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Who is Tom Bombadil?

Abstract
Believes that Tolkien knew the nature of Tom Bombadil, but purposely left it enigmatic in *The Lord of the Rings*. Examines clues left for the reader and concludes that Tom Bombadil is a Vala, specifically Aulë, and Goldberry is therefore Yavanna.

Additional Keywords
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Within the Tolkien household Tom Bombadil was originally a Dutch doll belonging to one of Tolkien’s children (Carpenter, Tolkien, p. 162; Grotta-Kurska, Tolkien, p. 101). Tolkien later wrote a poem about him called "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," published in Oxford Magazine in 1934, long before the writing of The Lord of the Rings began. When Tolkien decided to introduce Tom into the trilogy, little needed to be changed about him or his poem except for the feather in his hat—changed from peacock to swan-wing, since peacocks do not live in Middle-earth (Tolkien, Letters, pp. 318-19).

Many readers of The Lord of the Rings consider Tom's presence in the first book to be an unnecessary intrusion into the narrative, which could be omitted without loss. Tolkien was aware of their feelings, and in part their judgment was correct. As Tolkien wrote in a letter in 1954, "... many have found him an odd and indeed discordant ingredient. In historical fact I put him in because I had already invented him ... and wanted an 'adventure' on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out" (Ibid., p. 192). Judging by these remarks, critical readers are correct about the arbitrariness of Tom’s introduction into the story; however, as Tolkien continues, he deliberately (nonarbitrarily) kept Tom in to fulfill a particular role, to provide an additional dimension.

In a letter written to the original proofreader of the trilogy in 1954, Tolkien reveals a little about what Tom's literary role or function might be. Early in the letter he writes that "even in a mythological Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)" (Ibid., p. 174). Later he adds that "Tom is not an important person—" to the narrative, I suppose he has some importance as a 'comment.'" He then goes on to explain that each side in the War of the Ring is struggling for power and control. Tom in contrast, though very powerful, has renounced power in a kind of "vow of poverty," "a natural pacifist view." In this sense, Tolkien says, Tom's presence reveals that there are people and things in the world for whom the war is largely irrelevant or at least unimportant, and who cannot be easily disturbed or interfered with in terms of it (Ibid., pp. 178-79). Although Tom would fall if the Dark Lord wins ("Nothing would be left for him in the world of Sauron," Ibid.), he would probably be "the Last as he was the First" (Rings, 1:279).

In trying to grasp what Tolkien has in mind here it is very important, I believe, to distinguish between an enigma and an anomaly, for Tolkien's interest in Tom involves the former while reader dissatisfaction treats Tom more in terms of the latter. An anomaly is something discordant, unrelated, out of place. It is in this sense that someone might claim that Tom could be left out. An enigma, on the other hand, is a mystery, a puzzle, something which seems to be discordant, unrelated, out of place, but isn't. This distinction becomes pivotal in the discussion of Tom Bombadil when one considers that on three occasions in the story the question of Tom's identity or nature is pointedly brought up, twice by Frodo in Tom's house and later at the Council of Elrond. If there is no answer to the question, then Tom is anomalous. If there is, then he is, as Tolkien claimed, enigmatic.

When one takes into account the manner in which Tolkien composed The Lord of the Rings, especially the care he gave to sorting out the historical connections between people, things, and events, I personally find it inconceivable that there is no answer within the framework of the story to Frodo's question: "Who is Tom Bombadil?" Although Tolkien didn't want to tell his readers directly, it seems to me certain that he himself knew very well. Tolkien was very protective of what he wrote, including his errors. When he found something miswritten in his manuscript, he was more likely to ponder, in terms of Middle-earth, how his characters came to make such an error, or what special significance this might have, than simply to correct it. Thus, a mispelt foreign word was more likely to remain as an example of regional dialect than to be changed. Problems with the names and identities of characters were solved in a similar manner. There are, for example, two Glorfindels in the history of Middle-earth, one who died fighting a Balrog in the First Age, and another from Rivendell who lent Frodo his horse in the race to Imladris. This situation was, if not a problem, at least a bit unusual, and required special attention from Tolkien, since in general Elf names are unique to particular individuals. Rather than simply renaming one of the Elves, Tolkien concluded that they were the same person and that he had stumbled onto a rare case of reincarnation among the Elves. He then devoted some time to an examination of the theological implications of this special case (Becker, Tolkien Scrapbook, pp. 92-93).

