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Who is Tom Bombadil?: Interpreting the Light in Frodo Baggins and Tom Bombadil's Role in the Healing of Traumatic Memory in J.R.R. Tolkien's _Lord of the Rings_

Cover Page Footnote

I wish to express my thanks to the reviewers for their excellent suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay and my sincere appreciation for Brad Eden, editor of _The Journal of Tolkien Research_, for his tireless support of scholarship on the mythology of J.R.R. Tolkien.

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Shortly after Frodo Baggins survives the attack upon him by the Nine Ringwraiths, and after Elrond removes the splinter of the Morgul-blade that was making its way toward his heart in order to bring him under the dominion of Sauron, Gandalf sits in a room in Rivendell looking at Frodo, considering the hobbit's progress toward recovery and wondering what the future holds for him:

Gandalf moved his chair to the bedside and took a good look at Frodo. The colour had come back to his face, and his eyes were clear, and fully awake and aware. He was smiling, and there seemed to be little wrong with him. But to the wizard's eye there was a faint change, just a hint as it were of transparency, about him, and especially about the left hand that lay outside upon the coverlet. 'Still that must be expected,' said Gandalf to himself. He is not half through yet, and to what he will come in the end not even Elrond can foretell. Not to evil, I think. *He may become like a glass filled with a clear light for eyes to see that can.*'

'You look splendid,' he said aloud.¹

This is a remarkably poignant, even paternal, moment in which Gandalf perceives that Frodo's terrible wounding and miraculous healing has given him a powerful potential: to be filled "with a clear light" – if only "for eyes to see that can."

Within the story of *The Lord of the Rings*, there are only two people who actually see this light within Frodo: Gandalf and Frodo's servant, Sam. Gandalf's thought in Rivendell, then, may be a cue from the author, J.R.R. Tolkien, to his readers, which invites us to contemplate the "transparency" of Frodo and the "clear light" that shines through him.² How does Frodo become transparent, and why, and what is the nature of the light that fills him?

¹ *FR*, 222-23, emphasis added.

² Among the scholarly considerations of Frodo's transparency, two are distinctive: Verlyn Flieger, "The Body in Question: The Unhealed Wounds of Frodo Baggins," in *The Body in Tolkien's Legendarium: Essays on Middle-earth Corporeality*, ed. Christopher Vaccaro (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2013), 12-19, and Yvette Kisor, "Incorporeality and Transformation in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *idem*, 20-38. Kisor makes excellent points, namely, that in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, invisibility does not mean incorporeality (i.e., bodilessness), and that Frodo's transparency exists on the continuum between that of the Ringwraiths and Gandalf (after his

As recourse to Tolkien's letters shows, it appears that the light is related to the virtues of Frodo's character: love, self-sacrifice, humility, perseverance. The light in Frodo also is related to the light in the Phial of Galadriel, which comes from the Eärendil's Silmaril set in the heavens above Middle-earth, which is called the Morning Star. Because "Morning Star" is a name for Jesus in the New Testament, the light within Frodo may be interpreted, symbolically, as the Christ-light.

After providing evidence in support of these ideas, this essay considers how the light was ignited in Frodo, specifically by asking: who is Tom Bombadil, and what does he have to do with the light inside of Frodo? It explores multiple explanations for the long-standing, critically-debated mystery of Tom Bombadil's identity, ultimately showing that he must be interpreted at multiple levels of meaning simultaneously. Intriguingly, Tom Bombadil has parallels to the first Adam and the second Adam, Jesus, especially in his role as "Eldest" (or *ab origine*) and in his ability to bring light to Frodo in the grave of the barrow-wight, save him from death by his song, and heal him from spiritual "drowning" – a word that Tom uses to describe Frodo's terrifying experience in the barrow and which relates to Frodo's original childhood wound: the primal loss of his parents, who drowned in a tragic accident. When Frodo receives healing from this trauma, he is strengthened to endure what he later experiences on his quest to destroy the Ring.

Trauma and Transparency

Already in this passage from chapter 1, "Many Meetings," of Book II of *The Lord of the Rings*, readers sense that Frodo's transparency is brought about by trauma.³

resurrection). See also Flieger, *Splintered Light: Logos and Language in Tolkien's World* (Kent and London: The Kent State University Press, 2002).

³ For discussion of Frodo's trauma, see, for example, Michael Livingston, "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit: The First World War and Tolkien's Trauma of the Ring," *Mythlore: A Journal of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 25 (2006): 77-92. Livingston discusses the likelihood of Tolkien's personal experience of "shell shock," that is, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and how it is embodied in the character of Frodo. Other writers have provided further context for understanding Frodo's trauma in terms of Tolkien's experience in WWI. For an overview, see Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1977). John Garth's book, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (Boston, Mass. and New York, N.Y.: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), gives further detail as well as analysis of the impact of Tolkien's wartime experiences on the development of his mythology as does Janet Brannan Croft, *War and the Works of J.R.R. Tolkien* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2004). As my essay will indicate, in agreement with Verlyn Flieger, the trauma Tolkien represents in Frodo also may be influenced by the PTSD that his son, Michael Tolkien, experienced in WWII.

On Weathertop, when tempted to put on the Ring by the overpowering presence of five Ringwraiths, he gives in. As a result, he becomes invisible in the material realm of Middle-earth but clearly visible in the spiritual realm, so that the Witch-king of Angmar is able to attack him when he is vulnerable. In Rivendell, afterwards, Gandalf says to Frodo, “I wish you could have held out on Weathertop.”⁴

Yet the Witch-king’s attack is only one of four major traumas that Frodo experiences on the quest to destroy the Ring. As he will say to Gandalf later, “I am wounded by knife, sting, and tooth, and a long burden. Where shall I find rest?”⁵ In these words, Frodo is referring to the Witch-king’s knife, Shelob’s sting, and Gollum’s bite, which severs Frodo’s finger from his hand and leaves him an amputee.⁶ The long burden is, of course, the weighty task of carrying the Ring to Mount Doom where, ultimately, Frodo fails in his quest: the Ring is only destroyed because Gollum takes it from him and, over-reaching, topples to his death in the fires of Orodruin.

Gollum’s role in the destruction of the Ring reinforces Tolkien’s theological perspective, namely that evil is the absence of good and, ultimately, evil destroys itself.⁷ More importantly, as Tolkien points out in a letter to Mrs. Eileen Elgar dated to September 1963, Frodo’s decision to show “mercy” to Gollum – Tolkien later capitalizes the word when referring to the divine “Mercy” – and to allow him to live when he deserved death, is “rewarded” by this turn of events. This idea is inextricably tied, in Tolkien’s thought, to Tolkien’s understanding of Christian heroism:

⁴ *FR*, 219.

⁵ *RK*, 989.

⁶ The high rates of amputation in the field during WWI especially, but also in WWII, resulted in a great number of young soldiers returning to England from overseas in states of physical disability of varying degrees of severity. Although the loss of one finger is not as severe as the loss of a leg or an arm, Tolkien’s depiction of Frodo’s wounded hand is symbolic of a larger realm of war injuries, including those caused by attacks on men’s bodies and by medical amputations of body parts necessitated by prior attacks and/or infections. For discussion of disability in Tolkien’s mythology, with some reference to Frodo, see Irina Metzler, “Tolkien and Disability: The Narrative Function of Disabled Characters in Middle-earth,” *Death and Immortality in Middle-earth: Proceedings of the Tolkien Society Seminary 2016*, ed. Daniel Helen (Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2017), 57-77.

⁷ For discussion of Tolkien’s theological conception of evil as the absence of good, which was influenced by Augustine, see Jane Beal, “Why is Bilbo Baggins Invisible? The Hidden War in *The Hobbit*,” *The Journal of Tolkien Research* Vol. 2 (2015): Iss. 1, Art. 8, pp. 1-28. Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol2/iss1/8>.

Frodo indeed failed as a hero, as conceived by simple minds ... I do not think that Frodo's was a *moral* failure. At the last moment, the pressure of the Ring would reach its maximum— impossible, I should have said, for anyone to resist, certainly after long possession, months of increasing torment, and when starved and exhausted. Frodo had done what he could and spent himself completely (as an instrument of Providence) and had produced a situation in which the object of his quest could be achieved. His humility (with which he began) and his sufferings were justly rewarded by the highest honour; and his exercise of patience and mercy toward Gollum gained him Mercy: his failure was redressed.⁸

Tolkien's idea of heroism, informed by his Christian world-view, is not that the hero will achieve the goal of his quest in his own strength, but rather that he will develop and maintain his moral character on the quest to which he is called. "Providence" will ensure that the quest is actually fulfilled.

