

Iarwain Ben-Adar on the Road to Faerie:  
Tom Bombadil's Recovery of Premodern Fantasy Values

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## Chapter 1: Introduction: Tom Bombadil's Predecessors

J. R. R. Tolkien, well-loved by both scholars and laymen, has undoubtedly been a strong literary influence in the twentieth century and beyond. Many aspects of his writing appear quite distinct from the concerns of today's world, including his choice to write about an archaic mythical past in his famed setting of Middle-earth.<sup>1</sup> This choice is one of the aspects that sets Tolkien apart as an author. Upon a closer examination of his work, particularly his most widely known *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, one of Tolkien's characters also stands out among the rest: Tom Bombadil. For someone who has only seen the film adaptations, this name means little (Treschow and Duckworth 178), but reading the text of *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) or Tolkien's poetry collection "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" (1962) reveals that Tom is important and puzzling—perhaps important because he is so puzzling. Elrond refers to him as "Iarwain Ben-adar . . . oldest and fatherless" and "a strange creature," indicating that Tom is unique even in an already-fantastic setting (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 297). Critics have debated on who and what Tom Bombadil is, as his strange identity does not seem to fit neatly into the narrative or the imagined world. Some believe him to be some kind of "nature god," an unfallen version of Adam, a Vala, a Maia, or even Iluvatar himself—the God figure in Tolkien's mythos. One critic has posited that Tom Bombadil is in fact Aulë, the Vala concerned with stone and craftsmanship who created the dwarves, and that his wife Goldberry is Yavanna, the Vala concerned with trees and plants (P. Lewis 151). None of these assessments is completely satisfactory, though. While even maia are tempted and affected by the Ring, Tom remains unaffected (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 67, 150). However, Tom does not wield power over the Rings,

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<sup>1</sup> Worth noting is the fact that the term Middle-earth can be translated to the Norse "Midgard," referring to this world (Siewers 142), indicating that perhaps Tolkien's secondary world is closer to home than many people realize.

which he must were he a Vala or a god (298). He is not the right size for a human or for a hobbit, ruling out those particular categories (135). A more satisfying explanation is that Tom Bombadil embodies some of Tolkien's values concerning harmony with God's created order, which are important in the story and in society at large but which have recently begun to be lost in western fantasy media. The goal of this thesis project is to demonstrate that some well-known twentieth-century fantasy characters have lost the ideal of acceptance of God's created cosmos; as an embodiment of this value that Tolkien espoused, Tom Bombadil helps to recover it from a previous age, seen in the two aspects of a healthy relationship to nature and a non-controlling attitude towards power. This recovery is invaluable for the Christian reader of fantasy as they explore created reality and new ways of expressing it.

A sketch of Tolkien's own life reveals the high value he placed on God's created order through the lens of both nature-supernature and his concept of power, making him an effective exemplar of that ideal. As a Roman Catholic believer, Tolkien opposed modernist tendencies that paint religion as an affair originating in the human mind, with no bearing on noumenal reality, and affirmed the reality of the historical Jesus and the reliability of the Christian faith (Bossert 53-56). In the face of modernism—as well as the postmodernism that was soon to arrive—Tolkien sought to preserve the previously held and Biblically-based values of the Church, in both directly religious and general matters. In his letters, Tolkien explains that the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is firmly rooted in Christian beliefs, despite the absence of any explicit religious references: “*The Lord of the Rings* is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically any references to anything like 'religion,' to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed in the story and the symbolism” (Tolkien,

*Letters* 172). His beliefs and values had a way of permeating his well-loved trilogy. Among those important values are living well with nature as God's creation, standing up to those who would seize improper power, and accepting the value of mystery in a Christian-Catholic sense as an unknown and subsequently revealed truth.

One prominent aspect of Tolkien's works, seen particularly strongly in Tom Bombadil, is their respect for and relationship towards the natural world. As technology becomes more and more readily available, man may attempt to push the limits of nature, sometimes in an unhealthy way. Church leaders, including Pope Francis, have recently expressed concern over this desire to manipulate God's creation, which he refers to as the "technocratic paradigm." One scholar describes it thusly: "In the pre-technocratic period, man approached nature as a receiver, gaining from her what she allowed. Now, however, man disregards all dimensions of an object that fall outside of the technocratic paradigm's criteria, all the while working to maximize that which can be extracted from that which he masters." Tolkien referred to this paradigm as "the Machine," which involves seeking to dominate one's own creations while disregarding the laws of the Creator (Hren 97). Tolkien also recognized that the Machine is not always successful anyway. During the war, Tolkien's company had access to modern communication methods but were unable to use them "because the Germans had tapped the lines, and signalers were reduced to using lights flags, runners, and even carrier-pigeons" (Croft 15). Thus, he observed that technology could be unhelpful even when it was not directly harmful. In contrast to the Machine, Tolkien advocates a harmonious relationship with nature. Nature should neither be worshipped nor abused; in Tolkien's line of thinking, a proper view of nature is to treat it well as a created gift and to use it in an interdependent manner, recognizing that both we and it are creations made by a God who exists outside of time and natural laws. Instead of a material world that can be

controlled by man, Tolkien uses fantasy to describe a world that is outside man's control:

“Creative fantasy . . . may open your hoard and let all the locked things fly away like cage-birds. The gems all turn into flowers or flames, and you will be warned that all you had (or knew) was dangerous and potent, not really effectively chained, free and wild; no more yours than they were you.” However, this does not mean that man is helpless in the face of nature as something malevolent. Rather, nature becomes a positive good to be explored and enjoyed (Tolkien, “Tree and Leaf” 78). This love for nature is exhibited in Tolkien's fiction; for example, the elves of Lothlorien live in a beneficial relationship with nature and appreciate its life and beauty. As Sam describes the inhabitants, “they seem to belong here, more even than Hobbits do in the Shire. Whether they've made the land, or the land's made them, it's hard to say” (*Fellowship* 405). The close relationship to the land that Tolkien's characters display offers a healthy alternative to the modern disease of the Machine by affirming an inseparable nature-supernature.

The Machine that Tolkien identified is also tied into man's quest for power. As humans seek to build bigger and better ways of manufacturing and other production, an ironic reversal of power takes place as they become dependent on those means of power: “We have done exactly what Sauron did in forging the Ring. We have put our power into things in order to increase our power . . . we have deceived ourselves into thinking that we have become more powerful when all the time we have been becoming less” (Hren 102). As a veteran of World War I, Tolkien experienced the struggle for power firsthand and saw the damage that it caused. Croft argues that “for Tolkien, writing was at once an escape, an attempt to communicate the experience of the Great War, and a way of working out his vision of the interdependence of the real world and Faerie” (25). In his goal of communicating the experiences of the war, he sought to “[honor] the common soldier while at the same time [criticize] the modern trend toward anonymous and

mechanized war” (25). Speaking out of his wartime experiences, he created a world that is threatened by power-hungry villains, particularly Sauron and Saruman. As Tolkien explains it, Sauron’s ring is representative of “the will to mere power, seeking to make itself objective by physical force and mechanism, and so inevitably by lies” (Tolkien, *Letters* 160). Saruman joins in this Nietzsche-esque will to power by forging an orc army to aid Sauron’s interests (*Two Towers*). This mechanistic desire for power is troublesome indeed, but Tolkien portrays these characters as evil and shows the dangers of their unmitigated desire for power. As an alternative, he advocates bravely fighting against those who would try to seize power—always for the goal of defending what truly matters, not for the goal of taking that power for oneself. As Faramir states, “War must be, while we defend our lives against a destroyer who would devour all; but I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend” (314). For Tolkien’s heroes, it is noble and proper to use power only when necessary as a means of restoring order and gaining freedom—but to live one’s life outside of the desire or pursuit of power for its own sake.

Underscoring these values in Tolkien’s work lies a respect for imagination and for mystery in the Catholic sense, all of this as a part of perceiving and understanding God’s created order. Some thinkers today consider mystery to be problematic and in conflict with reason. One Catholic scholar remarks that “[c]ontemporary culture assumes the importance of the scientific revolution. But how can the natural sciences answer larger questions of philosophical meaning?” (White 30). Another scholar points out that “because scientism is so embedded in our culture, it often is assumed that if extraneous cognitive issues do not admit of precise solutions or solutions that all parties to the dispute agree on, or do not permit resolution by a method resembling scientific methodology, then such issues are not really cognitive” (Moreland 135). Instead of

seeing mystery as a problem that can and must be solved through human intelligence, separate from metaphysical matters, Christian tradition, particularly the Roman Catholic, views mystery as a truth to be contemplated with wonder, which humans may not be able to currently understand without divine revelation. Some things, like God's character, are completely incomprehensible to human reason on its own; the mysteriousness of God inspires awe and worship, and it lies at the heart of Christian theology and its entire worldview. Other mysteries are accessible to humans, and they are defined as hidden truths that are, or will be, eventually revealed (Baugus 248-49). This belief in mystery is by no means inconsistent with reason. Rather, White argues that "[t]he two are not opposed; they are deeply interrelated." Science itself does not pose any dangers to the Christian worldview and imagination; instead, Christianity and science can and should be compatible: "The Church would do a great service to our current culture if she could help those who care deeply about truth see that their devotion to reason need not condemn them to a crimped, scientistic approach devoid of moral wisdom and metaphysical meaning" (30). After all, many important questions of truth and reality exist that lie outside the confines of natural science. As J. P. Moreland argues, "many other disciplines involve rational argument, presentation of evidence, assessment of data, and the possibility of achieving truth . . . but are irrelevant to science" (133-34). Thus, science does not threaten Christian beliefs, nor does imagination threaten the quest for truth. Tolkien reflects, "Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason . . . The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make . . . For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun" (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" 75). When readers and writers embrace the presence of objective truth and trust God to reveal mysteries when He wills it, they can freely use imagination to probe those mysteries and follow

their God-given sub-creative instincts. Just as Tolkien defends it, “[f]antasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (75). Acceptance of God’s mystery, truth, and gifts to the human mind is integral to recognition of His created order and provides a foundation for fantasy literature with which the scientific postmodern world is significantly at odds.

This sense of mystery is a feature of traditional fantasy in its Christian roots. Early Christianity, spurred on by Paul’s writings, placed emphasis on the mystery of Christ that had been hidden in God but lately revealed in the person of Jesus: “To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1.27, NIV). This mystery involves becoming united with Christ in a way that “replaced the observance of the old Jewish law” (Artz 57). As described in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, mystery is not to be confused with ambiguity or indeterminacy. Rather, it is a pre-existing truth that is accessible and knowable in part before being eventually revealed. Behind every mystery is an objective truth, and its being only partially known makes it no less true. This concept of mystery as a truth not completely revealed is reflected in fantasy literature as well. Marie de France’s *Lanval*, for instance, contains a mysterious lady whose existence is known only to Lanval and whose origin is unknown to everyone. Even after her disappearance, Lanval trusts that she truly is real, and the truth of her existence—and her superior beauty—is eventually revealed at the end of the narrative (De France 74, 80). The miraculous disappearance and reappearance of Lanval’s lady are phenomena of wonder and celebration, although they are not easily explained. Indeed, the respect for mystery shown by these medieval fantasy characters and authors, such as Marie de France, appears due to the fact that great truths are difficult to fully and

readily explain but that they are indeed knowable to an extent and well worth trying to discover more fully and deeply.

This desire for the revealed truth of God's created order is manifest in aspects of human behavior as well, including tangible, visual aspects. Sociological researchers Thomas Herzog and Anna Bryce conducted an experiment on how individuals react to forest settings with high or low visual access. If the subject could see far enough into the forest to know that there was more to be explored, then the setting was said to have a high level of mystery. As the researchers define it:

Settings high in mystery are very likely to give the impression that one could acquire new information if one were to travel deeper into the setting. They provide partial information concerning what might lie ahead . . . A key feature of mystery is that the new information revealed by going deeper into the setting is continuous with what is already available.

This is quite different from "surprise" where new information that one could not have anticipated is suddenly revealed. (Herzog and Bryce 786)

This definition of mystery suggests that a mystery revealed is consistent with the truth that has come before it but that it also adds crucial new information. Scripture's concept of mystery is similar, with Paul telling his protégé Timothy, "from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3.15). Even before the mystery of Christ mentioned above was revealed to Paul, the existing writings also pointed toward its truth. Thus, the mystery is unforeseen but not deviant from the objective truth that already exists.

Tom Bombadil is the Tolkien character who most purely embodies these ideals, including the cosmological mystery surrounding integrated nature-supernature and attitudes toward power.

In order to understand this relationship, it is necessary to define what *embodiment* means. The suggestion that Tolkien used embodiment in the sense of direct incarnation as a way to create his characters like Tom Bombadil is not likely, as he gave other explanations in his letters for his characters, including Tom Bombadil. Furthermore, Tom does not display evidence of being directly a part of the forest itself; for example, his house is described as an effective barrier against the outdoors. Also, Tom teaches the hobbits about the friendly local wildlife and unkind trees in the forest as having their own identity (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 144, 147). The ways that Tom talks about and lives in the forest show that he lives well in it, but he does not indwell it as a direct incarnation of it. Neither does it seem likely that Tom Bombadil is merely a character in the story who sometimes illustrates some abstract concepts. Simply representing various ideas and concepts is something that myriad literary characters do. For a few examples from elsewhere in Tolkien's work, Aragorn may remind the reader of longsuffering and courage, Boromir of the dangers of temptation and the fragility of the human will in the face thereof.

Something different appears to be happening with Tom Bombadil, partially owing to the fact that he is so out of place in the narrative. It makes sense that he functions as a purer representation of ideals than other characters. Instead of simply showing various traits, characteristics, and ideals through his actions, Tom's personality and identity, his very essence, are clear personifications of those ideals and are largely—nearly completely—defined by them. Tolkien confirmed this theory in his letters, describing Tom as “an exemplar, a particular embodying of pure (real) natural science” (Tolkien, *Letters* 192). This makeup of Tom's identity may make him seem to lack the traits of a round and dynamic character, a criticism not without foundation. Tom does not change throughout the narrative—at least the small portion of it in which he appears. He waltzes into the story with an air of merriment, singing songs as he

emerges from the deep forest. For all his lighthearted demeanor, though, he is a knowledgeable and effective helper for the travelling hobbits in their distress, confident in his ability to eliminate the threat posed by Old Man Willow (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 134-35). When the reader first encounters Tom Bombadil, he is singing, sharing knowledge, and saving others from danger, and nothing has changed by the time the hobbits leave him in order to travel to Bree (161, 168). Based on the lack of change that the character undergoes, Tom is a rather static character—as are many conventional characters in traditional fairy tales. Neither does the reader get to see Tom’s inner thoughts or any kind of intrapersonal conflict, as is the case with round characters. The closest the reader gets to seeing Tom’s inward workings of the mind in *The Fellowship of the Ring* is when he lays out the spoils from the barrow after rescuing the hobbits and appears to be emotionally affected by a past memory (165). Other than this scene, which is not central to his character, Tom does not show his internal feelings, nor does he belie any kind of internal struggle. If Tolkien’s goal for Tom had been to create a complex, flawed, dynamic character who advances the plot and his own development, then he could be said to have failed at such an enterprise. However, Tom’s complete lack of development is a common and positive trait in fantasy characters, and it suggests that his purpose in the story lies elsewhere: namely, to serve as an example of certain values that Tolkien was trying to communicate through the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy as a whole. Treschow and Duckworth put it bluntly: “If we look for Bombadil to serve the story’s plot we have missed the point” (180). As an embodiment of values—that is, as a character whose main purpose is to demonstrate ideals of God’s created order and be defined by them—Tom Bombadil is a smashing success, partly because he extends an earlier tradition.

### ***Lanval* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* as Predecessors to Tom Bombadil's Story**

Understanding the twentieth-century situation in fantasy requires understanding how far it has come since its earlier Medieval roots. Thus, to understand Tom Bombadil's purpose and reflection of premodern values, examining a few premodern fantasy works will be quite illustrative. The ideal that Tolkien displays in *The Lord of the Rings* in the character of Tom Bombadil—namely, an acceptance of God's created order—is evident in much older premodern fantasy literature. A view of the world that is consistent with this premodern mindset involves an acceptance of mysteries as things that are true but as yet unknown or partially known. Also, an important aspect of the premodern fantasy paradigm involves accepting the belief that nature and supernature, which consists of entities or events not governed by physical laws, are inseparable, however mysteriously; furthermore, nature and supernature comprise an orderly cosmos that checks the desire for personal power, except as a means to restore order and help others. These ideas, which will later be shown in the character of Tom Bombadil, have their ancestry in such traditional European Medieval works as *Lanval* (late twelfth century) by Marie de France and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (fourteenth century).<sup>2</sup> The ideas shown in *Lanval*, including the lady herself, the location of the land of Avalon, and other aspects all point towards the ideal discussed above. In *Sir Gawain*, both the Green Knight's natural setting and behavior and Gawain's relationship to the natural-supernatural are also highly illuminating with respect to premodern fantasy values. The fact that Tolkien worked extensively with the poem, formulating his own verse translation with great attention to detail, also illustrates his indebtedness to the principles of premodern fantasy (Smith). Examining *Lanval* and its place within the medieval

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<sup>2</sup> Although *Lanval* was originally a poem in verse, the prose translation of Burgess and Busby is used here as it reads more similarly to Tolkien's prose fantasy; also, the focus is on the characters and plot more so than on the form.

model, along with *Sir Gawain*, helps to discover the foundation upon which some later fantasy literature rests.

Understanding *Lanval* and *Sir Gawain* necessitates understanding how the medieval mindset viewed the concept of mystery, which is, upon first glance, an elusive thing. As it pertains to matters seemingly outside the realm of factual human experience, it plays a highly significant role in fantasy literature. Despite its central role, however, postmodern fantasy writers and critics tend to portray mystery or things outside the laws of physics as separate from reality. Some authors, emphasizing the “incompatibility of the two realities,” argue that the mysterious “Otherworld . . . presents [characters] with an alternative reality” at best, separated from what they see as a more easily verifiable reality—that of nature and facts (Hodgson 21-22). This unfavorable or even dismissive perspective on mystery differs distinctly from the perspective seen through traditional fantasy, which was born out of the medieval tradition. In that tradition, the mysterious aspects of fantasy can point towards a harmony with God’s truth as created, as seen in an inseparable nature-supernature and an orderly universe leading to a non-controlling stance towards personal power.

The significance of *Lanval* and of *Sir Gawain* depends upon some of the ideals of premodern traditional fantasy. In the context of premodern medieval fantasy, the traditional view of mystery is not unknowable but rather simply unknown or partially known truth at a given point in time. Traditional fantasy does not shy away from mystery or the unknown, but it realizes that the unknown is not necessarily unknowable. A key requisite for premodernity’s comfort level with mystery or the unknown is that they believed it to be rooted in truth. Mystery was not unacceptable to them, and they saw no reason that mystery need be excluded from the realm of truth. Mystery is not meant to be analyzed or explained away, as in the case of the uncanny

(Todorov); instead, mysteries are meant to be revealed and contemplated, at least in part. Rather than being a source of worry or something that must be solved, mystery is simply something that is not known yet. While a postmodernist might dismiss a mystery or use it to point out what he sees as the essential fragmentation of all reality, medieval man, with his non-materialistic worldview, understood that mysteries could contain truth and reality. He therefore lived quite at peace among mystery, and faith was not an irrational leap of some kind but an acceptance of such mystery. While medieval Europe was also heavily influenced by pagan Greco-Roman thought, both schools of religious thought are firmly rooted in theism, and Christianity was indeed quite prevalent. In fact, Christianity, which formed the basis of much of medieval culture, describes the mystery of “Christ in you” as being hidden in years past but revealed of late by God to humans (Colossians 1.25-27 NIV). The revelation comes from a divine authority, not from man’s indeterminate musings. Furthermore, Jesus, the source of the Christian faith with which medieval man was so familiar, is Himself the embodiment of the supernatural mystery revealed in the natural world. Medieval culture in the West, out of which traditional fantasy grew, believed these concepts and was quite comfortable with the idea of mystery, an idea which is necessary to understand in order to understand the values that traditional fantasy communicated.

One of these mysterious values is concerned with the way nature and supernature—which lies outside the bounds of natural laws—are constituted. This same ideal observed in Tolkien’s life, discussed earlier, can be found in works like *Lanval* as well. While postmodernists would argue that the so-called “Otherworld” is a separated or alternate reality whose existence cannot be confirmed (Hodgson 21), premodern readers and writers of fantasy accepted the mysterious belief that nature and supernature are constituted in such a way that they are inseparable.

Medieval fantasy occupied an “integrated cultural landscape [that] was a horizontal experiential engagement of” the physical and spiritual parts of reality (Siewers 141). In these premodern terms, no wall or border exists between the physical realm of nature and a separate realm of supernature; instead, both are part of a whole reality as it was created.

That the Medieval Model left plenty of room for the Faerie realm within the Cosmos comes as no surprise. While the fairies, or *Longaevi*, did not occupy a universally acknowledged place in the medieval model (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 134), the concept of them did exist in harmony with the rest of the model. Lewis even believes that the idea of fairies helps to enrich and enliven the highly-organized medieval model: “They intrude a welcome hint of wildness and uncertainty into a universe that is in danger of being a little too self-explanatory, too luminous” (122). Unlike the Fairyland quest in MacDonald’s *Phantastes*, the Faerie realm was thought to be quite closely related to natural settings—no portals or wardrobes necessary. *Longaevi* were said to “haunt woods, glades, and groves, and lakes and springs and brooks” (122). Folk belief in fairies depended on a cosmic integration of nature and supernature. In Scotland, for example, people generally believed in a cosmic hierarchy in which a flat earth was positioned above hell and beneath Heaven. Fairies, as well as other types of otherworldly creatures, were considered by these Scots to inhabit “wild, uncanny, and magical places . . . [which] were largely within ‘middle-earth,’ though there was no doubt some flexibility and imprecision” (Goodare 166). While the fairy folk fit into the cosmos, their exact whereabouts were unknown. Evidently, within the medieval model, out of which much traditional fantasy grows, mysteries and elements

of Faerie are woven into the overall tapestry of reality.<sup>3</sup> Even when it is dealing with mysterious, unknown things:

[m]edieval literature never loses sight of the purposeful, teleological force that underlies all things, and it bequeaths to fantasy a renunciation of purely mechanical cause and effect in favor of an acceptance of an overall directing awareness, a universal truth: Fate, Fortune, coincidence—all are filigreed into a greater design which incorporates each single incident, no matter how arbitrary it may seem, and makes it a part of an universal schema that endows it with meaning and value. (Senior 36-37)

This schema is largely missing from today's postmodern ideological environment and is comforting to find in fantasy literature modeled after the medieval tradition. A distinctive aspect of the traditional mindsets regarding mystery and fantasy is the belief that traditional mystery is part of an ordered, hierarchical cosmos. This cosmology grew out of both Christian and Greco-Roman thought; what the two systems have in common is an emphasis on the orderly character of the universe and on man's proper place within it: "At his most characteristic, medieval man was not a dreamer nor a wanderer. He was an organizer, a codifier, a builder of systems. He wanted 'a place for everything and everything in the right place'" (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 10). Among the things and entities that medieval man systematized, perhaps the most important was the construction of the medieval model of the universe as a whole. They desired consistency in the way they saw the world: "a model must be built which will get everything in without a clash; and it can do this only by becoming intricate, by mediating its unity through a great, and finely ordered, multiplicity" (11). The medieval model allows room to include everything from the

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<sup>3</sup> While this argument does not affirm that medieval belief in fairies was advisable or in any way justified, the key point here is that such beliefs reflected a general inclusion of supernature in their conception of reality, a belief that is healthy and is somewhat lacking today.

highest orders down to the smallest intricacies of life. Influenced by the Greeks and Romans, medieval European society formulated a detailed hierarchy of the heavens, the earth, and their relationship to each other. The heavenly spheres, as they believed, were nested perfectly within each other, consistent with the undeniable order of the cosmos:

To look up at the towering medieval universe is . . . like looking at a great building. The “space” of modern astronomy may arouse terror, or bewilderment or vague reverie; the spheres of the old present us with an object in which the mind can rest, overwhelming in its greatness but satisfying in its harmony. That is the sense in which our universe is romantic, and theirs was classical. (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 99)

Because medieval people saw the universe as having a distinct organization and defined boundaries, they did not become worried about mystery, knowing that everything must fit into a master plan that was beyond their control. Even beyond the plan of the created universe, the medievals accounted for what lay beyond the universe. As Dante’s Beatrice explains in *Paradiso*, “We from the greatest body / Have issued to the heaven that is pure light; / Light intellectual replete with love” (Dante, *Paradiso* 30.38-40). Outside the realm of space and physicality is the realm of ideas and “intellectual light,” over which God is in control (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 97). For the medieval mind, such an awareness of the immensity of the universe and the somewhat Platonic realm of intellectual ideas beyond came with a high degree of humility. Unlike the pure aether, high in the heavens, medieval academics, such as the likely pagan Macrobius, believed that the matter on earth consisted of a substance far less pure, cast off from the higher heavenly realms: “Earth is in fact the ‘offscourings of creation,’ the cosmic dust-bin” (63). As the gravitational center of the universe, the planet Earth would be the lowest point, an idea leading to humility about man’s place in the universe. Realizing that humans are

relatively powerless in the grand scheme of things, medieval man was willing to accept the mystery of God's amazing created order. Because of this sense of God's power displayed in the cosmos, the use of personal power becomes less important in the literature than it might otherwise.