Given this general approach in writing the trilogy, I submit first that it would have been impossible for Tolkien to have brought up the issue of Tom's identity and nature three times and not to have continued thinking about it until he had an answer, and second that, although he might not have wanted to tell his readers the correct answer, feeling that enigmas are important, he would nevertheless have left some clues for those who wanted to pursue the matter as he had. The balance of this essay is an examination of those clues. Although the evidence is circumstantial, it is, I believe, convincing.

While some may consider this project offensive, believing that it is best for enigmas to be left alone, my aim is not so much to dispell the mystery surrounding Tom Bombadil as (1) to save him from the misinterpretations of his critics by providing a viable alternative and (2) to restore him to a status which will allow him to fulfill his role as a comment, as Tolkien always intended. I do not argue that my interpretation is the only one possible. For example, the claim that Goldberry is River-woman's daughter, which I would treat as a cover story, invented to help conceal her identity and Tom's from the Hobbits, could be the starting point for still another theory. If my analysis encourages additional interpretations, which not only identify Tom, but suggest an enhanced role for him in the trilogy, then the enigma will survive intact.
Beginning as early as Issac and Zimbardo’s Tolkien and His Critics, published in 1968, Tom Bombadil has almost universally been regarded as a nature spirit. In that volume, Edmund Fuller states that he is “unclassifiable other than as some primal nature spirit” (p. 23). According to Patricia Meyer Spacks, Tom has “natural power for good” and he “is in the most intimate communion with natural forces; he has the power of the ‘earth itself’” (p. 84). R. J. Reilly claims that Tom is “a kind of archetypal ‘vegetation god’” (p. 131) and argues that “when Tom Bombadil speaks, it is as if Nature itself—nonrational, interested only in life and in growing things—were speaking” (p. 139). This view of Tom, as a nonrational nature spirit, as a personification of nature itself, has been the dominant view ever since.

Ruth S. Noel in The Mythology of Middle-earth, published in 1977, in perhaps the longest and most elaborate discussion of him, begins with the remark that “Tom Bombadil is a character like Puck or Pan, a nature god in diminished form, half humorous, half divine” (p. 127) and she concludes with the remark that “Bombadil and Goldberry are undisguised personifications of land untouched by humans, underlaid by a hidden but potent power, representing both the danger of wild land and its potential to serve man” (p. 130). Anne C. Petty in One Ring to Bind Them, published in 1979, summarizes all of the above with the proclamation that Tom is “the nature deity par excellence” (p. 38).

As nearly as I am able to determine, the textual basis for the idea that Tom is a nature spirit is the discussion of him at the Council of Elrond, specifically, the following remarks: “Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself” and “... now he is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting for a change of days, and he will not step beyond them” (Rings, 1:279). I suspect that many people have concluded from the second passage that Tom, as a nature spirit, has gradually become hemmed in with the diminishment of the Old Forest. The passage, however, says no such thing. His limits are not set for him by the boundaries of the forest—rather he set them himself. Furthermore, the passage does not state that he cannot cross the boundaries, only that he will not. The claim that he cannot is not even factually correct: Tom frequently visited Farmer Maggot in the Shire and presumably had previously made similar visits to others “down from days hardly remembered” (“Bombadil Goes Boating” and Rings, 1:143). With regard to the first passage, it does not say that Tom is or has the power of the earth. It is ambiguous. The statement, “Tim does not have the ability to drive that far, unless that ability is in his car,” does not mean that Tim is a car. Likewise, the fact that Tom does not have the power to defy Sauron need not be because such power is not in the earth. I will provide a better explanation in due course.

