"It Had Been His Virtue, And Therefore Also The Cause Of His Fall": Seduction As A Mythopoeic Accounting For Evil In Tolkien's Work

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Abstract
Seduction is often connected to eros, but Tolkien generally uses the term in a broader fashion. A theoretical underpinning based on medieval sources, Baudrillard, and Catholic thought provides a basis for understanding how characters may be led astray from their proper paths, and how Tolkien’s critique of the domination of other wills is demonstrated in these cases.

Additional Keywords
"It had been his virtue, and therefore also the cause of his fall": Seduction as a Mythopoeic Accounting for Evil in Tolkien’s Work

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In a much-quoted letter to publisher Milton Waldman, Tolkien admits that the driving purpose for much of his fiction lay in creating “a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogonic, to the level of romantic fairy-story” that would be dedicated to England in lieu of the mythology that he believed she currently lacked (Letters 144). For Tolkien, a philologist as well as a medievalist, the appeal of such an undertaking lay in the same place as its greatest challenge: the resulting narrative should seem to demonstrate its own mythopoeic process while also being a “finished” product itself. In order to satisfactorily emulate a genuine mythology, Tolkien’s project would need to read as if it were a collection of tales: tales of different ages, varying degrees of symbolism and historicity, and originally told by multiple voices even though ultimately assembled by a single hand. At the same time, though, this supposed collection would also require some unifying cultural flavor, as if its constituent pieces all belonged to some identifiable group.

While Tolkien uses many strategies to create these impressions throughout his legendarium, one of the most notable can be found in his treatment of evil. In the same letter to Waldman, Tolkien explains his conviction that “all stories are ultimately about the fall” (Letters 147) and that the Elves,

1 I use this term in the sense that Tolkien himself did: to describe the entire corpus of his mythopoeic writings, and primarily for the ways in which these underlie and inform even his smaller-scale narratives (Letters 149, 189, 197, 231). It is important to note, then, that this definition encompasses the Histories of Middle-earth, Tolkien’s notes (wherever published), and by extension, several mutually-contradictive versions of events in addition to the “canonical” texts of The Hobbit, The Lord of the Rings, and The Silmarillion (though of course the canonicity of The Silmarillion, as published by Christopher Tolkien, itself might also be debated). I use the term “legendarium,” and this specific definition of it, in order to encourage thinking of Tolkien’s corpus in terms of its effect as a single “secondary world” tradition, rather than in terms of its piecemeal publication. The use that I am advocating will allow us to focus on the mythopoeic process that I find crucial for this survey, where the latter would hinder our sight of the larger picture by constantly stopping to debate which change or version is canonical.
who are the central people of his mythology, must “have a fall, before their ‘history’ can become storied” (Letters 147). This penchant, however, reflects more than the structuralist requirement of mythology, or that necessity of multiple “mythical elements” which would demand an Evil simply to oppose Good (Levi-Strauss 40-41). Instead, Tolkien uses his conception of a cosmogonic Fall to raise—and in a way, even to answer—a version of what is known colloquially as the “problem of evil”: why evil exists in the presence of an “omnipotent, omniscient, and morally perfect” deity (Tooley 1.1, par. 5).

In spite of these grand stakes, though—or perhaps because of them—one of the most crucial means by which Tolkien manages this specific treatment of evil has been regrettably overlooked. Critics have certainly discussed evil in the legendarium in a variety of ways, variously maintaining that Tolkien was inspired by the romantic doom of the Northern sagas, in which the mortal hero will die at the hand of a stronger evil (Shippey), or that Tolkien creates an omnipresent sense of evil that cannot always be directly encountered (Birzer), or even that he offers a surprisingly “fragmented, illegible image of the binary tension between good/evil” (Battis 921). Despite the variety of these approaches, though, little to no mention has been made of seduction, which is an understated but recurring motif throughout the legendarium.

Tolkien makes use of narratives of seduction in a number of ways: most visibly, to let his implied mythmakers establish a mythological basis for evil itself, but more subtly, also to account for a range of both evildoers and redemptive possibilities. First, there is no Manichaean power in Arda: although Morgoth is the source of evil in creation, he is not coequal or coeval with Eru Ilúvatar. Second, and more importantly: Tolkien must find a way to have his mythmakers express this belief, without the implied text devolving into a religious treatise rather than a collection of myth.

