
A Woman in Few Words: The Character of Nerdanel and Her Treatment in Canon and Fandom

By Dawn Felagund

As the wife of Fëanor in *The Silmarillion*, Nerdanel receives a bare four mentions in the text, yet she remains a popular character in *Silmarillion* fan fiction. Nerdanel appears in stories as a central character and as a woman of strength and wisdom, and she serves in roles that take her beyond her canonical function as Fëanor's wife and the mother of his seven sons. Indeed, more is written by fans about Nerdanel than any other female character from the *Quenta Silmarillion*, including Lúthien Tinúviel (see [Appendix](#)). Why is this? A closer examination of the *Silmarillion*-based texts both within and without the final published material reveal an admirable, intriguing character who has more than earned the attention paid to her by fans.

Canonically, she serves chiefly as the wife of Fëanor. The oft-cited *Encyclopedia of Arda* contains a single sentence about her ([10](#)), and to one unfamiliar with J.R.R. Tolkien's more obscure works, that seems a fair assessment. It is said that Fëanor was young when they married ([1](#)) and that Nerdanel met him while traveling in her youth, leading to the likely conclusion that she was close to him in age and likewise married young. After meeting, the pair is said to have been companions in their travels, wandering to the far reaches of Aman. It is further stated that Fëanor loved her not for physical beauty but for her strength, free thought, and hunger for knowledge ([2](#)).

Many fan fiction authors make the assumption that Nerdanel and Fëanor had a close, passionate marriage. While nothing in the canon directly supports this notion, it is stated that she was the only one from whom he took counsel, leading one to conclude that her judgment was given special regard by him ([1](#)). The couple had seven sons, the most of any couple in the recorded history of the Eldar ([2](#), [3](#)). Despite the evidence of great love having existed between them, when Fëanor was exiled from Tirion, Nerdanel was so upset by her husband's behavior leading up to the exile that she would not follow him to Tirion, and they became estranged ([1](#)).

A rather intriguing early version of these events survives where Nerdanel--against Fëanor's wishes--goes to live with Indis following the couple's estrangement ([4](#)). This fact, however, did not survive into the published *Silmarillion*, and a second version exists in "The Shibboleth of Fëanor" where Nerdanel returns to her father's house upon Fëanor's exile ([6](#)).

No discussion of Nerdanel is complete without mentioning her rather extraordinary role as the mother of seven sons. In fact--while concrete evidence as to the meaning of the name *Nerdanel* is lacking--one hypothesis is that *Nerdanel* means "man maker" in recognition of her extraordinary number of male children ([7](#), [14](#)). Furthermore, Nerdanel is said to have influenced her children both in terms of their appearances ([6](#)) and their temperaments ([1](#)), though the latter clearly was not to a degree sufficient to save even one of them from following their father to their respective awful fates.

Outside of her husband Fëanor and their seven sons, the only further detail we are given about Nerdanel's family is her father Mahtan, said to be a smith who worked in stone and metal ([1](#))

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and who was especially loyal to Aulë (2, 5, 6). In fact, much that exists in auxiliary canon sources as well as "fanon" (trends common--and accepted--in fan-based works) derives from her father Mahtan's character.

In notes found in *The Peoples of Middle-earth*, two key facts about Mahtan are made plain and seem to have influenced J.R.R. Tolkien's development of Nerdanel's character as well as fan fiction authors' perception of her. The former is Mahtan's skill with metal and stone and his loyalty to Aulë: This does receive limited mention in the published *Silmarillion* (1, 5). However, in early drafts of *The Silmarillion*, Nerdanel explicitly shares these traits with her father. She is said to have quested for new knowledge and to have learned from her father how to work in metal and stone, crafts that were atypical for women among the Noldor. Her talents in these arts were not only extraordinary but also innovative:

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. (2)

J.R.R. Tolkien's early conception of Nerdanel also shares her father's loyalty to Aulë. While the published *Silmarillion* is vague as to which of Fëanor's "later deeds grieved her" (1) the "Legend of the Fate of Amrod" makes this a bit clearer. Here, it is said that "Fëanor became more and more fell and violent, and rebelled against the Valar" prior to their estrangement. Elucidation occurs in the next sentence as to which of these flaws--his violence or his rebellion against the Valar--served as the breaking point for Nerdanel. Here, it is said that Mahtan was warned not to take part in the Noldorin rebellion against the Valar; that Fëanor and "all [Mahtan]'s children" (which, presumably, includes Nerdanel as well as his grandsons) would go to their deaths in Beleriand. In the next sentence, Nerdanel leaves Fëanor to return to her father's house and, later, in when she confronts Fëanor prior to his departure for Araman, Fëanor accuses Nerdanel of being "cozened by Aulë" and deceived into deserting her husband and children (6). It is notable that, at no point in this document, is the pair's estrangement made contingent upon Fëanor's behavior towards Fingolfin in Tirion but rather focuses on their differing loyalties to and relationships with the Valar.