It is possible that the nature spirit theory has been held so long because no one could think of an alternative. Consider Jarred Lobdell’s treatment of Tom Bombadil in England and Always, published in 1981. Declaring Tom to be the “least successful creation” in the trilogy, he continues:

Standing alone, he would be a nature spirit, ... but he is not standing alone. He is not the genius of the earth, since he is restricted to one part of it. ... He is apparently a man, since he is clearly not an

Elf or a Dwarf or an Ent or a Hobbit or one of the fallen races, but he is not one of the Men of the West. I suppose one could save the appearances by making him an angel, of a different order from the Istari, or by making him a god, but in both cases we would be in conflict with Tolkien’s mythology. (pp. 62-63)

Lobdell eventually concludes that Tom is an anomaly: “Though I find him an anomalous creation, I can make shift to account for him theologally—but only with the uneasy feeling that making shift is all that I am doing” (p. 63).

While I can agree that Tom is not a nature spirit, a Man, an Elf, a Dwarf, or a Hobbit, I see no reason why Lobdell should reject the possibility that
he is an angel or a god—in terms of Tolkien's mythology, a Maia or a Vala. We know from the Silmarillion that Orome once visited in Middle-earth, Olorin walked among the Elves unseen before he was Gandalf, and Melian spent a great deal of time in Beleriand with Thingol. There is thus ample evidence for occasional visits of such beings, even for the most frivolous or personal reasons.

Moreover, Tolkien draws some literary connections with regard to Tom that help support his divine status. First, as Noel has noted (Mythology, p. 128), Tolkien makes reference in "Bombadil Goes Boating" to a story in the Elder Edda about Odin, one of the most powerful Norse gods, thereby associating Tom with him. Second, in "In the House of Tom Bombadil" Goldberry answers the question "Who is Tom Bombadil?" with the simple statement "He is" (Rings, 1:335). In terms of medieval philosophy this would mean that existence is a predicate of Tom Bombadil and that he is therefore God. Although Tolkien denies this implication in a letter, written in 1954 (Letters, pp. 191-92), saying that Goldberry, like Tom Later, is only making a point about the nature of naming, I remain haunted by the remark. Just as the reference to Odin does not necessarily mean that we must conclude that Tom is Odin, the allusion to medieval philosophical terminology in describing Tom need not be interpreted as a Christian theological crisis. While Tolkien's denial clearly rules out the possibility that Tom is Iluvatar, I do not see that it eliminates the possibility that he is an offspring of Iluvatar's thought, a Vala or a Maia, for I see nothing theoretically troublesome with existence being a predicate of part of God.

Finally, there is Tom's singing. Tom's inability to separate song from his other activities, speaking, walking, working, suggests that it is very fundamental to his being in a profound way that distinguishes him from all other beings encountered in the trilogy. The wizards, for example, who are Maiar, chant in the modern sense of the word, rather than sing, and never unconsciously. This continuous singing may be an indication of Tom's high status. The world was, after all, brought into existence by a group of singers, the Holy Ones, some of whom became Valar. Second, Tom's basic song is structurally related to Legolas' "Song of the Sea" (Rings, 3:234-35), suggesting the possibility that Tom's is a corruption of an original piece of music from the Uttermost West common to both. Third, Tom's songs, although seemingly comic and nonsensical, have power in them to control individual elements and things in the forest. When told that Old Man Willow is the cause of the Hobbits' problems, Tom replies, "That can soon be mended. I know the tune for him" (ibid., 1:131), which I suggest means something like, "Don't worry, I have the plans for that thing and I'll fix it in a jiffy." This is the kind of knowledge that a Vala, who sang the Music, would likely have, and singing would be the natural way to apply it.

