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TOM BOMBADIL AND THE SPIRIT OF OBJECTIVITY

ÖANI INKPEN

FOR DECADES READERS OF *THE LORD OF THE RINGS* have been occupied by the questions: Who is Tom Bombadil? What kind of being is he? This, despite a stern warning from the Oxford don that Tom Bombadil is an enigma who will not be improved by philosophizing (*Letters* 192, #153). Bombadil enters the story for three brief episodes and then exits only to be mentioned in mysterious terms a handful of times in subsequent chapters. He is described by Elrond as “Iarwain Ben-ader [...] oldest and fatherless” and by Gandalf as “his own master” (*The Lord of the Rings* [LotR] II.2.265). Goldberry answers Frodo’s queries about her spouse’s identity by stating, “He is.” “He is as you have seen him,” she explains, “He is the Master of wood, water, and hill. [...] He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master” (I.7.124).

To the hobbits who meet him and through whose eyes we see him, he is a benevolent oddity: quick to laugh; perpetually singing; and more than a tad ridiculous. Stomping about in his yellow boots and bright blue jacket, feather jutting from his cap, Bombadil has the quality of a crayon drawing. His exuberant joy stands in sharp contrast to the more realistic and darker tones in *The Lord of the Rings* and the *Legendarium* more generally. Yet, he is spoken of in terms of respect by highly respectable people. There is no other character quite like him. Perhaps therein lies the temptation to speculate.

Indeed, few of Tolkien’s readers have heeded the professor’s admonition. Fans have speculated that Bombadil is a member of the order of the Ainur, or even Ilúvatar himself. Scholars have surmised that he is Aulë, craftsman of the Earth, concealed in humanoid raiment (Hargrove 23), or that he is a great mythic singer modelled on lusty Väinämöinen of the Finnish *Kalevala* (Fliieger, *There Would Always be a Fairy Tale* 190-91). Many agree that he is some form of protective nature spirit, perhaps even the spirit of Arda itself—an “exhalation of the world” in Tom Shippey’s words (*Road* 107) or “a personified force of nature” in those of Verlyn Fliieger (*Fairy Tale* 110). Others have analyzed Bombadil for the literary functions his character serves in the text, pointing to his role as nexus of fearless joy (Chapman-Morales 59), and as narrative midwife to the hobbits’ transition from the pastoral world of the Shire

to the Wilderness beyond (Treschow and Duckworth 181-82). In the Old Forest and Barrow Downs, the hobbits have their first real encounters with danger and Bombadil shepherds them out of harm's way, providing them with weapons and wisdom that serve them well at later points in their respective journeys. It is with the barrow knife given to him by Tom that Merry wounds the dread Witch-king and "break[s] the spell that knit his unseen sinews to his will" in the battle of the Pelennor Fields (*LotR* V.6.842).

For Tolkien, Bombadil served quasi-allegorical and literary functions. In his letters Tolkien characterized Bombadil as "the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside" (*Letters* 26, #19); as an "enigma" that enhanced the reality of a mythical world; and as a "comment," the function of which was to illustrate a "natural pacifist view" amidst a contest between conservative and destructive forces (*Letters* 174, 179, #144). Yet, Bombadil's identity and what type of being he is remains unspecified. In the census of peoples of Middle-earth, Bombadil appears to be a one-member category, a *lusus naturae* as Shippey notes (*Road* 105).

