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Bombadil's Role in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Investigates the oft-maligned Tom Bombadil chapters of *The Lord of the Rings*, revealing their centrality to Tolkien's philosophy and Tom's frequently overlooked symbolic importance at later points in the book.

Additional Keywords

Pacifism; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Tom Bombadil

Bombadil's Role in *The Lord of the Rings*

Michael Treschow and Mark Duckworth

When J.R.R. Tolkien began to plan a sequel to *The Hobbit*, his thoughts first turned to Tom Bombadil. His publisher, Stanley Unwin, had urged him to follow up the success of *The Hobbit*, but Tolkien was initially at a loss as to how to continue in the same vein. In mid-October, 1937 he wrote Unwin saying, "I cannot think of anything more to say about *hobbits*" (*Letters* 24). In casting about for another sort of suitable character his thoughts turned to Tom Bombadil, the hero of Tolkien's curious poem "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil." In mid-December 1937, he sent Unwin a copy of the poem and wrote to explain that the fun of hobbits was all used up and that he would have to pursue something different.

And what more can hobbits do? They can be comic, but their comedy is suburban unless it is set against things more elemental. But the real fun about orcs and dragons (to my mind) was before their time. Perhaps a new (if similar) line? Do you think Tom Bombadil, the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside, could be made into the hero of a story? Or is he, as I suspect, fully enshrined in the enclosed verses? Still I could enlarge the portrait. (*Letters* 26)

Tolkien soon found, however, that he did have a great deal more to say about hobbits after all. Still, he managed keep his original idea in play. He enlarged the portrait of Tom Bombadil and used his "spirit" to express an idea of primary moment to the story of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Although Tom Bombadil might seem to have come into the tale by accident, he certainly did not remain there by accident. Tolkien went through a careful, painstaking process of selecting and refining to shape his story. His early efforts with *The Lord of the Rings* show that he did not have any clear idea about the story that he had set out to write. He went through many early drafts and made numerous changes to characters and plotlines. He was, as Tom Shippey remarks, "writing his way into the story" (56). One of Tolkien's remarkable features as an author was his readiness to sacrifice

his labors, even long hard labors, for the sake of getting the story working to his satisfaction. Characters that he had developed in the course of several drafts he would finally abandon and then proceed with someone new. In the first draft he made his central character Bingo Baggins, the son of Bilbo. By the fourth draft he had changed Bingo into a Bolger-Baggins, now Bilbo's nephew and adopted heir (*Return of the Shadow* 28). In these early drafts Tolkien brought Bingo and his friends, Marmaduke Brandybuck, Frodo Took, and Odo Bolger (sometimes Odo Took), through their dangerous journey to Bree, where they would meet an odd character named Trotter, a sharp-witted hobbit, browned and wrinkled from his many years in the wilderness, who clopped about briskly in wooden shoes. Such was Tolkien's initial idea for a Ranger. All these characters eventually transformed, with some difficulty, into what we now know. When Tolkien first had the idea of calling Bilbo's nephew Frodo instead of Bingo Bolger-Baggins, he rejected it. He struck out the name Frodo and wrote in the margin, "No – I am now too used to Bingo" (221). So he wrote still another draft with Bingo before his better judgment finally gave way to Frodo Baggins. As for Trotter, although he may seem absurd to us now, Tolkien, as Shippey points out, had become "strongly attached to this character, and even more strongly attached to the name Trotter" (54). Nevertheless, the tough old hobbit Trotter at last gave way to the stern, mysterious man Strider. One feature of the story, however, remains consistent in all these early drafts. Once the hobbits had finally begun their journey to Bree they went into the Old Forest and had to be rescued from the Willow Man (as Tolkien first called Old Man Willow) and from Barrow-wights by Tom Bombadil (Christopher Tolkien, *Shadow* 110-114). This remained a consistent feature of the early drafts. Tolkien himself later reflected on how Tom Bombadil got into the story and stayed:

In historical fact I put him in because I had already 'invented' him independently (he first appeared in the Oxford Magazine) and wanted an 'adventure' on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out. (*Letters* 192)

So although Tolkien first put Tom Bombadil into the story because he was ready to hand, he left him in because he belonged.

Even so, as much as Tom was intentionally set into the story he does not fit smoothly into it, as Tolkien himself was well aware. Not long after the first publication of the book he wrote that "many have found him an odd or

