Character Biography
Vairë the Weaver

By Dawn Felagund

Vairë joins the long list of *Silmarillion* women who receive so perfunctory of treatment in the published text that they serve as little more than names waiting to be made flesh by writers of transformative fiction. And, through her association with Míriel, the mother of Fëanor, Vairë has received attention in transformative work that belies her painfully minor role in the published texts. However, as is often the case, delving deeper into the texts that Christopher Tolkien and Guy Kay drew from when assembling the published work reveals a woman deeper than her glancing treatment in the published *Silmarillion*. Indeed, in the case of Vairë, these foundational texts present her as a Valië surprisingly relatable and, yes, even human.

Vairë's History in the Published *Silmarillion*

Like most of the Valier—or female Valar—Vairë receives very little page-time in the published *Silmarillion*, appearing on a scant two pages. One of those pages doesn't mention her except to list her next-to-last among the Valier.

What the published book *does* tell us about her is that she is the wife of Námo Mandos. Given the epithet "the Weaver," Vairë's chief responsibility seems to be weaving tapestries depicting "all things that have ever been in Time." These tapestries decorate the halls of Mandos—if as frivolous-sounding a word as *decorate* is permissible in the same sentence as the phrase *halls of Mandos*—with the implication that as the halls swell with time (and, presumably, more residents), Vairë keeps pace with her "storied webs."

Vairë in Earlier Works

*The Book of Lost Tales* contains Tolkien's earliest work on his Arda-based mythology. In this work, Vairë is a not name belonging to a Vala but rather an Elf of Tol Eressëa, the hostess of Eriol (Ælfwine) in his travels. In this earliest version of the story, the wife of Námo Mandos was Fui Nienna, a character considerably creepier but also seemingly more assertive, given that she appears more than twice in the text. However, as I documented in my biography of Námo Mandos, the Valar concerned with death faded into the background as the mythology evolved, both out of necessity, given the limited knowledge of the fictional Elven loremasters who recorded the stories of *The Silmarillion*, and from the evisceration of the elaborate descriptions of the Valar in the *Lost Tales*.

Vairë makes her first appearance in the 1930s, in a work called the *Earliest Annals of Valinor*, as a penciled-in note listing the Valar. At this point, she became the spouse of Námo and Nienna assumed her single status, as she would remain into the published work. In the *Later Annals of Valinor*, recorded a few years later, Vairë receives her epithet "the weaver." The earlier *Quenta Silmarillion* provides her with the description that would stick with her until the published version some forty years later.
By all appearances, Vairë's evolution was brief and complete. Yet any reader who is familiar with transformative fiction about Vairë knows that she is often depicted in the company of Míriel Þerindë, the mother of Fëanor. This adds an appealing fullness to Míriel's story, a purpose beyond her role as Fëanor's mother and the only Elf to perish in Valinor (up to that point, anyway), as well as underscoring her considerable talent: Her work is literally up to the standards of a goddess. Yet aside from their shared penchant for the textile arts, a relationship between Vairë and Míriel isn't even hinted at in the published *Silmarillion*.

Instead, it comes from the *Later Quenta Silmarillion*, more specifically from a scene during which Vairë proves herself beyond the mere wife of a more important male character and the fulfillment of an archetypical (and traditionally feminine) role as "the weaver." While debating whether it would be lawful for Finwë to take a second wife, Vairë speaks suddenly and in favor of granting Finwë's request. Vairë asserts that she knows the spirit (or *fëa*) of Míriel, having kept company with her, and knows her to be willful: If she says she does not mean to return, then she will not return. Finwë, Vairë adds, would know this also because of the special connection between the *fëar* of spouses. Vairë goes on to say,

> When on of the Queens of the Valar, Varda or Yavanna, or even I, departeth for ever from Arda, and leaveth her spouse, will he or nill he [whether he wills it or wills it not], then let that spouse judge Finwë, if he will, remembering that Finwë cannot follow Míriel without doing wrong to his nature, nor without forsaking the duty and bond of his fatherhood.

Vairë's speech is one that allows the Elves a great deal of agency in deciding their fates and also extends considerable empathy: Until the Valar so quick to deny Finwë his second marriage have suffered the loss of a spouse, she contends, then they have no right to pass judgment on what perceived flaws may contribute to Finwë's desire.

Manwë ultimately rules that "though [Vairë] speaketh not without knowledge, she uttereth opinion and not certainty" and cautions against the presumption of "certainty with regard to the wills of the Children." Nonetheless, Vairë's speech stands out as one of surprising humanity and understanding of the Elves.

