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## Character Biography

### Varda Elentári

By Oshun

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Varda Elentári, also called Elbereth (Star-queen), Gilthoniel (Starkindler), and Fanuilos (Ever-white), is among the better known of Tolkien's demigods and probably the best known of the Valier, those among them referred to as the Queens of the Valar. She and Manwë reign from Taniquetil. They are described as having compatible attributes. She is known for her phenomenal hearing while he is given the ability to see farther than any others (1).

With him was Varda the most beautiful. Now the Ainur that came into the world took shape and form, such even as have the Children of Ilúvatar who were born of the world; but their shape and form is greater and more lovely and it comes of the knowledge and desire of the substance of the world rather than of that substance itself, and it cannot always be perceived, though they be present. And some of them, therefore, took form and temper as of female, and some as of male. But Varda was the Queen of the Valar, and was the spouse of Manwë; and she wrought the stars, and her beauty is high and aweful, and she is named in reverence. (2)

Many of Varda's various names are related to her most notable accomplishment, which is the mythical creation of the stars. The name Varda itself means the exalted, the lofty, the sublime and is said to be a translation into Quenya of a Valarin title (3). She is also referred in Quenya as *Elentári*, the Lady of the Stars, and *Tintallë*, the Kindler (4).

How and when and in what form Varda created the stars is not a question which is easily answered. (See more on this in the last section.) For the purposes of a summary biography of Varda, it seems pointless and counterproductive to try to draft a better general biography of Varda than the one which exists in the *Valaquenta* within the published *Silmarillion*.

With Manwë dwells Varda, Lady of the Stars, who knows all the regions of Eä. Too great is her beauty to be declared in the words of Men or of Elves; for the light of Ilúvatar lives still in her face. In light is her power and her joy. Out of the deeps of Eä she came to the aid of Manwë; for Melkor she knew from before the making of the Music and rejected him, and he hated her, and feared her more than all others whom Eru made. Manwë and Varda are seldom parted, and they remain in Valinor. Their halls are above the everlasting snow, upon Oiolossë, the uttermost tower of Taniquetil, tallest of all the mountains upon Earth. When Manwë there ascends his throne and looks forth, if Varda is beside him, he sees further than all other eyes, through mist, and through darkness, and over the leagues of the sea. And if Manwë is with her, Varda hears more clearly than all other ears the sound of voices that cry from east to west, from the hills and the valleys, and from the dark places that Melkor has made upon Earth. Of all the Great Ones who dwell in this world the Elves hold Varda most in reverence and love. Elbereth they name her, and they call upon her name out of the shadows of Middle-earth, and uplift it in song at the rising of the stars. (5)

One would certainly believe that Varda/Elbereth is the best loved of the Valar among the Elves if one were only to have read *The Lord of the Rings*. Conversely, in stories of the Elves of the First Age and prior, as recounted in *The Silmarillion*, one hears a great deal about the unique relationship between the Noldor and the Vala Aulë and the special reciprocal affection which linked the sea-loving Teleri to Ulmo and Ossë. No one is described as invoking Varda in times of need during the First Age. Upon finding Maedhros unreachable chained to the cliffs of Thangorodrim, Fingon calls upon Manwë and is sent the eagle Thorondor to assist him.

However, in *The Fellowship of the Rings*, simultaneously with the readers' first introduction to the Elves, one also learns of their admiration and love for Varda or, as she is referred to therein, Elbereth, "[t]he usual name of Varda in Sindarin, 'Star-Queen'" (6).

No one can deny that stars and starlight are compelling in myth, legend, and storytelling across diverse cultures. People in societies with Christian roots are reminded at this time of year of the story of the Star of Bethlehem, which guides the Magi to worship the newly born Christ child. Most adolescent readers of English hold as one of their first memories of Shakespeare the dozens of references to stars in the tale of the star-crossed young lovers Romeo and Juliet.

