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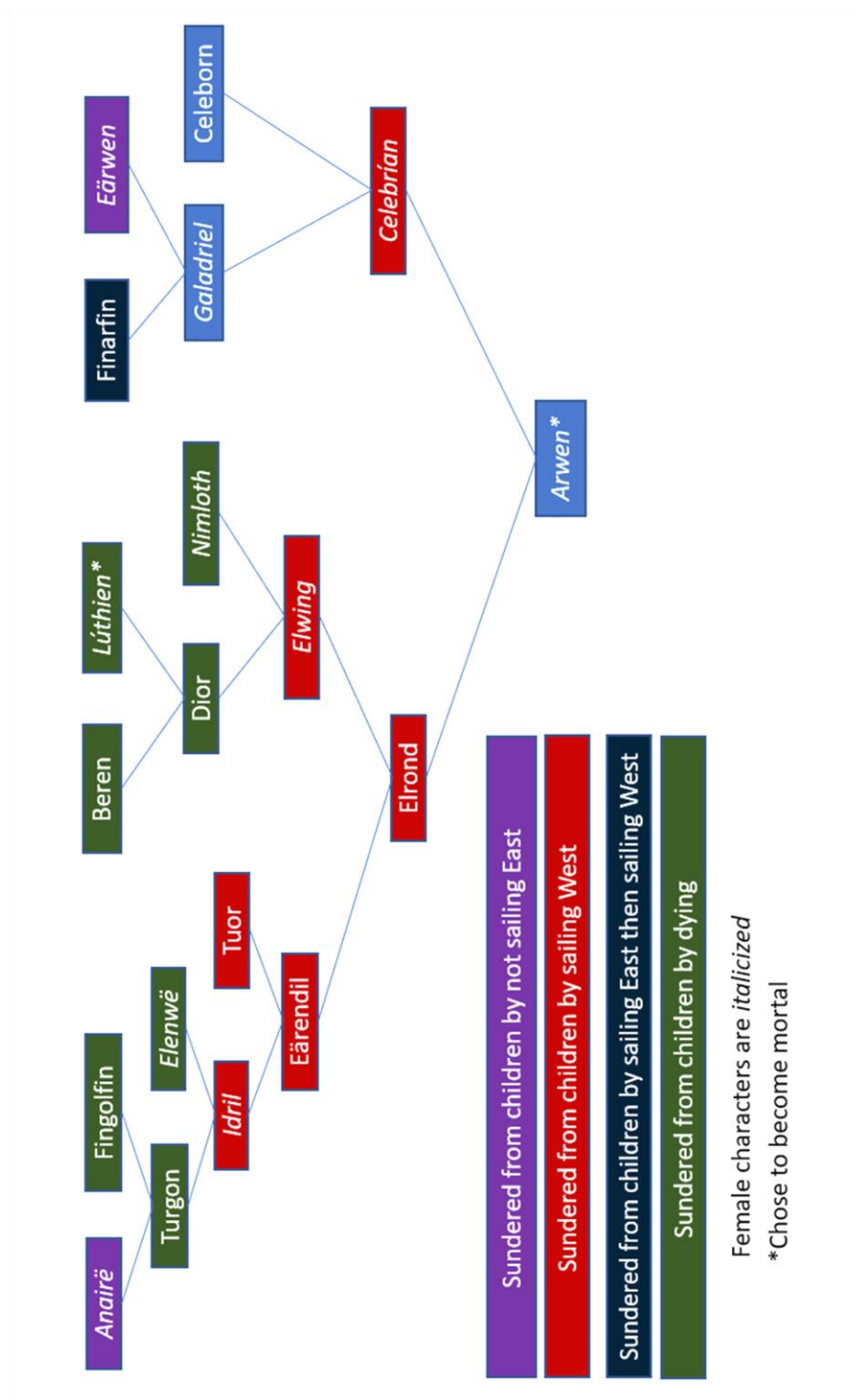
Half-Elven and Half-Orphans: The Choices and Consequences of “Crossing Over”

Tolkien at Kalamazoo Symposium, virtual presentation. May 7, 2022.