Nerdanel is also tied to her father Mahtan--at least in fanon lore--in terms of her appearance. Mahtan, as well as Maedhros and the twins Amrod and Amras, were all notable with respect to the coloration of their hair. The hair colors of these four characters is described as being reddish in color: red-brown, red-haired, copper-colored, or "brown [with] glints of coppery-red"; all are used synonymously in the source. This particular coloration among the Eldar is said to be exceptionally rare (6).

This information from "The Shibboleth of Fëanor" about Nerdanel's father and three of her children, however, has often been assumed to include her as well, and indeed, even credible reference materials that are often used and cited by *Silmarillion* fan fiction writers consider Nerdanel's red hair as fact rather than conjecture, however logical (7, 8). It is important to note, though, that at no point in the published source material is Nerdanel's hair color named as reddish (or any of the other synonyms); in fact, J.R.R. Tolkien seemed to be quite careful to exclude Nerdanel entirely from the discussion of the noteworthy coloration of her kinsmen. When referring to the rare reddish hair, it is always only attributed to "Nerdanel's kin" (6); in the

essay "The Problem of Ros," the reddish-colored hair of three of Nerdanel's sons is identified as "descending to them from their maternal grandfather." Nerdanel is skipped entirely (8).

What does this mean for Nerdanel? Certainly, it is logical and fan fiction authors are not amiss to assume that Mahtan's reddish-colored hair passed to his daughter before being handed down to three of his grandsons. However, to make a claim that this idea is directly supported by the words of J.R.R. Tolkien--or even Christopher Tolkien--is misleading and incorrect. In fact, there exists evidence to the contrary: According to the *Vinyar Tengwar*, in a series of notes about the etymology of various Elvish words for red and brown as they relate to hair colors, it is said that Nerdanel "herself had brown hair and a ruddy complexion" (11).

There are additional details about Nerdanel's appearance that appear in the published source material. It is remarked in an early version of *The Silmarillion* that Fëanor's choice of Nerdanel for a wife was somewhat remarkable, as "she was not among the fairest of her people" (2). And while there may be no canonical support for Nerdanel's typical portrayal as a redhead, it is said of Caranthir that "he was dark (brown) haired, but had the ruddy complexion of his mother" (6), which is also noted in the *Vinyar Tengwar* entry about hair color (11).

But what is most notable about Nerdanel is her strength and independence, a fact that quite possibly endears her to fan fiction writers, despite a lack of attention to her character in *The Silmarillion*. Alone of any among the Valar and Eldar, Nerdanel could calm and influence her tempestuous husband. She bears the epithet "the wise" and is said to be not only strong but patient, seeking to understand rather than master others (1). The earliest name she was given was *Istarnië* (2), a word that appears to be derived from the stem *ista-*, meaning *wise* (12). As to the unknown meaning of the name *Nerdanel*, another theory states that roots in her name meaning "man" might stand as further testament to her strength and independence (15). One draft of *The Silmarillion* conveys that Nerdanel was apt to listen to and observe others, understanding much of them from their gestures and facial expressions, and again adds that she sought understanding rather than control (2).

The "Legend of the Fate of Amrod" once again offers further evidence regarding Nerdanel's character for speculation. In this particularly dark version of the tale of the Burning at Losgar, Nerdanel is said to have given her twin sons the identical mother-name of *Ambarussa* at their births. When Fëanor protested this anomaly, she allowed one to bear the name *Umbarto*, meaning "the fated," claiming that time would decide which son would deserve this ominous title. Nor is this the only mention of Nerdanel displaying prophetic wisdom in the naming of her sons: Maglor's Quenya mother-name *Macalaurë*, meaning "forging gold," was said to be prophetic of his later skill upon the harp (6).

In the case of the twins, Nerdanel's prophecy does not come into fruition for many years. In this version of the tale, she is said to have approached Fëanor before he began his northward march to Beleriand, begging him to leave one or both of the twins with her in Valinor. When he refused, she foretold that one would not set foot on Middle-earth, a fact that proved true when Fëanor set fire to the ships while one twin remained on board, thus killing him before he set foot on Middle-earth (6).

