



Who Is Tom Bombadil?

Mystery. Enigma. These are two words to describe Tom Bombadil. Ever since his first appearance in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, published in 1954, he has left readers guessing and debating about who he is. Many have spent decades conjecturing who this character could be, speculating anything from an earth spirit all the way to God Himself. Joseph Pearce states that Tom Bombadil “is an enigma, a puzzling riddle who continues to baffle and confuse readers and those critics who endeavor to explain him”.¹ Pearce dedicates a chapter to solving the mystery in his book *Frodo’s Journey* and Daniel Cote Davis and Michael Organ have recently published an entire book on the subject entitled *Guests, Hosts and the Holy Ghost: Who Tolkien’s Tom Bombadil and Goldberry are and why it really matters*.

In his chapter entitled “The Enigma of Tom Bombadil”, Pearce looks at the evidence about Tom available to us in *The Lord of the Rings* and finds him and Goldberry to be “emblematic of the unfallen Adam and Eve”.² To support his conclusion that Tom is prelapsarian, Pearce cites Tom’s remembering of the first raindrop and acorn, his speaking poetically, his naming of the hobbits’ ponies, and the fact that he “knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless”.

In their book *Guests, Hosts and the Holy Ghost*, Davis and Organ go much further with the available evidence, arguing that “individually, and in union, Tom and Goldberry personify the Holy Spirit in Middle-earth”.³ Like Pearce, Davis and Organ identify Tom’s communication through song, but link this ability to the Music of the Ainur, when the angelic powers first sang of the world’s unfolding history, and to the Flame Imperishable, a representation of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Davis and Organ identify Tom as a personification of the Holy Spirit because he is described as “Eldest” and “fatherless”, and point to

Tom’s special powers to communicate with living beings and to control such elements as the wind. In their book-length account, the authors also provide further evidence that lends support to their argument. I will look at each of the above arguments in more detail later, but let us first turn to what Tolkien himself said about Tom Bombadil, both in his stories and his letters.

Perhaps the most explicit declaration of Tom Bombadil’s identity in *The Lord of the Rings* is given by Tom himself. In answer to Frodo’s question “Who are you, Master?” Tom states:

Eldest, that’s what I am. Mark my words, my friends: Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn. He made paths before the Big People, and saw the little People arriving. He was here before the Kings and the graves and the Barrow-wights. When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent. He knew the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside.⁴

There is a lot to unpack in this passage, and Pearce, Davis and Organ do a good job doing so. Tom obviously identifies himself as being very old, but there are two particular sentences that I would like to draw attention to—sentences that tie Tom to specific events in Middle-earth’s history and sentences that one would not understand unless one were also familiar with Tolkien’s greater legendarium as recounted in *The Silmarillion*. The penultimate sentence states: “When the Elves passed westward, Tom was here already, before the seas were bent.” A reader of *The Silmarillion* will recognize two specific historical events from the sentence: the Elves passing westward and the seas being bent. The Elves were

the Firstborn of the Children of Illuvatar, and as such, they were the first to awaken in Middle-earth. After their awakening, guided by the Valar Orome, they made the journey westward across the sea to Valinor, the Blessed Realm. The “seas being bent” occurs later and refers to the changing of the world upon the Downfall of Numenor, when men attempted to seize power from the Valar.

The last sentence from the above passage also refers to an event in Middle-earth’s earlier history. The phrase “dark under the stars” refers to the time before the rising of the Sun and Moon, when Middle-earth was lit only by stars. The Dark Lord is Melkor, the first and mightiest of the Valar, who fell from grace, becoming the original dark power and Sauron’s master. The most curious part of the sentence is the phrase “from Outside”. To many—and Davis and Organ appear to be in this camp—this would seem to refer to a place beyond the world, possibly the void, but what must be remembered is that Melkor entered into Arda (the world) with the other Valar and did not leave it until his final banishment at the end of the First Age. Tolkien’s son Christopher addresses this very issue in *The Return of the Shadow*, one of the History of Middle-earth volumes that recounts the drafting and writing of *The Lord of the Rings*: “It seems then that either Bombadil must in fact refer to Morgoth’s return from Valinor to Middle-earth, in company with Ungoliant and bearing the Silmarils, or else that my father had already . . . developed a new conception of the earliest history of Melkor.”⁵ Either way, Tom appears to be tied to the earliest events of Middle-earth, making him very old, yet even so, there is nothing to show that he is more ancient than the world itself.

