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Investigating the Role and Origin of Goldberry in Tolkien's Mythology

Abstract

Leads us to Goldberry through possible sources in classical and Celtic legend, and emphasizes her role in awakening the hobbits to the sustaining beauty of the world. Considers Goldberry as an Eve-like figure.

Additional Keywords

Tolkien, J.R.R.—Characters—Goldberry; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources—Celtic; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sources—Classical



INVESTIGATING THE ROLE AND ORIGIN OF GOLDBERRY IN TOLKIEN'S MYTHOLOGY

CARYNE JADE TAYLOR

DISCUSSING TOM BOMBADIL IN A LETTER, Tolkien explains: "As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation already exists) [...] even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)" (*Letters* 174). Certainly, if Bombadil is an enigma, Goldberry is more so. Goldberry is not, in Steuard Jensen's terms, "a relatively simple character"; she is steeped in mystery and power (Jensen 11). While Tolkien provides some facts about Goldberry in his letters, they do little to explain who she is or her purpose in *The Lord of the Rings* (*LotR*). For instance, Tolkien tells us Goldberry, as the River-woman's daughter, "represents the actual seasonal changes" in the "real river-lands of autumn" (*Letters* 272). Surely, Tolkien, who strongly resists allegory and is intent upon giving intense and calculated meaning and relationships to his characters, does not mean readers to believe Goldberry is a simple character, nor does he ever imply that she is. After the aforementioned quote, "there should be a lot of things unexplained," Tolkien follows with a hint: "especially if an explanation already exists" (*Letters* 174). Therefore, the scholars who lightly dismiss Goldberry by conflating her with Bombadil or simply mentioning her in passing are overlooking another well conceived piece of the puzzle that is Tolkien's intricate mythology. Despite what the scholarship that discusses Goldberry seems to suggest, Tolkien does not assert that she and Bombadil are the same kind of being, as linked as they may be otherwise. Therefore, this paper will discuss and examine Goldberry's character, nature, and purpose to uncover "an explanation [that] already exists" within Tolkien's legendarium.

Tolkien's legendarium was often inspired by myth and legend, it is as if he never read a story he did not yearn to re-write.¹ Goldberry, like all of Tolkien's characters, shares aspects with her predecessors from ancient myth. Many

¹ In his *Letters* Tolkien often discusses the influence of myth and legend on his legendarium. In particular, see *Letters* 131, 150, 163, and 257.

scholars, like Ruth Noel, have noted Goldberry's nymph-like qualities. Goldberry is "the River-woman's daughter," which in myth and legend typically denotes a being's status as a nymph or nature spirit. In *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, Goldberry pulls Bombadil into the water by his beard and then teases him, exhibiting her playfulness and wiles, traits often attributed to nymphs, particularly water nymphs or nixies. Noel traces Goldberry to the Undine, the Lorelei, and the Siren, citing her attempts to lure Bombadil down to her mother's house in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" (Noel 129). Certainly, the Goldberry of *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* appears to be more dangerous than the Goldberry of *Lord of the Rings*. After Goldberry pulls Bombadil into the water and attempts to seduce him to the watery depths, Bombadil charges Goldberry to "Go down! / Sleep again where the pools are shady / far below the willow roots" (*Adventures* 197). Goldberry is then likened to the other perilous beings that try to capture Bombadil, such as Old Man Willow, the Badger-folk, and the Barrow-wight; Bombadil tells the Barrow-wight to go to lie down "like Old Man Willow, / like young Goldberry, and Badger-folk in the burrow" (*Adventures* 201). Noel also notes that Goldberry's behavior and appearance resemble that of a water nymph even after she becomes married to Bombadil. At the end of "The Adventures," we find Goldberry sitting in Tom's house as she "combed her tresses yellow," which Noel asserts is "not the simple domestic action it seems, but the characteristic pose of all types of watersprites" (*Adventures* 202, Noel 129). In *Lord of the Rings*, the descriptions of Goldberry often recall water; when the hobbits first meet Goldberry she appears to be "enthroned in the midst of a pool," her footsteps are described as "like a stream falling," and her singing opens up "pools and waters" in the minds of the hobbits (*LotR* I:7, 121, 123, 130). Goldberry's attire also recalls the water spirits of myth and legend; her shoes are described as "like fishes' mail" (I:7, 129), recalling the scales of mermaids, and "her dresses, blue and green shot with gold and silver, are water-colored" which, Noel reminds us, evoke "the wet skirts and aprons by which nixies [a form of nymph] are traditionally recognized in Teutonic mythology" (Noel 129-30).