Many strong women are associated with the lines of the Half-elven, beginning with Lúthien. Lúthien is also one of many mothers in this family tree to be sundered from their children (by irrevocable choice, circumstance, or both). In the First Age Elenwë, wife of Turgon, died during the tragic oversea crossing from West to East into Middle-earth over the treacherous wasteland of the icy Helcaraxë, leaving her daughter, Idril, a half-orphan. Over 6500 years later, Celebrían, wife of Elrond, crossed the Great Sea from East to West, leaving Middle-earth in search of relief from the psychological trauma of an Orc attack. This act forever sundered her from her daughter, Arwen. These choices, and their consequences, bookend the history of the Half-elven, as Idril later became the mother of Eärendil, father of Elrond, and Arwen, daughter of Elrond, was the lastborn of the Half-elven. In the intervening ages we also have other examples of decisions to cross over the sea leaving the Half-elven not only half-orphans, but effectively fully orphaned. Elsewhere¹ I have argued that Elrond, the son of Eärendil, is the character most similar to Tolkien himself, two of many reasons being the impactful choices of their mothers (to be Catholic in England in the case of Tolkien, to be counted among the Eldar in the case of Elrond) as well as being first half-orphaned, and then fully orphaned at a young age (eerily, at precisely the same age, four, in the case of many versions of the legendarium’s timeline). This paper focuses on the repeated trope of mothers passing over sea and sundering from their children in the line of Elrond and the resonances with Tolkien’s own life.

We begin with a spoiler alert, in the form of a diagram that summarizes my findings:

¹ “The Problematic Perimeters of Elrond Half-elven and Ronald English-Catholic.” Tolkien Society Summer Seminar, virtual presentation, July 3, 2021.



While the first great sundering of Elves from each other was obviously the initial journey West across the sea to the Blessed Lands in the First Age, Tolkien does not specifically describe the separation of parents from children in these first generations of Elves (unlike the sundering of the brothers Olwë from Elwë [Thingol]).² Therefore the first stated sundering of parents from children was the case of Fëanor, caused by the deaths of his mother Míriel (by her choice), and the death of his father Finwë (at the hand of Melkor at the stealing of the silmarils). It is the oath of Fëanor and his sons to travel East to Middle-earth in order to hunt down Melkor and regain the silmarils that sets into motion numerous other examples of orphans.

Among the first was Elenwë, the wife of Turgon, who perished in the crossing of the Helcaraxë. In the late 1960s writing “The Shibboleth of Fëanor” we read for the first time that Turgon “had himself come near to death in the bitter waters when he attempted to save her and his daughter Itaril, whom the breaking of treacherous ice had cast into the cruel sea. Itaril he saved; but the body of Elenwë was covered in fallen ice.”³ Itaril is better known by her Sindarin name, Idril, future wife of Tuor and mother of Eärendil. There are several alternative names for Elenwë in the source material, as well as alternate fates. For example, in several essays dated to the late 1950s and included in *The Nature of Middle-earth* Elenwë is said to have chosen to remain in Valinor rather than join her husband and daughter in exile in Middle-earth.⁴ In his commentary to the volume *The War of the Jewels*, Christopher Tolkien discusses his father’s vacillating thoughts on the fate of Turgon’s wife throughout the last decade of his work on the legendarium.⁵ While mother and daughter were still sundered by the sea in these versions, by keeping the mother alive there remains at least the hope of a future reconciliation. We shall see this hopeful theme replayed throughout the line of Elrond. We should also note that Galadriel and her brother Finrod were also sundered from their mother, Eärwen daughter of Olwë, and eventually their father, Finarfin, in following the Fëanoreans over the sea to Middle-earth. Their mother remains behind in the Blessed Lands and Finarfin turns back with a large part of his people after the kinslaying at Alqualondë. Interestingly, both Galadriel and Finrod were ultimately afforded the opportunity to be reunited with their parents in the Blessed Lands, Galadriel after passing West with Elrond and company, and Finrod after being reincarnated.

² *The Nature of Middle-earth* contains calculations of population statistics for the various early generations. Tolkien notes that there were “various accidents and losses – increasing when Sauron discovered their dwelling” (111), so it is possible (likely?) that parents and children were sundered on the initial Westward trek.

³ *Peoples of Middle-earth* 345-6.

⁴ *The Nature of Middle-earth* 21; 25.

⁵ *The War of the Jewels* 323.

