is to play by the rules set forth by Ilúvatar—is ultimately powerless to change the fates of the Children of Ilúvatar. However, he takes the unprecedented action of moving up the chain of command to see what can be done: beseeching Manwë to ask Ilúvatar to intervene in the fate of the lovers. Manwë does, and Ilúvatar allows Lúthien to choose between life in Valinor and forgetfulness or life with Beren and mortality. Lúthien, of course, chooses the latter.

The "Of Beren and Lúthien" chapter stands apart from the rest of *The Silmarillion* due to its fantastical storyline and mythic tone in excess of what we see elsewhere in the published book. The encounter between Námo and Lúthien is an example of this and one that creators of *Silmarillion*-based transformative works often respond to scathingly. Some remark that Námo—who isn't exactly known for his tender-heartedness (the prime example being his recommendation of death for Eärendil for his crime of, among other things, having Noldorin descendants<sup>16</sup>)—seems out-of-character here. Others go still a step further, using the encounter to bolster the argument that Lúthien is a canon version of a "Mary Sue," a character who, according to Fanlore, "warp[s] the characterization and even the established story lines of the canon characters and settings,"<sup>17</sup> e.g., a beautiful and talented woman wrests an unusual act of kindness and pity from an otherwise stone-hearted god who finds her more beautiful and compelling than his menagerie of admittedly exceedingly pathetic dead spirits.<sup>18</sup>

However, I'd argue that neither of these points is true. (Full disclosure: I have a serious problem with Fandom-with-a-capital-F's concept of "Mary Sue.") Ironically, Lúthien seems to function in this way during her scene with Námo because the *fan* believes her to be the catalyst without looking beyond her to understand the deeper mythological significance of her scene with Námo and what it is meant to illustrate.

Without a doubt, one of the major themes of all of Tolkien's works concerns the "gift" of mortality: As a Christian, he would not have viewed death as an end, much less something to be feared (by those living a good Christian life, that is), but rather a gateway to a fate greater than anything the mortal world has to offer. He goes to great lengths to make the immortal life seem the short end of the proverbial stick. We are constantly reminded of the distress the Elves experience as the world around them undergoes irreversible changes (never for the better, it seems); even the Valar, Tolkien tells us, will envy the mortals' ability to die as time wears on.<sup>19</sup>

Two mythological traditions with which Tolkien would have been familiar have stories remarkably similar to the story of Námo and Lúthien. In the ancient Greek myth of "Orpheus and Eurydice," the musician Orpheus falls in love with and marries the lovely Eurydice. (Sometimes Orpheus is a son of Apollo, the god of music; in all cases, he is the bestest of mortal musicians.) On their wedding day, though, a viper bites Eurydice in the heel, and she dies, her soul passing to the Underworld. Orpheus's grief is so great that he follows her to the Underworld, where he "dared more than any other man ever dared for his love" and played a song for Hades, god of the Underworld, begging him to return Eurydice to him. According to Edith Hamilton's version of the myth,

No one under the spell of his voice could refuse him anything. He

Drew iron tears down [Hades'] cheek,  
and made Hell grant what Love did seek.<sup>20</sup>

Orpheus, however, must agree not to look back at Eurydice until they are both clear of the Underworld. He keeps his promise until the very end: As soon as he feels sunlight on his face, he turns to greet her. She has not emerged yet from the Underworld and so must return to the world of the dead. Orpheus is thwarted.

The Norse myth "The Death of Baldur the Good" in the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Prose Edda* proceeds similarly. Baldur, the son of Odin, was the most beautiful, kind, and beloved of all the gods. Baldur is accidentally killed by his blind twin, Höd, who is tricked into doing so by Loki, the trickster god who envies the attention the other gods are lavishing on their beloved Baldur. The entire world grieves, except for Loki, and Baldur's other brother Hermod decides to journey into the land of the dead to persuade Hel, the keeper of the dead (the fact that the word *Hell* derives from her name should give you a clue of what she was like), to let him return to life. Like Námo, like Hades, Hel agrees ... under one condition. In order to prove how much they love Baldur, *every being* in the nine worlds must weep for his death. Everyone does except for Loki, so Baldur remains in the land of the dead. The gods are thwarted.<sup>21</sup>