While it is clear that Goldberry exhibits aspects of nymphs, her story in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" connects her to a specific nymph: Proserpina/Persephone. In "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," Goldberry is sitting by the water before Bombadil captures her, a scene that recalls the abduction of Proserpina by Pluto/Hades in Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*. Bombadil "went and caught the River-daughter / in green gown, flowing hair, sitting in the rushes, / singing old water-songs to birds upon the bushes" (*Adventures* 201). Similarly, Proserpina was sitting by a lake surrounded by sweet songs of swans and a "canopy of leaves" with bright flowers; a place where spring was the only season of the year (Ovid 151; V.385). Interestingly, Bombadil, like Pluto, can be associated with the underworld and death. Bombadil tells Goldberry, "You shall

come home with me [...] You shall come under Hill," reminding one of the descent to the underworld and the *tumuli* or burial mounds of the Celts (*Adventures* 201, Rolleston 54). Thus, Bombadil, whether literally or symbolically, takes Goldberry to the underworld "Down along under Hill," just as Pluto takes Proserpina to Tartarus (*LotR* I:6, 117). Additionally, Bombadil is constantly commanding his enemies to sleep, as he does in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" with Goldberry, Old Man Willow, and Badger-brock, and in *Lord of the Rings* with Old Man Willow. Interestingly, Bombadil does not command the Barrow-wight to sleep in either "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" or *Lord of the Rings*; instead, Bombadil tells the wight to "go back" and "get out" (*Adventures* 201, *LotR* I:8, 139). This is of note because the sleep commanded may be similar to death or a miniature death, which would explain why Bombadil cannot command the Barrow-wight to sleep since it is already dead. The connection with death also links Bombadil further to Pluto, god of Death. Additionally, both Goldberry and Proserpina's mothers lament the loss of their daughters. Proserpina's mother, Ceres, while grieving for the loss of her daughter, "tore / Her hair and beat her breasts" (Ovid 153; V.472).² Goldberry's mother, the River-woman, becomes part of the nightly noises that disturb Bombadil's house as she sits on the river bank sighing for her daughter (*Adventures* 202). There is also striking similarity in the speeches given by the instigators of both abductions. Venus tells Cupid of Proserpina as she plans the abduction: "If we allow her, Ceres' daughter will remain / A virgin till she dies" (Ovid 150; V.375-6). A comment that closely mirrors Bombadil's during his abduction scene; Bombadil tells Goldberry: "Never mind your mother / in her deep weedy pool: there you'll find no lover" (*Adventures* 201). Also, both Goldberry and Proserpina are associated with lilies. In *Lord of the Rings*, Goldberry is first seen by the hobbits with "white water-lilies" at her feet; in Ovid, Proserpina is introduced as she plucks a white lily (*LotR* I:7, 121; Ovid 151, V.391). Goldberry is also associated with the seasons as is Proserpina's mother, Ceres. Tolkien explains in his letters: "Goldberry represents the actual seasonal changes in such lands" (*Letters* 272). Goldberry's connection to seasons becomes apparent in *Lord of the Rings* where her voice is said to be "as young and as ancient as Spring" (I:6, 119).

Though Goldberry's character certainly has echoes of Proserpina in her story, she, like many of Tolkien's characters, more closely resembles her Celtic mythic ancestry. The description of the Celtic goddess Etain, a member of either the Tuatha Dé Danann or *Sidhe*, closely resembles that of Goldberry.³ Eochy, Etain's future husband, first finds Etain "by a spring of water" combing her hair

² For a discussion of Ceres as mythic predecessor to the Entwives see Noel.

³ See Noel who discusses the Tuatha Dé Danann. Also, see Burns who compares Tolkien's Elves to the Tuatha Dé Danann.