Given that attitude concerning personal power, the world is not something to be manipulated and controlled but rather something that prompts a response of wonder in the observer. While not every work of fantasy succeeds in or even attempts to inspire wonder in the reader, such an aim is far more common in works that fall into the category of traditional fantasy, like the works of J. R. R. Tolkien (Laetz and Johnston 169). At its traditional roots, "fantasy does inspire wonder and awe and uplifts by its very nature" (Senior 34). Such an awareness of mystery requires a childlike—not childish—faith and an acceptance of the world as gift. Knowing the value of mystery in creation is tied in with the idea of the real created order as cosmos.

### **An Escape from Reality—or into Reality? Character and Setting in *Lanval***

Arthurian romances and *lais* provide numerous and diverse examples of this sense of mystery that governed premodern fantasy, including Marie de France's *Lanval*, considered by some scholars to be "one of the most mysterious and challenging *lais* by Marie de France" (Classen 67). To effectively address this challenge, the research will discuss medieval culture's general attitude toward mysteries and observe how it is exemplified in *Lanval*. Throughout the narrative, several unquestioned and unexplained events occur. *Lanval*, a prince from another land and a knight of the Round Table, has been overlooked by King Arthur during the parceling out of lands and privileges (De France 73). Into his outcast state soon comes a beautiful lady of unknown origin, and they promise each other their love (74). Neither the characters nor the

reader is ever told from whence the lady comes, and her ability to make herself unseen to all but Lanval is clearly fantastic. Though the lady cautions him not to tell anyone of their secret love, lest she be lost to him, when provoked by Queen Guinevere Lanval reveals his secret. At the conclusion of the tale, the lady appears unexpectedly to save Lanval from judgment by King Arthur, and the couple rides away to Avalon together, a mysterious place whose precise location is unknown (76, 81). Throughout the poem, the origin of the lady, the location of Avalon, the nature of the love between Lanval and the lady, and her vanishing and reappearance are all excellent examples of the traditional fantasy perspectives on nature-supernature and on power and order in the cosmos.

Lanval's lady enters the picture at a time when Lanval is most dejected and cast out from his social sphere at Camelot; her supernatural arrival in a natural setting reveals that mystery exists in a fully unified cosmos and prompts wonder. To find her, Lanval does not need to step through any sort of medium or gateway into a separate supernatural realm; rather, the supernatural comes to him. Two servants of the lady approach Lanval in the forest, inviting him to follow them to the lady's tent (74). When he complies, he meets the lady in a tent so exquisite that "no king under the sun . . . could afford it" (74) – a highly improbable degree of wealth and magnificence to simply appear in the forest near Camelot. The lady reveals little of her origin, telling Lanval, "fair friend, for you I came from my country. I have come far in search of you and if you are worthy and courtly, no emperor, count or king will have felt as much joy or happiness as you, for I love you above all else" (74). Her appearance and demeanor could suggest that her country is Faerie. With this in mind, it is important to remember that Faerie and the natural world interact quite closely, indeed inseparably, in medieval fantasy literature. As Lanval discovers, mundane life and the mystery of Faerie meet.

When Lanval sees the mysterious lady, he expresses wonder but does not see her as separate from reality: “He looked and her and saw that she was beautiful. Love’s spark pricked him so that his heart was set alight, and he replied to her in seemly manner” (De France 74). The mysterious appearance of such a beautiful lady allows Lanval to be struck with Cupid’s arrow through the eye, which touches his heart. However, he does not express surprise to find her there in the forest or doubt that she is real. He does not assume that the lady is angelic or purely spiritual; he knows that she is physically present. Lanval realizes that nature-supernature is part of a unified reality as it has been created and responds to this mysterious cosmic makeup not with doubt but with wonder.

One of the most puzzling and mysterious aspects of the tale for today’s reader is the mystery of the location of Avalon. At the end of the story, Lanval is carried away to this paradisiacal yet nebulous locale by his lady love: “when the maiden came through the door, he leapt in a single bound on to the palfrey behind her. He went with her to Avalon, so the Bretons tell us, to a very beautiful island. Thither the young man was borne and no one has heard any more about him, nor can I relate any more” (81). Scholars have questioned whether Avalon is a real place in the context of the story and whether it is considered part of reality. Today’s critic often has a difficult time connecting the two worlds and instead sees Avalon as utterly divorced from the real world. Displaying a view that differs greatly from the medieval view of mystery, F. Hodgson “portrays Lanval’s journey to ‘Otherworld’ as the final stage in a process of alienation . . . Avalon is then not a culmination of Lanval’s earthly achievements but a paragon of alienation and escapism.” However, this perceived total separation between Earth and Avalon is inconsistent with the events of the story, in which Lanval’s testimony is confirmed and his love figuratively consummated within Arthur’s very real court (Leventhal 195-96). None of the

Knights of the Round Table denies the lady's veracity or sees her as separate from reality itself: "These accomplishments point not to 'incompatible' worlds, but to a triumph of Otherworldly love *within* reality and *through* Lanval's actions in this reality" (196). The location of Avalon is not ambiguous, being equally either within reality or not; it is part of the most fully real reality, which is by no means limited to the bare facts of this life. This assessment of Avalon is much more closely in keeping with the medieval traditional view of mystery as truth that has its place in the natural-supernatural cosmos. The mysterious journey to Avalon demonstrates the idea that, through love and wisdom, represented by the lady, Lanval can rise to a higher place within reality, of which the lady is a representative, according to Cassidy Leventhal's "argument that Lanval's lady is a physical manifestation or embodiment of a greater reality" (197). The lady of mysterious origin leads Lanval not away from what is real but toward what is most true, real, and good. "Avalon and its 'Lady' parallel the artist's vision of beauty, Plato's 'good,' a romantic's love, a religious search for God, and a thousand other quests for a fundamental reality with which a relationship can be created and earned . . . [the lady] is, simply, the knowledge that intangible ideal is somehow tangible and wholly real" (198, 204). Lanval's story is a reminder that Avalon, as a truthful part of cosmic reality, is worth searching for within the fabric of daily life.

The concept of the lady as a real and fantastic embodiment of love is also quite telling with regard to the lady's power and how she chooses to use it. As Lanval takes his leave from the lady, she grants him the ability to always have plenty of wealth to share: "She gave him a boon, that henceforth he could wish for nothing which he would not have, and however generously he gave or spent, she would still find enough for him" (De France 74-75). In order to be able to make and keep such a promise, the lady must possess power beyond normal human means: "the

lady's wealth appears to be entirely at her own disposal . . . She is a patron in her own right" (Finke and Shichtman 491). The lady certainly has the power to follow through on promises of great wealth, but she has chosen to use it in a way that helps others. Soon after this meeting, Lanval increases his generosity, and the lady somehow provides what he promises to give: "Lanval gave costly gifts, Lanval freed prisoners, Lanval clothed the jongleurs, Lanval performed many honourable acts. There was no one, stranger or friend, to whom he would not have given gifts" (75). The lady's generosity through Lanval grows out of her love, which is generative and results in more love and kindness. While she could use her power for herself, she chooses to use it to promote love and restore justice—some of Lanval's beneficiaries are prisoners whom he sets free. This commitment to restoring rightness shows her faith in the orderly cosmos and that she believes in love and justice more than she values her own power.

The lady's miraculous disappearance and reappearance at the trial further show her supernatural abilities and restrained use thereof. When Guinevere, in a manner reflecting that of Potiphar's wife in Genesis, tries to seduce Lanval, he refuses and tells her that his lady is much fairer and purer than she. In so doing, he violates the promise he made that he would not tell anyone of the lady's existence, and the lady ceases to be available to him, just as she foretold. Lanval is, as expected, distressed and forlorn because of his mistake; he is "well aware of having lost his beloved by revealing their love. Alone in his chamber, distraught and anguished, he called his beloved repeatedly, but to no avail" (De France 77). Even though Lanval cannot contact his lady, he never doubts that she did indeed exist and pledged him her love. Such a deeply sorrowful reaction reveals that Lanval truly believes in the reality of his lady and that she is able to communicate with him in her mysterious way if she so chooses.

Later, the lady demonstrates her abilities but does so with an end toward bringing justice and good to Lanval. All along, Lanval knows his lady to be real, although she is unknown to the rest of the members of King Arthur's court. Since Lanval, by speaking of a lady more beautiful than Guinevere, has insulted the queen, the king requires that he must be tried based on whether his testimony of his lover is true; if he cannot furnish proof, he risks banishment (De France 79). Of course, this arrangement does not seem at all helpful to Lanval since he cannot access the lady anymore. However, at the right moment, the lady does arrive to provide an alibi for Lanval. Her beauty alone is evidence that Lanval's claim is true: "no one who had looked at her could have failed to be inspired with real joy" (80). She testifies, "King, I have loved one of your vassals, Lanval, whom you see there. Because of what he said, he was accused in your court, and I do not wish him to come to any harm. You should know that the queen was wrong, as he never sought her love. As regards the boast he made, if he can be acquitted by me, let your barons release him!" (81). The barons agree, and Lanval is set free. As seen here, the lady's power and supernatural quality bring hope and justice and are an example of the *eucaastrophe*, or turn, which brings resolution to conflict and a sense of joy (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" 85-86); the traditional medieval hope placed in mysteries to be revealed is evident in this passage, and the lady uses her power to produce such hope in a strong yet gentle way, always to bring about good rather than to increase her own position of power.

As Marie de France makes abundantly clear, the mysterious events in *Lanval*, including the lady's origin, her love for Lanval, her miraculous invisibility and reappearance, and the unknown location of Avalon, all point back to the medieval view held in traditional fantasy that mystery is awe-inspiring, partially known truth within the cosmos, which may eventually be revealed fully.

Reality is not the opposite of mystery; in some ways, reality is more mysterious than fantasy itself. *Lanval*, along with the canon of traditional fantasy, invites today's postmodern reader to appreciate the beauty of mystery and the wonder to be found in creation – to join the centuries-old noble quest for Avalon.

**Going Green: Bercilak as Integrated Nature-Supernature in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight***

Often, the aforementioned concept of mystery in traditional fantasy involved a strong relationship between nature and supernature as an inseparable whole. The anonymously composed *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* hearkens back to Arthurian times, presenting a picture of what that relationship means and how it is manifested. To do so, the poet introduces a character who simultaneously exhibits nature and supernature: namely, Bercilak or the Green Knight. Residing in the shadowy forest between civilization and the great unknown, Bercilak has in himself the elements of both nature and supernature, and he reflects the medieval acceptance of mystery through its concept of nature-supernature as one entity, one and only one divinely constituted reality. Through his interactions with Gawain and other members of civilized society, the Green Knight represents the integration of nature and supernature by way of his close, symbiotic relationship with nature and the spiritual overtones of the Green Chapel; he also shows great power but exercises restraint in his use of it.

As a representative of nature-supernature, the Green Knight displays a mysterious earthiness, reflecting the presumed forest regions he seems to inhabit. When he arrives unannounced and unrecognized during King Arthur's Christmas festivities, the narrator first notices his impressive stature but quickly draws attention to his odd coloring:

a ghastly knight sprang through the door,

Huge, taller than men stand . . .

And stunning the court

With the color of his race:

A fiery, snorting

Fellow, and his hands were green, and his face. (136-150)

Barefoot and lacking heavy armor, the knight carries only a sprig of evergreen holly, hinting at his connection to nature, and a green steel axe, presenting him as a force to be reckoned with (160, 203-210). Despite his appearance belying a heavy emphasis on nature, it is admittedly quite supernatural, given his green skin, green steel, and other elements. Some of the people present even begin to whisper that he is connected to some sort of sorcery (239-242). While the magic in fairy stories is often left unexplained, rather than described as the direct result of sorcery or witchcraft, the members of King Arthur's court are at least well aware that there is something supernatural about the Green Knight's characteristics and abilities. Suddenly bursting in from the outdoors, he is independent of Arthur's court or schedule, and he has no apparent qualms about interrupting a function of the royal court, showing that the importance of such events either does not occur to him or does not matter. Evidently, Arthur and his knights have been visited by nature that is inseparably linked to supernature. As shown by the Green Knight's natural and supernatural demeanor, the road to his forest domain is the road to Faerie and a more abundant view of all life; essentially, the way to nature is the way to supernature. The Green Knight acts as an ambassador to this natural-supernatural forest territory and invites Gawain into that space in order to expand his view of life beyond the walls of Camelot.

As a representative of the wild places in nature, the Green Knight is also an advocate of maintaining a well-balanced relationship towards nature. This attitude, far from being a pagan

worship of nature or an environmentalism prompted by fear of losing natural resources, is a blend of the iconic Green Man figure of myth and legend and a premodern Christian attitude of care towards creation. While his appearance initially suggests a connection to the Green Man, his actions and character do so as well: “The Green Knight himself is a representative of winter and of the vegetative world, as we know by his coloring and appearance, announced by thunder, at the Christmas court. He represents the winter aspect of the Green Man at his most terrifying in holding the power of the death that leads to renewed life” (Matthews 88). The Green Knight shows that nature is formidable and therefore worth respecting, and his behavior demonstrates the belief that “humans should be custodians of the environment, working with and respecting it” (George 31).<sup>4</sup> As well as using nature well, humans can appreciate nature in and of itself as a link to the God who designed it. Such a view keeps the supernatural origin of nature at the forefront, which helps to explain, at least in part, why medieval man had such a strong concept of nature and supernature as an integrated whole. The Green Knight, as the lord of his castle, has a balanced view of how to treat one’s natural surroundings and resources, as seen in the way he conducts the hunt. For example, he is quite willing to hunt the animals on his land and appears to enjoy this activity, but he also places certain limits on how it is done and what kind of deer can be killed (1153-1157). Such precautions and regulations were perhaps put in place to keep the forest’s ecosystem in balance. Bercilak uses his natural resources, but he does not abuse them. His balanced approach can be considered a positive example for the medieval reader: “[his castle] illustrates an estate balanced between culture and nature, and its conscientious lord

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<sup>4</sup> Medieval thinkers have somewhat differed on this matter, with Thomas Aquinas seen as taking a functional view of nature. At least loosely based on Aquinas’ ideas, nature exists for man’s use (33). St. Francis, on the other hand, emphasized nature’s value in and of itself: “for Francis nature represented a realm of being that related to God in a way that is unaffected, spontaneous, and authentic—an idea to which fallen man could only aspire” (Patterson qtd. in George 33). For the Christian worldview which was so widely held in medieval Europe, these are not necessarily incompatible beliefs. If nature is a gift from God, the Creator, then humans can and should use that gift well to improve and enjoy life to the fullest, but the value of the created world lies not only in its usefulness.

becomes a model of environmental awareness for the English ruling class that formed the poem's audience." This culture-nature balance is made possible by the Green Knight's dual nature—as the Green Knight, he is part of the wild landscape, a part of nature itself. As Bertilak of Hautdesert, he is a skilled manager of his household and its indoor occupants (Martinez 114-15). Some scholars believe that this character was particularly effective among Sir Gawain's original Midlands audience, in an area that was still being settled by diverse groups within polite society: "A courtly and frontier-like society comprises the original audience for the poem, and Bertilak/Green Knight becomes a figure that speaks to both groups" (115). A newly civilized area like the Midlands may have much needed the message that the Green Knight offers—that society can and should embrace nature, recognizing its own place within God's creation. Since nature is important and valuable, per the Green Knight's perspective, humans must be careful to treat it in a respectful and responsible way. Clearly, respect and care for nature are incompatible with neither civilization, proper control of the environment, nor the exercise of faith.

The Green Knight's connection to faith may be the strongest claim in favor of his representing an integrated nature-supernature. The Green Chapel's very name brings forth some clear ecclesiastical associations, and, for all its purely natural setting, it becomes a place of spiritual rebirth for Gawain. Upon first seeing the Chapel in the forest, Gawain approaches it with horror and refers to it as "an evil church" (*Sir Gawain* 2196). However, he and the reader soon discover that the chapel is not necessarily what it appears. The reader must step outside Gawain's Camelot-centered perspective to see the value of the Green Chapel. Green spaces and plant life are often used as symbols of new life and rebirth, and the Green Knight's chapel is no different: "man-made things are temporary and perishable through the past destruction of Troy and the future destruction of Camelot . . . But the entrance of the Green Knight into Arthur's

court is a challenge from a world of regeneration—nature can revive, just like the Green Knight does after losing his head” (Martinez 116). Even the types of trees that Bercilak keeps in his wood further the renewal imagery. The text specifically mentions Gawain tying his horse’s reins to a lime-tree, also known as a linden tree (*Sir Gawain* 2177). In literary references, the linden is usually “known for its vigorous regrowth . . . and for its reputed longevity” (Martinez 119). The presence of these symbolically rich linden trees shows that Gawain’s renewal is just ahead in the form of the Green Knight’s tutelage. The trees and the meaning of rebirth and growth are inseparable, with the existence of the natural tree in the setting being enough to bring out the connection. Furthermore, the chapel and its natural setting remind the reader as well that new life is possible. Especially paired with the overt religious overtones brought out by the church, the Green Knight’s territory presents nature as a symbolic reminder of spiritual regeneration.

Gawain’s response to Bercilak does bring about a kind of rebirth in him. Through the life-threatening challenge of facing the Green Knight’s axe, Gawain has a chance to prove his mettle, and it is in the green forest, not in the community of Camelot, that Gawain learns virtue. Before leaving Camelot in search of the Green Knight, Gawain had attached the emblem of the pentangle on his armor to demonstrate his devoutness and commitment to virtue. The pentangle, also known as “the infinite knot,” is a five-pointed star co-opted as a Christian “symbol for truth” (*Sir Gawain* 626-7, 630). Its five points, reminiscent of the five wounds of Christ on the cross, represent the virtues that a Christian knight ought to possess, including brotherly love, courage, freedom from sin, pity, and courtesy (645-55). Of course, these are all necessary virtues for a devoted Christian knight to have, but simply wearing their symbol will not impress them into a person’s heart. This is also not the only instance in the poem in which Gawain places his trust in a symbol. The green girdle, which he acquires from the Green Knight’s lady, is brought as a

protective agent, but the narrator reveals later that the girdle possesses no such power. Even though he is wearing the belt, the narrator states that it would not have protected him: “[Bercilak] pretended to swing [the axe] straight at his neck. / If he’d hurled it down as he swung it high / Gawain would have been dead forever” (2262-4). The narrator also remarks that “his chances / Of living seemed scant” (2307-8). Both the pentangle and the girdle, which are objects crafted in society rather than nature, are ultimately ineffective. Although the two are commonly seen in opposition to each other—true faith contrasted with superstition—they are more closely tied together than it might seem to today’s reader (Hardman 247). Gawain places the same kind of emphasis and belief in each, as effective in themselves rather than as a reminder of something deeper. However, manmade symbols and mementos alone are not enough to save Gawain if the underlying principles do not also reside in his soul. Rather, he must be brought to a moment of decision by the Green Knight to know whether he will choose honor and courage over fear. That moment comes when Bercilak pretends to swing his axe toward Gawain’s neck as if to behead him, and Gawain flinches away from the blow (*Sir Gawain* 2259-67). The courage spoken of in relation to the pentangle has not necessarily fully taken root in Gawain’s heart to influence his behavior, and Bercilak points this out in no uncertain terms: “Gawain? You can’t be Gawain, his name / Is too noble, he’s never afraid, nowhere / On earth – and you, you flinch in advance! / I’ve heard nothing about Gawain the coward” (2268-2273). By calling attention to Gawain’s moment of hesitation, Bercilak enables him to examine himself and make a change in his behavior. Gawain accepts this and says, “I flinched . . . / I won’t again . . . / I’ll stand like a stone: on my word of honor / My neck will be still till your stroke comes to it” (2280-87). Bercilak further uncovers Gawain’s deception regarding hiding the girdle from him, revealing to him:

That belt you're wearing: it's mine, my wife  
 Gave it to you – . . . Not many better men have walked  
 This earth . . . / But you failed a little, lost good faith—  
 Not for a beautiful belt, or in lust,  
 But for love of your life. I can hardly blame you. (2358-68)

Bercilak can forgive Gawain for this offense, since he did it out of a desire to preserve his life—it would be only natural to do so. However, Gawain does give up his deception, along with the belt, saying, “Fear of your blow taught me cowardice . . . / Oh knight: I humbly confess / My faults: bless me / With the chance to atone” (2377-87). Gawain views the green girdle as a reminder of his faults, and he considers that a negative association, but Bercilak chooses to give him the girdle as a reminder of the lesson he learned in the Green Chapel. The belief illustrated here is that the natural can have a relationship to the spiritual, both coming from the same Source. Far from the socially prescribed world of Camelot, Gawain learns what it means to put his values into practice in the wild woods. The practice of supernatural Christian virtue is thus connected to the Green Knight's verdant crucible of real-life experience. Once Gawain makes this connection, he returns to Camelot a changed man, more in tune with his own values.

In these interactions with Gawain and the other characters, the Green Knight demonstrates that he possesses power, but he does so with restraint and with an eye toward restoring order. The first clear indication of this power occurs when the knight serenely rides out of the castle carrying his own head, which Gawain has just chopped off (*Sir Gawain* 435-39). Anyone with the ability to go on living without a head is necessarily a person of great unexplained power. However, the way he uses that power is characterized not by domination or unlimited wielding of power but by a goal of restoration and improvement. After teaching

Gawain the value of courage after he flinches from the knight's blow, Bercilak is due to strike Gawain in the same way he himself was struck a year prior (2303-4). Instead of unleashing his full power and killing Gawain, which the contract would allow him to do, the knight holds back his power: "he struck hard, but hurt him only / With a nick, that snipped the skin" (2311-12). With this exchange also comes the revelation of his real name and identity as Bercilak of Hautdesert: "As the identification occurs, as the Green Knight becomes identified, he undergoes thereby a sudden reduction in his possibilities of power" (De Roo 240). While he does give up some of his air of powerful mystery, he does not lose his abilities, but his choice to give it up makes him more accessible to Gawain and his lesson more effective. This display of meekness, strength under control, is unexpected but just what the situation calls for. Bercilak values the good that he can do for Gawain by teaching him a life virtue more than he values the free exercise of his power.