indeed discordant ingredient" (*Letters* 192). And so they should. Tom Bombadil is odd. He is discordant. He is not in keeping with the rest of the book. But it would seem that he is not meant to be. Literary criticism of *The Lord of the Rings* finds Tom either a riddle or an impediment—or both. Positive criticism regarding Tom tends to get bogged down in the speculative slough of trying to solve his identity, which in itself shows that he is hard to fit into things. Even when positive criticism waxes effusive, saying such things as, "The passage about him is one of the most joyously lyrical" (Fuller 23), it seems to set Tom against the flow of the book. He is indeed joyously lyrical, but in a story whose tenor is marked by poignant, nostalgic loss—even in glorious triumph over the most horrible terrors. Tom's simple joyousness is too much for some critics, who find him not only discordant but insufferable. One says that "the unfriendly reader finds an easy stopping place in Tom Bombadil; forty pages of such dull stuff so early in a long work is hard to get over" (Sale 221). The suggestion here would seem to be that the author would have done better to leave him out and get on with the rest of the story. Another critic calls the scene with Tom Bombadil a "problem of belief," "a technical failure" and a "charming but slightly unconvincing digression," in effect an artless and needless detraction from the main story (Gasque 155). And a recent, generally positive critic tells us in an aside that his literary tastes are offended by Tom Bombadil: "Personally I find Bombadil's verse and talk very trying, and Goldberry wholly unbelievable" (Curry 181).

The problem of Tom Bombadil's fit with the rest of the book becomes very evident in attempts to dramatize it. The first dramatization was a BBC radio drama, broadcast in 1955-6. Tolkien was not very impressed or pleased with the result, especially in the portrayal of Tom.

I think the book quite unsuitable for 'dramatization', and have not enjoyed the broadcasts—though they have improved. I thought Tom Bombadil dreadful [...]. (*Letters* 228)

Tolkien had little confidence in drama's capacity to tell a story. He said, in fact that "Drama is naturally hostile to fantasy" ("On Fairy-Stories" 68). Even so, he was willing to cooperate (though not gladly) with the first attempt to turn the book into a film script. The treatment of the Tom Bombadil episode was particularly problematic. Tolkien wrote his publisher Rayner Unwin on 8 April 1958 to express his discontent with Morton Grady

Zimmerman's treatment of the book, but also to assure Unwin that he would try not to upset the apple cart.

I feel very unhappy about the extreme silliness and incompetence of Z and his complete lack of respect for the original (it seems wilfully wrong without discernible technical reasons at nearly every point). But I need, and shall soon need very much indeed, money, and I am conscious of your rights and interests; so that I shall endeavour to restrain myself, and avoid all avoidable offence. (*Letters* 267)

The treatment of the Tom Bombadil episode was particularly problematic. Tolkien thought that the script writer was betraying the principles of his book at this point. He wrote to the producer of the film project: "We are not in 'fairy-land', but in real river lands in autumn. Goldberry represents the actual seasonal changes in such lands" (*Letters* 272). The script writer perhaps deserves a little sympathy. How can a dramatization of the Bombadil episode help but fall through the looking glass or fly into Never-never land? How do you capture the dreamy flowing of time in the House of Tom Bombadil and yet keep things concrete? How do you show Goldberry as representing the "actual seasonal changes" and yet still show her as a "real" individual? Most especially, how do you dramatize Tom and maintain his credibility? How would you keep him from echoing the silliness of a comedy sketch out of Monty Python? Ralph Bakshi's animated version of the first half of the book avoided the problem by leaving the Bombadil episode out altogether. The hobbits leave the Shire, avoid a Black Rider by fleeing into the woods, and arrive safely at Bree. The BBC's second radio drama from the late 1980's follows suit. It offers most all of the book's narrative, but still skips past Tom. In this case the narrative is essentially left intact until the hobbits leave Crickhollow. There they decide to go into the Old Forest to avoid Black Riders on the road; but nothing happens on their way through it. They arrive at Bree almost at once, untroubled by any encounters. And, of course, Peter Jackson's film version of the *The Fellowship of the Ring* takes the four hobbits by a path much like Ralph Bakshi's: fleeing Black Riders, they pass over the Brandywine River and come straight to Bree.

A straight path is very efficient. And what really is lost by leaving the Tom Bombadil episode out? Not much, some would say, just a fleeting moment of charm, nothing substantial. So says Carol Jeffs:

And for anyone who has seen Part One of the film version of *The Lord of the Rings* [Ralph Bakshi's version], or who has heard the B.B.C. serialisation of the book, it could be noticed that Tom Bombadil was dispensed with, without any detriment to the general story, whilst also removing a rather charming episode. (Jefferies 26)

Peter Jackson argues that the efficiency of a film really has to dispense with Tom Bombadil because he does not move the story forward.

What does Old Man Willow contribute to the story of Frodo carrying the Ring? What does Tom Bombadil ultimately really have to do with the Ring? I know there's Ring stuff in the Bombadil episode, but it's not really advancing our story, it's not really telling us things that we need to know. (Jackson)

Christopher Lee, in defense of his director, says that the omission of Bombadil is an improvement to the story (Jackson).

This willingness to omit Bombadil betrays a misunderstanding of Tolkien's story. Those who are impatient with the slow meandering beginnings to the story and with the digressive "adventure on the way" do not take into account what Tolkien says of his book right at the outset. The first words of the Prologue under the heading "Concerning Hobbits" state that, "This story is largely concerned with Hobbits." The impatience for the story to "get on with it" really is an impatience to get to Bree and to get to Aragorn (as the adaptations all show). But that is to be impatient with Tolkien's avowed attentiveness to hobbits. For the digressive adventure with Tom quite straightforwardly concerns itself with the hobbits. Digressions are often very important and illuminating, as Tolkien's own reputation as a lecturer testifies.