There are several connections between the three myths. All of them involve journeys into the world of the dead that are represented as being particularly perilous or unpleasant. That these journeys are undertaken at all shows how much the deceased character was adored by others in his or her life. All of the myths involve characters who are the best and the brightest among their people; interestingly, the story of Námo and Lúthien is the only one in which this

exceedingly wonderful character is female. (One can only wonder how fans would react to the story if it was *Beren* singing of his grief for losing Lúthien.) More importantly, all of the stories involve love that is greater than any other. In two of the stories, the grief is expressed through a song.

Most importantly, though, none of the characters are fully successful. Neither Eurydice nor Baldur succeed in returning from the dead. Lúthien is allowed to return briefly, but she is offered the heartbreaking, near-impossible choice that would also play a central role in the lives of her descendants: She must either forsake her love or her immortality. All three myths could be summarized as, "You can't cheat Death and win, even if you're a god, even if you're a super-talented singer, even if you're the hottest Elf-woman on this side of the Sundering Seas." No amount of specialness can change the fact that people die.

The lynchpin that connects the three stories, however, is the pivotal role of an otherwise cold-hearted god who is persuaded by the strength of the characters' love to make an exception *just this one time*--yet due to circumstances beyond that god's control, his or her exception cannot be fully granted. One can imagine that the Greek and Norse stories functioned to teach listeners that even the most powerful--the gods--could not fully revoke death. The same is true of the story of Lúthien and Námo, which underscores again that death is ordained by Eru and therefore must be a Good Thing, but Tolkien, coming from a Christian rather than a pagan perspective, also uses the story to illustrate yet again the superiority of the mortals' fate compared the fate of immortals like the Elves and Ainur. Lúthien in her wisdom realizes that paradise is not to be found in the sojourn in Valinor that she is offered, freed from the pain of her memories, but beyond the circles of the world, where she can be with the one she loves and also unbound from the endless cycles of the world that so torment her kindred among the Elves and Ainur.

### The Halls of Mandos

The *Valaquenta* locates the halls of Mandos in western Aman, on the edge of the Outer Sea. However, this was a change made by Christopher Tolkien; the original version placed the halls of Mandos in *northern* Aman, on the edge of the Outer Sea.<sup>22</sup> Christopher originally believed, erroneously, that the two descriptors were contradictory and, in the *Book of Lost Tales* 1, admitted that he regretted "this piece of unwarranted editorial meddling."<sup>23</sup>

Being as they are the abodes of the dead, the halls of Mandos remain largely a mystery throughout the published *Silmarillion*. We are told of their isolation from the major cities in eastern Aman. Vairë, the wife of Námo, weaves tapestries of the goings-on in the world, and these adorn the halls of Mandos. Nienna is also said to visit her brother's halls frequently--being as they are near to her own--"and all those who wait in Mandos cry to her, for she brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom." This certainly is not a positive depiction of the halls: a place where weakness and sorrow prevail, and the keeper of the halls is either unable or unwilling to assuage either. Furthermore, the halls of Mandos are said to grow in size as unfolding history requires Vairë to add more tapestries to their walls, another sinister element, as one can easily imagine them always burgeoning with the grief-filled spirits of the dead and overtaking ground given to the living world around them.<sup>24</sup> Later, Melkor's imprisonment is described as occurring in "the duress of Mandos, alone," which is certainly not a comforting or cozy choice of wording.<sup>25</sup> Tolkien's narrators clearly didn't find the halls of Mandos a desirable place to go.

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The halls of Mandos also function as a prison, one so strong that even the greatest of the Valar, Melkor, was unable to escape from them.<sup>26</sup> In light of the mythological connections made above, this again makes sense and underscores the finality of death, a common theme in world mythology that Tolkien takes up in his own stories to deepen the sorrow felt for those slain Elves, like Fëanor, who will never come forth from Mandos.

### The Evolution of Námo Mandos

Námo is one of the earliest characters in Tolkien's legendarium, first appearing in the *Book of Lost Tales* that Tolkien started writing in 1916 as a young man during his service in World War I. Like most of the Valar, Námo--called Vefántur Mandos in the *Lost Tales*--is treated to a far more detailed description in this early text.

