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Abstract

Tolkien's Tom Bombadil is a notoriously mysterious character, standing somewhat apart from the central narrative, who has elicited debate and speculation among Tolkien's readers ever since *The Lord of the Rings* was first published. This paper argues that Tom's identity can be read not only as enigmatic, but as drawing on the enigmata, the riddle tradition, of the ancient and medieval world. The way in which Tom is presented amounts to a purposely obscure description that invites engagement and speculation from the reader, and that also depends for its reading on readers' familiarity with a specific shared tradition. A number of ancient, medieval, nineteenth- and twentieth-century texts that can be said to participate in that tradition are examined. Against this backdrop, Tom emerges as having a special relationship with the Wind, and this is useful not because it explains away any of Tom's essential mystery, but because it connects him in felicitous ways with the imagery and concerns of the larger text of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Additional Keywords

Grahame, Kenneth. *The Wind in the Willows*; Intertextuality; MacDonald, George. *At the Back of the North Wind*; Riddles; Ruskin, John. *King of the Golden River*; Tolkien, J.R.R. —Characters—Tom Bombadil; Victorian literature—Children's; Wind and wind imagery



TOLKIEN'S TOM BOMBADIL: AN ENIGMA “(INTENTIONALLY)”

SUZANNE JACOBS

A MYSTERIOUS FELLOW

TOM BOMBADIL IS ONE OF THE MOST INTRIGUING CHARACTERS in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*: he has an implacable power over the environment, lives in the infamous Old Forest, and does not seem to belong to any of the known races of Middle-earth (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] I.6.119). He also describes himself as being older even than the immortal elves and primordial forests of Middle-earth (I.7.131), and is the only character who is wholly unaffected by the Ring (I.7.133).

Tom is also presented in a way which foregrounds the mystery surrounding his identity from the outset. The hobbits meet Tom in the earliest stages of their journey, in the Old Forest just outside the Shire. He arrives just in time to save Merry and Pippin from Old Man Willow. When Frodo and Sam rush towards him begging for help, Tom remains unperturbed, and asks them whether they know who he is, only to reply teasingly himself: “I’m Tom Bombadil” (I.6.120). Aside from a long list of cryptic epithets and descriptions of his activities, that is all the answer that readers ever receive.

What is also puzzling about Tom is that he does not seem to be involved with the hobbits’ quest. Liam Campbell notes that there is a

general consensus among Tolkien commentators, even those very firmly in the pro-Tolkien camp, that Tom Bombadil is a somewhat incongruous element in *The Lord of the Rings*: an anomaly who, as Dickerson and Evans [...] suggest, ‘exists, in a sense, apart from or alongside the mainstream of the narrative’. (Campbell 42)

Readers’ responses to Tom are also anticipated and given voice by the main focaliser of the episode, Frodo, who asks Tom (LotR I.7.131) and his wife, Goldberry (I.7.124), what Tom is several times, and yet never receives an explicit answer. Considering all this, it is perhaps hardly surprising that the first recorded instance of a reader asking Tolkien about Tom occurred even before *The Lord of the Rings* was published. To a curious proof reader of the text, Naomi Mitchison, Tolkien wrote:

I like things worked out in detail myself, and answers provided to all reasonable questions. [...] There is of course a clash between 'literary' technique, and the fascination of elaborating in detail an imaginary mythical Age [...]. As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation actually exists) [...]. And even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally). (*Letters* 174, #144)

While it is generally recognised that Tom is an enigmatic character, the question that remains is whether he is an enigma in the older or in the modern sense of the word. In other words, is Tom, like one of the medieval Latin *enigmata*, a riddle meant to be solved, or can he be described, in modern English, as "enigmatic," as one of the many open-ended mysteries of *The Lord of the Rings*? This question is complicated by the fact that the legendarium lends itself so readily to interpretive strategies associated with both kinds of enigma.

On the one hand, the legendarium presents a highly coherent, carefully elaborated secondary world, so that background information and logical "explanations" regarding many of the more cryptic details in each individual text can be derived through close study of other texts in the legendarium. *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, is often usefully informed by *The Silmarillion*. Gene Hargrove's early argument that Tom is Aulë, the Vala of smiths and builders, proceeds from the assumption that Tom is such an intertextual riddle, and that a definitive answer as to his identity can be puzzled out.

On the other hand, the legendarium is also known for its studied use of "gaps" in the history of Middle-earth—supposedly "missing" information or "unrecorded" facts about this secondary world. These instances in themselves achieve various artistic effects, such as emulating the sense of nostalgia for the past and the awareness of the inevitable loss involved in the passage of time that are evoked by missing information in real medieval texts.

Studied lack of elaboration is also often associated with the natural world in *The Lord of the Rings*. Campbell outlines a common reading of Tom when he describes him as a pro-environmental counterpoint to the "ambition, science and a machine-wielding threat made manifest in the technocratic presence of those such as Sauron, Saruman and their foot soldiers of destruction" (41). The type of purely utilitarian approach to the natural world presented by these antagonists is founded on an assumption that the natural world can be fully understood and thereby controlled, and *The Lord of the Rings* therefore resists this type of stance by presenting a natural world that cannot be fully explained or understood. Middle-earth's infinite, unreachable, and impenetrable spaces, and also the suggestion that it is inhabited by a near infinite variety of creatures, restores a Romantic sense of wonder and respect for the natural world. It is therefore apt for the hobbits to meet, at the beginning of

their journey, Tom Bombadil, a protagonist and guide who draws their attention to the inescapable “otherness” and inherent value of the natural world, while also *being* one of the parts of that natural world which remains an insoluble mystery.

But what points to the fact that such an answer is not felt to be quite satisfactory, is that Tom has nevertheless remained the subject of scholarly debate and speculation, not to mention sometimes heated debate among Tolkien fans on more informal platforms.¹ Two comparatively recent contributions to the debate appear in the volume *Middle-Earth and Beyond: Essays on the World of J.R.R. Tolkien*: Jenika Kinga names Tom as the character in *The Lord of the Rings* who has “intrigued readers perhaps more than any other” (67) while Campbell describes Tom as having “fascinated and infuriated Tolkien critics for as long as his works have been in print” (43).

This article aims to suggest not so much an alternative as an addition to the existing range of possible answers to the riddle of Tom’s identity.

A NATURE SPIRIT

A widely-accepted aspect of Tom’s identity is that he is a nature spirit, or draws on that trope. For example, Ruth Noel argues that he is comparable to Shakespeare’s Puck and the god Pan (127). Edmund Fuller describes him as “unclassifiable other than as some primal nature spirit” (18), and Matthew Dickerson and Jonathan Evans describe him as an “embodiment of the natural world” (19). Tolkien himself describes Tom as “the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside” (*Letters* 26, #19), and the idea that Tom is something akin to a genius loci (see e.g. Tom Shippey [108] and Patrick Curry [76]) is supported by the fact that Tom refuses to help the hobbits beyond the point where his “country ends” (*LotR* I.8.148).

Tom’s partner, Goldberry, is perhaps a more conventional literary nature spirit, and she is quite explicitly portrayed as a water spirit. She is the “daughter of the River” (*LotR* I.7.123), whose songs and stories are said to be like rain falling onto hills and running into rivers, whose footsteps sound like “a stream falling gently away downhill over cool stones” (I.7.125), and whose shoes look like “fishes’ mail” (I.7.132). Tom is not as explicitly related to any element

¹ On 22 January 2020, Google returned 826,000 results for the search term “Tom Bombadil,” which gives some indication of the scope of the continued interest in the character at this time. Some examples of discussions regarding Tom’s identity include “Oldest and Fatherless: The Terrible Secret of Tom Bombadil” (<http://km-515.livejournal.com/1042.html>), “Who or what was Tom Bombadil?” (<http://scifi.stackexchange.com/questions/1586/who-or-what-was-tom-bombadil>), and the entry for Bombadil on the *Tolkien-Online* website (<http://www.tolkienonline.de/etep/B/bombadil.html>).

in nature, but his connection with Goldberry, like his supernatural power and his enthusiasm for the natural world, again suggests that he, too, is a nature spirit.