The willingness to omit Bombadil also betrays a misunderstanding of how stories work in general. Not every character in a story serves to advance the plot. There are other functions than the "dramatic." Tolkien understood very well that Bombadil does little for the plot of *The Lord of the Rings*. That was not his purpose, as Tolkien explained in his long letter to a proof reader.

Tom Bombadil is not an important person—to the narrative. I suppose he has some importance as a 'comment'. I mean, I do not really write like

that: he is just an invention (who first appeared in the *Oxford Magazine* about 1933), and he represents something that I feel important, though I would not be prepared to analyze the feeling precisely. I would not, however, have left him in, if he did not have some kind of function. (*Letters* 178)

If we look for Bombadil to serve the story's plot we have missed the point. His function as a "comment" is to serve the story's thought, by representing "something [...] important." Tolkien's phrasing here echoes what we heard him say elsewhere: "I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out" (*Letters* 192). From Tolkien's authorial standpoint Tom is far from expendable. He is really a critical moment of disclosure. What then does he show? What is lost if he is left out?

The most obvious thing is the initial "adventure on the way," as Tolkien called it (*Letters* 192). His literary instinct told him that an adventure with Tom was a good thing for his story. But how do we square this idea of an adventure with Tolkien's admission that Tom Bombadil is not important to the narrative? An adventure, after all, is a piece of narrative. This is really quite simple. Tolkien's "adventure on the way" really means a detour. It is a moment of narrative to be sure, but not so as to move the main narrative along. In fact, it holds the main narrative back. That is its purpose. Certain things need to be made clear before the main narrative can get underway again.

This "adventure on the way" has several parallels with Bilbo's journey to the Lonely Mountain in *The Hobbit*. Tolkien reused some of the motifs that worked so well in the earlier story. In doing so he set down the conditions in which Tom's significance could disclose itself. Tom Bombadil's wondrous sufficiency is set against the hobbits' ineptitude. In contrast to Tom they are shown to be unable to take care of themselves in the wide world and so unequal to the terrible quest that they have undertaken. In this respect the episode with Tom Bombadil parallels the beginning of Bilbo's quest in *The Hobbit*. Just as Bilbo in *The Hobbit* botches his rash attempt to burgle the trolls, so too Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin fail in what they have set out to do. They have gone into the Old Forest to avoid the terror of the Black Riders, but they cannot get through. They cannot resist the singing of Old Man Willow and they are helpless against the spell of the Barrow-wight. They fall into deadly peril twice over and must be rescued each time

by Tom Bombadil, who is indeed equal to such troubles. Like the Eagles who come “out of the blue” to rescue Gandalf, Bilbo, and the dwarves from the goblins and wargs, Tom comes as a great surprise to save the hobbits from Old Man Willow. Thus Tolkien further develops his idea of providential “luck” watching over the brave (though as yet incompetent); for Tom later answers Frodo’s question about whether he came upon them only by chance: “Just chance brought me then, if chance you call it. It was no plan of mine” (123). And like the eagles upon the eyrie he provides food and rest and conveyance. But Tom is also like Beorn. His hospitality is simple and rudimentary but civilized. For although both Tom and Beorn live very close to nature, both still have warm comfortable houses and tasty cooking. Tom is also uncanny like Beorn, indeed even more so. We never learn how or why Beorn became a shape-shifter, a berserk. And as for Tom we never learn just what he is, or how he has such great power. Both, moreover, answer to the needs of the needy, uncanny as their hearts may be. In *The Hobbit* Gandalf seeks out Beorn, who befriends Thorin and company; he not only helps them on their way but returns at the Battle of the Five Armies to shift the balance and avenge Thorin’s mortal wounds. Tom similarly befriends the hobbits and comes again to rescue them from the Barrow-wight when Frodo calls for him. Tom even more pointedly portrays Tolkien’s motif that help can come to the helpless, even when all seems lost.

Tom’s wondrous sufficiency does not serve to diminish the worth of the hobbits, but rather to give form and direction to what they must become. Their initial haplessness stands in clear contrast to their solid qualities at tale’s end. Just as Gandalf tells Bilbo as they return to the Shire at the end of *The Hobbit*, “You are not the hobbit that you were” (277), so too he tells Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin near the end of *The Lord of the Rings* that they have become capable of dealing with evil on their own. They too are about to return to the Shire and have just learned it is in serious trouble from ruffians and tyranny. But then Gandalf tells them that he is turning aside and will leave them to take care of these troubles themselves.

“I am not coming to the Shire. You must settle its affairs yourselves; that is what you have been trained for. [...] And as for you, my dear friends, you will need no help. You are grown up now. Grown indeed very high; among the great you are, and I have no longer any fear at all for any of you.”(974)

In case we needed any clearer perspective on how much the hobbits have grown in character, Tolkien has Gandalf then tell the hobbits that he is turning aside to visit Tom Bombadil, the very fellow who had told them a year before, with a hint of exasperation, how much they needed taking care of (141-2).