As in the published *Silmarillion*, Mandos is paired in the *Lost Tales* with his brother Lórien; the two are foils, one concerned with tenderness and healing, while the other collects and keeps the spirits of the dead. His wife Vairë hasn't yet made an appearance; instead, he is married to Fui Nienna, an early and much creepier conception of the later goddess of pity and mourning, Nienna.

The *Lost Tales* are of interest to any study of Námo for the explicit details they provide, both about him as a character and his dwelling, before Tolkien hid much of this detail behind the ignorance of his Elven narrators. In this early version, Mandos is out-and-out fearsome. Two of the Valar are chosen to confront Melkor (Melko) about his destructive behavior, "and these were Mandos and Tulkas, Mandos for that of his dread aspect was Melko more in fear than of aught else save it were the strength of Tulkas' arm, and Tulkas was the other."<sup>27</sup> When Melkor thinks you're dreadful, then you're pretty dreadful.

At the first blossoming of the Two Trees, it is said that "even Mandos smiled."<sup>28</sup> He and Fui Nienna become grouchy when the Sun is made.<sup>29</sup> His grim characterization, then, was in place at the outset. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the description of his dwelling. In the *Lost Tales* version, the term *Mandos* refers to the region in which he lives while his halls are called Vê:

So fair were [the abodes of the Valar] and so great the brilliance of the trees of Valinor that Vefántur and Fui his wife of tears might not endure to stay there long, but fared away far to the northward of those regions, where beneath the roots of the most cold and northerly of the Mountains of Valinor, that rise here again almost to their height nigh Arvalin, they begged Aulë to delve them a hall. Wherefore, that all the Gods might be housed to their liking, he did so, and they and all their shadowy folk aided him. Very vast were those caverns that they made stretching even down under the Shadowy Seas, and they are full of gloom and filled with echoes, and all that deep abode is known to Gods and Elves as Mandos. There in a sable hall sat Vefántur, and he called that hall with his own name Vê. It was lit only with a single vessel placed in the centre, wherein there lay some gleaming drops of the pale dew of Silpion: it was draped with dark vapours and its floors and columns were of jet. Thither in after days fared the Elves of all the clans who were by illhap slain with weapons or did die of grief for those that were slain -- and only so might the Eldar die, and then it was only for a while. There Mandos spake their doom, and there they waited in the darkness, dreaming of their past deeds, until such time as

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he appointed when they might again be born into their children, and go forth to laugh and sing again.

In this extraordinary passage, we learn that Nienna has her own halls, Fui, where mortal humans go after death: "Therein before her black chair burnt a brazier with a single flickering coal, and the roof was of bats' wings, and the pillars that upheld it and the walls about were made of basalt."<sup>30</sup> (See below for a discussion of the equally extraordinary eschatology of these early texts.) When the Elves awaken in Middle-earth, part of their peril comes from the children of Mandos, who are named in the same breath as the vassals of Melkor.<sup>31</sup> Mandos also released bats and owls into Middle-earth after the threat of Melkor was removed.<sup>32</sup> Námo's later grim idiom pales in comparison with this early and explicit association of Mandos with malice, darkness, isolation, and overt symbols of morbidity.

Although we are told that Mandos is not "any rebel against Manwë or abetter of evil deeds,"<sup>33</sup> Tolkien's depiction clearly shows that he was not originally envisioned as a character without moral complexity. On the heels of this assurance that Mandos is not evil, we are told that Melkor corrupted one of Mandos's servants and had him serve as a messenger to the Valar. This echoes Tolkien's tendency in the published *Silmarillion* to, as Doc Bushwell details in her essay The Tolkienian War on Science, use servants of Aulë as perpetual fodder to become the easily corrupted servants of Melkor, an apt illustration of the theme that too heavily relying on science and technology corrupts and destroys.<sup>34</sup> A Vala becomes judged, in part, by the company he keeps.