Although the word “seduction” carries explicit sexual connotations in contemporary discourse, earlier definitions stress other meanings. Etymologically, in fact, seduction is couched in terms of deceit. Drawing from the Latin se (“away”) and ducere (“to guide or lead”), early sixteenth-century

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English usages stress first “The action or an act of seducing (a person) to err in conduct or belief; allurement (to some course of action)” and second, “the condition of being led astray” (Oxford English Dictionary [OED] 1.a., 1.b.). Other definitions specify the persuasion of a soldier or subject “to desert his allegiance or service” (OED 2), the enticement of “a female child” to a marriage unsanctioned by her parents (OED 3.a.), or the temptation of an unmarried woman to extramarital sex (OED 3.b). The common element in these definitions is not a sexual element so much as it is the deliberately deceptive proffering of some error.

Seduction, then, is both masked and distinguished by falseness: the error itself is a false principle, the allure relies on faulty reasoning, and the perpetuator puts forth both error and allure under false pretenses. In this way seduction becomes what Dawn Marlan calls “a narrative of transformation” (317): neither sex nor desertion is the ultimate end, but either can become the unmistakable sign of a character’s transformation, and specifically their progression from right into error (Marlan 316-7, 324-5). Older narrative forms, from the epic to the chanson de geste, similarly present seduction as a “game of appearances and disguises” (Jewers 103) in which the capitulation to sex is a visible sign of conquest, rather than the seducer’s objective in and of itself. Overall, Jean Baudrillard adds, both parties are deceived: although the seduced is led into error by artifice, the seducer originates in that error, regardless of any actual subscription to it. As a result, Baudrillard argues, to seduce is to “reconstitute oneself as illusion. It is to be taken in by one’s own illusion” (69).

Seduction thus differs substantially from temptation and corruption, processes that often characterize the lapsarian portions of religious or mythological narratives. Temptation, however, suggests some foreknowledge of the temptation’s erroneous nature, and corruption indicates a potential lack of agency. People can be tempted into doing something they realize is wrong, and they can even tempt themselves; alternately, people can be corrupted without their knowledge. Although the error is central to any definition of seduction, then, artifice and illusion are also integral: these deceptions screen or conceal the error’s true nature until the seduced has chosen to accept it.

Ultimately, the nature of seduction is deceit and manipulation; the purpose of seduction is the attempted increase of power, or what Tolkien terms the “domination and tyrannous re-forming of Creation” (Letters 146); the appearance of seduction is illusory and artificial. While these three features (nature, purpose, and appearance) all characterize seduction, though, it is

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3 Thanks to Anna Darnena and Denis Bridoux at Oxonmoot 2015 for their insightful questions about the differences between these terms.
seduction’s nature—that is, deceit and the manipulation of choice—that most makes it such a valuable process for Tolkien’s mythopoeic project.

In a set of notes reproduced by Carl Hostetter, Tolkien lays out the Elves’ belief in free will, a principle that is in itself an invaluable instrument for many theodicies deconstructing the “problem of evil.” In these reconstructed notes Tolkien writes that “the Eldar held that only those efforts of ‘will’ were ‘free’ which were directed to a fully aware purpose” (185, added emphasis mine). Tolkien elaborates the importance of this “fully aware purpose” with the example of a man traveling to find his enemy: the Elves believe that the journey itself may be “fated” to happen, but the man’s own purpose, good or ill, is what “governs the whole process” (186). However, when free will thus works alongside fate in Arda (Flieger, “Music and Free Will” 153), this is a mythopoeic stratagem that we as readers acknowledge on two levels: as an authorial choice made by Tolkien, but consequently also as a narrative belief or decision on the Elves’ part, as the legendarium’s governing voice and “centre of view” (Letters 147). This conception of free will, then, can be understood as the Elves’ reassessing an often-grim mythological past as much as it is also Tolkien’s concession to the narrative need for a Fall and the structural need for Evil in his new mythology.

