

---

## Character Biography Oromë

By Oshun

---

Among the many evocative and fascinating of Tolkien's characters, the Vala Oromë uniquely tempts one to note the resemblances between the Professor's invented mythology and real world myth and legend. Autumn is a season when ancient folk myths assert that the veil separating the spirit world from the everyday world grows thin, even penetrable. Whether one is speaking of Halloween, Samhain, or the Day of the Dead, the traditional legends and observances of this season focus on bringing together familiar things of the natural world and the mysterious and unknowable of a realm beyond.

Oromë the Great Huntsman of the Valar is most frequently pictorially represented in the period shortly after the awakening of the Quendi at Cuiviénen, blowing on his great horn Valaróma while riding his steed Nahar through the virgin forests and under the starlit skies of Middle-earth. This visual image calls to mind traditional stories of forest gods, great hunters, and Wild Hunts. One might even expect to catch a glimpse of Cernunnos through a thicket of nearly impenetrable trees.

In the Index of names in the published *Silmarillion*, Oromë is described as

A Vala, one of the Aratar [the eight most important of the Valar]; the great hunter, leader of the Elves from Cuiviénen, spouse of Vána. The name [Oromë] means 'Horn-blowing' or 'Sound of Horns', cf. *Valaróma*; in *The Lord of the Rings* it appears in the Sindarin form *Araw*.<sup>1</sup>

Tolkien scholar Michael Drout refers to him as "Oromë, the great hunter god of Middle-earth."<sup>2</sup> As one of the chief among the Valar he is encouraged by Eru to participate in creating the great music of creation and the shaping of their world, the "... unfolding a history whose vastness and majesty had never been equalled ..."<sup>3</sup> Oromë is ranked fourth in the published *Silmarillion* among his brethren.

The names of the Lords in due order are: Manwë, Ulmo, Aulë, Oromë, Mandos, Lórien, and Tulkas; and the names of the Queens are: Varda, Yavanna, Nienna, Estë, Vairë, Vána, and Nessa. Melkor is counted no longer among the Valar, and his name is not spoken upon Earth.

\* \* \* \*

Oromë loved the lands of Middle-earth, and he left them unwillingly and came last to Valinor; and often of old he passed back east over the mountains and returned with his host to the hills and the plains. He is a hunter of monsters and fell beasts, and he delights in horses and in hounds; and all trees he loves, for which reason he is called Aldaron, and by the Sindar Tauron, the Lord of Forests. Nahar is the name of his horse,

---

The Silmarillion Writers' Guild Reference Library

<http://www.silmarillionwritersguild.org/reference/characterofthemonth/orome.php>

© Oshun

white in the sun, and shining silver at night. The Valaróma is the name of his great horn, the sound of which is like the upgoing of the Sun in scarlet, or the sheer lightning cleaving the clouds. Above all the horns of his host it was heard in the woods that Yavanna brought forth in Valinor; for there Oromë would train his folk and his beasts for the pursuit of the evil creatures of Melkor. The spouse of Oromë is Vána, the Ever-young; she is the younger sister of Yavanna.<sup>4</sup>

It is not surprising, inspired as Tolkien was to create a native mythology for the English people, that the history of his Elves begins in the forests and that it is the great woodsman of the Valar Oromë who first happens upon them there. Tolkien thus pays tribute to the one of the most traditional sources of English folklore by embedding the origin of his Eldar within Arda's deep and mysterious woodlands.

Forests once covered nearly all Britain, even the wetlands, in an opulent tide of green, brown, flickering shadows, scattered gold. We share this forest legacy, and therefore our animal species, with the rest of Northern Europe. The ancient forests of Northern Europe were the crucible of folk tale.<sup>5</sup>

The legends of the British Isles are wound inseparably throughout those trees and the deep woods: "Through their branches and their roots-systems which mirror each other in aspect, trees both reach up into the heavens and down into the underworld; they therefore provide ideal bridges between the worlds of the gods, the living, and the dead."<sup>6</sup>

Tolkien's world picks up those themes and develops them with the tale of the awakening of his Elves into a vast sunless and moonless forest where only the dimmest starlight illuminates their steps. Threats and their frequent unexplained disappearances are part of their earliest experiences. Oromë as a benevolent forest god is introduced in an attempt to protect them. The Quendi hear and catch glimpses of Oromë even before he comes upon them. And they fear him, confusing him with Melkor's evil minions who also stalk those dark primeval woodlands.