A MAIA

Attempts to puzzle out Tom's identity have also considered what space he might occupy in the angelic hierarchy described in *The Silmarillion*. Because Tom seems to have supernatural control over nature, it has been argued that he might be a Vala (Hargrove), an angelic being that serves Middle-earth's creator, Ilúvatar, but who is also roughly equivalent to the gods of Northern and Greco-Roman pantheons. But there are problems with this argument. For example, much of the fallen nature of Middle-earth in the ages described in *The Lord of the Rings* can be attributed to the fact that the Valar have separated their realm in Arda from Middle-earth by reshaping the sea, in order to protect their realm from the machinations of the satanic antagonist Melkor (*Silmarillion* [*Silm*] 150-161). Also, Tom Bombadil's influence is strictly limited to a specific piece of land, which he refuses to leave (*LotR* I.8.148), while the Valar are each in control of their element across the whole of Middle-earth.

However, Tom cannot be a man or elf either, as he describes himself as being present in Middle-earth *before* the creation of Elves and Men, and as having seen the "first raindrop and the first acorn" (*LotR* I.7.131). What this would suggest is that Tom is one of the Maiar; lesser angelic beings in service to the Valar. There is a sense of fitness to such a reading, considering that the characters Gandalf, Saruman, and Radagast are known to be Maiar, and, like Tom, take on the forms of mysterious old men while they live in Middle-earth.

Tom's constant singing also suggests that he might be one of those Maiar involved in the creation and continuous ordering of the natural environment. Tom often sings about the natural environment, and the Valar and Maiar are described as creating and ordering the world through music (*Silm* 15-22). Tom's songs are also shown to have uncanny power when he admonishes Old Man Willow by threatening to sing, and defeats the Barrow-wight through a song: As Tom says, his songs are "stronger songs" (*LotR* I.8.142).

What remains somewhat unsatisfactory about this broad classification of Tom as (plausibly) one of the Maiar, is that it does not go very far towards explaining how the hobbits' meeting with Tom relates to the rest of the novel, and that it also does not explain the playful list of epithets and descriptions of Tom that the hobbits receive in answer to their question regarding Tom's identity. Quoting Tolkien's description of Tom, Campbell describes Tom's identity as an "Enduring Enigma," but he also calls Tom, in the modern sense, "a riddle," since, as he points out, so many "clues" to Tom's identity are provided by various characters and at various points in *The Lord of the Rings*, and

since so many readers have responded to these clues by trying to gain more definitive answers about Tom's identity. Campbell then makes a convincing case that Tom evokes the Green Man of European folklore.

But Tom's riddle-like quality in itself points the way to a different set of source texts, and the "solution" derived by consulting these source texts relates the Tom Bombadil episode to ideas and motifs that are important throughout *The Lord of the Rings*.

A RIDDLE

The fact that Tom ascribes a set of epithets to himself and dares his audience to guess who he is, is highly reminiscent of the medieval riddle tradition. In this tradition, animals, objects or forces of nature would routinely be made difficult to recognise by being described in very human terms. Water, for example, would be described as a "mother" which "gives birth to plants," as in line 4 of Riddle 84 in the *Exeter Book* (Crossley-Holland 78-79). This achieved the dual function of making the riddle hard to guess, and guiding the audience to ponder the nature of the object afresh. Very often, the effect of estrangement would be carried further in that the object, animal, or force in question would be the speaker—one who would ascribe a series of epithets to itself, and then challenge its audience to guess its name, exactly as Tom does. And while riddles implicitly guide their audience to ponder anew the nature of non-human phenomena, Tom does the same. When Tom tells the hobbits the history of the surrounding landscape, he tells them just that: the history of the land, with its trees, woodland creatures, and flocks of sheep, so that the hobbits begin "to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things [are] at home" (*LotR* I.7.129-30).

In Middle-earth, as in the medieval world, riddles are a favourite pastime—so much so that the protagonists are nearly trapped outside Moria when Gandalf assumes that the instruction outside the door ("speak, friend, and enter") must be a riddle, rather than an instruction to say the word "friend" (*LotR* II.4.306-308). In *The Hobbit*, when Smaug asks Bilbo who he is, Bilbo provides a riddle instead, ascribing a set of epithets to himself, such as "friend of bears" and "Barrel-rider" (XII.235). Most famously, Bilbo and Gollum have a riddle contest with Bilbo's life at stake (V.84-90).

The medieval riddle tradition spans many texts in different languages, but the answers to certain riddles became in some measure conventional, so that, though there is great variation between the riddles, similar epithets can often be found describing the same phenomenon in different riddles. The riddles of the legendarium are not only conventional, but, in keeping with the conceit that its texts are Tolkien's translations of real medieval texts (like the *Red Book of*

Westmarch), the legendarium draws on the conventions of real medieval riddles. When in January 1937 a reader questioned Tolkien regarding the sources of *The Hobbit*, Tolkien mentioned that "[t]here is work to be done [...] on the sources and analogues" of the riddles of *The Hobbit*, and that he "should not be at all surprised to learn that both the hobbit and Gollum will find their claim to have invented any of them disallowed" (*Letters* 32, #25). Yvette Kisor mentions that the riddles from the late-tenth-century *Exeter Book* were most probably the medieval literary riddles to which Tolkien refers here, and that these were often based on fourth- or fifth-century Latin riddles (570). But Tolkien would also have been familiar with the *Enigmata* of the seventh-century scholar Aldhelm,² and with the riddle-like texts in the fourteenth-century *Book of Taliesin*.³

The conventionality of the epithets used in riddles, and *The Lord of the Rings'* conceit of being a translation of a real medieval document, are important, and this is because a number of the epithets that Tom ascribes to himself are also used in medieval riddles as conventional epithets for the wind. This might be taken to suggest that Tom has a special relationship with wind or air, which makes for a felicitous reading of his identity, since wind is also developed as a motif indicating the presence of the divine throughout the larger text of *The Lord of the Rings*.

Goldberry says that "[n]o one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow" (*LotR* I.7.124). Later, when Tom saves the hobbits from the Barrow-wight, he sings of himself that "[n]one has ever caught him yet" (I.8.142). Catching the wind is conventionally understood to be impossible even today, and it is mentioned in the first line of the Latin riddle "Ventus" from Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, where the wind presents itself by saying, "None can espy me, none lay hands on me" (Pitman 4-5). Line 35 of the "Song of the Wind" in the *Book of Taliesin* (Skene 1:535-538) similarly describes the wind as "unconfined."

Tom also sings of himself that his "songs are stronger songs, and his feet are faster" (*LotR* I.8.142) and in "Ventus" the wind says that its "rushing voice shrills swift through all the earth" (Pitman 4-5). In "Riddle 1" from the *Exeter Book* the wind also describes itself as noisy, saying that it "roar[s] loudly and rampage[s] over the land" (Crossley-Holland 3, l.4). Tom is generally presented as a very noisy character: as making "noise enough" for one of the "Big People," as "charging through grass and rushes like a cow going down to drink" (*LotR* I.6.119), and as "singing loudly and nonsensically" (I.6.120).

² Tolkien admired Aldhelm's work, considering him an "example of an English, Christian scholar who both esteemed and contributed to a vernacular poetic tradition" (Powell 5), even if the *Enigmata* are in Latin rather than Anglo-Saxon.

³ For example, Spangenberg notes that he seems to have drawn on the *Book of Taliesin* in constructing the battle of the Ents (448).