Seduction operates within this grey space, between the primary-world influences of Tolkien’s mythopoeic sensibilities and Roman Catholic principles on one hand, and the constructed secondary-world beliefs of his Elves on the other. Where many theodicies attempt to explain the existence of evil on a grand scale (i.e., demonic evil or all the evil in the world) via the application of free will (created beings willingly choose to oppose the demiurge), seduction offers an explanation for evil on a smaller scale (i.e., evils committed by non-demonic, or even non-evil, beings) via the manipulation of free will. In this manipulation, the Elves’ requisite “fully aware purpose” is simultaneously satisfied and compromised. The case of the seducer is fairly straightforward: this subject is

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4 Free will is the focal point of many theodicies that attempt to reconcile the existence of an all-perfect God with the reality of evil. Essentially, such theodicies maintain that created beings can use their God-given free will correctly (choosing to do good, and thus serving the glory and vision of God) or incorrectly (choosing to do evil, and thus subverting an otherwise perfect creation). For more on such theodicies, see Augustine’s City of God, Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologica, John Calvin’s Bondage and Liberation of the Will, and Alvin Plantinga’s God, Freedom, and Evil.

5 I describe the Elven “mythmakers” as a general group, rather than settle on authors such as Pengolodh, Elrond, or even Bilbo Baggins, since my focus here is on the functions of myth rather than on the authorship transmitting it. For an excellent treatment of authorship and bias in The Silmarillion, see Dawn Walls-Thumma’s “Attainable Vistas: Historical Bias in Tolkien’s Legendarium as a Motive for Transformative Fanworks.”
fully aware of the error yet chooses to lead the innocent away or astray. The case of the seduced diverges in that the “fully aware purpose” is often mismatched with reality: for instance, the “purpose” that the seduced chooses may not be the seducer’s endgame, or else might lead into other, more malign ends unforeseen by the seduced and planned by the seducer.

Despite its significance, the process of seduction is remarkably easy to overlook in the legendarium. One of the major reasons for this understandable oversight is the fact that the word “seduce” is used only rarely: twice in the entirety of *The Silmarillion* and once (that I have found) in *The Histories of Middle-earth*. Despite their rarity, though, these instances describe some of the most influential events in the Elves’ mythology—happenings that historically, and sometimes even literally, re-shape their understanding of Arda. Moreover, the select instances in which a form of “seduction” is explicitly, linguistically present also outline a narrative that Tolkien has the Elves return to later for more localized, micro-scale events: the narrative of innocents led into error by purposes that they misunderstand and their seducers conceal.

Another, more primary-world reason why seduction in the legendarium is usually overlooked may be that most of those involved are male, seduced and seducer alike—a circumstance that may prove difficult to disentangle from the twenty-first century expectation that seduction is always sexual. This expectation, however, can be disproven by the substance of other legendarium narratives that are characterized by sexual elements. At first glance the stories of Arien, Aredhel, Luthien, and Tar-Miriel may seem to be seductions, but a closer look demonstrates that these narratives diverge in some respect from the nature, purpose, and appearance that we have already determined characterize seduction.

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6 It comes up similarly rarely in Tolkien’s nonfiction writings, featuring just twice in his letters: as “seduces” in the letter to Milton Waldman (*Letters* 155), and as “seduction” in the 1941 letter to Michael Tolkien about relationships between men and women (*Letters* 50).