In modern American pop culture, Walt Disney takes advantage of the innate yearning for a magic contained within the stars, ever visible and yet untouchable, when he commissions, for example, the song "When You Wish upon a Star" for his film adaptation of the children's story *Pinocchio*. Many English-speaking toddlers prattle "Twinkle, twinkle little star" as their initial attempt to raise their voices in song. The references to the firmament abound in cultural references ranging from the sublime to the ridiculous, from the interpretation of the heavens and the naming of its bodies within Greek mythology to Disney cartoons. In our primary world, we continue to look to the marvels of the night sky as a source of inspiration. Scientific explanation seems not to have dampened our primitive fascination. Tolkien touches upon that innate enthrallment when he writes that the favored creatures of his mythology, the Quendi, awaken and begin their lives in a world illuminated only by starlight.

Tolkien fills his work with references to stars for simple practical purposes such as to pinpoint the hour; his stars shine brighter against the blackest skies and dimmer in contrast to the sky which lightens in the hours closest to dawn. But his repeated allusions to stars are most often an artistic element inserted to add enchantment and poetry to his work. The vision of the first Elves awakening at Cuiviénen looking up in wonder at the glittering stars strikes a primal chord in the heart of the reader. Such attraction to the stars surfaces throughout his fictional history of Arda. In *The Silmarillion*, the House of Fëanor is represented by an eight-pointed star. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the flag of Gondor includes seven stars on a field of sable.

We rarely comes across more graceful prose or lines with a lovelier cadence than the words put into the mouth of Aragorn: "I have crossed many mountains and many rivers, and trodden many plains, even into the far countries of Rhûn and Harad where the stars are strange" (7). The tale of Tolkien's most idealized couple, the mortal Man Beren and the quasi-immortal Elf-maiden Lúthien, is sung replete with its own distinct stellar imagery.

And in the glade a light was seen  
Of stars in shadow shimmering.  
Tinúviel was dancing there  
To music of a pipe unseen,

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And light of stars was in her hair,  
And in her raiment glimmering. (8)

It is not surprising that Varda/Elbereth, the Queen of the Stars, is the deity who is cherished most out of all of her brethren by the protagonists in *The Lord of the Rings*. Arda exists without any forms of organized religion, while the Valar hover above it, usually appearing forgetful or at the very least remote. These demigods have a history of occasional interventions that become rarer and rarer as one nears the climax of the story of the Elves in Middle-earth. The origins of the Elves dating back to a period of starlight unrelieved by the light of a sun or a moon would make Varda as the star-kindler more visible to them than most of the other Valar.

Comparisons are made by certain Tolkien scholars between Varda and the Virgin Mary. Tolkien himself avoids making that direct association, although he does acknowledge an intercessory relationship with Varda comparable to that of believers in the powers of the Virgin Mary in our world: "The Elves often called on Varda-Elbereth, the Queen of the Blessed Realm, their especial friend; and so does Frodo" (9).

It is early on in the adventures of Merry, Pippin, Sam and Frodo—even before they have encountered Strider—when they first speak of Varda/Elbereth and her particular significance to the people of Middle-earth. They hear in the dulcet tones of Elves the song from which the following lines are taken:

O stars that in the Sunless Year  
With shining hand by her were sown,  
In windy fields now bright and clear  
We see your silver blossom blown!  
O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!  
We still remember, we who dwell  
In this far land beneath the trees,  
Thy starlight on the Western Seas.

The song ended. 'These are High Elves! They spoke the name of Elbereth!' said Frodo in amazement, 'Few of that fairest folk are ever seen in the Shire. Not many now remain in Middle-earth, east of the Great Sea. This is indeed a strange chance!' (10)

Throughout the remainder of *The Lord of the Rings* saga, Varda/Elbereth is the one among the Ainur who is most frequently called upon and looked to for guidance and assistance (putting aside Gandalf/Olórin, of course, who is an active participant in the struggles of the people of Middle-earth). Legolas calls upon her, as do Frodo and Sam repeatedly. Galadriel sings of Varda in her haunting Lament, which is the longest piece written in Quenya included within *The Lord of the Rings*. It is not precisely translated there, but, instead, we are presented with words that are claimed to be a later paraphrase made by Frodo from his memory of Galadriel's song:

`Ah! like gold fall the leaves in the wind, long years numberless as the wings of trees!  
The long years have passed like swift draughts of the sweet mead in lofty halls beyond  
the West, beneath the blue vaults of Varda wherein the stars tremble in the song of her  
voice, holy and queenly. Who now shall refill the cup for me? For now the Kindler,  
Varda, the Queen of the Stars, from Mount Everwhite has uplifted her hands like clouds,  
and all paths are drowned deep in shadow; and out of a grey country darkness lies on

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the foaming waves between us, and mist covers the jewels of Calaciryra forever. Now lost, lost to those from the East is Valimar! Farewell! Maybe thou shalt find Valimar. Maybe even thou shalt find it. Farewell!' (11)

### There Are No Galaxies Here

I had written more than half of this biography beating a deadline half to death already before I realized that I did not have the expertise to write intelligently about Tolkien's cosmology, much less the time to acquire such knowledge. I have tried to give the reader the other most basic biographical details and some literary considerations. Most likely, this particular biography would have best been written by a student of astronomy. If you are looking for stars and galaxies, you will not find them here. However, the Silmarillion Writers' Guild does have in its research section an essay [The Stars That Varda Made](#), written by Kitt Otter, which compares the mythical stars made by Varda and named in the texts in Elvish with identifiable matching stars existing in our primary world.

More importantly, this article does not concretely discuss the changes to Varda's participation in the creation of the firmament of Arda and its actual physical makeup. Tolkien continually revised the physical complexion of his world. Along with that are the revisions of the works of creation and the deeds of the creators. In his short discussion of such questions in *Myths Transformed*, he gives us his late thoughts about the basis for discussion of his physical world:

The High Eldar living and being tutored by demiurgic beings must have known, or at least their writers and loremasters must have known, the 'truth' (according to their level of understanding). What we have in the *Silmarillion* etc. are traditions (especially personalized, and centered upon *actors*, such as Fëanor) handed on by *Men* in Númenor and later in Middle-Earth (Arnor and Gondor); but already far back - from the first association of the Dúnedain and Elf-friends with the Eldar in Beleriand - blended and confused with their own Mannish myths and cosmic ideas. (12)

Papers have been written parsing and comparing Tolkien's evolving cosmological texts, from the earliest versions dating to drafts compiled in *The Lost Road and Other Writings* (Volume V of *The History of Middle-Earth*) all the way through Tolkien's inclusions in *The Lord of the Rings*, and Christopher Tolkien's final choices for the published version of *The Silmarillion*. One such article is "The Evolution of the 'Queen of the Stars'," (13) which is available online, written by Kristine Larsen, Professor of Physics and Astronomy at Central Connecticut State University, who has also written a number of other interesting articles on the underpinnings of Tolkien's physical world and the evolution of his cosmology.

Her summary of the elements of the evolution of Varda's role in the creation of Arda is as follows:

As with any mythology, Tolkien's legendarium evolved in its repeated telling, leading to sometimes significant changes in the relative importance and powers of certain characters. This analysis has demonstrated that Varda, Queen of the Stars, is a vivid example of this character development. From her earliest stages as companion of Manwë who "played" at placing stars into the heavens, Varda had clearly become one of the mightiest of the Powers by the time of the publication of *The Lord of the Rings*, perhaps only second to Ilúvatar himself. However, in light of the 'Myths

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Transformed' texts and their related amendments to works such as the *Annals of Aman* and the *Ainulindalë*, one can speculate that Varda might have, to paraphrase Galadriel, diminished and gone into the West, if Tolkien had continued tinkering with the legendarium in any concerted way. (14)

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## Works Cited

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5. *The Silmarillion, Valaquenta.*
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7. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "The Council of Elrond."
8. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "A Knife in the Dark."
9. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, in a footnote to 211 to Rhona Beare.
10. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Three Is Company."
11. *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "Farewell to Lórien."
12. Kristine Larsen, The Evolution of the 'Queen of the Stars', *Mallorn, The Bulletin of The Tolkien Society*, accessed 1 December 2011 through the blog of the BlogulSocietății Tolkien din România (Tolkien Society of Romania).
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## About the Author

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