Tom also describes himself as being “Eldest” (*LotR* I.7.131) and the Elves describe him as being “oldest and fatherless” (II.2.265). The wind is “fatherless” in the sense that it has no readily-observable cause or point of origin. The “Song of the Wind” from the *Book of Taliesin*, says of the wind that:

It will not be older, it will not be younger,
Than it was in the beginning.
[...]
[It is] Without old age, without age.
[...]
And he was not born [...]. (Skene 1:535-538, ll. 1-27)

The idea that the wind is “oldest” and “fatherless” also reflects the traditional Christian creation narrative, in which it was the wind of God the Father that first moved upon the face of the newly-created earth. Tom’s comment that he was there before the “first raindrop and the first acorn” (*LotR* I.7.131) suggests that he, similarly, was one of the agents of the earliest acts of creation. The “Song of the Wind” also describes the wind as having been present since before “the deluge” (l.2), probably a reference to the biblical flood. Tom, similarly, was present “before the seas were bent” (*LotR* I.7.131), before the Powers of Middle-earth used the “Sundering Seas” to flood Atalantë and its sinful people, and to separate themselves from Middle-earth.

The lines from the “Song of the Wind” that describe the wind by saying “[h]e has no wants / [f]rom creatures” (ll. 11-12), “[h]e will not come when it is wished” (l. 32) and “[h]e will not [act] according to counsel” (l. 38) seem to be echoed by Tom’s character, as even Elrond knows that he cannot compel Tom to act (*LotR* II.2.348).

When Tom admonishes Old Man Willow for attacking the hobbits, Tom’s threats to Old Man Willow all involve things that air can do to a tree: If Old Man Willow will not let the hobbits go, Tom says, he will “freeze his marrow cold,” “sing his roots off,” and “sing a wind up and blow leaf and branch away” (*LotR* I.6.120). It is conventional, in the riddle tradition, to mention the violent power which wind has over trees. In Aldhelm’s “Ventus” (l.3), the wind says “I shatter oaks with harsh and hideous might,” and in “Riddle 1” (l.8-9) from the *Exeter Book*, it says “men die sudden deaths when I shake the forest, / the flourishing trees, and fell timber.”

Those epithets and descriptions of Tom that are *not* conventional epithets for the wind of the medieval riddle tradition, are also often still probable descriptions of the wind. The wind is largely unconstrained in its movements, and Tom describes himself as “walk[ing] wide, leaping on the hill-tops” (*LotR* I.7.128). Air is all that, like Tom, can enter the Ring without being affected by it (I.7.133), and Tom’s house is a safe place because “Nothing passes

doors or windows save moonlight and starlight and the wind off the hill-top" (I.7.128). Like Tom, the wind might be said to sing constantly. If we are not distracted by the fact that the speaker is, just as in the medieval riddle tradition, presented first and foremost as an anthropomorphic speaker, then the answer "wind" becomes quite probable.

Reading Tolkien's comment to Naomi Mitchison, that Tom Bombadil is an enigma, "(intentionally)," might easily guide us to call Tom "enigmatic" in the modern sense, meaning that he should remain a mystery, but the possibility that Tom might be part of a tradition in which riddles were still called by the older term "enigmata" is equally probable. When Tom's identity is read in this way, then the word "enigma" in Tolkien's letter begins in itself to function as a mischievous etymological riddle.⁴

A PHILOLOGICAL CURIOSITY

Like so many details of Tolkien's legendarium, the study of the connection between the wind and godhood has its ultimate foundation in philology. The connection is also made familiar through philology: Deities associated with the sky are common, and are therefore often used as examples of the interconnection between etymologies and the evolving world views that shaped them. Meyer Abrams points out that this connection frequently underlies the metaphors of Romantic poetry:

When Shelley, for example, made the west wind the breath of Autumn's being, and a spirit, which became his breath and his spirit and blew through him the trumpet of inspired prophecy, he may seem boldly innovative and metaphorical. But from a philological point of view, Shelley was reactionary; he merely revived and exploited the ancient undivided meanings of these words. For the Latin *spiritus* signified wind and breath, as well as soul. So did the Latin *anima*, and the Greek *pneuma*, the Hebrew *ruach*, the Sanskrit *atman*, as well as the equivalent words in Arabic, Japanese, and many other languages, some of them totally unrelated. (Abrams 121)

⁴ Riddles which hinge on variations of a single word seem to amuse Tolkien. The best-known example is the word "speak" in "speak friend and enter" on the gates of Moria, which confuses Gandalf, since it should really be translated as "say" (*LotR* II.4.306-308). Another example is "inventa" in the title of Tolkien's "Enigmata Saxonica Nuper Inventa Duo." The correct translation is "Two Saxon Riddles Recently Discovered," while they are in truth "newly invented" by Tolkien, exactly as a reader unfamiliar with Latin might first assume upon reading the word "inventa."

In this description, Abrams reflects the widely-held assumptions of the “anthropological school” of mythologists. In the words of Owen Barfield,⁵ this school believed that

[S]uch a purely material content as “wind”, on the one hand, and on the other, such a purely abstract content as “the principle of life within man or animal” are both *late* arrivals in human consciousness. [...] [T]he old concrete *meaning* “spiritus” [...] contained within itself the germs of both later significations. (Barfield, *Poetic Diction* 80-81)

However, in the early 1900s, this was not the only theory regarding the development of myth. Max Müller had famously opposed the anthropological school by arguing instead that myth was a “disease of language.” He argued that metaphors were used, by ancient societies, to describe natural phenomena in terms of human actions, and that over time these were misunderstood, taking on a life of their own, giving rise to stories about powerful beings in charge of the forces of nature—myths about nature gods (*Lectures on the Science of Language* 1-29). It is interesting to note that, when Tom Bombadil is read as the present paper suggests, then the character can be seen as having been informed by this debate. Müller argued that riddles were particularly prone to being the roots of myth, because they so often describe forces of nature in anthropomorphic terms, purposely making it hard to recognise that they are in fact describing forces of nature (*Contributions to the Science of Mythology* 92). When a riddle’s answer was forgotten, Müller argued, only a description of an odd and powerful human character in control of some natural phenomenon would remain. Riddles also contain highly conventional epithets, which might be remembered even when the words used in those epithets fell out of general use. Müller makes the case that the proper names of many deities are in fact misrecognised and corrupted epithets.

Andrew Lang refuted Müller’s overall argument by championing the view of the anthropological school. Lang also specifically took issue with Müller’s idea about riddles (*Modern Mythology* 127-136). Lang thought it unlikely that people would keep repeating riddles if their logical answers were to be lost and replaced with mysterious proper names, because this would defeat the purpose of the riddle game, which would then no longer be amusing.

In his essay “On Fairy-Stories” (OFS), Tolkien briefly engages with the debate on the origins of myth (41-42). He generally sides with Lang in saying that myth is *not* a “disease of language,” but he adds the caveat that stories and

⁵ Tolkien’s friend, and one of his major influences. Verlyn Flieger mentions that Barfield’s “concept of an ancient semantic unity had modified [Tolkien’s] whole outlook on language” (50).

story-elements do tend to take on a life of their own, as Müller suggested. What we see in the Tom Bombadil episode seems to be a missing link in this process: Tom is at once a quasi-mythological figure, a personified natural phenomenon, and a riddle.

What might be made of this depends on the type of conceit under which *The Lord of the Rings* is read: To readers who read this episode while suspending their disbelief in the existence of Frodo and friends who lived long ago, Tom becomes a nature god of the type envisioned by Lang: He is the wind personified, and challenges his listeners to come to a greater understanding of his nature.

To readers suspending their disbelief in the existence of the real medieval *Red Book of Westmarch*, the fictional character Tom Bombadil who appears in it might be seen as a riddle which has very recently evolved, by dint of the manuscript's long history of imperfect oral transmission, careless scribes, and misunderstanding, into a nature god. This is somewhat reminiscent of the type of evolution suggested by Müller, but in Tom's case the evolution has been a recent one, so that the character is not yet entirely unproblematic as a myth, nor completely unrecognisable as a riddle: Tom is established as an anthropomorphic character, but as an odd and intriguing one which still prompts a search for answers in ways which echo the riddle tradition.

Tom's name also lends itself to the latter reading. When Frodo asks Tom who he is, Tom recognises that Frodo is really asking what type of creature he is, and he responds by pondering the fact that it is difficult for any creature, even for Frodo, to relate the nature of its identity to another in an intelligible manner. But it is interesting that Tom's first reply to Frodo is "Don't you know my name yet? That's the only answer" (*LotR* I.7.131), since the evolution of nature gods suggested by Müller precisely assumes that a point will be reached when the only "answer" to a riddle about a natural phenomenon will, in the minds of its tellers, be a proper noun, the name of the newly-evolved nature god.