7 Perceptive readers might question why I do not explore the possibility of sexual elements in male/male seductions, especially since I will document the sexual elements in female/male encounters and have already demonstrated that this is where contemporary readers might expect any use of the term “seduction” to proceed. However, this was a conscious omission on my part. To do this question anything near justice would require an in-depth discussion of authorial intent and reader response, which I could not see a way to address sufficiently within the confines of this particular paper.
Some of these narratives, for instance, are not seductions because their central characters do not follow a tempting error. For instance Arien, the Maia who “steers” the Sun after the darkening of Valinor, is approached by Morgoth, who desires her beauty and power. Arien, however, refuses his advances, seeing that the Vala “hast long forgotten” what is right (“Myths Transformed” [MT] 381). Tolkien’s notes offer two conclusions: in one, Morgoth “cried in his wrath: ‘The gift which is withheld I take!’ and he ravished Árië, desiring both to abase her and take into himself her powers” (MT 381), and in another, “he attempted to ravish Arien [...] to destroy and ‘distain’ her” (MT 405). In both versions, though, Arien not only sees the error to which she is being tempted—Morgoth’s grand blasphemy against his creator—but also rejects it without reservation. Aredhel, the only daughter of the eventual High King Fingolfin, is similarly without actual error. During her travels, Aredhel is wed by the Dark Elf Eöl, but only after “he set his enchantments about her so that she could not find the ways out, but drew ever nearer to his dwelling in the depths of the wood” (Silmarillion [Silm.] 133); readers are further told that she cannot walk during the daytime “at Eöl’s command” (Silm. 133) and ultimately that “It is not said that Aredhel was wholly unwilling, nor that her life in Nan Elmoth was hateful to her for many years” (Silm. 133). While Aredhel is led astray by Eöl’s “enchantments,” this is in a literal rather than a moral sense: she is tricked into believing herself lost, and then a guest.

The other two narratives, though, may seem to fulfill the purpose of seduction, since they concern power and contain unmistakably sexual elements. For instance, when Lúthien comes into the great hall of Angband, she is “stripped of her disguise by the will of Morgoth, and he bent his gaze upon her” (Silm. 180). Yet readers are told that she is “not daunted by his eyes” and that she chooses to sing for him (Silm. 180). It is at this point that

Morgoth looking upon her beauty conceived in his heart an evil lust, and a design more dark than any that had yet come into his heart since he fled from Valinor. Thus he was beguiled by his own malice, for he watched her, leaving her free for a while, and taking secret pleasure in his thought.

(Silm. 180)

If anything, Lúthien comes the closest to seduction herself, as she uses Morgoth’s own desire with which “to create a space and time wherein she might take mastery of Angband” (Agn 179). Although her choice and purpose are evident, though, the error is of Morgoth’s own making, and Lúthien simply fosters its existence. A similar case can be found for Tar-Miriel, rightful heir to the throne of Numenór, who is “forced into marriage” by her cousin.
“It Had Been His Virtue, and Therefore Also the Cause of His Fall”: Seduction

Ar-Pharazôn (Silm. 341): here the error is his, as he “took her to wife against her will” (Silm. 269).s

Ultimately, the common thread of these four narratives is one character’s display of power over and against another, which corresponds more closely to critical definitions of rape (Brownmiller 15; Sanday 5, 13) than to seduction. None of these four female characters are led to exercise free will in choosing a disguised error, as would be necessary for a seduction: instead, capitulation is forced rather than manipulated, power becomes a direct display rather than a deceptive sign (Baudrillard 69), and there is little to no focus on being led “astray” in the intangible—i.e., spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or moral—sense that the root *seducere* denotes.

In addition, the moral(s) that could be read in these narratives are vastly different from the theodicies that seduction supports elsewhere. Seduction narratives in the legendarium tend to uphold the explanation that evil begets evil and that its power is wrongfully derived from good. The narratives of Arien, Aredhel, Lúthien, and Tar-Míriel, however, send a different message entirely. When pressed by ill intent or outright evil, these characters do not turn to evil themselves, so there is no explanation for evil or its communication in their stories—instead, these read more as cautionary tales of what evil can do.

The first seduction we see in the legendarium is actually that of Sauron. In this initial iteration of the Elves’ theodicy justifying evil as both freely and wrongly chosen, the unfathomable, cosmogonic origin of Evil begets a more visible and immediate form.

Of old there was Sauron the Maia, whom the Sindar in Beleriand named Gorthaur. In the beginning of Arda Melkor seduced him to his allegiance, and he became the greatest and most trusted of the servants of the Enemy, and the most perilous, for he could assume many forms, and for long if he willed he could still appear noble and beautiful, so as to deceive all but the most wary. (Silm. 285)