Despite Tom's good-natured vexation with them, these helpless hobbits are less helpless after their visit with him. Their interaction with him prepares them for the quest ahead. Here again the story-line is similar to the episode with Beorn in *The Hobbit*. Beorn offers the adventurers a respite where they can gather their wits for the next stage of the journey. He also offers instruction and provision for their journey. Beorn has deep lore in the matter of goblins and also in the paths of Mirkwood. He has clear-eyed perspective on the movements of their foes and the knowledge to show the troop the way forward. He helps them on their way with food and ponies, and even accompanies them to the edge of Mirkwood, both for the sake of his ponies and to see his guests safely on their way. But he can only help them so far: "Beyond the edge of the forest I cannot help you much; you must depend on your luck and your courage and the food I send with you" (125). Similarly Tom Bombadil can, or will, only go so far with the four hobbits. When he brings them to the eastern border of the Old Forest, he sends them on alone, not even sure whether they might meet Black Riders on the short way to Bree.

"Do you think," asked Pippin hesitatingly, "do you think we may be pursued, tonight?"

"No, I hope not tonight," answered Tom Bombadil; "nor perhaps the next day. But do not trust my guess; for I cannot tell for certain. Out east my knowledge fails. Tom is no master of Riders from the Black Land far beyond his country." (144)

The hobbits have a similar sense of abandonment to that the dwarves and Bilbo have in *The Hobbit* at the edge of Mirkwood, when not only Beorn returns home but Gandalf too leaves them to their own wits (129-31). Like the dwarves, the four hobbits feel bereft and plead for the safety of Tom's company. They "wished he was coming with them. [...] [H]e would know how to deal with Black Riders, if anyone did. [...] A deep loneliness and sense of loss was on them" (144). They begged him to come at least as far as Bree and to share a drink with them one last time.

...but he laughed and refused saying:

Tom's country ends here: he will not pass the borders.

Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting. (144)

It may seem disconcerting that he laughs at them in their sense of distress and real plight. But he has done a great deal for them, and helped them on their way more than they are as yet aware. He has prepared them to go on. Like Beorn, he has taught them the way of things, indeed much more so. During their visit with him, their asylum of safety, as Shippey called it (51), he gives them a sense of the sweep of time, a sense of the story that they have been caught up in. He may not help advance the narrative, but he helps the hobbits (and the reader) see the shape and flow of the narrative that they have been caught up in. Tom has perspective. Although he does not clearly see the way ahead for the hobbits, he sees how things are and how they have been. He sees far, far back through all time past with a sure sense of understanding. When the hobbits are resting in his house he recollects to them the whole sweep of time past. He moves from the present time, explaining the natural order all around them with “tales of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest, about evil things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secrets hidden under brambles” (127). Then he moves back into the history of the Old Forest and the roots of malice in the Great Willow. He also passes over the history of men in this region, compressing images of kingdoms rising and falling until only the barrows remain, harboring a malice that bides its time: “A shadow came out of dark places far away, and the bones were stirred in the mounds. Barrow-wights walked in the hollow places with a clink of rings on cold fingers, and gold chains in the wind” (128). But then he turns far back to the earliest history beyond the hobbits’ reckoning.

[T]hey found that he had now wandered into strange regions beyond their memory and beyond their waking thought, into times when the world was wider, and the seas flowed straight to the western shore; and still on and back Tom went singing out into ancient starlight, when only the Elf-sires were awake. (128)

Much of this is mysterious to the hobbits but they are filled with a sense of wonder and a much greater awareness of the world around them. Indeed they are "enchanted [...] under the spell of his words." They have taken on something of his understanding. And it is important to notice that his understanding is virtuous, fully cognizant of good and evil. When Frodo asks Tom, "Who are you, Master?" he replies that he is only just himself, but then explains that his self has seen and understands everything unfolding. He calls himself Eldest, "from before the river and the trees." He remembers "the first raindrop and the first acorn." He saw Men and Hobbits arrive. He knew from the beginning how trouble came to the world of Middle-earth: "When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside" (129).

The Dark Lord that Tom mentions here is not Sauron but Morgoth, Sauron's Master, the character of Satan in Tolkien's mythology. Tom Bombadil's character is by no means amoral, as some have argued; he is keenly aware of the battle between good and evil, and is altogether in sympathy with the good. Out on the barrow, after rescuing the hobbits and hauling all the treasure out of the dark mound into the sunlight, Tom picks up a jewel and reflects tenderly and poignantly on the lost beauty that it signifies.