Although this interpretation of Tom's singing is inconsistent with the general claim that Tom is nonrational, it is not inconsistent with Tolkien's own characterization of Tom in two letters in 1954, in which Tom is associated with the pure scientific study of nature. Tolkien writes:

... [Tom] 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 unsatisfied in making anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany, not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture. (Letters, p. 192; see also, p. 174)

As the exemplification of pure science, Tom could hardly be nonrational. Tom's purity, moreover, stems from his desire to delight in things as they are, without dominating and controlling them. The former is the aim of pure science, the latter the essential aims of applied science. Tom's knowledge of nature allows him to control nature when necessary, but because such control is not his aim, he is more akin to science than engineering.

If we take Tom's remark quite literally that he was "here before the river and the trees... the first raindrop and the first acorn" (Rings, 1:142), he is saying either that he was in Middle-earth when the Valar arrived or that he arrived as one of the Valar. His remark that "he knew the dark under the stars when it was fearfull-before the Dark Lord came from the Outside" refers to the time before Morgoth, the original Dark Lord, had officially turned renegade—the time when the "old" or original stars were made. Since the world was incomplete at that time and nothing lived on the earth except the Valar, it is hard to believe that Tom is anything but a Vala.

One interesting hint that Tom is a Vala may be tucked away in the confusing claim that Tom is "the oldest" even though Treebeard is at the same time supposed to be "the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun." In The Road to Middle-earth, published in 1982, T. A. Shipley, who considers Tom a "one-member category," struggles with this "inconsistency" and concludes that the claim that Treebeard is the oldest living thing, if true, implies that Tom is not alive, just as the Nazgul are not dead (p. 82). Although the analogy is most likely not correct, it is suggestive. Living probably means minimally that Fangorn is biota, that is, an element belonging to the living system of the Earth, the biosphere. There were in fact two classes of beings "living" in Middle-earth, who, as beings from outside of Ea, were not part of this system: the Valar and their servants, the Maiar. Their bodies were "veils" or "formant," appearances, in which they were self-incarnated (Road Goes Ever On, p. 66). As noted in the essay, "The Istari," in Unfinished Tales (p. 389), the Maiar who became the wizards of Middle-earth—and who had the same nature as the Valar—were converted to living beings temporarily by the special consent of Iluvatar: "For with the consent of Eru they... [were] clad in the bodies of Men, real and not feigned, but subject to the fears and pains and weariness of earth, able to hunger and thirst and be slain..." The need for this conversion suggests that the Valar and Maiar were indeed nonliving, but in a manner very different from the Nazgul. Whereas the Ringwraiths were former living beings who were kept in existence unnaturally through the power of their rings in association with the One Ring, the Valar and Maiar were beings from another plane of existence (the Void) who, as a result, had not completely fit into the world of Middle-earth. Instead, of placing Tom in an anomalous category of one, or associating him with the undead, Shipley's "inconsistency" may simply be a hint that Tom has extraterrestrial status as a Vala or Maia.
Someone might, of course, want to object that Tom Bombadil really doesn't look or act like a Vala or a Maia, appearing and behaving instead more like an overgrown Hobbit. I submit, however, to the contrary, that there is no Hobbit in the story so well equipped to receive the waters of the ocean and prepared the sea beds for all the things in Middle-earth he was involved in nearly every aspect of its making. He prepared the sea beds and prepared the land for plants and animals. As the Maker he developed and taught all arts, crafts, and skills. Of all the Valar, he had the greatest interest in the Children of Iluvatar. So impatient was he to see them among the Valar, moreover, is probably too warlike to submit his work to the will of Iluvatar that saved the Dwarves from destruction and made it possible for them to receive the gift of free will from Iluvatar.

When one carefully considers the special moral characteristics of Aule, the similarities to Tom are most striking and revealing. Like Aule, Tom is not possessive, not interested in the possession of others, but sought and gave counsel. It was, in fact, Aule's lack of possessiveness and his willingness to submit his work to the will of Iluvatar that saved the Dwarves from destruction and made it possible for them to receive the gift of free will from Iluvatar.

Robert Foster in the Complete Guide (p. 496) thus seems to be on the right track when he suggests that "it is possible that he is a Maia 'gone native.'" The only problem is that there is no Maia in the Silmarillion who matches Tom's general character. It is only when one turns to the Valar themselves that potential candidates emerge.