s Tar-Míriel, however, also offers a notable exception. Christopher Tolkien points out that a later version of his father’s revisions shows Tar-Míriel being drawn to Ar-Pharazôn for his apparent power and handsome looks, and breaking off a lawful engagement to marry him of her own free will (“Peoples of Middle-earth: History of the Akallabêth” 159-163). However, this half-finished version does not add anything about her position when Sauron was brought to Numenór, and it is impossible to know whether she was seduced alongside her husband in this version. Thanks to Murray Smith at Oxonmoot 2015 for requesting this clarification.
As a sample of the Elves’ mythmaking, this passage establishes specific things about Sauron as both a force of evil and an enemy. First, it asserts that he is less naturally powerful than Morgoth. Although both are of a higher order and power than the races of Arda, the Elven mythmakers position Sauron slightly closer to their own levels of power—unlike Morgoth, who as one of the Valar is only a step below Eru himself. In addition, this passage also suggests that the threat of Sauron stems from attributes other than the god-like strength and “nihilistic madness” of Morgoth (MT 396). While Sauron is described as both “the greatest” and “the most perilous” of Morgoth’s servants, this peril comes from the way “he could assume many forms,” especially those of beauty and nobility. In other words, Sauron is dangerous mainly because he can manipulate his appearance, speech, and intentions in ways that conceal his true purpose, thus carrying on the tradition of seduction that Morgoth initiated with him.

In his role as the Elves’ own mythmaker, Tolkien also expounds on Sauron’s role, doing so in the form of information that the Elves apparently lack about the Maia’s “narrative of transformation” (Marlan 317). Some of Tolkien’s notes, for instance, establish that “Sauron’s original name was Mairon, but this was altered after he was suborned by Melkor” (Parma Eldalamberon 183, qtd. in Fauskanger par. 5). This original name, which in Tolkien’s secondary-world languages meant “the Admirable” and was derived from the same root as “Maia” and “Maia” (Fauskanger par. 6), is notably absent from the legendarium otherwise. There are hints, later, that Sauron does not use “his right name, nor permit it to be spelt or spoken” (The Lord of the Rings [LotR] III.1.416), but the Elves name this particular enemy specifically for his fall from angelic grace into demonic sorcery and torture.

From Tolkien’s notes too readers will learn that Sauron seeks domination where Morgoth seeks only utter (and self-) destruction (MT 394, 396-7). Tolkien establishes that this difference stems from Sauron’s initial good purposes, writing that “it had been his virtue (and therefore also the cause of his fall, and of his relapse) that he loved order and co-ordination, and disliked all confusion and wasteful friction” (MT 396). However, this initial purpose also become the means by which the Maia is seduced, as “[i]t was the apparent will and power of Melkor to effect his designs quickly and masterfully that had first attracted Sauron to him” (MT 396).

The erroneous nature, false appearance, and apparently power-increasing purpose of a seduction are all apparent in this “narrative of transformation” (Marlan 317). The Maia is led away from his original and correct allegiances to the Valar and Ilúvatar (Silm. 285), deceived by the “apparent” ways in which Morgoth appears to achieve things that the Vala actually cannot (MT 396), and temporarily increases Morgoth’s own power by
giving him a lieutenant who was “often able to achieve things [that] his master did not or could not complete in the furious haste of his malice” (MT 420).

The most visible result of this first seduction is that Sauron becomes “a problem” that the races of Arda must, but also can, “deal with” (MT 404). Unlike Morgoth, whose two defeats are only accomplished through the combined power of his fellow Valar (Silm. 19, 41, 259-60, 263), Sauron is “the last of those [evils] in ‘mythological’ personalized (but non-human) form” (MT 404) and as such he can be combated, even defeated, by heroic but non-demiurgic beings. The seduction of Mairon and the implied “narrative of transformation” (Marlan 317) that re-makes him as Sauron mark him as a different, lesser form of evil than Morgoth. Tolkien emphasizes that Morgoth’s is “a sub-creative Fall” (Letters 146n), or an error based on his usurpation of the Creator’s own powers, where all other evildoers, such as Sauron, instead fall “into possessiveness and (to a less degree) into perversion of their art to power” (Letters 146n). Although both chose evil of their own free wills, Morgoth was under no influence or duress but his own, while Sauron misused his will to choose the perversion of his original “art.”

