

**Tom Bombadil and the “Hyper-
Fantastic” in J.R.R. Tolkien**

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*Still round the corner there may wait
A new road or a secret gate,
And though we pass them by today,
Tomorrow we may come this way
And take the hidden paths that run
Towards the Moon or to the Sun.*

— J.R.R. Tolkien,
The Fellowship of the Ring, 77.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of *The Lord of the Rings* between 1954 and 1955¹, Tom Bombadil has maintained his status in the readers' imaginary as one of the biggest mysteries of the novel. Many have even gone as far as to suggest that it could be a plot hole, considering that, apparently, it does not advance the plot in any way despite occupying a whole chapter and half of two more²—in this sense, Peter Jackson justified its absence from his extremely popular cinematic adaptations by arguing that its inclusion would render the films *unnecessarily* long (*Lord of the Rings Appendices*). Others, on the other hand, were so intrigued by its potential function in the novel that they asked Tolkien himself for an explanation (see letters 144 and 153 in Tolkien, *Letters*³ 174, 191-92), to which Tolkien only answered with more ambiguities, declaring that “even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)” (174). After all, as Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond explain in their introduction to Tolkien's poetry collection *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, not only do we not know his function, but there is also an explicit resistance on the part of the novel itself

¹ Even though Tolkien considers it a single novel, for editorial reasons it was published in three volumes: *The Fellowship of the Ring* and *The Two Towers* in 1954, and *The Return of the King* in 1955. As a matter of fact, the edition used for reference in this essay follows this approach in its page numbering by having the second and third volume start their page numbers where the previous volume ended. For these reasons, this essay will reference *The Lord of the Rings* as a novel, in singular.

² He appears for the first time towards the end of the sixth chapter (Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring* 118-22), has a main role in the whole of the seventh chapter, titled, after himself, as “In the House of Tom Bombadil” (123-34) and, finally, he appears again towards the end of the eighth chapter (141-48).

³ From now on, Tolkien's works will be shortened as follows (alphabetically): *Fairy-stories* for “On Fairy-stories”, *Adventures* for *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil*, *Fellowship* for *The Fellowship of the Ring*, *Letters* for *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, *Return* for *The Return of the King* and *Silmarillion* for *The Silmarillion*.

to categorise him in any of the groups of intelligent beings presented on Tolkien's *Legendarium*—in other words, neither do we know, nor did Tolkien want to reveal, his nature (8-9).

Because of all this, it should never be overlooked that Tolkien was more than aware of the questions such a character would raise in the reader, and, despite it all—or maybe even because of it—, he still decided to devote more than 30 pages to him, adding to the aforementioned chapters numerous reappearances and references to the character throughout the novel to the very end (see *Return* 1030). It becomes specially relevant that in a novel explicitly coded as *historic*—with various appendices that include extremely detailed information on languages, races, historical events and chronicles—a character refuses to be defined, which, if anything, only makes him more attractive if only for the mystery it creates. The present essay's intention is, then, to explore to which extent this *mystery* is related to the disruption that the element of *the fantastic* usually presents, with the added complexity of the character being an *other* in a world that is already *other* to the reader—that is, in a fantastic world. It is in this sense that this essay will propose the concept of “hyper-fantastic”—a fantastic element, that is, disruptive in its strangeness or *otherness*, in a world that is already fantastic in essence —, so that it can be explored how it applies to the way in which Tom Bombadil is presented in the novel and the implications this potential function may suggest.

2. FROM THE FANTASTIC TO THE *HYPER-FANTASTIC*

In his chapter in *Teorías sobre lo fantástico* [*Theories on the fantastic*], Jaime Alazraki presents us with the problematic categorisation of the genre of *the fantastic*, pointing to the different—sometimes even contradictory—definitions given throughout the last couple of centuries. On the one hand, there are less strict categorisations, such as Carilla's, who sees as *fantastic* those stories dealing with that which “escapes, or is beyond the limits, of the ‘scientific’ and realistic explanation; that which is outside of

our surrounding and provable world⁴⁵⁷ (Alazraki 266). In this sense, anything outside of what is traditionally considered *realistic*—which in this case means “provable as real or possible in the real world”—belongs in the realm of fantastic literature. On the other hand, however, there are definitions of *the fantastic* as a genre in which the supernatural is presented as something actively disruptive. In this context, novels such as *The Lord of the Rings*, where the *supernatural*⁶ is shown to be a new natural and, say, *ordinary* order, would not fit within *the fantastic*, but would be rather classified within the genre of *the marvellous*⁷. Alazraki includes as well a quote from Caillois that illustrates the distinction perfectly:

The universe of the *marvellous* is naturally populated by dragons, unicorns and fairies; miracles and metamorphosis are continuous there [...]... In the *fantastic*, on the contrary, the supernatural appears as a rupture of the universal coherence. A prodigy is turned there into a forbidden aggression, threatening, that breaks the stability of a world whose laws were, until then, understood as rigorous and immutable⁸⁹. (268)

In conclusion, if we follow Alazraki’s approach, only in accordance to the loosest definitions can *The Lord of the Rings* be considered fantastic, whereas its

⁴ “[E]scapa, o está en los límites, de la explicación ‘científica’ y realista; lo que está fuera del mundo circundante y demostrable”.

⁵ All the translations throughout the essay will be ours, and, accordingly, the original quote will be provided on the footnotes.

⁶ For lack of a better word, this is used here to refer to anything in Tolkien’s *Legendarium* outside of whatever is deemed natural or possible in our world. Thus, we will include here both aspects that are more clearly linked to supernatural or preternatural forces, such as the specific stances of *magical* elements presented on *The Lord of the Rings*, as well as aspects more loosely supernatural, such as different races and species that do not exist in our world and therefore are technically considered outside of the natural. Also, the concept of *magic* is problematised by Tolkien both within his fictional (see *Fellowship* 362) and in his non-fictional works (see letter 155 in *Letters* 199-200)—for the sake of brevity, however, this concept will be used in its more universal meaning of a power to influence events or objects by a force that is not natural to our (real) world.

⁷ Literally, “lo maravilloso”.

⁸ This will be specially relevant to this context Tom Bombadil’s immunity towards the most dangerous object of the novel, the One Ring (see section 3, pages 11-12).

⁹ “El universo de lo *maravilloso* está naturalmente poblado de dragones, de unicornios y de hadas; los milagros y las metamorfosis son allí continuos [...]... En lo *fantástico*, al contrario, lo sobrenatural aparece como una ruptura de la coherencia universal. El prodigio se vuelve aquí una agresión prohibida, amenazadora, que quiebra la estabilidad de un mundo en el cual las leyes, hasta entonces, eran tenidas por rigurosas e inmutables”.

normativisation of the magical and supernatural would make a stricter categorisation consider it within the realm of *the marvellous*. After all, if *the marvellous* offers any room for disruption of the rational it is only indirectly—in this sense, Rosie Jackson, while accepting *the marvellous* as a kind of fantasy, declares that that kind of stories “[leads us] to believe that the universe is, ultimately, a self-regulated mechanism in which goodness, stability and order will prevail¹⁰” (144). On the contrary, the subversive fantastical—*the fantastic* for Alazraki—,

by calling attention to the relative nature of [the dominant philosophical and epistemological categories], [...] aims towards a dismantling of the “real”, [...] [towards] eroding the foundations of society by means of its refusal to construct categorical structures. [...] The fantastic, in its movement towards *non-signification*, tends towards the *non-thetic*, [that is,] everything opposed to the dominant practice of significance. (146-47; emphasis added)

Therefore, if the fantastic (or disruptive fantastic) refers to any disruptive element of the reality presented as ordinary, by definition in essential resistance to enter philosophical and epistemological categories, what would we call a similar element situated not within an ordinary reality, but within a marvellous-fantastic one? This would suggest, then, a *fantastic* element for an already *fantastic* reality, where, potentially, the mechanisms this fantastic element would alter would be those that, being fantastic, have already been accepted as ordinary or *normative* within said reality—it could thus be called *hyper-fantastic*. In this sense, it would not be necessary for *the fantastic* (or *hyper-fantastic*) to disrupt the normativised world explicitly by being anarchic—rather, it would suffice for its nature to be in essential resistance to definition, suggesting that the reality which it disrupts is far more complex than what we as readers had considered initially. These elements would not be but, like Cortázar said, “perfectly valid and legitimate mechanisms that our logical mind is unable to grasp but that manage to barge in from time to time¹¹” (Alazraki 276). Interestingly enough, even if

¹⁰ “[Dan] a entender que el universo es, en última instancia, un mecanismo autorregulado en el que la bondad, la estabilidad y el orden acabarán por imponerse”.

