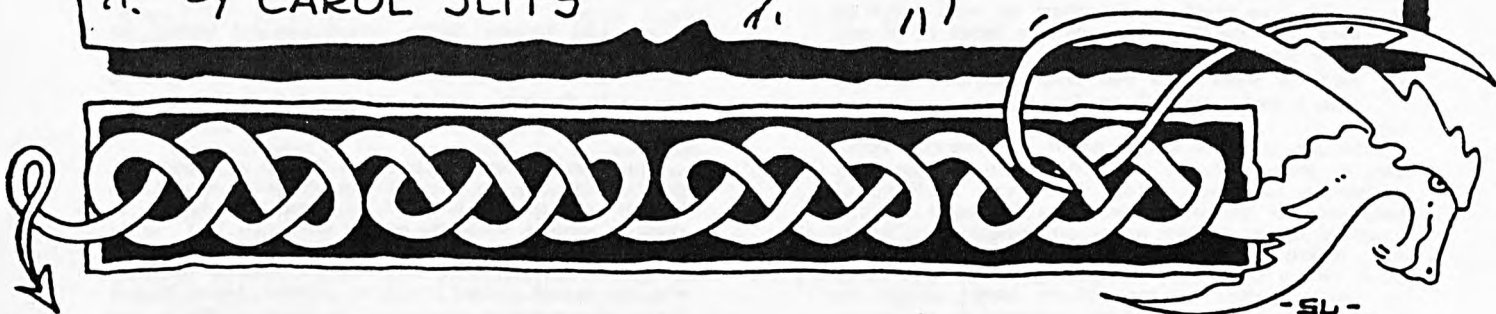


# a merry fellow

by CAROL JEFFS



ery few or no definite conclusions can be drawn from the available evidence about the real nature of Tom Bombadil. On the surface he is portrayed as a rather whimsical rustic, merrily tripping through the Old Forest singing some of the worst poetry Tolkien ever wrote:

Old Tom Bombadil was a merry fellow;  
bright blue his jacket was and his boots were yellow,  
green were his girdle and his breeches all of leather;  
he wore in his tall hat a swan-wing feather. (n. 1)

But even from these poems and from his very first encounter with the Hobbits in the Old Forest, we discover that one should not judge a book by its cover. In "Bombadil Goes Boating" we find that he has some kind of power over the beasts of his domain (n. 2) and, more pertinent to the Hobbits, he has power over Old Man Willow. This, together with the incident on the Barrow-Downs, is the only time that we have demonstrable proof of Tom's abilities. The rest is left to the reader to decide. Such lofty statements as we get from Goldberry, when asked by Frodo: "Tell me, if my asking does not seem foolish, who is Tom Bombadil?" that "he is" (n. 3) lead us to conclude that Tom Bombadil is very special indeed. The attribute of merely being is an attribute of God alone - "I am that I am." (n. 4)

When asked again, a little later on, "Who are you, Master?" Tom elucidates a bit more than Goldberry but still as enigmatically:

"Eldest, that's what I am. Mark my words my friends. Tom was here before the river and the trees; Tom remembers the first drop of rain 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." (n. 5)

Elrond calls him "oldest and fatherless" (n. 6) which might lead one to the conclusion that Bombadil is an emanation of Eru himself in a guise that would make him presentable to earthly beings, his true glory being too much for Middle-earth to cope with. But unless Gandalf himself is sorely deceived as to the true nature of Bombadil, we have to take notice of his moderating words in the affair. There is this dichotomy concerning Tom that while, during that disconcerting episode with the Ring, - It could not make him disappear as it did with others (n. 7) and he could handle it in a trifling manner -, this is precisely how he would treat it should it come



into his guardianship. Whereas he has powers over his flora and fauna

"Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others. And now he is withdrawn into a little land, within the bounds he has set, though none can see them... and he will not step beyond them."

"Would he not take the Ring and keep it there, forever harmless?"