I have little to say about the question of Bombadil's species membership, agreeing with Verlyn Flieger's assessment that he ultimately defies definition (*Fairy Tale* 61). Still, much may be learned about a thing without having to classify or define it. Even enigmas have qualities that may be profitably investigated to thereby render them less enigmatic.¹ In this essay I aim to better grasp Bombadil's nature by deciphering a set of comments Tolkien wrote in a 1954 letter to Peter Hastings, the manager of Newman Bookshop, a Catholic book store in Oxford. Hastings had reached out to Tolkien because he was concerned that certain aspects of *The Lord of the Rings* "over-stepped the mark in metaphysical matters" (qtd. in *Letters* 187, #153). He specifically cited Goldberry's description of Tom as "Master" and her assertion that "He is" (*LotR* I.7.124). To Hastings, these comments echoed God's declaration in the Old Testament, "I am," drawing an uncomfortably close parallel between Bombadil and the Christian divinity. Tolkien responded by highlighting the grammatical differences between "I am," and "He is," and their ontological ramifications. To the question of mastery, he replied:

He [Tom] is *master* in a peculiar way: he has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm. He hardly even judges, and as far as can be seen makes no effort to reform or remove even the Willow. (*Letters* 192, #153)

¹ Suzanne Jacobs has recently analyzed enigma in this context, pointing to its modern and medieval meanings. The medieval Latin *enigmata* poses Tom not as an indefinitely inscrutable mystery but as a riddle to be solved (80).

He explained further that Tom Bombadil fulfills a particular function in the text. Although Tolkien famously disavowed allegorical thinking, he confessed that Bombadil was:

an 'allegory', or an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science: the spirit that desires knowledge of other things, their history and nature, *because they are 'other'* and wholly independent of the enquiring mind, a spirit coeval with the rational mind, and entirely unconcerned with 'doing' anything with the knowledge: Zoology and Botany not Cattle-breeding or Agriculture. [Italics in original] (*Letters* 192, #153)

This intriguing description has received little probing from scholars. What did Tolkien mean by "pure (real) natural science" and a "spirit coeval with the rational mind?" And what, precisely, do these traits have to do with having no desire for domination and wanting to know things "*because they are 'other'?*" In what follows I look to the history of science to illuminate Tolkien's words to Hastings. Science has taken many historical forms. Appreciating what Tolkien might have meant by *science*, and what he did not, will enhance our understanding of Tom Bombadil's nature *vis-a-vis* the letter to Hastings. Grasping why Tolkien would have described him as the spirit of pure science requires looking to the history of natural history, a form of scientific inquiry that was especially popular during Tolkien's youth and formative years. To understand his association of the scientific outlook with renunciation of control, we must look to the history of objectivity. Unlike other virtues attributed to successful and laudable knowledge-makers—such as a commitment to portraying the hidden truths in nature—objectivity explicitly associates the ability to produce knowledge with the knower's capacity for self-renunciation and self-control. Objectivity is the cardinal virtue of modern science, imbuing it with an ethics founded in ideas of self-mastery that are relevant to understanding Bombadil's symbolism. While my analysis will not answer the vexed question of Bombadil's species membership in Middle-earth, it provides an answer to the question, "Whom or what is Tom Bombadil master of?", shedding light on his nature and his significance within *The Lord of the Rings*.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF NATURAL HISTORY

Today the term "science" conjures images of laboratories, white coats, test tubes, large, expensive machines, and computers. These associations are not particularly well-suited to the profoundly silly, pastoral Tom Bombadil. They betray a distinctly late twentieth-century sensibility and must be historicized if we are to grasp what alternative image of science Tolkien evoked in 1954. Tolkien wrote to Hastings in the midst of an upheaval in how science was

practiced in the modern world. Large-scale wartime endeavors like the American Manhattan Project and the British Tube Alloys Project—which together produced the world’s first atomic weapons—set a new precedent for what could be achieved through technoscientific endeavor. Such wartime undertakings changed how research was done, what purposes it was intended for, and the institutional settings in which it was performed. In elephantine, centralized projects, teams of (often military-supported) scientists and technicians worked toward a practical or technical goal in large, industrial-style laboratories. While theoretical knowledge was involved, scientists were as much engineers and project managers as they were scientists. Historians refer to this style of research as “Big Science,” and it was heir to centuries of laboratory science, writ on the industrial scale (Weinberg 161).

