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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Strange Case of Tom Bombadil: A Metaphysical Account

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| ABSTRACT
The aim of this article is to present a coherent account of the identity and narratological purpose of Tom Bombadil by examining various pieces of textual evidence and identifying the historical model on which he is largely based. What is revealed is a metaphysical reality not explored in current literature that reveals the author's philosophical and theological grounding as part of his universe creation. It reexamines the character in light of those findings and encourages further research.

| KEYWORDS

Strange Case of Tom Bombadil; Metaphysical Account; historical model; literature

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1. Introduction

What can we say of the merry Tom Bombadil the wood-dweller, the perfectly unknowable character from Lord of the Rings? There has been a lot of speculation as to his origins, such as that he is a nature spirit, a frolicking, disinterested incarnation of Eru Iluvatar, a Spirit of the Ainur, or a reincarnation of Aule. Many readers have focused on his presumable Nordic roots, such as his connection to the hero of the Finnish Kalevala, and so they concluded he is a Northern myth himself, a happy-go-lucky songster from the Viking regions, not much unlike Santa Claus. Yet, there are still aspects of his personality that have not been formally recognized and evaluated, which seems to be necessary if we are to adequately investigate his position within the narrative.[1] In order to arrive at a better understanding of the role an ethically and narratively ambiguous character plays in the scheme of things, some basic questions about ethics and narrative first need to be asked.

Most agree that Bombadil represents a force for Good: he helps the hobbits on their journey, and teaches them the ways of the world by retelling old mythologies and situating them in the relevant historical tradition. He showers them with gifts and generally strengthens them for their quest. The clarity and purpose of his moral function—although in other ways he is still ethically ambiguous, being an isolated, pacifist type—is revealed when the effects his actions produce are contrasted with the effects produced by the opposing side: "A further aspect of evil in The Lord of the Rings, which implies that the proper functioning of the moral faculty requires an emotional input, is that Sauron has a depressing and demoralizing effect on those who come under his sway" (Boyd 75). Bombadil, in contrast, has the opposite effect on others, exerting a revitalizing, uplifting and purpose-giving influence: "In the character of Tom Bombadil, the power of joyful exuberance is developed into a striking form, underscored by his easy dismissal of the Ring's power" (Guanio-Uluru 76). Bombadil is one of those figures, brimming with life, that seem "almost alien to the author's habitual invention" (Boyd 76). His non-dualistic, integrated philosophy of life adds many important elements to the ethos of Middle-earth.

An argument often heard is that he has no function in the narrative proper. Since he does not directly participate in the action of the main story, he is viewed as a marginal figure of little or no importance. Unfortunately, this argument conflates the

1 See Shippey, *The Road to Middle-Earth*, 105 for some basic questions concerning Bombadil.

general story with the main narrative, as if the only important thing was the linear progression of an action toward a goal. What is not recognized is the larger scheme envisioned by the author which contains different narratological elements, including the fact that he "adds a significant moral dimension to *The Lord of the Rings*" (Guanio-Uluru 54). We can legitimately conclude that by dismissing Bombadil as not important to the story, any interpretation or adaptation establishes from the outset its unfaithfulness to the original work and intention of the author, conceding it is unable to accommodate the enigma which the author tried to convey.

Thus, in order to arrive at a clear understanding of Bombadil's role, we first need to determine the historical model used as a source for the most salient aspects of his personality. There are in fact six pieces of textual evidence that identify the historical figure on which he is largely based. After examining them, we can reevaluate his role on the basis of those findings. For the purpose of clarity, I will list them in order: 1) In a world dominated by the power of the Ring, a symbol, according to different interpretations, of Evil, Power, or Sin, Tom represents a saintly figure, free from Sin, Power, and Evil, 2) He lives in the woods, surrounded by nature and, presumably, animals (as indicated by his giving a donkey to the hobbits) with whom he lives in perfect harmony, 3) In his letters the author describes Tom as having "taken a vow of poverty," (144) since he is said to have renounced the ways of the world, 4) Tom is a songster, a lyricist, always singing, expressing himself almost exclusively in song and verse, 5) He is described as a mildly mischievous figure, a trickster of sorts; for example, he plays with the Ring and makes it disappear and reappear, alarming the hobbits, and 6) He performs miraculous acts of saving the lives of the main characters in their first encounters with evil.

In each and all of these aspects combined, we are confronted with the representation of the life of Saint Francis of Assisi. For just as Tom is positioned as perhaps the saintliest of the Middle-earth characters, so is St Francis venerated as the greatest Christian saint. Just as Tom lives in the woods with animals and other creatures, so is St Francis the official patron saint of nature and animals. Just as Tom sings, so was St Francis known as the troubadour of the Middle Ages. Just as St Francis established a religious order which made that vow central to its purpose, so has Tom taken a "vow of poverty." Just as Tom is mischievous, so is St Francis known as a "joggleur of God," performing tricks and pantomime to attract an audience before preaching to them. Just as Tom performed saving miracles, rescuing the hobbits from Old Man Willow and the Barrow-Wights, so St Francis miraculously saved, in one famous account, a small Italian village from imminent mortal danger.