What of Idril's relationship with her own child? After seven years in Gondolin, the human Tuor and the Elf princess Idril are wed, and not long after is born Eärendil Halfelven. In *The Silmarillion* Idril is said to be "wise and far-seeing, and her heart misgave her, and foreboding crept upon her spirit as a cloud. Therefore in time she let prepare a secret way, that should lead down from the city and passing out beneath the surface of the plain issue far beyond the walls... and she contrived it that the work was known but to few."⁶ During the fall of Gondolin at the hand of Melkor's army the survivors escape through Idril's secret pathway,⁷ a plot point that goes all the way back to the original text "The Fall of Gondolin" found in *The Book of Lost Tales*.⁸ As we see, she moves heaven and earth to protect her family and keep it whole.

After the fall of Gondolin, the survivors escape to the mouths of Sirion, later joining their people with those from the fall of Doriath, literally in the marriage of Eärendil to Elwing, the heir of Thingol and holder of a silmaril. According to *The Silmarillion*, around this time

Tuor felt old age creep upon him, and ever a longing for the deeps of the Sea grew stronger in his heart. Therefore he built a great ship... and with Idril Celebrindal he set sail into the sunset and the West, and came no more into any tale or song. But in after days it was sung that Tuor alone of mortal Men was numbered among the elder race, and was joined with the Noldor, whom he loved; and his fate is sundered from the fate of Men.⁹

In the process, the pair is also sundered from their only child. Eärendil continues to sail himself, searching for his parents and looking to bring the Valar a message to "move their hearts to pity for the sorrows of Middle-earth,"¹⁰ voyages that take him away from his own wife and, eventually, his children. The desperate searching of Eärendil for his parents goes back to *The Book of Lost Tales*, which makes a note of the "Great love of Eärendel and Tuor."¹¹ There are early multiple versions of the tale; while Tuor leaves without Idril in all of them, in some she is somehow reunited with him while in others she dies. By the time of the next iteration in the mid-1920s, the so-called "Sketch" or "First Silmarillion," Tuor and Idril sail away together. Christopher Tolkien notes this important change in his

⁶ *The Silmarillion* 241.

⁷ As a side note, I would remind the detractors of "warrior Galadriel" in the Amazon *Rings of Power* series that Tolkien clearly describes how at the siege of Gondolin "Idril arrays herself in mail" and fights to save herself and her child (*The Book of Lost Tales Part Two* 174).

⁸ *The Book of Lost Tales Part Two*, 167-8.

⁹ *The Silmarillion* 244-5.

¹⁰ *The Silmarillion* 246.

¹¹ *The Book of Lost Tales, Part Two* 254.

commentary but does not offer a reason for it.¹² It is notable that the change persists in the later revisions of the legendarium, down to the published version of *The Silmarillion*. This is our second example in which Tolkien appears reticent to kill the mother (or permanently separate the parents from each other) in the line of Elrond, despite his initial intention to do so. However, there remains the important sundering of the children from the parents by the expanse of the sea (in a literal and metaphorical sense), as Eärendil is never physically reunited with Tuor or Idril.

We now take a step back and examine the case of Elwing's parents, Dior and Nimloth. After Dwarves killed Thingol over the silmaril, Beren comes out of seclusion to reclaim it for his son Dior. Dior, Nimloth, their two sons, and daughter, Elwing, settle in Doriath as Thingol's heirs. Not long after, the silmaril is delivered to Dior, signaling the death of Beren and Lúthien. The sons of Fëanor predictably come after the jewel, killing Dior and Nimloth, and making their daughter Elwing – with Silmaril in hand – a refugee in Sirion (along with the remainder of their people). As for their young sons, the host of one of the Fëanoreans leaves them in the forest to starve, although Maedhros searches in vain for them, “and of the fate of Eluréd and Elurín no tale tells.”¹³ However, one particularly optimistic very rough manuscript dubbed D2 by Christopher Tolkien (a version of part of “The Tale of Years” dating to the early 1950s) offers that “some say that the birds succoured them, and led them to Ossir” while their mother, here named Lindis, “escaped with Elwing” and the jewel and “fled to the Havens of Sirion.”¹⁴ The genealogies of the 1930s list the birth years of Elwing's brothers as 192 and 195 respectively,¹⁵ making them fourteen and eleven years old at their deaths. This is close to the age of Ronald and his younger brother, Hilary, at the death of their mother, Mabel (twelve and ten).

