In the House of Tom Bombadil

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Contents

Foreword

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I've been in love with Goldberry since 1979.

Well, "love" might be too strong a word. To be certain, I've had a crush on her since then. Granted, I was only eleven at the time I first met her, but something about her captivated my imagination and has ever since.

> Then another clear voice, as young and as ancient as Spring, like the song of a glad water flowing down into the night from a bright morning in the hill, came falling like silver to meet them....
>
> Her long yellow hair rippled down her shoulders; her gown was green, green as young reeds, shot with silver like beads of dew; and her belt was of gold, shaped like a chain of flag-lilies set with the pale-blue eyes of forget-me-nots. About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be enthroned in the midst of a pool.[1]

What's not to love? She is, in almost every way, the perfect embodiment of a water spirit, a holy Nimue, a non-native White Buffalo Woman, or a more organic Virgin Mary.

1. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring,* 2nd edition (1954; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1994), 119, 121.

Equally important, as the Hobbits understood, Goldberry embodied grace itself. "Their eyes followed her, for the slender grace of her movement filled them with quiet delight."[2]

I'm also fairly certain the painting of Goldberry by the Brothers Hildebrandt—which appeared in the 1977 Tolkien Calendar—didn't hurt my image of her, either. To this day, aside from Tolkien's own paintings, it's my favorite visual depiction from Tolkien's entire mythology. In some mysterious way, the two brothers captured her essence in that painting. She is at once the purity of youth and the ancient goddess of wisdom.

I also really liked (and continue to like) Tom Bombadil. I never minded his outlandish appearance. In fact, I thought his primary colors fit the majesty of his character. Plus, he helped my heroes, Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, just when their need was greatest. What was there not to like? My only disappointment on my first read of *The Lord of the Rings* was that I didn't get to see more of the man! That is, presuming he's a man. Certainly, I found him as interesting as I found Gandalf, and I loved Gandalf.

I can also state with certainty that after teaching *The Lord of the Rings* for two decades that no topic elicits more discussion from students than exactly who Bombadil is. Is he God? Is he a man? Is he a Vala or Maia that went native? Is he an unfallen Adam? Just who is he?

Whatever else he is, Bombadil is an excellent steward. In his own description of the land over which he is master, he says:

> There were fortresses on the heights. Kings of little kingdoms fought together, and the young Sun shone like fire on the red metal of their new and greedy swords.

2. *The Fellowship of the Ring,* 122.

An Apology

This is a short book; even so, I suspect that the subject's creator would think that it is too long and that the ideal page count should amount to zero.

I think that Professor Tolkien would have believed that I am up to no good. He didn't altogether approve of preachers, you know, being suspicious of us when we venture beyond our pulpits. He thought that we are particularly dangerous when we sit down to write stories, and he warned small children about us. Here's an example taken from his unpublished introduction to *The Golden Key* by the Reverend George MacDonald:

> I must warn you that [George MacDonald] is a preacher, not only on the platform or in the pulpit; in all his many books he preaches, and it is his preaching that is valued most by the grown-up people who admire him most.[1]

I think it is safe to conclude that Professor Tolkien didn't want children to grow up into the sort of people who read stories looking for preaching. Instead he wanted

1. *Smith of Wootton Major*, ed. Verlyn Flieger, 2nd ed. (1954; New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 71–2.

children, as well as adults, to be taken up into stories, to experience the wonder, the mystery, and even the terror that can be found in them.

Perhaps it will surprise you to learn that (for the most part) I agree with him. In a review of Tolkien's story "Smith of Wootton Major" (my favorite when it comes to his short stories, by the way), Roger Lancelyn Green said something about stories that Tolkien later thanked him for: "To seek for the meaning is to cut open the ball in search of its bounce."[2] Rubber balls are meant to be gratefully received and enjoyed. (Even preachers know that.) When it comes to Tolkien's stories, it's their bounce that he wanted us to enjoy.