Because most of the Valar are married, determining the possible identity of Goldberry can be a help in establishing Tom's. There are three possible Valier who might have enjoyed living for a time in the Old Forest: Nessa, Vana, and Yavanna. Nessa, who loves deer and dancing, does not fit well, since neither of these is one of Goldberry's specialties. Her husband, Tulkas, the best fighter among the Valar, moreover, is probably too warlike to be Tom. Vana, who cares for flowers and birds, also does not fit very well, since Goldberry is concerned with a larger variety of plants and birds have no special role. Orome, Vana's husband, furthermore, is a hunter, especially of monsters. If he were Tom, there would have been no need for Vanamore. And Yavanna, however, we have just the right emphasis, for she is responsible for all living things, with a special preference for plants. Since she is Queen of the Earth, it is easy to imagine her watering the forest with special care, as Goldberry does during the Hobbits' visit. Finally, her husband, Aule the Smith, has many common characteristics with Tom and this identification helps explain some of the events that occur in Tom's house especially his control over the ring without any fear or temptation.

Aule was the maker of all the substances of the earth: minerals, gems, and metals. During the creation of Middle-earth he was involved in nearly every aspect of its making. He prepared the sea beds to receive the waters of the ocean and prepared the land for plants and animals. As the Maker he prepared plants and taught the Hobbits all arts, crafts, and skills. Of all the Valar, he had the greatest interest in the Children of Iluvatar. So impatient was he to see them that he made the Dwarves. According to the "Valaquenta" in the Silmarillion (p. 27), although Aule and Melkor were not the only two of all the Valar in thought and power, their attitudes toward the products of their labor and the labor of others were significantly different. While Melkor carefully guarded his works for himself and destroyed the works of others out of jealousy, Aule delighted in making, not possessing, and he did not envy the works of others, but sought and gave counsel. It was, in fact, Aule's lack of possessiveness and his willingness to submit his work to the will of Iluvatar that saved the Dwarves from destruction and made it possible for them to receive the gift of free will from Iluvatar.

It is also important to note the tremendous power and control that Tom has over the ring. He is, first of all, able to overcome its normal effects. When he puts it on his finger, he does not become invisible. When Frodo puts it on his finger, Tom is still able to see Frodo: he is "not as blind as that yet" (Ibid.). Second, Tom is able with ease to use the ring in ways that were not intended by its maker. If he is able to make the ring itself disappear, it is possible that Sauron himself might be unable to do this, for the ring embodied a great part of Sauron's own power, drained from him during its making.) Such power over the ring, displayed almost as a parlor trick, I submit, cannot be accounted for by classifying Tom Bombadil as an anomalous nature spirit. The ability to dominate the ring suggests a Valar; the ease with which it is dominated suggests the ultimate maker of all things in Middle-earth, Aule the Smith, of whom both Sauron and Saruman were mere servants in the beginning before time.

If Tom is Aule, however, two other questions need to be answered. First of all, what are he and Yavanna doing in the Old Forest to begin with? As far as Yavanna is concerned, she is probably just visiting with growing things and vacationing with her husband. Aule, on the other hand, is probably there for the purpose of studying Hobbits. We should not forget that of all the Valar Aule was the one most eager to see the Children of Iluvatar. He is also the only one to make sentient, rational beings of his own. Given his interest in such creatures, it is not unreasonable to assume that he, like Gandalf, found Hobbits fascinating. As Hobbit songs about Tom Bombadil suggest, moreover, he had plenty of contact with...
Hobbits in Buckland and the Marish, no doubt allowing ample opportunity for Hobbit study.