He looked long at it, as if stirred by some memory, shaking his head, and saying at last:

"Here is a pretty toy for Tom and for his lady! Fair was she who long ago wore this on her shoulder. Goldberry shall wear it now and we will not forget her!" (142)

Tom is referring to an unnamed lady who dwelt in the ancient northern kingdom of the Númenóreans. This kingdom was long before overcome by the Witch-king of Angmar, who still endures as the chief Nazgûl. Tom's nature is to keep the memory of that which is good and the beautiful in full knowledge of the devastation that evil has wrought against it. His memory thus sheds light on the present troubles. Bombadil really exemplifies here Tolkien's comment on *Beowulf* that the defeat of something noble is not its refutation ("Monsters" 70). Its value remains gathered up in its own moment of wonder.

Tom's clear sight, his sure understanding of how things are, is most in evidence in his treatment of the Ring. He knows its awesome power, but it holds no power over him. He treats it with irony, even contempt, which astounds Frodo and even annoys him. Frodo can only feel the great weight of its awful import to the world, as Gandalf has indeed taught him. But unlike Gandalf, Tom is not troubled by the Ring. "Show me the precious Ring!" he suddenly and unexpectedly demands of Frodo. The word "precious" here means quite the opposite of what Gollum means when he calls it his "precious." When Frodo, to his own surprise, hands the Ring over to Tom, he only trifles with it.

It seemed to grow larger as it lay on his big brown-skinned hand. Then suddenly he put it to his eye and laughed. For a second the hobbits had a vision, both comical and alarming, of his bright blue eye gleaming through a circle of gold. Then Tom put the Ring around the end of his little finger and held it up to the candle-light. For a moment the hobbits noticed nothing strange about this. Then they gasped. There was no sign of Tom disappearing!

Tom laughed again, and then he spun the Ring in the air—and it vanished with a flash. Frodo gave a cry—and Tom leaned forward and handed it back with a smile. (130)

Here is the point where we come to moment of disclosure. Here Tom's own import comes to the fore. The Ring swells to meet Tom's greatness of spirit, but is no match for his equanimity. Tom sees right through it; its awful power encircles his bright blue eye. Two points of utter contrast have been brought together, and it is indeed alarming. Alarming that this Ring cannot overbear Tom's foolery with it, his "silliness" in the deep sense of that word. At this moment things fall suddenly into a new perspective. The Ring can lose its terror. Tom's simple goodness cannot be borne down by it, but bubbles up through and around it.

That moment of perspective, where the Ring's evil power merely frames Tom's bright and clear sight, is a dangerous moment for Tolkien's story. It veers suddenly close to smashing into a wreck on Tom's unassailable virtue. The whole rationale of the quest is poised to overbalance and fall down at this moment. For Bombadil is greater than the Ring. Indeed Tolkien once scribbled a note to himself when still writing the early drafts: "Tom could have got rid of the Ring all along [...] if asked!"

(*War* 98). Such was Tolkien's idea of Tom's greatness. That greatness remains intact but Tolkien managed in the end to steer clear of crashing his narrative on the rock of this greatness. In the logic of the fully developed story Tom Bombadil is understood to be so fully content, so fully self-contained, that the allure of the Ring means nothing to him. He is wholly contained by the Old Forest and its environs. He does not leave its care, nor does he leave Goldberry and the river to which she is bound. As he says on the Barrow Downs when he offers to see the hobbits safely out of the Old Forest, "I've got things to do [...] my making and my singing, my talking and my walking, and my watching of the country. Tom can't be always near to open doors and willow-cracks. Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting" (142). His power is in his own place. And it is a creative power: not such that he cannot undo the Rings' power, only that its power cannot touch him. Were he to be entrusted to guard it, he would finally only neglect it and it would at last escape his notice. Such at least is Gandalf's understanding of Bombadil in the debate at "The Council of Elrond" (259). The elves Glorfindel and Galdor of the Grey Havens add that Bombadil's power is not warlike so as to withstand and defeat Sauron. It is of another kind, something that is in harmony with nature. Bombadil would finally be overcome by Sauron if the Ring were left in his keeping. Glorfindel surmises: "I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall, Last as he was First; and then Night will come" (259) And Galdor adds: "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself. And yet we see that Sauron can torture and destroy the very hills" (259). Thus the narrative is saved from shipwreck. Tolkien came to portray Bombadil as wondrously impervious to the Ring's power by virtue of his contentment, but as having no part in the quest by virtue of his being contained by his life in the Old Forest. Even so, he also depends for his life on the success of the quest.

And so the story moves forward without him, though he is not to be forgotten. In one of his letters Tolkien described Bombadil as one who stands aside from the battle even though its outcome is of enormous consequence for him. He represents, as Tolkien describes him, a third way in the battle between good and evil.

