

THE ELVEN HYMN TO ELBERETH

by

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Perhaps the most beautiful of all Elvish verses in THE LORD OF THE RINGS is that found in Vol. 1 at the end of "Many Meetings" (the variety of editions renders page reference complex):

TRANSLATION

A Elbereth Gilthoniel
silivren penna miriel
o menel aglar elenath!
Na-chaered palan-diriel
o galadhremmin ennorath,
Fanuilos, le linnathon
nef aear, si nef aearon!

O Star-queen Star-kindler
Glittering slants down jewel like
from heaven the glory of the star host!
To remote distance having gazed afar
from tree meshed middle-lands,
Veiled spirit ever white, to thee I sing
This side of the Sea, here this side of the
Great Sea.

It is in Sindarin and is but the first verse¹ of a hymn addressed to Elbereth (Varda in the high tongue), wife of the chief of the Valar, Manwe. As the name Elbereth Gilthoniel suggests, it was she who set and gave light to the stars before the beginning of the days. The Elves of the three houses of the Eldar (note the 'star' suffix in the word Eldar itself) have an obvious and great affinity with the stars and it is to Elbereth they turn in praise and in times of despair rather than to Manwe or any other of the Valar or indeed Eru (God) himself. (See for example Gildor's words to Frodo in the Shire - 'May Elbereth protect you' and to Frodo's own cry of 'O Elbereth! Gilthoniel!' on the last page of "A Knife in the Dark" Vol. 1). There is a preponderance of 'star' components in the words of both Sindarin and Quenya (and it might be noted that in the Elven Calendar the new day starts with the coming of the new evening).

My purpose here is to try and 'reconstruct' to some extent the Hymn to Elbereth using what little information that is available in Tolkien's works. Naturally many verses could be written using imagination and references to Elbereth outside the context of high Hymn (as in Galadriel's song of Eldamar) but to do so would be to diverge from the purpose of this article (though no doubt, such attempts would be valid outside its context).

Admittedly, even such 'reconstruction' as I intend to undertake would be farcical if it pretended to represent the actual original Hymn. I am here merely interested in producing a few extra verses of the sort that Tolkien indicates were in the original (and thus will use as much of Tolkien's own words as can be managed). For this purpose the verses may well be in English (over which I have some command) as in Sindarin (over which I have little indeed). Verse 1 is but a translation of the initial Elvish verse employing the same rhyme scheme, metre and seven line stanza form, as we shall throughout :

O Queen of stars whose bright light fell
Like that of jewels from night's black well
Slanting down from heaven's zenith,
From tree grown lands wherein I dwell
I gaze afar and on my breath
A song, bright spirit white, to thee
Beyond the wide and sund'ring Sea!

Footnote : 1 The Road Goes Ever On. Pg. 63

We now turn to a source for further material which is readily available in the song of Gildor and his companions in 'Three is Company' which Tolkien tells us indeed a form of 'A Elbereth Gilthoniel'¹. A manipulation of the lines which contain new material so as to conform with the Hymm's verse form gives us :

Snow-white! Snow-white! O Lady clear!
O Light to us that wander here
Amid the world of woven trees.
O stars lit in the Sunless Year
Now bright in fields swept by the breeze
We see you silver blossom blown,
By her bright hand your light was sown.

Here might be included a second, different rendering of the initial Elvish verse to maintain the theme of the Hymm, a chorus in sentiment though a verse of different words :

O Queen who set the stars aflame
Whose light like bright jewels slanting came
from heaven high to Middle Earth,
Beneath its trees I call thy name
And gaze afar to starlight's birth,
Veiled spirit white I sing to thee
On this side of the sund'ring Sea.

However, it will be noted that the translation I have given as 'Verse 1' uses the actual rhymes of the Elven verse (of '-el' and 'eth') and indeed, this is essential when we turn to the 'Reprise' of the Hymm given in 'The Grey Havens' Vol. III in which the final lines are in English. Thus our fourth verse becomes :

O Queen of stars whose bright light fell
As glittering jewels from night's deep well
Slanting down from heaven's zenith,
Gilthoniel, O! Elbereth!
We still remember we who dwell
In this far land beneath the trees
The starlight on the Western Seas.

It is true that the above verse makes a departure from the 'aa, b, a, b, cc' rhyme scheme which Tolkien tells us is maintained in the Hymm, but as this change is of his doing, it may be assumed to be acceptable.

We now come to Sam's Invocation at the beginning of 'The Choices of Master Samwise' Vol. II. As Sam does not even know the Elven tongue in which it is spoken, and as it comes with visions of the singing of both Gildor's song in the Shire and the Hymm itself in Imladris, there seems only little doubt that the lines that he speaks are either closely related to, or from the Hymm. Tolkien gives a beautiful translation of these in THE ROAD GOES EVER ON which may now be rearranged and combined with the few lines still spare from Gildor's song in the Shire :



O bright your breath and clear your eyes
Beneath the dome of Wester skies,
White robed from heaven gazing far
O Lady white please hear my cries!
O Queen who kindled star on star
Here overwhelmed in dread of Death
I cry : O guard me Elbereth!

Finally, I might offer a translation of the initial verse into Quenya :

Ai Elentari Ai Varda!
vemiri sila unlanta
alcar eleni menello!
Ar si itiran palanna
Aldar quantwa endorillo
linuvan lyenna Tintalle
Ai si pella aneare.