Thus the nature, appearance, and purpose of Sauron’s seduction by Morgoth also emphasize a second impact that the process of seduction serves within Tolkien’s mythopoetic project: the theodicy of evil as freely chosen (at least initially) grants the Elves a means by which to rationalize their various enemies. In this line of reasoning, fellow Elves, Men, and even superior beings such as Maiar are neither evil nor irredeemable so long as they possess enough independent will to break away from the purpose to which they were seduced. When their wills waver or are lost—as when Sauron loses sight of his original “positive purposes” (MT 396) and his goals “became the sole object of his will, and an end, the End, in itself” (MT 397)—then the bearers become evil instead of merely committing evil. Conversely, creatures such as orcs and wights are deemed evil because they lack the necessary will to be otherwise, being either bred to or entrenched in evil. For the orcs in particular, the Elves believed that “by slow arts of cruelty [they] were corrupted and enslaved” (Silm. 50).

Although it is described in much less narrative detail, the second seduction that we see in the legendarium is similarly identifiable by its nature, the power-increasing purpose of the seducer, and the use of appearance(s). In describing the earliest days of Arda, Tolkien establishes that, following his first defeat, Morgoth tells Manwë that he repents of his evil-doing and so will

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Even Tolkien, as the authorial mythmaker, explains the orcs' evil natures as a matter of will: because Morgoth misused his “highest privilege” of sub-creative power to twist the orcs, they are “naturally bad” (Letters 195), but “by accepting or tolerating their making—necessary to their actual existence—even Orcs would become part of the World, which is [Ilúvatar’s] and ultimately good” (Letters 195).
become the Valar’s servant to make amends. Tolkien writes that “It is this offer which seduces or deludes Manwë” (MT 391-2). Despite its brevity, this sketch is worth noting because it is another example of how a seduction radically changes the course of Arda: Melkor uses his ill-gained freedom to stir dissent among the Elves, and eventually to destroy the Trees. The brief story of Manwë’s seduction also emphasizes how free will distinguishes evil itself: although the other Vala is deceived into seeing Morgoth’s “mockery of self-abasement and repentance” (MT 391) as genuine repentance, neither Tolkien nor his Elven mythmakers depict Manwë himself as either evil or an evildoer.

Much as Sauron is presented as a more immediate form of evil than Morgoth in terms of his lesser power and stature, the seductions that he perpetuates are similarly more immediate to the Elven mythmakers—or, as Tolkien writes, after Morgoth’s defeat and the end of the First Age the narratives “become less mythical, and more like stories and romances” (Letters 149).

Due to the lifespans and history that Tolkien establishes for his Elves, the deeds of the Second Age may have survivors, eyewitnesses, or other close ties to the assumed narrative present of the Third Age in The Lord of the Rings. Practically speaking, the narrative necessity of the Fall is not diminished with Morgoth’s defeat, but after the downfall of cosmogonic Evil, evil deeds must be accomplished in more prosaic and less mythological terms—and must also demonstrate correspondingly reduced effects. Sauron is a force of evil for these changed times: where Morgoth focused on corrupting creation itself, Sauron is bent mainly on “the creatures of earth, in their minds and wills” (MT 395, emphasis in original). In the Elves’ mythmaking, Sauron is closer to the ground, so to speak: the Elven mythmakers portray him as actively involved in the destruction he causes, and as a result, often interacting with his victims in person and at considerable length. This more immediate modus operandi situates Sauron particularly well for seduction, and readers are thus shown him resorting to this tactic regularly, where the Elven mythmakers have only the two outstanding examples for Morgoth.

The first seduction we see from Sauron is that of Celebrimbor and his craftsmen in Eregion. Although this is one instant that is not actually described with the word “seduction,” the hallmarks of seductive nature, appearance, and purpose are all present. Sauron targets these Elves partly out of spite because their kin had suspected and rejected his lies, but also because their pride makes them particularly open to his deceptions: Celebrimbor is “especially” easy to approach because he “desired in his heart to rival the skill and fame of Fëanor” (“History of Galadriel and Celeborn” [“History”] 236). Then, to accomplish this
seduction, Sauron relies heavily on appearances, taking on the “hue [...]of one both fair and wise” (Silm. 287), “posing” as an emissary from the Valar (“History” 236-7), using “all his arts upon Celeborn and his fellow-smiths” (“History” 237), and finally dropping his “disguise” when angered enough that it no longer serves his purpose (“History” 237). Finally, Sauron’s ultimate aim is the increase of his own power, which he eventually accomplishes through the One Ring (“History” 237, Silm. 287) as well as the lesser rings that he deals among “the other peoples of Middle-earth, hoping thus to bring under his sway all those that desired secret power beyond the measure of their kind” (Silm. 288).