The fact that the name "Tom Bombadil" is one of the few proper names of significant protagonists in *The Lord of the Rings* of which the origins and history is not mentioned at all,⁶ and the fact that Tom has so many other sensical epithets, could be seen to give the vaguely absurd name "Tom Bombadil" the air of a forgotten and corrupted epithet turned proper noun. Such a trajectory can be seen in the absurd name "Sharkey" given to Saruman, from *Sharkū*, meaning "old man" in the debased form of the Black Speech (*LotR* Appendix F).

⁶ For example, Tolkien discusses the meanings of several of his protagonists' names in Appendix F of *The Lord of the Rings*, and names like "Beorn" (Walsh 56) and "Gandalf" (Evans 134-135) have etymological and literary sources outside the legendarium.

1132). The fact that no equivalent explanation is given for the origins of Tom's name, is part of the artistic effect of the character; Tom intrigues, but his identity ultimately remains an open question.

The present paper's "solution" to the riddle of Tom's identity is, as mentioned before, an addition rather than an alternative to the existing inroads that have been made into Tom's identity. Because the connection between the wind and the divine is such a common one, reading Tom as an anthropomorphised wind, and reading him as reminiscent of specific mythological figures (inside or outside the legendarium) that are *not* explicitly connected with the wind, need not be mutually exclusive: There are certainly precedents for gods and spirits that are very strongly associated with the wind, but that are by no means limited to actions that might serve as metaphors for the wind. Examples include such different gods as the Christian God the Father and Pan. Reading Tom as having a connection with the wind would therefore not preclude him from *also* being the genius of the Old Forest or of the vanishing Oxford and Berkshire countryside, or from being a covert allusion to the Green Man.

A SERVANT OF MANWĒ

This "solution" also does not preclude Tom from being situated in terms of *The Silmarillion's* angelic hierarchy; on the contrary, Tom's association with air starts to suggest that, like Gandalf, he might serve Manwë, the leader of the Valar, who is, predictably, in control of the winds of Middle-earth. Tom shares many of the attributes of Manwë described in *The Silmarillion*. Manwë is a humble peacemaker: he "has no thought for his own honour, and is not jealous of his power, but rules all to peace" (*Silm* 40). Likewise, though Tom is the "master" of his land and the living things in it, Goldberry understands that he does not *own* them (*LotR* I.7.124), and Tom allows even those who oppose him, the Barrow-wight and Old Man Willow, to remain in his land, only acting against them once they attack the hobbits.

"[P]oetry is the delight of Manwë, and the song of words is his music" (*Silm* 40), and Tom very nearly always sings or speaks in metre. Manwë's "raiment is blue, and blue is the fire of his eyes" (40), and Tom is one of the few characters in *The Lord of the Rings* described as wearing bright blue clothes (*LotR* I.6.119). He also has startling, piercing blue eyes and a blue feather in his hat (I.6.119). Manwë is served by the Eagles and receives news from birds (*Silm* 26), and Tom is described as "whistling like a starling" (*LotR* I.7.128) and "like a tree-full of birds" (I.8.135).

Tom's partner, Goldberry, is associated with water, and when the hobbits first approach their cottage, Tom and Goldberry sing a song together which describes many of the actions of water and air in their little land (*LotR*

I.6.122). This further suggests that Tom might serve Manwë, because *The Silmarillion* describes weather patterns as being the result of the "melodies" made by Manwë, the Vala associated with air, and his good friend Ulmo, the Vala of water (*Silm* 19).

The mythological framework of *The Silmarillion*, in other words, seems to be amenable to a reading that connects Tom to the air or wind. This framework, coupled with the broader association between wind and spiritual agency, also usefully informs the larger episode involving Tom.

A SINGING FOREST

In the Tom Bombadil episode, the hobbits meet a series of supernatural characters. Though multifaceted and unique, the presence and power of these characters tend, in each case, to be represented at least partially by their songs and by their connection to the wind and weather. But while the malevolent spirits present themselves first as unfavourable natural phenomena and then, gradually, as malevolent agencies, the benevolent spirits echo the conventions of the riddle tradition in that they present themselves first as benevolent agencies, and then, gradually, as favourable natural phenomena.

The seemingly hostile atmosphere and shifting trees of the Old Forest, and the suspiciously drowsy atmosphere near Old Man Willow, cause a building sense of paranoia about the nature of the Old Forest. This culminates in the revelation that Old Man Willow is definitely more than just an ordinary tree. After Old Man Willow's attack on the hobbits, his rising anger is presented as "a sound as of a wind rising and spreading outwards to the branches of all the other trees round about," and Frodo's cries for help are "blown away from him by the willow-wind" (*LotR* I.6.118). Tom later describes Old Man Willow as a "mighty singer" (I.7.126) and a "master of winds" (I.7.130).

Similarly, when the Barrow-wight leads the hobbits astray, it is not immediately clear whether the hobbits have not simply lost their way in the darkness and fog. The weather grows increasingly unpleasant, and a "biting wind" from the east begins to "hiss over the grass" (*LotR* I.8.139). The Barrow-wight tries to induce a state of despair in the hobbits by singing an "immeasurably dreary" song of "grim, hard, cold words, heartless and miserable," describing the dark lord's coming victory as a time when "In the black wind the stars shall die" (I.8.141).

Tom's cheerful singing is a counter-narrative to the songs of the two malevolent beings: When his song becomes audible in the Forest, the "willow-wind" that so bewilders Frodo suddenly "puff[s] out" (*LotR* I.6.119), and the Barrow-wight goes "wailing," "like the winds" (I.8.142).

As in the riddle tradition, Tom and Goldberry are first presented as more or less human characters. It is then gradually suggested that, in some

sense, they “are” natural phenomena. In Aldhelm’s riddle collection this trajectory presents natural phenomena from a fresh perspective, and in the process the Christian God is glorified. The Tom Bombadil episode, similarly, makes the point that, if natural phenomena like weather and the resultant plant growth, seasons and rivers, are in fact the work of benevolent nature spirits like Tom and Goldberry, then such phenomena are in themselves indicative of the omnipresence of the divine. The problem is that favourable natural phenomena are in fact so commonplace as to go unappreciated—air and wind being the best example of this principle, since it is at once omnipresent and essential, and invisible. Tom and Goldberry’s appreciation for the natural world, their connection to it, and the riddle of Tom’s identity all attempt to drive this point home, and thereby to restore the hobbits’ and readers’ sense of appreciation for the natural world, and their trust in divine providence. This principle can be seen to inform the use of wind-related imagery in the larger text of *The Lord of the Rings*.

THE WIND FROM THE WEST AND THE REST OF THE QUEST

Very gradually throughout the hobbits’ quest, and especially towards the end of their journey to Mordor, the wind is developed as a personal rather than an indifferent or purely physical force. In particular, the malevolent East and benevolent West winds are increasingly presented as being in conflict with one another. This division echoes a typical characterisation of the East and West winds and their association with godhood in the Bible and in the pagan tradition, but in the legendarium “The East” is also a common epithet for Mordor, and “the West” for its enemies among the mortal races of Middle-earth, and for the Valar and their leader, Manwë, who sends winds to do his bidding.

The hobbits’ quest sometimes seems hopeless, and they undergo many unpleasant experiences and setbacks which might make it difficult for them to believe that any divine providence presides over their fate. Towards the end of their journey, however, an uncanny number of lucky accidents—from their finding of the weapons in the Barrow, to the Ents’ chance involvement in capturing Isengard, to Gollum’s presence in Mount Doom—all contribute to their victory. At the same time, the wind is also increasingly presented as a personal rather than an arbitrary or indifferent force.