In the *Lost Tales* version of the story, Mandos is not yet as strongly associated with foresight and judgment as he is in the published text, although he and all of his people are credited with a "power of prophecy."<sup>35</sup> He isn't yet depicted as the Doomsman of the Valar, prognosticating at the urging of Manwë; in fact, it is said that he does not speak often at councils at all.<sup>36</sup> Nienna, as the judge of the souls of mortal humans (see below), fills this role more than Mandos does. Possibly, when Tolkien concentrated care of the dead onto Mandos, he shifted Nienna's role as a judge of dead spirits, which could have easily and logically expanded to include judgment of living Elves and Ainur whose natural fate is not death, as discussed above. And as an already reticent participant at councils, he would have naturally also evolved into the role of one who speaks only at Manwë's bidding.

Like the published version, in the *Lost Tales*, Mandos disappears almost entirely from the story except by allusion to his halls, usually by dying characters. Again, the sole exception occurs in *The Tale of Tinúviel*, in which an early version of Lúthien's expression of grief to Mandos occurs. In this version, since both Beren and Lúthien are Elves, Mandos allows them to return to life with the understanding that they both become mortal.<sup>37</sup> This is notable primarily because it shows how, at this early stage of the story, Mandos was able to make decisions concerning characters' fates that were later reserved only for Ilúvatar.

Some would argue that the *Lost Tales* are too distant from the published work to provide reliable evidence of how to interpret the published texts. Nienna certainly illustrates why: From a cold, sinister character associated with death in the *Lost Tales*, she evolves in the published *Silmarillion* to the most empathetic of the Valar and the teacher of Olórin, who exerts a massive positive influence on the events of the Third Age as Gandalf, in part, because of his ability to pity characters like Gollum. But what about Námo? Can we use any of the wealth of information in the *Lost Tales* to draw reliable conclusions about him? I'd argue that we can.



While certain characters--like Nienna--underwent transformations over the decades that left their published versions unrecognizable from their earliest forms, this certainly isn't true of all or even most of the characters. In Mandos from the *Lost Tales*, we can see the germ of the character who, fixed into permanence by publication of *The Silmarillion*, we would come to know as Námo Mandos. It has long been a theory of mine that, as the early tales evolved across Tolkien's lifetime, he shied away from a lot of the complexity and moral ambiguity that he invested in characters like Mandos in the *Lost Tales*, preferring instead a more dualist good-evil approach. The evolution of Námo certainly illustrates this.

*The Sketch of the Mythology* and *The Quenta*--both composed around 1930--pare down the detail-rich *Lost Tales* immensely, and Námo begins to emerge in the form we will eventually see in the published version. In *The Quenta*, the Prophecy of Mandos (later the Prophecy of the North) first appears that portends dire consequences for the Noldorin betrayal of their kin.<sup>38</sup>

*The Quenta* also contains the Second Prophecy of Mandos (a shorter version appears in *The Sketch of the Mythology*), which did not survive into the published text. The Second Prophecy of Mandos makes numerous predictions about the ending of the world: Melkor will destroy the Sun and Moon, Eärendil will attack him, the Last Battle will commence in Valinor, Túrin will slay Melkor, the Silmarils will be recovered, Fëanor will give the Silmarils to Yavanna, and she will break them and use them to rekindle the Two Trees, then

the Mountains of Valinor shall be leveled, so that the light goes out all over the world. In that light the Gods will again grow young, and the Elves awake and all their dead arise, and the purpose of Ilúvatar be fulfilled concerning them. But of Men in that day the prophecy speaks not, save of Túrin only, and him it names among the Gods.<sup>39</sup>

This is an extraordinary passage and one that has provided writers of Tolkien-based transformative works much fodder in shaping their stories, despite the fact that it doesn't appear in the published *Silmarillion*. Christopher Tolkien justifies the removal of the Second Prophecy of Mandos based on his father's later assertion that "if ... the Marring [of Arda] be amended, Manwë and Varda may know; but they have not revealed it, and it is not declared in the dooms of Mandos."<sup>40</sup> Essentially, the removal of the Second Prophecy occurs not because Tolkien decided that what it predicts doesn't in fact come to pass but, rather, because the fictional authors/narrators of *The Silmarillion* could not have been privy to such information.