2. An Account of Similar Aspects

First then, in a very general sense, we are faced with a character unaffected by the power of the Ring, the supreme symbol of Power, Evil or Sin, making him a clear representation of sainthood, and specifically in that form found in the Catholic tradition in which it bears certain well established characteristics, such as freedom from the effects of sin, benevolence and high spirits. For in examining the evidence of the congruence of the life of St Francis and Tom, it becomes obvious that Tolkien was drawing upon an archetypal image of the free and happy saint. This is supported by various incidents and their interpretations throughout the books. For example, putting the Ring on one's finger, much like engaging in Sin, is accompanied by a surge of immediate power and pleasure. Tom the saint has renounced power to live a life of freedom, poverty and simple joy. Indeed, we can say that his merriness is caused by his independence from the world of dependence, constituting an elaborate metaphor of the human binding to a source of suffering. In a world in which everyone is unfree and affected by the power of the Ring, Tom is a free, lighthearted, benevolent creature, whose character is specifically and manifestly reflective of the Catholic freedom of the saints. To further establish this initial point, we can recall that Frodo gives the Ring to Bombadil without hesitation, with no thought or apprehension which are always present in his dealings with others. Tom therefore affects the Ring's power over others, an image of the saint's control over mortal sin.[2] This is reflective of the freedom and power over sin as indicated in the book's general symbolism, and is in keeping with the teaching on the persistence of saints in Catholic theology. The Ring also seemed to grow large in Bombadil's hand, as Sin is magnified and perceived more clearly when placed in contrast with the purity of Saints.

The descriptive and etymological elements that point to this are well-established: his first name, Iarwain, literally means 'old-young'[3]—saints are generally perceived as youthful, energetic and vibrant, even in old age: "Tom Bombadil also appears to be Chestertonian paradox personified. Older than the world, he is perennially young. He has the wisdom to wonder, the wisdom of wonder, which sees through worldly cynicism. He has childlike innocence without childish naïveté" (Pearce 430-1). Not only is the Christian idea of childlike innocence required to enter the Kingdom of Heaven characteristic of many characters in *Lord of the Rings*, but Tom's character and life seem to perfectly embody the biblical mandate "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). Within the narrow bounds of the Old Forest, Bombadil has limited scope of movement, where he is surrounded by malevolent creatures, and in interactions with others he

2 Thus, on purely textual grounds, if he wanted to keep the Ring for himself, not only would no one, including Sauron, be able to take it from him, but if Bombadil asked Sauron to give him the Ring, we can conclude that Sauron would do so with the same alacrity as Frodo, since the act of giving it is a direct consequence of the power over its effects by the receiver, and Bombadil, as demonstrated several times, possesses absolute power over any effect the Ring can produce.

3 His full name, Iarwain Ben-adar, signifies being fatherless, and represents the common trope of saints having a Father in Heaven.

always seems to know more than they, yet always behaves in the most benign way: "Like the emblem placed atop the tallest spire when a medieval cathedral was finally finished, Bombadil may be Tolkien's own monkish gift to Iluvatar—a creature not meant for our understanding but for the enjoyment of God alone" (Wood 42). To further confirm this initial, general characterization, Tom is often described as an enigma in the critical literature,[4] by the author himself (*Letters* 196, #144), and by other characters in the book—he is characterized by Elrond as 'a strange creature' (Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* II.2.265), just as in Christian hagiography saints are described as a wonder to the world, strange and incompletely understood. So, Tom is the solitary saint in Tolkien's mythology, as indicated by three key aspects. Ethically, since he is not burdened by sin—Bombadil's freedom from sin is usually seen as related to his deliberate repudiation of power and control: "Rivendell's policy to destroy the Ring in fact imitates Bombadil's renunciation of control. The policy to cast the Ring into the cracks of Mount Doom is a determined will not to power […] Rivendell will finally conform completely to Bombadil's renunciation" (Treschow and Duckworth 188), indicating that Bombadil represents the ideal image of a saint, one whose example is to be followed and imitated. Aesthetically, in being described as merry, amiable, warm and perpetually young; and metaphysically, being made of old, possibly outside of Time itself, just as saints are made in the mind of God before their beginning in Time, based on Jeremiah 1:5. And perhaps most conclusively, although he is said to be ancient and present in Middle-earth from the beginning, Tom Bombadil is not found in the *Silmarilion*, just as the Christian saint is not found in the Old Testament.

Thus, as much as Frodo typifies the striving saint's sacrificial love, so Tom Bombadil exemplifies the independent, happy saint, which is consistent with the author's overall plan of making the book to be "primarily a study of the ennoblement (or sanctification) of the humble" (*Letters* 255, #181): "First, the startling thing about Bombadil as the hobbits encounter him in the story is that he is wholly unaffected by the Ring's power and consequently appears as a vivid contradiction to Gandalf's view that the Ring is supremely powerful – the view which has set the whole quest in motion and upon which the logic of the whole plot depends" (Guanio-Uluru 55). His unaffected, carefree attitude is emblematic of the spiritual lightness of the person not burdened by the knowledge or consequences of evil actions. Although Bombadil may not be important to the action proper in a narrow sense, he is important to the implied author's general ethical and narrative strategy, because he represents that point 'beyond' towards which the movement of the whole narrative progresses (Ibid, 55). And because he precedes the striving saint chronologically in the books, Tolkien suggests that the finished saint is independent of the constraints of Time itself—one clear indication of which is that he has an awareness of the future resurrection: "The wisest characters in Middle-earth (Gandalf, Aragorn, Bombadil) have some idea of this future resurrection, life after death" (Shippey "Author of the Century" 424). Because of the general congruence of these attributes, namely his foreknowledge, understanding, sympathy and good-will, he can perform the saint's confessional role: "In successive chapters, Tom Bombadil [lays] bare the hearts of trees and their thoughts," describing them as "filled […] with pride and rooted wisdom, and with malice" (Cohen 120).