Laboratory science is a modern invention rooted in an early modern epistemology, according to which, in the laboratory, scientists isolate the phenomenon of interest and manipulate variables in systematic ways to see what does and does not affect it. Many grade school students would recognize this as *the* scientific method, a testament to the influence of this conception of science. The idea that nature could be studied by intervening upon it has a long and storied lineage. Though it may be traced back to alchemical traditions, it received its most polished and rhetorically persuasive treatment in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during what is commonly referred to as the Scientific Revolution. At this time advocates of “The New Philosophy” articulated an approach to natural philosophy (a precursor to modern science) rooted in intervening upon nature and forcing it to reveal its secrets. Nature was most tellingly revealed, wrote Francis Bacon, one of the New Philosophy’s most eloquent champions, “under constraint and vexed; that is to say, when by art and hand of man she [*sic*] is forced out of her [*sic*] natural state, and squeezed and molded” (82). Simply observing nature’s regular processes, Bacon insisted, was not enough; would-be knowers needed to break things down and intervene upon the pieces one by one. Investigating nature was a highly manipulative and interventionist process.

In the nineteenth century this approach moved to the halls of universities as chemists, biologists, and physicists developed techniques for investigating phenomena in the artificial setting of the laboratory. In the lab, it was believed, conditions could be better controlled to isolate the desired phenomena. Accordingly, it was advocated as the best place to investigate the natural world. Twentieth-century science inherited this experimentalist-laboratory lineage. But it was filtered through a new vision of what it meant to intervene upon nature that was articulated during the decades when Tolkien first began to shape Middle-earth. In the 1910s and 1920s scientists argued that the creative and manipulative practices of engineering could lead to knowledge

of even the biological realm. The process of making something, argued French biologist Jacques Loeb, revealed information about how it works. “The idea is now hovering before me,” he wrote to the philosopher Ernst Mach, “that man himself can act as a creator even in living nature, forming it eventually according to his will. Man can at least succeed in a technology of living substance” (qtd. in Pauly 51). Just as mechanical, civil, and electrical engineers had produced railroads and telegraphs, the engineer of living substance would create fabulous new forms (though Loeb himself achieved little more than *Tubularia*—a colonial salt water creature that resembles fantastic trees in a Dr. Seuss book—with heads on either end of their bodies). The essence of the Loebian standpoint, according to historian Philip Pauly, “was the belief that biology could be formulated, not as a natural science, but as an engineering science” (199). This stance, that of an engineering ideal, encapsulated a faith in maker’s knowledge as the best kind of knowledge.

The engineering ideal underlay much of twentieth-century Big Science and is alive today in areas like synthetic biology where scientists trained as engineers or computer scientists create rabbits that glow nuclear green with genetic material from sea jellies, and chimeric potatoes that harbor the genes of moths and bees. Fulfilling Loeb’s wildest dreams, this latter day alchemy blurs divisions between making knowledge and making artifacts, between nature and artifice (Roosth 9, 15).

None of this resonates with the character of Tom Bombadil. The New Philosophy and the engineering ideal share an emphasis on the ability to produce knowledge through manipulating nature. Both carry connotations of dominance and practical application that we see in much scientific research today (including, for example, in geo-engineering research and cancer research). But Bombadil is “entirely unconcerned with ‘doing’ anything” with his knowledge (*Letters* 192, #153). Rather, this interventionist and practical tradition more aptly applies to Saruman.

After learning that his fellow Istari has used secret arts to decompose white into many colors, Gandalf cautions, “he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom” (*LotR* II.2.259). Saruman’s experiments in color, and Gandalf’s criticisms of them, echo a famous episode in the history of early modern science. The idea of white as the conglomeration of multiple colors resulted from Isaac Newton’s optical experiments of the 1660s and 1670s. In his *experimentum crucis*, Newton used prisms to fracture white light into the colors of the visible spectrum. The *experimentum crucis* was celebrated by the promoters of the New Philosophy as an exemplary case of their preferred mode of interventionist inquiry. Yet Newton’s approach to colors was famously criticized by the Weimar polymath Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who advocated instead a more holistic approach to the investigation of color. “Phenomena,” Goethe

emphasized in florid prose, “must be freed once and for all from their grim torture chamber of empiricism, mechanism, and dogmatism” (309). To decompose colors was to destroy them, a sure way to leave the path of wisdom.²