In the *Quenta Silmarillion* found in *The Lost Road and Other Writings*, written around 1937, we see for the first time Námo as a prophet and judge, speaking only when bidden by Manwë.<sup>41</sup> By this point, he has taken the shape he keeps through to the published version of *The Silmarillion*.

### **Námo, Mandos, and the Mythic Tradition**

Most pantheons found in myth include a god of the dead, so Námo joins a long list of similar deities, not surprising considering that Tolkien's stories arose from a long study of world mythology and a desire to create "a body of more or less connected legend ... which I could dedicate simply to: to England; to my country."<sup>42</sup> There are many parallels between Námo and these deities.

Like Námo, gods of death tend to be depicted as aloof and cold, sometimes even cruel. The ancient Greek god of death, Hades, is frequently described as grim. The Greek Underworld also resembles the halls of Mandos in many ways. It was believed to be located in the far west,

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beyond the sea that encircled the world; Mandos lay in the mysterious western realm of Valinor, forbidden to mortals, and near the Outer Seas that formed the boundary of the world. Like Mandos, most spirits in the Greek Underworld don't seem cruelly treated so much as miserable and sorrowful. The Greek Underworld, however, did reserve sections for the punishment of the exceptionally wicked and the blissful reward of the very good.<sup>43</sup>

In Norse mythology, the ruler of the land of the dead is Hel:

Hela he cast into Nifelheim, and gave her power over nine worlds (regions), into which she distributes those who are sent to her, that is to say, all who die through sickness or old age. Here she possesses a habitation protected by exceedingly high walls and strongly barred gates. Her hall is called Elvidnir; Hunger is her table; Starvation, her knife; Delay, her man; Slowness, her maid; Precipice, her threshold; Care, her bed; and Burning Anguish forms the hangings of her apartments. The one half of her body is livid, the other half the colour of human flesh. She may therefore easily be recognized; the more so, as she has a dreadfully stern and grim countenance.<sup>44</sup>

Like Hades--and like Námo--Hel is known for her grimness. Neither god seems the sort to provide the comfort or guidance that a newly dead spirit might desire. Their respective realms also share much in common with the halls of Mandos. All gather spirits or souls of the deceased (although Elven spirit can refuse Námo's summons; see below). All are described in unpleasant terms, and all are heavily guarded and seemingly inescapable, representing the permanence of death. Perhaps trivial but interesting to note is the tendency to refer to the god and his or her domain by the same name: Hades, Hell, and Mandos. The god takes on the terrifying aspects of his establishment to where the two seem inseparable.

Námo's role as the judge also has a mythological precedent. Judgment after death is, of course, a central belief of many Christian sects and is described in the Christian Bible.<sup>45</sup> In the Greek Underworld, three judges determine the fate of the dead spirits who pass before them, sending some to torment in Tartarus, others to bliss in Elysium, and most to nondescript misery in Asphodel.<sup>46</sup> In ancient Egyptian mythology, Anubis, the god of death, weighs each dead person's heart in judgment. Those who have committed evil deeds have their souls devoured by the monster Amenti. Those who have done good deeds in their lives are permitted to join their ancestors in the afterlife.<sup>47</sup>

Where Námo differs as a judge from his mythic brethren is that he renders judgment against the living as well as the dead. Of course, Tolkien's mythology involves a significant contingent of immortal characters--Elves as well as all of the Ainur--making judgment after death unlikely if not impossible in some cases, such as Melkor's. It seems a natural shift for Námo to take over responsibility for judgment of the living in these cases.

Perhaps the greatest difference between Tolkien's legendarium and the world myths is Námo's relatively low level of involvement in the afterlives of mortal humans. Granted, we are told that little is known about what happens to mortals after they die<sup>48</sup>; it is possible that Námo plays a more important role than Tolkien's fictional narrators would have had any way of knowing. In crafting his myth to have the mortal humans pass beyond the Circles of the World after death--a fate very different from other beings on Arda--Tolkien seems to be giving a deliberate nod to his Christian belief of ascendancy to Heaven after death; whether mortal humans undergo any form of judgment similar to Christian beliefs is not known.