¹¹ “[M]ecanismos perfectamente válidos, vigentes, que nuestro cerebro lógico no capta pero que en algunos momentos irrumpen”.

Tolkien's stance on fantasy did not really fit these requirements of disruption that dismantles the foundations of reality (see Jackson 147)—as he defended realistic approaches¹² to fantasy by declaring that “[f]antasy does not blur the sharp outlines of the real world; for it depends on them” (*Fairy-stories* 160)—, he still proposed a very similar idea to Cortázar's definition, by suggesting that fantasy's play with—and potential disruption of—the ordinary laws of our reality may only be *apparent*:

[The term “fantasy”] combines with its older and higher use as an equivalent of Imagination the derived notions of “unreality” (that is, of unlikeness to the Primary World¹³), of freedom from the domination of observed “fact”, in short of the fantastic. I am thus not only aware but glad of the etymological and semantic connections of *fantasy* with *fantastic*: with images of things that are not only “not actually present”, but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there. [...] That the images are of things not in the primary world (if that indeed is possible) is a virtue not a vice. (139; the italics are Tolkien's, the highlights ours)

In this way, Tolkien seems to be implying that what may look like a disruption of the real—or primary—world, may just be a revelation of a different side of our reality that could not have been grasped merely through *observed “fact”*, thus revealing perfectly legitimate yet empirically unobservable mechanisms. The disruption presented by fantasy should then be grounded on a “recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (144). All this to say that the potential disruption posed by *the fantastic* may not essentially negate the pillars of our reality, but rather their *perceptibility*. In this sense, it is uniquely poignant to consider that the prevailing perspective in the Tom Bombadil chapters is that of the hobbits, who beyond technically forming part of a fantastic race,

¹² Tolkien was firmly opposed to more *irrational* approaches to fantasy (see his stance on Lewis Carroll in *Fairy-stories* 144) in which the fantastic elements were understood as the result of a dream or even mental delusion. For him, this type of fantasy could rarely achieve the effect that proper fantasy intended of *sub-creating* worlds which gave the illusion of reality or provoked *secondary belief* (see footnote 13). In that sense, for him fantasy is “a rational, not an irrational activity” (*Fairy-stories* 139).

¹³ Tolkien calls the *real* world “Primary World” as opposed to the created world's “Secondary World” (*Fairy Stories* 139). He derives his definition for the effect that fantasy should have, which he calls *Secondary Belief*, that is, the “achievement of the expression, which gives (or seems to give) ‘the inner consistency of reality’” (139), as a response to Coleridge's concept of *willing suspension of disbelief* (see 132).

are coded as an *alter ego* to the readers, thus playing the role of us, 20th—or 21st in our case—century humans immersing ourselves in Tolkien's *Legendarium*. Not for naught do they live outside of any magical or supernatural element—or any strangeness whatsoever for that matter—when the story begins, both in *The Hobbit* and in *The Lord of the Rings*. It actually is *their* world that is disrupted by the entrance of the fantastical elements, usually heralded by the arrival of Gandalf the Wise¹⁴. In this sense, it is of particular interest that, with the reader, they are forced to accept a first level of fantasy (fairly comprehensible even if strange), only for it to be shaken by a new twist to the *now-normativised* fantasy world with the arrival of a second level of fantasy (this time incomprehensible in essence according to the norms of either the first level of fantasy or any world known to the hobbits and, consequently, to us).