I might put it this way. The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship,

moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. But if you have, as it were taken 'a vow of poverty', renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. It is a natural pacifist view, which always arises in the mind when there is a war. But the view of Rivendell seems to be that it is an excellent thing to have represented, but that there are in fact things with which it cannot cope; and upon which its existence nonetheless depends. Ultimately only the victory of the West will allow Bombadil to continue, or even to survive. Nothing would be left for him in the world of Sauron. (*Letters* 178-9)

Bombadil's stance is squarely on the side of good. Even though he is not disposed to help solve the present problem, he has the respect of Rivendell (which here means the leadership of the coalition of free peoples). For Bombadil, as Tolkien here described him, is quite simply and clearly the moral opposite of Sauron. He has no desire for power, no will to dominate. That is why the Ring has no power over him. The Ring's power is the power to control. His renunciation of control is a freedom from the "will to power." It is the ground of his own kind of power, which is wholly at odds with what Sauron seeks. He is, as Tolkien put it, a "natural pacifist." Tolkien meant that he is not a pacifist in an ideological sense but rather that he is so after the manner of nature. He has no policy of war but simply keeps to his own. In the depths of his character he has no interest in dominion. He does not own the Old Forest, as Goldberry tells Frodo; rather he is "the Master" (122). His mastery is obviously not through possession or enslavement. He is "the Master" in the sense of the *magister*, the teacher.

Bombadil's poetic lore indeed has great authority—authority even to undo the songs of trees and the spells of barrow-wights. But his authority so eschews political power he leaves the Old Forest in a state of anarchy. Tolkien, who called himself a sort of anarchist, characterized Bombadil's mastery thus:

He is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges,

and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow. (*Letters* 192)

Rivendell cannot uphold disregard for dominion. It must use dominion to fight against Sauron's domination. Hence the Ring is a temptation for those who enter the war against Sauron. For the power of the Ring is the power to dominate, which is very close in kind to wielding dominion, so close in fact that characters like Saruman and Boromir lose sight of the difference.

Even so, the view of Rivendell and the stance of Bombadil are not quite so distinct as Tolkien's words might seem to suggest. They are certainly not at odds. Rivendell's policy to destroy the Ring in fact imitates Bombadil's renunciation of control. The policy to cast the Ring into the cracks of Mount Doom is a determined will *not* to power. Indeed, as we shall observe a little later, Rivendell will finally conform completely to Bombadil's renunciation. Likewise, Bombadil's stance is not a principled pacifism that opposes all war and battle and contest. He may renounce control, but he does not renounce warriors. He does not protest the will to fight evil in others. And he is ready enough to fight in his own way if the occasion presents itself. He strikes Old Man Willow with a stick and defeats him with the malicious Willow's own weapon of singing. In the same way Tom chants away the spell of the Barrow-wight and sends the wight withering into the void of the outer darkness. And then he takes the ancient and enchanted swords of Westerneesse from the barrow and gives them to the hobbits to use on their quest against the forces of darkness.

These swords prove to be important along the way, and reminders of Tom's support and help in the fight against darkness. None of the swords plays such a great part as does Merry's, which undoes the enchantment woven about the body of the Witch-king of Angmar whereupon Éowyn's sword can cleave through him. The sword perishes but to wondrous effect.

So passed the sword of the Barrow-downs, work of Westerneesse. But glad would he have been to know its fate who wrought it slowly long ago in the North-kingdom when the Dúnedain were young, and chief among their foes was the dread realm of Angmar and its sorcerer king. No other blade, not though mightier hands had wielded it, would have dealt that foe a wound so bitter, cleaving the undead flesh, breaking the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will. (826)

Pippin's sword also shares in a noble deed. Its lineage too is recollected, though more briefly, at its great moment in the battle before the Black Gate of Mordor. Amidst the mêlée a great troll-chief smites down Pippin's friend Beregond and then goes to bite through his throat. But Pippin saves his friend with his sword. He stabs upward "and the written blade of Westernesse pierced through the hide and went deep into the vitals of the troll, and his black blood came gushing out" (874). Sam's sword does less work, but still helps achieve something wondrous. When Sam and Frodo find that Gollum has led them into the trap of some terrible, unknown horror (Shelob's lair) Sam instinctively reaches for the sword that Tom gave him from out of the darkness of the barrow. Sam thus remembers Tom himself who can vanquish creatures of the darkness. He wishes at once that "old Tom was near us now" (703). This shows, of course, Sam's awareness that Tom is a good ally when hard beset by terror. But it at the same time it shows to Sam's mind that light can prevail in darkness; his memory of Tom reminds him of the lady's glass, without which he could not have vanquished Shelob. Such is the result of merely touching the hilt of the noble sword from the barrow.

The Council of Elrond, like Sam, fully recognizes that Tom would fight if need be. They know that Tom would not submit to Sauron, should Sauron come to him, but would oppose him to the last and finally fall. Tom should be understood to have much the same sensibility as Treebeard, another creature who lives outside of civilization in full communion with the natural order, who likewise keeps to his own with a spirit of mastery thereof but not domination, and who also does not readily take sides in someone else's war but in the end will fight to defend his own. Treebeard says, "I am not altogether on anybody's *side*, because nobody is altogether on my *side*" (461). Even so, when Merry and Pippin's forthright and bold speech incite him and his fellow Ents to awake to the threat against their forest, they not only attack Saruman in Orthanc but also ally with Gandalf and march on the army of Uruk-hai to help both themselves and the people of Rohan. Treebeard and Tom Bombadil both exhibit goodwill and generosity that is limited and contained because they are withdrawn from civilization and its dominion. But they attack evil within their own spheres and help those afflicted by it.