Tolkien's understanding is, of course, much different from the epic heroism of Homer's *Odyssey* or Virgil's *Aeneid*, though it shares something in common with that of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. That being said, Tolkien's Christian vision of the hero does not avoid depicting the trauma that results to the hero from pursuing a quest in which he fails. As he writes elsewhere in the same letter:

Frodo undertook his quest out of love – to save the world he knew from disaster at his own expense, if he could; and also in complete humility, acknowledging that he was wholly inadequate to the task. His real contract was only to do what he could, to try to find a way, to go as far on the road as his strength of mind and body allowed. He did that. I do not myself see that the breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment was any more a *moral* failure than the breaking of his body would have been— say, by being strangled by Gollum, or crushed by a falling rock ... but what Frodo himself felt about the events is quite another matter.⁹

⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, "246 From a Letter to Mrs. Eileen Elgar (drafts), September 1963)," in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter with Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1995, 2000; first published with Allen & Unwin, 1981), 325-33, esp.326. The emphasis on the word *moral* in this quotation and the subsequent quotation is Tolkien's.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 327.

Tolkien here commends Frodo for the virtues of his character – love, self-sacrifice, humility, perseverance – but he also explicitly acknowledges the “breaking of his mind and will under demonic pressure after torment”: a severe trauma. So, too, does the author acknowledge the negative feelings Frodo has later about his “failure.” From Tolkien’s remarks in this letter, it does seem that the “clear light” inside of Frodo is at least in part explained by the virtues of his character, which he continues to demonstrate as he undergoes traumatizing events.

It is in Ithilien, after Frodo has already suffered the wounds of the knife and the long burden, while he is still carrying the Ring toward Mordor and seeking to destroy it, that Sam looks at him and sees the light that Gandalf anticipated in Rivendell would fill him in the future. Indeed, readers who see Frodo from Sam’s perspective realize that Frodo already had this light within him, but now, it has grown stronger:

Frodo after a few mouthfuls of *lembas* settled down into the brown fern and went sleep. Sam looked at him. The early daylight was only just creeping down into the shadows under the trees, but he saw his master’s face very clearly, and his hands, too, lying at rest on the ground beside him. He was reminded suddenly of Frodo as he had lain, asleep in the house of Elrond, after his deadly wound. Then as he had kept watch, Sam had noticed that at times a light seemed to be shining faintly within, *but now the light was even clearer and stronger.*¹⁰

Sam then realizes that he loves Frodo deeply, and in consequence, readers may wonder if it is his love for his master that makes him see the light inside of Frodo. We also may notice that Ithilien in this moment is like Rivendell earlier in the story: a place of temporary respite from war, when Frodo has peace and experiences brief rest and healing. Thus it seems that trauma may be the cause of Frodo’s transparency, but it is in his moments of healing rest when those who love him can see the light shining through him.

In Ithilien, when Sam is looking at Frodo, he notices that Frodo’s “face was peaceful, the marks of fear and care had left it; but it looked old, old and beautiful.”¹¹ Trauma has aged Frodo, certainly, but the absence of fear here

¹⁰ *TT*, 651-52, emphasis added.

¹¹ *TT*, 652.

suggests that Frodo's trauma is temporarily alleviated, and in place of fear, beauty remains. It seems to Sam "as if the chiseling of the shaping years was now revealed by many fine lines that had before been hidden, though the identity of the face was not changed ... 'I love him. He's like that, and sometimes it shines through, somehow.'"¹² It may not be coincidental that Sam sees this light in Frodo after Frodo has partaken of *lembas*, in which some interpreters have seen echoes of the Eucharistic bread, the "body of Christ," that was so significant to Tolkien's faith.¹³

The connection between Frodo and Christ is carefully drawn by Tolkien, who sought to avoid any overly-didactic or overly-explicit representation of Christian symbolism or theology in his sub-created secondary world, which seemed to him to be "fatal."¹⁴ If *lembas* is Eucharistic, in taking it, Frodo is not so much a

¹² *TT*, 652.

¹³ Tolkien lends support to this interpretation in his letters, where he writes, "In the book, *lembas* has two functions. It is a 'machine' or device for making credible the long marches with little provision, in a world in which as I have said 'miles are miles.' But that is relatively unimportant. It also has a much larger significance, what one might hesitatingly call a 'religious kind.' This becomes later apparent, especially in the chapter 'Mount Doom' ..." (Tolkien, "210 From a Letter to Forrest J. Ackerman, ca. June 1958").

In another letter, Tolkien notes with approval that critics have correctly deduced that certain facts of his biography are in fact relevant to the interpretation of his works, namely his Christianity and Catholicism – and by way of example of useful criticism, notes the connection one critic observed between the waybread, *lembas*, and the viaticum, or the Communion given to a dying person: "Or more important, I am a Christian (which can be deduced from my stories), and in fact a Roman Catholic. The latter 'fact' perhaps cannot be deduced; though one critic (by letter) asserted that the invocations of Elbereth, and the character of Galadriel as directly described (or through the words of Gimli and Sam) were clearly related to Catholic devotion to Mary. Another saw in waybread (*lembas*) = viaticum in the reference to its feeding the *will* (vol. III, page 213), and being more potent when fasting, a derivation from the Eucharist." (Tolkien, "213 From a Letter to Deborah Webster, 25 October 1958").

The idea that *lembas* is, in some sense, Eucharistic, has become familiar in scholarship on Tolkien's works. An example of a work of scholarship that examines this idea is Jonathan Sands Wise, "Lord of the Lembas: A Study of What's Cooking in Popular Culture," in *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 172-89.

¹⁴ In his letter to Milton Waldman, Tolkien observes:

Of course there was and is all the Arthurian world, but powerful as it is, it is imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; and does not replace what I felt to be missing. For one thing its "faerie" is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive. For another and more important thing: it is involved in, and explicitly contains the Christian religion. For reasons which I

Christ-figure as an “everyman” figure who can stand for the Christian who seeks to be Christ-like (i.e., humble, loving, and self-sacrificing), but fails. Several points could be made to show how this is so, but one of the most pertinent to the analysis in this essay has to do with the light inside of Frodo.

Christopher Vaccaro has observed, “Early English religious poetry and prose was rife with images of martyrs and *miles Christi* and of Christ’s body itself shining like a glass filled with light.”¹⁵ In his tenth footnote, drawing on information brought to his attention by Bruce D. Gilchrist, Vaccaro cites pertinent lines from the Old English poem, “Christ III,” that Tolkien certainly read and that probably inspired his particular use of this imagery:

...Beoð þa syngan flæsc
scandum þurhwaden swa þæt scire glæs
þæt mon yþæst mæg eall þurhwitan

[... the sinful flesh will be /
pierced through like the clear glass
that may be seen through with complete ease]¹⁶

will not elaborate, *that seems to me fatal*. Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary “real” world. (Tolkien, 131 Letter to Milton Waldman, 144, emphasis added)

¹⁵ Christopher Vaccaro, “Introduction,” *The Body in Tolkien’s Legendarium*, 3.

¹⁶ *Christ III*, ll. 1281-82. In this instance, however, the flesh through which the light is shining is not that of a martyr, a soldier or Christ, but sinners at the time of the Last Judgment before God. The full poem is available in Old English in George Krapp, Philip Dobbie, and Elliot Van Kirk, eds., *Christ III* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1936) or online at: <http://www.apocalyptic-theories.com/literature/christiii/oechristiie.html>. Cf. “Bickling Homily 10,” in Richard Morris, *Bickling Homilies* (London: N. Trübner, 1880), 109, which speaks of the bodies of the dead at the Last Judgement in similar terms, given in modern English here:

No man need think that his body may or can amend the sin-burden in the grave; but therein he shall rot to dust and there await the great event [the Doom], when the Almighty will bring this world to an end, and when he will draw out his fiery sword and smite all this world through and pierce the bodies, and cleave asunder this earth; and the dead shall stand up, **then shall the body (flesh-garb) be as transparent as glass** (*bif þonne se flæschoma ascyred swa glæs*); nought of its nakedness may be concealed. Wherefore it is needful for us that we follow not too long foolish works, but we must make our peace with God and men, and establish firmly the right belief in our hearts, that it may there dwell and there

Looking at these Old English lines, it seems that Tolkien paraphrased them when giving words to Gandalf to express what he saw in Frodo when the hobbit was recovering in Rivendell. Tolkien adapts the lines to a new context: not the Last Judgement, but a wizard's judgement; not in the General Resurrection of the Dead, confirmed as Catholic doctrine in the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 AD), but in the particular resurrection of a single hobbit. For metaphorically, Frodo is resurrected: he had been "fading," but the healing skill of Elrond saved his life and returned him to health.

Tolkien's interest in the symbolism of a "glass filled with clear light" is not only imagined in Frodo, but, clearly, in the Phial of Galadriel. As Galadriel tells Frodo when she gives it to him, within the glass "is caught the light of Eärendil's star, set amid the waters of my fountain. It will shine brighter when night is about you. May it be a light to you in dark places when all other lights go out. Remember Galadriel and her Mirror!"¹⁷ Eärendil's star, to which Galadriel refers, is a Silmaril, one of three. In them, Fëanor captured the light of the Two Trees of Valinor, Telperion and Laurelin, which later were destroyed by Morgoth and Ungoliant. Eärendil's star is the Silmaril shining on Eärendil's brow in the heavens where the Valar placed him in his ship, the Foamflower.¹⁸

In Tolkien's mythology, that star is called the "Morning Star," a name which in the New Testament refers to Christ.¹⁹ Thus, it is possible to interpret the

grow and bloom; and we must confess the true belief in [God and in] our Lord Jesus Christ, his begotten Son, and in the Holy Ghost, who is co-eternal with the Father and Son. (emphasis added)

Available online in Old English and modern translation here: <http://www.apocalyptic-theories.com/literature/blicklingx/meblickx.html>.