And yet, balls can be admired and even talked about without cutting them open. Tolkien did that sort of thing himself quite famously in a talk he once gave titled "On Fairy Stories." In that talk we learn (obliquely) that what irritated the Good Professor when it came to preaching with stories was *allegory*. After repeatedly being accused of committing the sin of allegory in his own stories, he said this in the foreword to the second edition of *The Lord of the Rings*:

> I cordially dislike allegory in all its manifestations, and always have done so since I grew old and wary enough to detect its presence. I much prefer history, true or feigned, with its varied applicability to the thought and experience of readers. I think that many confuse 'applicability' with 'allegory'; but the one resides in the freedom of the reader, and the other in the purposed domination of the author.[3]

My intent with this book is to exercise my freedom as a reader. And taking Professor Tolkien at his word, I intend

2. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien* (1981; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), 388.
3. *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring,* xv.

CHAPTER 1

"Who is Tom Bombadil?"

You either love him or hate him, or so it seems. For readers in a rush, Tom Bombadil feels like a needless insertion, a detour, or maybe a way to buy time for an author who is unsure of what comes next. How does he advance the plot, anyway?

If a threadbare story is what you're after, and a thrilling race to the finish, then there doesn't seem to be much of a point to Bombadil. He might as well be left out of *The Lord of the Rings*. That's what Peter Jackson did with his film adaptation.

But J.R.R. Tolkien didn't write a thriller, even though it is thrilling. It's *more* than that, and that's why people thrill to read it again and again. Most thrillers skim along the surface, each thrill topping the last. Speed is essential. But if you know what comes next, the thrill is gone. However, *The Lord of the Rings* is better the fourth or fifth time through, and that's saying a lot, because reading it just once can change your life. It changed mine.

The Lord of the Rings is a deep book. It's the depth that justifies re-reading, because the reader misses so much the

first time through. (And the second, third, fourth, and fifth times through.)

But even people who have read *The Lord of the Rings* with patience and attention to detail can lose patience when it comes to Bombadil. What's the point of the enigmatic and apparently ridiculous fellow in the blue jacket and yellow boots? What purpose could he possibly serve? Even characters in the story are as mystified by him as the reader. And scholars who have plumbed the depths of Tolkien's legendarium[1] are flummoxed when asked, "*Who is Tom Bombadil?*"

So, who is Tom Bombadil?

Let's begin with his appearance. I mean both his physical appearance and his appearance in the story. Here's his entrance. This is from *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the first volume of the trilogy, from the chapter titled "The Old Forest."

> Then suddenly, hopping and dancing along the path, there appeared above the reeds an old battered hat with a tall crown and a long blue feather stuck in the band. With another hop and a bound there came into view a man, or so it seemed.

Tolkien then describes an odd creature—someone too big to be a hobbit, yet too small to be a man. That's a subtle hint, I think. Tom is *sui generis*—he's a breed apart. Furthermore, he's loud, not just in speech, but in manner. Hobbits are wary, and even stealthy, as any small creature with an interest in survival should be. But Tom is heedless,

1. The legendarium is the enormous backstory of *The Lord of the Rings*. It covers thousands of years and contains hundreds of characters. If that seems like it would take a lifetime to come up with, that's because it did.

and I think that this is another clue. He doesn't care who knows he's coming—in fact, he announces it. Then the Good Professor tells us more:

> He had a blue coat and a long brown beard; his eyes were blue and bright, and his face was as red as a ripe apple, but creased into a hundred wrinkles of laughter. In his hands he carried on a large leaf as on a tray a small pile of white water-lilies.[2]

Well, he does appear odd, but he seems nice enough. He turns out to be better than nice; he turns out to be good, and just as importantly, surprisingly powerful—he's just what a hobbit needs when he's at the mercy of a malevolent willow-tree.

Speaking of trees, the dilemma the hobbits face when Tom shows up is itself a bit surprising because Tolkien was something of a tree-hugger.[3] Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin have gone into the Old Forest to escape the pursuit of black riders—black figures on black horses. The story has hardly begun, and the four hobbits that the story follows are nearly done in by a willow-tree. But the Forest proves to be nearly as dangerous as the riders. Later we're told that even though trees are large, and strong, they're not invulnerable. Things that move about on two legs, or four, or even more, prey on them: eating them, cutting them down, burning them. But they remember when they were the Lords of the forest. And this combination of age, memory, and malice has made them dangerous, especially

2. *Fellowship of the Ring*, 117. Douglas Wilson once pointed out to me that the most common color in *The Lord of the Rings* is grey—Grey Havens, grey eyes, Gandalf the Grey, etc. But he noted that when Bombadil appears, he comes in the primary colors: yellow, blue, and red. He's the full spectrum. This will be important when I contrast him with someone else in *The Lord of the Rings*.
3. For a marvelous treatment of Tolkien's ecological vision, see Matthew Dickerson and John Evan's book *Ents, Elves, and Eriador: The Environmental Vision of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2011).

the Great Willow, the most powerful tree in the Old Forest. He holds the other trees under his sway—his songs are "invisible root-threads" that pull other trees along after him according to his will.