We can also briefly mention one final aspect of the representation of Tom as a saintly figure, which is his marriage to Goldberry, who, according to different interpretations, represents the Church, or Christ himself: "Tom and Goldberry are the only functioning (i.e., loving, sacramental) marriage in the whole of The Lord of the Rings" (Eaglestone 70). Goldberry then is best understood as an image of the Church, exercising a Marian influence through the "sociopsychopneumatically linked 'homes' of mother-love [Mabel], Mother Church" (Richmond 13-14). Goldberry is also the only character to pronounce the biblical words 'he is', clearly reminiscent of 'I am.' She keeps a house in which everyone is welcome and safe, and is described as wearing a gown "[…] green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of flag-lilies," analogous to the descriptions of the riding Christ in Revelation.

But perhaps the most conspicuous aspect connecting Tom with St Francis is their close relationship with the natural world. Bombadil leads an idyllic life in the woods, conversing with plants and animals, while St Francis famously lived in a cave, preached to the birds and is recognized as the patron saint of nature and animals. Their intimate knowledge of the natural world informs their understanding of human events, but also of Time itself (Basham 157). An ecological metaphysics thus informs their apparently detached, disinterested attitude to historical events (Ibid, 157). It is often argued that Bombadil's ecological identity is the cause of his unique powers (Rudd 22) but also that he represents an embodiment of deeper levels of meaning: "Due to his deep unity and communion with the natural environment, his aesthetic attitude of appreciation for growing things, his pacifism, his merriment, his self-mastery, and his status as 'eldest', Bombadil serves as an embodiment of many of the deeper levels of valuing in the tale – not least its ecological subtext." (Guanio-Uluru 80). The geographical boundaries of Tom's life thus become the basis for the exploration of power dynamics throughout the novels. In opposition to characters who have far-reaching but finite power in large, often industrialized areas, pursuing their ambitions relentlessly and mostly to the detriment of others, Tolkien gives absolute power within a small, natural realm to a disinterested, carefree and benevolent creature whose actions are aimed at the benefit of others. This set of characteristics embodied in a single character, particularly the fact that he is not a 'master' of things, but allows them to exist individually, is indicative of the theological teachings on the aseity of God, namely his self-existence and self-sufficiency.

4 For example, see Liam Campbell, "The Enigmatic Mr. Bombadil: Tom Bombadil's Role as a Representation of Nature in The Lord of the Rings".

In fact, and to further explore this point, most of the basic dogmatic teachings on the attributes of God are found in Tolkien's descriptions of Bombadil: the incorporeality of God is indicated by his fleeting, unlocalizable movement, by him being unaffected by the most important object in the physical universe, and indicated by critics who argue that Bombadil is merely a spirit of the woods; the attribute of omnipotence is indicated by his absolute power and control, the attribute of mystery is indicated by his generally incomprehensible manner of speaking and doing; omniscience is indicated by his old age and knowledge of beginnings; oneness is indicated by his being a singular, unique and complete creation among other characters;[5] providence is indicated by his forethought and preparation of the protagonists for their mission; omnipresence by his appearing everywhere within seconds; impassibility is indicated by the evident inability of Bombadil to suffer, as there are certainly no examples of it; immutability is indicated by his possessing the same attributes throughout time: a small, portly man of unchanging age in a hat existing from the beginning of time; immanence and transcendence are clearly indicated by his being in the world, yet outside it, and finally, the teaching on the simplicity of God states that He is not partly this and partly that, but whatever He is, is so entirely—and thus Bombadil is a married man in the fullest sense, for example, thinking about his wife when he is out gathering flowers, signifying that he is entirely dedicated to her at all times.

Some of these attributes can also consistently be applied to his dwelling, a symbol of the Church in a fallen world. His house has no specific coordinates within the forest, the only indication of its location being that it is 'over hill and meadow,' and yet, paradoxically, specific directions are given on how to reach it, suggesting that it is not merely a local place, but is found universally and only through guidance. Most importantly, once it is found, its grandeur creates in the hobbits feelings of awe, joy and safety. The Old Forest itself, described as dark and full of hate, exemplifies not only the theme of the contrast between Good and Evil as it relates to geographical boundaries, but also reflects the insularity of the monastic sphere in a fallen world. Indeed, this isolated area is described as more conscious and alive than the fallen world outside: "But the Forest is queer. Everything in it is very much more alive, more aware of what is going on, so to speak, than things are in the Shire. And the trees do not like strangers. They watch you." (*LotR* I.6.110). This enhanced physical and moral vision of the Forest towards the outside world explains the somewhat indifferent attitude that Bombadil and the Ents have to the Wars waged outside it: "the detached perspective of Tom Bombadil and the Ents towards the War of the Ring embodies the indifference of nature towards ephemeral human affairs" (Bratman 251).[6]

However, this view, as pointed out previously, ignores other aspects of Tom's role in the War, such as his preparing the hobbits with gifts and stories and fortifying them on their mission. Thus a more accurate account is not that the natural world is his chief or only concern, but that his attunement with human affairs happens at a deeper level. The ecological subtext should not be accepted as a conclusive definition of his character, but examined in its relation to the nature-based aesthetic Tolkien drew from, allowing us to correctly evaluate his narrative function and find answers to the various real and hypothetical scenarios in which he is an actor. One such instance is the speculation by the Council about giving him the Ring. This type of counterfactual scenario indicates not only the readiness of the protagonists to contemplate any possibility when faced with limited options, and thus the seriousness of their predicaments, but also the reality and extent of his capabilities, as well as their potential significance to the narrative: had the Council decided to give the Ring to Bombadil, Sauron would try to conquer the Old Forest. Given the established power dynamics, it becomes interesting to consider how this scenario would turn out: the armed, desperate forces with limited power against an unarmed, disinterested being with absolute power. Since the author had contemplated having Bombadil stop the Nazgul dead in their tracks by merely raising his hand, we can see how he envisions such a 'conflict' to develop—it would be a void attempt from the start, which is partly why it was never developed. Thus, in this conflict the spiritual and theological implications embedded in the text are revealed: the conception of Good and Evil is firmly shaped by Catholic ethics, from which the image of the happy saint emerges, unaffected by sin and exemplified by such figures as St. Antony of Padua and St. Francis of Asisi, who overcome the struggles of the world with apparent ease.

