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July 1, 2025

# An Exploratory Essay on the Valar in *The Hobbit*

The origins of *The Hobbit* can be misconstrued to impute a general meaninglessness upon the story as a whole. For example, from the position that "Mr. Baggins began as a comic tale among conventional and inconsistent Grimm's fairy-tale dwarves" (*Letters* no. 19), it does not follow that he remained that way. "I squandered all my favourite 'motifs' and characters on the original 'Hobbit'" (no. 23). In the end, *The Hobbit* was framed inside of and infused with Tolkien's mythology. Mr. Baggins himself became part of the myth, and the story as a whole forms a colorful image of interconnected, meaningful parts. In this paper, I propose several ways in which we may notice the Valar in *The Hobbit* – or rather, how the Valar's existence affects our reading of *The Hobbit*. First, I offer a broad conception of the Valar as Tolkien describes them in the *Valaquenta*. Then, I present six reflections comparing this conception to *The Hobbit*.

## 1. The Valar in the *Valaquenta*

> In the beginning Eru, the One, who in the Elvish tongue is named Ilúvatar, made the Ainur of his thoughts; and they made a great Music before him. In this Music the World was begun; for Ilúvatar made visible the song of the Ainur. (*Valaquenta*)

So begins Tolkien's *Valaquenta*, and these two sentences contextualize all we learn afterwards about the Ainur. The Ainur are before all things musicians, and the world a derivative of song. Speech plays a fundamental role in Middle-earth partly for this reason. The world began with words, and its ministers shepherd through their words. Or rather, the world began with chanting – musical words – and thus, it is enchanted.

Of the Ainur, fourteen descended to the world to bring about Ilúvatar's purposes: seven Valar, seven Valier. They are called "gods" by some, but they serve the One. They are angels, powerful spirits – "the Powers of Arda." They are the heavenly musicians ordering events on the world. If even a cursory link between these spirits (fourteen) and the Medieval cosmos (seven planets) could be imagined, then one could argue that Tolkien's mythology begins with "the music of the spheres," and these heavenly bodies order life on earth. The numerological progression from seven to fourteen can be explained by the dualities of Tolkien's sub-creation [e.g. two trees in Valinor bearing a singular light (*Letters* No.131), two deluges (Beleriand, Númenor)].

The similarities could extend from count to characteristics. Manwë (the ordered king) and Varda image Jupiter. Ulmo (the lord of waters who can drive men to madness) and Nienna (who abides at the edge of the world closest to the moon, cf. *Roverandum*) image Luna. Aulë (the lord and craftsman of gold and counselor) and Yavanna (the tree crowned by the sun) image Sol. Oromë (the trainer and general of armies and lover of forests) and Vana (the ever-young, life after war) image Mars. Mandos (the Doomsman of Arda who knows the future) and Vaire image Saturn. Lórien and Estë (keeper of a garden spirits frequent) image Venus. Tulkas (athletic and non-conformist) and Nessa (both swift of foot) image Mercury.

While intriguing, these connections are suspect, and the idea of Tolkien importing the Medieval spheres into his sub-creational myth is inconsistent with other narrative elements and his overall methodology (e.g. *Letters* no.25). A more balanced reading would see the Valar as functionally similar to, though categorically distinct from, the Medieval spheres. Overall, the Valar differ from the spheres in their boundedness to time and earth and in their personal nature and agency. We might also note how Tolkien's mythology is set within a Anglo-Saxon, Christian

atmosphere of Middle-earth, in contrast to the Classical, Christian atmosphere of Medieval cosmology.

Tolkien describes the Valar in three classes: elemental, regional, and missional. Elemental lords include Manwe/Varda (air/heavens), Ulmo (waters), and Aule/Yavana (earth/substances). These rule over elements in Arda, seemingly irrespective of geography or region. Regional lords include Mandos/Vaire (Mandos, place of the dead) and Irmo/Este (Lorien, gardens of rest). These rule over special locations, both serving a peculiar function in Arda. Missional lords include Nienna (minister to the dead), Tulkas/Nessa (athletic feats), and Oromë/Vána (warfare). These are known by their not activity rather than location and are not bound to one place in the way regional lords are.

## 2. Observed Valarian Themes in *The Hobbit*

One may ask why Gandalf chose Bilbo for the journey, but first wonder: why did he need to ask anyone at all? Are thirteen dwarfs insufficient for the task? The answer is, "Yes, they are." Bilbo proves essential in the end, but not in the way the dwarves realized. Their misunderstandings begin before the first chapter when they asked Gandalf to find a *fourteenth* member of the company. While they do want a burglar, their concern rests primarily on the "luck" of numbers. Without Bilbo, they are thirteen members, which will not do because thirteen is an unlucky number. Tolkien passes this point a few times to demonstrate its futility – yet, the dwarfs are guilty of mishandled, not misplaced, concern, because fourteen is certainly a better number in Middle-earth than thirteen.