3. TOM BOMBADIL AS AN *ESSENTIALLY* DISRUPTIVE ELEMENT

To analyse the *strangeness* kindled by the presence of Tom Bombadil is, if anything, a challenging endeavour—because of this, and for the sake of brevity, this essay will focus on the three aspects that we believe are of special relevance: the insinuation or codification of his house as an *altern* space or *heterotopy*, the *performative* power of his words—and, especially, his songs—and his non-thetic and apparently irrational nature, in contrast to Tolkien's emphasis on the important of *reason* in fantasy.

From the very first impression the hobbits have of Tom Bombadil's house, it seems that, magically, this house has been separated from the rest of the world: leaving the *Old Forest*, dark and menacing—compared to an “ominous dream” in *Fellowship* 121)—, “*suddenly* the trees came to an end and the mists were left behind” (121; emphasis added), and nature is now joyful, bright and beautiful. More meaningful even is the moment when they enter the house: “[a]nd [...] the hobbits stood upon the *threshold*, and a golden light was all about them” (122; emphasis added). This codification of the

¹⁴ For a very nuanced and engaging discussion on the role of hobbits as the readers'—or contemporary humans'—alter ego, see Tom Shippey's discussion of Bilbo in particular and the hobbits in general as a representation or even parody of the English bourgeoisie and their rationalistic mentality in his chapter titled “The Bourgeois Burglar” (2005).

entrance of the house as the entrance to a new, say, dimension is highlighted formally by its being at the very end of the chapter, so that everything that happens within the house is secluded within a single chapter, as if protecting its secrets¹⁵—curiously enough, the next chapter is entitled “In the House of Tom Bombadil”. If the relevance of the crossing of the threshold had not been clear enough, the *in-house* chapter begins by repeating the same idea: “[t]he four hobbits stepped over the wide stone *threshold*, and stood still, blinking” (123; emphasis added)—it is as if they knew they had entered a new world, a place outside of their world.

Once inside, Bombadil and his wife, Goldberry, will repeat till exhaustion that no enemy may reach them there, but that they are actually protected—or *secluded*—from the exterior world. And in a world where the enemies the hobbits are facing have supernatural power, and even their physical power is well beyond the hobbits’ own power, promising total protection is nothing short of supernatural. Furthermore, the hobbits will actually *feel* this sense of *security*, which will make them so joyful and at ease—again, nothing short of supernatural after all the trauma they have endured even if it is just the beginning of their *quest*—that they will find singing far more natural than speaking. This is specially relevant when—beyond the performative element that Tom Bombadil’s songs have and that will be dealt with presently—, singing over talking, or talking through a constant bundle of songs is one of Tom Bombadil’s most defining qualities—even when in *prose*, his speech present a permanent internal rhyme—: it is as if by entering his house Tom Bombadil had infected them with his own language, and one that, as will be explained below, will be intrinsically linked to God and his creation in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. The hobbits will have a constant feeling of peace mingled with *strangeness*, especially when Bombadil tells them stories of the Old Forest: “they began to understand the lives of the Forest, apart from themselves, indeed to feel themselves as the strangers where all other things were at home” (130), which calls back to Tolkien’s view of the inhabitants of *Fäerie* or the world of fantasy and how they are mistakenly understood as *supernatural* as opposed to us humans:

¹⁵ It must be acknowledged that the next chapter to this one will start within the house still, so the seclusion is not perfect, but still the effect stands—and in a moment as important as their first time they entrance to the house.

Supernatural is a dangerous and difficult word in any of its senses, looser or stricter. But to fairies it can hardly be applied, unless *super* is taken merely as a superlative prefix. For it is man who is, in contrast to fairies, supernatural (and often of diminutive stature); whereas they are natural, far more natural than he. (*Fairy-stories* 110; the italics are Tolkien's, the highlights ours)

Finally, when their time to leave the house comes, the house will disappear from their sight as quickly as it appeared, and the only house-related element that will remain will be a vision of Goldberry on the top of the hill, “like a sunlit flower against the sky” (*Fellowship* 136). Interestingly enough, even if more *heterotopies* will appear throughout the novel, such as Rivendell and Lothlórien, and even if these also share with Bombadil's house the feeling that they are the remnants of an ancient and lost world, in both it will be suggested that they are only capable of keeping that status thanks to an external power—that is, the rings of power—, whereas Bombadil's house is, once again, quintessentially *natural*.