...if any of the Elves strayed far abroad, alone or few together, they would often vanish, and never return and the Quendi said that the Hunter had caught them, and they were afraid. And indeed the most ancient songs of the Elves, of which echoes are remembered still in the West, tell of the shadow-shapes that walked in the hills above Cuiviénen, or would pass suddenly over the stars; and of the dark Rider upon his wild horse that pursued those that wandered to take them and devour them. Now Melkor greatly hated and feared the riding of Oromë, and either he sent indeed his dark servants as riders, or he set lying whispers abroad, for the purpose that the Quendi should shun Oromë, if ever they should meet.<sup>7</sup>

It is Oromë who approaches these fearful Elves and tells them of the Valar and the bright land across the sea, where he would transport them to protect them from "the shadow of great trees . . . the valleys of the night-clad hills [where] there were dark creatures old and strong."<sup>8</sup>

When Oromë discovers the Firstborn, he is immediately enamored with them and fearful for them. The description of his first sighting of the Elves ranks among Tolkien's most lyrical prose.

And on a time it chanced that Oromë rode eastward in his hunting, and he turned north by the shores of Helcar and passed under the shadows of the Orocarni, the Mountains of the East. Then on a sudden Nahar set up a great neighing, and stood still. And Oromë

---

wondered and sat silent, and it seemed to him that in the quiet of the land under the stars he heard afar off many voices singing.

Thus it was that the Valar found at last, as it were by chance, those whom they had so long awaited. And Oromë looking upon the Elves was filled with wonder, as though they were beings sudden and marvellous and unforeseen; for so it shall ever be with the Valar.<sup>9</sup>

Parenthetically, the language of the above passage might lead one to believe that the Elves are to the Valar as mysteriously *Other* and, therefore, incomprehensible as the Valar are to the Elves. Therein may lie some of the basis for the misunderstandings which result in the failure of the Noldor to adapt to Aman and the Valar's inability to predict or discern the nature of their mutual apparent incompatibility.

Oromë attempts to waylay the reluctance of the Quendi to leave all that they have known and resettle in a strange land beyond their comprehension of distance and geography. (Certain fantastical elements surrounding the transference of the original Eldarin émigrés from Middle-earth to Aman will not be pursued or developed in this essay. If one wishes to read of the various permutations and details later altered, such as magical bridges from Middle-earth to Aman, those may be found in "The Hiding of Valinor" of *The Book of Lost Tales*.<sup>10</sup>)

Oromë tarried a while among the Quendi, and then swiftly he rode back over land and sea to Valinor and brought the tidings to Valmar; and he spoke of the shadows that troubled Cuiviénen. Then the Valar rejoiced, and yet they were in doubt amid their joy; and they debated long what counsel it were best to take for the guarding of the Quendi from the shadow of Melkor. But Oromë returned at once to Middle-earth and abode with the Elves.<sup>11</sup>

Neither are all of the Valar in accord concerning the idea of transporting the Eldar to Aman, nor are all of the Quendi willing to leave their homeland. After discussion, both sides agree that leaders of the three main peoples of the Quendi shall travel to the Blessed Lands and return to tell their people what they have seen there.

And coming they were filled with awe by the glory and majesty of the Valar, and desired greatly the light and splendour of the Trees. Then Oromë brought them back to Cuiviénen, and they spoke before their people, and counselled them to heed the summons of the Valar and remove into the West.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, the majority begin the long trek west to the sea under the sporadic guidance of Oromë.

It is told that when the hosts of the Eldalië departed from Cuiviénen Oromë rode at their head upon Nahar, his white horse shod with gold; and passing northward about the Sea of Helcar they turned towards the west. Before them great clouds hung still black in the North above the ruins of war, and the stars in that region were hidden. Then not a few grew afraid and repented, and turned back, and are forgotten.