with a “clear comb of silver” that was “adorned with gold”; the scene evokes Goldberry “combing her tresses yellow” in the house of Bombadil (Rolleston 157, *Adventures* 202). Etain wears a mantle of silver and gold and a green tunic with “clasps of silver and gold” (Rolleston 157). Goldberry is also associated with silver, gold, and green. When the hobbits first see Goldberry, she is described as she sits in a chair surrounded by lilies: “her gown was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold” (I:7, 121). Goldberry’s hair is also golden, “long” and “yellow” it “rippled down her shoulders,” just as Etain’s “tresses of golden hair” fall as her maid undoes her hair (*LotR* I:7, 121; Rolleston 157-158). Both Goldberry and Etain are associated with light and the sun. Goldberry appears “framed in light,” the light of a candle flowing through her hand “like sunlight though a white shell,” and her hair catches the sun as “a light like the glint of water on dewy grass flashed from under her feet” (*LotR* I:7, 129; I:8, 132). Similarly, upon looking at Etain, “men saw the bright gold and the green silk flashing against the sun” (Rolleston 157). Etain is often compared to water in description, just like Goldberry. Etain’s neck is described as white as the foam of a wave, her feet as white as the ocean’s foam, just as Goldberry is compared to water, dew, and a stream (Rolleston 158, *LotR* I:7, 123, 124, 125).

Although the comparisons in the description of Goldberry and Etain are quite fruitful, comparing their love stories is even more rewarding. When Etain is seduced by Midir he asks her, “O lady if thou wilt come to my strong people, the purest of gold shall be on thy head—thy meat shall be the swine’s flesh unsalted, new milk and mead shalt thou drink with me there, O fair haired woman” (Rolleston 161). This speech is strikingly similar to Bombadil’s speech to Goldberry; Bombadil says “‘Here’s my pretty maiden! / You shall come home with me! The table is all laden: / yellow cream, honeycomb, white bread and butter; / roses at the window-sill and peeping round the shutter’” (*Adventures* 201). Thus, both prospective husbands lure their mates to their homes with the promise of food and beautiful things, homes that share as many aspects as Etain and Goldberry. Midir describes the land of his home, a fairy mound palace in The Land of Youth, as a “marvelous land, full of music, where the hair is primrose yellow and the body as white as snow,” a place where “none speaks of ‘mine’ and ‘thine’” (Rolleston 160). This description fits Bombadil and Goldberry’s house “Under Hill” perfectly (*Adventures* 197). Bombadil and Goldberry live in a land full of music as well, a land filled with their own singing and the music of nature. Also, no one speaks of ownership in the house of Bombadil. When Frodo asks Goldberry: “Then all this strange land belongs to him?” she replies “‘No indeed!’” going on to explain that “all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves” (*LotR* I:7, 122). Thus, Goldberry’s

home appears to be in a land apart from Middle-earth, just as Etain's home is apart from Ireland in *The Land of Youth*.

Thus, Goldberry and Bombadil inhabit a piece of land that is apart from that of Middle-earth: Faërie. Tolkien tells us in "On Fairy-Stories" that "Faërie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific magician" (32). This is similar to Tolkien's statement regarding Bombadil when he asserts Bombadil is "an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and their 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" (*Letters* 192). By this Tolkien means that Bombadil is concerned with nature in itself, and how it works, seeing nature as an end in itself, not seeking to tame or use it as a means to an end like the "scientific magician." Goldberry and Bombadil's magics are magics of song and nature; their magic is "the essential face of Faërie [...] the Magical towards Nature" ("On Fairy-Stories" 44). Goldberry and Bombadil's magic like "the magic of Faërie is not an end in itself, its virtue is in its operations," one of which is "to hold communion with other living things" (34-35). In the land of Goldberry and Bombadil this communion with nature is certainly present; we see Bombadil conversing with trees and badgers and Goldberry singing to birds. While Tolkien does assert in a letter regarding Morton Zimmerman's adaptation of *Lord of the Rings* that in the realm of Goldberry and Bombadil "We are not in 'fairy-land', but in real river-lands in autumn," this is in reference to the "more childish fairy-tale" land found in Zimmerman's representation of *Lord of the Rings*, not Faërie (272).

Goldberry and Tom reside in a polder, a magical land outside of but contiguous to Tolkien's secondary world, Middle-earth. Tolkien separates Goldberry and Tom from the Elves because Frodo feels that the "spell [...] laid upon him [by Goldberry's singing] was different" from that of the Elves: "less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvellous and yet not strange" (I:7, 121). Nonetheless, the home of Goldberry lies within Faërie, perhaps just a different part of Faërie than that of the Elves. When the hobbits near the home of Bombadil and Goldberry, "[t]hey began to feel that all this country was unreal, and that they were stumbling through an ominous dream that led to no awakening" (I:6, 119). Thus, the hobbits have entered the perilous realm of Faërie and must pass through the forests to reach the haven of Bombadil and Goldberry's cottage. In the home of Tom and Goldberry time is fluid. The hobbits "under the spell of Tom's words may have missed one meal or many"; powerful words spoken of such beings, as it seemed "at least a week

since they had eaten," a popular expression, that in this case is likely more literal than metaphorical (I:7, 129-30). Thus, Goldberry is a being of Faërie, of a different sort than the Elves but a being of Faërie all the same. Perhaps Goldberry is more like the *Sidhe* than the Elves, ancient, primordial beings who are, of all the Irish mythological world, "the oldest and the most distinctive" yet still "a people like ourselves who inhabited the [...] hill-sides," the fairy mounds that link our world to Faërie (Evans-Wentz 27).