## The Eschatology of Arda

The role played by Námo and his halls in the afterlife of the various peoples of Arda is complicated and beyond the scope of this biography. Tolkien tinkered from the outset with how his mythology handled death and the afterlife, including several major changes. Even though just about anything to do with death or the afterlife indirectly concerns Námo, I'm going to stick only with that information that references him directly.

The halls of Mandos are also termed the halls of Awaiting because, after their bodies are slain, the spirits (or *feär*) of Elves go to the halls of Mandos, where they await rebirth. Being reborn requires willingness from both Námo and the slain Elf; rebirth cannot be forced by the Valar, nor can it be undertaken by the Elf without the blessing of the Valar.<sup>49</sup> Although, initially, Tolkien envisioned the deceased Elf being reborn to his or her children,<sup>50</sup> *In Laws and Customs among the Eldar*, he describes rebirth as occurring simply with childbirth, specifying that Elves that died young might be born again to the same set of parents. As the child aged, she or he gradually regained knowledge of her or his former life, experiencing "double joy of childhood, and also an experience and knowledge great than the year of its body." Elves that died more than once did not typically desire rebirth.<sup>51</sup>

Tolkien's concept of Elven reincarnation made one final change in *Finrod Anthrabeth ah Andreth*, where he declared that Elves were "re-housed in the same form and shape as they had had."<sup>52</sup> This solved a lot of the troublesome aspects of having reincarnated Elves reborn to a new set of parents while also able to remember their old set.

Not all spirits were reborn. Those who had willingly given up life were made to wait for a long period of time before rebirth; many didn't desire rebirth, which was believed to show "a weakness or lack of courage in the *fëa*." Elves who had committed wrongful deeds during their lives were also often not permitted to return.

Spirits in Mandos were "corrected, instructed, strengthened, or comforted, according to their needs or deserts." This shows a change from Tolkien's earliest vision of Mandos seem in the *Lost Tales*, where the Elves passively waited in the darkness, dreaming of their past deeds.<sup>53</sup>

Elven spirits kept in Mandos seem able to interact at least somewhat with each other. When Elu Thingol (Elwë) forsakes the journey to Valinor in order to remain with Melian, Finwë "knew that he should not see him again, unless it were in the halls of Mandos."<sup>54</sup> (How much Finwë would have known of the halls of Mandos at this relatively early stage of his life is an interesting question, or his statement could simply be a poetical remark made in later, wiser years when recounting his story to the loremasters of Valinor.) *Laws and Customs among the Eldar* clarifies that most spirits in Mandos preferred solitude, unless they had deeply loved the other spirit during life.

Tolkien presents a third option for Elven spirits. Upon dying, the spirit is summoned to Mandos, but the spirit retains its autonomy insofar as it can refuse this summons. According to *Laws and Customs*, this is especially common for the Elves who refused the summons to Valinor. Elves who lingered late in Middle-earth also tended to refuse. These Elves "wander houseless in the world ... haunting trees or springs or hidden places they once knew." These spirits can be

sinister; "[i]ndeed the refusal of the summons is in itself a sign of taint." They can also forcibly inhabit and enslave the bodies of the living.<sup>55</sup>

I have long held misgivings about this passage. *Laws and Customs* admits that the information about these houseless, malicious spirits comes from the Eldar, that is, the Elves that *accepted* the invitation to Valinor. As Angelica pointed out in her essay Name Calling: Group Identity and the Other among First Age Elves, the two groups of Elves became "separate and opposite" following the summons to Valinor, with resentment building on both sides toward the other. In addition to believing themselves superior,

The Eldar saw the Avari not as long-divided kin but as a foreign and hostile people, separate and different, so alien that they were not only not recognized as members of the same race but even confused with their enemies: on first encountering Orcs, the Eldar thought they were Avari who had turned evil and savage in the wild.<sup>56</sup>

The Eldarin certainty that spirits who refused the call of Mandos were not only capable of but routinely engaged in malicious body-snatching and displayed an inherent spiritual "taint" might be nothing more than virulent ethnocentrism at work.