Although this particular legend never made it into the published *Silmarillion* and although Amrod's awful fate is subject to a strong love-hate dichotomy in the *Silmarillion* fan fiction community, it does serve to underscore several key details about Nerdanel's character. First is

her wisdom and ability to see the consequences of the Noldorin rebellion, particularly as compared to the brilliant but short-sighted Fëanor, who marches heedlessly into Middle-earth and is among the first of his people to die in spite of his intelligence and talents. Secondly, her strength and her independence are apparent here, namely her willingness to confront Fëanor when few others dared, at a time when he possessed persuasive powers enough to sway even a servant of the Ainur, not to mention a full 90% of the Noldor (13). Although she was not successful in saving her children from his influence, that she herself did not become ensnared in his fate is notable.

The degree of attention paid to Nerdanel in the fan fiction community seems defiant of the fact that she is mentioned only four times in the published *Silmarillion*. However, even as fans can't help but wonder about the woman strong enough to subdue the brilliant and destructive Fëanor, it seems fairly clear that J.R.R. Tolkien dabbled with the same and painted a far more detailed portrait of Nerdanel than appeared in his published and much-trimmed *Silmarillion*. Drawing upon not only what made it to publication in *The Silmarillion* but also J.R.R. Tolkien's notes on this extraordinary woman, it becomes easier to understand Nerdanel's allure of a character of strength, wisdom, and independence quite unlike any other in *The Silmarillion*.

Appendix

It has always been my perception, as a reader and author of Tolkien-based fiction, that Nerdanel receives more treatment in fan fiction than her rather limited role in the original narrative would lead one to expect. Naturally, as the wife of Fëanor and the mother of his seven sons--all of whom are pivotal in the development of the story--some mention of Nerdanel would be expected. However, stories that develop her character beyond the rather limited role she is dealt in the canon remain popular, with some stories creating an extensive backstory for her, pondering her life after the exile of her husband and children, or written solely from her point of view.

In writing this essay, however, I needed more objective proof of this theory. I visited several major Tolkien archives and counted the number of stories involving Nerdanel. Included here are the data from the Henneth Annûn Story Archive (HASA) and Fanfiction.net, examining the number of stories published in each archive that feature Nerdanel as a prominent character. There are two reasons for including data from these archives in particular. For one, of many online Tolkien archives, each has its own unique search scheme (and some have no way to search stories at all), and alone of all of the archives I examined, these two allowed me to view *all* of the *Silmarillion* stories apart from the *Lord of the Rings* stories. Secondly, HASA and Fanfiction.net represent what I feel are two very different "fandom cultures," with HASA having worked to garner the reputation as an archive where serious-minded writers gather to share work that is generally high quality. Fanfiction.net, on the other hand, with its relaxed standards, has more of a reputation as a "people's archive" where fans of all interests, ages, and skill levels can share and gain an audience for their work with little oversight. The *Silmarillion* sections of both HASA and Fanfiction.net are quite extensive and allowed me to work with a large sample size.

Once again owing to differences in the search services provided by both sites, however, I present slightly different data from each, so comparison between the two is not possible. HASA is unique among all of the sites that I studied in its ability to sort stories belonging to a particular age. Therefore, I was able to look only at stories that took place in the Time of the Trees, where

Nerdanel played her most pivotal role. However, due to the fact that HASA classifies stories by era rather than the book on which they're based, I was not able to sample all *Silmarillion* stories.

As of 11 May 2007, HASA had archived 122 stories (all statuses and ratings) that took place during the Time of the Trees. I went through each story and, judging by the summary, attempted to discern whether Nerdanel played a major role in the story: that is, she influences other characters and the plot and does not simply appear in the supportive or background role that she is given in *The Silmarillion*. When I wasn't certain of this based on the short summary alone, I referred to additional summary and story material in making my decision. After surveying all 122 stories, I found that 24 used Nerdanel as a major character. In other words, 19.67% of the stories on HASA that are set during the Time of the Trees focus on Nerdanel.

HASA also allows a reader to sort stories based on who the author lists as major characters. I generated a list of every story--regardless of other search criteria--where the author had listed Nerdanel as a major character and found 56 stories total on HASA that met this criterion. In other words, my search of stories taking place only during the Time of the Trees found only 42.86% of the stories on the site that featured Nerdanel. Briefly skimming the list, I found that she appeared also in stories listed as First Age and Multi-Age.