Saruman is a technologist. In his account of Saruman as technologist, Tom Shippey analyzes the etymology of Saruman’s name, tracing links among the Mercian (the language of The Mark) *saru* and West Saxon *searu*, noting the latter’s connotations of metal, iron, and cunning (*Road* 170). After he betrayed the White Council around 2851 of the Third Age, Saruman’s lore turned to what may be called “research and development” of domineering technologies to be used in subjugating other peoples. The explosive powder deployed against the Rohirrick defendants of Helm’s Deep (*LotR* III.7.175) and the ballistic liquid fire turned toward the Ents during the Siege of Isengard are two such technologies (III.9.215). Like mustard gas, tanks, and automatic weapons, phenomena Tolkien encountered during the Great War, they are technologies engineered to kill other living beings *en masse*. Tolkien’s ambiguous feelings toward technology, no doubt partly shaped by his wartime experiences, are well known. In a letter to Christopher Tolkien, written while his son was serving in the Royal Air Force, Tolkien disparaged and lamented “the tragedy and despair of all machinery.” Machines, for him, were actualizations of the mind’s desires. Unlike art, which merely expressed sub-creative thoughts, engineering attempted to “create power” in the material world (*Letters* 87, #75). Informed by a Catholic theology, Tolkien viewed all human creations as subject to the decree of The Fall. “Our devices not only fail of their desire,” he told Christopher, “but turn to new and horrible evil. So we come inevitably from Daedalus and Icarus to the Giant Bomber. It is not an advance in wisdom!” (88).

Saruman, then, represents a technical and bellicose approach to knowledge. He is, as James G. Davis has argued, a *faber*—a word that originally meant “smith” but came to mean a creator of artifacts in general, bearing connotations of the industrial and the technocratic (56). In this, he is

² None of this goes against Verlyn Flieger’s well-known analysis in *Splintered Light*. There, Flieger reads the history of a fallen Middle-earth in terms of the parallel splintering of originary White Light (into the Lamps of Arda, the Trees Laurelin and Telperion, the Silmarils, Galadriel’s phial) and Logos, the originary Word (into languages). Although specific moments in the history of splintered light are enacted by individuals, its historical logic is at the foundation of Arda, marred by the discordance sowed by Melkor before the world came into being. Flieger is less concerned with the ethics of individual acts of splintering light than its world-historical, metaphysical, and psychological ramifications. She makes clear that Tolkien believed some good could be found in splintered light, as it served as material for sub-creators like himself to compose new beauty in the world (62). Her discussion of Saruman’s conversation with Gandalf is brief and focuses more on his hubris than the act itself (144).

diametrically opposed to the way of knowing represented by Tom Bombadil. The dominant image of modern science as an experimental and laboratory-based activity, best captured by Saruman's style of knowledge-making, has historical roots in philosophies of intervention and practical mastery. It thus fails to capture the vision of science appropriate to Bombadil and so cannot account for Tolkien's words to Hastings. We must, then, set aside many of our modern conceptions of science when considering the case of Tom.

Instead we must look to another tradition in the history of Western science. When Tolkien referred to Bombadil as the spirit of pure science, he likely had in mind something more like natural history, a branch of knowledge-making that traditionally focused on studying nature *au plein air*. In its broadest sense, natural history is the study and taxonomizing of the natural world. Its origins date to the Renaissance when savants and wealthy amateurs looked up from their books and scrolls and began to investigate the natural world around them, creating compendiums—*histories*—detailing what they found. Natural history was chiefly characterized by the activities of collecting, describing, and cataloguing specimens, be they botanical, zoological, geological, or anthropological (Strasser 304). Its primary products were the atlas or encyclopedia, the museum display, and the specimen drawing. It blossomed in quiet, local chapters of amateur enthusiasts devoted to studying of their particular corner of the countryside, and eventually in globe-spanning voyages of famous men like Charles Darwin.