Undoubtedly, the Green Knight is a mysterious figure, occupying an inseparable nature-supernature, and he cannot touch the world of Camelot without impacting it in a healthy way. In a socially prescribed setting like Camelot, it pays to remember that the natural world is not dependent on human activity or rules but that it is quite supernatural. Bercilak calls attention to this apparent tension and causes Gawain to realize that it is not really a tension at all. It may be a mystery, but the Green Knight's behavior and mysterious origin reveal that such a mystery is not only acceptable but worthy of being embraced and celebrated. As he demonstrates in Sir Gawain's life, to step into the unknown forest is to find honor, courage, and a richly vibrant life.

In sum, these two major premodern examples of fantasy characters exhibit an acceptance of God's creation, with all its mysteries, that Tolkien displayed in his life and work. However,

not all twentieth-century fantasy writers have emulated the premodern precedents as he did. In the following chapter, this project will examine three fantasy characters from the postmodern era. As the research will show, the intellectual climate and widely held values in fantasy literature have changed significantly. From the wonder-filled fantasy tradition of works like *Lanval* and *Sir Gawain*, we turn to a world of modern wizards and space aliens. The three characters to be examined are Ged, the main character of Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968), Willy Wonka from *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964) by Roald Dahl, and one science fantasy offering: Q from *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994). Many would consider these to be engaging characters in relatable, while strange, situations. While readers and viewers can certainly enjoy these well-crafted stories, a close examination will reveal more worldview matters than initially meet the eye. While their settings are diverse, these postmodern fantasy characters have some things in common, such as a lack of harmony with the cosmos as it was created—the ideal that *Lanval* and *Sir Gawain* display and that Tom Bombadil may help to recover. The following chapter will go into detail about what the fantasy literature has lost through the postmodern works mentioned above.

## Chapter 2: Postmodern Fantasy Characters' Departure from Premodern Ideals

### True Names and Dark Shadows: Ged in *A Wizard of Earthsea*

The worldview and values exhibited by the previously discussed premodern characters, Lanval's lady and Bercilak, would eventually be contrasted with new and different ways of thinking. Centuries after these works enjoyed popularity in medieval Europe, the category of postmodern fantasy called into question the ideal of submission to God's created order that the traditional fantasists advocated through their work. One of the most prominent works at the inception of postmodern fantasy is Ursula K. Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea*. Le Guin herself recognized that her work was groundbreaking: "In 1967 [fantasy] was pretty much nowhere. Kid stuff. The only adult fantasy novel most people had even heard of was *The Lord of the Rings* . . . . When *A Wizard of Earthsea* came out, there had not been a book like it. It was original—something new." While she acknowledged the importance of Tolkien as a major figure in twentieth-century fantasy literature and even called his work "great," she also sought to subvert the traditional fantasy category of which it was a part (261-2). The way in which she subverts Tolkien's traditional fantasy ideals is evident through the world she has constructed in her novel *A Wizard of Earthsea*, a novel that Tom Shippey calls "evidently a Bildungsroman, a story of a sorcerer's apprenticeship" ("Magic" 150). In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged's life and world illustrate a disconnect between natural and supernatural realms, and Ged's use of power involves control and the acceptance of his own darkness.

In the world in which Ged lives, Earthsea, nature and supernature interact in a way that is much more disconnected from the inseparable nature-supernature seen in the two medieval texts discussed earlier. In Earthsea, natural objects can be controlled through the use of their true names—what they are called in the "Old Speech," Earthsea's original language (63). This old

language provides the basis of magic in the novel. Despite this magical power given to names, however, there does not appear to be an overarching ultimate reality bound to the natural world. Interestingly, characters use words from the Old Speech and speak of a creation myth for their world, recalling how a figure named Segoy “raised the islands of the earth from the Open Sea,” but no one seems to know where the Old Speech, the sea, or Segoy himself come from (160). They only have a creation myth without a known creator. In contrast to the biblical and premodern sense of mystery as something unknown, at least partially, but still knowable, these matters are not only unknown but also unknowable; the Master Namer says that “no man could learn them all [the words of Old Speech]. For there is no end to that language” (64). It is not simply that the humans cannot understand the Old Speech completely; rather, the language itself is indeterminate and incomplete. Even the Master Namer carries this sense of unknowability and disconnection within himself. He lives in the “Isolate Tower” and bears the name Kurremkarmerruk, “a name that had no meaning in any language” (62). Whereas premodern Christian readers saw language as a method of revelation used by God to reveal truth about himself (Romans 1.20), Kurremkarmerruk makes no effort to be understood or provide any revelation. Despite this lack of revelation, Old Speech words are used to bring about magical results, however illusory they may be. For example, spells can create the illusion of transforming an object, but saying the object’s name will return its true identity and appearance (58). Also, the Master Name tells Ged that, to control the foam on the sea, one “must use its own true name in the Old Speech, which is essa” (64). The primacy of names in Old Speech is what forms the foundation for Earthsea: “The wellspring of Le Guin's fantasy, which is based upon the myth of a magical Ursprache, an original language of names, is found in the recreation and re-creation of names” (Robinson 110). Kurremkarmerruk’s function can be described as demonstrating the

endless unknowability of the language—to reveal that there is no revelation available. Thus, even the most skilled wizards among the people are disconnected from a higher, supernatural meaning, if there is one, and they have no way of knowing whether a higher power exists.

The Terrenon, an enchanted stone in Bendersk's castle, is another example of the way supernature is treated in *Earthsea*. Upon seeing the stone for the first time, Ged knows that it is powerful and dangerous: "This was a very ancient thing: an old and terrible spirit was prisoned in that block of stone" (159). Ged does not believe that he should touch or speak to the stone because it could do much evil, but the reader is not given a foundation for this belief: "There is, however, no great power—no God or creator—that underwrites moral goodness" (Dickerson and O'Hara 186). Thus, it is difficult or impossible to tell what exactly makes the stone evil and other forms of magic acceptable, unless by Ged's intuition alone—a poor, postmodern substitute for reliable revelation. While the stone is inhabited by a spirit of some sort, the inhabitation is the juxtaposition of two completely separate substances: a material stone and a spirit that is supernatural—at least as supernatural as *Earthsea* magic can be. This idea stands in contrast to Tolkien's statement that natural things can be elevated by fantasy, in and of themselves, with no infusion or possession by a spiritual power necessary: "By the forging of Gram cold iron was revealed; by the making of Pegasus horses were ennobled; in the Trees of the Sun and Moon root and stock, flower and fruit are manifested in glory" (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" 78). Whereas Tolkien saw nature as something wonderfully created from a supernatural source and disclosed by its Creator to His praise (Psalm 19.1), Le Guin apparently views nature as material objects that may be injected with a disconnected, perhaps quite alien supernatural power. She does tend towards dualism in her work, including the other novels in the *Earthsea* trilogy, echoing "the sort of Westernized Eastern mysticism that George Lucas would later make famous in his first *Star*

Wars trilogy” (Dickerson and O’Hara 188). In this line of thought, reality is one coin with two sides, and determining which side is which is quite difficult. This view stands in contrast to the traditional fantasy view of the cosmos as an integrated whole hierarchy of which man is the lowest rung (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 63, 98), a holistic system whose form and substance are one.

Another contrast to traditional fantasy lies in Ged’s views toward sharing knowledge, which he tends to view as a means of secrecy and subsequent power compared to others. The archetypal figure of the Green Man operates by teaching people about his natural domain, just as the Green Knight teaches Gawain a lesson about courage and Tom Bombadil shares knowledge of the Old Forest (Matthews 90). However, as a young budding wizard, Ged is actually discouraged from sharing his special knowledge. When his witch aunt offers to teach him a magic spell, she forbids him from telling it to the others, because, as she asserts, “we must keep the secrets of our craft.” The young Ged is glad to have this secret knowledge, “liking to know and do what [his friends] knew not and could not” (Le Guin 5). While the lady in Lanval also advocates a degree of secret-keeping, she does so not to guard some kind of esoteric power from anyone else but to preserve something special between Lanval and herself. In fact, she even transfers some of that power to Lanval for the benefit of others; therefore, her secret is not selfish (De France 75). Instead of granting power to others or spreading knowledge about an integrated nature-supernature, though, Ged advocates a kind of pagan gnostic desire for secret knowledge and chooses to keep his magical knowledge separate from others.

As well as uncertainties concerning the Old Speech and Old Powers, the world of Earthsea also contains spiritual boundaries between realms. Instead of seeing the universe as a hierarchical cosmos that included realms beyond space, Earthsea has a distinct boundary

between the land of the living in nature and the land of the dead, which is mystically separate from life and rationality. In what may be the most pivotal moment in the story, Ged attempts to summon the spirit of Elfarran, a woman who had died roughly one thousand years ago. When he succeeds, the result is a tear in the boundary between the places of life and death, “a rent in the darkness of the earth and night, a ripping open of the fabric of the world” (Le Guin 82-84). In an earlier passage, when Ged tries to heal a dying child, the narrator reveals that the realms of life and death are separated by a “low wall of stones” (112). The same stone wall is referenced in other works by Le Guin: “Le Guin’s wall of stones is a visual marker of the division between the worlds of the living and of the dead at that liminal point.” In *Earthsea*, there is a border between these two realms, which results in isolation. Foster argues that “this division of a supernatural location, walling it off from the rest of the surrounding lands, leads to stagnation” (Foster 38, 42). These images of walls and boundaries show that the spiritual realm of the dead and the physical realm of the living are distinctly isolated from each other—a construction that stands in contrast to the inseparable nature-supernature seen in traditional fantasy.

As well as having a separated view of nature and supernature, Ged’s world has some concepts of personal power that differ significantly from premodern ones. On a surface level, Tom Bombadil’s power and Ged’s do appear to have some similarities, the most prominent being that they both use words as a means of power and defeating their enemies. Therefore, words are taken seriously in both worlds: “Like the wizards of Middle-earth, the wise of *Earthsea* (mages in particular) always take language seriously; no passing word is taken lightly” (Dickerson and O’Hara 176)—most likely because words can influence events and alter outcomes. The heavy power of words is exhibited in both Tom Bombadil’s and Ged’s lives. When Tom Bombadil sings his songs to malevolent creatures such as Old Man Willow and the

barrow-wights, his words have an immediate and powerful effect (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 136, 161). Likewise, Ged achieves results through words as he uses the true names of objects. When he goes to fight the Old Dragon of Pendor, Ged uses his knowledge of the dragon's true name in the Old Speech, Yevaud, to force him to promise not to harm the islanders anymore. Ged's strategy is effective: "When he spoke the dragon's name it was as if he held the huge being on a fine, thin leash, tightening it on his throat . . . He spoke again: 'Yevaud! Swear by your name that you and your sons will never come to the Archipelago'" (Le Guin 127-28). Through words, Ged is able to protect the islanders. However, despite this surface-level similarity to Tom Bombadil's use of power, there are some key differences as well. For Ged, power is used as a means to control people and things. The success he has with the dragon is not simply due to internal power on his part but rather due to the spell of a magic word that he must invoke, leaving the dragon wholly under his control. Even as a younger, more immature wizard, Ged's behavior reveals that he enjoys the control he can have over others, which shows him to be less of a strong character than Tom: "At first all his pleasure in the art-magic was, childlike, the power it gave him over bird and beast, and the knowledge of these. And indeed that pleasure stayed with him all his life" (7-8). Although his appreciation of magic eventually goes beyond simply controlling living things, that desire is still a part of his practice of magic as an adult. Le Guin does not necessarily condone Ged's enjoyment of power as control. According to Shippey, the use of personal power is something against which Ged must struggle: "the temptation which runs as a thread through the account of Ged's apprenticeship is to act, to exploit his power, to reject the wise passivity of the true mage" ("Magic" 152). Instead of setting a positive example for non-controlling power, this temptation renders Ged a morally weaker character than someone like the Green Knight, who uses restraint in his exercise of power.

Also, while Tom Bombadil does not claim to have power over weather, calling himself “no weather-master” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 151), Ged does claim to have this power, and he utilizes it. He also notably uses it by his own power rather than relying on a more powerful figure to accomplish the task.<sup>5</sup> While on a failed voyage from Serd, one of the islands in Earthsea, Ged is called upon to direct the winds during a storm and has some measure of success: “he raised up the magewind into her sail. At once the ship began to cleave straight to the east, and the ship’s master began to look cheerful again. But little by little, though Ged kept up the spell, the magewind slackened, growing feebler, until the ship seemed to hang still on the waves for a minute, her sail drooping” (135). Ultimately, the ship is forced to turn back to its place of departure, but Ged does change and affect the weather to some degree. This exchange demonstrates that the laws of nature should be manipulated if they can serve the characters’ ends, and characters who have the power to do so should exercise that power.

In addition to the portrayal of power as a means to control, the ultimate purpose of power in Earthsea is quite different from that in premodern fantasy works. While characters like Lanval’s lady and the Green Knight see power as a means to restore objective virtue and justice, characters like Ged seek the goal of balance between light and dark above all else instead of aspiring to a universal sense of rightness. Concepts of good versus evil are not absent from the Earthsea novels by any means: “Indeed, we see the language of good and evil throughout the Earthsea trilogy, seemingly used as though these were objectively defined” (Dickerson and O’Hara 181). However, Le Guin’s own beliefs cast a different light on these concepts and

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<sup>5</sup> In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, for example, Agamemnon and the other human characters are subject to Artemis’ weather manipulation due to her anger (Aeschylus vv. 189-215). While this wind has a clear source in the gods, Ged’s power stems from himself.

denounce the idea of a war between good and evil. In her afterword to *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Le Guin states:

War as a moral metaphor is limited, limiting, and dangerous. By reducing the choices of action to “a war against” whatever-it-is, you divide the world into Me or Us (good) and Them or It (bad) and reduce the ethical complexity and moral richness of our life to Yes/No, On/Off. This is puerile misleading, and degrading. In stories, it evades any solution but violence and offers the reader mere infantile reassurance. (265)

While her desire to decry unnecessary violence and avoid viewing people in reductive terms is admirable, such a perspective of good and evil themselves is morally inadequate. If good and evil are not manifestations of an objective and knowable reality, then the way one uses his or her power lacks legitimate moral context, coherence, and purpose. Ged displays this lack of moral center through his choices and fears. Instead of being unequivocally good and steadfast in his commitment to what is right, Ged fears that he may be controlled by his shadow for the furtherance of evil—at least evil as it is portrayed in the novel. He expresses this anxiety to his teacher, Ogion: “‘if it defeats me wholly,’ he said, arguing perhaps with Ogion, perhaps with himself, ‘it will take my knowledge and my power, and use them. It threatens only me, now. But if it enters into me and possesses me, it will work great evil through me’” (179). While the behavior of Bercilak and Lanval’s lady is sometimes inscrutable, one would never expect to see them arguing with themselves in this manner or expressing anxiety about being overcome with evil. While Ged does seem to be younger than either of these two, his youth does not excuse him from his diffidence about remaining on the side of what is right. Ged, for all his magical power, lacks confidence that he can be triumphant over the shadow. This lack of confidence reveals him to be a weaker character in that respect as he relies on his own strength without the assurance of

help from a greater power. Neither is his fear unfounded; the text makes known that Ged really can be overpowered by evil. He is continually beset by the shadow, whether he is in the land of the living or the realm of the dead; for Ged, there is no escape (112-113). Also, the stone referred to as the Terrenon holds an all-too-real threat for Ged. Rather than remaining unaffected by evil, Ged is at high risk for being controlled by the stone: “If he had once touched the Stone, or spoken to it, he would have been utterly lost. Yet, even as the shadow had not quite been able to catch up with him and seize him, so the Stone had not been able to use him—not quite. He had almost yielded, but not quite” (166). While Ged ultimately chooses not to give in to the stone’s temptation, he very nearly does, a struggle that undermines his power. If he, a wizard, cannot withstand this force of evil, then perhaps his power, as well as the moral underpinnings of its purpose, must be called into question.

In some cases, Ged even chooses to take on the form of evil in order to fight it. When he is tasked with removing the threat of the ancient dragon, Ged turns himself into a dragon so that he can successfully conquer its offspring: “Ged worked a spell of Changing, and between one breath and the next flew up from his boat in dragon-form. Spreading broad wings and reaching talons out, he met the two head on, withering them with fire, and then turned to the third” (121). While this tactic does work, Ged must quickly return to his human form because it is “most perilous to keep that dragon-shape longer than need demanded” (122). Ironically, he has willingly put himself at risk of becoming more dragon-like in his attempt to defeat dragons. Ged’s approach to fight fire with fire appears to be self-defeating—one wonders what the point of combating evil may be if one risks becoming it in the process. As readers of the Inklings are aware, Ged is not the only human fantasy character to be turned into a dragon; Eustace is also transformed into a dragon in C. S. Lewis’ *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Rather than

functioning as a strategic move, Eustace's predicament is portrayed as decidedly negative. He has become a dragon due to his "greedy, dragonish thoughts," and he knows that his choice to behave like a dragon has isolated him from his community: "[h]e realized that he was a monster cut off from the whole human race" (C. S. Lewis, *Voyage* 97-98). For Eustace, being a dragon comes with no benefits, only trouble. It is not until he submits to Aslan's painful removal of his dragon skin that he can return to his human identity (116). This dependence on another, more powerful being in order to be restored from a wholly negative state differs greatly from Ged's ability to change into a dragon at will and use his dragon form for his own purposes.

At the novel's climactic moment, Ged makes the choice to embrace and accept evil as a part of himself—a far cry from the wholly benevolent, albeit static, characters of premodern fantasy. Continually pursued by the shadow, Ged can never be at peace: "as long as he flees his double, he cannot possibly realize its true meaning, nor can he develop fully. Ultimately, he must become prey to what he seeks to avoid" (Slethaug 330). Ged clearly has a problem in the form of the shadow, one that could consume him, so he believes that he needs to find a way to defeat it. However, the way that he chooses to solve this problem may come as a surprise to those who are accustomed to premodern notions of right and wrong. When Ged and his faithful friend Estarriol pursue the shadow to the edge of the world, Ged finally accepts the shadow: "Ged spoke the shadow's name and in the same moment the shadow spoke without lips or tongue, saying the same word: 'Ged.' And the two voices were one voice. Ged reached out his hands, dropping his staff, and took hold of his shadow, of the black self that reached out to him. Light and darkness met, and joined, and were one" (251). All along, the shadow was simply another side of Ged's own psyche, and he finds a dualistic sort of peace when he realizes that he does not have to defeat it at all; he only has to recognize and own it. According to Slethaug, Ged's use of power

to accept his shadow reflects a “theme [that] lends itself readily to the creation of modern *psychomachias* in which the physical conflict mirrors the character’s internal struggle for self-realization.” Le Guin “openly admits her indebtedness to Jung and views this conflict as a struggle between the self and the shadow. She sees the battle as one in which the two aspects of the self must blend, mutually surrendering, if a healthy resolution is to be achieved” (Slethaug 326). This blending and merging of the self and the shadow—which could be seen as a mere projection constructed by the self if it even exists—are just what Ged does when he accurately names the shadow with his own true name. The narrator claims that this action makes Ged “a man: who, knowing his whole true self, cannot be used or possessed by any power other than himself, and whose life therefore is lived for life’s sake and never in the service of ruin, or pain, or hatred, or the dark” (254). However, this assertion that he cannot be used for darkness is suspect, given that he has just accepted his dark shadow as a representation of the evil inside himself. In fact, even his efforts to use magic against the realm of death backfire by causing more darkness; even though he wants to use light against darkness when he summons Elfarran’s spirit, his attempt is misguided:

Ged’s temptation is to use his power; it is a particularly great temptation to use it to summon the dead or bring back the dying; he rationalizes it by wishing to “drive back darkness with his own light.” And yet the respect for separate existences within the totality of existence, which is inherent in magic dependent on knowing the names of things, resists the diminution of others which comes from prolongation of the self, extension of life. One might say that the darkness has rights too. So the nature of his own art is against Ged, and his attempts to break Equilibrium with his own light only call forth a new shadow. (Shippey, “Magic” 153)

In this line of reasoning, Ged's problem is that he attempts to commit an act of defiance against death and darkness without expecting payback. What he learns is that every action comes with a dualistic tradeoff—a philosophy of an eye for an eye, life for death, light for darkness. This idea that light and darkness must, in a way, cancel each other out seems strange and implies that the universe is in a state of conflict or tension, rather than belying a coherent, transcendent morality. In *Earthsea*, though, this support for the idea of balance between good and evil as the highest form of good is part of the fabric of reality. An action is portrayed as either good or bad based on whether it will upset the balance. The Master Hand asserts that “[t]he world is in balance, in Equilibrium. A wizard’s power of Changing and of Summoning can shake the balance of the world . . . To light a candle is to cast a shadow” (Le Guin 59). This balance between light and darkness is in contrast to the beliefs of premodern and Christian authors: “According to [Archmage] Gensher—and, it would appear, according to Le Guin, as least as she expresses her philosophy in the *Earthsea* trilogy—good is not supposed to triumph over evil, but rather the two are supposed to remain in balance, like light and dark, life and death. In this, Le Guin could not be much further in opposition to Tolkien and Lewis”—or to their premodern precedents (Dickerson and O'Hara 183). The verse that Estarriol sings from *The Creation of Ea*, *Earthsea*'s oldest song, makes sense when viewed in the light of this dualistic worldview: “Only in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life: bright the hawk’s flight on the empty sky” (Le Guin 254). In the world Le Guin has constructed with her *Earthsea* novels, power is not primarily for defeating darkness and upholding light and proper order; it is for embracing the darkness and balancing it with the light.

As the text demonstrates, *Earthsea* is a significantly different ideological environment from *Faerie*, *Avalon*, or even the *Wirral Wilderness*. With its separate realms of existence,

Earthsea does not admit the kind of inseparable nature-supernature found in traditional fantasy. Furthermore, despite the wizards' emphasis on true names, Earthsea is a world of incoherent and inaccessible purpose behind those names, since there is no ultimate reality or transcendent source, or even the hint of one, of Old Speech to which to trace them. In contrast to the previously discussed sympathetic characters of premodern fantasy, Ged appears to be a weak protagonist, with his short-sighted desire for control. Although he does grow out of this tendency to some degree, his shaky character makes him a less trustworthy hero. Even the purpose of power itself, which Ged eventually learns, is highly distinct from its purpose in traditional fantasy, in which power is used to restore what is right and help others. In Earthsea, the purpose of power is to restore a balance between light and darkness, not to promote the light. Thus, while Le Guin's novel may resemble some of the trappings of premodern fantasy, with its wizards, dragons, and far-off lands, its worldview content places it at odds with that tradition, demonstrating how far postmodern fantasy, in Le Guin anyway, has drifted from its premodern roots.

### **Smoke, Mirrors, and Chocolate: Willy Wonka's Material Fantasy**

While Earthsea offered readers a dualistic world in which nature and supernature are separated, around the same time English author Roald Dahl was crafting a story which can be identified with a trend toward the material world and away from supernature altogether. *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, one of his most well-known works, has been beloved by both members of Generation X and their children, who may have been introduced to the story by way of the 2005 film adaptation. Drawing on sources of inspiration such as European Gothic folklore and the American tall tale, Dahl's children's fantasy novel has enjoyed popularity in both the US and in Europe (Schober 36). While Charlie is the protagonist and title character, Willy Wonka,

owner of the title factory, is arguably the main character. Readers and characters alike wonder at Wonka—where he comes from, where he got his near-magical knowledge of confectionery, and whom he employs in his chocolate enterprise. A closer look at this strange character reveals that he has precious little in common with characters found in traditional fantasy, such as Lanval's lady or the Green Knight. As evidenced through his interactions with the other characters in the novel, Willy Wonka represents the ideological shift away from restrained power and inseparable nature-supernature in favor of an ambiguous hypernature—an attempt to stretch the boundaries of the material world to imitate supernature. He has a reputation of mystery and power, most of his activities can be explained in a secular material universe without admitting supernature, he uses hyperbole and ambiguity to evade questions about his abilities, and he ultimately reveals himself as a human with limits like any other.