It is while the hobbits are under the spell of the willow that Tom Bombadil comes romping and stomping along. We learn his name before we even seen him because the fellow can't stop singing about himself. As he comes traipsing by, this is what the hobbits hear:

> *Hey dol! merry dol! ring a dong dillo!*
> *Ring a dong! hop along! fal lal the willow!*
> *Tom Bom, jolly Tom, Tom Bombadilo!...*[4]

This is just a snippet of what he sings—and it has the feel of something impromptu. It not only describes him, it announces his intentions. He is going home to his beloved Goldberry, and he's bringing something important—white water-lilies. And he's in a hurry—so watch out Willow-man!

When Tom arrives on the scene Merry's feet are sticking out of a crack in the tree, and Pippin has been swallowed alive. Frodo and Sam run up to Tom begging for help. Tom then, with what amounts to mock alarm, asks:

> 'Whoa! Whoa! Steady there!' cried the old man... 'Now, my little fellows, where be you a-going to, puffing like a bellows? What's the matter then? Do you know who I am? I'm Tom Bombadil!'[5]

After Frodo and Sam tell Tom about their predicament, Tom says this:

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4. *Fellowship of the Ring,* 116, 117.
5. *Fellowship of the Ring,* 117.

CHAPTER 2

"Tom Bombadil is Master"

The future of our world depends on the contents of this chapter.[1]

I'm about to get into a hot topic—so hot I need to ease into it slowly and carefully, like a hot bath. What am I talking about? Let's return to the story.

The hobbits are now enjoying the atmosphere of a comfortable and well-ordered house. Goldberry attends to her domestic chores, but her movements are so graceful the hobbits sit entranced. And from the outside, Tom comically sings to himself. Then Frodo, no longer able to contain himself, asks the question you have already heard him ask, but here it is again, along with Goldberry's response, this time in context:

> 'Fair lady!' said Frodo again after a while. 'Tell me, if my asking does not seem foolish, who is Tom Bombadil?'
>
> 'He is,' said Goldberry, staying her swift movements and smiling.

1. By the time I'm done I hope you will see that this isn't hyperbole.

Frodo's incomprehension is plain to see, so Goldberry repeats herself, but she adds that Tom is master of "wood, water, and hill."

So Frodo naturally asks, "Then all this strange land belongs to him?"

Now it is Goldberry's turn to be puzzled. Frodo's inference that mastery means ownership doesn't follow for her. So she says:

> 'The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom.... He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master.'
>
> A door opened and in came Tom Bombadil. He had now no hat and his thick brown hair was crowned with autumn leaves. He laughed, and going to Goldberry, took her hand.[2]

There it is: Tom is *Master.* But his mastery is not the sort that Frodo is accustomed to. And Tom doesn't look like a master; he looks and sounds more like a jester. There's the blue jacket, the ridiculous yellow boots, the nonsense rhymes. There's a paradox to Tom's mastery. And everything in the world of Middle Earth (and I think our world as well) hinges on that paradox.

For the moment, let's focus on Goldberry's statement: "*Tom Bombadil is master.*" What could she mean if it doesn't imply ownership?

Remember, the Good Professor said that Tom represents something that he felt "important." Here he is again, in his own words:

> Tom Bombadil is not an important person—to the narrative. I suppose he has some importance as a "comment."

2. *Fellowship of the Ring,* 122.

CHAPTER 3

"A LONG STRING OF NONSENSE-WORDS (OR SO THEY SEEMED)"

THE THING THAT delights many readers about Tom Bombadil is the thing that exasperates many others. I'm talking about Tom's nonsense singing. I suppose it's something of a Rorschach test. Your response to Tom's nonsense may say something about you.