Thus, Goldberry is not one of the Elves because the magic she represents to Frodo is not Elven magic. Instead, Goldberry is other; she is another being in Tolkien's legendarium altogether. When Steuard Jensen discusses Goldberry and Tom as Maiar, he asserts that their "frequent singing might reflect their memory of being a part of the original Music" (8). But Goldberry cannot logically be a Maia, as Jensen himself notes. A Maia would not be called the River's daughter; instead, a Maia would be the River's mother (Jensen 10). Jensen, however, is not far off as Goldberry's singing could be an echo of the Great Music, the untainted music of the Ainur that created her. Goldberry and Tom appear to be primeval and have a certain strange innocence that has led many scholars to compare them to Adam and Eve, asserting that they are the unfallen caretakers of Arda.⁴

From this argument, it follows that Goldberry was created in the first united music of the Ainur before Melkor tainted the music. *The Silmarillion* explains that the Children of Ilúvatar, Elves and Men, "came with the third theme, and were not in the theme which Ilúvatar propounded at the beginning" (18). Goldberry possesses a special primeval natural magic that Frodo notices when he first sees her; this magic is what sets Goldberry apart from the other beings of Middle-earth and traces her beginnings to the first theme of the Ainur's Music. Goldberry is too full of goodness and light to be a part of Melkor's corrupted second theme and too separated from Men or Elves to be a part of the third theme of Ilúvatar. *The Silmarillion* notes that above all the "matters of which Arda was made," water was most greatly praised (*Silmarillion* 19). "And it is said by the Eldar that in water there lives yet the echo of the Music of the Ainur more than in any substance else that is in this Earth" (*Silmarillion* 19). Goldberry's being is created from that music of the Ainur and in her the music remains. As a water nymph, Goldberry's music is closer to the original music than Bombadil's. Goldberry's voice is "as young and as ancient as Spring," echoing the music that created the Spring of Arda, the flowering of the World out of the Void (I:6, 119). Goldberry's magic is indeed different from the Elves; it is more like the songs of the Maiar concerned with creation and beauty. The hobbits hear her voice "like the song of a glad water flowing down into the night from a bright morning in

⁴ See Rosebury, Startzman, and Slethaug. [Editor's note: Also see Basso in this issue.]

the hills" as she sings a song about the beauty of Arda (I:6, 119). The song of Goldberry contains the same resonance of the Maiar, a song of creation. She sings:

Now let the song begin! Let us sing together
Of sun, stars, moon and mist, rain and cloudy weather,
Light on the budding leaf, dew on the feather,
Wind on the open hill, bells on the heather,
Reeds by the shady pool, lilies in the water:
Old Tom Bombadil and the River-daughter! (I:6, 120)

Goldberry's song seems to hold great power. Her song creates an image in the minds of the hobbits and brings them safely to the threshold of Goldberry and Bombadil's house, through the realm of Middle Earth and Faërie. With this song the hobbits are able to head towards the "yellow beam" of light of the house and away from the darkness, the "queer gnarled faces," the gray, bare land, and the "dark shapes of the Barrow-downs" (I:6, 119). Indeed, it is Goldberry who assuages the hobbits' fears by shutting out the night and peril; she symbolically closes the door, turns her back to it, and "with her white arms spread out across it" exclaims, "let us shut out the night" (I:7, 121). Goldberry's power is such that Frodo's heart is "moved with a joy he did not understand," and he tells her that "Now the joy hidden in the songs we heard is made plain to me" (121). Upon seeing Goldberry and witnessing her power, Frodo has noticed her resonances of the Great Music of the Ainur, although he may not recognize it as such. Frodo recognizes echoes of the Great Music in Goldberry, just as the Children of Ilúvatar recognize the music living in the water, which is why they "hearken still unsated to the voices of the Sea, and yet know not for what they listen" (*Silmarillion* 19). This power is what makes Goldberry such an important character in the *Lord of the Rings*.