In addition, Ronald and Hilary lost their father, Arthur, at even younger ages (four and two), while the sons of Elwing were separated from their parents at the sacking of their settlement when they were four years of age.¹⁶ Eärendil is largely an absentee father, driven to search for his parents, and to seek the help of the Valar. In at least one early version of the legendarium in *The Lost Road* (before the creation of the character of Elros), his son Elrond was born while he was on one of his many sea voyages, suggesting that they may have never met in person.¹⁷ In *The Silmarillion* we read how the Fëanoreans attack Sirion during one of Eärendil's voyages, and Elwing, rather than give up the silmaril, jumps into sea with it. Ulmo changes Elwing into a seabird and she flies to Eärendil's ship. It is said that “Great

¹² *The Shaping of Middle-earth* 69.

¹³ *The Silmarillion* 236-7.

¹⁴ *The War of the Jewels* 351.

¹⁵ *The Lost Road* 403.

¹⁶ *The War of the Jewels* 348.

¹⁷ *The Lost Road* 143.

was the sorrow of Eärendil and Elwing for the ruin of the havens of Sirion, and the captivity of their sons, and they feared that they would be slain.”¹⁸ However, Elrond and his twin brother Elros are instead fostered by the last two surviving sons of Fëanor, Maedhros and Maglor, perhaps in restitution for the deaths of Elrond’s uncles, the sons of Dior. This relationship foreshadows Elrond’s fostering of Aragorn in the Third Age, and mirrors Ronald and Hilary’s relationship with Father Morgan.¹⁹ When Eärendil and Elwing reach the shores of Tol Eressëa, Eärendil send his three sailor companions away but Elwing refuses, fearing that “Then would our paths be sundered for ever; but all thy perils I will take on myself also;”²⁰ instead she runs onto shore and violates the ban on mortals setting foot in the Undying Lands. Afterwards the choice of the half-elven given to them and Eärendil chooses to be of Elven kind after his wife chooses first. While he travels the heavens alone as the Evening Star, he returns to Elwing in the dawn. As in the case of Idril and Tuor, in earlier versions of the legendarium the pair was permanently separated, usually by the death of Elwing when she leapt into the sea with the silmaril. In some versions, she is turned into a seabird but does not fly to meet Eärendil, as happens in the later iterations.²¹ However, Tolkien first softens his stance, by leaving open a potential future reunion of the couple in the future, before adopting as his preferred stance that they journey to the Blessed Lands together. While they were forever separated from their children, they could still be seen in the sky, at sunrise or sunset (as Elwing could also sometimes be seen flying up to meet him, perhaps as the planet Mercury to Eärendil’s Venus), visible signs of hope and ultimate victory in times of darkness.

In the early versions of the legendarium, Elrond is the King of Númenor, but after the creation of his twin brother Elros he becomes “the minstrel and counsellor of Gil-galad,” as Tolkien explains in the first drafts of what becomes the chapter “The Council of Elrond” in *The Lord of the Rings*.²² It is also in these drafts that we first meet Elrond’s wife, “Celebrían child of Galadriel.”²³ What do we know about Celebrían? Not much. She is never given a definitive birthdate, although in the circa 1959 essay “Time-scales and Rates of Growth in Middle-earth” included in *The Nature of Middle-earth*, Tolkien notes it is “probably SA 300.”²⁴ According to the published form of Appendix B of *The Return of the King*, we know that she and Elrond wed 109 years after the death of Gil-galad, and their children – twin sons Elladan and Elrohir and daughter Arwen – were born within the first century

¹⁸ *The Silmarillion* 247.

¹⁹ Kristine Larsen, “Medieval Fostering in the First and Third Ages of Middle-earth: Elrond as Fóstri and Fóstr-son.” *Amon Hen: Bulletin of the Tolkien Society* #264: 11-14; #265: 11-13, 2017.

²⁰ *The Silmarillion* 248.

²¹ For a summary of the different fates, see *The Shaping of Middle-earth* 204.

²² *The Treason of Isengard* 110.

²³ *Sauron Defeated* 48.