European natural history reached its zenith in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, becoming a geopolitically powerful practice of nations during the Age of Empire. Naturalists encircled the globe, riding upon on the networks of empire, delving into places unexplored by Europeans and returning with specimens and facts that increased the storehouse of European knowledge. They were, according to Londa Schiebinger, "agents of empire" and their taxonomies and nomenclatures, "tools of empire" (11). It is difficult to overstate the importance of natural history to Victorian Britain. It was integral to the imperial project and interwoven in the daily life of citizens through news media, public ceremonies, neighborly gossip, and literary works of every variety (Browne 305). The importance of natural history to the Empire reverberated into the Edwardian years.

Growing up in Edwardian England, Tolkien would have been familiar with natural history and known natural historians to be persons who sought an understanding of how things worked in nature. When he describes Bombadil as knowing and understanding things in "his natural little realm" and as "observing," he paints a portrait of a natural historian poking about the countryside, learning about the plants, rocks, and animals that live there. Tom is analogous to the erudite local society member who knows everything about

the structures, life cycles, and distribution of fungi in Lancashire, as well as which are delicious and which are dangerous. Tom's musical knowledge of the denizens of his realm is equivalent, though deeper in scope and reach. Our mycologist is limited to a language that seeks to describe a world separate from itself. Her taxonomies are based on arbitrary characteristics of fungi, picked out by fellow naturalists, and will forever be incomplete and imperfect. Bombadil's knowledge possesses no such inadequacies. His language *is* the language of nature. His songs for Willow-man, Badger-brock, Barrow-wight, and River-woman's daughter in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" have a natural power over each because they express their true natures. Bombadil's speech encapsulates the myth of a lost natural language, an uncorrupted Ur-speech that is "isomorphic with reality" (Shippey, *Road* 106). Nevertheless, it is a knowledge of names and natures, different only in degree and scope from what the mycologist knows. It is not different in kind.

Zoology and botany, the sciences Tolkien cites in reference to Bombadil, were transforming into laboratory-based endeavors during his adult lifetime, but were still rooted in the tradition of natural history that privileged observing organisms in their natural environments without manipulating them or intervening upon their natural cycles. It is this passive, observational approach to which Tolkien refers when he contrasts them to the practical, interventionist arts of agriculture and breeding. The latter two, with their connotations of the mechanical and practical arts, share more with Saruman's technical knowledge. The spirit of "pure" science represented by Tom is that of natural historical observation and understanding, untainted by interventionism and the desire to manipulate.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF OBJECTIVITY

We are now in a better position to analyze the ramifications of Tolkien's statements to Peter Hastings. The spirit of pure science refers to an idea of science as natural historical observation for the sake of knowing and appreciating nature's wondrous diversity. But how does this account of science entail fearlessness and an abjuration of domination? Tom "has no fear, and no desire of possession or domination at all. He merely knows and understands about such things as concern him in his natural little realm," Tolkien told the bookstore owner. According to this formulation to know and understand is to lack a desire to possess. Grasping this equation requires delving into the history of objectivity.

For many people objectivity is *the* defining virtue of modern science. The image of the disinterested scientist, enrobed in a white lab coat, emotionally detached from the outcomes of her research, is perhaps the most ubiquitous icon of modern science. As heirs to the world of professional science that emerged in

the nineteenth century, we tend to think of objectivity as the *sine qua non* of science. Proper scientists are objective scientists. Yet, this image, like science, has a history. Objectivity is only one of several traits believed to have defined the virtuous scientific knowledge-maker over time. Appreciating its historical specificity brings its ethical contours into relief.