Within Tolkien's legendarium, fourteen is the count of the Valar. The powers that order Arda – elemental, regional, and missional lords – come to fourteen. In a world ruled by fourteen,

the number thirteen may come to symbolize imbalanced or incompletion. Motifs of order and disorder, harmony and dissonance, are bound up in these numbers. With thirteen, something integral to the operation is missing, and it will not work. With fourteen, all parts are in their proper places – or rather, all places have their proper parts. Thirteen may be read as "unlucky" insofar as it images a world missing one of the ordering powers, a medieval cosmos robbed of Jupiter or Mercury.

As clarified elsewhere in this paper, this numerological observation is not offered as evidence of deliberate encoding on the author's part, but as an emerging pattern when *The Hobbit* is read retrospectively within Tolkien's developed mythology. A second observation situates relatedness in musicology. Of all the "meaningless," playful quirks in *The Hobbit*, songs tend to drift towards the top of a critic's list. Some chants fit, but others seem ridiculous. For example, consider the elves singing when the party enters Rivendell:

> O! What are you doing,
> And where are you going?
> Your ponies need shoeing!
> The river is flowing!
> O! tra-la-la-lally
> here down in the valley!
> ("A Short Rest," *The Hobbit*)

Such songs are inescapably spontaneous in the narrative, which lends them a farther degree of silliness and improbability in the minds of some readers. They appear inappropriate for "serious" reading.

However, the apparent quirkiness of such music is vital to comprehending the significance of chant and instrumentation in Middle-earth. Goblins and dwarves do not burst out

in coordinated Broadway pieces. Rather, their proclivity to song betrays their origins in the music of creation, that the world is a derivative of song. Arda is created out of chant; Tolkien's world is a fuguing tune. Chant is also used to thwart the purposes of Ilúvatar, to uncreate and destroy what He wills. Morgoth's dissonance in the *Ainulindalë* is the first and type-setting instance. Music in Middle-earth, then, may be associated with creation and destruction, with order and disorder, depending on who is chanting. Therefore, beginning a long journey with song is important.

> "Now for some music!" said Thorin, "after which the dwarves bring out instruments. The music was important enough to lug instruments to Bag End, and the music awakens "something Tookish" in Bilbo. ("An Unexpected Party," *The Hobbit*)

The presence of song – spontaneous, natural, and effectual (e.g. Bilbo's taunting of the spiders) – in *The Hobbit* mirrors, and perhaps even participates in, the influence of the Valar. Even the "silly" elves of Rivendell demonstrate such meaning in the end, aptly striking at the heart of the narrative:

> The dragon is withered,
> His bones are now crumbled;
> His armour is shivered,
> His splendour is humbled!
> Though sword shall be rusted,
> And throne and crown perish
> With strength that men trusted
> And wealth that they cherish,
> Here grass is still growing,
> And leaves are yet swinging,
> The white water flowing,

> And elves are yet singing
>
> Come! Tra-la-la-lally!
>
> Come back to the valley!
>
> ("The Last Stage," *The Hobbit*)

Speaking of Rivendell, the house itself is described by Tolkien in Valarian motifs, and this shall constitute my third observation. Peering into the valley, Thorin & Co. hear "the voice of hurrying water" below. Shortly after, Tolkien notes how "Elves know a lot and are wondrous folk for news, and know what is going on among the peoples of the land, as quick as water flows, or quicker." *Ulmo*, the lord of waters, speaks and receives news from the waters of the world. The very presence of this valley, which cannot be merely a cove discovered by the elves but at least in part crafted to exhibit its characteristics, showcases earthen craftsmanship reminiscent of *Aulë*, lord of the substances of Arda. Elrond also embodies Aulë's generosity when he exhibits knowledge of and praises the swords' craftsmanship, and when he gives counsel to the company. "The scent of trees was in the air," and Rivendell boasted its own collection of beech and oak, in contrast to the pine around and corresponding to *Oromë's* love of forests. "The air grew warmer as they got lower," an anomaly warranting attention (*Manwë*, ruler of air, high and low). Though the light had been dimmed without a moon, in the valley Bilbo "looked up at the stars. They were burning bright and blue." *Varda*, lady of the stars, is associated most clearly with heavenly light and the stars, which proves vital to the dwarves' mission when Elrond reads the moon runes. Descending, the smell of the trees made Bilbo "drowsy, so that every now and again he nodded and nearly fell off." *Estë*, the giver of rest and sleep (who herself sleeps in the day), and *Irmo*, the master of visions and dreams, keep a garden of healing rest east of Valinor. "All of them, the ponies as well, grew refreshed and strong in a few days there…" From the trees, the traveling company hears "a burst of song like laughter," which comes from elves, whom Gandalf

chides for having "over merry tongues," not unlike *Tulkas*, the ever laughing (with his wife *Nessa*), who rejoiced even in the face of Morgoth. Elrond also embodies *Nienna*, the Valier of lamentation: "He took [the map] and gazed long at it, and he shook his head; for… he hated dragons and their cruel wickedness, and he grieved to remember the ruin of the town of Dale and its merry bells, and the burned banks of the bright River Running." In Rivendell, Thorin's Co. enjoys tales of the past and learns a prophecy of the future (of Durin's Day), as one would expect to learn from *Mandos* (Doomsman who knows the future) and *Vairë* (historian-wife of Mandos who knows the past).