I had expected Nerdanel to feature in many of the stories set during the Time of the Trees, but even I was surprised by the fact that nearly 20% of these stories include her as a major character and to find that her role extends beyond her canonical appearance during the Time of the Trees to feature in stories set in other ages as well. Again, Nerdanel receives only *four* mentions in the text of *The Silmarillion*. I can only conclude that *Silmarillion* authors who share their work on HASA believe her to be a character of greater importance than that.

On 13 May 2007, I conducted a similar survey of Fanfiction.net. I was limited again by the search mechanism used by that site: While I could view all *Silmarillion* stories (as they are kept separately from the *Lord of the Rings* stories), I could not further sort them by era or character. As such, one would expect Nerdanel to feature far less prominently in this survey, and true to my expectations, she did. Fanfiction.net is also, currently, the largest *Silmarillion* archive on the Internet, and in the interest of time, I looked only at the most recent 300 *Silmarillion* stories in the archive. I looked at stories of all ratings. Like my survey of HASA, I used the short summary to determine whether Nerdanel was a major character in the story; when it wasn't possible to tell, I searched the story material for additional information. Based on this, I found 12 stories on Fanfiction.net where Nerdanel was a major character. In other words, 4% of the most recent 300 stories archived on Fanfiction.net featured Nerdanel in a prominent role.

At first glance, the disparity between HASA and Fanfiction.net seems questionable. However, my survey of Fanfiction.net included *all* stories based on *The Silmarillion*, including those from the First and Second Ages, eras in which Nerdanel plays no canonical role. Given the breadth of time and the literally hundreds of characters from which Fanfiction.net authors have to draw, 4% is a significant command of such a varied pool of stories.

It is also interesting to consider how Nerdanel's treatment in Tolkien-based fan fiction differs from that of other female characters. To get an idea of how writers treat Nerdanel as compared to her female counterparts, I surveyed three major Tolkien archives that allowed me to sort stories based on major characters as they are listed by the story's author ([Henneth Annûn Story Archive](#), [Open Scrolls Archive](#), and [Stories of Arda](#)). I compared these numbers alongside

indicators of the character's canonical importance, as measured in two ways. The first--the number of in-text mentions--counts the number of times that the character's name appears in the *Quenta Silmarillion*. The second measure counts the number of index entries listed for that character in *The Silmarillion*. Index entries tend to be indicative of the breadth of the character's appearances across the entirety of the *Quenta Silmarillion*. In other words, a character that features heavily in a single scene might have her name appear twenty times but would have only a single entry in the index; Aredhel is a good example of such a character. A character that features prominently throughout the book would have in-text and index mentions that are closer in value, with Haleth as perhaps the best example out of the characters that I surveyed. Characters that appear very little--Nerdanel and Eärwen, for example--have low totals in both columns. Together, these values provide something of a picture of that character's treatment in the canon.

Character	In-text mentions in <i>Quenta Silmarillion</i>	Index mentions in <i>The Silmarillion</i>	Archive		
			HASA	OSA	SoA
Nerdanel	4	3	56	19	32
Eärwen	3	3	11	6	13
Indis	6	3	4	3	5
Míriel Serindë	10	3	9	2	n/a
Haleth	23	6	3	4	n/a
Aredhel	33	3	29	6	16
Lúthien Tinúviel	133	13	34	7	27
Searches conducted on 14 May 2006					

Nerdanel's number of canon appearances--and indeed her role--is very close to that of Eärwen, the wife of Finarfin, in the book, yet between these three archives, Eärwen appears in only 28.04% of the number of stories as Nerdanel. Even Tolkien's primary female character in *The Silmarillion*--Lúthien Tinúviel--appears in only 63.55% the number of stories as Nerdanel, yet Lúthien has more than 33 times the number of in-text mentions. These numbers are quite astounding and show a character whose canonical impact is relatively small but whose regard by the fans writing stories based on this canon, nonetheless, remains high.

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Acknowledgements

This essay started as a test piece for the SWG reference readers, and I enjoyed it so much that it grew from there into a piece that I offered for actual consideration for our Reference section. However, I owe a tremendous amount of gratitude to the reference readers who, in addition to regularly putting up with my flakiness as I manage the Reference section, also gave me feedback that helped me in shaping the piece into what I hope is a valuable reference.

I also owe a special thanks to Lady Elleth, whose extensive knowledge of Nerdanel and excellent feedback was invaluable as I worked on this piece, and who also located the elusive *Vinyar Tengwar* reference that finally provides a source about Nerdanel's hair color that extends beyond mere speculation.

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