¹⁷ *TT*, 376.

¹⁸ J.R.R. Tolkien, "*Quenta Silmarillion: Of the Voyage of Eärendil and the War of Wrath*," in *The Silmarillion*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1977, repr. 2004), 254-63.

¹⁹ For the biblical references to Christ as the "Morning Star," see 2 Peter 1:19, where the author is remembering the Transfiguration of Jesus depicted in the Gospels, and Rev. 22:16, where John the Revelator hears Jesus in a vision telling to write to the Church at Ephesus, saying that to the one who is victorious and does Christ's will until the end, he will give the morning star. This connection and Cynewulf's poem "Christ," which contains the name "Eärendil" (read by Tolkien in 1911), has been discussed in Jane Beal, "Orphic Powers in J.R.R. Tolkien's Legend of Beren and Lúthien," *The Journal of Tolkien Research* Vol. 1 (2014): Iss. 1, Art. 1, pp. 1-25, esp. p. 24. Available at <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol1/iss1/1>.

light as a symbolic reflection of the light of Christ, the Morning Star, within Tolkien's sub-created world. It comes from the Two Trees in Valinor to the Silmarils, one of which is Eärendil's star set in the heavens above Middle-earth, and then down from Eärendil's star to the waters of Galadriel's fountain, from which Galadriel gathered it into her Phial to give as a gift to Frodo on his quest. It is not only star-light, but a reflection of the Light.²⁰

It should not be surprising, then, that this light has great power within Middle-earth. With it, Frodo defeats the temptation to put on the Ring when he is cowering on the side of the road with Sam and Gollum outside Minas Morgul; he places his hand on the Phial, instead of the Ring, and the Witch-king passes by him with his army and does not see him. With its light, Frodo and Sam fight Shelob and fend her off; then, once more with its light, Sam alone takes on the Two Watchers guarding the Tower of Cirith Ungol where Frodo is imprisoned, and he succeeds in escaping their wrath not once, but twice, first on the way in and again on the way out!

But within the realm of Middle-earth, the reflected light of Eärendil's star, captured from Galadriel's fountain in Galadriel's Phial, is not depicted as all-powerful. It fades in Mount Doom, the heart of Sauron's realm. Nor is it depicted as ever-lasting: it "glimmered and was lost"²¹ when Frodo leaves the Gray Havens and is approaching Valinor. In the first case, it apparently fades (though it does not go out completely) because the darkness is so great. In the second case, it apparently glimmers and is lost because the light is so great. The reflected light of the star is no longer necessary to Frodo because he is approaching another source of light, protection, and healing.

²⁰ Jesus called himself, "The Light of the World" (John 8:12); he also told his disciples that they were "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). On Tolkien's view of light as "primeval symbol," see his letter to Milton Waldman, esp. footnote 15: "as far as all of this has symbolical or allegorical significance, Light is such a primeval symbol in the nature of the Universe, that it can hardly be analyzed. The light of Valinor (derived from light before the fall) is the light of art undivorced from reason, that sees things both scientifically (or philosophically) and imaginatively (or sub-creatively) and says that they are 'good' – as beautiful." Tolkien's words here, especially the last expressing that the light "sees things" and says "they are good" certainly echoes the creation narrative from Genesis. As Timothy McDermott has remarked, "Aquinas believed human reason has its own natural autonomy given it by God and respected by divine revelation; secular natural philosophy and sacred revealed theology must collaborate to build truth, aiming at harmony, not discord" (*How to Read Aquinas* [London: Granta Books, 2007], 3-4). Cf. Greta Rogers, "Iarwain Ben-Adar on the Road to Faerie: Tom Bombadil's Recovery of Premodern Fantasy Values" (Liberty University, M.A. Thesis, 2018), 75, which discusses this insight in relation to Tolkien's thought.

²¹ *RK*, 1029.

Frodo's view of his own traumatizing experiences is that they cannot be healed fully: "I am wounded ... wounded; it will never really heal."²² This view is at least partially shared by Gandalf: "Alas! There are some wounds that cannot be wholly cured."²³ Indeed, J.R.R. Tolkien himself writes in a letter, in which he discusses Frodo's journey to Valinor, that he goes there not because he has become immortal, like the Elves, but rather to seek healing before he dies.

Frodo was sent or allowed to pass over the Sea – to heal him if that could be done *before he died*. He would have eventually to 'pass away': no mortal could, or can, abide forever on earth or within time. So he went both to a purgatory and to a reward, for a while: a period of reflection and peace and the gaining of a true understanding of his position in littleness and in greatness, spent still in time amid the natural beauty of 'Arda Unmarred,' the Earth unspoiled by evil.²⁴

While readers do not get to see whether Frodo's memories of trauma are healed in the undying lands, they do see him right up to the moment when he comes to their shores and can hear the singing that comes from there. The sensory language that Tolkien uses to describe that moment is remarkably hopeful:

Then Frodo kissed Merry and Pippin, and last of all Sam, and went aboard; and the sails were drawn up, and the wind blew, and slowly the ship slipped away down the long gray firth; and the light of the glass of Galadriel that Frodo bore glimmered and was lost. And the ship went out into the High Sea and passed on into the West, until at last on a night of rain Frodo smelled a sweet fragrance on the air and heard the sound of singing that came over the water. And then it seemed to him that as in his dream in the house of Bombadil, the gray rain-curtain turned all to silver glass and was rolled back, and he beheld white shores and beyond them a far green country under a swift sunrise.²⁵

²² RK, 1025.

²³ RK, 1025.

²⁴ Tolkien, "246 Letter to Eileen Elgar (drafts)," 328 (Tolkien's emphasis).

²⁵ RK, 1030.

All the perceptions of Frodo's senses, described in richly alliterative, poetic language in this passage, are good: what he smells is a "sweet fragrance"; what he hears is "the sound of singing"; what he sees is a "gray rain-curtain" turned to "silver glass," rolled back to reveal "white shores," "a far green country," "a swift sunrise." The color symbolism is striking: the *gray* rain becomes *silver* glass, and light shines through it so that Frodo clearly sees *white* shores – whiteness that traditionally stands for purity and holiness – and a *green* country, green that represents life, renewal of life, abundance, and growth. Bright color replaces the gray rain-curtain, and the light that makes this vision possible comes from a swift sunrise.

The reference to Tom Bombadil in this, the last image the readers have of Frodo, is striking. It appears as another cue from the author, J.R.R. Tolkien, to look back in the story for the context that can help explain what is happening to Frodo as he approaches Valinor. At the beginning of chapter 8, "Fog on the Barrow-Downs," Frodo has a dream remarkably like what Tolkien describes him experiencing as he approaches Valinor at the end of the story. A quick glance at the language used to recall that dream shows how very closely it is echoed at the conclusion of *The Lord of the Rings*:

But either in his dreams or out of them, he could not tell which, Frodo heard a sweet singing running in his mind: a song that seemed to come like a pale light behind a gray rain-curtain, and growing stronger to turn the veil all to glass and silver, until at last it was rolled back, and a far green country opened before him under swift sunrise. The vision melted into waking; and there was Tom whistling like a tree-full of birds; and the sun was already slanting down the hill and through the open window. Outside everything was green and pale gold.²⁶

That dream, we realize at the end of the story, was prophetic. Frodo had it in the home of Tom Bombadil, who appears as an extraordinary and somewhat mysterious character in Tolkien's mythology. Who, after all, is Tom Bombadil, and what does he have to do with the light inside of Frodo?

²⁶ *FR*, 135. The description of Tom Bombadil singing like "a tree-full of birds" should remind readers of the Tree in "Leaf by Niggle," specifically the Platonic form that Niggle sees in the place later called "Niggle's Parish," and of the Tree of Tales in Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy-Stories." In relation to these two connections, we may better understand the fullness of Tolkien's comments (discussed below) on Tom Bombadil as a figure of Poetry and Tolkien's representation of Tom as a great singer and storyteller, a being much like Tolkien himself in this regard.