The third distinguishing characteristic that establishes a connection with the saint of Asisi is the vow of poverty. Throughout his life, St Francis emphasized the renunciation of power and is responsible for establishing poverty as a chief Christian virtue. By saying he would marry himself to Lady Poverty, he elevated it to the status of a person (Vauchez 165). Several important facts from Bombadil's life perfectly encapsulate this philosophy. Being sequestered from the world, Bombadil has a limited scope of movement, which is emblematic of the cloistered life. He acts as a gift-giver, personifying St Francis's principle "For it is in giving that we receive," just as saints are said to be wedded to the Church, receiving and bringing her gifts. By taking a vow of poverty, he introduces a separate gift economy based on mutual exchange (*Bassham 95).* His life thus discounts the idea of sex as the original sin, since he is married, and confirms the idea of possession (of knowledge) as the original sin, since he does not possess the things he is master of. His marriage to Goldberry is a symbolic representation of this philosophy, in that being childless, which

5 Shippey refers to him as a "lusus naturae, a one-member category" (Shippey, *Road to Middle-Earth,* 105).

6 For a more thorough treatment, see "Tolkien's Green Time: Environmental Themes in The Lord of the Rings" by Andrew Light (Bassham and Bronson 150-63).

is strange for a couple of their age, is a major aspect of their poverty. This paradoxical fact of his life, namely, enjoying plenty and acting as a gift-giver while living under a vow of poverty, is not only a Biblical motif,[7] but an indication of the relevance of the Christian monastic philosophy to the general narrative strategy: a consequence of renouncing certain experiences, desires and pleasures is that the person achieves greater insights and wisdom related to the workings of the material and spiritual worlds. His poverty is thus directly related to his power over the Ring, making him its only real ruler, because while it has been claimed that the Lord of the Rings is the Ring itself, or Sauron, the standard and accepted definitions of 'Lord' and 'Ruler' include the possession of unidirectional control over its object by a person, thus making Bombadil the only real Lord of the Rings, a controversial thesis, to say the least. By taking the vow of poverty, he has renounced control over all things, but has thus gained power over all things, including the Rings, as confirmed by the principle from Psalm 118:22, "The stone which the builders discarded/has become the cornerstone," which in his case becomes relevant and uniquely prophetic—the only major character that is almost universally left out of every production of the book is the one on which the entire, reinvisioned mythological-ethical structure may stand.

To conclude, his life, as it relates to poverty, contains both an ethical and an aesthetic aspect. The vow of poverty establishes a plan of behavior which shapes his entire life—in the correct attitude of an ecclesiastic, Tom cannot expend too much time on the affairs of the world: "I've got things to do [...] my making and my singing, my talking and my walking, and my watching of the country. Tom can't be always near to open doors and willow-cracks. Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting" (*LotR* I.8.145), but it also forms a basis for the aesthetic of the virtuous life (Treschow 190). He has dispossessed himself of all things and thereby acquired a pure "delight in things for themselves" (*Guanio-Uluru 59)*.

The next aspect differentiating Bombadil from all other characters is the fact of his constant singing. Song figures greatly in Tolkien's mythology, acting as a sort of prayer, and Bombadil, a character originally created in a series of poems, uses verse to explain things, tell stories, issue commands, entertain his guests, or comfort them after they have nightmares: "The nightmares that Pippin and Merry experience are unlike Frodo's visionary dream, but they are similar to each other in tone and in circumstance, each being soothed by the enchanted singing of Tom Bombadil" (West 88). This aspect of his character is partly based on Vainamoinen from the Finnish *Kalevala*, in that both are old, ancient beings who sing and possess intimate knowledge of the beginnings of the world, and his peculiar name is also indicative of the author's efforts of having names express a fundamental aspect of identity (Smith 5). Thus Bombadil, as an individual, is not only completely different from all other individuals in a metaphysical and existential sense, but his name is also different from all other names, possessing a certain unsophisticated, un-etymological quality, for naturally, since he has no ancestors, his name cannot have an etymology. His name is thus a product of Tolkien's 'inventive genius,' demonstrated in "how well the name 'Tom Bombadil' fits its jolly, rumbustious owner." And indeed, his name is also reflective of his unique musical qualities: "We can see from the examples of the invented names 'Withywindle' and 'Bombadil' that Tolkien knew how to provoke certain reactions in readers' minds through the use and combination of specific phonemes [...] Similarly, composers of music know how to arouse certain emotions through the use of specific keys" (Smith 11). The notable difference here is that philologists purportedly have far greater control over the impressions they create in the minds of their readers than do composers in the minds of their listeners. By giving a name like *Bombadil* is to create a definite impression which does not admit of divergence, analysis or comparison. A listener to a symphony may use the theme and adapt it into their own conceptual or fantastical creation, but language produces such definitive forms of thought that little creative divergence is possible. For example, one can listen to the Pastoral symphony and imagine a landscape based on an alien world and fully enjoy the authenticity of the produced effect, but one cannot hear the word *Bombadil* and ascribe to it any serious, mystical or taciturn qualities and experience an authentic effect. The very introduction of the name *Bombadil* into the *LotR* system of names produces a discordant effect similar to that created by St Francis's introduction of the word and concept of 'joggleur' into the Christian monastic nomenclature.