Unlike the Elves, mortal humans leave the world entirely after death,<sup>57</sup> although they are said to stop for a time in Mandos, "but their place of waiting there is not that of the Elves, and Mandos under Ilúvatar alone save Manwë knows whither they go after the time of recollection in those silent halls beside the Outer Sea."<sup>58</sup> Beren is, of course, the most famous example where we see the role of the halls of Mandos in the afterlife of mortal humans. After his death, "Beren at [Lúthien's] bidding tarried in the halls of Mandos, unwilling to leave the world, until Lúthien came to say her last farewell upon the dim shores of the Outer Sea, whence Men that die set out never to return."<sup>59</sup> It is significant that the most powerful of the Valar could not break out of Mandos, but Beren possesses the strength to resist his own fate long enough for Lúthien to convince Námo to intercede and ensure her shared fate with her beloved Beren.

The Dwarves believe their fate similar to that of the Elves, with a sojourn in Mandos before the most worthy among them live again:

Aforetime it was held among the Elves in Middle-earth that dying the Dwarves returned to the earth and the stone of which they were made; yet that is not their own belief. For they say that Aulë the Maker, whom they call Mahal, cares for them, and gathers them to Mandos in halls set apart; and that he declared to their Fathers of old that Ilúvatar will hallow them and give them a place among the Children in the End. Then their part shall be to serve Aulë and to aid him in the remaking of Arda after the Last Battle. They say also that the Seven Fathers of the Dwarves return to live again in their own kin and to bear once more their ancient names: of whom Durin was the most renowned in after ages, father of that kindred most friendly to the Elves, whose mansions were at Khazad-dûm.<sup>60</sup>

The earliest version of the story from the *Lost Tales* depicts the afterlife of the Children of Eru radically differently. In this version, Mandos and Nienna dually preside over the spirits of the dead. Mandos gathers the Elves while Nienna gathers the mortal humans.<sup>61</sup> They pass over a road called Qalvanda (the Road of Death) that separates Elves from mortals.<sup>62</sup> Elves are described as waiting in Vê for rebirth through their children, an idea that persisted until relatively late in Tolkien's writings (when he doubtlessly realized the multiple quandaries posed by this

poetical but impractical idea). Nienna passes judgment on mortal humans, sending them either to torment in Angband, to a blissful life in Valinor, or--for the majority--a rather nondescript existence on the plains of Arvalin. Most significant--aside from the obvious parallels between the Catholic idea of Hell, Heaven, and Purgatory (as well as the ancient Greek separation of the virtuous, the wicked, and the ordinary)--is that, although separating the fates of Elves and mortals even at this early stage, Tolkien did *not* conceive of the mortals leaving the Circles of the World.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

Námo Mandos remains one of the more fascinating of the Valar. While many of the Valar are not fully sketched or are so unilaterally good or evil as to be bland, Námo receives not only a relatively detailed treatment in the texts but also a dose of moral ambiguity: Although depicted as a good guy, he is unremittently cold and sometimes brutal, and his association with similar gods of death found through world mythology only enhances this. But perhaps most intriguing to the writer of transformative works, he is also a character kept shrouded deliberately in mists. There is much that we don't know about him and what he does. There is still much exploration to be done and discoveries to be made in the chill, labyrinthine halls of Mandos.

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3. Douglas Charles Kane. *Arda Reconstructed*, "Valaquenta (Account of the Valar)," pp. 40-43.
4. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names," entry for "Námo."
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6. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Silmarils and the Unrest of the Noldor."
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12. To quantify this, I counted the number of times each of the names of the Valar appear in the chapters set entirely in Middle-earth, beginning in the chapter "The Return of the Noldor" and ending in the chapter "Of Tuor and the Fall of Gondolin." *Mandos* occurs twenty times, mostly in reference to the Doom of Mandos and occasionally in reference to the halls of Mandos. In comparison, *Manwë* occurs eleven times, *Oromë* three times, and *Varda* a mere one time. Yavanna, Irmo, Nienna, and Aulë are not mentioned at all.

- The only Vala mentioned more than Mandos is Ulmo--the only Vala who did not forsake the exiled Noldor--and he is mentioned thirty-nine times.
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