Second, if Tom is Aule, and he is such a fine and wonderful god, why doesn't he choose to be more helpful? Put another way, why isn't there power in him to fight the enemy? The answer to this question is simpler than one might at first imagine. When Ulmo rises from the sea in "Of Tuor and His Coming to Gondolin" to give instructions to Tuor, who is supposed to deliver a message to the Elves of Gondolin, he hurries with his directions fearing that his own servant Osse will hurl a wave upon the shore and drown his emissary. As he puts it in Unfinished Tales (p. 30): "Go now... lest the Sea devour thee! For Osse obeys the will of Mandos, and he is wroth, being a servant of the Doom." Although Ulmo's actions are so contrary to the will of the rest of the Valar that even his own servant will not help him (and is actually prepared to act against him), Ulmo, nevertheless, insists that he is not really opposing the other Valar, but rather is merely doing his "part":

... though in the days of this darkness I seemed to oppose the will of my brethren, the Lords of the West, that is my part among them, to which I was appointed ere the making of the World. (p. 29)

The key phrase is "to which I was appointed ere the making of the World." First, it makes it clear that Ulmo is not acting defiantly at all, merely following orders, just as his servant would be following orders if he hurled up a wave and killed Tuor. Second, it refers to the time of the song which created the world. It is this song, I believe, that contains the conflicting instructions both Ulmo and Osse are following, different parts, elements, or themes of the whole. If I am correct, then Ulmo's power to help the Elves is both limited by and partially determined by the Music of the Ainur, insofar as it established the existence of the earth and determined its major events. While Ulmo may have had free will as he sang his part in the song in those distant times, he is now bound by what he sang and cannot go beyond or change his part. If Tom is Aule, then he too is bound by his part in the song and although sympathetic and concerned, he can only help the Hobbits and the Free Peoples of the West in little ways.

This account of Tom as Aule is not really inconsistent with Tolkien's claim that Tom has renounced power in a kind of "vow of poverty" and that he exemplifies "a natural pacifist view." At the time of the singing of the Great Music, it is true that Aule, along with most of the other Holy Ones, eventually stopped singing, leaving Melkor to sing on alone. However, they did not stop because Melkor's thunderous and discordant singing defeated them, but rather because they did not wish to compete with him and considered the song spoiled by his behavior. It was not defeat, since obviously by singing together the others could have overcome him. Rather it was a rejection of the conflict itself—hence, a pacifist position. It was indeed the Third Theme sung by Iluvatar, representing the part of the Children of Iluvatar that was to overcome Melkor's disruption. Concerning the "vow of poverty," Aule has indeed taken such a vow—as exemplified by his attitude toward his work and the work of others—his lack of excessive pride, jealousy, and possessiveness.

In contrast, if Tom is a nature spirit, then no vow of poverty has been taken, and there is no natural pacifist view. According to the nature spirit thesis, as Verlyn Flieger puts it in Splintered Light, published in 1983: "Tom Bombadil, on whom the Ring has no effect, is a natural force, a kind of earth spirit, and so the power over the will which the Ring exerts simply has no meaning for him" (p. 128, note). As a natural force, Tom has the same status as a falling rock or the wind or the rain—he is blind activity with no direction or purpose. As such he is not a moral agent, and cannot therefore make moral decisions. The moral dimension is thus completely absent. Tom is immune to the influence of the ring not because of his high moral character, but because he is not capable of having a moral character at all.

If Tom is Aule, however, there is a moral dimension, indeed, a heightened one, for Tom's appearance in the story, although only a "comment," serves as a sharp and clear contrast to the two evil Maiar, Sauron and Saruman, both of whom were once his servants before turning to evil and darkness. Unlike their former master, these two followed the ways of Melkor, envy, jealousy, excessive pride, and the desire to possess and control. As Tolkien explained to his proofreader, Tom's role was to show that there were things beyond and unconcerned with domination and control. On the surface, this view of Tom seems to make him unrelated to all other things and events in Middle-earth—indeed, anomalous. As Aule, however, Tom is not beyond and unconcerned anomalously, but rather is located at the core of morality as it existed in Middle-earth, as the ultimate exemplification of the proper moral stance toward power, pride, and possession. In fact, in terms of the moral traits that most fascinated Tolkien both as an author and as a scholar, Tom Bombadil is Tolkien's moral ideal.

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