²⁴ *The Nature of Middle-earth* 65.

and a half of their marriage.²⁵ She was attacked by Orcs in 2509 TA while traveling to visit her parents in Lórien, and departed West the next year, due to the lingering effects of a poisoned wound.²⁶ The only mention of Celebrían by name in the main text is in the chapter “Farewell to Lórien” when Galadriel gives Aragorn the Elfstone, which Celebrían had given to Arwen and Arwen now wished to be gifted to Aragorn.²⁷ The early drafts of Appendix B tell a different story, one that is less kind to Elrond and Celebrían’s marriage. In the first two versions, Celebrían is killed about a century after producing Elrond’s heirs.²⁸ Curiously, Tolkien is not shy about torturing Celebrían. For example, in earlier drafts of “The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen,” we read how she was taken captive by Orcs “and tormented; and though she was rescued by Elrond and his sons, and brought home and tended, and her hurts of the body were healed, she lay under a great cloud of fear and she loved Middle-earth no longer; so that at the last Elrond granted her prayer, and she passed to the Grey Havens and went into the West, never to return.”²⁹ Celebrían’s story is problematic in its violence against women, although it is certainly not singular in this regard. Lynn Whitaker³⁰ discusses the rape narrative in the stories of Aredhel and Lúthien, while a literal assault on the divine appears in one of the late essays collected in *Morgoth’s Ring* which describes the sun maiden Arië as being “ravished” by Melkor, “desiring to abase her and to take into himself her powers”³¹ after rebuking his proposal to be his wife. Christopher Tolkien notes that much of Celebrían’s story is compressed, reduced, and omitted from the published appendices of *The Lord of the Rings*.³² Thus Celebrían’s role becomes downplayed in the end, becoming not much more than a convenient reason for Elrond’s sons to be obsessed with Orc hunting and therefore on the road with the Dúnedain much of the time.

Sending Celebrían West over sea also gives Elrond a familial reason to eventually pass over the sea himself and leave his children behind. However, this decision is even more striking when seen in contrast with the 1904 Tolkien sketch “Home.” Jane Chance explains that this work, created when Mabel Tolkien was dying of diabetes, depicts Tolkien and “Edwin Neave, husband-to-be of his Aunt Jane, seated before the fire, darning socks and mending pants, with a caption

²⁵ *The Return of the King* 366.

²⁶ *The Return of the King* 368.

²⁷ *The Fellowship of the Ring* 391.

²⁸ *The Peoples of Middle-earth* 226; 249.

²⁹ *The Peoples of Middle-earth* 263-4.

³⁰ Lynn Whitaker. “Corrupting Beauty: Rape Narrative in The Silmarillion.” *Mythlore* 29.1 (2010): 51-68. <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol29/iss1/5/> .

³¹ *Morgoth’s Ring* 381.

³² *The Peoples of Middle-earth* 264-5.

reading ‘What is Home Without a Mother (or a Wife)’.”³³ There is no denying the incredible loss Mabel’s death represented in Ronald’s young life, and its lifelong influence. The question is, what reflections do we see in his writing?

I argue that we see it reflected in each of the cases I have mentioned where Tolkien initially had a mother in Elrond’s family tree die, but instead later chose to have them pass over sea, and leaving open, in many cases, the possibility of a future reunion, perhaps symbolizing the hoped-for reuniting of Tolkien and his own mother in an afterlife. Tolkien was seemingly hesitant to burden Elrond, a character with whom he closely identified (either consciously or unconsciously), with both a dead mother and a dead wife. I would also argue that it may have been the existence of Elrond’s twin sons, Elladan and Elrohir, as unconscious proxies for Ronald and Hilary, that stayed his hand. Perhaps this is also why he left the twins’ fate unresolved, leaving open the possibility that they could eventually sail West (unlike their sister) and be reunited with their mother and father – a eucatastrophe indeed.³⁴ Such a possibility would have certainly appealed to the young boy in Tolkien who had been so traumatized by his parents’ deaths. Such an interpretation makes even more poignant the sons of Elrond’s ongoing war against the orcs “forgetting never their mother’s torment,” the twins seeking revenge against the cruel “disease” that took their mother from them in a way that Ronald and Hilary never could. Therefore, while it is undeniable that Tolkien’s wartime trauma shaped his writing,³⁵ we also see echoes of a far earlier trauma reverberating through the history of Middle-earth, especially within the family line of Elrond.

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³³ Jane Chance. *Tolkien, Self and Other: “This Queer Creature.”* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 20.

³⁴ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* 193.

³⁵ For example, Michael Livingston, “The Shell-shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien’s Trauma of the Ring,” *Mythlore* 25.1 (2006): 77-92. <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol25/iss1/6>; Tim Lommerse, “Tolkien as War-novelist: Another Way of Dealing with Trauma Through Writing.” *The Tolkien Society*, 13 September 2017, <https://www.tolkiensociety.org/blog/2017/09/tolkien-as-war-novelist-another-way-of-dealing-with-trauma-through-writing/>.

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