So Tom Bombadil can and will fight. But the essential point about him all the same is that he does not strive. He knows his place—and that in both senses of the phrase. He has the humility not to seek further for himself. But he also has a thorough understanding of his land and his lady. The whole bearing of his life is to serve them. Indeed, as a nature spirit he would seem to be bound to his own locale and to be wholly content therein. He knows his place because he is at rest with it. The relation of such stillness to the capacity to know is very important, as Josef Pieper, the great Thomist philosopher, explained under his discussion of prudence in *The Four Cardinal Virtues*. He said that prudence is the first and foremost of the natural virtues upon which the others depend. It is an intellectual virtue by which the knowing mind is able to see clearly, to see how things are and whither they tend, and so to make good choices. It is the virtue that informs philosophy (as the “love of wisdom”), enabling due wonder at the life and existence of the world around us. Pieper, moreover, explained that “prudence is specially opposed to covetousness” (21). The enemy of prudence is lust, not merely sexual lust, but more especially the lust for power, glory, security—the lust for the confirmation of one’s own importance. To which Pieper remarked:

Need we say how utterly contrary such an attitude is to the fundamental bent of prudence; how impossible the informed and receptive silence of the subject before the truth of real things, how impossible just estimate and decision is, without a youthful spirit of brave trust and, as it were, a reckless tossing away of anxious self-preservation, a relinquishment of all egoistic bias toward mere confirmation of the self; how utterly, therefore, the virtue of prudence is dependent on the constant readiness to ignore the self, the limberness of real humility and objectivity. (21)

Such words resonate closely with Bombadil’s renunciation of control through his delight in things for themselves.

Another of Tolkien’s attempts to explain the significance of Bombadil resonates again with Pieper’s words and adds a new dimension to our understanding of this strange character. Bombadil, he said, expresses the spirit of knowledge. He sums up the very idea of the knowing mind that attends beyond itself to things in themselves.

I do not mean him to be an allegory—or I should not have given him so particular, individual, and ridiculous a name—but 'allegory' is the only mode of exhibiting certain functions: he is then an 'allegory', or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are 'other'* and wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with 'doing' anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture. Even the Elves hardly show this: they are primarily artists. (*Letters* 192)

It is very important to attend closely to what Tolkien says here. Bombadil is the embodiment of an idea. The vexed question of his identity is answered in this. All further attempts to square his identity with Tolkien's larger mythology may at times be interesting, but are really beside the point. The host of various speculations as to Tom Bombadil's identity have been gathered up in Charles E. Noad's article "The Natures of Tom Bombadil: A Summary." Some are sensible enough, but many are ridiculous. Tolkien himself felt that such speculations were not helpful. Christopher Tolkien, in his publications of his father's notes and drafts, has wisely not attempted to go further than what his father said.

It is quite remarkable, given Tolkien's oft-mentioned antipathy to allegory, to find him saying that although Tom Bombadil is not an allegory, nevertheless he is "allegory." That would be a very cryptic remark if he did not add that Bombadil is an exemplar or an embodiment of the idea of natural science. Tolkien conceived his character Bombadil in the same way that he understood the dragon in *Beowulf*, as something real and concrete but also symbolic of an idea. There are moments in the poem, he notes,

in which this dragon is a real worm, with a bestial life and thought of its own, but the conception, none the less, approaches *draconitas* rather than *draco*: a personification of malice, greed, destruction (the evil side of heroic life), and of the indiscriminating cruelty of fortune that distinguishes not good or bad (the evil aspect of all life). But for *Beowulf*, the poem, that is as it should be. In this poem the balance is nice, but it is preserved. The large symbolism is near the surface, but it does not break through, nor become allegory. Something more significant than a standard hero, a man faced with a foe more evil than any human enemy of house or realm, is before us, and yet incarnate in time, walking in

heroic history, and treading the named lands of the North. ("Monsters" 65-6)

Bombadil is, to be sure, more thoroughly worked out as a concrete individual than Beowulf's dragon, but he is just as symbolic. In Bombadil's case the personification is that of natural science, as Tolkien said. This in Tolkien's art means a spirit of completion and contentment (both in the sense of his "containedness" and his happy sufficiency). To know nature fully his spirit must be full of wonder and joy at how things are. Tom Bombadil very fittingly is a nature spirit. For Nature, which (as we all know) abhors a vacuum, can readily bear the sense of fullness.

Tom is fully given to all that he has received. When Frodo asks Goldberry, "Who is Tom Bombadil?" her reply is simply, "He is." Tolkien, to be sure, protested in one of his letters that he in no way meant to suggest that Tom is God himself, the Great "I am" (Letters 192). And although he called Tom an embodiment, he is careful to explain that he does not mean the sort of embodiment that is the Incarnation.