Outside of the text of *The Lord of the Rings*, what did Tolkien himself have to say about the identity of Tom Bombadil? Un-

fortunately, there are only two of Tolkien's published letters that actually address the topic to any reasonable extent. The first was in a letter to Naomi Mitchison, who was a proofreader for *The Lord of the Rings*, and the second was to Peter Hastings, the manager of a Catholic bookshop in Oxford. Both letters are lengthy and include Tolkien's various answers to questions the writers had related to his mythology. The letter to Hastings, it should be noted, was only in draft form and was never sent, Tolkien writing, "It seemed to be taking myself too importantly."⁶ Both letters asked about who Tom Bombadil was, Hastings going so far as to inquire whether he was God because of certain references Tolkien had made. Tolkien's response about Tom in the letters, while not completely forthcoming, is rather consistent. To Hastings, he states:

I don't think Tom needs philosophizing about, and is not improved by it. But many have found him an odd or indeed discordant ingredient. In historical fact I put him in because I had already "invented" him independently (he first appeared in the *Oxford Magazine*) and wanted an "adventure" on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out. I do not mean him to be an allegory—or I should not have given him so particular, individual, and ridiculous a name—but "allegory" is the only mode of exhibiting certain functions: he is then an "allegory", or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are "other"* and wholly independent of the inquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with "doing" anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture.⁷

Similarly, Tolkien writes to Mitchison about Tom, contrasting him to the Entwives: "He is in a way the answer to them in the sense that he is almost the opposite, being say, Botany and Zoology (as sciences) and Poetry as opposed to Cattle-breeding and Agriculture and practicality."⁸ As can be seen, Tolkien did perceive Tom Bombadil as an embodiment of something—that of pure natural science. But can we go further than this? It would seem that some, including Davis and Organ, would like to,

and they cannot be blamed. Pearce states: "Tolkien's efforts to describe or even define Tom are not enough. We hunger for more. We feel that there is more to Tom Bombadil than Tolkien is disclosing."⁹

Let us now revisit Davis and Organ's more extensive argument about Tom representing the Holy Spirit.

One of the arguments that Davis and Organ use to support their theory that Tom Bombadil is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit is how he is referred to as "Eldest" and "fatherless". Tom refers to himself as "Eldest" in the passage quoted earlier, but in what sense is he using the term? Does he mean he is as ancient as God Himself and one of the Holy Trinity? Or could it mean he is the eldest in a certain context, such as that within the creation of the world? In Tolkien's original drafting of this passage Tom refers to himself as "Aborigine" rather than "Eldest", and I think such an initial conception of Tom may lend support to the idea that Tom is one of the original inhabitants of a part of creation and not necessarily divine.¹⁰

The reference to Tom as "fatherless" is a bit more interesting, but still can be accounted for within the context of where it was used. Tom is referred to as "fatherless" by Elrond at the Council of Elrond when he says, "Iarwain Ben-adar we called him, oldest and fatherless".¹¹ Now such a title is noteworthy, but it must be remembered that this is the name that Elrond and his kindred, the Elves, had given to Tom Bombadil, and from their perspective he may appear "fatherless", since when they awakened in the world he was already there. Yet if Tom were, say, an incarnate Maiar, as Gandalf and other characters are, rather than a personification of the Holy Spirit, such a title would still fit him, for he would not have a "father" in the strict biological sense. As regards Tom's supernatural powers that Davis and Organ identify—such as communicating with living beings and controlling the wind—these powers could be explained, once again, if Tom were a Maiar, an angelic being, rather than an embodiment of the Holy Spirit.

In their book, Davis and Organ outline many arguments to support their thesis that Tom Bombadil is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit, and while insightful, most supporting arguments can be given alternative explanations, like those given above. So who is Tom Bombadil? Is he a personification of the Holy Spirit, or some stand-in for God in *The Lord of the Rings*? I would

tend to agree more with Pearce when he says, "Superficially, he might seem to have shades of the Divine, but his voice is too passive and detached to be an active agent."¹² Tom seems to be tied too much to his own locale and unconcerned with the events of the outside world. As Tolkien said in his letter to Hastings, "He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm."¹³ I would take Tolkien at his word here and not go further afield to find the identity of Tom. There is one thing, however, on which I would agree with Davis and Organ, and this is when they declare that "[Tom Bombadil] is therefore obviously the product of Tolkien's conscious and unconscious thought processes."¹⁴ While I do not think Tolkien deliberately, or consciously, made Tom a representation of the Holy Spirit, I do think that Tolkien's Catholic Christianity made it inevitable that certain unconscious manifestations of his faith could not help but creep into his characters, including Tom Bombadil.

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References

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4. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), p. 131.
5. Christopher Tolkien, ed., *The Return of the Shadow: The History of The Lord of the Rings, part one* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 122.
6. Humphrey Carpenter, ed., *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000), p. 196.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 192.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
9. Pearce, p. 41.
10. Christopher Tolkien, p. 121.
11. J. R. R. Tolkien, p. 265.
12. Pearce, p. 43.
13. Carpenter, p. 192.
14. Davis and Organ, p. 87.