Song and Salvation

When Frodo encounters Tom Bombadil for the first time in the Old Forest, he has already experienced trauma that has made him fear for his life: Gandalf, his friend, counselor, and protector, is inexplicably missing; Black Riders, a group of terrifying demonic Ringwraiths (whose true origin and identity he does not yet know), have hunted him from Hobbiton onward; and a great tree-root, one among the “great winding roots ... like gnarled dragonets straining down to drink,”²⁷ apparently has attempted to hold him face-down in the water of the Witherwindle and drown him. He narrowly escapes death in the Old Forest only with Sam’s help. Frodo says to Sam that the “beastly tree” threw him in, to which Sam replies he must have been dreaming and ought not to sit in so precarious a position by the river. Meanwhile, Old Man Willow has opened a crack in his trunk and is attempting either to eat, suffocate or squeeze to death Frodo’s friends, Merry and Pippin. After unsuccessfully trying to free them by threatening Old Man Willow with fire, Frodo goes running up the path, crying out: *help! help! help!* Tom Bombadil then appears, singing, and he rescues the hobbits and takes them away with him to his home and his wife, Goldberry, daughter of the River, for whom he has been gathering small white water-lilies.

It is relevant to note the origins of Tom Bombadil, who had a life in Tolkien’s imagination long before Frodo encountered him in the Old Forest in *The Lord of the Rings*. As has been known since Humphrey Carpenter’s biography was published in 1977, Tolkien’s inspiration for this character was a brightly-dressed, peg-wood, Dutch doll (with a feather in his hat!) that belonged to his second son, Michael. Tolkien’s oldest son, John, unfortunately, did not like it and once decided to drop it in a lavatory.²⁸ But the doll was rescued – in more ways than one – for

²⁷ *FR*, 116. Comparing these roots to young dragons is quite a vivid metaphor, reminding us of the evil of Tolkien’s other dragons (e.g., Smaug, Glaurung, Ancalagon).

²⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, 165. Scholars writing subsequent studies of Tom Bombadil (and Goldberry) have drawn on this information, including three contributors to a volume published by The Tolkien Society in 1991: Charles E. Noad, “The Natures of Tom Bombadil: A Summary,” in *Leaves from the Tree: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Shorter Fiction* (London: The Tolkien Society, 1991), 79-88; Patricia Reynolds, “The Real Tom Bombadil,” *Leaves from the Tree: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Shorter Fiction* (London: The Tolkien Society, 1991), 85-88; Christina Scull, “Tom Bombadil and *The Lord of the Rings*,” in *Leaves from the Tree: J.R.R. Tolkien’s Shorter Fiction* (London: The Tolkien Society, 1991), 73-77. Carpenter’s information has also shaped interpretations of Goldberry: see John Bowers, “Tolkien’s Goldberry and *The Maid of the Moor*,” *Tolkien Studies* 8 (2011), 23-36 and Eugene L. Startzman, “Goldberry and Galadriel: The Quality of Joy,” *Mytholore* 16 (1989): 5-13.

Tolkien told stories about this doll to his children, and he wrote a narrative poem, “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,” about him and published it in *Oxford Magazine* in 1934. In the poem, Tom Bombadil is described as “a merry fellow; / bright blue his jacket 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.”²⁹ His appearance is much the same in *The Lord of the Rings*.

When Tolkien’s publishers were looking to him to write a sequel to *The Hobbit*, Tolkien tried to interest them in Tom Bombadil. In a letter to Stanley Unwin in 1937, he asked, “Do you think Tom Bombadil, the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside, could be made into the hero of the story?”³⁰ His publishers did not think so, and Tolkien incorporated Tom Bombadil as a supporting character into *The Lord of the Rings* instead. Only after the publication of Tolkien’s masterpiece would Tom Bombadil get his own book. In 1961, in response to his aunt Jane Neave (then aged 90) who had asked “if you

²⁹ Tolkien, “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008), 175, lines 1-4. As noted, the poem was first published in 1934 and then as part of the poetry collection, *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, in 1962. NB: In revising the poem, Tolkien changed the feather in Tom’s hat from that of a peacock to that of a swan, noting only that there were no peacocks in Middle-earth. However, if we recall the avian symbolism of the peacock vs. the swan, the change makes sense: rather than associate Tom Bombadil with the “Argus-eyed” bird of Hera, Tolkien chose to associate him with the noble swan, a King’s bird. In medieval England, swans were in fact owned by the crown (or by others by permission of the crown), and their bills were marked to indicate ownership, and fines were meted out for altering such marks; for the cultural history of this, see Cleaver, Emily, “The Fascinating, Regal History Behind Britain’s Swans,” *Smithsonian.com* (31 July 2017), available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/fascinating-history-british-thrones-swans-180964249>. Tolkien indicates his knowledge of this in lines from “Bombadil Goes Boating,” in which Tom Bombadil addresses the “Old Swan of Elver-isle”: “If one day the King returns, in upping he may take you, / brand your yellow bill, and less lordly make you!” (“Bombadil Goes Boating,” in *Tales from the Perilous Realm*, p. 185).

In *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien associates swans with the Prince of Dol Amroth, who has as the device of a ship and a silver swan on his blue banner. The Elves of Lothlórien have a ship in the shape of a swan that the Company sees as they are leaving to continue the quest; perhaps it was made thus in imitation of Eärendil’s ship, the Foamflower, which was also in swan-shape. In the *Silmarillion*, and elsewhere in his legendarium, Tolkien calls the Teleri Elves “Swanherds”; they name their city Alqualondë (“Swanhaven”). Tolkien also tells two stories of seven swans: the Maia Ossë sends seven swans to draw Teleri ships to Aman, and the Vala Ulmo sends seven swans to guide Tuor to Vinyamar, where he finds a shield with a white swan’s wing emblem on it. Tuor later accepts one feather from each of these swans and sets them in the crest of his helm. Tolkien consistently associates the swan with nobility and the miraculous in his legendarium. By making Tom Bombadil’s feather a swan-feather, Tolkien associates the character with both of these qualities: nobility and the miraculous.

³⁰ Tolkien, “19 Letter to Stanley Unwin (16 December 1937),” 25-27.

wouldn't get out a small book with Tom Bombadil at the heart of it," Tolkien began thinking of creating a small poetry collection featuring one of his earliest characters, complete in blue with yellow boots.³¹ At the time, Tolkien wrote a companion poem, "Bombadil Goes Boating," and he gathered together a few other poems, which he revised fairly extensively.³² In addition, he created a preface to the collection in which he imagined these poems came from the Red Book, from the Shire in the lifetime of Bilbo and Frodo Baggins, and featured poems written or translated by them or others, such as Sam Gamgee (though, within the fiction imagined in the preface, authorship of others was deemed anonymous). The book was published in 1962.

Of course, when readers meet Tom Bombadil in the Old Forest, he is no longer a child's doll or a spirit of the English countryside (vanishing or otherwise). Like most of Tolkien's characters, Tom Bombadil has developed into something grander than he was first conceived to be. Frodo was once Bingo Bolger-Baggins and Sauron a wicked cat named Tevildo, but by the time that they, and Tom Bombadil, appear in *The Lord of the Rings*, they have grown, and changed, and become much more than they once were.³³

In the *The Fellowship of the Ring*, when Frodo asks Goldberry, "Who is Tom Bombadil?" She replies, "He is," and then adds, "He is, as you have seen him ... He is the Master of wood, water, and hill." Readers may well wonder, with Frodo, what makes him so. Goldberry explains, "No one has ever caught old Tom ... He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master."³⁴ This is quite a mysterious set of answers, but an important point does come across: Tom's *fearlessness* is part of the reason

³¹ Tolkien, "231 Letter to Jane Neave (4 October 1961)," 308.

³² For discussion of revisions to these poems, particularly "Princess Mee," see Jane Beal, "Tolkien, Eucatastrophe, and the Re-Creation of Medieval Legend," *The Journal of Tolkien Research* 4 (2017): Iss. 1, Art. 8, pp. 1-18, esp. pp. 5-10. Available at <https://scholar.valpo.edu/journaloftolkienresearch/vol4/iss1/8/>.

³³ This reflects Tolkien's developing beliefs and understanding of fairy-stories, which he no longer thought ought to be written as if for coddled children, but rather for children as they are, bright and capable, and also for adults (see "163 Letter to W.H. Auden [7 June 1955]"). This perspective emerged in his 1939 Andrew Lang lecture at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland and was set down in his now-famous essay, "On Fairy Stories," which he composed between the writing of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and which, by his own account, allowed him to produce the latter on a "large canvas" (163 "Letter") that he was longing for. See below for further discussion of development of Tom Bombadil as described in *The Return of the Shadow*.

³⁴ *FR*, 124.

why he is Master. Frodo calls him “Master” in subsequent conversation, but he clearly has not solved the mystery of Bombadil’s identity to his own satisfaction, and hobbit-like, he remains curious. After a rainy day on which Tom Bombadil tells the hobbits a number of “remarkable stories,” Frodo asks him directly, “Who are you, Master?” The answer may be hidden in the question. But Tom Bombadil replies anyway, “Don’t you know my name? That’s the only answer ... I am old. Eldest, that’s what I am ... Tom remembers the first raindrop and the first acorn.”³⁵

Like Frodo, Tolkien’s readers have been intrigued by these replies, and particularly by Tom Bombadil’s names and how they might relate to Tom Bombadil’s identity. Elrond later says that Elves call him “Iawain Ben-dar, oldest and fatherless” and adds that he known as “Forn by the Dwarves and Orald by Northern Men, and many other names beside. He is a strange creature ...”³⁶ Frodo’s questions, Tom’s answers, and Elrond’s descriptors, “oldest and fatherless,” have led to speculation that Tom Bombadil could be:

- the Creator of Arda, Eru Iluvatar and, by extension, a parallel to the Judeo-Christian God³⁷
- one of the Ainur, “the offspring of Eru Iluvator’s thought”
- a Vala (a specific one, Aulë)³⁸
- a Maia (like Gandalf or Sauron) and, by extension, parallel to an angel³⁹
- an elf or a dwarf
- the first man (and by extension, a parallel to the Adam of the Genesis account)⁴⁰

³⁵ *FR*, 131.