There is no "embodiment" of the Creator anywhere in this story or mythology. [...] The Incarnation of God is an *infinitely* greater thing than anything that I would dare to write. (Letters 237)

So when Goldberry says that "he is" she means that he is fully himself. For Tolkien's Catholic thinking, informed through his schooling by Catholic Thomistic philosophy, that means that he expresses the divine nature as fully as he can, according to his own capacity. In Tom's case that capacity is very great. Thomistic thought shares the general medieval understanding, deriving from Greek rationalism, that the whole created order is an explication of the divine mind, an unfolding of God's thought (Oakley 166). Accordingly the created order is full everywhere of the traces of the creator, his glory refracted and reflected here, there and everywhere. As Thomas said in the *Summa Theologiae*, "Every effect in some degree represents its cause, but diversely" (Prima Pars, 45.7). Tolkien expressed this Thomistic understanding in the *Silmarillion* where the created order arises through Eru, or Iluvatar, singing in concert with the angelic choir, each of whose members has his own distinctive measure of Eru's mind in order to sing his part. Creation is wholly Iluvatar's work, but the angel host shares in the singing that determines its shape. Singing here precisely means the

explication of the divine mind. Tom Bombadil's powerful singing and the constant sing-song in his speech express his closeness to and deep participation in the divine nature. That is why he has an aura of paradise around his person. Time moves around his home in a different measure, where dream and waking merge together. Here the whole field of time past is surveyed in a kaleidoscopic vision. Here too in Tom's home Frodo, on the very morning before he departs, has a dreamy vision in which he glimpses through sounds of a song the true paradise, of which Tom's presence and home is only a sign . . . a trace . . . a taste.

[E]ither in his dreams or out of them, he could not tell which, Frodo heard a sweet singing running in his mind: a song that seemed to come like a pale light behind a grey rain-curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under a swift sunrise. (132)

And thus it is intimated to us that Frodo has taken his bearings from the House of Tom Bombadil. For there he sees whither he finally tends. And even though he (and we) cannot see his end until he has reached it, even so this dream of his end haunts the narrative until it comes true (cf. Flieger 189).

Tom Bombadil's completeness is, of course, not the only mode in which to live out a life of virtue. All the major characters of the tale—Gandalf, Bilbo, Frodo, Samwise, Aragorn, Galadriel—must in their own way and according to their own capacity, take up the war against evil and fight darkness, tyranny, and slavery. They are all called to play such an active part. Tom Bombadil has “found the better part,” living the contemplative life instead of the active. His part, however, is not reserved to him alone. It awaits all who must cease from their labors. In fact, all those who reject the Ring finally come to his position. This is very clear in the case of Gandalf. Without a doubt he has been called to wage war. He is one of the Istari, a Maia sent by the Valar, to help Elves and Men in their struggle with Sauron. But once the Ring has been destroyed his task is done. When he turns aside to visit Tom Bombadil, leaving the hobbits now to manage their own troubles without him, it is because he has joined Bombadil in his “natural pacifism.” Gandalf has ceased striving.

"Do you not yet understand? My time is over: it is no longer my task to set things to rights, nor to help folk to do so. [...] I am going to have a long talk with Bombadil: such a talk as I have not had in all my time. He is a moss-gatherer, and I have been a stone doomed to rolling. But my rolling days are ending, and now we shall have much to say to one another." (974)

Galadriel too chooses with Tom Bombadil. She takes his vow of poverty upon herself by choosing to remain, or fully become, herself. After the terrible vision of her unendurable beauty should she take the Ring, she subsides into a wistful contentment at her victory.

Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad.

"I pass the test," she said. "I will diminish, and go into the West, and remain Galadriel." (356-7)

Frodo too, when he has ceased from his great labor and is spent, finds that he has no place or role in the Shire, just as Bilbo too had found in his own way when he gives up the Ring. Frodo then must leave his friends to join Gandalf, Galadriel, Bilbo, and Elrond in their journey from Rivendell to Tol Eressea, the Isle of the Blest, which Frodo had glimpsed in song before. And so he too completes his course and joins in this newly formed company of "natural pacifists."

Then Frodo kissed Merry and Pippin, and last of all Sam, and went aboard; and the sail were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long grey firth; and the light of the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was lost. And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the grey rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise. (1007)

Here at the end of the book we are left behind like Sam, Merry, and Pippin, bereft and hollowed out. With Sam we turn back to our home, our work, our tasks, and our troubles. It seems that the moment of this book, its

bearing that was made so wondrously clear in the House of Tom Bombadil, has overshot us and left us behind. But we need not linger in such melancholy, even though we cannot help but feel it for a time. With Sam, to whom Frodo had hinted that his time to follow would yet come, we can learn to hope. This book's moment that arcs so far beyond us is a hint and a sign of that great Christian hope that all things shall be well. It encourages us to wake up with Sam and exclaim, "Is everything sad going to come untrue?" (930), or if we'd rather, to settle quietly into our chair like Sam's father Hamfast, the Gaffer, and reflect hopefully and contentedly that "All's well as ends Better!" (953).

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