It is Nienna who next suggests that Míriel should be permitted to return to her body so that she could "have the joy of her body and the use of its skills in which she delighted" by being permitted to work alongside Vairë. Námo ultimately rejects this request (neither does Míriel seem particularly inspired to advocate for herself), but when Finwë dies and comes to Mandos, the issue is reopened. Mandos--ever cold and unwilling to extend kindness without first extracting a measure of suffering--agrees under the condition that Finwë serve as a ransom for Míriel: By refusing to return to life in his body, Míriel will be allowed to return to hers. Her mood improved by Finwë's company but nonetheless not wishing to return to the Noldor,

> she went to the doors of the House of Vairë and prayed to be admitted; and this prayer was granted, although in that House none of the Living dwelt nor have others ever entered it in the body. But Míriel was accepted by Vairë and became her chief handmaid; and all tidings of the Noldor down the years from their beginning were brought to her, and she wove them in webs historial, so fair and skilled that they seemed to live, imperishable, shining with a light of many hues fairer than are known in Middle-earth. This labour Finwë is at times permitted to look upon.⁶

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This whole episode sheds some light on the character of Vairë. She stands almost as a foil to her husband, showing a surprising degree of insight and empathy. Although she makes but a single speech during the debate, the whole of that speech is founded on her firsthand knowledge of the Elves in question rather than philosophical abstractions. Her regard for and willingness to harbor Míriel as an equal suggest an uncharacteristically egalitarian (for the Valar) view of the Elves. Given this, it seems a shame that Vairë does not emerge more fully from the published text.²

Another interesting extrapolation about Vairë can be gleaned from the notes to this document, where Christopher Tolkien angsts at some length about the confusion of referring to the House of Vairë while earlier documents state that she lived with Mandos. He concludes that "in this final text it seems certain that Vairë in some sense dwelt apart [from Námo]."² This reader finds less interest in speculating about the possibility of geographical separation between Vairë and Námo than the effect that Tolkien's repeated references to the House of Vairë creates: It gives a sense of autonomy to Vairë that she would lack otherwise, as a mere part of her husband's halls. Even if the so-called "Halls of Vairë" are little more than a portion of the halls of Mandos, that they bear her name separates them from him and assigns them to her, a designation that fits nicely with her outspokenness at the conference about Finwë's remarriage and her deviation from her husband's pitiless treatment of the tragic couple.

The omission of the story of Finwë and Míriel entirely from the published Silmarillion makes it hard to classify Vairë among the list of woman characters marginalized during the editing process. Tolkien depicted her fully just once, and that "just once" also just happened not to make it into the final work. As a result, she is unfortunately reduced to a name and an archetype as a weaver goddess involved in the afterlives and fates of those on earth (as weaver goddesses often are). Nonetheless, if Tolkien had to set any character opposite the pitiless and cold Námo, Vairë--with her empathy, assertiveness, and surprising humility--seems the perfect woman to temper somewhat his ruthlessness.

Works Cited

1. The Silmarillion, Valaquenta.
2. The Book of Lost Tales 1, The Cottage of Lost Play.
4. The History of Middle-earth, Vol. 5: The Lost Road and Other Writings, Later Annals of Valinor.
5. The History of Middle-earth, Vol. 5: The Lost Road and Other Writings, Quenta Silmarillion, "Of the Valar."
6. The History of Middle-earth, Vol. 10: Morgoth's Ring, Laws and Customs among the Eldar, "Of the Severance of Marriage."
7. Tolkien later revised the story of Finwë and Míriel (HoMe 10, "Laws and Customs among the Eldar"). In this revised version, unfortunately--as is often the case with Tolkien's revisions where women and Valar are concerned--much of the detail that allows us to draw inferences about Vairë's character is removed. Speaking to her husband Námo, Vairë indicates that Míriel has been dwelling with her and, therefore, she knows her spirit and that she does not intend to return. Since the context is no longer one of a
conference between all of the Valar, Vairë’s pointed and empathetic admonishment to the Valar who have never lost a spouse or considered the loss of one was among the content removed.


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**About the Author**

Dawn Felagund is the founder and owner of the Silmarillion Writers' Guild and has written about one hundred stories, poems, and essays about J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Silmarillion*, some of which have been translated and published in fan magazines around the world. Dawn is a graduate student in the humanities, and her academic work on Tolkien’s cosmogony and the Tolkien fan community has appeared in *Mythprint* and *Silver Leaves* (in press) and has been presented at Mythmoot II, Mythmoot III, and the New York Tolkien Conference. Dawn can be emailed at DawnFelagund@gmail.com.