Is the person who finds Tom irritating an artless person who drains life of its serendipity? Or, is the person who delights in Tom's nonsense some sort of flower child, traipsing through life with finger-paint on his hands? Or is this dichotomy the real nonsense?

Tom's singing isn't actually nonsense, although the rhymes may annoy you. (I enjoy them myself, but I have no pretense when it comes to taste—at least so far as poetry is concerned.) But I think that you need to read between the lines to see the sense in them.

Some people don't like reading between the lines because it strikes them as opening the door to all sorts of fanciful nonsense. They prefer plain language, and a direct and literal approach to interpretation. But is reading always so simple? Maybe life is art all the way down. And maybe when the original Artist said, "Let there be light,"

He had more than one thing in mind. Perhaps, just perhaps, the world doesn't read like the manual that came with your washing machine.

No matter, to the point here: Tolkien says that Tom's singing only *seemed* like nonsense. The line that tells us so is the title of this chapter.

The efficacy of Tom's singing is the best argument that it *isn't* nonsense. Tom's singing saves the hobbits more than once. And when we're first introduced to Tom, he tells the hobbits that it is his *songs* that will save them from Old Man Willow.

How do the songs work? We're not told. (And the hobbits never think to ask.) We do have clues to work with, but in order to see those clues we'll have to pan out a bit and look at the larger world in which *The Lord of the Rings* is set. But even more than this, we'll need to pan out still further to see the things that Tolkien thought are true in our world.

Knowledge is Power, Redux

Our first clue is Tom's lore. I'm using the old-fashioned word *lore* for "knowledge" in part because Tolkien does. But I'm also using it to contrast Tom's knowledge with what Saruman knows. Saruman knows things by breaking them. But what about Tom? We're told something about Tom's lore during the account of Tom's time with the hobbits over the course of a rainy day, "He...told them many remarkable stories...of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest," both the good and the bad when it came to them. Then we're told, "It was not comfortable lore." In particular he told them about, "the hearts of trees" and the bitter grudge they hold against creatures that can move about freely. To the trees

CHAPTER 4

"Fear nothing! For tonight you are under the roof of Tom Bombadil"

Tom is master, and his mastery has something to do with what he knows; but what difference does it make in the way he lives? It's when we're at home that we are truly ourselves. So, what does Tom's mastery look like when he is at home? In *The Lord of the Rings* we don't have to wait long to find out.

After their deliverance from Old Man Willow, the hobbits draw near to the house of Tom Bombadil.

They stumble out of the Forest and onto a lawn that swells before them. To one side, the headwaters of the Withywindle cascade over rocks, and run through a narrow channel as the water reflects the light of the stars just appearing in the evening sky. Then the reader is told:

> The grass under their feet was smooth and short, as if it had been mown or shaven. The eaves of the Forest behind were clipped, and trim as a hedge. The path was now plain before them,...[and] on a further slope, they saw the twinkling lights of a house. [1]

1. *The Fellowship of the Ring,* 119.

Then the door of the house opens and a bright beam flows out and soon they are welcomed into a haven of light and song.

Tom's house is a welcome respite from the perilous land that the hobbits have just passed through. And another peril is awaiting them on the farther side—the Barrow-downs. But between these perils—the Forest and the Downs—there is the House of Tom Bombadil.

Let's return to the root word we get the word *dominion* from: *domus*, Latin for "house." The title of this chapter is Goldberry's promise that under the roof of Tom Bombadil—under his dominion, in other words—there is no reason to fear.

We're told elsewhere that Tom's dominion includes the Old Forest as well as the Barrow-downs. But his house is different. There is a distinction between his domain and his domicile.

The Old Forest

When the hobbits originally entered the Old Forest they left the Shire behind them. The Shire is a well-tended garden, like the garden of the Lord. And it is in the west of Middle Earth, and the only place that we know much about that is farther west is the Grey Havens and the abode of Cirdan the Shipwright, the place of departure from Middle Earth to the Uttermost West. The Shire is walled in and protected by the Rangers of the North who patrol its borders and keep it safe without the knowledge of its inhabitants. Aragorn's kinsman Halbarad gives us a glimpse of their labors in this off-handed remark much later in the story: "A little people, but of great worth are the Shire-folk.... Little do they know of our long labour for