For example, on Caradhras, Boromir challenges the doubts of the company by saying “Let those call it the wind who will; there are fell voices on the air.” Aragorn replies that he does “call it the wind,” but that this does not make what Boromir says untrue, and that there are “many evil and unfriendly things in the world that have little love for those that go on two legs” and that have “been in this world longer than [Sauron]” (*LotR* II.3.289). When the ominous clouds above Sauron’s stronghold are blown back by a “wind from the

West," Sam immediately interprets this as Sauron "not having it all his own way" (VI.2.919), and when Saruman dies, the column of mist that gathers over his corpse is dissolved by a "cold wind" from the West (VI.8.1020).

In this way, the hobbits' changing perception of the wind becomes representative of their growing awareness of the Powers that preside over Middle-earth. When Tom is read as the wind incarnate, then the hobbits' meeting with Tom at the start of their journey, and Tom's riddle prompting them to guess who he is, foreshadows that development.

Tom's connection with the Powers also begins to explain some of the contradictions of his character. Though Tom is clearly on the side of good, there are curious limits to what he is prepared to do for the hobbits, and instances in which he seems indifferent to their fate. Though he knows that they are travelling through the perilous Old Forest and toward Old Man Willow (*LotR* I.7.126), and knows that they are carrying the Ring (I.7.132), he does not come to the forest with the purpose of meeting them (I.7.126). After saving them from the Barrow-wight, he does accompany them to the East Road, but when they finally come within sight of it, he refuses to accompany them any further.

Similar contradictions in the character of the wind are reflected in the medieval riddles as well: The "harsh and hideous might" of the wind in "Riddle 1" (l.8-9) along with the generally violent imagery of death and destruction in Riddles 1, 2 and 3 from the *Exeter Book*—the Storm Riddles—seems to contradict the lines from the Taliesin "Song of the Wind" that describe the wind by saying that "[t]here will not come from his design / [f]ear or death." The "Song of the Wind" also seems to refer to this contradiction when it says of the wind that "he is good, he is bad" (l.49), and "[h]e will disorder / [h]e will not repair what he does," and yet goes on to describe the wind as "sinless" (ll. 55-57). Despite all these contradictions, the poet can also still say of the "one who made" the wind, "[g]reat [are] his beauties" (l.15-16). Taliesin's "Song of the Wind" begins as a clever description of the wind, but from line 63 onwards it segues into a meditation about the nature of God. "Riddle 1" from the *Exeter Book*, similarly, begins by asking "[w]ho is so clever and quick-witted / as to guess who goads me on my journey?" And the last of the three "storm riddles" repeats the query: "Tell me my name, / and Who it is rouses me from my rest, / or Who restrains me when I remain silent." This first riddle explores, by implication, the power of the Christian God who is in control of the element of air, and who is so often represented by it. Pitman remarks of Aldhelm's riddles, too, that "it is seldom that the reader ceases to feel the force of Aldhelm's underlying purpose—the glorification of God, and the spreading of his kingdom" (Pitman iv).

As is often noted of the Christian God, the master that Tom serves "works in mysterious ways": The hobbits perceive themselves as being

vulnerable to chance events in an indifferent universe, but Tom knows better—hence his lack of concern.

THE WEST WIND WAS CALLING: TOM AFTER *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*

Besides *The Lord of the Rings*, Tom Bombadil also appears in three of Tolkien's poems. He appears in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil," published before *The Lord of the Rings*, in "Bombadil goes Boating" ("Boating"), written and published after it,⁷ and in "Once upon a Time," written at an unknown time, and published posthumously. Tom is presented more or less coherently across *The Lord of the Rings* and the three poems, so that readers' understanding of any one of these four texts must needs affect, in some measure, how Tom is read across all of them. What is most intriguing, however, is that "Boating" can be read as suggesting Tom's connection to the wind. The poem opens by connecting good fortune (a happy day) with the West Wind:

The old year was turning brown; the West Wind was calling;
Tom caught a beechen leaf in the Forest falling.
'I've caught a happy day blown me by the breezes!
Why wait till morrow-year? I'll take it when me pleases.
This day I'll mend my boat and journey as it chances
west down the withy-stream, following my fancies!
(*"Boating"* 12, ll. 1-6)

At this point in the poem, it is not clear where Tom plans to travel, or why. The rest of the poem describes a visit to Farmer Maggot, which could be taken to suggest that this is what Tom intends from the outset, but the West Wind might also be read as "calling" Tom in more than a metaphorical sense, and the journey "west" might then be a journey to Valinor rather than to Maggot's house. Such a reading begins to explain Tom's oddly vehement responses to a bird that overhears his reflections:

Little Bird sat on twig. 'Whillo, Tom! I heed you.
I've a guess, I've a guess where your fancies lead you.
Shall I go, shall I go, bring him word to meet you?'

'No names, you tell-tale, or I'll skin and eat you,
babbling in every ear things that don't concern you!
If you tell Willow-man where I've gone, I'll burn you,
roast you on a willow-spit. That'll end your prying!
(*"Boating"* 12-13, ll. 7-13)

⁷ Tolkien notes that "Boating" presents the characters "after the visit of Frodo and his companions" ("*Boating*" v).

Tom's response can be read as playful hyperbole, but it might also be read as incongruous. Since he does not keep his friendship with Maggot a secret, there is no reason why he should threaten to skin the bird for daring to mention Maggot's name, or insist that his visit does not concern the bird. Any genuine alarm or urgency would make more sense if Tom and the bird are speaking at cross purposes: if Tom assumes that the bird has guessed his intention to embark on a longer journey, which would allow Old Man Willow to get up to real mischief in his absence. Such a reading is supported by the next verse:

Willow-wren cocked her tail, piped as she went flying:
'Catch me first, catch me first! No names are needed.
I'll perch on his hither ear: the message will be heeded.
"Down by Mithe", I'll say, "just as sun is sinking"
Hurry up, hurry up! That's the time for drinking!

Tom laughed to himself: 'Maybe then I'll go there.
I might go by other ways, but today I'll row there'.
(*"Boating"* 13, ll. 14-20)

What is incongruous here is that, while the first verse has Tom deciding to depart by boat, Tom now seems to decide for the first time that he will visit *Farmer Maggot* by boat, saying "Maybe *then* I'll go there [...] / *today* I'll row there." Tom also relaxes fairly suddenly, letting the bird go without carrying out the threats that he made moments before. One way of accounting for this is that, once the bird mentions "Mithe" and "drinking," Tom realises that his real intentions to journey to the far west have not been guessed after all, and that the bird was referring to a more ordinary journey to visit Maggot. Tom proceeds to laugh at the misunderstanding, and decides that, since the bird is off to alert Maggot to his visit, he will visit Maggot instead.

Reading Tom as being associated with the wind also suggests interesting possibilities as to the line "I might go by other ways, but today I'll row there" (*"Boating"* 13, l. 20). After Tom's journey and his visit to Farmer Maggot, he seems to travel by very interesting "other ways" indeed:

Old Maggot slept at last in chair beside the embers.
Ere dawn Tom was gone: as dreams one half remembers,
some merry, some sad, and some of hidden warning.
None heard the door unlocked; a shower of rain at morning
his footprints washed away, at Mithe he left no traces,
at Hays-end they heard no song nor sound of heavy paces.
(*"Boating"* 21, ll.141-146)

After his visit to Maggot, Tom seems to vanish without a trace, and is again associated with dreams. He leaves his animal friends to retrieve his boat ("Boating" 23, ll.147-150), and the poem gives no indication as to whether he ever returns home, suggesting that he might have embarked on his final journey from home at last.

A FAMILIAR FELLOW

Reading Tom as the wind connects him, as this paper has shown, with the larger text of *The Lord of the Rings*, with *The Silmarillion*, and with "Boating," in felicitous ways. However, thus far, this paper's reading hinges on some fairly precarious bases: on a set of details in the episode which might be read as a covert allusion to a series of obscure medieval riddles. It is useful, at this juncture, to consider on what basis readers judge whether such details in a text do or do not amount to a covert allusion.