“Objectivity has not always defined science,” write historians Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison in their seminal study of the topic; “[n]or is objectivity the same as truth or certainty, and it is younger than both” (17). Before objectivity other virtues and normative imagery were associated with knowledge making. Indeed, prior to the late eighteenth century the words “objectivity” and “subjectivity” meant the opposite of their present definitions. When a thing was said to be objective it meant that it existed purely as an “Object of the Mind.” “Subjective” referred to things as they existed in themselves. This changed around the time of the French Revolution when philosophers and scientists began to use “objective” to refer to the objects in themselves, and “subjective” to mean the perception or cognition of them in our minds (29). This shift in meaning was consequential for the ethics of knowledge-making.

Daston and Galison reveal objectivity to be a historically-specific epistemic virtue that rose to prominence during the nineteenth century. Epistemic virtues are ethical characteristics believed to be relevant to producing knowledge. They are normative codes of conduct that are “preached and practiced in order to know the world” (39). Before objectivity, an epistemic virtue that they call “truth to nature” dominated Renaissance science. Natural historians and philosophers who adhered to the virtue of truth to nature sought to represent the hidden truth behind the diverse and passing expressions of the natural world. One finds in Renaissance encyclopedias drawings of dioecious plant specimens that include male and female reproductive parts on the same plant though in reality they are found in separate individuals. The bisexual representation was thought to capture the ideal form of the plant as it existed in the “Book of Nature.” Although curious to modern minds conditioned by a rigorous empiricism, for those who abided by truth-to-nature there was a divinely ordained Book of Nature: a set of ideal blueprints ordered by a logic that was veiled by the hurly-burly of worldly phenomena. It was the task of the student of nature to perceive this truth behind appearances.

The personal skill of the observer and the artist was ineliminable in this process. Only the most gifted of observers could ascertain the truth hidden in the multiplicity of appearances and extract it for reproduction on the page. This entailed celebrations of individual genius. At the twilight of the truth-to-nature era, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (who, incidentally, lambasted Newton’s optical experiments) was celebrated for his uncommon ability to perceive the archetype behind all plants, the *Urpflanze*. The *Urpflanze*, or Ur-plant, he

believed, was the ideal blueprint from which all plant types were derived by accentuating or downplaying various aspects of a prototypical leaf structure. A root was a modified leaf that stayed underground and sucked fluid, a bulb was a conglomeration of root leaf structures, a stem was a leaf stretched out, and so on for other parts of a plant. To Goethe's eye, the diverse realm of plants was the result of the continual metamorphosis of a single leaf-like archetype. Typical representations of the *Urpflanze* resemble Tolkien's drawings of the Tree of Amalion, a tree that bears many different types of leaves and flowers (Hammond and Scull 64). Goethe's work required a particular ability to see the hidden unity in diversity. His *Urpflanze* research contributed to the celebration of his unique, multi-faceted genius. Grasping the truth in nature was regarded as a product of Goethe's exceptional proclivities; his ability to do so was the *result*, not the effacement, of subjective perspective (Hallet 191; Daston and Galison 69-71).

Objectivity, on the other hand, was an escape from perspective. "To be objective," write Daston and Galison, "is to aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower—knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment" (17). Objectivity is the opposite of subjectivity; it is its negation. Yet it is essential to it. As right defines left, objectivity cannot be understood without the idea of a subjective self as a potential impediment to accurate knowledge. Being objective means overcoming aspects of the self to see nature as it really is irrespective of perspective. Thus understood, it is an ethical achievement: a mastery and effacement of self, or an "assiduous cultivation of a certain kind of self" as Daston and Galison phrase it; a self capable of mastering its own desires and impulses (40).

