
Character Biography

Nessa

By Oshun

In the *Valaquenta* section of *The Silmarillion*, Nessa is listed as one of the seven Queens of the Valar, or Valier (the feminine form of the word in Quenya, its singular being Valië). She is often listed last among the Valier, who also include Varda, Yavanna, Nienna, Estë, Vairë, and Vána. There are few references to Nessa in *The Silmarillion* and those largely concern her relationships to others; e.g., as the sister of Oromë and wife of Tulkas.

Nessa is known for her swiftness of foot and as a dancer as well,

His [Tulkas'] spouse is Nessa, the sister of Oromë, and she also is lithe and fleetfooted. Deer she loves, and they follow her train whenever she goes in the wild; but she can outrun them, swift as an arrow with the wind in her hair. In dancing she delights, and she dances in Valimar on lawns of never-fading green.¹

The above description of Nessa in *The Silmarillion* recalls images of the Roman goddess Diana, who is also associated with deer and woodlands both and often pictured in the company of a deer. One of Diana's characteristics, similar to a distinguishing element in the description of Nessa, is her affinity with animals in the wild. But, it is not only in classical Greco-Roman mythology but in the myths of Northern Europe that one finds goddesses who are associated with sprinting through the forest and befriending animals, particularly deer. English antiquarian and folklorist Dr. Hilda Roderick Ellis Davidson writes of a feminine deity who also resembles Tolkien's Nessa. Explaining that in the Scottish Highlands there are

. . . traditions of a local supernatural being who acted as guardian of the wild deer She approved of those who did not kill too many animals, particularly hinds. She is said to protect and milk the deer"²

Tolkien might have been influenced in his creation of the character of the Valië Nessa by one or the other or both of those deities, among other influences. This is the more serious side of Nessa. She has an even lighter side also.

Nessa's husband Tulkas, who is known to be hardy and strong, is like her a singularly physical being among the Valar: "He delights in wrestling and in contests of strength; and he rides no steed, for he can outrun all things that go on feet, and he is tireless."³ Apparently Tulkas is a handsome and a vibrant fellow as well. "His hair and beard are golden, and his flesh ruddy"⁴ The impression Tolkien presents is of a personable, physically active couple. Tulkas is the one among the often taciturn Valar who "laughs ever, in sport or in war."⁵ The two embody recognizably human traits, uniquely among the Valar, who usually are as easy or easier to imagine disembodied as they are in the corporeal forms with which they garb themselves from time to time for the comfort of the Eldar.

Nessa and Tulkas might disabuse the reader that all of Tolkien's Valar leave one with the impression of lofty distance and a lack of visible expression of emotion. One learns in the texts

that Tolkien did intend to communicate that the Valar, much like Norse gods and heroes, indulged in alcohol. Christopher Tolkien refers in footnotes relating to the *Lay of Leithian* that “there was viticulture in Valinor.”⁶ He goes on to point out that

after the accounts of life in the halls of Tulkas and Oromë in the tale of *The Coming of the Valar* . . . it is said that Nessa wife of Tulkas bore 'goblets o(the goodliest wine', while Meássë went among the warriors in her house and 'revived the fainting with strong wine.'⁷

Makar and his fierce sister Meássë are barbaric warrior demi-gods eliminated by Tolkien from the ranks of the Ainur after their appearance in *The Book of Lost Tales*. The entire drinking/feasting scene might be more anticipated in the Asgardian halls of the Norse gods than to those of the largely pious and well-behaved Valar of Tolkien's legendarium.⁸ An even livelier description of that kind of carousing that may also found in *The Book of Lost Tales* follows:

His [Makar's] was a house of mirth and revelry; and it sprang high into the air with many storeys, and had a tower of bronze and pillars of copper in a wide arcade. In its court men played and rivalled one another in doughty feats, and them at times would that fair maiden Nessa wife of Tulkas bear goblets of the goodliest wine and cooling drinks among the players.⁹

Oh, those rowdy Valar. Tolkien ameliorated this sort of behavior considerably in his later drafts. But one of the few mentions of Nessa in *The Silmarillion* is also a festive one. Having defeated Melkor, the Valar finally believe they are able to rest and Manwë organizes a celebration for them.

And it is sung that in that feast of the Spring of Arda Tulkas espoused Nessa the sister of Oromë, and she danced before the Valar upon the green grass of Almaren.^{10,11}

It is hard to resist repeating the dancing references, since Nessa comes up so few times in the texts.

But most she loved to retire unto a place of fair lawns whose turn Oromë her brother had culled from the richest of all his forest glades, and Palúrien had planted it with spells that it was always green and smooth. There danced she among her maidens as long as Laurelin was in bloom, for is she not greater in the dance than Vána herself?¹²

So, if one relies upon the fuller body of Tolkien's texts, Nessa's life consists of drinking, dancing, running through the forest with deer, while married to the good-looking, physically fit, laughing Tulkas. Perhaps not a feminist's ideal for a fantasy heroine, but there are far worse outcomes in *The Silmarillion*.

Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, Valaquentia.
2. Hilda Ellis Davidson, *Roles of the Northern Goddess* (London: Routledge, 1998), 29, <http://www.questia.com/read/104114032>.
3. *The Silmarillion*, Valaquentia.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. *Lays of Beleriand*, Footnotes.
7. Ibid.
8. *The Book of Lost Tales I*.
9. Ibid.
10. "Almaren: The first abode of the Valar in Arda, before the second onslaught of Melkor: an isle in a great lake in the midst of Middle-earth." *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Beginning of Days."
12. *The Book of Lost Tales I*.

About the Author

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