"No... he would not understand the need. And if he were given the Ring, he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian; and that alone is answer enough." (n. 8)

Although there is something of the immortal about Tom, it seems safe to say that he is not Eru, yet neither is he human. While Tom shows qualities of goodness, he cannot be said to be good in the accepted sense; rather he is an amoral being whose coin, luckily has, when spun, landed best uppermost. He is like a child in that he is naive enough not to let the tragedies of the outside world affect his equilibrium, but, because of his closeness to the earth, he possesses a 'knowing' far deeper than the veneer of human superficiality. He can objectively help the Hobbits through the Old Forest because he has no vested interest in the affairs of the Ring. But his objectivity does not make him callous. Nature is as many-faceted as Shelob's eyes (n. 9) and, as a manifestation of an earth force, Tom is Shelob's absolute opposite, as full of good nature as she is of bad. A safe indication of Tom's kinship to nature comes in a brief comment given by Galdor at the Council of Elrond, "Power to defy our Enemy is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself." (n. 10)

Perhaps Tom and Shelob's proximities to the centres of safety and of danger respectively contribute to their various natures. The Hobbits encounter Tom just outside the Shire, while Frodo and Sam meet Shelob just before their entry into Mordor. Some have written critically about the creations of Tom and Shelob (n. 11), stating that Tolkien "failed to make them convincing", (the Balrog is included in this list). On one level "they are extraneous to the traditional framework of the story" (n. 12); as Gasque has pointed out, relating to the Balrog's "sudden" appearance during the flight from Moria, "the Orcs were foe enough" (n. 13). And for anyone who has seen Part One of the film version of *The Lord of the Rings*, or who has heard the B.B.C. serialisation of the book, it could be noticed that Tom Bombadil was dispensed with, without any detriment to the general story, whilst also removing a rather charming episode. Shelob is less extraneous in that, because of their encounter with her, Sam and Frodo are 'rocketed' into Mordor in a rather unexpected fashion, Frodo with greater speed and Sam with greater determination since the Orcs have his master.

However, having defended Mr. Gasque so far, it is obvious that he is missing the point somewhat concerning all these creations and most importantly concerning Tom Bombadil. Tom's immunity from the power of the Ring has already been touched on, and, on attempting to cross Caradhras, Aragorn says:

"There are many evil and unfriendly things in the world that have little love for those that go on two legs, and yet are not in league with Sauron, but have purposes of their own. Some have been in this world longer than he." (n. 14)

Much the same is reiterated in narrative about Shelob (n. 15) and when Sam says, on their encounter with her, "I wish old Tom were near us now" (n. 16), the impression is that only Tom might have matched her power for power, as he did with Old Man Willow. But Frodo and Sam are now able to deal with such trouble, as they were not at the time they met Old Man Willow.

These characters are placed in *The Lord of the Rings* for a purpose and that purpose is precisely to show that there are, whether for good and evil, creatures in this world that are above and beyond the

struggles of mortals. For this reason alone, it is plain that Hugh T. Keenan and Jane Chance Nitzche have misunderstood the purpose of such creations as Bombadil and Shelob. Keenan places Shelob as the "feminine counterpart of Sauron"; (n. 17) while Nitzche claims that "Tolkien shows the analogy between the two monsters (Sauron and Shelob) and their towers by structuring their books similarly". (n. 18) Nitzche further compounds the misunderstanding by placing Shelob on the same plane of thought as Saruman and Gollum:

Like Saruman, Shelob 'served none but herself' but in a very different, more bestial way... Never can she achieve the higher forms of perversion manifested by Saruman... Gollum and Shelob both illustrate the lower sins of gluttony, sloth and lechery." (n. 19)

There is no analogy between Shelob and Saruman, or between Shelob and Gollum. Shelob, as Nitzche herself stated, knew little of "or cared for towers, or rings, or anything devised by mind or hand"; (n. 20) while Sauron and Saruman and Gollum are positively foaming at the mouth for want of rings and towers. As such, she can never aspire, let alone achieve, those "higher forms of perversion manifested by Saruman" and it also places her beyond the pale of sinning. Gollum is like Sauron and Saruman in that he should know better than to be wicked; Shelob does not.