At the opening of the novel, the name of Willy Wonka is spoken with near-reverence, due to his reputation of mystery and power as observed in the extraordinary products and inventions that come from his factory. Charlie's Grandpa Joe recounts some of the wonders that Mr. Wonka has invented, such as his recipe for ice cream that can go unrefrigerated without melting. When Charlie expresses his disbelief, Grandpa Joe replies, "Of course it's impossible! . . . It's completely *absurd!* But Mr. Willy Wonka has done it!" (Dahl 11). Grandpa Joe does not doubt that Wonka has some degree of superhuman ability or intelligence to be able to conceive of such things. With such secret knowledge, Wonka is initially seen as transcendent over normal human life, according to the modes of action explained by Northrop Frye.<sup>6</sup> Critic Hamida Bosmajian applies these modes to Willy Wonka's story to gain a sense of its "complexity": "In

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<sup>6</sup> Describing the mythic mode, Frye states, "If superior in kind both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being, and the story about him will be a *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god" (33).

the *mythic mode* Willie Wonka is a god-like being who has created a universal empire transcendent of our experience. From this realm Wonka extends himself in power through all the chocolate-loving world” (37). Willy Wonka is seen in conjunction with his mysterious factory, both of which are outside the scope of typical human experience. The factory has an air of wonder, evoking a style referred to as “Dickensian gothic: Wonka’s mysterious chocolate factory, with its ‘huge iron gates leading in it, and high wall surrounding it, and smoke belching from its chimneys, and strange whizzing sounds from deep inside it’ . . . whiffs of a factory in Dickens’ London during the Industrial Revolution (Schober 36). This brand of wonder and mystery, defined by the physical world, is not to be found in medieval fantasy—mysteries and threats typically come from a supernature-infused nature, not from civilized society or even the medieval village of that time (the closest form of civilization available). However, in a post-industrial society, even a purely physical entity such as a chocolate factory carries much weight and wonder for those outside of said factory and for those concerned about technology’s impact on life. Thus, it functions as a source of pseudo-mystery for postmodernity.

Perhaps the greatest mystery surrounding Mr. Wonka is the fact that no one has ever seen his factory workers. As Grandpa Joe reveals in whispered tones, “*Nobody . . . ever . . . comes . . . out!*” . . . *And . . . nobody . . . ever . . . goes . . . in!*” (14). The lack of exchange between the people outside the factory and the people or creatures inside of it demonstrates a complete separation between daily life and the unknown—a situation reflective of the alienation between nature and supernature seen in postmodernity. This peculiar situation regarding the isolation of the factory follows the closing of Wonka’s factory several years prior. When it reopened, however, none of the original employees was re-hired, according to Joe: “most mysterious of all, Charlie, were the shadows in the windows of the factory. The people standing on the street

outside could see small dark shadows moving about behind the frosted glass windows” (17). These unknown workers are treated as a great mystery, in the sense of an unknowable phenomenon, by the outside world, in keeping with Willy Wonka’s reputation as a man of untold power and unprecedented skill. His secretiveness is also reminiscent of the way that the Green Knight’s power is augmented when his identity is unknown to Gawain (De Roo 240). When Charlie and the other golden ticket winners arrive at the factory for the tour, Wonka appears consistent with this reputation of powerful secrecy and strangeness—he is eccentric in his appearance and odd in his mannerisms (Dahl 57). His speech reveals that he must have a plan of which no one else is aware, as evidenced by his comments as he welcomes the children inside: “don’t wander off by yourselves! I shouldn’t like to lose any of you at this stage of the proceedings!” (60). Whatever proceedings he has in mind are known only to him and without discernible origin or reasoning; the cosmos of his mind is neither orderly nor revealed. Since his purposes are unknown, he must function as a kind of guide figure to the children touring his factory. This connection can also be seen through the lens of Frye’s romantic mode<sup>7</sup> as Bosmajian explains it, with Wonka becoming “Charlie’s guide, an omniscient and wise old man” (37). These impressions indicate that Willy Wonka operates on a higher, while human, plane and has everything under control.

Despite his marvelous semblance, however, Willy Wonka does not, as it is revealed, derive his unique skills from a supernatural source; in fact, most of the wonders of his factory can be explained by an amplified, larger-than-life version of the material world, a far cry from the traditional fantasy perspective of integrated nature-supernature. Even before Wonka appears

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<sup>7</sup> Frye describes the Romantic mode thusly: “If superior in degree to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of romance, whose actions are marvelous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended” (33). This description seems to fit into how Wonka presents himself.

in the book, this idea of supernature being a mere illusory amplification of nature begins to surface when Wonka releases five golden tickets to the world, hidden in his chocolate bars; the five children who find these tickets receive a free tour of Wonka's factory. Amid the worldwide frenzy to locate the golden tickets, something strange and wonderful happens when Charlie, a poor, unlikely candidate with a kind disposition, wins the last golden ticket. Early on, the tickets are referred to as "magical" (Dahl 27), but the reader must call this idea into question, given how the events—like the tickets themselves—unfold. In a chapter entitled "The Miracle," Charlie finds some money on the side of the road and decides to buy a Wonka chocolate bar with it; amazingly, he encounters the ticket in the wrapper to that candy bar he has just bought (42-44). Upon closer consideration, this turn of events is not truly a miracle—an event that defies the logic of a purely material world. That Charlie would find a ticket at this late stage in the game is highly improbable, granted, but not miraculous. Some scholars have pointed out that the novel demonstrates "the marginality of fate . . . [and] the almost providential intervention of chance" (Schultz 464). Charlie's finding the ticket is something akin to the supernatural, but it never really leaves the realm of possibility, humanly speaking, even if the world is to be considered as purely material.

Later, as more and more of Willy Wonka's character and inventions are explored in the novel, the occurrences are stranger and more fantastical in their presentation, but they are only hypernatural; nothing about them is truly supernatural. For instance, he has built most of his factory underground, so that he can expand his operations without running out of room. He tells the tour group, "All the most important rooms in my factory are deep down below the surface! . . . There wouldn't be nearly enough space for them up on top! . . . But down here, underneath the ground, I've got all the space I want. There's no limit—so long as I hollow it out" (62).

However, it does not take a geologist to realize that there are, in fact, limits to how far one can burrow before something collapses. Wonka has done the impossible yet again, but he does so by stretching the laws of physics, not by relying on anything outside of nature. Similarly, his pink sugar boat could possibly be recreated with enough time, sugar, and food dye, although it would certainly not hold up to the regular use that Wonka seems to put it to (81). The unlikelihood of Wonka's inventions tests the reader's suspension of disbelief while falling short of anything truly fantastic.

Beyond simply being curiosities or whimsical inventions, Wonka's eccentricities soon start to have serious consequences for the greedy, impulsive children on the tour. In the Chocolate Room, Augustus Gloop is siphoned into a large pipe carrying melted chocolate—a purely mechanical device (Dahl 74). However, the next child to face retribution is Violet Beauregarde, whose comeuppance takes a more fantastical form. After chewing a piece of forbidden chewing gum said to replicate a “whole three-course dinner all by itself,” Violet turns purple, in keeping with her name, and swells to the size and shape of an oversized blueberry (94, 98). At first glance, Violet's experience appears more supernatural at least than Augustus' journey through the chocolate pipe; however, the magic—if it can indeed be called magic—that affects Violet proceeds from a material source: the gum and whatever unusual ingredients that it comprises. What is happening in this scene is an attempt at magic without admittance of the supernatural in nature. Rather than set fantasy in a secondary world far removed from the necessities of everyday life, as Tolkien would have it, “Dahl creates low fantasies for children that incorporate fantasy elements in the real or primary world . . . When he then introduces his quirky brand of spell weaving into his otherwise mundane setting, Dahl makes it seem all the more possible. Magic becomes a viable option in the real world in which his readers live”

(Schober 31). In this postmodern fantasy climate, there seems to be no need for an integrated nature-supernature if one can simply stretch nature to zany proportions. Consistently with this trend in the story, the other children also meet pseudo-magical ends. In response to her greed, Veruca Salt, the spoiled child of wealthy parents, is thrown down a garbage chute by squirrels who are sentient enough to determine that she is a “bad nut” and drag her towards the chute (Dahl 112). Rather than proceeding from supernatural, the squirrels’ highly trained behavior is the result of stretching something that is possible in nature into the realm of incoherence.

One of the strongest examples of Wonka’s nature-bound magical abilities is his experimenting with Television Chocolate, an invention that bends the laws of physics to his intentions. Before he can demonstrate his new media creation, Wonka explains the science, according to himself, behind television:

At one end, where the picture is being taken, you have a large movie camera and you start photographing something. The photographs are then split up into millions of tiny little pieces which are so small that you can’t see them, and these little pieces are shot out into the sky by electricity. In the sky, they go whizzing around all over the place until suddenly they hit the antenna on the roof of somebody’s house . . . at last every single one of those millions of tiny pieces is fitted back into its right place (just like a jigsaw puzzle), and presto!—the photograph appears on the screen . . . (126)

While some may say that this explanation is simply a whimsical part of children’s literature and need not be scientifically accurate because children do not attend to such cosmological matters, what it says about Wonka’s hypernatural manipulation of physics still stands, regardless of who the reader is; furthermore, most children who are old enough to read the novel can realize that what Wonka does with his information is not quite right. By applying his dubious understanding

of physics to an oversized chocolate bar, Wonka succeeds in sending a bar of his own chocolate across the room “by television,” much smaller than it was but still edible (127-28). The fact that his experiment is successful seems like magic, but it arrives there by way of science—even a science only loosely based in nature. This kind of material magic is reflected in much of postmodern fantasy and science fiction, reminiscent of Arthur C. Clarke’s assertion that “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic” (Clarke). One can see this attitude taking shape even in the early stages of the Industrial Revolution; as technology expanded, argue some scholars, “many doctors during [that] period described improvements in medical science as ‘god-like’ and unlimited in their capacity to alleviate human suffering” (Economides 100). That attitude has burgeoned and grown since then, as faith in the supernatural has waned and faith in human ability has increased. If nature and science can advance enough, reason the postmodernists, then nature can begin to take the place of supernature in human life. Wonka’s invention blurs these lines between nature and supernature, but not in the way that medieval authors would have portrayed an integrated nature-supernature; instead, Wonka attempts to extend nature further and further, stretching its boundaries in an attempt to do away with the need for supernature altogether. Instead of seeing nature and supernature as unified, he ironically separates them so far apart and inverts the traditional medieval model so as to remove supernature from the equation in favor of the material world.

As Willy Wonka’s magical abilities come about apart from a traditionally held realm of supernature, this situation renders the wonders of his factory suspect; Wonka responds to these doubts with vagueness, hyperbole, and wordplay in order to preserve his sense of power. He tends to write off strange occurrences as commonplace, remaining surprisingly calm in the face of the children’s disasters. In response to Violet’s transformation into an oversized blueberry, for

example, he gives the order, “take her along to the Juicing Room at once . . . [w]e’ve got to squeeze the juice out of her immediately. After that, we’ll just have to see how she comes out” (Dahl 99). Later, after revealing that Veruca Salt and her parents have been sent down the garbage chute towards an incinerator, he placidly remarks, “They only light it every other day . . . Perhaps this is one of the days when they let it go out. You never know . . . they [Veruca and her parents] might be lucky” (116). Wonka’s noncommittal attitude shows either an apathetic lack of control over his factory or, worse yet, a malicious intent to send the children to their strange fates. By remaining vague and unconcerned, he can deflect the doubts raised about his skills.

Furthermore, Wonka uses hyperbole and hyperactivity to disguise his true intentions and level of fantastical skill. For example, he speaks using more exclamation points than the other characters, to the point that they become part of his usual rhythm of speech and therefore lose their semantic impact and significance. The exclamations are accompanied by hyperbole in his descriptions of the factory’s operations, including the chocolate river and waterfall: “There’s enough chocolate in there to fill *every* bathtub in the *entire* country! *And* all the swimming pools as well! Isn’t it *terrific*? And just look at my pipes! They suck up the chocolate . . . [t]housands of gallons an hour, my dear children! Thousands and thousands of gallons!” (64).<sup>8</sup> The italics, exclamation points, and superlatives in his speech patterns indicate that he, in an odd role reversal, is even more excited than the children are. Even his mannerisms upon first meeting the

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<sup>8</sup> Wonka also speaks in these hyperbolic bursts of exclamation elsewhere in the narrative; as the children enter the factory, he directs them, “follow me. *That’s* the way! Good! Everyone ready? Come on then! Here we go! . . . Come on! . . . Get a move on please! We’ll *never* get round today if you dawdle like this!” (Dahl 62). He also behaves rather wildly while traveling in the pink sugar boat: “Mr Wonka was jumping up and down in the back of the boat and calling to the rowers to row faster and faster still. He seemed to love the sensation of whizzing through a white tunnel in a pink boat on a chocolate river, and he clapped his hands and laughed and kept glancing at his passengers to see if they were enjoying it as much as he” (68).

children demonstrate his eccentricity; they seem to emphasize his oddities in a way that does not invite questioning. The narrator describes Wonka's appearance and presentation:

[H]is eyes . . . seemed to be sparkling and twinkling at you all the time. The whole face, in fact, was alight with fun and laughter. And oh, how clever he looked! How quick and sharp and full of life! He kept making quick jerky little movements with his head, cocking it this way and that, and taking everything in with those bright twinkling eyes. He was like a squirrel in the quickness of his movements, like a quick clever old squirrel from the park. (57-58)

As charming as this description of Wonka is, it also seems to suggest a furtive attempt at concealing something, with his quick, erratic movement and demeanor. Given the calamities that befall the children later in the story, Willy Wonka's behavior begins to seem less fun and clever and more simply crazy. However, in an effort to make himself feel more powerful and superior to others, he manages to deflect these doubts with more hyperbolic and absurd behavior, also bringing in some clever snark and wordplay. On the sugar boat ride through the factory, the group passes several storerooms, one of which contains "all the creams," including "hair cream," but Wonka brushes off questions about this particular bit of wordplay (86). Another room contains whips, with the reasoning that "[w]hipped cream isn't whipped cream at all unless it's been whipped with whips. Just as a poached egg isn't a poached egg unless it's been stolen from the woods in the dead of night!" (86). Some of his punning even verbally attacks his guests—many of whom admittedly deserve it: "They passed a yellow door on which it said . . . all the beans, cacao beans, coffee beans, jelly beans, and has beans. 'Has beans?' cried Violet Beauregarde. 'You're one yourself!' said Mr. Wonka. 'There's no time for arguing!'" (86-89). As the novel continues, Wonka begins to ignore other children's questions instead of dealing

with them honestly. On more than one occasion, he pretends not to hear Mike Teavee and accuses him of mumbling when Mike asks him a question or expresses a doubt (105, 126-27). Wonka's reluctance to be open and honest with his child guests raises even more doubts about his mysterious status. His evasive and even deceptive attitude is distinct from the mysterious traits of Lanval's lady, for instance. While she does remain hidden for a great deal of the narrative, she is not deceptive about it; rather, her disappearance actually shows her honesty, since it is a fulfillment of her word (De France 75). Also, she eventually reveals herself at the end of the story (80). Similarly, the Green Knight leaves his location unknown to Gawain but invites him to discover the Green Chapel, not hiding the truth from him (*Sir Gawain* 455). Based on Willy Wonka's actions and behavior, he belies a cosmic detachment not seen in the premodern characters, nor does he display their same commitment to truth and self-disclosure.

Eventually, the material wonders of the factory and Wonka's evasive attitude towards questions and doubts reveal that he is not the mysterious character one might find in a work of traditional fantasy; instead, he is a limited, fallible human being, despite his bravado and hypernatural magical deeds. Instead of having power and using it in a restrained, orderly way, like the premodern characters, Wonka desires for his power to be unrestrained, despite not truly having such power. In the final chapter, Willy Wonka admits to Charlie and Grandpa Joe that his fantastical abilities have their limits. Putting aside his pretenses and evasive attitudes, Wonka informs Charlie that he is aging and in need of an heir to his chocolate empire; Charlie has shown himself to be a worthy heir, so Wonka offers to pass his factory along to Charlie:

“Listen,’ Mr. Wonka said, ‘I’m an old man. I’m much older than you think. I can’t go on forever. I’ve got no children of my own, no family at all. So who is going to run the factory when I get too old to do it myself? . . . a good, sensible loving child, one to whom I can tell all

my most precious candy-making secrets—while I am still alive” (Dahl 151). Willy Wonka, who seemed so unlimited and full of life, is all alone and on the decline. Charlie is faced with the reality that what he had thought of as the paragon of secret knowledge cannot remain so and must pass on his knowledge to the next generation. What Dahl is doing at this point is, in a way, tearing down the preceding fantasy in the story. His goal appears to be noble; children need to realize that everyone has flaws and limitations, even admirable people. Furthermore, if one’s childhood heroes are just as fallible as everyone else, then anyone can take up the mantle of magic and continue the enterprise, whether it be chocolate factories or scientific advancements. However, the impression he gives is that of undermining children’s faith in something transcendent or in someone to look up to. It is as if children are expected to believe unreasonable things found in fantasy and must be gently informed that none of it is real. Some scholars, Tolkien included, would argue that this argument seriously underestimates the literary sensibilities of children, who can appreciate fantasy even with the awareness that it is not part of the primary world:

I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse . . . In what ever world he had his being it was an Other-world . . . I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, I in my timid body did not wish to have them in the neighbourhood, intruding into my relatively safe world . . . But the world that contained even the imagination of Fafnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart. For the heart is hard though the body be soft. (63-64)

In contrast to this concept of the true supernatural and literary belief in something beyond the material infused into the world, Dahl gives his readers a hypernatural semblance of magic and

fantasy, but at the close of his novel he removes even that. In Dahl's view, there is no supernatural realm and certainly no integrated nature-supernature; the sooner one realizes this, the better. In a stroke of consummate irony, all that remains in fantasy is magic without mystery and hero-worship without heroes.

As a mysterious fantasy character, Willy Wonka shows himself to be a rather weak example. Although he initially appears as an amazing, albeit quirky, source of mysterious power, enough time spent in his factory deflates his larger-than-life persona and demonstrates that he is every bit as human as the other characters. Wonka is revealed to be a person who is not worthy of faith, but his lack of credibility can be observed as a symptom of a greater societal loss of trust in the mysterious and the supernatural. When nature is divorced from supernatural, then the idea of supernatural begins to appear unnecessary and even untenable. If humanity can simply advance far enough, reason the postmodernists, it can create a semblance of supernatural within nature. Given enough smoke, mirrors, and chocolate, it may even be able to convince itself that this artificial hypernature is tantamount to the real thing.

**“The Universe Is Not So Badly Designed”: Q in *Star Trek: The Next Generation***

As this age of technology and scientific advancement has progressed, science fiction and science fantasy have become a significant part of fantasy literature and media, and, as the genre of fantasy has changed, the media in which it is presented has changed as well. Television and film are steadily growing as a primary medium for storytelling in the developed world. As more and more people replace reading with film, critics have raised questions about what effects this change in media will have on society and whether film can accomplish the same ends as literature.<sup>9</sup> Of course, the things that can be communicated through literature are different than

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<sup>9</sup> Ever since Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is the message," scholars have grappled with the question of what the television screen says and how it says it (McLuhan 7). While the content of a given book and

those that can be communicated through film (McLuhan 94); television as a medium—even if it is well-executed—is shallower than a well-written book, due to the absence of description, introspection, and other solely literary elements. However, film has a unique ability to include visuals and sounds that are not available through books, and it is still worthy of study in its own right as a contemporary cultural phenomenon even if it is quite a different medium.<sup>10</sup>

Some television programs such as *Star Trek* can even be studied as a key part of Western cultural history: “*Star Trek* is a historical, narrative discourse that not only feeds our passion for what the future might bring but also forms a relationship with the past, mediated not through written discourse . . . but through television and film. *Star Trek* acts as a canonical reference to what makes America American, and what will make Americans more human” (Geraghty 18). One major element of this western cultural discourse is the decline of religion and the false dichotomy between faith and reason. As an atheist disillusioned with religion, Gene Roddenberry, director of *Star Trek* until his death in 1991, serves as an excellent example of this societal trend. Roddenberry’s distrust of God and religion is evident in his work: “In *Star Trek*, organized religion tends to be portrayed as the product of a pre-rational age, antithetical to science and reason, and God is depicted as a category mistake—an advanced alien life-form mistaken for a god” (Pearson 14). Probably the clearest example of such an alien life-form in the shows is Q, an alien character first appearing in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. An arrogant and facetious character, Q has the power to bend the laws of physics, space, and time, and he uses these powers in antagonistic and inscrutable ways. He baffles the minds of the USS Enterprise crew and inspires fear and resentment in them. As seen through these traits and his various

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given film may be quite similar in some ways, critics like Crystal Downing argue that the form is quite different and can affect how content is construed, citing “visual elements that make a movie experience radically different from a reading experience” (4).

<sup>10</sup> See footnote on p. 117

encounters with Captain Picard's crew, Q represents the postmodern conception of power, mystery, and supernature through his incomprehensibility, capriciousness, temporary downfall, and relationship to human individuality.

One of the first striking aspects of Q's character is that he is not fully understood by the crew, who see this situation negatively. The Enterprise's first encounter with Q is precluded only by the appearance of a forcefield barrier in front of the ship and Counselor Troi's inexact sense that there is "a powerful mind" nearby ("Encounter"). Q appears abruptly on the ship dressed in Renaissance-era garb and informs Captain Picard, "We call ourselves the Q. Or thou mayst call me that. It's all much the same thing . . . I present myself to thee as a fellow ship captain, that thou mayst better understand me" ("Encounter"). However, this gesture is less than helpful; it is still unclear whether he is singular or plural—perhaps a part of a collective hive mind. His ambiguous identity and collective focus defy human definitions of personhood, and he is therefore difficult to pin down. Not even the hyper-perceptive female bartender Guinan is able to identify what is going on when Q snatches Picard away in "Q Who?". When calling the Bridge about a strange feeling she has, she quickly adds, "It's just a feeling. I've had it a couple of times before. It's probably nothing," although she does recognize Q from her past when she sees him later ("Q Who?"). The presence and activities of Q excite an inexplicable inkling in her mind that something is not quite right, but his identity and any coherence of the situation remain elusive. This elusiveness renders Starfleet's goal of collecting knowledge about various life forms, at least in this case, difficult if not impossible. After Q offers to join the crew as their guide into unknown territories, Picard responds, "Our mission is to go forth to seek out new and different life forms, and you certainly qualify as one of the most unique I've ever encountered. To learn about you is, frankly, provocative. But *you're next of kin to chaos*" ("Q Who?")

emphasis added). While Picard desires to understand Q, he sees it as a problem that he cannot understand, and—if he cannot comprehend Q’s nature—then he cannot trust him either. As Picard asks Q, “Simply speaking, we don’t trust you . . . How can we be prepared for that which we do not know?” (“Q Who?”). In Picard’s view, being equipped for progress is impossible without understanding. While a traditional fantasy mindset would encourage the exploration of mysteries, even if they are never completely “solved,” Q’s unknown origin and slippery collective mind are approached with doubt and apprehension. Medieval Christians were accustomed to viewing God in a context of mystery—anyone worthy of worship is, quite fittingly, impossible to understand fully. However, Q’s inscrutable behavior does not render him worthy of worship in the slightest; rather, he is met with fear. Q shows the darker side of mystery as the postmodern world sees it, demonstrating that no news is not necessarily good news. Q is not simply an acceptable mystery seen in a negative light by the ship’s crew or by today’s society. As a mystery, he is indeed unacceptable and untrustworthy. The negative aspects that come with Q’s mysteriousness may reflect something of what the postmodern world thinks of mystery in general. While not all mysteries hide something sinister, this one does. Q’s behavior shows that, for postmodernism, mystery is dangerous and must be discovered and explained, if such discovery and explanation are even possible, on human terms apart from any supernatural revelation before there can be any peace of mind.