³⁶ *FR*, 265.

³⁷ This idea comes about because Goldberry says of Tom that he is “Eldest” and when Frodo asks, “Who is Tom Bombadil, she says, “He is,” which could be like “I am,” one of the names of God. Discussed further below.

³⁸ Gene Hargrove, “Who is Tom Bombadil?” *Mythlore* 13.1 (1986), 20-24. Hargrove argues that Tom Bombadil is the Vala, Aulë, and Goldberry is Yavanna.

³⁹ Hargrove sees no reason to discount the possibility that Tom Bombadil could be an angel or a god, or “in terms of Tolkien’s mythology, a Maia or a Vala.” See <https://www.cas.unt.edu/~hargrove/tombomb.html/>. He notes that in *Tolkien’s World from A to Z: The Complete Reference Guide to Middle-earth* (New York, NY: Del Rey / Ballantine, 1978), Robert Foster earlier speculated that “it is possible that he [Tom Bombadil] is a Maia ‘gone native’” (496).

- a man with a dual-nature and a protective role (like Beorn)⁴¹
- a man or a hobbit⁴²
- a nature-spirit or spirit of the earth⁴³

⁴⁰ In *The Road to Middle-earth* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), T.A. Shippey has noted parallels with Adam. Discussed further below. It is worth noting here that in Tolkien's mythology, the role of "first man" seems to be filled by Beor the Old. See Tolkien, *The War of the Jewels: The Later Quenta Silmarillion, Part II*, ed. Christopher Tolkien (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), esp. chap. 14 "Of the Coming of Men into the West."

⁴¹ The similarities between the roles of Beorn and Tom Bombadil are noted in Michael Treschow and Mark Duckworth, "Bombadil's Role in *The Lord of the Rings*," *Mythlore* 25 (Fall / Winter 2006), 175-96. They are analyzed in further detail in Paul W. Lewis, "Beorn and Tom Bombadil: A Tale of Two Heroes," *Mythlore* 25 (Spring/Summer 2007), 145-60 and Justin T. Noetzel, "Beorn and Bombadil: Mythology, Place, and Landscape," in *The Hobbit and Tolkien's Mythology: Essays on Revisions and Influences* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014), 161-81.

⁴² Tolkien describes Tom's first appearance to the hobbits like this: "With another hop and a bound, there came into view a man, or so it seemed. At any rate, he was too large and heavy for a hobbit, if not quite tall enough for one of the Big People" (*FR*, 119). Later on, Tom Bombadil expresses his appreciation for the hobbit Farmer Maggot, whom he knows personally and converses with occasionally: "There's earth under his old feet, and clay on his fingers; wisdom in his bones, and both his eyes are open" (*FR*, 132-33). In *The Return of the Shadow*, we learn that Tolkien had considered making Farmer Maggot a relation of Tom Bombadil's. Tolkien has Tom say in an early chapter draft: "We are akin," he said, "distantly, very distantly, but near enough to count" (122). Tolkien also considered changing Maggot race from hobbit to another kind of creature (not a dwarf).

⁴³ This is the view expressed by Verlyn Flieger in *Splintered Light*, where she calls Tom Bombadil: "a natural force, a kind of earth spirit" (128n). In *The Road to Middle-earth*, T.A. Shippey sees parallels between Tom Bombadil and the Green Knight, as well as the "green man," who provides a source and analogue for the Green Knight. Shippey says that Tolkien

must have also reflected on the strange Green Knight who comes to challenge Sir Gawain in the poem he had edited in 1925, like Tom Bombadil, a *lusus naturae* in size and colour, conveying to many critics a sense of identification with the wild wintry landscape from which he appears, called by the poet in respectful but uncertain style *an aghlich mayster*, 'a terrible Master.' The green man, the uncreated man, the man grown by 'spontaneous generation' ... From what? Obviously, from the land. Tom Bombadil is a *genius loci*. (122)

A *lusus naturae* is "a jest of nature"; a *genius loci* is the protective spirit of a place. See also Liam Campbell, "The Enigmatic Mr. Bombadil: Tom Bombadil's Role as a Representation of Nature in *The Lord of the Rings*," in *Middle-earth and Beyond: Essays on the World of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Kathleen Dubs and Janka Kascakova (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2010), 41-65 and the thesis of Rogers, "Iarwain Ben-Adar on the Road to Faerie," which is remarkably insightful about the relationship between "nature" and "supernature" figured in Tom Bombadil.

- a pagan god, such as the Norse divinity, Wayland the Smith (i.e., Weland), or the Greco-Roman faun, Pan, or a Finnish deity, such as Väinämöinen, from the *Kalevala*⁴⁴
- the personification of an abstract concept, such as time or music (or an embodiment of the music of the Ainur)⁴⁵

Taking a metacritical perspective, some have thought Tom Bombadil is a representative of Tolkien himself or perhaps a representative of the reader.⁴⁶ This is not a complete list of interpretations nor of those who have put them forward.

In two of his published letters, one actually sent and the other in draft form, Tolkien fortunately addressed questions about Tom Bombadil. His responses were to Mrs. Naomi Mitchison, who read page-proofs for the first two volumes of *The Lord of the Rings*, and to Mr. Peter Hastings, manager of the Newman Bookshop (a Catholic bookshop in Oxford), who was enthusiastic about the *Lord of the Rings* but wondered if its author had not “overstepped the mark in metaphysical matters.”⁴⁷ The first reader might be characterized as sympathetic; the other, perhaps less so. The second letter is remarkably revealing as Tolkien defended his artistic choices from a theological critique.

To Mr. Hastings (the less sympathetic reader) in September 1954, Tolkien says, “As for Tom Bombadil, I really do think you are being too serious, besides

⁴⁴ In “229 From a Letter to Allen & Unwin (23 February 1962),” Tolkien explicitly rejects the idea that Tom Bombadil is connected to Weland or a Pan-type (307), a connection that had been presupposed by a critic. On the possible influence of the Finnish divinity, see David Elton Gay, “J.R.R. Tolkien and the *Kalevala*: Some Thoughts on the Finnish Origins of Tom Bombadil and Treebeard,” in *Tolkien and the Invention of Myth*, ed. Jane Chance (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), 295-304.

⁴⁵ See Ranger from the North, “Who is Tom Bombadil? Answering the Mystery of who Tom Bombadil is: The Incarnated Spirit of the Music of the Ainur,” posted in January 2013. Available at <http://whoistombombadil.blogspot.com/2013/01/outline-of-sections-regarding-tom.html>.

⁴⁶ Several of these interpretations and others considered at “Theories about Tom Bombadil,” *One Wiki to Rule Them All: The Lord of the Rings Wiki*; I have formulated my own list in my own order here. See http://lotr.wikia.com/wiki/Theories_about_Tom_Bombadil for comparison. For the Ranger of the North’s argument against several of these theories, see <http://whoistombombadil.blogspot.com>. My discussion of some of these theories in the published literary scholarship on Tolkien is discussed further below.

⁴⁷ This information is from the headnote provided by Humphrey Carpenter and Christopher Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, 187.

missing the point.”⁴⁸ Tolkien then makes the points that he believes are relevant to interpreting Tom:

- if “in time,” Tom was “primeval” and “Eldest in Time”;
- when Goldberry says of Tom Bombadil, “he is,” that is “quite different” from “I am that am”;
- Tom was “master in a peculiar way: he has no fear and no desire of possession or domination at all”;
- “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 ... a spirit coeval with the rational mind and entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany, not Cattle-breeding and Agriculture.”⁴⁹

From this, readers can clearly see that Tolkien imagined Tom Bombadil both *literally* and *allegorically*. Within Tolkien’s literal, historical, sub-created world, Tom Bombadil was the “first person”⁵⁰ in Middle-earth, the “Eldest in Time.” Goldberry’s claim that “he is” is not a claim that he is the “I am,” the Tolkienian equivalent of the Judeo-Christian Creator-God within his mythology, a role that can more logically be paralleled with the role of Eru Iluvatar. He is “Master” because he is fearless, without desire for possession or domination. He is a particular character, not meant as an allegory, but serving allegorical functions: “he is an allegory” and “an exemplar.” This is not a contradictory statement by Tolkien, at least from the perspective of medieval interpretive theory, for in that context, many things can be understood both literally and allegorically at the same time. Tom Bombadil thus “embodies” a “spirit”: one that desires knowledge of other things for their own sake, one that exists at the same time as the rational mind, and one

⁴⁸ Tolkien, “153 Letter to Mr. Peter Hastings (draft),” 191.