Secondly, if Shelob is anyone's counterpart, as previously stated, it is Bombadil's. And finally, Saruman did serve; he might have thought he was only serving his own ends, but he was as much a slave to the power of the Ring as if he had possessed it himself.

But Tolkien is also doing more with them than this; although he would not admit it, Tolkien, in a very subtle way, is moralising. Firstly, the truly evil side of the natural is eliminated, or at least we can assume that Gandalf finally defeated the Balrog, as Sam, to all intents and purposes, so disarmed Shelob as to make her ineffective for a long time to come; while Bombadil survives. So here we find a conflict arising in Tolkien's imagination between those he most admires, the Elves and Gandalf on the one hand, and Tom Bombadil and what he represents on the other. The conflict arises out of the word 'magic' - High Magic and Earth Magic.

The best example of High magic is seen in Lothlórien when "It seemed to him that he had stepped over a bridge into a corner of the Elder Days, and was now walking in a world that was no more." (n. 21) And once the Fellowship has left Lórien, Sam and Frodo cannot quite figure out just how long they have spent there. Frodo "can remember three nights there for certain", but the "New Moon" mentioned by Sam suggests "a whole month". (n. 22) And as we have learnt previously in the story, and as Frodo mentions a few lines further on, "Rich are the hours, though short they seem... where Galadriel wields the Elven-ring." (n. 23)

The out-of-time qualities of Lórien, although Elves are immortal, are maintained by the use of *Nenya*, 'prometheanly' forged. Both Sam and Pippin call this 'magic' (n. 24) and on both occasions the replies they receive are almost the same, "I do not know what you mean by that." (n. 25) This High Magic or power wielded by both the Elves and Sauron seems to emanate from what has been placed of themselves in objects of magic whilst in the making, traits and powers of the maker, from the Rings themselves to the Elven cloaks given to the Fellowship on their departure from Lórien. The Rings are fallible and destructible. They have been forged as an aid to power, and even though the three Elven Rings have been forged in the desire of "understanding, making and healing" and not with a desire for "strength or domination or hoarded wealth" (n. 26) as Sauron's One Ring was, nevertheless they have become objects of desire in themselves, just as the Silmarils became to Fëanor. Their effects are artificial and contrary to the power of a finite world and, as such, have to be rendered as powerless as the One Ring.

"Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World... its desire is power in this world,

domination of things and wills." (n. 27)

Though Tolkien mourns the passing of the Elves, the judgement has been rendered. Even the Istari, abounding in a 'magic' far higher than even the Elves have possessed, "were forbidden to match his (Sauron's) power for power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force and fear." (n. 28)

Tom Bombadil's 'magic' is very different. Sam describes the magic of Lórien as being "right deep down, where I can't lay my hand on it" (n. 29), whereas Tom's magic is expressed in Frodo's feelings about Tom's house:

"... Frodo..., feeling his heart moved with a joy that he did not understand. He stood, as he had at times stood enchanted by fair elven-voices; but the spell that was now laid upon him was different: less keen and lofty was the delight, but deeper and nearer to mortal heart; marvellous and yet not strange."(n. 30)

Tom's earth magic is part of the very fabric of Nature, a magic that Sam possesses more than he realises. The "Primary World" of Tom's existence is subject to mutability, changing seasons, birth, growth and death; whereas the enchanted world of Lórien is a place of long, long existence on one plane, rather like the existence of the Nazgûl, though on a much pleasanter level: the Mallorn trees do not fade and shed their leaves every Autumn but in Spring, merely growing new foliage without any decay. The idea is indeed captivating but not meant for Middle-earth.

Therefore, while all the main protagonists in The Lord of the Rings lose that which they coveted, and because people like Elrond "had forgotten Bombadil"(n. 31) Tom, because he has no desire, inherits, albeit a small domain, one of the last remnants of the truly Natural.

Carol Jeffs.

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[The Editor wishes to point out that this article was written some time ago, and that, although some of the questions raised herein (like the true nature of Bombadil) have been answered elsewhere, the points it made seemed to justify its inclusion. Publication delays alone are to be held responsible for making it seem outdated.]