As well as confounding the minds of *Star Trek*’s human characters, Q also uses his power for ends that are capricious at best and cruel at worst. Referred to by one critic as Picard’s “sometimes-mentor, sometimes-tormentor,” Q vacillates between helping the crew in his own odd way and hindering them in their goals (Cover 212). Despite his godlike aura of mystery, Q “is morally ambiguous, displaying both benevolence and a bent towards cynicism and self-

gratification . . . If he is to be viewed as a ‘god,’ Q is clearly a deeply flawed one” (Mitchell 176). The first-season episode “Hide and Q” illustrates most clearly that Q likes nothing better than to play games with what he sees as the frail, small-minded humans. He does not hesitate to interrupt an important rescue mission to teleport a few crew members to an unknown planet for a game with constantly changing rules, saying that “this game shall in fact be completely unfair” and that the objective is to “stay alive” (“Hide and Q”). When Picard questions him about why this game is necessary, Q replies, in a string of Shakespeare quotes, “Why these games? Why, the play’s the thing . . . All the galaxy’s a stage . . . If [Shakespeare] were living now he would have said galaxy. How about this? Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (“Hide”). Picard clarifies: “I see. So how we respond to a game tells you more about us than our real life, this tale told by an idiot? Interesting, Q” (“Hide”). By subjecting the human characters to an unpredictable, arbitrary game in which the rules are unknown and subject to change, he hopes to find out more about their nature—perhaps to exploit it. Later in the episode, his goal is revealed as offering Commander Riker a place in the Q continuum, which he refuses after a bit of internal struggle. Q’s need to understand humans is mixed with a desire to dominate and control them, sometimes even maliciously.

However, other actions taken by Q show that he is not single-mindedly trying to destroy the humans; he does appear to have some beneficial intentions albeit cloaked in an unsettling God complex. In a sixth-season episode, near the end of the series, Picard has an atemporal surprise meeting with Q. It begins with the usual mind games, as Q tries to tell Picard that he has in fact died: “You’re dead. This is the afterlife, and I’m God” (“Tapestry”). He replies to Picard’s assertion that he is not God with, “Blasphemy! You’re lucky I don’t cast you out, or

smite you or something. The bottom line is, your life ended about five minutes ago” (“Tapestry”). By making such broad, sweeping claims about his power, Q raises some intriguing questions about God’s nature and existence. Picard recognizes this and will not admit the possibility that Q could have that much power, responding with, “No. I am not dead. Because I refuse to believe that the afterlife is run by you. The universe is not so badly designed” (“Tapestry”). In a sense, Picard is right in saying this; if God is anything like Q—relegated to running a limbo-esque afterlife and looking for reasons to smite people—then mankind has sufficient reason to be greatly troubled. Nonetheless, Q continues to behave unexpectedly; he soon reveals his intention to allow Picard the chance to undo some of his past mistakes in his life and see how his life would have unfolded differently. In his own words, “This is not for me. This is for you, Jean-Luc. This is your opportunity to make peace with your sordid past” (“Tapestry”). The way Picard makes peace with it is through realizing that all of his experiences, even his past mistakes, have made him the man he is in the present; Q then returns everything to normal and gives Picard another chance at his current physical life, having made his point. However, one question still remains unanswered: what reason has Q to perform this unasked-for service for Picard, a mere mortal? He reflects:

[T]here's still a part of me that cannot accept that Q would give me a second chance, or that he would demonstrate so much compassion. And if it was Q, I owe him a debt of gratitude. There are many parts of my youth that I'm not proud of. There were loose threads, untidy parts of me that I would like to remove. But when I pulled on one of those threads it unraveled the tapestry of my life. (“Tapestry”)

It is never explained why Q would do this kindness for Picard or what gives him the power to do so. His purposes and supernatural abilities remain inaccessible, even irrational, or supra-rational.

With such a paradoxical blend between guidance and malevolence, one never knows what to expect from Q; he is unpredictable and indefinable. Mirroring this view, many people in today's postmodern climate may view God as similarly unpredictable, hoping that He will help them with aspects of their lives and becoming angry at Him when life takes a negative turn. Some believe that, if God exists, He is trying to make humans suffer. Instead of the supernatural being a source of unchanging principles and love from a constant God, the supernatural then becomes a fount of cultural anxiety in the face of unchecked and unknowable power. The postmodern concept of truth is based on what is communally decided, well within the laws of nature (Grenz 8), so if something or someone hails from outside the laws of nature, then it has just as much of a chance to harm humanity as to help it. Since one can never be sure of these things in such an arbitrary and impersonal universe, postmodernity has concluded that supernatural power structures are unreliable and therefore must be rejected.

This desire to reject the supernatural is reflected in Q's temporary downfall to human status, as revealed through his actions and dialogue with other characters.<sup>11</sup> In the episode entitled "Deja Q," Q appears on the Enterprise and explains that he has been punished by the other members of the Q Continuum: "They said I've spread chaos through the universe, and they've stripped me of all my powers . . . I stand before you defrocked. Condemned to be a member of this lowest of species" ("Deja Q"). Unsure of whether Q is telling the truth, the Enterprise crew keeps him in the brig to monitor him, and crew members and viewers alike have the opportunity for a moment of triumph over Q as he experiences human frailties such as hunger, back pain, and the need for sleep. When Data, an android, wonders aloud whether Q is

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<sup>11</sup> As a visual medium containing a great deal of dialogue, television as a primary source requires researchers to cite more direct quotes of character speech than might otherwise be necessary if the researchers were using a printed book.

being truthful about his punishment, Q replies, "It's the ghastly truth, Mister Data. I can now stub my toe with the best of them," to which Data responds, "An irony. It means that you have achieved in disgrace what I have always aspired to be" ("Deja Q"). What Data wishes for would be quite a few steps down for Q on the chain of being—the traditionally-held medieval conceptual hierarchy in which "every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another" (Tillyard 23). Although Q views humanity as lowly, he must do the best he can in his temporary human skin. Still in possession of a superhuman intellect and not accustomed to frustration, Q can recognize what needs to be done—in this episode, the situation calls for changing the universe's gravitational constant—but he no longer can do anything about it ("Deja Q"). Later, while visiting Guinan's establishment Ten Forward for some human sustenance, Guinan recognizes Q and takes the chance to gloat over his misfortune, stabbing his hand with a fork to prove that he is really flesh and blood ("Deja Q"). She seems to relish his misfortune: "It must be terribly frightening for you, to be totally defenseless after all of those centuries being omnipotent . . . Frightening one race after the other, teasing them like frightened animals, and you enjoying every moment of your victims' fears" ("Deja Q"). After Q uses the phrase "I beg your pardon," she quips, "you'd better get used to . . . [b]egging. You're a pitiful excuse for a human. The only way you're going to survive is by the charity of others" ("Deja Q"). It is understandable that Guinan, who has had previous run-ins with the Q Continuum, would gain some satisfaction from seeing Q in his weakened state. He who was, at one time, in control of human activities is now subject to them, and the human characters are finally able to understand and manage him. When dealing with a capricious, sometimes cruel being like Q, this understanding is certainly a relief. At a larger societal level, though, this sentiment is similar to the postmodern desire to subvert

authority, topple regimes, and abandon absolutes. While this line of thought has led to some positive developments—for example, the fall of the Communist USSR just a few short years before this episode aired—it becomes dangerous when rightful authority is also flouted. While the Medieval world understood supernature as a source of unchanging absolutes and ultimate Truth independent of humans or time (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 97), the postmodern environment of *Star Trek* is quite different, and applying the Enterprise's approach to human Q to postmodernity's approach to supernatural power is quite revealing. If being made human is such a horrid punishment, Q's attitude at first glance could appear to be consistent with the medieval view of Earth as the bottom and center of the universe—a view which inspired humility in humans before their Creator (98). However, the forces governing the universe in *Star Trek* canon are quite different. While the foregoing description was not penned with Star Trek in mind, the “sense of the pathless, the baffling, and the utterly alien—all agoraphobia . . . [which] is so markedly absent from medieval poetry” is certainly present in this world of postmodern science fiction (99). Even if Q, the powerful, god-like being, can be cut down to a human shape and size, still greater powers must exist to carry out the transformation. One must then wonder who or what controls the Q Continuum. In a universe in which there is no absolute, humans can rejoice at the downfall of Q, but the apparently infinite, or indefinite, chain of power in a vast and inhospitable universe renders this downfall a small and fleeting victory.

The only distinguishing factors left for humans, then, must be the evolutionary progress and individual agency of humanity; ultimately, humans are shown to be superior to the Q Continuum—if not in power, then in progress. Based on the Federation's line of thinking, humans are valuable, not because they are created by an infinite and loving God who leaves some things to mystery, but because they continually learn and progress. Instead of intrinsic

value in inseparably natural-supernatural creatures, in the *Star Trek* universe the asking of questions and subsequent gathering of answers are what set humans apart. As one critic puts it, “it becomes clear as the series develops that what may be called an evolutionary eschatology is being advocated” (Peterson 72). With this worldview, nature can grow to hypernatural proportions, ever improving without ever having to rely on the supernatural. Even from the Enterprise’s first encounter with Q, this theme is clearly laid out. Q has decided to put the crew on trial for the crimes of mankind, “to stop the Enterprise specifically as the beginning of a general effort to stop the spread of humanity, the ‘savage race’” (73). He explains, “on finally reaching deep space, humans of course found enemies to fight out there too. And to broaden those struggles you again found allies for still more murdering. The same old story, all over again” (“Encounter”). By implying that humans can never transcend their cruel ways, Q is making what may be the greatest insult to the Federation, whose mission is one of peace and the increase of knowledge. Picard’s defense is that “humanity is no longer a savage race” and that Q’s actions—which include knowingly endangering human lives in order to conduct his “test” of humanity—are more savage than anything the humans are doing (“Encounter”). Q may have an absolute advantage over the humans in intelligence and power, but the humans are portrayed as being nobler due to their unswerving commitment to progress and scientific answers to their problems. However, this pursuit of progress is rendered suspicious and perhaps even pointless in a postmodern universe in which “time is no longer linear, appearance is not necessarily reality, and the rational is not always to be trusted” (Grenz 9). Even the aspect of humanity that places humans in a superior position over Q is uncertain if the quest for knowledge cannot yield reliable answers.

Individuality is another area in which humans are shown to be superior to the Q Continuum. Commander Riker exemplifies this idea in “Hide and Q” in Season One. After Q’s surreal game that he forces the crew to play, Q offers Riker a place in the Q Continuum, citing his desire to learn more about humans:

[A]t Farpoint we saw you as savages only. We discovered instead that you are unusual creatures in your own limited ways. Ways which in time will not be so limited . . . Perhaps in a future that you cannot yet conceive, [you will advance] even beyond us. So you see, we must know more about this human condition. That's why we've selected you, Riker, to become part of the Q, so that you can bring to us this human need and hunger, that we may understand it. (“Hide”)

Near the end of the episode, Riker offers the other crew members gifts that bend the laws of nature using his temporary Q powers, such as fixing the blind Geordi LaForge’s vision and making the youthful Wesley Crusher an adult prematurely. However, Data recognizes that these hypernatural offerings are not authentic or even desirable; when Riker offers to turn Data into a human, Data responds, “I never wanted to compound one illusion with another. It might be real to Q, perhaps even you, sir. But it would not be so to me. Was it not one of the Captain's favourite authors who wrote, This above all, to thine own self be true? Sorry, Commander, I must decline” (“Hide”). In a delightful moment of irony, Data, the android, reminds the others of the importance of staying true to their humanity; in quite an irrational and ironic way, he realizes it more than anyone because he has never lived a human life. Eventually, Riker sees that wielding the power of Q would violate the individuality and human experience of his friends and refuses to join the Q Continuum. Q is thus a representation of the collective attempting to crush the individual, a goal which is extremely problematic. Riker’s choice is met with approval, and

rightly so. If the viewer examines Q as a symbol of the way postmodernity views the idea of God, however, his desire to subsume Riker into the Continuum makes him an unfeeling and impersonal god at best. In this case, it is better to rely on oneself than to trust a mystical, hypernatural being like Q.

As seen in his actions and attitudes, Q represents a distortedly postmodern version of mystery, power, and supernature. The mysterious about him is untrustworthy; his incomprehensible ways are more of an annoyance or an obstacle than they are a source of wonder or contemplation within a larger, if only partially understood, coherent universe. As such, his ways must be eliminated or at least avoided. As a supernatural force, Q is a poor one; he is extremely powerful, but he is threateningly inconsistent instead of benevolent. Whereas, in medieval fantasy, supernatural characters are often a help—albeit a cryptic one—to others, Q seems to revel in often being a hindrance. In an age of false dichotomy between science and faith, relying on one's own logic and intuition is seen as more favorable than anything or anyone that requires belief in supernature. The medieval cosmology on which traditional fantasy was built is one of order but also wonder, a perfect and inseparable harmony between a natural-supernatural creation and its Creator. As fantasy media has taken to the skies, however, the cosmos has been exchanged for a hypernatural chaos in which the only constant is man's progress. The postmodern universe leaves no room for the integration of nature and supernature. It would rather push the idea of mystery, or supernature, or God out of the picture entirely or caricature it until it is unrecognizable, such as in the form of Q. If mystery and supernature are the way that they are portrayed in his character, the universe must be badly designed indeed—or perhaps not designed at all. Man must simply take a leap of faith, far greater than any faith

required to accept medieval mystery, and plod on in his indefinite humanistic search that may yield him some empirical answers but will inevitably remove all joy from the questions.

As all three of the discussed characters show, postmodern fantasy in the twentieth century contains a shift away from premodern conceptions of nature-supernature as an inseparable creation, as well as the idea of power as a means to unselfishly promote rightness and order. Whether it be Ged's dualistic struggle for balance, Willy Wonka's hypernatural façade, or Q's inscrutable control tactics, the traits that define these characters position them far away from the medieval roots of traditional fantasy as seen in Bercilak and Lanval's lady. Therefore, fantasy literature needs a restoration of unequivocally good characters who live in harmony with nature-supernature as created and use their power to point towards ultimate order and righteousness. The reader need not return all the way to the medieval era to find such characters, though. Within the twentieth century itself, Tolkien offers a recovery of the premodern values and ideas that many recent fantasy works have lost by introducing one Tom Bombadil. The next two chapters will treat specifically of Tom Bombadil's restoration of nature-supernature as integrated and power as a selfless help to others in the service of cosmic order.

### Chapter 3: “The Lives of the Forest”: Tom Bombadil’s Relationship to Nature

#### Introduction to Tom Bombadil

In Tolkien’s world—one that is already quite different from Le Guin’s, Dahl’s, or Roddenberry’s—one character in particular stands out as being quite distinct even from Middle-earth: Tom Bombadil. This eccentric character has at times been a stumbling block for readers and critics who were confused as to who or what exactly he is.<sup>12</sup> Something is clearly unique about Tom Bombadil, and his uniqueness invites questions about his creatureliness. His identity and origin are unexplained beyond the normal degree of unexplained origin among fantasy characters; even Gandalf, whose origin is not explained at the opening of the story, is revealed elsewhere to be a maia from a clear origin (26). Thus, there are quite a few questions among readers concerning Tom Bombadil’s purpose in the story. In truth, Tolkien himself was not quite sure initially what that purpose would be, as he stated in a letter: “In historical fact, I put him in because I had already ‘invented’ him independently (he first appeared in the Oxford magazine) and wanted an ‘adventure’ on the way. But I kept him in, and as he was, because he represents certain things otherwise left out” (*Letters* 192). It would stand to reason, then, that the most satisfying and balanced assessment of Tom Bombadil is that he is a character who embodies some values that Tolkien held dear, including a premodern fantasy attitude toward nature and a non-controlling approach to personal power.

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<sup>12</sup> Critics have discussed the identity and origin of Tom Bombadil’s character at length. Being “too large and heavy for a hobbit, if not quite tall enough for one of the Big People,” Tom appears to be neither human nor hobbit (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 135). His relationship to the Ring further suggests that he is not a maia, a kind of angelic being of the same order as Gandalf, Saruman, and Sauron. Even Gandalf is susceptible to being tempted by the Ring, though he does not yield, but Tom is completely unaffected by it (67, 150). Neither does he appear to be a mere symbol of something else; he is still a character that lives a physical existence and acts within the narrative. Some scholars have also classified him as “a manifestation of nature or a nature spirit of some kind,” and some have connected him to the Greek god Pan or Puck in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (Campbell 75). Campbell also posits that “the origin of ‘the spirit’ Tolkien refers to when he speaks of Tom is that of the Green Man—an archetypal representation of the spirit of nature that dates back into prehistory” (90-91).

### Tom Bombadil's Relationship to Nature

The characteristic of Tom Bombadil with which this chapter will concern itself is his strong connection to the natural world in the form of his forest home. Like Tom himself, the Old Forest is a place of mysteries, in which supernature and nature are impossible to separate. As such, the forest commands respect, which Tom shows by existing in a relationship of interdependence with the natural world; he provides for himself and his household out of the products of nature, and he in turn manages and enhances the lands under his care without misusing or abusing them. In a century in which technology and industry were growing rapidly, this call back to pre-industrialized nature through the example of Tom Bombadil would be counter-cultural and highly noticeable.<sup>13</sup> Although Tolkien would probably find very little in common with the environmentalists of today or the nineteenth-century transcendentalists and romantics, his treatment of nature and of characters like Tom Bombadil expresses the premodern fantastic view of nature as it was created. He also promotes using its resources and respecting it while avoiding the extremes of either wantonly destroying or venerating it. Many aspects of Tom Bombadil, including his appearance, habitat, and behavior, illustrate that he is an expression of Tolkien's respectful attitudes towards the natural world. Through the medium of fantasy, Tolkien grounds his readers in a natural past and surprisingly brings them down to earth through the hobbits' adventures with Tom Bombadil, a fact that is not so surprising when one considers that

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<sup>13</sup> Rather than espousing a nineteenth-century romanticism in reaction to rationalism, Tom Bombadil's brand of romantic attitudes toward nature has precedence in the world of fairy tales. Twentieth-century authors like Gunter Grass have written about the need to preserve nature, hearkening back to Grimm's fairy tales, which were concerned with forests as important places of supernatural significance (Thesz 109, 111). This fairy-tale emphasis on the forest is not new: "Statements by Jacob Grimm about the destruction of forests . . . indicate that the preoccupation with ecology dates back into German cultural history" (111). To look even further back, medieval European fantasy took notice of its natural environment and emphasized it. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* deals heavily with the relationship between man and nature and with the opposition between nature and manmade society. The poet of *Sir Gawain* shows respect for nature and the seasons, for example, which operate independently of man-made constructions (*Sir Gawain* 498-501). This positive and romantic influence that nature has on Gawain is part of the character of premodern fantasy, which is reflected later in Tolkien's *Fellowship of the Ring*.

traditional fantasy views nature and the fantastic as intrinsically linked. Tolkien's treatment of Bombadil aids the reader in making this connection, as seen in the sixth, seventh, and eighth chapters of *The Fellowship of the Ring*: "The Old Forest," "In the House of Tom Bombadil," and "Fog on the Barrow-Downs." Also, the poems contained in "The Adventures of Tom Bombadil" provide a delightful look into the life of Tom and Goldberry and add to the connection by adding information about their meeting and about the other inhabitants of the forest ("Adventures" 197-99). As this chapter will address, Tom Bombadil's natural setting and demeanor are coupled with his supernatural abilities and are distinct from the industrial world of today, showing that nature and supernature are constituted in a way that is inseparable and that prompts wonder; furthermore, he displays a proper attitude towards the care of nature by managing it and his household well (*Fellowship* 141, 146) and provides a respite for the hobbits in which to strengthen themselves both physically and mentally for their journey (146, 167).

The Old Forest, by its very naturalness, evokes a sense of supernature-in-nature, which Tom reflects in his actions and manners, that is not commonly found among postmodern thought. Late twentieth-century thinkers tend to view supernature, if it exists at all, as a realm or plane completely separated from nature. Writing in 1978 about Ludwig Feuerbach's nineteenth-century naturalist ideas, Frederick Sontag acknowledges that the zeitgeist of his own time had moved past those naturalist beliefs and the modernist approach to reason that had come before: "there are signs that the twentieth cen[t]ury has left the 'Modern World' behind. Too much has been breaking in upon us to think that only the natural world can be called 'real'" (147). He proposes the idea of the existence of a separate realm of supernature, asking, "Is our life lived between two worlds and not in one only? If so, split attention is the interesting fact about man and it may be all that distinguishes him from the animal" (Sontag 146-47). This hypothesis is

questionable, as it implies that man must pay attention to two separate realms but does not seem to belong to either of them. While Sontag is not denying outright the existence of something supernatural, a brief examination of past Christian thought reveals that such disconnected or even purely materialistic beliefs have not always held sway. Thomas Aquinas is a prominent example of a thinker who saw nature and supernature as one whole rather than two separate entities related or separated by something. He did not hold to beliefs about a divide between the sacred and secular.<sup>14</sup>

In Aquinas' view nature does not play second fiddle to supernature: God is in fact not supernatural but the source and author and end of the natural. For this reason 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. (McDermott 3-4)

According to McDermott, Aquinas' view resembles Aristotle's emphasis on the natural world more so than Plato's emphasis on an inaccessible world of forms. This is not to say that Aquinas was a materialist by any means; the assertion that God is "not supernatural" here indicates that He is not distant or separated from his creation (3). A Christian thinker could just as easily say that nature is not exactly natural, because it was created by a supernatural God by methods beyond human perception. The key point in Aquinas' view is that nature and supernature should be seen as one—the real creation of a real God. McDermott argues that such a belief "may be just the refreshing view we need to resolve this contemporary debate" between the material and

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<sup>14</sup> Sacred is not necessarily synonymous with supernatural, nor is secular synonymous with natural. The sacred is that which is set apart for spiritual or special purposes, while the secular operates without special treatment or influence from outside the material world. For example, taking the Eucharist is both sacred and emphasizing the natural, while the magic of Willy Wonka or the incantational wand magic of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is both secular and emphasizing the supernatural.

the supernatural (5). Indeed, looking at the world as a created whole that is both natural and supernatural at the same time is a welcome change from the drudgery of materialism and the uncertainty and indeterminacy of postmodernism.