This first narrative of seduction as enacted by Sauron again highlights his immediacy. Of the Maiar’s own seduction by Morgoth, readers are only told that it happened, in keeping with Tolkien’s plans for a “mythical” First Age (Letters 149). Of Sauron’s seducing others into evil, though, readers are given something more closely approaching an informational, if still “romantic” (Letters 149), narrative. Eregion and Ost-in-Edhil can be located on the maps of Middle-earth; the battles fought and deaths caused are named, if not detailed; and Tolkien’s meticulous timelines allow curious readers to pinpoint the Rings’ creation and the resulting wars within the “historical” narrative of Middle-earth.

Beyond transforming the mythical into the pseudo-historical, though, Sauron’s relative immediacy is also a means for Tolkien to have his Elven mythmakers explore and even question their governing theodicy. For the “mythical” First Age narratives, justifying evil as a byproduct of free will is fairly straightforward, as the mythmakers are presumably closer to the narrative demands of their own times than to most factual or historical sources, and thus,

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10 Certain parts of this narrative differ depending on the version. In “History” Celeborn is sometimes simply a Noldorin Elf of especial skill, while in The Silmarillion he is descended from Fëanor through his fifth son, Curufin. Additionally, in “History,” Galadriel and Celeborn rule Eregion, Celeborn rebels against them under Sauron’s influence to become lord of Ost-in-Edhil, and the Gwaith-i-Mirdain are “a society or brotherhood” (237); in The Silmarillion, Galadriel and Celeborn are not mentioned in conjunction with the establishment or rule of Eregion or Ost-in-Edhil, Celeborn is chief among the craftsmen of the Gwaith-i-Mirdain, and there is no rebellion. Although these differences do influence the amount of pride and vanity involved in Celeborn’s deception and eventual fall, both versions certainly still involve seduction.

11 In this, too, we can already see glimpses of the ways in which the Rings of Power that Sauron either creates or corrupts (i.e., the One Ring, the nine rings of Men, the seven rings of the Dwarves) will later function: through Sauron’s seduction of their wearers and the resulting possession and direction of their wills. Throughout The Lord of the Rings, readers are shown how it takes “an effort of will” to even move away from, or harm, the Ruling Ring (1.2.60), demonstrating how this device has become the pinnacle of Sauron’s seduction(s).
most effects of First Age evil are either spent (the Silmarils are out of reach, whether one accepts their loss to earth, sea, and sky) or also explicable in non-mythical terms (geographic abnormalities can be attributed either to Morgoth’s corruption of Arda or to natural events). For the elapsed yet visible Second Age, on the other hand, Elven mythmakers and audiences alike are still directly affected by its evils: the need for the Ring quest at the end of the Third Age, for example, can be traced to the Ruling Ring being made just after Sauron’s time in Eregion during the Second Age.

The treatment of evil is noticeably affected by the decreased narrative distance. In the narrative of Sauron and Eregion, for instance, the Elven mythmakers must distinguish between their own race and the fallen Maia to whom most of their recent woes are attributed: are Celebrimbor and his people evildoers because they were seduced, the same process by which Sauron supposedly began?

To reinstate the challenged theodicy, Tolkien has his mythmakers re-emphasize the role and absolute necessity of free will. The Elves of Eregion, and Celebrimbor in particular, are shown choosing not to continue following Sauron once they realize the error to which they have been seduced, and when they hold to this second choice, it becomes their defining narrative: Celebrimbor, for instance, is said to have been killed by Sauron when he refused to surrender the three elven rings (“History” 238). By showing that he crafts the Three and dies in their defense, the Elven mythmakers are also maintaining that Celebrimbor revoked his initial erroneous choice to follow Sauron’s teachings, and committed himself irrevocably to a better one by resisting the fallen Maia’s new designs. Though neither the Three nor his death can erase or reverse the terrible results of Celebrimbor’s initial seduction, then, the Elven mythmakers ultimately portray him as involved in evil deeds rather than an outright evildoer.