The possibility of objectivity as an epistemic virtue demands a particular conception of the psychological self. The self to be overcome through objectivity is a willful psychological agent that requires taming to prevent it from skewing one's perspective on the world. Daston and Galison maintain that this particular understanding of the self arose in the nineteenth century, the result of new psychologies that overthrew an earlier faculty psychology model in which the psyche was comprised of competing but generally equal faculties (e.g., Reason, the Passions, Imagination). The model of the psychological self underpinning the idea of objectivity was not a mishmash of equal faculties vying with one another, but a top-down model in which the will, properly cultivated, possessed the capacity to direct attention, subdue the passions, and fortify itself. This willful self can be glimpsed in clichés about "will power" and of needing to "fortify one's will." These are ways of saying that one must gain control over mind and body, and the underlying idea was as common in Tolkien's time as in our own. Indeed, self-mastery and the will to resist the Ring's temptation are Frodo's perpetual trials, both of which he ultimately fails. When objectivity is

understood as the achievement of self-effacement or self-control, a willful self is its necessary foil. Appreciating this historically-situated, conceptually-necessary opposition of self and object shines light on the question of Bombadil's mastery.

THE ETHICS OF BOMBADIL'S SELF-MASTERY

In his fearlessness and his lack of desire to control or to even judge, Tom Bombadil captures the pure spirit of disinterested science, the spirit of objectivity. We also know that he is Master. But Master of what? Goldberry clarifies for Frodo that he does not *own* the wood, water, and hill. He "knows the song" for each of the elements in his realm which allows him to direct them away from harming others, as the encounters with Old Man Willow and the Barrow-wight demonstrate in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Yet, this power is exercised with a light touch. Through his songs he *can* manipulate willows, wights, future spouses, and the like. Yet he does so only as needs be, not because he desires to impose his will upon them. Understanding Bombadil as the embodiment of the pure spirit of objective science reveals him as a master of more than wood, water, and hill. Tom is master of *himself* in a philosophically and morally significant sense. Bombadil, as the spirit of objective science, has no desire to dominate, to make things other than they are, or to alter his relation to them by modifying them. He seeks to know about his fellow denizens of Creation purely for the sake of knowing about them, not to make them fit his ends. He makes no effort to "reform or remove" because to do so would be to impose his will on others.³

It is not simply a matter of possessing free will. Bombadil is master of those traits that so often bring down the Second Born (and some First Born): fear; jealousy; pride; the desire to shape the world according to one's desires. Although common to the Children of Ilúvatar, these traits are essentialized in the characters of Melkor and Sauron. Both dark lords are plagued by fear, arrogance, and a desire to make others do their bidding. Without delving too far into a psychoanalysis of evil in Middle-earth, we can nevertheless note that Tom, as described in the letters and portrayed in the book, has no fear or desire; his love of Goldberry seems free of jealousy. Fear, desire, jealousy are all feelings that suggest a deficit. Lacking them, Tom is perfectly at peace with the world, wishing only to know it for what it is. As the spirit of objectivity, he is master of himself and the psychological weaknesses that underlie evil.

³ Problematically, the case of Goldberry's betrothal in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" appears to be an exception to this rule. At the end of the poem Tom catches and holds fast Goldberry, whisking her away to their merry wedding with little concern for her consent. But it is worth noting, as others have, that the Bombadil of Tolkien's poetry differs from the character fleshed out in *The Lord of the Rings*. There, Goldberry's autonomy appears to be fully respected (Tolkien, "Adventures" 88).

This resonates with Tolkien's attributing to Tom a "natural pacifist view." In 1954, he told Naomi Mitchison that "rights and wrongs of power and control" are "utterly meaningless" for Tom Bombadil (*Letters* 179, #144). Like the detached scientist, the pacifist is removed from the turmoil of the phenomenal world. The pacifist merely observes, she does not engage. This distinguishes Bombadil from the other forces of good in the War of the Ring. Gandalf and his allies are the opposite of Sauron. They *oppose* him and seek a world order based on different power relations among the citizens of Middle-earth. To put it in absurdly neutral and anachronistic terms, they are fighting for a different distribution of political power than Sauron offers. Enlightened monarchy in the cases of Arnor, Gondor, and Rohan; collective self-governance bordering on enlightened anarchism in that of the Shire. Bombadil, by contrast, eschews political power. He has no desire for that ultimate symbol and expression of power, the Ring. If given the Ring "he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind," Gandalf tells the council at Rivendell (*LotR* II.2.265). He does not seek to oppose Sauron with an alternative vision of political order. He is, then, in his detached self-mastery, not Sauron's opposite, but his philosophical *negation*.