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. Therefore whenever Oromë departed, having at times other matters to heed, they halted and went forward no more, until he returned to guide them.<sup>13</sup>

### Aspects of the Wild Hunt in the Story of Oromë

In the legends of the Wild Hunt, the description of the Lord of the Hunters or forest god figure represents a vision which in certain limited aspects is not unlike that of Oromë.

. . .the Wild Hunt, appears in the greatest variety of detail, though the central idea is always the same. It is the apparition of a hunter with a crowd of huntsmen, horses, and dogs, crossing the sky at night. Stories of this kind go back to classical antiquity, and they appear nearly all over Europe. The huntsman himself, and sometimes his companions, are identified with historic characters, sometimes even with one of the gods.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the menacing character of the participants of the Wild Hunt might more readily call to mind the companions of Melkor than Oromë, although there is a benevolent aspect of the hunter god in certain versions also, wherein he rewards the individual who will face him with courage. The tale of Sir Orpheo, translated below by Tolkien himself, includes not only a sighting of the Wild Hunt, but also the theme of kidnapping into the land of Faerie.

There often by him would he see,  
when noon was hot on leaf and tree,  
the king of Faërie with his rout  
came hunting in the woods about  
with blowing far and crying dim,  
and barking hounds that were with him.<sup>15</sup>

Tolkien, of course, must have noted the similarities between the encounter of his Elves with Oromë, a god of the forest, and his subsequent persuasion of them to withdraw into a halcyon land, with the legends of human interactions with woodland deities and visits to Elfland. Or, perhaps, he would argue that the differences between his created legendarium and the naturally evolved folk traditions are so distant from one another as to be of no significance.

Regardless of their regional names, all Hunts seem to share several common features wherever they appear: a spectral leader, a following train, announcement by a great baying of hounds, crashes of lightning, and loud hoofbeats along with the Huntsman's shouts of 'Halloo!'<sup>16</sup>

The associations between healing, hunting, and death in Celtic belief allow the Wild Hunt to act as a bridge to the Otherworld.<sup>17</sup> In the lore of Arda, Oromë the Vala serves the purpose of a direct bridge between the Quendi, newly awakened on the banks of Cuiviënen, and the Valar across the western seas in their otherworldly paradise, the Blessed Lands of Aman. As noted above, Oromë encounters the Quendi under the starlit skies of Middle-earth, shares this information with his brethren Valar on the peaks of Taniquetil, argues to remove the newly awakened children of Eru from their home, and transfers them to the protected realm of the Valar.

One familiar with the folklore of the British Isles and Western Europe cannot but make the comparison between Oromë's desire to escort the Quendi to Elvenhome and the multiplicity of

legends around the seduction of lesser beings into a magical Elfland, removed from all of the stresses of day-to-day life, but accompanied by a loss of freedom.

Many traditional folk songs and tales (such as that of Tam Lin or Thomas the Rhymer) concern the transfer of a mortal into the land of faerie (or in Tolkien's version the immigration of the Quendi from Middle-earth to the Elvenhome or *Eldamar* of the Valar). The similarity of the mythos is perhaps unintentional, as the lesson to be drawn from it may be as well. In leaving their original homeland to enter a paradisiacal Elvenhome, there are those among the Quendi who find that life there feels strangely flat and constricting, an experience almost identical to that in folktales of the mortal visitor in Elfland. In each case, if one finds one's way back into the earthly realm one may forever long for Elvenhome. In Tolkien's legendarium this could be likened to the longing for Aman by the exiled Noldor. The much discussed sea-longing of the Elves who never saw Eldamar is a subtly different and unique compulsion.

The above comparison and extrapolation, however, are more likely than not concepts which would have Tolkien tossing in his grave or frowning from on high were he to read them. He did not lightly accept associations of his work with pre-existing mythology, folklore or fairy tales. When asked if there are influences or parallels his responses usually read something like this one:

My tale is not consciously based on any other book — save one, and that is unpublished: the 'Silmarillion', a history of the Elves, to which frequent allusion is made. I had not thought of the future researchers; and as there is only one manuscript there seems at the moment small chance of this reference proving useful.<sup>18</sup>

### Oromë and Amazing Beasts

Oromë is also one of the few Valar remembered by the Men of Middle-earth down through the Ages of Arda. He is referred to as Béma in "the tongue of Rohan (Tolkien was inspired by the Old English word *béme* 'trumpet')."<sup>19</sup> The Rohirrim claimed that their preternaturally gifted horses called Mearas had been brought by Béma from the West over the Sea to the lands of Middle-earth.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to the association of Oromë with his great steed and the lord of horses Nahar, his relationship to nature connects him to other beasts as well. Boromir's famed horn in *The Lord of the Rings* is linked to Oromë through a breed of mythical beasts, the Kine of Araw.