Tolkien echoes this belief about the inseparability of nature-supernature in his work, as Tom Bombadil exemplifies. Tom does not make distinctions between the natural and the supernatural but rather interacts with it as one. In “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,” his first appearance, Tom contends with supernatural but also highly natural threats from Old Man Willow, sentient badgers, and Barrow-wights, ghostly figures from the barrow-downs (Tolkien, “Adventures” 198-99). In that poem, he also marries Goldberry, the River’s daughter, never troubling to explain who her mother the “River-woman” is or how she can live both in and out of the water (197). Tom’s marriage to Goldberry serves to demonstrate that he is closely connected to nature, and their wedding further illustrates this point with its woodland setting: “Old Tom Bombadil had a merry wedding, / crowned all with buttercups, hat and feather shedding; / his bride with forgetmenots and flag-lilies for garland / was robed all in silver-green” (202). The poem also contains descriptions of his simple forest lifestyle, even as he encounters unexplained supernatural forces within nature, like barrow-wights and conscious trees (197, 201). “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil” is idyllic with its narrow focus on Tom’s domain, despite the threats that he deals with. *The Fellowship of the Ring* offers a more outside-in approach to Tom’s region. With the hobbits’ arrival in *The Fellowship*, the reader begins with an outside perspective on the Old Forest, rather than being directly shown Tom Bombadil’s realm just yet. Even before Tom appears in the narrative, the hobbits are affected by the natural-supernatural character of his forest home. The forest is made up of trees, which are natural, but they are not purely material; something greater is at work here. This perception of the forest’s strangeness comes from both its

appearance and from legends. The legends, while fantastic in character and reminiscent of Faerie, do not seem to have deviated far from reality, since Merry's description of the forest from legend is consistent with what the hobbits of the shire have observed. (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 125-26). As both experience and legends tell them, the forest is a powerful and unexplained place with formidable wills at work. Thus, in contrast to someone like Willy Wonka's exploitative approach towards the natural world, the hobbits' attitude towards the natural-supernatural forest must be one of hushed respect (Dahl). The forest is viscerally present and more powerful than they, and they appreciate it as such. Tolkien himself often expressed a belief in the importance of appreciating nature. The fantasy enthusiast is by no means disconnected from nature in favor of an ethereal realm that never touches reality; rather, nature and supernature are inseparable. Alfred K. Siewers describes Tolkien's "eco-centric Middle-earth" as "portraying the natural world as a central character beyond human control and even human concerns, integrated rather than separated from the divine, representing a kind of premodern version of Aldo Leopold's twentieth-century 'land ethic'" (140).<sup>15</sup> Seeing nature as an expression of the divine shows the intrinsic connection of the natural world and the supernatural creative power of God, which further leads to humans sub-creating their own imaginative art. Tolkien also shows nature as an avenue to higher things, as seen in the narrative, and his words suggest that he views it as being quite closely related—indeed, inseparable. For Tolkien, the physical things found in nature go beyond simply pointing towards objects of wonder; they are themselves objects of wonder. In "Tree and Leaf," he writes, "fairy-stories deal largely, or (the better ones) mainly, with simple

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<sup>15</sup> This supernatural characteristic of nature is somewhat reflected in the Romanticist beliefs of Coleridge and his contemporaries, which "saw nature acting as a stimulus to the imagination, with nature being the way to objective reality and to God" (Douglas and Douglas 541). Romantic theory is further described as having a "view of nature pointing to and conveying the divine, quite apart from and beyond the intellect" (541). Coleridge himself observed that "nature itself is to a religious observer the art of God" (270).

and fundamental things, untouched by Fantasy, but these simplicities are made all the more luminous by their setting . . . It was in fairy-stories that I first divined the potency of the words, and the wonder of the things, such as stone, and wood, and iron; tree and grass; house and fire; bread and wine” (78). Fantasy involves seeing the supernature in nature and realizing that they are one, all part of reality as God has created it. This idea does not mean that all things in creation are the same or that they are in any way on a level with God; rather, it signifies that both things within the laws of nature and things outside the laws of nature are linked by proceeding from the creative mind of God and being impossible to separate or divorce from each other.

While he has supernatural abilities, such as freeing the hobbits from Old Man Willow, staying dry while out in the rain, and bringing about events through singing (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 136, 146, 162), Tom Bombadil actually illustrates a strong connection to nature through his abilities, and Tolkien wanted to emphasize Tom’s natural, earthy character. One of Tolkien’s letters was written to a prospective producer of a *Lord of the Rings* film that never took place, perhaps because Tolkien feared that a film portrayal would disconnect Tom from his natural setting: “How can a dramatization of the Bombadil episode help but fall through the looking-glass or fly into Never-never land? How do you capture the dreamy flowing of time in the house of Tom Bombadil and yet keep things concrete?” Not even the recent film adaptations have been able to incorporate the Old Forest or Tom Bombadil (Treschow and Duckworth 178). Regarding those difficulties, Tolkien stated that the Old Forest should be portrayed in the prospective film as more down to earth than otherworldly: “We are not in ‘fairy-land’, but in real river lands in autumn” (Tolkien, *Letters* 292). For example, all of the things that Goldberry speaks of in the following song are naturally occurring, but their naturalness enhances their fantastic character in

the Old Forest setting, showing the miraculous character of nature in its own right. As Goldberry sings:

*Now let the song begin! Let us sing together  
Of sun, stars, moon and mist, rain and cloudy weather,  
Light on the budding leaf, dew on the feather,  
Wind on the open hill, bells on the heather,  
Reeds by the shady pool, lilies on the water:*

*Old Tom Bombadil and the River-daughter!* (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 138)

Not only Goldberry celebrates these natural phenomena. Tom, too, references nature and celebrates the sunlight, the flight of the starling, and the water-lilies by the river (136); he also uses those water-lilies to beautify his home and give Goldberry a lovely reminder of the summer in the midst of winter (142). The attitudes of Tom and Goldberry therefore show that nature, in and of itself, is worth celebrating as a created system of beauty.

Furthermore, by being such a richly natural place, the forest can also be an indicator of something more supernatural, revealing that the two are more inseparable than one might think. The elements of supernature in nature seen in the text are sometimes positive, such as the graceful Goldberry, daughter of the river (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 139), and the general sense of aliveness that the Forest possesses, which Merry has pointed out (124). Tom also points it out by telling the hobbits of the “lives of the forest,” including small plants, bees, and the trees themselves, which are steeped in history: “It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords” (147). Such a rich history and store of life experience is valuable and precious. These

supernatural tendencies in the Old Forest are not all necessarily positive, though. The forest often poses dangers to Tolkien's characters, and evil trees lurk therein. What is supposed to be a positive creation is twisted in places, leading to the malevolent intent of some of the trees to entrap and confuse the hobbits (124). As Tom Bombadil tells the hobbits, the old trees, especially Old Man Willow, have been hardened against outsiders:

[N]one were more dangerous than the Great Willow: his heart was rotten, but his strength was green; and he was cunning, and a master of winds, and his song and thought ran through the woods on both sides of the river. His grey thirsty spirit drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest from the Hedge to the Downs. (147)

Tom Bombadil is able to coexist with this malevolent tree and others, but even he would rather avoid encountering the Willow (143). He lives among these malevolent intentions but does not share them.

Even barring direct ill will from some trees, the forest is still an intimidating and foreboding place, showing that not everything in the forest has a proper attitude like Tom's. These negative supernatural elements can be explained by the influence of evil distorting something that was created to be beneficial: "Certainly Morgoth and Sauron have the ability to corrupt things that are originally or essentially good. If Morgoth can twist and corrupt Elves to breed Orcs and can breed Trolls in mockery of Ents, then he can also corrupt nature . . . Tolkien portrays the natural world as originally neutral at worst—if not actually friendly" (Dickerson and Evans 140). The word "neutral" is even an understatement; Tolkien's Christian beliefs are consistent with the idea that nature is good and that humans have moral responsibilities in how

they deal with it. In Genesis, man was called to ““fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ . . . God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1.28, 31). Nature is a good creation made by a morally perfect God. Therefore, there exists a moral aspect to living well in God’s creation, fallen now though it is. However, nature itself does not engage in moral or immoral acts. Rather than emphasizing a dichotomy between good and evil, then, Tolkien’s forest here emphasizes a distinction between civilization and untamed nature as it was originally created. Despite the originally good character of the forest, its untamed wildness is the source of some of its difficulties for travelers. Tolkien, inspired by “Medieval Germanic and Celtic folklore, myths, and romances,” included trees and forests extensively in his mythos in keeping with that fairy tale tradition. As “a foil to civilization and urbanity . . . [and] because of their feral nature, forests in fairy tales are . . . challenging places” (Post 68). Thankfully, the forest can also bring help and positive interactions, which will soon be found in the form of Tom Bombadil.

During these interactions, Tom represents in himself aspects of an integrated nature-supernature. Before entering the forest, Merry warns of the trees being “aware of what is going on” and seeming to be “whispering to each other” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 124). The very nature of the forest is what makes it so strange and fantastic. Merry realizes that nature carries a great deal of mystery, and this idea is deepened when the hobbits later meet Tom Bombadil, who tends to embody the nature they see around them. Dickerson and Evans argue that Tom can even be described as nature personified:

Tom may not *fit into* Middle-earth because he *stands for* it. The most satisfying interpretation of Tom Bombadil, then, is that he is the representation or personification of

nature: an earth spirit. This is suggested in several ways by Bombadil's description and behavior and can be felt in his unpretentious naturalness, even his earthiness. (19)

The idea that Tom represents nature and the earth through his demeanor and habitat is consistent with the text. Tom's first appearance is paired with song, which references the hills, wind, wild birds, and the light of the sun and stars (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 134). If his demeanor alone were not natural enough, his house, deep within the woods, is quite at home in nature; he and Goldberry have even brought the outdoors in by displaying water lilies in earthen vessels:

“About her feet in wide vessels of green and brown earthenware, white water-lilies were floating, so that she seemed to be enthroned in the midst of a pool” (139). Evidently, Tom's home and his ways of speaking and acting reveal his comfort with nature and his function as a symbol of nature. According to Campbell, these characteristics point to a resemblance between Tom and the archetype of the Green Man—a joyously mischievous character, emblematic of nature, that recurs in literary tradition. Tolkien himself was well aware of this tradition and called attention to it in his introduction to *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, saying, “the greenness of the Knight, and his holly bob, are no doubt drawn from popular belief in a ‘green man’” (Tolkien, *Sir Gawain* xx). As the texts on Tom Bombadil reveal, the reader can observe parallels among Tom, the Green Knight, and the Green Man. While Dickerson and Evans do not directly reference these mythological and traditional figures, they do emphasize Tom's natural tendencies and offer the explanation that “he may be the most explicit, concrete embodiment of the natural world” (Dickerson and Evans 18). While it is clear from the text that Tolkien did not intend Tom Bombadil to be a pantheistic expression of the environment by any means, he did confirm the concept of Tom as an embodiment of created nature by calling him “the spirit of the (vanishing) Oxford and Berkshire countryside” (Tolkien, *Letters* 26). Referring to Tom directly as an “earth

spirit” is not completely consistent with the rest of his description; rather, the image of Tom as personified nature includes supernature, both of which are inseparably linked in his identity. Tom need not be a spirit to be supernatural, because what he represents and embodies is an inseparable nature-supernature that is not made up of distinct, separate entities. Tom invites the hobbits into nature, which includes supernature, thus sharing himself with them.

In addition to the earthy sense that the reader gets from Tom’s demeanor, Tom has a healthy respect for the mysterious side of nature as well. This idea is consistent with premodern sensibilities that “Nature was a book in the sense of a mystery with which to be engaged, like an Irish illuminated manuscript as icon, rather than a text needing to be decoded and possessed by a reader” (Siewers 147). Tom displays this attitude of appreciating the mystery in nature and promotes a sense of wonder at it. He claims that he is the “Eldest,” existent before any other living thing in Middle-Earth (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 148). Since Gandalf later claims that Treebeard is in fact “the oldest living thing that still walks beneath the Sun upon this Middle-earth,” a contradiction seems to exist, unless the reader chooses to view Tom as a type of embodiment of the spirit of nature (*Two Towers* 107). Campbell explains that “Tom certainly has will, and power to execute that will, but as Galdor suggests, all his power lies ‘in the earth itself.’ He therefore is a manifestation of that natural power; waking and animate, but bound indelibly to the elemental power and fate of nature” (Campbell 89). If Tom is nature-supernature embodied, in keeping with Roman Catholic views of nature, then his life force is bound up in Middle-earth. He shares in the life of Ea, created before any beings, such as Treebeard, came into existence. This old life is what runs through Tom Bombadil’s quite real veins, enabling him to relate events and emotions from long before the time of the hobbits. He certainly has a long memory of the history of Arda, as evidenced by his storytelling to the hobbits in his home:

[T]hey found that he had now wandered into strange regions beyond their memory and beyond their waking thought, into times when the world was wider, and the seas flowed straight to the western Shore; and still on and back Tom went singing out into ancient starlight, when only the Elf-sires were awake . . . The hobbits sat still before him, enchanted; and it seemed as if, under the spell of his words, the wind had gone, and the clouds had dried up, and the day had been withdrawn, and darkness had come from East and West, and all the sky was filled with the light of white stars. (148)

For all his lightheartedness, Tom is also steeped in a sense of mystery, buried deep within the natural world and fading into the supernatural and spiritual aspects of the world.

Later, in Tom's house, he reveals the mysteries of the Old Forest—the hearts and thoughts of the trees, the age of some of the trees, and the kings and lord that fought within the forest's borders (147). Thus, Tom reveals mysteries because he is one. The hobbits do not know Tom's origin or even his species, but they can trust the part of his identity that is revealed to them. Frodo can believe the truth of Goldberry's statement that "He is, as you have seen him . . . He is Master of wood, water, and hill" (140). Whatever else Tom may be is not immediately accessible to the hobbits for their knowledge, but it must be consistent with his identity as already revealed. Tom Bombadil as both a mysterious truth and a revealer of other mysterious truths demonstrates that mystery is right at home in the natural setting of the Old Forest.

Tom is also an effective manager of his natural surroundings, showing his respect for his habitat. He uses the resources around him in a beneficial, non-abusive way, and he does have a high degree of mastery over natural things. This responsibility even echoes back to man's duty to "Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground" (Genesis 1.1). Tom Bombadil exercises this mastery in several examples of his

behavior. For instance, he remains dry when it rains: “Tom Bombadil came trotting round the corner of the house, waving his arms as if he was warding off the rain—and indeed when he sprang over the threshold he seemed quite dry, except for his boots” (146). This scene “suggests that he has some power over the elements” (Noetzel 171). However, his boots do get wet, a detail that could easily be overlooked but which has implications for his relationship to nature. He appears to be able to escape nature’s effects but does not attempt to change or affect nature. Much like his relationship to the One Ring, Tom is not affected by it, but neither does he exert control over it; it simply has “no hold on his mind” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 150, 298). To keep his boots dry would involve drying the ground itself, a goal in which he is apparently either uninterested or incapable. In either case, Tom’s goal is not to bend nature to his will but rather to take care of it as well as himself. As this scene shows, Tom wants to live well in nature and manage it in a way that is helpful to himself—for instance, not becoming soaked in the rainy weather—but without upsetting the ecosystem. In a similar fashion, he has evidently taken the time to mow his lawn, as the hobbits observe when they approach his house, while leaving the rest of the forest to grow wildly (136). In addition to these actions, the candles that Tom lights demonstrate his ability and willingness to dispel the darkness within the four walls of his home. As he leads the hobbits back to his house, he sings: “*Tom’s going on ahead candles for to kindle. / Down west sinks the Sun: soon you will be groping. / When the night-shadows fall, then the door will open, / Out of the window-panes light will twinkle yellow*” (136). That emphasis on light is “important for both moral and natural reasons, and is tied to goodness” (C.S. Lewis, *Discarded* 153). Clearly, Tom cares about bringing light to the lives of himself and others. Notably, he does not keep the darkness from coming, though. Night must still fall, as the cycle of nature dictates, but he does ensure that he and his guests can have light by harnessing the power

of fire and making wax into candles. These measures that Tom takes to improve his surroundings for himself and his guests show that he is committed not to suppressing nature but to harnessing it in a respectful and helpful manner, which comes out of an attitude of loving care. Tolkien saw this attitude as vitally important, and some scholars have likened it to the idea of stewardship: “[his] definition of good stewardship falls somewhere between . . . caring management and servanthood stewardship, perhaps combining some elements from both models, but one far from the negative extreme of careless domination and exploitation” (Dickerson and Evans 45). Tom’s care and use of his surroundings are consistent with Tolkien’s concept of dealing with nature without seeking to suppress or control it. The word *stewardship*, though, implies private ownership, so it may not be the most accurate term to describe what Tom does. As seen in the text, Goldberry refers to Tom as the master over his natural realm, although she makes it clear that that realm does not really belong to him or to anyone else: “The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master” (141). Rather than attempting to take ownership or control of the natural realm that surrounds him, Tom sees himself in a mutually beneficial relationship with the created order. Somewhat similarly to Adam’s Edenic role, Tom is a master with duties and abilities. However, he is not trying to shape it into his own or someone else’s vision. He takes his responsibility to the forest around him seriously in an effort to live in harmony with nature as a created order.

Tom’s stewardship of nature also comes with a desire for understanding, which he willingly shares with others out of the bounty of his natural knowledge. This sharing of knowledge is separate from a desire to manipulate nature; rather, its goal is to appreciate and

understand nature as it is: “Tom Bombadil represents the pursuits and love of selfless knowledge of the created world and its history . . . Bombadil gathers knowledge because he wants to know and to learn. He is a pure scientist, with no interest in technology; he has the desire to know and to understand, but without the desire to manipulate” (Dickerson and Evans 21). In sharp contrast to Saruman, who “seeks to twist, ravage and exploit nature and other things for his own gain,” Tom “seeks to understand nature and other things on their own terms” (107). Tom does not know everything about his surroundings: “[W]eather in that country was a thing that even Tom could not be sure of for long, and it would change sometimes quicker than he could change his jacket. ‘I am no weather-master,’ he said; ‘nor is aught that goes on two legs.’” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 151). However, he does give helpful advice about navigating the forest and gathers information and knowledge about the natural world around him (151). His understanding of nature allows him to appreciate it and live well in it, a characteristic more prevalent in the premodern world than in the present age. According to Siewers, “[t]he elves and their realms, the Ents and Tom Bombadil’s domain, all have precedents in indigenous narratives of northern Europe shaped by an earlier, more cosmically-oriented Christianity with which Tolkien was familiar through his scholarship.” He also refers to this medieval premodern literary landscape as a “Christian literary milieu of a nature integrated with the divine” (Siewers 140-41). This centrality of nature prompts a respect for it and a desire for knowledge and understanding of it. Tom then passes this knowledge of the natural world on to his guests.

Tom as a source and conduit of knowledge is consistent with conceptions of the Green Man as well: “studies of the lore of the Green Man more often than not reveal an aspect of his persona to be that of a teacher or a giver of knowledge” (Campbell 93). These teachings have historical roots concerning man’s engagement with the natural world. As one critic notes, “From

the Green Man . . . our ancestors learned the secrets of life . . . the mystery of the seasons and the agricultural year, the lore of medicinal herbs and plants; the companionship of the natural world” (Matthews 12). As seen in the primary text, this is the kind of knowledge that Tom imparts to Frodo and the others. When the hobbits are prevented from traveling on a rainy day, Tom recounts information about the creatures and plant life that dwell in the forest:

He told them tales of bees and flowers, the ways of trees, and the strange creatures of the Forest, about the evil things and good things, things friendly and things unfriendly, cruel things and kind things, and secrets hidden under brambles. As they listened, 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. (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 147)

As the hobbits learn, nature is not something that is neatly packaged or easy to control. It is made up of a multitude of lives living in a vast, untamed ecosystem. Much like the Wilderness of Wirral in *Sir Gawain in the Green Knight*, the Old Forest is untamed, existing independently of human interaction or intervention. As a marvelously ordered system, nature is an object not of human control but of study and wonder. In keeping with the Biblical idea that “It is the glory of God to conceal a matter; to search out a matter is the glory of kings” (Proverbs 25.2), Tom has spent numerous years searching out the secrets of his natural surroundings and sharing his findings with others, all of which contributes to his symbiotic inhabitation of his home and rightful place within nature.

Tom’s loving management of the forest and his welcome to the hobbits provide them with the means to gain their bearings before continuing their journey.<sup>16</sup> This concept of the forest

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<sup>16</sup> This journey is not just physical; in keeping with iterations of the forest journey in Medieval fantasy, the sojourn from the Shire to Mordor is a lonely journey of the soul through wild wastes. One exemplary medieval source is Sir Gawain’s journey through the Wirral Wilderness, where he is tested on both his physical strength and endurance and his psychological fortitude. The forest is something that Gawain must struggle against, but he also finds shelter

as a place of temporary, restorative rest reflects Northrop Frye's idea of the "green world," a natural setting in which issues are resolved and order is temporarily deconstructed and then reestablished. Frye describes this concept in the context of some Shakespeare comedies, although the text of *The Fellowship of the Ring* suggests that it also applies here: "Thus the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world" (Frye 182). A similar idea is reflected in Tolkien's concept of the secondary world as a place in which things of importance can be recovered. The secondary world is an essential part of fantasy: "Enchantment produces a Secondary World into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desire and purpose" (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" 73). The goal of this secondary world is an escape from the prison of mundane concerns and a sense of recovery of important things, by which Tolkien means a "regaining of a clear view . . . I might venture to say 'seeing things as we are (or were) meant to see them'—as things apart from ourselves. We need, in any case, to clean our windows; so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" (77). The green world of the Old Forest turns out to be an excellent place for this cleaning of windows and gaining of perspective. While one might view Middle-earth itself as a sort of "green world" for the reader, the Old Forest is a green world within that green world for the hobbits. By visiting Tom Bombadil, Frodo and the others are given an opportunity to step outside their problems, including the weight of the ring and the threat of black riders, and catch their proverbial breath before they continue their journey. As opposed to Willy Wonka's cryptic

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along the way in the natural setting (Sobecki 465). As Sobecki describes this journey, "It is the archetypal emotional landscape of the Christian soul in spiritual adversity" (465). Similarly, Frodo and the other hobbits must battle not only the physical dangers of the road but also their own insecurities and flagging courage.

goals known only to himself (Dahl) or to Star Trek's Q, who throws the Enterprise crew into unexplained, contextless situations in an attempt to prepare them for future struggles ("Q Who?"), Tom Bombadil provides time for rest and helpful counsel for the journey ahead. For example, on a day in which "the Forest was completely veiled" "behind [the rain's] deep curtain," the hobbits are hidden from the outside world and prevented by the weather from leaving Tom's house (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 146). Frodo is glad that they are unable to continue the journey, as he does not yet feel ready. The rain gives them more time for Tom to "teach the right road, and keep [their] feet from wandering" (151). When the group finally does leave the home of Tom and Goldberry, Sam expresses readiness to face the next part of the journey: "I am sorry to take leave of Master Bombadil . . . but I won't deny I'll be glad to see this Prancing Pony he spoke of" (168). Rather than providing a place of mere escapism from their task, the refreshment they have received in the Old Forest has effectively prepared them for what lies ahead. The hobbits' stay in the forest reminds them of the triumph of good over evil—or "the victory of summer over winter"—giving them the strength to exit back into the outside world and complete the task before them (183). This reminder of the hope that lies outside their own experience is reflective of the green world of myth, "not as an escape from 'reality,' but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate (184). Tom's Old Forest is restorative, evoking a rejuvenating, positive view of nature,<sup>17</sup> but it does not detract from self-awareness or purpose. In fact, the Old Forest is an entity separate from the sojourners therein that makes them more aware of themselves—how small they feel among the trees, for instance, or where their

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<sup>17</sup> This positive attitude towards nature does not entail an over-dependence on it, as some Romantics would advocate. For romantics like Rousseau, nature is a place of solitary reflection and can even involve losing one's sense of self. As seen in Rousseau's nature walk journals, Venkataraman explains that the romantic "loses himself in the immensity of this beautiful system with which he feels himself one . . . he sees and feels nothing except the whole" (334). Thus, being in nature is an end unto itself and causes the loss of identity and awareness.

place is in history. This refreshment of identity and purpose actually helps the hobbits to move on from the forest with healthy drive towards their goals. In Tolkien's story, nature is valuable in its own right, but it does not exist to subsume the traveler's identity; rather, it has value even beyond itself. For Frodo and the others, time spent with Tom Bombadil in his natural setting produces wonder but also strength to continue towards their greater purpose.

As observed in Tolkien's description of Tom Bombadil's Old Forest home, Tom holds great respect for a vision of nature that is completely integrated with supernature. In the setting which Tolkien has written around Tom Bombadil, there are not two separate realms that never touch; instead, one can observe that nature itself is supernatural, if one looks into it deeply enough. Tom is interdependent upon this relationship as well. As he inhabits the natural world well, the natural world, in turn, provides for him and Goldberry out of its created bounty. Tom is aware of the blessings of nature and seeks to care for it properly. This harmonious environment of respect is a welcome respite for the hobbits from their weary journey, and it also serves as a refreshing setting distinct from the modern reader's industrialized world. In the postmodern works discussed earlier, characters like Ged have nowhere to rest in a disconnected world (Le Guin); Q's approach to humans is to wantonly break the laws of nature and confuse people (*Star Trek*). Similarly, Willy Wonka operates through deceit, evasion, and denial of the supernatural within nature (Dahl). In contrast to these, Tom Bombadil freely shares knowledge of the natural world and respects it as a natural-supernatural entity. A visit to Tom's forest is a reminder of a simpler time and an exhortation to value and enjoy nature in a healthy way for what it is—an everyday miracle; sometimes one has only to step into the wild forest of fantasy to find it.

