

Tolkien's Tom Bombadil and Social Media: An Excursus Note

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John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) was an Oxford trained philologist, professor (don) at Oxford, noted scholar, and author of high fantasy literature. His *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (*TLOTR*) has sold over 150 million copies worldwide making it the second bestselling work of fiction of all time ("The Lord of the Rings," 2014). His popularity has resurged, though it never really waned, with Peter Jackson's big screen adaptation of Tolkien's most famous work *The Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003), also in trilogy form, winning multiple Oscar Awards, and grossing over 3 billion dollars worldwide ("The Lord of the Rings," 2014). More recently, Jackson's three part installments of the precursor to *TLOTR*, *The Hobbit* (2012-2014), have also proved highly successful in movie format.

As has been long noticed by fans and critics alike, Tolkien's works, *TLOTR*, *The Hobbit*, *The Silmarillion* (his legendarium of Middle-earth or Arda), and other lesser known works like *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil* (*TATB*) are permeated with social themes and as well as thinly veiled ecological tropes. According to Morgan (2010), Tolkien's socio-ecology is "[grounded in a] creation-centered ethic of stewardship . . . that holds the potential to re-enchant the world" (p. 383). This re-enchantment of the world is especially manifest in one of Tolkien's poems contained in *TATB*. By re-enchantment, I mean the awe that we have when meeting or communing with another person or species. That is, when we lose our solitude, driven by physical isolation or by the isolation of techno-media to a place in society where we exist beyond the monad or the One (Levinas, 1982).

Tolkien's earliest formulation of *TATB* is the eponymously titled opening poem which appeared in *Oxford Magazine* in 1934. By 1962, with the publication of *TATB* as a separate book, it contains 16 poems. It was illustrated by Pauline Baynes and published by George Allen and Unwin. It is presented like *TLOTR* as part of his legendarium of Middle-earth, as contained in the Hobbit-written *Red Book of West-march*, and in the Preface, Tolkien had gone to some length to explain its fictional origins to augment its importance in his history of his fantasy world of Middle-earth (Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990). Tolkien has said of it in the Preface, for example:

The present selection is taken from the older pieces, mainly concerned with legends and jests of the Shire at the end of the Third Age, that appear to have been made by Hobbits, especially by Bilbo and his friends, or their immediate descendents. Their authorship is, however, seldom indicated. those [sic] outside the narratives are in various hands, and were probably written down from oral tradition. (*TATB*, 1990, Preface)

These are rhymes or stories that revert back to their own beginning. Tolkien also has noted their style ranges from crude to complex and shows the influence of High-Elvish, Númenorean legends of Eärendil, Gondorian, and the widening of the Hobbits' world via contact with other races and places at the end of the Third Age (Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990). He also has noted that some of the manuscripts came from Hobbits' Buckland where they obviously knew of Bombadil and probably gave him this appellation since it is in the Bucklandish dialect (Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990). Further, Tolkien has written:

They also show that [even though they knew Bombadil] . . . no doubt they had little understanding of his powers as the Shire-folk had of Gandalf's: both were regarded as benevolent persons, mysterious maybe and unpredictable but nonetheless comic. No. 1 is the earlier piece, and is made up of various hobbit-versions of the legends concerning Bombadil. No. 2 uses similar traditions, though Tom's raillery here turned in jest upon his friends, who treat it with amusement (tinged with fear); but it was probably composed much later and after the visit of Frodo and his companions to the house of Bombadil. (Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990, Preface)

Again, in his Preface, there is no doubt that Tolkien went to great lengths to include *TATB* into his larger mythopoeia and legendarium.

One understudied work by Tolkien is *TATB*. In the poem "Bombadil Goes Boating," Bombadil makes his way to his friend Farmer Maggot's house for an impromptu visit. This is something seldom done in these days of hurriedness and computer technology. The closest many of us come to an unscheduled meeting with friends is through social media like Facebook. Bowers (2013) has an interesting remark about this, and though specifically aimed at education, it is still applicable even in more social situations with all the complex dynamics that are at play in them:

The different educational uses of computers, from participating in electronic communities to learning various forms of decision making and model building, should be seen by teachers as opportunities to help students understand the forms of knowledge and relationships that cannot be communicated through a computer. It would be important to teach why computers cannot communicate the forms of local knowledge passed on through face-to-face relationships.