⁴⁹ All quotations in this list are from Tolkien, “153 Letter to Mr. Peter Hastings (draft),” 191-92.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 192. Tolkien uses this phrase in a note in this draft of his letter: “Only the *first person* (of worlds or anything) can be unique. If you say *he is* there must be more than one, and created (sub) existence is implied. I can say “he is” of Winston Churchill as well as of Tom Bombadil, surely?” Thus Tolkien stresses Tom’s uniqueness (not his race).

that is evidenced in the study of plants and animals (botany and zoology) as opposed to breeding animals or farming land.

To Mrs. Naomi Mitchison a few months earlier, in April 1954, Tolkien had already hinted at some of these points. He wrote to her that, in his mind, Tom Bombadil had no connection to the Entwives “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.”⁵¹ This statement gives a larger picture to Tolkien’s more sympathetic reader: Tom Bombadil is not only a figure of Botany and Zoology, but of Poetry; he is contrasted not only with Cattle-breeding and Agriculture, but practicality. Tolkien also wrote to his page-proof editor that Tom Bombadil “represents something that I feel important, though I would not be prepared to analyze the feeling precisely”:

I would not, however, have left him in, if he did not have some kind of function. I might put it this way. The story is cast in terms of a good side, and a bad side, beauty against ruthless ugliness, tyranny against kingship, moderated freedom with consent against compulsion that has long lost any object save mere power, and so on; but both sides in some degree, conservative or destructive, want a measure of control. But if you have, as it were, taken ‘a vow of poverty’, renounced control, and take your delight in things for themselves without reference to yourself, watching, observing, and to some extent knowing, then the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless. It is a natural pacifist view, which always arises in the mind when there is a war.⁵²

Here Tolkien figures Tom Bombadil in almost Franciscan terms, as one who metaphorically has taken “a vow of poverty.” Tom Bombadil has renounced the control sought by those on the side of either good or evil, and he represents “a natural pacifist view.” This explains why, when Elrond wonders if he should have invited Tom Bombadil to the Council in Rivendell to decide what to do with the Ring, Gandalf says, “He would not come.”⁵³ For Tom Bombadil has renounced control; he is a pacifist.

⁵¹ Tolkien, “144 Letter to Mrs. Naomi Mitchison,” 179.

⁵² Tolkien, “144 Letter to Mrs. Naomi Mitchison,” 178-79.

⁵³ *FR*, 265.

Tolkien himself was not a pacifist. As he says in his letter to Mrs. Mitchison, “Ultimately only the victory of the West will allow Bombadil to continue, or even to survive. Nothing would be left for him in the world of Sauron.”⁵⁴ But Tolkien believed that the view of pacifists could continue to exist in a world where goodness, beauty, kingship, and moderated freedom with consent triumphed over evil, ugliness, tyranny, and compulsion whose only object is power. As Tolkien also wrote, “The view of Rivendell is that it [the natural pacifist view] is an excellent thing to have represented.”⁵⁵

From the letters of 1954, then, it is clear that the allegorical sense represented in Tom Bombadil is quite rich. He embodies the spirit of Botany, Zoology, and Poetry; he renounces control, possession, and domination; he represents the natural pacifist view. This may be enough of an explanation of the significance of Tom Bombadil to satisfy, but then, there are Tolkien’s other statements about him that make it appear that even this is not the total explanation of his signifying power. In his letter to Mrs. Mitchison, for example, he makes this provocative statement early on:

As a story, I think it is good that there should be a lot of things unexplained (especially if an explanation actually exists), and I have perhaps from this point of view erred in trying to explain too much, and give too much past history. Many readers have, for instance, rather stuck at the *Council of Elrond*. And even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally).

Thus Tolkien implies that Tom Bombadil is enigmatic *intentionally*, but that what is unexplained about him *does* have an explanation. Tolkien is bringing to Mrs. Mitchison’s attention (and to ours) that there is more to Tom Bombadil than Tolkien has stated openly, either in *The Lord of the Rings* or in his letters of 1954. Readers only have to consider the things Tom Bombadil actually does in Tolkien’s masterpiece to recognize that this is so.

T.A. Shippey has noted the connections between Tom Bombadil and the “first person” in Tolkien’s Roman Catholic understanding of the created world: Adam of the biblical account in Genesis.

⁵⁴ Tolkien, “144 Letter to Mrs. Naomi Mitchison,” 179.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 179.

Like Adam, also fatherless, ‘whatsoever [he] called every living creature, that was the name thereof.’ Unlike the descendants of Adam, he does not suffer from the curse of Babel; everybody understands his language by instinct ... Unlike even the oldest living creatures, he has no date of birth, but seems to have been there since before the Elves awoke, a part of Creation, an exhalation of the world.⁵⁶

I agree with Shippey that Adam, specifically the *prelapsarian* Adam, influenced Tolkien’s conception and representation of Tom Bombadil. For Tom looks like what a sinless Adam might look like, transplanted to Middle-earth: being a steward of creation, not its owner, and naming creatures, such as the hobbits’ ponies, so that the names he gives are their names ever-after. Tom even appears to be made in the image of his Creator, for he sings, *imitatio Creatoris* (in imitation of the Creator) just as Eru Iluvatar sang and caused Arda to come into existence.

Later in the story, at the Council in Rivendell, Elrond says of Tom Bombadil “the power to defy our Enemy [Sauron] is not in him, unless such power is in the earth itself.”⁵⁷ While some have read this as support for the idea that Tom is a nature-spirit or an earth-spirit, Elrond’s analogy may actually relate more closely to the idea that Adam was made from the earth. In Genesis, his name, “Adam,” is actually word-play on the Hebrew word *adamah*, which means “earth.”

The good part of the Old Forest that Tom shares with Goldberry certainly has an Edenic quality. More than one scholar has remarked on parallels between Goldberry and Eve (and perhaps, by extension, Mary, who typologically relates to Eve in medieval scriptural interpretation, with which Tolkien was so familiar).⁵⁸ That Old Man Willow’s part of the Old Forest is evil does not make Tom’s home less like the perfect garden, for even into Eden, the serpent crept to deceive.

⁵⁶ T.A. Shippey, *The Road to Middle-earth, Revised and Expanded Edition* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 121-22. Shippey is quoting Genesis 2:19 (King James Version).

⁵⁷ *FR*, 266.

⁵⁸ See Ann McCauley Basso, “Fair Lady Goldberry, Daughter of the River,” *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature* 27:1, No. 1, Article 12, pp. 139-46. She says that Goldberry provides “an Eve figure who parallels the Mary figure of Galadriel.”

Additional support for the parallel between Tom Bombadil and Adam may be found in *The Return of the Shadow*, the first book of *The History of the Lord of the Rings*. This book provides Tolkien's notes and early drafts of chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring* with explanatory comments by Christopher Tolkien. The fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters in it concern Tom Bombadil. In the sixth, Tolkien calls Tom an "aborigine" multiple times. Tolkien writes, in a note sketching out his ideas for himself, that "Tom Bombadil is an aborigine – he knew the land before men, before hobbits, before Barrow-wights, yes, before the necromancer – before the elves came to this quarter of the world."⁵⁹ Then, in an early draft of a chapter, he has Tom saying, "I am an aborigine, that's what I am, the Aborigine of this land ... Tom remembers the first acorn and the first raindrop ..."⁶⁰ For readers today, the word "aborigine" may bring to mind native peoples, or "First Nations," but of course Tolkien is not referring to the indigenous tribes of the primary world.

Instead, Tolkien seems to be using the word in its etymological, Latin sense: *ab origine* or "from the beginning." However, preferring English to Latinate terms in *The Lord of the Rings* generally, he revised and used a synonym: "Eldest." In a comment on Tom's "aboriginal" claim to remember the first acorn and the first raindrop, Christopher Tolkien says, "These words are extremely surprising ... Tom Bombadil was 'there' during the Ages of the Stars, before Morgoth came back to Middle-earth after the destruction of the Trees ..."⁶¹

Yet supposing that the prelapsarian Adam provides a parallel for Tom Bombadil, the connection does not sufficiently explain all that Tom says or does in *The Lord of the Rings*. The things Tom does seem to relate to the study of natural realm of flora and fauna, certainly, but also to exceed it in the supernatural realm. His poetry may seem to be nonsense, but when sung to Old Man Willow or a Barrow-Wight, it also has very obvious spiritual power. While Tom Bombadil may renounce domination in the material world of Middle-earth, he exerts dominion in the spiritual world, particularly with respect to the Ring (which has no effect on him) and the Barrow-wights (whom he defeats). He may express pacifism, but he engages in spiritual warfare when it comes to the evil spirits who attack the hobbits. Indeed, after rescuing the hobbits the first time, he instructs them before he sends them on their way again to call on him if they need help. Frodo does this from

⁵⁹ J.R.R. Tolkien and Christopher Tolkien, *The Return of the Shadow: The History of The Lord of the Rings, Part I* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998, 2000), 117.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 121-22.

within a barrow, as if he is praying a prayer, and Tom comes a second time and saves him and his friends from death. Depending on how the strange scene in the barrow is read, Tom may actually be *resurrecting* the hobbits from the dead.