To conclude, his singing, in conjunction with the impression produced by his unique appearance, serves to underscore the effect of enchantment aimed at the protagonists:

There is something cheerfully fictive and enchanted about Bombadil (signaled to us by his talking in verse), and this tells us that we too can transform our world into one of enchantment in which we see things as they really are: rings as pretty pieces of shining metal, and men and women as utterly real and yet utterly mysterious. In contrast to Tom's singing that rescues the hobbits from entrapment, the honeyed tones of Saruman are merely tricks of dominatory magic that fixate their audience so that they do not see what is really going on (Bassham 96).

7 Fleming Rutledge compares the banquets provided by Bombadil and the Elves, and argues that they blend into the image of the New Jerusalem (*Battle for Middle-earth* 72).

A significant part of this enchantment is thus the masking effect produced by versification: someone who merely listens to his verses and their preposterous rhymes may think there is nothing behind them, but they have a purpose, their repetition serves not only to entertain, but also to protect him (Bombadil) from intruding eyes. As Boyle writes, "they may give a faded form of pleasure, the relief from care that comes with the reassuring repetition of verbal or other formulas with which we keep the truth at a distance" (Boyle 118). So what is the truth that Bombadil keeps from us at a distance? Perhaps that the drama presented in the narrative proper is not decisive or to be taken all too seriously, or that everything will turn out well in the end, since its turmoils will result in some kind of a paradisaical conclusion, of which his abode is a preview. Whatever the case may be, it is clear that his entire persona, his erratic behavior and repetitive, nonsensical verse-making are all designed to keep the reader at bay, to prevent him from seeing the serious symbolic, ethical and theological meanings he brings to the world of the Lord of the Rings. The author himself engaged in this masking effort in private letters, warding off and discouraging any attempts at serious interpretation of what is, by all accounts, his most enigmatic character.

From what others have observed so far, and in accord with other aspects of his personality, we can conclude that his versifying is a form of gift-giving (Milbank 117). His '*Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo'* sounds jarring and pointless in relation to all other song or speech in *Middle-earth: "In each case the act of utterance becomes intelligible by finding its place in a narrative." (Maclntyre 210). However, Bombadil's utterances are largely unintelligible because they cannot be fitted into any recognizable narrative. The stories he tells are mythopoeic accounts of far away and long ago, with no set characters, no clear progression, nor any clear relation to the present circumstances,* dissociating him from any other type, and deepening the chasm between the serious, mainstream mythology and his own whimsical, marginal existence, but since songs act as prayers in Tolkien's works, when examined more closely, these discordant elements show a pattern with a unique purpose. The unusual nature of his utterances is explained as resulting from the fact that they represent "an ancient language whose words were mainly those of wonder and delight" (*LotR* I.8.146). Tom's speech can thus be understood as a form of glossolalia aimed at praising the natural world. His songs, which sound like gibberish, consisting mainly of "a long string of nonsense-words" (*LotR* I.6.119) but also his wife Goldberry's singing, create a fully immersive liturgical setting, a sublime, choir-like atmosphere representative of the daily life of the Church. If it is true that "Tom Bombadil's powerful singing and the constant sing-song in his speech express his closeness to and deep participation in the divine nature" (Treschow 193), and that his jocularity arises from it not only as a form of free expression, but as a fundamental aspect of his personality, then their correspondence to the nature songs and divine laughter of St Francis becomes apparent. Known as a troubadour during the Middle Ages—the German philosopher and theologian Joseph Gorres wrote a book titled *Franziskus, ein Troubadour*, in which Francis is portrayed as a jongleur and poet, the 'Orpheus of the Middle ages' (Vauchez 232)—St Francis died singing psalm 142, which, perhaps significantly, deals with the theme of an isolated, imprisoned individual, avoiding snares set by enemies. We can conclude that this correlation of a single character trait with a salient and unique characteristic within one's own cultural and religious tradition, which bears some theological or literary significance, is a fundamental aspect of Tolkien's work.

Just as Bombadil represents a mischievous, capering figure, playing inconceivable tricks with the Ring of Power, so St Francis presents himself as a 'jongleur of God,' an idea considered provocative by the clergy of the time: "To associate, as did Francis, jongleurs and God thus constituted a real provocation that consciously challenged the traditional boundaries between the sacred and the profane" (Vauchez 321). The term 'jongleur' was used almost exclusively to describe "actors and narrators of legends and farces," who were "marginal folks, generally poor and doomed to vagrancy […] The great ones of this world despised them but could scarcely do without them because their presence livened up their gatherings and feasts […] It even happened sometimes that jongleurs could say to the powerful, with a farcical tone of derision, what people at court or their subjects really thought of them, but which no one in their immediate entourage dared to say to their face," prefiguring the role of the court jester of the medieval morality plays and the later Shakespearean fool. Normally treated as a marginal character by readers and critics alike, even though entire chapters of the book are dedicated to him, Bombadil's position within the *LotR* hierarchy is entirely appropriate for such a role. It is certainly reinforced by the general attitude the other characters, particularly the most powerful ones, have towards him. At times fascinated, nonplussed, or dismissive, they make various errors of judgment concerning his actions and possible role within the narrative. As is most evidently seen in the cases of Elrond and Gandalf, these erroneous opinions serve to isolate him from the relevant action and define the space within which the accepted actors can act out their own roles, i.e. maneuver the Ring in a concerted, purposeful, uninhibited manner, since an actor who can easily dispose of it presents a major disruption to the narrative plan. Their actions require well-defined limits within which narrative tensions are preserved and hardships can be addressed, overcome and made progressively more difficult. Thus the story makes substantial progress by excluding and misrepresenting the one character that might jeopardize its structural integrity, and his position in relation to this structure can only be properly understood if one recognizes the archetypes he represents. For example, Klaus Jensen and Ruairidh Macdonald have analyzed Bombadil from the perspective of Jungian psychology, and have established a connection between Bombadil and the trickster archetype. The trickster's task is to "facilitate psychological transitions by breaking down old barriers and outdated conscious attitudes" (Jensen 37) which is analogous to the moment of Bombadil's appearance in the story—the hobbits' embarking on a mission and confronting the world beyond the Shire. In Bombadil they see "none of the trickster's negative qualities (e.g. his