On the other hand, as has already been advanced, one of Bombadil's defining characteristics is his constant expression through songs—many times without any apparent logic—either external or internal—on the part of the songs, which will be dealt with presently. And yet, there is something that stands out even more than the (apparently) non-sensical nature of the songs: their *performative* power. From the very first time the hobbits listen to his songs, after having asked—or even prayed—for help while being quite literally swallowed up by Old Willow-man, Sam and Frodo “[stand] as if enchanted” (119), which is suddenly followed by the wind stopping and the dangerous willow standing still. As if this did not show enough of Bombadil's songs' power, both for enchanting the mind of the hobbits and of Old Willow-man and the very weather, once Bombadil finds them, he will explicitly *command* Old Willow-man to let them out, threatening him like this: “I'll *sing* his roots off. I'll *sing* a wind up and blow leaf and branch away” (120; emphasis added). If the use of *sing* as a verb that expresses not only producing melodies, but, most importantly, an action capable of consequences such as taking the willow's roots off and generating a wind so strong that it is able to “blow leaf and branch away” did not tell enough with no further context, understanding

the implication within the context of Tolkien's *Legendarium* will leave no doubts as to its relevance—after all, that world was created through music, when God or Eru Ilúvatar commanded his army of angel-like creatures, the Ainur, to sing the melody he had previously taught them, after which the whole world appeared and was created before their eyes, Ilúvatar declaring that “great beauty has been wakened into song” (*Silmarillion* 3). Not only is this reminiscent of the world's creation, then, but it also links his power to Ilúvatar's power given to the Ainur—in other words, it links his power to *divine* power. Interestingly enough, Bombadil is not the only character in the *Legendarium*, or even in the novel itself, to possess that kind of power—indeed, both the Old Willow-man and the Barrow-wights show the power to bewitch others through their songs. However, Bombadil's power seems to be stronger than their power, as he is able to easily save the hobbits from them through his own songs. In this sense, a similar kind of power will also appear again in the elves, as will be seen when the hobbits arrive to Rivendell, where it is established that a very common activity among those elves is to sing poems that are automatically reproduced *audiovisually* in the listeners' minds. And yet, the elven music's performative power seems still of a lesser kind to that of Bombadil, as his power goes beyond reproducing images in people's minds—he is also capable of actually altering reality, just as Ilúvatar—and thanks to him the Ainur—could.

Consequently, it is inevitable for there to be raised a very relevant question: what exactly is Tom Bombadil and why does he seem to possess divine power? In this sense, his intrinsic *undefinability*, along with the *non-sensical* quality to his behaviour, is worth a discussion—especially when Rosie Jackson had presented this as the defining transgression within fantasy: “everything that is other, everything that is absent from the symbolic, outside of the rational discourse¹⁶” (148). In this way, it is more than thought-provoking that the first thing Frodo notices when they first meet Bombadil is that “[he] was singing nonsense” (*Fellowship* 119)—interestingly, while admitting that Bombadil spoke mostly nonsense, the narrator also suggests that it could be “perhaps a *strange language* unknown to the hobbits, an *ancient language* whose words were mainly those

¹⁶ “[T]odo lo que es otro, todo lo que está ausente de lo simbólico, fuera del discurso racional”.

of wonder and delight” (146; emphasis added). Indeed, the fact that we as readers cannot understand his language does not mean that his language has no meaning—the lack of understanding is inevitable when the only point of view we are given is that of the hobbits, who do not have a way of deciphering his potentially *ancient language*.