In this respect, Tom Bombadil may be more like the Second Adam: Jesus. The connection between Adam and Jesus is established in the New Testament, and the Church Fathers elaborated upon the idea until it was a virtual commonplace in the Middle Ages.⁶² It also appears to contribute to Tolkien's representation of Tom Bombadil. While Frodo, Aragorn, and Gandalf have all been called "Christ figures" in *The Lord of the Rings*, no one, to my knowledge, has considered the Christ-like role that Tom Bombadil fulfills in the story.⁶³ However, a closer investigation of the story shows that Tom Bombadil's song effects Frodo's salvation from death and his first healing from trauma, which makes possible the "clear light" that Gandalf, Sam, and Tolkien's readers see in Frodo later on.

Frodo actually arrives in the Old Forest already traumatized, not only from recent events – Gandalf's unexplained failure to arrive on time and the Ringwraiths' relentless pursuit across the Shire – but from a deep childhood wound: the drowning of his parents that left him an orphan. As a child, Frodo lost both of his parents in a boating accident. Readers learn of this at the beginning of *The Fellowship of the Ring* as part of rough-and-tumble gossip at *the Ivy Bush*, an inn on the Bywater road.

There the discussion is of the fact that Frodo is half-Baggins (respectable) and half-Brandybuck (less respectable or, rather, "queer"). Inhabitants of Hobbiton observe that Brandybucks live near the Old Forest and actually take boats on the

⁶² See, for example, Romans 5 and 1 Cor. 15:22, 45. Paul does not actually use the phrase "Second Adam," but late antique and medieval writers come to understand Jesus as the "Second Adam" from Pauline thought – and they do use the phrase. For a short synthesis of other biblical passages connecting the first Adam to the second, Jesus, along with a brief overview of the theological concept, see Paul Ferguson, "Adam, the Second," in *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Ada, Mich.: Baker Books, 1997). Available at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/adam-the-second.html>. For an academic discussion that considers the medieval context for this idea, see Alistair Minnis, *From Eden to Eternity: Creations of Paradise in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, Penn.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁶³ One blogger believes that Tolkien's Trinitarian conception of God is represented in Eru Iluvatar (God the Father), Gandalf, Frodo, and Aragorn (God the Son, Jesus, in his roles as prophet, priest, and king), and Tom Bombadil (God the Holy Spirit). See Jim Denny, "The Enigma of Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*, Part II," <https://jimdenney.wordpress.com/2012/07/05/the-enigma-of-tom-bombadil-in-the-lord-of-the-rings-part-2/>.

Brandywine River. Ham Gamgee, “the Gaffer,” offers his opinion of Frodo to the listeners, in such a way as to express both his approval and his sympathy for Frodo (which clearly not everyone in town shares). He says quite plainly that Frodo was “as nice a young hobbit as you could wish to meet ... After all his father was a Baggins.”⁶⁴ He then alludes, provocatively, to the manner of Mr. Drogo Baggins’ death: “he was drowned ... he went out *boating* on the Brandywine River, and he and his wife were drowned, and poor Mr. Frodo only a child and all.”⁶⁵ Following this disclosure, with which all the listeners present were already familiar – “They had heard this and other darker rumours before, of course; but hobbits have a passion for family history, and they were ready to hear it again” – Sandyman the Miller suggests that the wife pushed the husband in, and he pulled her in after him. To this, the Gaffer retorts: “There isn’t no call to go talking of pushing and pulling. Boats are quite enough for those that sit still without looking further for the cause of trouble.”⁶⁶

Perhaps because these facts are introduced in the give-and-take of local gossip, and the listening hobbits at the *The Ivy Bush* are more entertained by Frodo’s backstory than particularly empathetic to his childhood circumstances, Tolkien’s readers may overlook just how serious a matter this is. Frodo experienced the death of both of his parents when he was a very young hobbit, due to a tragic accident: drowning in water. The Gaffer observes that, as a result, Frodo was “an orphan and stranded, as you might say, among those queer Bucklanders, being brought up anyhow in Brandy Hall. A regular warren ...”⁶⁷

It is easy to be more engaged by the conflict between the Gaffer and the Sandyman, and more intrigued by their gossip, than the emotional reality behind it. The Gaffer, who defends Frodo, actually thinks his mother’s entire side of the family is “queer” and compares his extended family’s home to a rabbit warren. That Sandyman implies that Frodo’s parents were in some sort of marital conflict when they drowned is even more distracting. The scene seems to be set to characterize the inhabitants of Hobbiton (as provincial) and reveal what at first may seem to be a mere plot device: the explanation of how Bilbo got his heir.

⁶⁴ *FR*, 22.

⁶⁵ *FR*, 22.

⁶⁶ *FR*, 23.

⁶⁷ *FR*, 23.

Indeed, because Tolkien never gives us Frodo's memories or feelings about the loss of his parents – at least, not directly – and instead focuses our attention on his deep love for Bilbo, we can easily be swept up in the suspenseful story of *The Lord of the Rings* and fail to recognize that the traumatic loss of his parents would have affected Frodo profoundly. For Tolkien himself shared something in common with Frodo: both were orphans who lost their parents at a young age. Tolkien's father died in South Africa of fever when Tolkien was only three years old, shortly after Tolkien, his mother, and his brother took a long trip over the Atlantic Ocean on a ship from Africa to England. When he was only twelve years old, Tolkien's mother died of complications of diabetes. He and his brother were entrusted to the care of a guardian, Father Francis Morgan, but for various reasons, they were shuffled between relations, boarding houses, and schools until they entered college.⁶⁸ Tolkien's letters make clear how painful to him was the loss of his parents, especially the loss of his mother.⁶⁹ So when Tolkien made Frodo an orphan, about whom the Hobbiton locals gossip at a Bywater pub, it was not because he was unaware of what being an orphan, “stranded,” felt like to the orphan himself.

Although Tolkien does not give to readers Frodo's own account of the loss of his parents or its effects on him, he does create a motif in *The Lord of the Rings* that, when traced back and followed forward, implies the deep emotional impact of Frodo's primal loss: the ‘drowning’ motif.⁷⁰ For Frodo himself is nearly drowned in the Withywindle by tree roots like “gnarled dragonets.” Fortunately, Frodo is physically rescued by Samwise. But later, when Frodo experiences a supernatural kind of near-drowning in his encounter with the Barrow-wight, Tom Bombadil rescues him, physically *and* spiritually:

There was a loud rumbling sound, as of stones rolling and falling, and suddenly light streamed in, real light, the plain light of day. A low door-like opening appeared at the end of the chamber beyond

⁶⁸ Humphrey, *J.R.R. Tolkien: A Biography*, chap. 1 and 2.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Tolkien, “250 Letter to Michael Tolkien (1 November 1963),” esp. page 340.

⁷⁰ Tolkien may have had a fear of drowning, evident from what he called his “Atlantis complex” or his “Atlantis-haunting”: a dream he had repeatedly of a towering wave. “This legend or myth or dim memory of some ancient history has always troubled me. In sleep, I had the dreadful dream of the ineluctable Wave, either coming out of the quiet sea, or coming in towering over the green inlands. It still occurs occasionally, though now exorcized by writing about it. It always ends by surrender, and I awake gasping out of deep water.” (“257 To Christopher Bretherton (16 July 1964), p. 347). Tolkien later learned that his son, Michael, also had this dream, and Tolkien believed that his son had inherited this dream from him. See “163 Letter to W.H. Auden (7 June 1955).” Tolkien gives this dream to Faramir in *The Lord of the Rings*.

Frodo's feet; and there was Tom's head (hat, feather, and all) framed against the light of the sun rising red behind him. The light fell upon the floor and upon the faces of the three hobbits lying beside Frodo. They did not stir, but the sickly hue had left them. They looked now as if they were only very deeply asleep. Tom stooped, removed his hat, and came into the dark chamber, singing: "*Get out, you old Wight! Vanish in the sunlight! ...*"⁷¹

Tom Bombadil enters the barrow where Frodo has been entombed – where his friends lie with a sword against their necks and a bodiless hand, weirdly animated, has been approaching Frodo to attack him – and light streams into Frodo's darkness. Tom casts out the evil spirit, and Frodo and his friends are freed – indeed, they are resurrected. By the virtue of Tom's song, they experience salvation from death. Then Tom says to them, because they are worried about their original clothes, which were taken and replaced with grave-clothes in the barrow:

"You've found yourselves again, out of the deep water. Clothes are but a little loss, if you escape from drowning. Be glad, my merry friends, and let the sunlight heat now heart and limb! Cast off these cold rags! Run naked on the grass while Tom goes a-hunting!"⁷²

Tom Bombadil specifically characterizes the experience of the hobbits in the barrow as a *drowning* experience. For Frodo in particular, this is highly significant, connecting as it does to his original childhood wound, the primal loss of his parents. In response to Tom Bombadil's declaration of freedom and permission to cast off their grave-clothes, they do so, running naked and unashamed over the grass: an Edenic moment. It is as if they have been baptized in death, resurrected to life, and restored to a state of innocence. The light with which Tom Bombadil entered the tomb enlightens them. Tom's role is Christ-like: his entrance into the barrow where the hobbits are held captive is figured like the Harrowing of Hell.⁷³

⁷¹ *FR*, 142.