What makes covert (or purely implicit) allusions a "difficult" textual feature is that they can go unnoticed (or unrecorded, undiscussed) indefinitely, and that their presence within a text must needs remain open to debate. Readers are left to judge intuitively whether the similarities between features of one text and another are obvious and meaningful enough to constitute an allusion. This makes covert allusions in texts from past eras an especially difficult feature. Because readers' perceptions of texts are not transhistorically stable, neither are their assumptions regarding the presence or absence of allusions.⁸

The historical horizon of expectations on which such judgements regarding the presence or absence of allusions are based, might be approached in some measure by considering the literary backdrop of the text in question. For this reason, it is useful to examine figures in the canonical children's literature of Tolkien's day who represent anthropomorphic and divine winds. These are useful both for the precedents that they set regarding this type of character, and because they are emblematic of certain features of the horizon of expectations of Tolkien's original audience. Arguably, when Tom is read against this literary backdrop, a much lighter touch is required to render him as a recognisable character of the same kind.

THE WIND IN LANG'S COLOUR FAIRY BOOKS

The hobbits' entrance into the Old Forest is marked as significant by such elements as the hedge that the inhabitants of the Shire plant to mark its border, the fact that many of the hobbits have never crossed that border, and the

⁸ These ideas are derived from the conversation on the study of allusion in Ben-Porat, Perri, Machacek, Leddy and Irwin ("What is an Allusion?" and "Against Intertextuality"). Machacek, in particular, considers how allusions are not transhistorically stable.

fact that the well-ordered farmlands of the Shire are so very different from the gloomy and frightening Forest. It is also marked as a significant transition in that the episode shifts subtly away from the text's novelistic baseline, towards the tropes of the fairy tale genre. The hobbits' entrance into the forest and their meeting with a mysterious guide figure who lives in an isolated cottage are the most obvious and recognisable tropes contributing to this shift. Tom seems a supernatural figure, but his precise nature and his function in and relevance to the tale are left unexplained. Such figures are, as Max Lüthi (*The Fairytale as Art Form and Portrait of Man [Art Form]* 43-68) notes, a typical feature of fairy tales, and they are meaningful in that they are "suggestive of secret systems that project just this tip into the realm of the tale," (Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature [Folktale]* 62) and of the "invisible ties" that link the heroes "with the secret powers or mechanisms that shape the world and fate" (*Folktale* 57).

The hobbits' various narrow escapes in this episode also follow the same ritual-like pattern that Lüthi considers an essential feature of fairy tales, namely that the heroes receive warnings or prohibitions against a specific action, but are then forced or foolish enough to take that action, after which they are miraculously saved from the crisis that follows. This is such a typical feature of the genre that, in fairy tales, "prohibitions are also anticipations" (*Art Form* 91). Tolkien himself discusses the use of such prohibitions as typical feature of fairy tales (OFS 49, 185, 217). Much like Little Red Riding Hood or the wife of Bluebeard setting out on their respective journeys, the hobbits are told exactly what actions to avoid. They are warned not to enter the Old Forest, but do so to escape the Black Riders. They are warned to avoid the Forest's haunted centre, but that is where the shifting trees force them to go. They comment on the fact that Old Man Willow seems to be making them sleepy, and warn one another that they should stay awake, but they doze off and are attacked. On leaving Tom's house, Tom warns them to travel quickly and avoid the barrows, but they take a leisurely lunch and a nap on their way to the road instead, and are lured into one of the barrows, before being rescued by Tom once again.⁹

Aside from the fact that these fairy tale conventions suggest the "religious touch" Lüthi mentions, this echoing of fairy tales is also important because anthropomorphic winds are a stock type in that genre, and the hobbits' time with Tom recalls the interactions of such winds with fairy tale protagonists.

⁹ Tolkien famously considers the miraculous and unlikely salvation, what he calls the "eucatastrophe," to be an essential feature of fairy tales. He relates it to the Christian evangelium, and sees it as evoking the victorious resurrection of the just after death—after all hope seems to be lost. Lüthi, similarly, reads the fairy tale hero's helplessness, foolishness, and his miraculous salvation as representative of the fact that such a hero is "as little master of his own fate as man in general," and of "what is referred to in theology as grace" (*Art Form* 139).

One might turn to Lang's colour fairy books (1889-1910) for examples of the trope, both because Lang's collections attempted to represent the most popular fairy tales of the time, and because Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories," written the year after he writes the Tom Bombadil episode of *The Lord of the Rings*,¹⁰ shows a detailed knowledge of the tales in Lang's collections (Flieger and Anderson 129). In that essay, Tolkien also notes that "In English none probably rival either the popularity, or the inclusiveness, or the general merits" of Lang's collections (OFS 33).

Out of Lang's ten Colour Fairy Books, only two (the *Crimson Fairy Book* and *Lilac Fairy Book*) do not feature the wind as either a magical force or an anthropomorphic character in at least one story. Overall, there is little consistency as to the type of character that the wind is in these fairy tales. It is sometimes kind; sometimes said to intone "fee, fi, fo, fum" and then try to eat people in the manner most readily associated with the giant in *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

However, six of the tales¹¹ stand out for being in some measure analogous because the wind features fairly prominently in them, and because their protagonists interact with the wind in similar ways. In these, the journey that the protagonists take through a harsh natural environment and towards the wind's home is often unusually arduous, takes them far from civilisation, and takes an unusually long time or covers an unusually large distance. The protagonists often travel along mysterious roads or by mysterious means, much as the hobbits travel through the Old Forest, one of the few spaces in Middle-earth that are "unmappable" due to its shifting trees. The fairy tale protagonists are sometimes hopelessly lost and in need of assistance by the time they discover or reach the wind's home, as the hobbits are when Tom finds them. A common tenet is that the fairy tale wind is said to be all-seeing and therefore capable of finding things or people that the protagonists have lost, or that they need. While some of these protagonists seek the wind out to ask its advice, some come upon the wind by chance, and then receive his help. The hobbits have lost Gandalf; though they have great need of him, he never arrived as promised, and they must therefore try to reach Bree alone. And though they do not think to ask Tom about Gandalf, Frodo does have prophetic dreams in Tom's house, in which a being capable of flight seems to show Frodo where Gandalf is. Frodo is "lifted up" over the barriers around Orthanc, as if he is flying, hears the sound of the

¹⁰ His letter to Stanley Unwin of 13 October 1938 mentions that he has reached Chapter XI (*Letters* 41, #34), and in February of 1939 he indicates that, given the choice to speak about any of Lang's work, he would like to discuss the nature of Fairy Stories (Flieger and Anderson 125).

¹¹ See "East of the Sun and West of the Moon," "The Snuff Box," "The White Wolf," "The Sprig of Rosemary," "Soria Moria Castle," "The Enchanted Pig."

Black Riders' hooves preceded by a sound like a "strong wind," and notices the wind blowing around Gandalf (*LotR* I.7.127). Frodo also later dreams of the end of his journey, when he sails for the West, and when he wakes from his second dream, Tom is in the room with him.

Though the hobbits' interactions with Tom echo the interactions of protagonists with the winds from fairy tales, these winds are, like most characters of that genre, fairly flat. Tom's character owes more to the wind as it figures in the canonical children's literature of Tolkien's day, written in later periods.

JOHN RUSKIN'S SOUTHWEST WIND, ESQUIRE

Such a figure features in Ruskin's "The King of the Golden River" (1851). When the south-west wind first comes knocking at the door, Ruskin's protagonist, Glück, assumes that it must be the wind, since nobody else would dare to knock so boldly at the door where he lives with his two infamously cruel and miserly older brothers. Glück turns out to be right, since the visitor is eventually identified as "Southwest Wind, Esquire" (103). At first, however, Glück is surprised to find that it is *not* the wind but instead an unusual-looking old man at the door. As the episode progresses, most of the old man's peculiarities, such as his corkscrew-like moustache, his long cloak, his salt-and-pepper hair, and the fact that he is "so *very* wet" (101), are exposed as resulting from the fact that he is in fact a storm-cloud-clad south-west wind.