Goldberry's task in *Lord of the Rings* is not simply to represent goodness and joy, but to cleanse the hobbits and awaken them to the power of love and knowledge. When the hobbits awaken, they discover that it is raining, which Frodo secretly blesses because "it delayed them from departing" the sanctuary of Bombadil and Goldberry's house (I:7, 127). However, the rain is not an average rain but has come about for "Goldberry's washing day" and "her autumn-cleaning" (127). This purifying rain is that which was sung about by Goldberry, the rain that brought the hobbits safely to her doorstep. Goldberry sings of "sun, stars, moon and mist, rain and cloudy weather" (I:6, 120). By singing this song Goldberry invokes the cleansing rain, although she does not command the rain, for as Bombadil notes: "I am no weather master [...] nor is aught that goes on two legs" (I:7, 131). Just as Bombadil is not the owner of the land, so he is also not the master of the weather, nor is Goldberry. Yet Goldberry can still use the power

of her song to awaken the restorative power of nature and give the hobbits love, peace, and joy.⁵ During this cleansing rain, Tom tells the hobbits stories about the beings in the Forest, stories that seem to restore the hobbits' love of nature, which Gordon Sleuthag tells us has been destroyed along with their naïveté. Because of Tom's stories and the cleansing rain, the hobbits "began to understand the lives of the Forest apart from themselves" (I:7, 127). Bombadil's stories give them the knowledge of good and evil and all else that exists in nature, the resulting awareness replaces the idea the hobbits held before leaving the Shire: the belief that everything is black or white, good or evil. Indeed, the cleansing rain allows the hobbits to let go of their naïveté but not their love and innate joy in the world, for they become aware of these truths of life and their naïveté is washed away, as is the disappointment and sorrow that comes with its loss.

Goldberry also grants the hobbits the ability to recognize their potential to have a deeper understanding of themselves. Goldberry sings to the hobbits, songs that "began merrily in the hills and fell softly down into silence; and in the silences they saw in their minds pools and waters wider than any they had known, and looking into them they saw the sky below them and the stars like jewels in the depths" (I:7, 130). These waters show the hobbits the potentiality of themselves and the world, the potentiality of great love, beauty, and hope. For the next time they encounter Goldberry, as they make their way away from the house of Bombadil, they are overcome with great joy and feel they "should be leaping" towards the Road "as lusty as Tom" (I:8, 133). Goldberry's cleansing rain and pools of potential allow the hobbits to continue on their journey, having learned important lessons that will serve them well throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. As the hobbits are ready to leap about with unfettered joy, she reminds them of the presence of evil and darkness, bidding them "hold to your purpose" (133). When the hobbits leave Goldberry, she gives them one last vision of hope; they see her far away "small and slender like a sunlight flower against the sky," and then she vanishes (133). This image does not suggest her impotence outside the realm of Bombadil as some suggest; rather it is a reminder that there are always beautiful, joyous things to behold despite the evil and darkness that is awaiting the hobbits.⁶

Indeed, Goldberry's teaching proves to hold Frodo and Sam to their course in the lands of Mordor. Sam looks into the night sky in deep despair and spots a twinkling white star. "The beauty of it smote his heart, as he looked up out of the forsaken land, and hope returned to him" (VI:2, 901). In this moment,

⁵ See Startzman for a superb article that discusses Goldberry as a symbol of joy.

⁶ See Startzman, page 7, where it is suggested that Goldberry is impotent outside of Bombadil's domain.

Sam remembers the potentiality of beauty, love, and goodness in the face of darkness, a lesson that he first learned through the singing of Goldberry. Sam realizes that “the Shadow was only a small and passing thing: there was light and high beauty for ever beyond its reach” (901). While the Council notes that if the West should lose, even Bombadil would fall—goodness would not be extinguished. Goodness would live on through the echoes of the Music of the Ainur, the creations of Ilúvatar, and in the sanctuaries of Faërie such as the Grey Havens. Thus, Sam recalls the lesson that goodness and light, no matter how small in the vastness, still hold hope. Sam awakens the strength within himself, stored up in the waters of his being, and revealed by Goldberry. The hobbits are constantly drawing upon those hidden wells of the natural magic revealed by Goldberry both in themselves and the world, and this is what allows them to defeat the Shadow and save the Shire. For the kind of hope and love that prevails in the good proves to be stronger than any other magic. Thus are the lessons of Goldberry, the mysterious being of Faërie who instills in the hobbits the wisdom, love, and hope of Ilúvatar as they were passed to her in the Original Music.

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