Some of these connections are better founded than others. The significance is in the whole as a singularity, not in any single reference: Rivendell is Valarian. To come to Rivendell is to step into a Valar-ordered world, and so the travelers stay fourteen days. Elrond's valley embodies the qualities of the Valar. Theologically speaking, Rivendell is heavenly, a microcosm of heaven on earth. It is no wonder that this "last homely house" is called a "perfect" home, and that "evil things did not come into that valley."

The final three observations are character comparisons: Aulë and Yavanna compared to dwarves and hobbits, the eagles compared to Smaug, and Nienna compared to Gandalf. In diverse ways, these characters function as personalizing and contemporizing agents in *The Hobbit* for the Valar.

Aulë is the only Valar to fashion his own race, thereby creating a unique relationship between himself and the dwarves. Dwarves image Aulë.

> As they sang the hobbit felt the love of beautiful things made by hands and by cunning and by magic moving through him, a fierce and a jealous love, the desire of the hearts of dwarves. ("An Unexpected Party," *The Hobbit*)
>
> [Aulë] is a smith and a master of all crafts, and he delights in works of skill.` (*Valaquenta*)

Their fall and redemption arc (e.g. Thorin's generous death before the Lonely Mountain) involves a return to the *Imago Aulë*. Aulë's spouse is Yavanna, "the lover of all things that grow in the earth… robed in green; but at times she takes other shapes. Some there are who have seen her standing like a tree under heaven, crowned with the Sun; and from all its branches there spilled a golden dew upon the barren earth, and it grew green with corn" (*Valaquenta*). Note the similarity between Yavanna and hobbits: "It had a perfectly round door… painted green, with a shiny yellow brass knob… they dress in bright colours (chiefly green and yellow)…. also that he was very fond of flowers" ("An Unexpected Party," *The Hobbit*). Exemplifying Aulë and Yavanna respectively, the dwarves and Bilbo are a match made in the deep myths of Middle-earth. Despite initial misgivings, they work well together.

Consider also the two lords of the air: the eagles and Smaug. Birds sit close to the heart of Manwë, particularly the eagle, king of birds. Morgoth's dragons, a type of anti-eagle, oppose the Lord of the air. All of Morgoth's devices can be linked to his thwarting the Valar, Ilúvatar's ministers of order in Arda. It is no surprise, then, that we find eagles at the center of *The Hobbit's* domestic chiasm (A. Bag End… F. Eagle Nests… A'. Erebor), and that a dragon sits in a pivotal role of evil (whom the Necromancer wants to recruit, as his master used Glaurung). This contributes to a motif established when Manwë and Morgoth fought in the first age. Thus, insofar as the eagles and dragon contribute to the story in similar ways, we find a shadow of the Valarian struggle.

Finally, consider Gandalf in light of Tolkien's angelic goddess Nienna. Beneath the Valar are the Maiar, "other spirits whose being also began before the World, of the same order as the Valar but of less degree… their servants and helpers" (*Valaquenta*). Here, Gandalf is called Olórin, wisest of the Maiar. Gandalf dwelt in Lórien, where he became accustomed with healing

and rest. His grey attire is likely a sign of this home, in the habitation of Estë the gentle who also wore grey. However, Gandalf often visited "the house of Nienna, and of her he learned pity and patience" (ibid.). Nienna dwells alone and "mourns for every wound that Arda has suffered in the marring of Melkor…. Those who hearken to her learn pity, and endurance in hope…. All those who wait in Mandos cry to her, for she brings strength to the spirit and turns sorrow to wisdom" (ibid.). Gandalf as a student of Nienna learned pity for those who suffer, and also faith in the midst of trial. He learned the discipline of hopeful lament and ministering to those who are in the valley of death. He visited Nienna's house as a student, and he is called the wisest of the Maiar. In a way, Gandalf becomes the chaplain of Middle-earth. His presence in *The Hobbit*, as a servant of Nienna carrying on her practice, points to the Valar.

The aim of this paper, to demonstrate the presence of Valerian themes and references in *The Hobbit*, by no means depends upon Tolkien's intentions. It is possible to concede even that he had no explicit desire to put the Valar in *The Hobbit*, but only wanted to write a good story. However, in the ways described above, his wider mythology, at the very least, naturally worked its way into the tale.

## Works Cited

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