Like Tom Bombadil, this old man is short, "about four feet six" (99). And while Tom Bombadil has a blue feather in his hat to match his blue clothes, Ruskin's Southwest Wind, being a wind of storm clouds, has a black feather in his black hat, to match his black clothes. Like Tom, Ruskin's wind is vaguely comical, but also powerful and imperturbable, and therefore puzzling. When he is treated badly by Glück's older brothers, he responds by sending them across the room "spinning like a straw in a high wind" (101). He announces that he will never return, and Glück's brothers rejoice, but because he has influence with his relations, the West Winds, none of them ever return to bring rain to the area either, and Glück's brothers face hard times. Though the wind is not directly connected with God in this tale, it is a moral creature, punishing the wicked and protecting the good. Glück's brothers, like Tolkien's antagonists, are characterised as evil partly because they have a purely utilitarian view of nature. Southwest Wind, like Tom, guides the characters to see nature afresh.

Tom differs from Ruskin's wind, however, in that Tom is more clearly developed as bearing a connection to the Powers. Clearer precedents for this side of his nature are set by Grahame's Pan and MacDonald's North Wind.

KENNETH GRAHAME'S PAN

It has often been observed that the setting and creatures of Tolkien's Shire bear an overall resemblance to those of Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* (*Willows*) (1908). Both settings recall the late Victorian English countryside, are bordered by ominous forests with unpleasant reputations, and involve small creatures who live sheltered lives in well-furnished holes in the ground.¹²

As mentioned before, Noel places Tom in a rough category of character types such as Puck and Pan, that have been "diminished" to woodland spirits (127). That Tom and the god Pan might bear any more direct relation to one another seems, at first, counterintuitive: Tom lacks Pan's darker, more sexual side, he calms rather than incites "pan-ic," and he is not, like Pan, a known mythological figure. The hobbits' encounter with Tom does, however, bear some resemblance to the animals' encounter with Pan in *Willows*.

The portrait of Pan in *Willows* is, like the portrait of Tom Bombadil in *Lord of the Rings*, brief, striking and intriguing, and involves Pan coming, against all odds, to the rescue of a small and helpless creature lost in the forest. Grahame's Mole and Rat encounter Pan as they search for a lost baby otter. Just as Merry and Pippin's capture by Old Man Willow reduces Frodo to feeling "desperate: lost and witless" (*LotR* I.6.118), the missing baby otter is an instance from *Willows* in which the possibility of tragic death looms. Both groups of protagonists experience a crisis in a forest, follow a river deep into the forest, and are drawn by mysterious forces towards a clump of willows. Tom and Pan resolve these crises, and they first make their presence known in that the sound of their music gradually becomes audible over the sound of the wind. Tom announces his presence through his nonsense-song, which becomes audible over the sound of the wind caused by Old Man Willow's anger. As Grahame's Rat and Mole approach the clump of willows where they encounter Pan, Rat discerns Pan's song first, while Mole says he hears nothing himself "but the wind playing in the reeds and rushes and osiers" (Grahame VII.151).

In each case, the protagonists depart without any memory of having been in an "august Presence" (Grahame VII.154); in Mole and Rat's case, this is because Pan somehow causes them to forget that they had encountered him, had become awestruck, and had worshipped him (VII.156). Once their encounter with Pan is over, it is a "capricious little breeze, dancing up from the surface of the water" which gives them the "gift of forgetfulness," "[I]est the awful remembrance [of Pan] should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth and pleasure" (VII.156-7). In Tom Bombadil's case, he meets the hobbits in the guise

¹² Tolkien seems to have admired *Willows*. When a collection of additional stories about the *Willows* characters was published after Grahame's death, Tolkien wanted a copy right away (*Letters* 90, #77).

of a kindly, comical little man, and this tempers what glimpses they do get of his supernatural power.

Pan is not *exclusively* a god of the wind, but because he is associated with the all-pervading animating force in nature, and with pan-pipes, wind does come to stand for Pan. In *Willows*, it is suggested that the wind is a sign of Pan's presence and agency.

Aside from the fact that it is the only profound moment of its kind in *Willows*, Rat and Mole's encounter with Pan is also significant for the way in which it informs the title *The Wind in the Willows*. Though Rat and Mole's encounter with Pan is a relatively brief episode, and not particularly representative of the overall tone and sensibility of the novel, it was considered significant enough for illustrations involving Pan to be used on the front cover of the first edition. The use of this illustration begins to suggest that the title *The Wind in the Willows* refers to more than just the nature of the setting, and that it refers instead to the benevolence of the presiding genius responsible for keeping that setting as idyllic and sheltered as it is: Pan, who describes himself as the protector of small woodland creatures (Grahame VII.161-162), is the titular "wind" in the willows.

When Shippey (108) and Curry (76) describe Tom as being, like Pan, the presiding genius of a place, that is largely based on the strong connection Tom has with his small piece of land; a piece of land that the hobbits soon leave. But through his connection with the wind, Tom also, like Grahame's Pan, comes to represent the agents of that Providence which presides over the protagonists' fate throughout their various adventures. Tom is, however, more explicitly connected with a quasi-Christian angelic hierarchy than Pan is. In this, he resembles no anthropomorphic wind as much as MacDonald's North Wind.

GEORGE MACDONALD'S NORTH WIND

Though Tolkien had a complex response to the work of George MacDonald, expressing both admiration and criticism of it, MacDonald is generally considered to have been a significant influence: Gisela Kreglinger, for example, notes that Tolkien is indebted to MacDonald's essays on the imagination for many of the ideas he explores in "On Fairy-Stories," in particular the "relationships among faith, imagination, and fantastic writing" (399), and the ways in which fairy tales might reflect and convey aspects of Christian faith.

MacDonald's *At the Back of the North Wind* (1871) is a work which embodies these ideas. This tale follows the life of a young boy named Diamond who, as a very young child, is visited by the North Wind incarnate. North Wind shares some of the conventional contradictory aspects of the wind represented by Tom's character and the medieval riddle tradition: Diamond learns that,

while the North Wind is most definitely a force for good, she sometimes has to do what seems evil, such as stirring up a storm which sinks a ship. When Diamond objects, the North Wind replies that she is simply obeying “orders” (MacDonald 89). She seems not to know exactly what “orders” she is following, but it is suggested that she is, in essence, an emissary of God, since her mischievous friend the East Wind has told her that the world is “all managed by a baby” (58), referring to Christ. Her actions are also often shown ultimately to work toward the good of the deserving.

In doing what she senses she must, MacDonald’s North Wind seems to be responding to the music of the spheres, of which Tolkien’s music of the Valar is another variation. North Wind tells Diamond:

I will tell you how I am able to bear [the suffering of others], Diamond: I am always hearing, through every noise [and suffering], through all the noise I am making myself even, the sound of a far-off song. I do not exactly know where it is, or what it means; and I don’t hear much of it, only the odour of its music, as it were, flitting across the great billows of the ocean outside this air in which I make such a storm; but what I do hear is quite enough to make me able to bear the cry from the drowning ship. So it would you if you could hear it. (MacDonald 71-72)

As the hobbits meet and then leave Tom before their quest really begins, so Diamond has a series of interactions with the North Wind at the beginning of MacDonald’s novel, after which he undergoes various adventures in which the North Wind does not feature—at least not incarnate. When at the beginning of the novel Diamond becomes very ill, the North Wind takes Diamond to visit the country at her “back,” which is also the land of death, an idyllic land of innocence and contentment. When Diamond gets well again, his soul returns from this land, but the experience has changed him. He bears witness to a simple though profound awareness that, in the face of all seeming evidence to the contrary, God is just and benevolent. The largest part of the novel tells the story of how Diamond remains untroubled and unfailingly virtuous, cheerful, and kind amidst his family’s misfortunes and poverty.

Diamond’s carefree existence, like Tom’s, is portrayed through long, cheerful nonsense-songs about the simple pleasures afforded by the natural world. It is, in both cases, suggested that these songs are in some sense profound, or the result of an enlightened state of mind. Diamond describes his songs as being sung by the river in the idyllic land of Death, and toward the end of the hobbits’ stay with Tom the narrator speculates whether Tom’s songs are perhaps in “a strange language unknown to the hobbits, an ancient language whose words were mainly those of wonder and delight” (*LotR* I.8.146). When Diamond dies at the end of the novel, he is said to have returned to the country

"at the back of the North Wind," much as Frodo travels West, towards the West Wind, at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*; a journey he dreamt of in Tom Bombadil's house.