uncontrollable mischievousness), and identify him instead as the archetypal divine child, the wise fool, and ultimately the divine jester. As divine child, he represents birth, rebirth, and triumph over death—evidenced especially in his rescue of the hobbits from their burial in the barrows" (Jensen 39). But a further function of the divine child is to bring one back to his original roots. To Frodo, suddenly cut off from his roots, Bombadil represents "life affirming gaiety, 'earthiness,' and literal selflessness"—the best characteristics of hobbits. The relationship between these qualities of character and the resulting forms of behavior is succinctly described by Pearce, *"The admiration that Chesterton felt toward Saint Francis was inextricably bound up with his belief in the superiority of childlike innocence over all forms of cynicism. Saint Francis and his followers were called the Jongleurs de Dieu because of the innocence of their jollity and the jollity of their innocence. 'The jongleur was properly a joculator or jester; sometimes he was what we should call a juggler.' It was this mystical synthesis of laughter and humility, a belief that playing and praying go hand in hand, which was the secret of the saint's success" (Pearce 111). This aspect of innocent playfulness has been variously researched by scholars, often in relation to the guilelessness required for resisting the Ring's allure and its fetishistic nature.*[8]

Bombadil is thus not simply outside the present story temporally, since he "belongs to another Age," but also conceptually, since an awareness of the past is perpetually mixed up in him with the present, informing all of his actions. As Nicolas Boyle notes, "Thanks to the perspective provided by the hobbits, *The Lord of the Rings* repeatedly conveys the startling transition from unawareness of the past, or a sense only of its strangeness and difference, to recognition of it as one's own past, or even as one's own present, as closer and more immediate than had been thought" (Boyle 259). A full awareness and presence of the past is thus perfectly embodied in him, since he is constantly retelling and reliving it. His knowledge of past and present is characterized by a completeness and profundity demonstrated by no other character, including Gandalf, because to him they are interpenetrable at a very basic level, and this also protects him from various dangers, as we shall see presently, since it forms the basis for his providence.

The degree to which various incidents in the trilogy are based on actual historical events depends on how successfully such elements can be incorporated into the text, and the possible ethical and theological underpinnings which the event itself establishes. Thus popular anecdotal stories from his own cultural tradition become part of the underlying structure of his fiction and are used by the author to establish a correspondence which reinforces both events. Just as Bombadil delivers the hobbits from Old Man Willow, singing to him in an act of persuasion, a reflection of St Francis's attempt to convert the Sultan, so also in the episode of the Barrow Downs, which is a potentially more violent confrontation, we recognize the incident in which St Francis pacifies the Wolf of Gubbio. As Ross Smith has pointed out, "The travelers are almost consumed by this overwhelming, devouring landscape, but are rescued in time by someone *capable of speaking directly to and commanding* the land and the trees, namely Tom Bombadil" (Smith 16), and in an identical manner St Francis directly accosts the dangerous wolf that terrorizes the village: through use of direct speech both are able to neutralize the threat and establish mastery over the natural environment. There are in fact numerous instances from the life of St Francis in which he saves animals from slaughter (Vauchez 212, 273). In the case of Bombadil, his powers even include raising the hobbits from the dead: "This is the second time Bombadil saves them, and his ability to dispel the horrifying Wight, and even call Sam, Merry and Pippin back from (a state close to) death further underscores both his power and his mastery. Bombadil's power is spiritual rather than physical, since both the Old Willow and the Wight obey his commands without any physical struggle" (Guanio-Uluru 55). Being in perfect command of the natural and spiritual worlds, Bombadil removes evil with words, since saints are traditionally given the power to expel evil spirits, and it is thus wrong of Gandalf, or any other character, to describe him as careless or disinterested.

3. A Metaphysical Account

But I had now learned from Aquinas that my attempt to provide an account of the human good purely in social terms, in terms of practices, traditions, and the narrative unity of human lives, was bound to be inadequate until I had provided it with a metaphysical grounding. (MacIntyre xi)

I will now show how Tolkien was aware of the inadequacies of describing a universe solely in terms of traditions and narratives, and provided a substantial part of this metaphysical grounding in Tom Bombadil. In the first place, we are faced with a character who is described not in terms of any known social practices or traditions, the account of his life lacking even narrative congruence with the main story, or basic commonalities with other types of lives, but is described in terms of an exclusive, *sui generis* independence, his main attributes borrowed from historical and mythological persons, all of which produces the effect of a largely unknown or unknowable entity. However, it also points to a metaphysical foundation which encompasses and presupposes both poles of ethics, it not being entirely clear to everyone whether he acts for good or evil; both opposites of

8 For a thorough perspective see Alison Milbank, "My Precious: Tolkien's Fetishized Ring," Basham and Bronson.

aesthetics, in him being an unsightly, rugged, dwarf-like creature who nonetheless leads a happy life in beautiful surroundings, wedded to a beautiful woman; both poles of philosophy: he dissembles by telling outlandish tales which are hard to accept, yet his words are always truthful; and both extremes of epistemology: child-like, seemingly ignorant behavior full of playful wonder is coupled with complete knowledge of the beginnings of the universe.