## Chapter 4: “His Songs Are Stronger Songs”: Tom Bombadil’s Attitudes Toward Personal Power

In the way he inhabits nature-supernature, Tom Bombadil is significantly different from the postmodern characters who live in a state of separation between the physical world and the invisible realm beyond. Another vitally important difference between these two types of characters concerns how they respond to the idea of personal power. Ged relishes power and eventually uses it to restore balance instead of defeating evil with good (Le Guin). Willy Wonka cryptically orchestrates different scenarios and is highly concerned with passing on his façade of power to the next generation (Dahl). Finally, Q’s power is no façade, but it is untrustworthy and malignant (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*). In sharp contrast to these postmodern perspectives, Tom Bombadil offers a display of natural-supernatural personal power that may seem counterintuitive to the postmodern mind, a power characterized by benevolence, some limitations, and even music. From the moment Tom Bombadil appears in the narrative of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, he appears singing and continues throughout his time in the story.<sup>18</sup> The musical character of Tom’s behavior, as well as the rhythmic cadence of even his normal speech, creates a distinct persona for the character of Tom. His singing produces meaningful results, too. In “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil,” the poetry collection about Tom, his singing has an influence over badgers, barrow-wights, and Old Man Willow (Tolkien, “Adventures” 198-99). When the hobbits encounter him in the Old Forest, Tom arrives as a rescuing force against the willow, and he repeats his efforts with the barrow-wights later. Each time, it is his song that causes a change in his environment (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 135, 161). Such a being that can control

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<sup>18</sup> As the hobbits are traveling through the Old Forest on their way to Bree, Tom Bombadil arrives from the wilderness to save Merry and Pippin from the ill-intentioned willow tree, and he does so by singing (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 135).

the actions of other creatures must be powerful indeed, beyond the laws of physics. However, Tom Bombadil does not seem to embrace this power besides using it to help those who cannot help themselves—namely, Frodo and his friends. He is confined to one specific area of the Old Forest and does not venture beyond it (168). As well as being limited by physical space, likely due to his internal motivation rather than external constraints, where Sauron is concerned, Tom's power is also limited, whether internally, externally, or both. Oddly enough, although Tom can handle the One Ring without being affected by it, the elf Glorfindel makes it clear later in the story that Tom would not survive in a world in which Sauron had taken control (298). This oxymoron of power in Tom Bombadil is coupled with the fact that he does not care about gaining power or manipulating the abilities that he does have for his own benefit, in sharp contrast to others such as Saruman who are willing to destroy in order to control. As the plot texts about him reveal, particularly in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tom Bombadil displays curious attitudes toward personal power consistent with premodern fantastical views; he is powerful in that he uses music to supernaturally bring about order or acknowledge a higher music of the heavenly spheres (Marvell), but he limits his power and never pursues it for its own sake.

Ultimately, Tom Bombadil reveals that he has power over darkness, connected with his singing ability, but he always uses it in a responsible way to bring order to chaos. After Frodo cries for help upon discovering that Merry and Pippin are trapped inside the willow tree, Tom appears singing, unannounced and unexplained. Sam tells him, “Master Merry’s being squeezed in a crack!” to which Tom replies, “‘What?’ . . . ‘Old Man Willow? Naught worse than that, eh? That can soon be mended. I know the tune for him. Old grey Willow-man! I’ll freeze his marrow cold, if he don’t behave himself. I’ll sing his roots off. I’ll sing a wind up and blow leaf and

branch away” (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 135). What appears to be a matter of life and death for the hobbits is for Tom simply a task of disciplining some naughty trees. He quickly succeeds in singing Merry and Pippin out of the tree; evidently, singing carries much power beyond the laws of physics. Later, he displays his abilities again when the hobbits find themselves in danger on the Barrow-downs. Frodo and the others are all imprisoned by a ghostly barrow-wight that lurks in the tombs of ancient kings. In the barrow, Frodo hears these spectral figures singing an incantation:

Cold be hand and heart and bone,  
and cold be sleep under stone:  
never more to wake on stony bed,  
never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.  
  
In the black wind the stars shall die,  
and still on gold here let them lie,  
till the dark lord lifts his hand  
over dead sea and withered land. (160)

The dark lord, presumably Sauron, also can employ music to achieve his ends, albeit a cold, discordant, perverted music. The forces of good, however, have a far more powerful music at their disposal. For example, in keeping with Chalcidius’ writings, which had a significant impact on medieval thought, “hearing exists principally for the sake of music . . . the souls of most men are out of tune. The remedy for this is music; ‘not that sort which delights the vulgar . . . but that divine music which never departs from understanding and reason’” (C. S. Lewis, *Discarded* 56). Traditional sources recognized that these two kinds of music do exist; when misused or done badly, music can promote the baser motivations in the soul of man, as is the case with the

predatory barrow-wights. However, when music adheres to understanding and reason, it can be considered divine, having healing power for the soul. Music is also divine in its source: as a human art form, it is a kind of sub-creation as Tolkien defined it (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf"). As such, it can be a strong force for righteousness, harmony, and order.

The idea of harmonious music as a source of order is found in medieval cosmology, out of which traditional fantasy has grown. Reflecting this idea, the music of the spheres was one belief prevalent in the medieval and Elizabethan ages (Tillyard 45). C. S. Lewis argues that medieval man saw the universe as being a structured, musically rich cosmos:

[A]s that vast (though finite) space is not dark, so neither is it silent. If our ears were opened we should perceive, as Henryson puts it, "every planet in his proper sphere / In moving makand [sic] harmony and sound" (Fables, 1659) . . . The "silence" which frightened Pascal was, according to the Model, wholly illusory; and the sky looks black only because we are seeing it through the dark glass of our own shadow. You must conceive yourself looking up at a world lighted, warmed, and resonant with music.

*(Discarded 112)*

In this premodern cosmology, space is not a harsh, cold place of incoherent, inert material; its vast systems are sustained through concordant music. Seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell highlighted this concept in his poems. As one of the Metaphysical poets, Marvell often turned toward the "sphear" of Heaven and matters of the soul (Bennett 109). In keeping with this upward gaze, "Musick's Empire" discusses the creation of the cosmos in musical terms: "First was the World as one great Cymbal made, / Where Jarring Windes to infant Nature plaid. / All Musick was a solitary sound" (Marvell 1-3). Later in the poem, other voices join in to produce a full and pleasant harmony, as "the Progeny of numbers new / Into harmonious Colonies

withdrew” (11-12). These harmonies combine into a great music that envelops the earth, while unheard by her inhabitants: “Then Musick, the Mosaique of the Air, / Did all of these a Solemn noise prepare: / With which She gain’d the Empire of the Ear, / Including all between the Earth and Sphear” (17-20). Marvell’s conceptualized description of the universe is consistent with Lewis’ description as a place of music interacting in a rationally structured way, and the magnitude reflected in describing creation in musical terms illustrates the power behind music in ordered harmony, a power that comes from God’s creative ability. It is logical and consistent with the ideas present in the poem that an orderly, beautiful God would create a cosmos that expresses these aspects of his character. As the psalmist famously declares:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
 the skies proclaim the work of his hands.  
 Day after day they pour forth speech . . .  
 no sound is heard from them.  
 Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,  
 their words to the ends of the world. (Psalm 19.2-4)

Notably in the same psalm, the speaker moves from an observation about the orderly cosmos to a discussion of God’s law (19.7). As the structure of the psalm suggests, these two topics are closely related, with the figurative sound of the cosmos’ music serving as a reflection of God’s consistent character.

The belief in a rationally structured universe governed by music influenced the way medieval westerners dealt with the composition and theory of music as well. Certain harmonic structures and intervals were widely accepted as producing the most pleasing and reasonable sounds. As a foundation, the octave was “the starting point of medieval presentations of the

diatonic intervals, the theory of the consonant species, and the related theory and practice of counterpoint, to name only a few examples” (Mengozzi 173). In counterpoint, certain intervals, such as the third, sixth, and the octave itself, were considered consonant, and others—the second, fourth, and seventh—were dissonant, with the dissonant intervals functioning as an impetus to return to the more consonant ones. These patterns of movement back to a harmonic center have a rational reason for existing, based on their relationship to the octave. This rationale of music as moving towards order has prevailed in western music through the Middle Ages and beyond. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the somewhat harmonically simple organum developed into the more complex counterpoint, and more precise methods of rhythmic notation were devised. According to Artz, “all of these experiments in harmonized music, from the ninth through the twelfth centuries, created a musical style of increasing complexity.” Later, the Italian trecento composers of the fourteenth century added more layers: “the older crude successions of fifths and octaves have vanished; the thirds and sixths have been definitely accepted, and the harmonic system has become one attractive to modern listeners.” As the Renaissance unfolded, composers like Josquin de Pres strengthened the idea of tonality: “Through the Flemish style, music regained a definite tonal center about which the whole musical structure is organized” (Artz 411, 415, 418). These developments, while unique, all tied back to the foundational ideal of an orderly structure that made sense to both the mind and the listening ear. Though music has changed throughout history, these medieval principles have held great influence beyond their own era. Thus, music as order is a relic of the premodern thought which gave rise to traditional fantasy literature.

This premodern connection between music and orderly power can be clearly seen in Tolkien’s work, from his grand, sweeping creation narrative of Middle-earth to each of Tom

Bombadil's individual songs. The power of music is examined near the beginning of *The Silmarillion*, when the angelic beings known as the Ainur are created.<sup>19</sup> Iluvatar, the "God" figure in Tolkien's mythos, instructs these beings to "make in harmony together a Great Music . . . ye shall show forth your powers in adorning this theme" (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 15). One of the Ainur, Melkor, turns to evil when he decides to deviate from the harmony in an effort to use his song for his own power and glory (16), showing that the way one uses power has a grave impact. Just as Marvell outlines in "Musick's Empire," music has creative power but must be produced in harmony without being drowned out by personal ambition. Like the Ainur, Tom Bombadil also understands that music and power are connected, and he uses his musical skills in a creative and helpful way. His songs, which come naturally to him, help to create the image of another world in his listeners: "they realized they were singing 'as if it was easier and more natural than talking.' . . . the hobbits experienced an unfolding vision as he spoke, 'like a vast shadowy plain over which there strode shapes of Men, tall and grim with bright swords, and last came one with a star on his brow.'<sup>20</sup> These images caught the hobbits up in a kind of reverie or dream, touching those Other Worlds within each of them" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 165-66 qtd. in Richards 71). For Tom, music is a path to higher, even heavenly, realms—a reflection of the cosmic and the ideal. Tom, then, considers music and singing as engagement with spiritual truth, not simply an aesthetic experience. His music does have a practical application, too, though, and his wisdom turns out to be vital for the hobbits. In the barrow, Frodo sings the call for help that Tom instructed him to sing, which soon brings Tom to their rescue (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 161). The

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<sup>19</sup> The Ainur are the same personages who appear later in the *Silmarillion* as the Valar, and they include Manwe, Aule, Yavanna, and others (Tolkien, *Silmarillion* 20). Melkor, who turns to evil, becomes known as Morgoth, of whom Sauron is a servant (79).

<sup>20</sup> Possibly a reference or connection to Tolkien's short story "Smith of Wootton Major," in which a character becomes closely acquainted with the land of Faery after a silver star appears on his forehead (Tolkien, "Smith" 22).

impact of Tom's singing shows that he holds more power than the evil barrow-wights; his songs "can have a powerful effect on reality." This effect is an unexplained and mysterious sort of power: "If this is magic, it is different from the sort we might encounter elsewhere . . . Bombadil utters no magic spell or incantation. There is no battle, nor is there any resistance to his commands. His word alone is enough" (Dickerson and Evans 22). In Tom's word, spoken in song, an individual expression of language and the harmony of the cosmos converge, and this union has power. Tom's song is what breaks the hold of the darkness on Frodo and his friends. After his triumph, Tom rejoices in the vanquishing of the dark powers: "Wake now my merry tads! Wake and hear me calling! / Warm now be heart and limb! The cold stone is fallen; / Dark door is standing wide; dead hand is broken. / Night under Night is flown, and the Gate is open!" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 162). The defeat of darkness is to be celebrated because it brings life to light. Tom's capacity to defeat evil and protect others through music is quite comforting. As one critic observes, "Bombadil is wise and reassuring, the kind of character who could offer a safe haven where one could dream deep dreams" (Sturgis 131). Through the gift of music, Tom Bombadil has the power to speak positive change into reality and change the lives of others for the better.

While Tom Bombadil is portrayed as an eminently powerful force for good through his singing ability, his power is limited—both spatially and conceptually. Tom's limitation to a specific area of the Old Forest is revealed when the hobbits take their leave of him for the last time. After Pippin asks Tom, "do you think we may be pursued, tonight?" Tom admits that he does not know: "No, I hope not tonight . . . nor perhaps the next day. But do not trust my guess; for I cannot tell for certain. Out east my knowledge fails. Tom is not master of Riders from the Black Land far beyond his country" (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 167). The help that he can provide is

mostly concerned with what happens within the boundaries of the forest. Although Frodo and the others wish that Tom could accompany them further, he must decline. He gives them directions to The Prancing Pony in Bree but stays behind in his forest home: “he laughed and refused, saying: / *Tom’s country ends here: he will not pass the borders. / Tom has his house to mind, and Goldberry is waiting!*” (168). Tom sees his assignment as remaining close to home, within his own small sphere of influence. That a powerful benevolent creature would be confined to such a relatively small space may seem counterintuitive; after all, it seems that he could do more good if he could travel beyond the forest and help those who are outside it. However, Tom’s rootedness in his physical location is a premodern and vital facet of the story. Instead of spreading his power to do good thinly over a large area, he is able to fully commit to his own sphere of influence.

What Tolkien is trying to illustrate through Tom’s limitation to the forest is that Tom places an exceedingly high value on his place, which includes both his physical place and his role within the surrounding cosmos—a value that has been sadly forgotten in recent years. Several of the characters discussed in the second chapter of this thesis do not share this value. Ged, for instance, has “no safe place” to which to turn; harried by the shadow, he has nowhere to rest or feel safely at home (Le Guin 178). In *Star Trek*, Q exists in a continuum outside the laws of nature and affects nature from the outside (“Hide”). On the other hand, Tom is at home in the natural world, and he affects it from the inside, making him ontologically different from the postmodern characters mentioned. His settlement in his habitat is reflective of the idea of a sense of place. Writing in 1998, some scholars argue that the “reality of place . . . has long been denied, suppressed, and devalued by a mechanistic view of nature.” They refer to a place as a “center of meaning and felt value” and posit that a sense of place can be considered as “the collection of meanings, beliefs, symbols, values, and feelings that individuals or groups associate

with a particular locality” (Williams and Stewart 18-19). These ideas are central to an individual’s purpose and identity in the context of his place, and Tom Bombadil is no different. He sees what he most highly values in the life of the Old Forest and is most effective within its borders. Tom is never intended to be a conquering hero figure; his strength lies in his commitment to his place: “Inexplicable in terms of normal hero stories, the Bombadil interlude, like the Shire, provides a kind of center for the other part of story: the story of people who are deeply rooted in their place. Understandable as its exclusion [from the film] is, its absence nevertheless subtly skews the whole story” (Wilkinson 79). This sentiment is even an understatement; Tom Bombadil’s sense of place is an essential part of Tolkien’s vision, and removing that necessary piece of the story or viewing Tom through the lens of the crusading knight leaves both him and the story dreadfully lacking and denies the sense of rootedness that his character is truly supposed to represent.

As well as allowing himself to be limited to a certain place, Tom’s power is limited regarding Sauron and the Ring.<sup>21</sup> One of the most striking abilities that Tom possesses is his ability to handle the ring and remain unaffected by it:

Then suddenly [Tom] put [the ring] to his eye and laughed. For a second the hobbits had a vision, both comical and alarming, of his bright blue eye gleaming through a circle of gold. Then Tom put the Ring round the end of his little finger and held it up to the candlelight. For a moment the hobbits noticed nothing strange about this. Then they gasped. There was no sign of Tom disappearing! (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 150)

Furthermore, he can see through the ring’s effect of invisibility on the wearer. When Frodo puts on the ring just to make sure that it is indeed the same ring, Tom addresses him, “Hey! Come

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<sup>21</sup> This aspect of Tom’s character further illustrates that unlikelihood that he is a Vala or Maia, having the same level and kind of power that Sauron has.

Frodo, there! Where be you a-going? Old Tom Bombadil's not as blind as that yet. Take off your golden ring! Your hand's more fair without it" (151). This exchange, while disconcerting for Frodo, demonstrates that Tom is not bothered by little things like invisibility. Evidently, Tom is outside the reach of the Ring's influence. However, despite this fact, he is still not a suitable choice to take it for safekeeping. At the Council of Elrond, Erebor proposes that Tom Bombadil could help in efforts to dispose of the Ring, observing that he appears to have power over it (298). Gandalf replies, "Say rather that the Ring has no power over him. He is his own master. But he cannot alter the Ring itself, nor break its power over others. And now he is withdrawn into a little land, within bounds that he has set, though none can see them, waiting perhaps for a change of days, and he will not step beyond them" (298). Gandalf goes on to say that Bombadil, while surely well-intentioned, would be an unreliable guard for the Ring, saying that "he would soon forget it, or most likely throw it away. Such things have no hold on his mind. He would be a most unsafe guardian" (298). His independence from other powers does not mean that he can be an effective safeguard against Sauron's forces, due to his limited mastery within his own chosen habitat and his lack of concern about the Ring. Furthermore, Glorfindel believes that Tom would not be able to withstand Sauron directly. He wonders, "Could that power be defied by Bombadil alone? I think not. I think that in the end, if all else is conquered, Bombadil will fall" (298). Therefore, in matters that lie outside the reach of his domain, Tom Bombadil is someone to be protected, as are all created beings, rather than being a protector himself.

Despite having limits on his power, Tom Bombadil is unbothered by these limits—which he has embraced for himself—because he does not desire or pursue power as an end unto itself. He does not rejoice in power for its own sake or desire to dominate or judge anything. Rather, for someone in Tom's position, "the question of the rights and wrongs of power and control might

become utterly meaningless to you, and the means of power quite valueless” (Tolkien, *Letters* 192, 179). Tom does not even take control of his own domain, nor does he find his identity in it. When Frodo asks Goldberry who Tom is, she replies that “He is,” an answer that does not satisfy Frodo; she then explains, ““He is, as you have seen him . . . He is the Master of wood, water, and hill.” Frodo asks whether “all this strange land belongs to him,” but Goldberry assures him, “No indeed! . . . That would indeed be a burden . . . The trees and the grasses and all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves. Tom Bombadil is the Master. No one has ever caught old Tom walking in the forest, wading in the water, leaping on the hill-tops under light and shadow. He has no fear. Tom Bombadil is master” (*Fellowship* 140-41). As Goldberry describes him, Tom values courage and the freedom of all living things. Instead of valuing power for what it can do for him or how he can control things with it, Tom is a reminder that power must be held loosely and that its value lies in the good that it can do in the world. In the aforementioned scene in which Frodo and the others are taken captive by the barrow-wights, Tom gladly steps in to rescue them, again with singing:

*Old Tom Bombadil is a merry fellow,*

*Bright blue his jacket is, and his boots are yellow.*

*None has ever caught him yet, for Tom, he is the master:*

*His songs are stronger songs, and his feet are faster. (161)*

In the face of the serious threat against the hobbits, Tom’s chosen song seems oddly nonchalant given the circumstances. The discrepancy in tone between the situation and the song demonstrates that Tom is quite confident that he will have no problems defeating the barrow-wights. He turns out to be right: “As Frodo left the barrow for the last time he thought he saw a severed hand wriggling still, like a wounded spider, in a heap of fallen earth. Tom went back in

again, and there was a sound of much thumping and stamping. When he came out he was bearing in his arms a great load of treasure” (162). This course of events also shows that Tom cares little for the power that material possessions can bring. He freely distributes the treasure for the hobbits to wear but seems unconcerned that they have lost the clothes they brought with them: “‘You won’t find your clothes again,’ said Tom . . . ‘You’ve found yourselves again, out of the deep water. Clothes are but little loss, if you escape from drowning’” (163). Tom’s main concern is the safety and well-being of his guests—which is also the main purpose for which he uses his natural-supernatural personal power.

Tom’s attitude towards using his power and the objects in his possession stands in sharp contrast to that of someone like Saruman. Whereas Tom “renounces mastery of his environment [and] discards his power,” Saruman “pursues mastery of his environment in the pursuit of power” (Campbell 107). As he works to manufacture the Uruk-hai at Isengard, he gets closer to his goal of control of the world around him.<sup>22</sup> Saruman does not use songs as does Tom Bombadil, but he does use rhetorical skills to deceive others; one critic even notes that he “talks like a politician” (Shippey, *Road* 119). However, his true motivations are those of a power-hungry controller: “Representing, as he does, an industrialised force that lays waste the land . . . the beguiling nature of Saruman’s voice is evocative of ‘big business’ market-leading industries and political institutions” (Campbell 104). As such, Saruman could be seen in Marxist terms as a representation of a malevolent bourgeoisie intent on seizing the means of production in society. To clarify, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy in and of itself does not necessarily promote Marxist ideals. Although some “‘modern Communists’ have interpreted Tolkien’s anti-industrial ideas and his depiction of the hobbits’ simple agrarian lifestyle ‘as a return to primordial

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<sup>22</sup> The Uruk-hai are a breed of unnaturally created orcs formed by Saruman at his stronghold of Isengard; they are also known as the “Orcs of the White Hand,” Saruman’s trademark (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 18).

Communism,' a Marxist ideal free from the exploitative and destructive forces of capitalism," the idyllic Shire's economy does include capitalist trading in goods such as mechanical watches, umbrellas, and pipe-weed (Kelly 116). The presence of capitalism is not the problem in Tolkien's trilogy; rather, the problem is that Saruman's actions are monopolistic, seeking to gain all the power for himself through his manufactured Orc army—an action that actually hurts capitalism and competition, reflecting dictators who have touted Marxism and equality while seizing power over their people. Of course, the reader should not confuse these tendencies with direct allegory, despite the similarities between Saruman and monopolistic dictatorships:

"Saruman and the Mouth of Sauron speak the universal language of coercers, usurpers, and occupying nations, but they are not actually Stalinists" (Mortimer 124). Whether or not a reader agrees with Marxist views, the reader can see that Saruman's behavior is consistent with the archetype of the controlling, dictatorial leader or the cruelly powerful bourgeoisie who cares nothing for the people and the places under his control. Saruman's extreme path to power lies in controlling the area around him and manipulating it, thereby stifling free growth and exchange.

Tom Bombadil, on the other hand, is entirely outside the power structure that consumes Saruman. Questions about who prevails in the power dynamics or who owns the means of production are irrelevant to him. This disconnect from the struggle of gaining power leads to a "stark contrast" between Tom and Saruman: "Bombadil's uncomplicated and down-to-earth phrases convey a weight of power but they do so effortlessly and without subterfuge . . . Indeed when the hobbits first encounter Tom in the Old Forest the narrator describes how they are compelled to stand still by the mere sound of his voice" (Campbell 105). Tom simply does not need guile or subterfuge, because power is not his goal. He values his own realm of stewardship and desires to use his abilities to help others; however, use of the industrial machine of deceit

and manipulation does not occur to him, giving him a distinctly pre-industrial persona and attitude.