Regarding Tolkien's creative journey, it is interesting to note that one of the earliest outlines of a story that would contribute to the legendarium mentions Eärendel meeting "The Spider," "Tree-men," and "fire-mountains," being carried over the earth by a mighty wind, and journeying to the "back of West Wind" (qtd. from Tolkien's notes in Garth [53]). While it has always been clear that the other motifs mentioned in this early draft eventually re-emerged in *The Lord of the Rings*, it might also be said that, in a sense, the motif suggested by the phrase "back of West Wind" re-emerges in the Tom Bombadil episode: as in MacDonald's novel, one of the emissaries of the divine try to bring it under the protagonists' attention, before their journey really begins, that their steps are shadowed by the divine.

SINGING TO THE WIND

Because wind is associated, in *The Lord of the Rings*, with the protagonists' perceptions regarding the divine and, by implication, the afterlife, the motif also recurs in episodes concerned with their responses to death. One such episode is best read with Lang and MacDonald's tales in mind. Before the protagonists reach the battlefields closer to Mordor, they participate in two burials that recall the historical heroic age. The first is the Barrow-wight's attempt to make the hobbits assume the roles of long-dead warriors, and the second is Boromir's funeral by boat. In Tolkien's day, these two heroic-age funerary practices had received attention when their odd combination in the Sutton Hoo site was discovered. What is interesting about these two heroic-age burials in *The Lord of the Rings* is that the connected motifs of riddles and anthropomorphised winds, which this paper reads as being implicit motifs in the Tom Bombadil episode, recur in more explicit forms in the episode surrounding Boromir's funeral, extending the overall echoing of the earlier episode by the latter.

Immediately before and after Boromir's funeral, Aragorn, Gimli and Legolas puzzle over the direction their journey should take. For guidance, they look at the tracks on the ground, to try to establish the directions in which Merry and Pippin have been carried, and Frodo and Sam have fled. These tracks are muddled and difficult to read. They also consider their various priorities and loyalties to the different members of the disbanded fellowship. This amounts to what they repeatedly describe as a "riddle"; one that, though it seems insoluble, they must "guess" if they are to "choose [their course] rightly" (*LotR* III.1.416).

At the funeral itself, Legolas and Aragorn sing a dirge in which they alternately question the winds as to the whereabouts of Boromir, and sing the

supposed answers provided by the directional winds. The West and South Winds are said to reply that they have lost sight of Boromir. The North Wind is said to reply that he has seen Boromir in his funeral boat (*LotR* III.1.417-418). The dirge also reflects mournfully on the fact that Boromir's people, not knowing of his death, will anticipate his return. The questions asked of the different winds in this song echo the fairy tale convention of asking the wind after the whereabouts of a lost companion. They also echo MacDonald's idea that the wind might have access to the land of death.

At the same time, the questions in the dirge seem to be purely rhetorical, as if, in Middle-earth, it is conventional to ask unanswerable questions of the winds to express a sense of sadness or longing. The very fact that the questions seem rhetorical suggests the reason for their sadness: Boromir, in death, has travelled into a region of which the presiding Powers, and the winds that represent them, seem silent. They seem neither able to carry on a dialogue as in the dirge, nor available to guide the protagonists in solving the "riddle" of what the best course of action might be.

However, when Frodo and Sam later meet Faramir in Gondor, Faramir tells them that news of his brother's death reached him in the form of a vision: He saw Boromir in his funeral boat, on its way to the Sea (*LotR* IV.5.666). Faramir's vision, like the dreams Frodo has in Tom's house about Gandalf's whereabouts and about sailing west, again seems to imply that, in Middle-earth, the winds are neither deaf nor dumb.

When the Barrow-wight captures the hobbits and tries to create in them the same sense of despair felt by the warriors originally buried in the barrow, the hobbits summon Tom through a song, and he saves them from that despair. The suggestion that the winds have responded to the rhetorical questions of the song sung over Boromir, and have carried a message to his family, serves a similar function as Tom's intervention. In either case, the suggestion of benevolent Powers presiding over Middle-earth mitigates the sadness felt in the face of death.

CONCLUSION

On being asked about Tom's function in the text, Tolkien says that

Tom Bombadil is not an important person—to the narrative. I suppose he has some importance as a 'comment'. [...] [H]e 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, #144)

The reading of Tom's identity presented by this paper attempts to add to the existing dialogue regarding the type of comment that this character might

be seen to make. According to this reading, the "riddle" of Tom's identity can be seen to depend on a fairly broad body of intertexts: on portraits of the anthropomorphic and divine winds in the medieval and quasi-medieval texts of the riddle tradition, in fairy tales, and in some examples of children's literature with a mythopoeic and antiquarian bent.

However, all of these texts differ from *The Lord of the Rings* in that their portraits of the wind are *explicitly* that: Many of the riddles have answers that are, in Tolkien's time as in ours, generally accepted; the fairy tales and children's stories call the wind by its name; Ruskin's Southwest Wind reveals his true identity; Grahame and MacDonald explicitly state that the charmed lives led by their small, helpless protagonists are due to a supernatural Power presiding over their lives. Such explicit characterisation hints at the connection that the fairy tale has with the world of myth. Grahame, by including Pan, does more than just hint at such a connection, since Pan is a known mythological figure.

In the development of his "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien repeatedly considers the different narrative traditions and stylistic features that are typically represented in fairy tales, comparing them to the primary colors which an artist might recombine into more nuanced shades (OFS 193, 204-5, 226, 247, 249). In an early draft of the lecture, he mentions the editions of Lang and the creations of Macdonald, Ruskin, and Grahame as examples of canonical fairy tales which, in various ways, participate in such a project, but he lingers on Grahame's *Willows*, saying that it

is an almost perfect blend [...] of many pigments: beast-fable, satire, comedy, *contes des fées* (or even pantomime), wild-wood and rivers of Oxfordshire—with just in one corner that colour, too much, the beautiful colour in itself that muddies the exquisite hue. Pan has no business here: *at least not explicit and revealed*. (OFS 249, my emphasis added)

Tom Bombadil can be seen as an attempt to include a figure which has a similar function to that of Pan, but who has a less explicit connection to the narrative tradition of myth. One effect of (and potential motivation for) this difference in treatment is that the episode remains within what Tolkien seems to consider a more pleasing stylistic scope.

On the other hand, the Tom Bombadil episode might also be seen as elaborating on an idea common to the canonical fairy tales and children's literature that this paper reads as significant intertexts to the episode. These texts are concerned not only with the supposed anthropomorphic or divine nature of the wind, but also with the lack of awareness that ordinary people have about that nature: the wind of the fairy tale tradition is seen by scholars of that genre as an obscure reference to the divine and the way in which its heroes enjoy the favour of providence; Ruskin's antagonists are punished by the Southwest Wind

because they do not recognise him, thinking he is simply a harmless old man; Grahame's Rat and Mole try in vain to remember their encounter with the august Presence of the "Wind in the Willows"; the majority of MacDonald's characters never meet the anthropomorphic North Wind, and throughout the novel they consider Diamond to be foolish due to the unconditional trust in providence that he learned from her.

Tolkien can be seen as participating in a similar project and as drawing attention to the fact that he is doing so by echoing the tropes associated with anthropomorphic winds of these texts. However, he can also be seen to hark back to the medieval riddle tradition by putting not only his characters, but also his audience in a position which leaves them frustrated and dissatisfied with, or at least intrigued by, a highly unusual speaker with a list of cryptic epithets. Like the riddles, Tom prompts his audience to ponder his nature, and, in so doing, the nature of the divine as it is represented in Middle-earth.

However, because the portrait of this character also suggests a profoundly "other" way of being in the world, even an answer such as the one suggested by the present paper cannot rob Tom of his essential mystery; he remains an "enigma" in both the older and the newer sense of the word.

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