A metaphysical account would be able to contain all of these polar possibilities—since the *Silmarilion* does not provide a metaphysical foundation for the Middle-earth universe, but is a historical account of its natural and supernatural origins—thus not only allowing the historical development to occur, but making it intelligible. Since Tolkien chose to describe the Fall in aesthetic terms (one of the Ainur creates a discordant musical theme), and the moral fall is only consequent upon this—bearing in mind that even though some aspect of free will seems to be presupposed in the act of music creation, the Fall, as described, cannot strictly be attributed to an act of free will, since free will is an ethical concept and must be interpreted in those terms, and of course we cannot say that a theme is morally bad—the ethical system, one that clearly distinguishes between good and evil, thus arises or is established at some unknown point in the interim between the initial discord and the later historical account, which is philosophically and theologically inadequate. Tolkien is aware of this problem and addresses it by placing the missing metaphysical components, i.e. Tom Bombadil, in historical time post-facto, thus closing the initial caesura in the theology. We should note that this act of philosophical completion is not performed post-facto in terms of universe building, since the creation of this particular character precedes the creation of the universe, but should be interpreted as a simultaneous, intuitive preservation of philosophical and theological consistency.

An example of how these metaphysical elements affect or shape events in historical time can be seen in the dynamics of commands in Bombadil's relations with the hobbits. When faced with an injunction from Tom, the decision-making process in the hobbits is suspended, and the command is performed with no thought, apparently based on some 'non-rational decision.' While Gandalf's commands are performed with rational understanding and conscious acquiescence of the will, being based on a relationship of trust, Bombadil's commands are performed in an area 'beyond will.' This is because in the first case the recipient is aware of the existence of established and knowable ethical categories, while no such awareness exists in the second case. Since the hobbits are uncertain as to whether he is good or bad, the action of their will is suspended, and the command is performed without understanding of the mind or effort of the will, because there is an awareness of the presence of metaphysical elements that precede and are the basis of such a process. What Tolkien thus demonstrated in Bombadil is the closest thing to a pure relationship between a believing soul and God, a relation and an acting which extends beyond temporality, beyond will, beyond the constraining necessities of time and space and into an eternal moment where only a direct and immediate presence exists.

Bombadil's commands thus carry a metaphysical force that is instilled in each type of utterance he produces. Because he is such an individualist/solipsist, every command he gives is characterized by a 'because I wish it' reason, making it impossible to divorce one type of utterance from another—his commandment to Barrow Wights is both 'because I wish it' and 'because it would give pleasure to a number of people,' while his asking Frodo for the Ring falls under the categories of 'because I wish it' and 'because it is your duty,' namely, it is Frodo's duty to provide insight into an object which bears on their individual destiny or the collective destiny of the group. So what we have is a wish obeyed as a command, another upsetting of categories, which again indicates a metaphysical basis. This ambivalence is also related to his general dual role of what MacIntyre describes as manager and therapist (MacIntyre 30). On the one hand, the common goal of the other characters is treated by him as a 'given end, as outside his scope.' His main function is actually to transform their neuroses into 'directed energy' through exposure to his life, his story-telling, advice and gift-giving, in effect, to prepare them for their mission. On the other hand, in his managerial role, the precise couching of the command in a certain type of discourse is an essential aspect of its efficacy:

Factual judgments are true or false; and in the realm of fact there are rational criteria by means of which we may secure agreement as to what is true and what is false. But moral judgments, being expressions of attitude or feeling, are neither true nor false; and agreement in moral judgment is not to be secured by any rational method, for there are none. It is to be secured, if at all, by producing certain non-rational effects on the emotions or attitudes of those who disagree with one. We use moral judgments not only to express our own feelings and attitudes, but also precisely to produce such effects in others. (MacIntyre 12)

What is thus essential for the command to work is to employ methods of non-rational persuasion. Tom achieves this through the use of the already mentioned estrangement function of poetry, the invoking of outlandish scenes, and a subjectivized account of nature or his surroundings. The final effect of his speech is thus a product of all of these types of discourse, as when he prefaces his warning of the danger of Barrow Wights with an elaborate description of the natural habitat (*LotR* I.7.130). However, as MacIntyre further explains, "What I also came to recognize was that my conception of human beings as virtuous or vicious needed not only a metaphysical, but also a biological grounding." Thus Bombadil's life presents a complete picture, a basic metaphysical idea coupled with characteristics firmly grounded in the natural world. Just as this biological aspect is so prominent in Bombadil, it is conspicuously absent in other supernatural characters, such as Gandalf, is related to fundamental ethical categories and clearly divorced from what Tolkien would consider superficial secular virtues such as agreeableness and pleasantness. "First that 'good' is

the name of a simple indefinable property, a property different from that named by 'pleasant' or 'conducive to evolutionary survival' or any other natural property" (MacIntyre 15). Bombadil is thus described as simply good, as a personification of a 'simple indefinable property,' although other characters generally regard him as unpleasant and disconcerting, and he is certainly not conducive to any evolutionary survival, showing no signs of development, but living a hermetically frozen and thus unnatural existence.