In any case, his behaviour will also mirror that of a mad person: not only does he constantly sing, but he also dances and laughs without a break, even in situations of extreme danger—for example, when saving the hobbits from the Barrow-wights (143). He will act so careless that even Gandalf advises against him becoming the One Ring’s guardian, as, according to the wizard, he will end up forgetting about it and throwing it out, leaving the whole of Middle-earth in extreme danger (265). Actually, it will be in relation to the One Ring that the transgressive nature of the character will reach its climax: surprisingly, the power of the One Ring does not affect him in the very least, so he does neither become invisible when using it nor do ring-wearers become invisible for him. This is especially shocking when remembering that not even Gandalf, one of the *Legendarium*’s most powerful characters—as a Maia, he belongs to the Ainur—, dared *touch* the One Ring for fear it would take control of his mind and the terrible consequences that could have in someone of his power (see 49 and 61). What is it that makes Bombadil so much stronger, nay, utterly invulnerable to the power of the ring, that what a Maia does not dare even touch despite the strongest of temptations, he does not even mind? Indeed, when insistently asked by Frodo about his nature, both Goldberry and him will answer with apparently evasive statements such as “He is” (124) or “[He] is the Master” (124), in a suspiciously similar form to Judeo-Christian God’s “I am” or “I am what I am” (YHWH)—still, Gandalf will later explain that if the Ring does not have much power on him it is because he is Master of himself, nothing more¹⁷ (265). And yet, Gandalf also remembers that he used to be called “Iarwain Ben-adar [...], oldest and fatherless” (265). So, Bombadil is *oldest, fatherless* and *Master*, arguably more powerful than the Maiar we know, and yet he does not seem to be

¹⁷ Although this may all be nothing more than mere speculation, Gandalf acknowledges that despite all of his power, Bombadil “cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others” (*Fellowship* 265), which could be a very good argument to reject the possibility of Bombadil being none other than Eru Ilúvatar—after all, why would God himself be incapable of destroying a ring created by a Maia?

Ilúvatar, as Tolkien himself declared that “there is no embodiment of the Creator anywhere in this story or mythology” (Letter 181 in *Letters* 237). In any case, besides his peculiar power over the Ring and creation itself—at least in the confines of his lands (see *Fellowship* 265)—and the implications that they may have when trying to decipher his nature, it should still be taken into account that, even if the hobbits take him as a figure of authority, their main memory of him, as Sam will show, will be based on his strangeness or *queerness*: “I am sorry to take leave of Master Bombadil, [...] I reckon that we may [...] see naught better, nor queerer” (148). Indeed, if anything in the novel can rival the transgressive nature of his *antinormativity*, it will be his (almost) unlimited power—he is a madman that, in truth, seems to know and be capable of much more than any of the heroes within the novel, including the wise figure *par excellence*, Gandalf, which makes it, by far, one of the most irrational-looking and transgressive decisions of the novel.

4. CONCLUSION

When thinking about the mystery of the nature—and function—of Tom Bombadil as a character, one cannot help but think that, even if “[he] is not an important person—to the narrative” (Letter 144 in *Letters* 178), Tolkien admitted explicitly that “[he] would not, however, have left him in, if he did not have some kind of function” (178). And although this admission is followed by an explanation for his thematic relevance in terms of *pacifism* and *un-possessiveness* within the context of the novel (178-79), one could still think that there is much more behind his refusal to properly define him, either explicitly when asked or implicitly by writing him as a non-thetic character. This essay has defended, then, that he would fulfil a very important function, that is, give readers a taste of the most radical take on *the fantastic*—namely, the essential disruption of the order considered natural to a reality or a world, only more engaging this time as the *transgressed* world was already fantastic in nature and, because of that, disruptive even if moderately. Thus, even if we believe that it is not possible to decipher with any certainty what Tolkien himself chose to *veil*, we do believe that such a disruption may imply an experimentation close in approach to what he suggested when he said that “[w]e must be satisfied with the soup that is set before us, and not desire to see the

bones of the ox out of which it has been boiled” (*Fairy-stories* 120)—he, after all, believed that untangling a fairy-story would only render it useless, losing all effect on the reader. He himself admitted to this when he wrote in his 144th letter that “even in a mythical Age there must be some enigmas, as there always are. Tom Bombadil is one (intentionally)” (*Letters* 174). Of course, when talking about the importance of satisfying ourselves with the *soup as is set before us*, he was referring to an excessive interest in the part of researchers to figure out the origin behind fairy-tales, and yet it also works perfectly in the context of Tom Bombadil: the fantastic, by nature, resists delimitation, or, in other words, absolute rationalisation—it is normal, then, that after giving in to temptation and rationalising to such an extent his mythology, Tolkien felt the need to disrupt, even if only for 30 pages, that so very human need to see *the bones of the boiled ox*.

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