There are reasons to believe that Bombadil's self-mastery underlies his ability to resist the Ring, a reification of Sauron's will to dominate, rooted in fear, jealousy, and pride. The belief that self-mastery may entail spiritual enlightenment and, sometimes worldly power, can be found in both Eastern and Western philosophical traditions. Nearest to Tolkien's Catholic worldview are Thomist accounts of prudence, which Michael Treschow and Mark Duckworth explore in their analysis of Tom Bombadil.⁴ "[P]rudence," they write, following Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper, "is the first and foremost of the natural virtues [...]. It is an intellectual virtue by which the knowing mind is able to see clearly, to see how things are and whither they tend, and so to make good choices." Prudence is more than mere knowledge, it is a virtue of the wise (and so distinct from Saruman's technological know-how). It is the virtue, they explain, "that informs philosophy (as the "love of wisdom"), enabling due wonder at the life and existence of the world around us." The contours of prudence are illuminated by considering its opposing vice, lust. Its opposite is not merely sexual lust, but the lust for power, fame, dominance—"the lust for the confirmation of one's own importance" (190). Prudence, then, functions like objectivity. It is a renunciation of willful desires and passions; a mastery of the willful self. The truly prudent person, like the idealized objective observer of

⁴ These authors discuss the letter to Hastings under scrutiny in this essay, but do not pursue the question of science, focusing instead on Tolkien's remarks about Bombadil as the embodiment of an idea.

nature, has overcome the temptations of ego and has achieved a relation of respectful wonder for their fellow denizens of the world.

Thinking historically about science reveals different ways of conceiving how knowledge-making ought to proceed, and shows how changeable normative dimensions attended shifting epistemologies of self and world. Much of our modern imagery of science stems from the technoscientific lineage of Western science. Given what Tolkien has written about technology and how he portrayed the character of Saruman, we must look elsewhere in the history of science for the meaning of Bombadilian “pure science.” We find it in the tradition of natural history, with its valorization of passive observation over artificial manipulation. Its purity comes from seeking knowledge of things themselves, without the taint of subjective desire or intention—normative ideals associated specifically with the epistemic virtue of objectivity. Unpacking Tolkien’s words to Peter Hastings and situating them in the history of Western science allows us to better appreciate Tom Bombadil’s symbolic and literary functions in *The Lord of the Rings*. The histories of natural history and objectivity reveal Tom as the distillation of an ethical orientation in which the achievement the self-mastery is done in service of knowing and appreciating things as they are in themselves. Considering this alongside Thomist accounts of prudence suggests that his self-mastery is crucial for his ability to resist the Ring. Probing the Professor’s words on science, then, has revealed a richer portrait of the nature of Tom Bombadil. Thus it seems, as with many of the wizard’s utterances, there is much to be unpacked in Gandalf’s description of Tom Bombadil as “his own master.”⁵

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⁵ I have made no claims as to whence Bombadil’s power of self-mastery springs, for this leads to questions about what kind of being he is. Yet, we may speculate that the idea of Tom as self-master may be tied to his portrayal as a nature spirit. The natural elements of Middle-earth, the flora and fauna (with the exception of Old Man Willow, the Huorns, a few talking birds, and perhaps one cognizant fox), do not strive to master the world. Nor do they struggle with vices and psychological weaknesses. They appear to merely act in the world within the bounds prescribed by their natural ways of life, simply existing in their Eru-given relation to the rest of Creation. This self-less mode of being seems related to Tom’s objective, pacifist orientation.

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