Students should also be encouraged to recognize that computers cannot be used to communicate the following as a living experience: elder knowledge, participation in ceremonies, family

relationships and interdependencies, mentoring in clan knowledge and skills, and the stories and practices that carry forward an awareness of how the spirit world requires different expressions of moral reciprocity. (p. 126)

In the poem, Bombadil exhibits his attitude to time and ecological reverence in his boating trip. He is not hurried, takes his time to talk with the forest creatures, and he does so lyrically. For example, Bombadil says as follows about his stance on time in general:

The old year was turning brown; the West Wind was calling;
Tom caught a beechen leaf in the Forest falling,
'I've caught a happy day blown me by the breezes!
Why wait till morrow-year? I'll take it when me pleases.
This day I'll mend my boat and journey as it chances
west down the withy-stream, following my fancies!
(Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990, p. 12)

So he takes his time going wherever chance may take him, uncaring about the speed getting there, and wherever there may be. Taking a trip without purpose with no temporal schedule is something almost unheard of in modernity. Even when going on an outing, we tend to have a direction, destination, and a schedule all neatly figured out on a GPS, and this ingrained sense of hurriedness even in leisure pursuits is part of modern humankind's downfall. It is a design problem as Orr (2011) and Bowers (2013) would have it. It is the comodification of time seeping over from our technologically driven lives as both producers and consumers into even supposedly relaxing activities. These are products of Industrialization and capitalism. Tolkien, through Bombadil, shows us that there can be another way: one where we are only driven by the natural temporal constraints of the seasons and daylight hours. This is something most of us lost long ago to the factory whistle of the Industrial Age or the Class Bell. Even members of First Nations (Indigenous Peoples), who were long holdouts against these anti-circadian rhythms, have now become as vulnerable to them as those first to embrace modern industrial capitalism with all its constraints on humanity's naturalness and innate sense of time (LaDuke, 2005).

Bombadil in the poem also takes time to converse face-to-face with animals showing his appreciation for their lives and their right to exist. He speaks to numerous birds on his voyage down the Withywindle River like the Old Swan from whom he took a feather and chides, "You old cob, do you miss your feather?" (Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990, p. 16). He also speaks to some un-named, wary Hobbits disarming them with his charm and affability in what becomes a quest for ale:

'Away over Brandywind by Shirebourn I'd be going,
But too swift for cockle-boat the river is now flowing.
I'd bless little folk that took me in their wherry,
wish them evenings fair and many mornings merry'.
(Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990, p. 18)

In his charming of the suspicious and even potentially hostile Hobbits, Bombadil proves Orr's (2011) statement that being convivial even to hostile strangers can go a long way in making peace where enmity once prevailed.



Bombadil in his visiting of his friend Farmer Maggot and his family in person show all of these dynamics that cannot be adequately reproduced electronically.

Maggot's sons bowed at the door, his daughters did their curtsy,
his wife brought tankards out for those that might be thirsty.
Songs they had and merry tales, the supping and the dancing;
Goodman Maggot there for all this belt was prancing,
Tom did a hornpipe when he was not quaffing,
daughters did the Springle-ring, goodwife did the laughing.
When others went to bed in hay, fern, or feather,
close in the inglenook they laid their heads together,
Old Tom and Muddy-feet, swapping all the tidings
from Barrow-downs to Tower Hills: of walkings and of ridings
of wheat-ear and barley-corn, of sowing and of reaping;
queer tales from Bree, and talk at the smithy, mill, and cheaping;
rumours in whispering trees, south-wind in the latches,
tall Watchers by the Ford, Shadows on the marches.
(Tolkien, *TATB*, 1990, pp. 20-21)



By engaging in face-to-face conversation and frivolity, several things are accomplished by Bombadil that cannot be done with today's social media: true fellowship, engaging in customary rituals like bowing, meal sharing to ensure amity, unique local dancing, and the dissemination of practical and impractical information about local events not only through conversation with all its nuances and inflections but the gestures that can often go unseen by the computer-aided eye, especially through such popular habits like texting, Emoticons or not. In such an environment unencumbered by technology, one begins to engage in what anthropologist Geertz called the "thick description" of ethnography even if that was not Bombadil's purpose in his visit (Geertz cited in Bowers, 2013, p. 60). Otherwise, if technology had been the venue of their meeting, only a thin conveyance of such a rich, life-enhancing environment could be gleaned.

Through Bombadil's actions and meetings in this poem, the reader can learn to appreciate a need for another type of time not driven by clocks but by natural means, to be kind and likeable even to your enemies, to partake in the custom of breaking bread and conversation, native acts of politeness and culture, and even to travel in an ecologically sound manner; that is, by man-powered boat. If we are to break techno-media mindset that has proven so alienating to ourselves and our world and others, it is integral that we learn the meaning of the word to "commune." We then will no longer be the monad, or just One (Levinas, 1982).

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