A further aspect of his behavior can be analyzed from the perspective of the philosophy of emotivism, which involves the erasing of a distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations (MacIntyre 23-4). If we apply it to Bombadil's case, it becomes clear that by severing the power of the Ring over Frodo for a few moments, Bombadil freed Frodo, even though Frodo was not aware of this, from being the subject of a manipulative social scheme, i.e. from being a largely unwitting and helpless player in a larger game. Due to his marginalized position, Bombadil's gift-giving and advice are often interpreted as small-scale actions, but their importance for the 'large-scale project' can be instantly recognized given the above considerations, and one certainly need not follow the rest of the narrative to retrospectively reveal his intentions. To establish this point, we may note that according to the narratological use of the term 'moral'—"the early uses of 'moral' in English translate the Latin and move to its use as a noun where 'the moral' of any literary passage is the practical lesson that it teaches" (MacIntyre 38)—the Bombadil episode represents the introduction of the moral dimension into the story, as he introduces the hobbits into the world of danger, of right and wrong, and shows them how to behave in particular situations. Bombadil thus clearly adopts a moral attitude that contemplates long-term developments, rather than merely immediate consequences. And even though Frodo freely chose to carry the Ring, one of the most detrimental effects of that decision is that it transformed his moral life into a servitude, making him a means to an end. Bombadil thus opened up a space wherein the free moral agent can be reestablished and the larger plan clearly seen. By playing with the Ring, Bombadil shows Frodo 'good reasons for acting in one way rather than another,' an ability to choose from moment to moment which is as close to the freedom of an independent moral agent as is attainable in his position.

Now, let us further explore his managerial function as it relates to the main narrative. In that he manipulates and controls reality with a purpose to achieve certain goals, there is certainly a managerial aspect to Bombadil. Since he does not manipulate human beings into compliant patterns of behavior, but allows them to freely investigate and get into danger, merely aiding them with advice, we must conclude that for him effectiveness has been raised to a morally neutral level. A different perspective on the neutrality exhibited by the managerial role is provided by Goffman's analysis of the individual role player and his degree of involvement (MacIntyre 115). Tolkien's characters certainly exhibit aspects of this dynamic. Hobbits become over-involved in whatever topic they encounter, Galadriel becomes infatuated with a single idea, and Denethor's obsession with effectiveness leads to his demise. However, without a place in the social order, "a man would not only be incapable of receiving recognition and response from others; not only would others not know, but he would not himself know who he was" (MacIntyre 123-4). We can extend this observation to include the place of the individual in a heroic society: "[…] morality and social structure are in fact one and the same in heroic society. There is only one set of social bonds. Morality as something distinct does not yet exist." It certainly appears clear that Bombadil does not have such a place in the social order of a heroic society, but perhaps a better way of explaining it is to say that by excluding himself from the heroic Middle-earth ethos, he adopts an emotivist, modernist form of identity.

The individualism of Bombadil is thus best understood in contrast with the ethos of the heroic society from which he is excluded: "that there is no way to possess the virtues except as part of a tradition in which we inherit them and our understanding of them from a series of predecessors in which series heroic societies hold first place" (MacIntyre 127). Bombadil has no predecessors and thus no tradition, which means his virtues exist in an original form. He is not part of a heroic society, but of a personal, individualistic epic, in which a certain aspect of history is being played out in a very different type of setting. To expand on this last point, the conception of virtues in the Middle-earth ethos is very clearly based on Christian ethics and is teleological in nature. Thus characters in the narrative proper individually demonstrate virtues such as resilience, fortitude, courage, or foresight. Bombadil, however, is not limited to one virtue, but embodies all of them simultaneously. His complete knowledge of history enables him to predict future events in the manner of Gandalf; he shows resilience when confronting evils, which the hobbits will often emulate, and he rushes into danger without thought, something Aragorn and Legolas will do regularly. Thus, the narrative proper of *LotR* is a realization of a fantasy narrative which places constraints on the characters involved in it, and from that perspective, the character who does not act under those constraints will possess the greatest amount of freedom, as evidenced in his actions. However, since most characters conscientiously participate in the action of a single, unified narrative, the largest constraint is actually placed on him who, occupying a place outside it, is treated in an aggressively dismissive way by its actors, especially those with authority to orchestrate parts of the main narrative, and less so by those merely playing a role. This duality is therefore a significant aspect of the book's narrative strategy and demonstrates the overall breadth of Tolkien's moral vision.

As we explained, the narrative proper is based on a medieval type of society: "The virtues are then on this kind of medieval view those qualities which enable men to survive evils on their historical journey. I have already emphasized that medieval societies are in general societies of conflict, lawlessness and multiplicity" (MacIntyre 176). Bombadil's world, on the other hand, is characterized by general concord, strict rules which set limits to what happens, and unity. We can see then how Tolkien uses a medieval metaphysics to couch the symbolic embodiment of individual virtues in the heroic form of narrative (MacIntyre 115) while the representation of a complete set of virtues is placed in a modernist, ahistorical, individualist sphere. The reason Bombadil is not situated in a medieval universe, although mostly based on a medieval historical individual, is because he contains metaphysical and other elements which have an underlying theological purpose, and which require a unique historical and conceptual creation to be adequately contained.

After establishing the historical model used for creating the character of Tom Bombadil, the particular symbolic elements which represent various forms of virtue were revealed, and so his function within the story was more clearly understood. This analysis has examined various contradictory aspects of the character, from the ethical variants it contains, its metaphysical basis, managerial and therapeutic roles, to the historical-religious connections it contains, and it was found that all of these elements have to be accounted for to accurately determine the nature of his personality and his role within the story. What is ultimately discovered is that the most complex, hard-to-define, contradictory character in Tolkien's work has been, perhaps predictably, variously misunderstood or misinterpreted because one or more of these aspects was unaccounted for. The consequences of the process by which different readers, critics or film producers have tried to disentangle him completely from the narrative, which clearly cannot be done without addressing the remaining strands of effects of his actions and personality found throughout the books, are yet to be explored.

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