⁷² *FR*, 143. Tom's hunting succeeds: he brings back swords for the hobbits. His role in arming the four friends for the literal and spiritual battles that lie ahead is certainly significant. Denny has suggested that the swords correlate to the "sword of the Spirit." See Ephesians 6:10-18.

⁷³ The Gospel of Nicodemus is a primary source for medieval conceptualizations of the Harrowing of Hell. NB: Tom Bombadil's ability to exorcise an evil spirit can also be compared to Jesus casting out Legion. See Matthew 8, Mark 5, and Luke 8.

Psychologically, the symbolism of this scene clearly suggests that Frodo is receiving healing from trauma. It is the healing he experiences at this stage of his journey that strengthens him so that he can endure subsequent traumatic events on his quest to destroy the Ring. Here, with Tom Bombadil, light surrounds him and becomes a part of him. Later, Gandalf and Sam see that light shining through Frodo. So do Tolkien's readers.

Conclusions

Much more could be said about the parallels between Tom Bombadil and Christ – Tom tells parables of good and evil, with references to “sheep”;⁷⁴ he tells the hobbits of “one with a star on his brow”;⁷⁵ he is wedded to a golden lady who receives white lilies from him, who appears enthroned when the hobbits first see her (which relates, in terms of medieval iconography and allegoresis, to the bridal imagery that unites Jesus and Mary).⁷⁶ Even his name may be a suggestive: “Tom,” short for “Thomas,” means “twin,” which suggests that Tom is the twin of someone else. There are, obviously, limits to the comparison between Tom and Jesus. Yet perhaps the most important aspects of Tom's character are those which bring about Frodo's transformation. Tom comes to Frodo when Frodo first prays for help in the face of Old Man Willow's threat; he saves Frodo from death, darkness, and “drowning” by the light he brings into the grave and the song he sings that banishes the barrow-wight. It seems that, from this moment on, light is sparked in Frodo, a light made possible by his healing from trauma, which later becomes a “clear light” visible to those who love him.

So the questions with which this essay began – how does Frodo become transparent, and why, and what is the nature of the light that fills him? – have some powerful answers. Frodo's transparency comes about in moments of rest and

⁷⁴ Tom Bombadil's great storytelling on a rainy day is recalled in chapter 7, “In the House of Tom Bombadil,” *FR*, 129-131. Sheep are referred to twice: “Sheep were bleating in flocks ... Sheep walked for a while biting the grass, but soon the hills were empty again.”

⁷⁵ *FR*, 145. This phrase alludes to Eärendil and the Silmaril bound on his brow that becomes the Morning Star in the heavens above Middle-earth.

⁷⁶ Many different kinds of medieval pictures of Mary depict her with a golden halo, signifying her holiness. In Annunciation scenes, Gabriel presents her with trumpet lilies, which are different in appearance from water-lilies, but both are white and so symbolic of purity. Numerous extant medieval pictures depict Mary enthroned, most often with the Christ-child in her arms or at her breast. Medieval iconography is enriched by medieval allegoresis: a tradition of interpreting the relationship between Jesus and Mary in terms of the relationship between lover and beloved (‘hortus conclusus’) in the Song of Songs.

healing after trauma, and the nature of the light that fills him relates to the virtues of his character in the face of ongoing suffering: love, self-sacrifice, humility, perseverance. Symbolically, the “clear light” within him is related to the light caught in the Phial of Galadriel, which comes from the Eärendil’s Silmaril set in the heavens above Middle-earth, which is called the Morning Star. The Morning Star is another name for Jesus in the New Testament. Thus, the light in Frodo seems to be, on a symbolic level, the Christ-light.

The questions with which this essay continued – who is Tom Bombadil, and what does he have to do with the light inside of Frodo? – have answers that are similarly powerful and, indeed, intriguing. The mystery of Tom Bombadil’s identity is long standing, and an easy resolution to the mystery is not readily found. However, review of all that Tolkien said (and others have said) about Tom suggests that, as a character, he can and should be interpreted at more than one level of meaning.

By thinking in terms of the four levels of meaning found in medieval scriptural exegesis and literary interpretation, it is possible to consider Tom Bombadil literally, as a wooden doll that belonged to Michael Tolkien in the created world and as “Eldest” in the sub-created world; allegorically, as the spirit of the vanishing English countryside in the created world and a figure of the study of Zoology, Botany, and Poetry in the sub-created world, parallel to the first, prelapsarian Adam. Morally, Tom Bombadil is a storyteller, representative of J.R.R. Tolkien, the author himself. This parallel is further strengthened by Tolkien’s note: “Tom Bombadil rescues them from Willow Man. He says it was lucky he came that way – he had gone to the water-lily pool for some white water-lilies for Goldberry (my wife).”⁷⁷ If Goldberry represents Tolkien’s wife, Edith, it stands to reason that, at some level, Tom Bombadil represents Tolkien. It is not insignificant that “Tom” means “twin,” and indeed Tom can be seen as Tolkien’s “twin” within the world of Middle-earth. Anagogically, Tom Bombadil is also a figure of the second Adam, Jesus.

As we have seen in this essay, Tom Bombadil has qualities that relate to both the first Adam and the second Adam, Jesus. In saving Frodo from the barrow-wight, Tom Bombadil has a Christ-like role in Frodo’s healing from trauma, especially the trauma caused by his original childhood wound, the primal loss of his parents, who drowned in a tragic accident. Frodo’s healing in the Old Forest gives him the strength to continue his quest to destroy the Ring and endure the suffering caused by the new traumas of knife, sting, tooth, and a long burden.

⁷⁷ Tolkien, *The Return of the Shadow*, 117.

Tolkien's portrayal of Frodo's trauma has been tied to Tolkien's own experiences in World War I, and certainly, these were influential.⁷⁸ Tolkien was also orphaned at a young age as was Frodo. But Frodo also may represent – indirectly, yet poignantly – Tolkien's son, Michael, a veteran of World War II who suffered post-traumatic stress disorder.⁷⁹ In this connection, it is not insignificant that the original inspiration for the character of Tom Bombadil came from a wooden doll that belonged to Michael. Gandalf's paternal contemplation of Frodo in Rivendell, and Tolkien's portrayal of Frodo's prophetic dream in the house of Tom Bombadil, fulfilled at the end of *The Lord of the Rings* as Frodo approaches Valinor, may suggest Tolkien's hope for his son's healing before death.

Recognizing that Gandalf's original observation of the "clear light" in Frodo came from Tolkien's reading of lines from the Old English poem called *Christ III* gives readers further insight. In the original context of the poem, that light shines within those people who are rising from the dead to the Last Judgement. Frodo, too, experiences a kind of resurrection when Tom Bombadil saves him from the death, darkness, and spiritual "drowning" in the barrow. Later, when Frodo fails to destroy the Ring in the fires of Mount Doom, his author's judgement of him is not that he is a *moral* failure, however much Frodo may later feel that he is.⁸⁰ In Frodo, Tolkien presents a compassionate and realistic picture of a type of Everyman (or Christian), who tries to do what is right, is overburdened by trauma, and cannot accomplish what he set out to do, but is shown Mercy by Providence, so that, ultimately, and without requiring Frodo's perfection, the Quest is achieved.

⁷⁸ See Livingston, "The Shell-Shocked Hobbit."

⁷⁹ "Two brief passages in Tolkien's published *Letters* referred to circumstance even more directly connected to Tolkien's own life. In a letter written to Sir Stanley Unwin on 29 June 1944, barely two months after VE Day, mentions that Tolkien's "son, a much-damaged soldier [is] ... trying to ... recover a shadow of his old health." This comment is annotated in the editor's note #2 to letter 74, which gives the further information that Michael Tolkien [Tolkien's second son] had been judged unfit for further military service as a result of 'severe shock to the nervous system due to prolonged exposure to enemy action.'" The extent of Tolkien's grief, after coming through his own war, at seeing the effects of a second war on his son can only be imagined. His portrait of the heroic, failed, irrevocably damaged Frodo may be part oblique allusion, part oblique tribute to this other 'much-damaged' soldier" (Flieger, "The Body in Question," 18). I would only modify Flieger's conclusion here to note that Tolkien indicates his hope for Frodo's healing before death, and given his Christian world-view, Tolkien certainly believed that both Frodo and Michael would experience healing after death.

⁸⁰ Tolkien, "246 From a Letter to Mrs. Eileen Elgar," 326.

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