Tom Bombadil is clearly more than a mere oddity; he is a force to be reckoned with when encountered in his own domain in the Old Forest. However, his power is not absolutized, glorified, or pursued. It is derived from music and from the universal cosmic fluidness, coherence, rhythms, artistry, and purpose that constitute a divinely created nature-supernature. That music's purpose lies in creating order amid chaos, not in exercising personal power for its own sake. Tom is content to remain within the bounds of his land and dwell in it well with an eye toward helping others, but he does not do so for the sake of glory or domination of other forces. In a lively and somewhat humorous display of the fantastic, rather than shining armor and a white horse, Tom Bombadil voluntarily opts for yellow boots and a pony. His ability, coupled with his choice to live a simple life detached from the power struggles around him, seems counterintuitive, but it is what makes him so special and so well worth protecting in a world threatened by Sauron's dominating evil. His power is in his devotion to his place, and his strength is in his song.

### Chapter 5: Conclusion: A Return to the Old Forest

As seen through observing the texts in which he is presented, as well as his predecessors and successors, Tom Bombadil is a singular character to the degree that he embodies the ideal of creatures' intellectual and volitional acceptance of God's created order. This acceptance takes the forms of belief in nature-supernature as inseparable reality and belief in letting go of personal power to serve higher ends of order and justice.

Tracing these beliefs through a few exemplary pre- and postmodern fantasy works has illustrated how far postmodern fantasy has moved from its medieval roots. While the works chosen are not necessarily reflective of all fantasy literature in their respective eras, they contribute to a display of values present, absent, or recovered. Marie de France's *Lanval*, including the example of Lanval's lady, offers a portrayal of the medieval fantasy ideal played out in a story. The lady's mysterious origin from an unspecified country, which may be Avalon, helps today's reader recognize that physical and cosmological boundaries between the natural and the supernatural were not as clear-cut as they are presumed to be today—Marie's work implies that they do not exist at all (74). The lady also has abilities beyond the material world but uses them to sustain Lanval and, by extension, those in need (75). At the lai's conclusion, the lady reveals herself as a mystery that has been made known (80). She is an expression of something greater in the midst of daily life, and the story ends with her going with Lanval to Avalon, "a very beautiful island" (81); human life is given entrance into the realm of the beautiful and the unknown, although such mystery is neither inaccessible nor unreal. Just as the lady acts within the realm of reality, Tom Bombadil, while he also comes from an unknown origin, lives a simple daily life and is by no means disconnected from the real. The mystery concerning his origin and identity is not a problem; indeed, it is advisable to contemplate him in

that mystery and what he represents. Thinking about Lanval's lady together with Bombadil may lead to consideration of what is meant by reality—whether it can only admit matters that are easy to understand, or whether the mysteries can be treasured as well.<sup>23</sup>

Also taking place partially in King Arthur's court, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* contains a strong example of the inseparability of nature-supernature in the character of Bercilak, the green knight. In the initial challenge at Camelot, the Green Knight offers Gawain a chance to give him a cut with an axe, given that he will return the favor a year later (*Sir Gawain* 294-97). When Gawain accepts the challenge, the supernaturally-capable Green Knight invites Gawain into the green space of his natural domain, asking for Gawain's "word to seek me / Yourself, to come to me there where I am, / At home on this earth" (394-96). Gawain must leave the comfort of society in order to enter the wild, unknown realm of the natural-supernatural. In that natural setting, the Green Knight uses his power to help Gawain learn a spiritual lesson and reveals the mystery of his dual identity as the Green Knight/Bercilak of Hautdesert (2385-88, 2444-45). A highly natural-supernatural character who uses his personal power to impart truth and courage, the Green Knight exhibits harmony with God's created order through the medium of fantasy and serves as an enlightening precedent for the later character of Tom Bombadil, who also shares truth from inside his wilderness domain (Tolkien, *Fellowship*). Both characters are linked by their similarity to the archetypal Green Man: the previously discussed mythical figure who represents the wild aspect of the natural world and communicates knowledge and the secrets of nature to others. In the legacy of the Green Man, both Bercilak and Bombadil hearken back to the world's natural state as an alternative or foil to prescribed civilized life in cities. Perhaps the

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<sup>23</sup> The reader could also observe some similarities between the lady and Goldberry. Like Lanval's lady, Goldberry is quite beautiful and appears in nature. While such a discussion has fallen outside the scope of this research, perhaps Goldberry represents a feminine facet of the mysterious that was not possible to portray through Tom himself.

reader can gain a sense of balance between manmade traditions and a raw state of nature by considering these characters, recognizing that the dichotomy is between nature-supernature and civilization, not between nature and supernature as if they were separate.

Contrasting these medieval works with postmodern works helps to outline the loss of premodern values, particularly the acceptance of God's creation and plan. Such a loss is to be expected in this secular age, and the Christian reader of fantasy is wise to be aware of it. In the groundbreaking *Wizard of Earthsea*, Ged lives in a world quite distinct from the premodern world of Faerie or Avalon. Earthsea exists in a state of separation between nature and supernature, and between life and death, and it does not even trace its existence to a transcendent source (Le Guin 91). For instance, the Master Namer has no meaningful name, and the unknown nature of the Old Speech is also unknowable (62). Ged is also a weaker protagonist than his premodern predecessors, given his tendency to embrace personal power and the control over others that it gives him (8). Even the purposes of this power differ from the goals of Bercilak or of Lanval's lady. For Ged, the highest goal is to restore balance between light and dark (251), not to dispel darkness with light or bring knowledge or justice to others. Ged's cosmology and uses for power are significantly distinct from the worldview seen in premodern fantasy. Tom Bombadil looks forward to the world becoming mended or restored, implying that an objectively good state of affairs does exist and that he seeks to contribute to restoring the small things while waiting for that day. Instead of trying to restore an arbitrary balance that admits both good and evil, Tom Bombadil unequivocally sides with the good, inspiring readers to act with the same kind of clear purpose.

Like *A Wizard of Earthsea*, Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* also distances itself from premodern notions of nature-supernature. Willy Wonka's zany enterprises may

appear supernatural on the surface, but they are really an attempt to expand nature, viewed as the purely material world, to near-supernatural proportions (Dahl 62, 126). Wonka's stretching of the laws of physics gives him a sense of personal power, which he uses in a secretive manner to weed out the unsuitable candidates from his tour group and dismiss their questions and concerns (86, 105). However, despite this semblance of power, the close of the novel reveals that he does not truly have any special power; he is still a limited human in need of someone else to take up the mantle of his chocolate empire (151). Instead of having power within himself to benefit others, Wonka has built up a hypernatural façade of self-aggrandizing power; as a hero, he is a rather disillusioning one. While Tom Bombadil shares some of Wonka's whimsical disposition, Tom's lightheartedness seems to stem from real joy that is quite at home in his harmoniously integrated natural-supernatural life. Willy Wonka, on the other hand, uses whimsy and hyperbole to deflect questions and hide his lack of supernatural power. This distinction paints Tom as a more consistent hero and stronger example to follow.

As an examination of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* has demonstrated, recent fantasy media has also lost a proper sense of God's created order, particularly in the character of Q. He appears in a materially-focused universe in which human exploration is the main goal, but he exists outside of that order in a continuum of what he considers omnipotent beings ("Deja Q"). Affecting the laws of nature from the outside, Q belies a disconnect between nature and supernature, as well as a distrust of supernature. He illustrates a kind of supernature, perhaps the only kind available in a postmodern secular setting, but it is untrustworthy, and, as seen in his interactions with the Enterprise's crew ("Hide and Q"), he uses power to manipulate and control others. Unlike Q, Tom Bombadil operates within nature even as he achieves supernatural feats. Rather than trying to control innocent people with his power, Tom provides a place of refuge

from the dominating forces of Sauron and the Black Riders. Tom reveals that supernature, or at least the appearance of it, need not inspire fear or mistrust; rather, it is a part of a rationally structured created reality and can impact the world in beneficial ways.

Although Tom Bombadil appears in twentieth-century literary works, studying his behavior and attitudes shows that he bears more similarities to the premodern fantasy category than he does to his postmodern contemporaries. Tom's appreciation for and management of his Old Forest habitat demonstrate his roots in nature, and his existence as the "Eldest" and his ability to affect the elements around him show that he has an integrated perspective of nature-supernature as united (Tolkien, *Fellowship* 148, 146). Furthermore, Tom communicates with the willow trees and badgers in the forest, showing an inseparable nature-supernature ("Adventures" 198). Tom's rootedness in nature differentiates him from displaced postmodern characters like Ged and from Willy Wonka's delusions of hypernature. He also has personal power akin to a power "in the earth itself," and that power does transcend the material world (*Fellowship* 298). However, Tom rejects the pursuit of power for what it can do for him, thus separating himself from the struggle for power. He makes no attempt to control the One Ring, but neither does it have any effects on him (151). Tom remains limited to his physical and social place, but he uses his power within his place to benefit others (162). His unusual attitude toward power, wielded in a way that helps others rather than controlling them, makes him well worth protecting in a world in which Sauron's struggle for power provides the central conflict. As a comparative analysis between Tom and the other characters discussed here suggests, Tom Bombadil can be a restorative force to bring back the ideals of premodern, as opposed to postmodern, fantasy.

The ideal of harmony with the created order, as observed in traditional fantasy and recovered in Tolkien's Tom Bombadil, can impact the reader beyond the confines of the literary

work as well. Fantasy literature today is arguably quite popular, and the genre has grown during the twentieth century and is continuing to do so now. When considering such a large-scale western cultural phenomenon, the Christian reader would be wise to consider how his worldview reflects the literature of the day. Thinking critically and reflectively about the literature one engages is healthy and enriching, while choosing not to consider the worldview implications of literature can be detrimental. Even some people who have learned how to talk about literature in an educational context neglect to do so in their own lives: “[these students] don’t make an anti-hero connection between Gatsby and Iron Man, they don’t consider the lyrics of the songs they enjoy, instead relying (as they do in the classroom) on their friends’ opinions or thoughts they’ve picked up in the comments under YouTube videos” (Stallings 13). Such a passive approach to the literature or media that one consumes makes it easier for unhealthy ideas to take root, and it also prevents the reader from receiving the full benefit of ideas that lead to a healthier life in the world. Given that Christianity is often at odds with postmodern thought, this postmodern age is one in which careful consideration of literature is well warranted. Given its historical roots in an essentially theistic cosmos, the Christian need not have a problem with fantasy itself. Rather, he can embrace it: “Fantasy literature should have an ally in Christianity, in that both affirm the existence of the supernatural and of moral freedom, both affirm the importance of our choices, both encourage escape from materialist determinism, and both find a materialist worldview to be insufficient” (Dickerson and O’Hara 54). These characteristics are common to traditional fantasy literature; however, the reader must be able to recognize when today’s fantasy literature deviates from these traits. As evidenced by the dualistic world of Earthsea, Willy Wonka’s hypernatural antics, or the humanist sentiments of *Star Trek’s* Federation in response to Q, today’s fantasy media goes against some of the values of traditional fantasy, including the ideal of harmony with

creation as a natural-supernatural cosmos. Tolkien, on the other hand, affirmed premodern, theistic concepts through fantasy, although they did not manifest themselves in direct allegory; in a letter to W. H. Auden, he wrote, “I don’t feel under any obligation to make my story fit with formalized Christian theology, though I actually intended it to be consonant with Christian thought and belief” (Tolkien, *Letters* 355). The differences between Tolkien’s brand of neo-premodern fantasy and the more widespread postmodern fantasy may appear subtle, especially since the trappings are at times similar, but their worldview impact can be widespread and significant. By looking to twentieth-century authors like Tolkien, who sought to revive the old ideal from premodern fantasy, today’s reader can recover a sense of this ideal, which can be seen as having diminished in recent years. Tom Bombadil’s behavior in the works in which he appears suggests him to be a pure exemplar of this ideal, in the form of his attitudes towards nature-supernature and personal power. By considering Tom Bombadil, the reader can regain a sense of those attitudes and why they are important for life today.

Following the example of Tom Bombadil, today’s reader, whether Christian or non-Christian, can gain a sense of healthy dwelling within the natural world. For the Christian, this sense is heightened by the concept of the world as a created gift from God to respect and enjoy. The way Tom Bombadil interacts with his natural habitat involves using it well but not abusing it. Similarly, humans can “come to see everything—including all of nature—is not ‘ours’ but is received from God” (Cloutier 124). Citing Wendell Berry’s argument that we humans must use the resources in creation in order to live but that we should do so mindfully, Cloutier further observes, “We depend on God’s good creation for our life. We see its beauty and goodness, lament our own inability to receive it well, and hope that God might renew us and refashion this bond of dependence in ways that glorify God and rejoice with the neighbor” (125). Instead of

attempting to take ownership of the natural world, the wise reader can learn from Tom Bombadil to receive the gift of nature graciously and take joy from simple things—like the whole-foods supper prepared for the hobbits in *The Fellowship of the Ring* (141). Recognizing that “all things growing or living in the land belong each to themselves” and are part of a well-designed creation, the reader may “beg[i]n to understand the lives of the forest” and of nature as a whole, as a natural-supernatural gift (141, 147).

In addition to gaining an appreciative perspective on nature-supernature as it was created, the reader of premodern fantasy can recover its values that lead to a better understanding of order, justice, and the goal of power. For traditional fantasy practitioners, personal power comes from an orderly cosmos created by an omnipotent God. The reader may grasp a sense of the order in the cosmos by taking C. S. Lewis’ advice: “The recipe for such realization is not the study of books. You must go out on a starry night and walk about for half an hour trying to see the sky in terms of the old cosmology. Remember that you now have an absolute Up and Down. The Earth is really the centre, really the lowest place; movement to it from whatever direction is downward movement” (*Discarded* 98). When man views himself in these terms, he can gain humility; ironically, this medieval portrayal of the cosmos, with the earth at the center, decentralizes man in terms of importance. With this recognition, humans must acknowledge that any personal power is subject to God’s creative power in the cosmos; thus, it can best be used by promoting the kind of order seen in the cosmos among others. In *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tom Bombadil is well aware of how the wonder-inspiring Ea, or Middle-earth, was designed and knows “the dark under the stars when it was fearless—before the Dark Lord came from Outside” (149). What he does with his knowledge of creation’s original design is to try to restore that order in whatever small ways he can in the lives of individuals. Until “the world is mended,”

Tom has a role in using his personal power and abilities to bring order and justice to his friends in distress (162). Likewise, today's reader can consider instances in the world around him in which order is abandoned or justice neglected; by following Tom Bombadil's example, the thoughtful Christian reader of fantasy has the opportunity to play a part in the great mending of the world.

### **Suggestions for Further Reading**

With so much to be potentially gained from study of Tom Bombadil and his recovered premodern ideal, the reader may wonder what other fantasy characters offer similar insights or how to engage with fantasy in general in such a way as to recover the premodern ideal of acceptance and harmony with creation as it was designed. Further research along these lines could proceed in any of several directions.

While Tom Bombadil is one of the strongest embodiments of Tolkien's premodern values, the search for similar characters can yield many results elsewhere within Tolkien's work. Throughout *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, several characters may stand out as promoting these values. For example, Treebeard in *The Two Towers* is an immensely intriguing foil to Tom in some ways—and a complement to him in others. An Ent<sup>24</sup> living in Fangorn Forest, which used to be connected to the Old Forest, Treebeard offers a view of life in the other ancient forest setting (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 64). Instead of Tom's constant stream of fast-paced singing, Treebeard speaks extremely slowly and uses an unhurried language: "It is a lovely language, but it takes a very long time to say anything in it, because we do not say anything in it, unless it is worth taking a long time to say, and to listen to" (66). While he advocates a sense of slowing down in life, both he and Tom emphasize a connection to the natural world. If Tom Bombadil's

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<sup>24</sup> Tree-like beings entrusted by Yavanna with shepherding the trees in the forest (Tolkien, *Two Towers* 70).

resemblance to the Green Man archetype is strong, then Treebeard's is clearly unmistakable. As a representative of the raw, primal—or primeval—side of nature, Treebeard may prove an insightful complement to Tom Bombadil's forest management practices.

Also within the pages of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the reader may observe Gondorian brothers Boromir and Faramir in terms of their approaches to personal power. Boromir becomes overcome by the temptation for power and attempts to forcibly take the ring from Frodo (*Fellowship* 449). While his motivation is ostensibly to use the ring against Sauron (448), the aftermath of his actions results in Merry and Pippin being captured and in himself being killed by orcs (*Two Towers* 4). In contrast, Faramir realizes that the ring is an “heirloom of power and peril” and declares, “I would not take this thing, if it lay by the highway. Not were Minas Tirith falling in ruin and I alone could save her, so, using the weapon of the Dark Lord for her good and my glory. No, I do not wish for such triumphs, Frodo son of Drogo” (314). He also wishes for the return of Gondor's king, even though he knows it will not be himself (314). The reader may consider how these two brothers came to have such different views on power and how they may apply in today's world. In addition to these examples, Tolkien's work contains numerous other characters that exemplify these premodern traits; observing the behavior and dialogue surrounding Gandalf, Galadriel, Frodo, Aragorn, and others can be a fruitful exercise in noticing Tolkien's premodern worldview elements.

Outside the work of Tolkien alone, countless other works of fantasy provide occasions for thought and discussion, whether they align with premodern traditional fantasy values or not. To draw from the work of another Inkling, C. S. Lewis' *Narnia* series contains clear symbols of Christianity, whereas Tolkien's Middle-earth is a self-contained mythos without direct reference to Christian or religious beliefs. One may consider Aslan's representation of Christ and whether

it works more or less effectively than Tolkien's Valar or Iluvatar. Furthermore, Edmund's temptation at the hands of the White Witch or her distortion of nature—by converting the normally vibrant Narnian forest into a perpetual winter landscape—relates to questions of desire for personal power and nature-supernature.

A discussion of C. S. Lewis warrants mention of his inspiration, George MacDonald, whose *Phantastes: A Faerie Romance* involves dreamlike wanderings through Fairyland. The forest in Fairyland has its own malevolent trees, akin to Old Man Willow in Middle-earth's Old Forest, although Anodos, the main character, also encounters good trees (MacDonald 26). Like Ged, Anodos unleashes his shadow by dabbling in works of darkness and must spend the greater part of the novel to be free of it (57). The differences in the nature of these shadows and how Anodos and Ged deal with them are an interesting subject, as is what their actions say about their author's cosmologies. *Phantastes* also features Sir Percival as a character (40), who also appears in such medieval works as Chretien de Troyes' *Perceval: The Story of the Grail* and the German *Parsifal*. Comparing Percival's behavior in each of these works may yield some enlightening results and connections between today's fantasy and the traditional fantasy of the medieval period.

Meaningful considerations can also appear in the context of popular works, even entertainment films such as the *Star Wars* franchise.<sup>25</sup> The viewer may find that the dualistic nature of the *Star Wars* universe, with its goal of balancing the Force, bears a striking

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<sup>25</sup> The merits of printed versus visual media have been discussed in a previous chapter; the things that each medium can say and how they can say them are different. For example, demonstrating a certain point of view in literature involves using different narrative techniques, including first-person, limited omniscient, and unreliable narrators (Chatman 158). In film, point of view is accomplished through “two . . . cotemporal information channels, visual and auditory (and in the auditory, not only voices but music and noises)” (158). Perhaps film can say more about a plot event more easily, but it does not entail the required imagination or subtlety of the written word. Nevertheless, each medium can communicate stories that may be evaluated on their own virtues, although the methods achieve different effects.

resemblance to the cosmology of Earthsea. Furthermore, individual characters can be helpful in a comparative analysis as well. For example, one could observe the advice that Yoda gives and how it differs from Gandalf's, Tom Bombadil's, or the Green Knight's—although Yoda is, quite literally, a green man. Tracing similarities and differences between Frodo and Luke Skywalker could be an educational exercise as well; both are unsuspecting heroes caught up in something larger than themselves, but they operate within very different universes (Lucas). As it is one of the most prominent science fantasy works of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, an understanding of what is happening in *Star Wars* can be enlightening indeed.

Perhaps the most widespread popular fantasy series of our time is the *Harry Potter* novels by J. K. Rowling, and any discussion of today's fantasy would be remiss not to mention them. Due to the high degree of popularity they have enjoyed in recent years, the reader would be wise to consider what ideas are being promoted therein). It is no secret that some Christian readers are opposed to Rowling's work due to the positive portrayal of magic (Dickerson and O'Hara 227-28). However, perhaps a more beneficial discussion would involve the cosmology of Rowling's Wizarding World rather than focusing solely on the presence of magic itself. After all, Gandalf and Radagast are wizards, as are Harry and Hogwarts headmaster Albus Dumbledore; it is the source of magic that differs between the characters. For example, Harry is able to make magical things happen accidentally, such as communicating with a snake at the zoo and making its glass enclosure disappear so that it can escape (Rowling 27-28). Harry does not call upon any sort of higher power to accomplish this feat. Later, at Hogwarts School, the students learn to make purely material potions that achieve magical results (138) and learn to utter arbitrary charms that will have magical effects. The only characters who do use conjuring or summoning of other beings are those who align with Voldemort, the main villain (Dickerson and O'Hara 244). Thus,

the presence of magic in the *Harry Potter* novels is not as problematic as its apparent lack of a transcendent and morally good source. The reader may wish to consider whether Dumbledore and the other wizards use a magic that is closer to the sub-creative powers of Gandalf and Bombadil or to the secular hypernatural ones of Willy Wonka. These reflections are not only interesting for the adult reader of fantasy literature; they are also important discussions to have due to the popularity of fantasy literature among many readers including children. While engaging with *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter* can certainly be entertaining, Christian readers can and should also be able to engage with the ideas found in such cultural artifacts and discover what those ideas mean for society.

While most of the works discussed in this thesis have originated in England, with a few coming from American authors, Marie de France's *Lanval* has served as an important representative of French fantasy literature. To use a more contemporary example, Antoine de Saint Exupéry's *The Little Prince* is a delightful work of unique perspective, blending childlike wonder with ageless wisdom. The reader may choose to consider how nature and supernature interact—or whether they are seamlessly integrated. Also, the pride of the little boy's rose and the narrator's attitude towards other grown-ups are worthy of study as they relate to questions of personal power as opposed to the humility of a small child (de Saint Exupéry 5, 33). Perhaps the most significant contribution to offer here from the pages of *The Little Prince* is the narrator's warning to discern properly between different kinds of seeds, which, like ideas and worldviews, are sometimes indistinguishable on the surface:

[S]eeds are invisible. They sleep deep in the heart of the earth's darkness, until some one among them is seized with the desire to awaken . . . If it is only a sprout of radish or the sprig of a rose-bush, one would let it grow wherever it might wish. But when it is a bad

plant, one must destroy it as soon as possible, the very first instant that one recognizes it.

Now there were some terrible seeds . . . and these were the seeds of the baobab . . . A

baobab is something you will never, never be able to get rid of if you attend to it too late.

(21-22)

As this narrator warns, readers must identify which seeds—and which ideas—are true and which are pernicious, threatening to destroy the fabric of life. By thinking critically about the literature that one chooses, today's reader can stop the spread of bad seeds and become more aware of himself and of the society with which he engages.

Perhaps these directions for further research will prompt some readers to reconsider their perennial favorite characters. Fantasy and myth are a fundamental human activity for any age (Tolkien, "Tree and Leaf" 68), so it is vital to ascertain what kind of myths we are making and what they are telling us about the world and about ourselves. Tolkien took this responsibility seriously, particularly in the character of Tom Bombadil. Through Tom's actions and place in the story, Tolkien helps to recover premodern ideals, contributing to harmony with the created cosmos. Amid diverse literary options and opposing worldviews, Tom Bombadil draws the reader back to the Old Forest and old ways. In the shadow of Isengard and Barad-dur, it becomes all the more important to protect the little stone cottage in the woods, where the weary traveler will find strength for the journey and a renewed appreciation for the world as a gift of the kind Creator, infused with wonder.

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