The wild kine that were still to be found near the Sea of Rhûn were said in legend to be descended from the Kine of Araw, the huntsman of the Valar, who alone of the Valar came often to Middle-earth in the Elder Days. Oromë is the High-elven form of his name.<sup>21</sup>

Boromir's great horn, passed down through the eldest sons of the Stewards of Gondor throughout the Third Age, is made of the horn of that mythical beast. "In an unpublished manuscript held at the Bodleian Library, the Wild Kine were likened by Tolkien to aurochs [large wild cattle, now extinct, which were found throughout Europe, Asia and North Africa]."<sup>22</sup>

In Valinor Fëanor's son Celegorm is said to have been befriended by Oromë, who taught him wood lore and other things relating to birds and animals and gifted him with the famous hound Huan. While Fëanor and his other sons were often found in the company of Aulë, "Celegorm

went rather to the house of Oromë, and there he got great knowledge of birds and beasts, and all their tongues he knew."<sup>23</sup>

Now the chief of the wolf hounds that followed Celegorm was named Huan. He was not born in Middle-earth, but came from the Blessed Realm; for Oromë had given him to Celegorm long ago in Valinor, and there he had followed the horn of his master, before evil came. Huan followed Celegorm into exile, and was faithful; and thus he too came under the doom of woe set upon the Noldor, and it was decreed that he should meet death, but not until he encountered the mightiest wolf that would ever walk the world.<sup>24</sup>

(If one wants to know more about Huan and his relationship to Oromë and Celegorm and his significant role in the history of Middle-earth, Huan has his own biography here.)

Oromë, the Lord of Trees, Lord of Forests, Hunting Lord and Lord of Hunters, seems singularly among Tolkien's demi-gods, the Valar, to be an especially English mythical figure. He, therefore, succeeds in the role he plays in the legendary of the Elves and their origins in helping Tolkien create the English mythology that was his goal.

## Works Cited

1. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
2. Michael D. C. Drout, *J.R.R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Routledge, October 2006.
3. *The Silmarillion*, *Ainulindalë: The Music of the Ainur*.
4. *The Silmarillion*, *Valaquenta: Of the Valar*.
5. Ruth Padel, "Into the Woods: On British Forests, Myth and Now," *Journal of Mythic Arts*, <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/rrlIntoWoods.html>
6. Christopher R. Fee, and David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 109.
7. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. *The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Hiding of Valinor*.
11. *The Silmarillion*, "Of the Coming of the Elves and the Captivity of Melkor."
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*. New York: Dryden Press, 1946, p. 257.
15. Tolkien, J.R.R. and Hostetter, C. F. (1975) *Sir Orpheo, A Middle English Version*. Trans. J.R.R. Tolkien. Ballantine: New York. Also appears in *Tolkien Studies* 1.1, 2004, pp. 85-123.
16. Ari Berk and William Spytma, "Penance, Power, and Pursuit: On the Trail of the Wild Hunt," 1996, *Journal of Mythic Arts*, <http://www.endicott-studio.com/rdrm/forhunt.html>.

- 
17. Christopher R. Fee, and David A. Leeming, *Gods, Heroes and Kings: The Battle for Mythic Britain*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 109.
  18. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, 25 to the Editor of the *Observer*.
  19. *The Silmarillion*, "Index of Names."
  20. *The Return of the King, Lord of the Rings*, Appendix A, "Annals of the Kings and Rulers: The Realms in Exile."
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Wayne G. Hammond and Christina Scull (eds), *The Lord of the Rings: A Reader's Companion*, p. 265.
  23. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Eldamar and the Princes of the Eldalië."
  24. *The Silmarillion*, "Of Beren and Lúthien."
- 

## About the Author

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