A final example of seduction in Tolkien’s legendarium, however, demonstrates the opposite. Where Sauron’s seduction of Celebrimbor and the Elves of Eregion is broken by further acts of free will once the Elves realize their error, Sauron’s seduction of Ar-Pharazôn, twenty-fifth and final king of Numenóre, paints the Man an evildoer as much as a participant in evil deeds.

Ar-Pharazôn, who is identified as the “captor of Sauron, by whom he was seduced” (Silm. 317), is infuriated when Sauron begins attacking Númenórean colonies along the coast of Middle-earth and it is rumored that the Maia plans to destroy Numenór (270). The furious Ar-Pharazôn envies Sauron’s self-awarded title as “King of Men,” is “filled with the desire of power unbounded and the sole dominion of his will” (270), and in pride decides that he will “compel Sauron to become his vassal and his servant” (270). Faced with certain defeat, Sauron surrenders to Ar-Pharazôn and is taken to Numenór as a
prisoner (271), where he spends over three years flattering the king and offering him secret knowledge before convincing Ar-Pharazon that the Man can address his fear of death by worshipping Morgoth (272) and then sailing on the Blessed Lands themselves to wrest immortality from the Valar (275). While the Elven mythmakers’ decreased narrative distance from these events keeps the story of Ar-Pharazon from being as “mythical” as those of the First Age (Letters 149), Tolkien also uses this event to reiterate the necessity of free will. Unlike Celebrimbor and the Elves of Eregion, Ar-Pharazon is not immediately drawn in by Sauron: he is “not yet deceived” when the fallen Maia feigns his surrender (Silm. 271), and takes the aforementioned three years to fully subscribe to Sauron’s whisperings (273). However, Ar-Pharazon’s longer period of grace does not make him more righteous than the more easily-deceived Elves of Eregion: instead, Ar-Pharazon never repents once he does buy into Sauron’s error.

Interestingly, the aftermath of Ar-Pharazon’s seduction produces the only event that the Elven mythmakers credit to actual divine intervention: where even Morgoth, the personification of cosmogonic evil, is eventually overcome by the combined armies of the Valar, Ar-Pharazon’s invasion of the Blessed Lands can only be forestalled by Eru Ilúvatar himself. It is tempting to read this as the Elven mythmakers diminishing Men, their younger mortal counterparts, by hinting that even the greatest of Elven errors never required this level of divine intervention, but there is another, more far-reaching consequence of Ilúvatar’s actions in sinking Numenor: Sauron is “robbed now of that shape in which he had wrought so great an evil, so that he could never again appear fair to the eyes of Men” (Silm. 280). In mythmaking terms: his evil still exists, but through divine intervention, his seductive grasp is diminished to a point where non-divine beings can hope to defeat him with sufficient will of their own.

This diminishment becomes evident in the supposed narrative present of The Lord of the Rings. Readers never see Sauron in the foreground again, and even as his modus operandi persists, the destruction of his “fair” shape (Silm. 280) means the loss of appearances, one of the three characteristics required to affect seduction directly. Consequently, any seduction that Sauron affects in The Lord of the Rings—that of Saruman, and of anyone who is tempted by the One Ring—can only be affected through some other appearance, such as Saruman being shown raw power and the Ringbearers beginning with Frodo being taken in by the “very fair and pure [...] rich and beautiful” form of their burden (I.2 60).

Grima Wormtongue may be the clearest indication of how reduced and imperfect the transmission of error and evil through seduction has become with Sauron’s diminishment. Wormtongue’s control of Théoden is tenuous and ultimately broken because the error has been diluted four times by the time it
reaches the Rohirric king. In addition, readers are never given enough information to learn whether this is in fact a seduction (i.e., Théoden chose the error) or simply an ensorcellment (Wormtongue used spells to force weakness upon the king).

An interesting conclusion emerges from this consideration of seduction in Tolkien’s legendarium. As we have already observed, Tolkien consciously prepares his texts as mythopoeic: that is, they are styled as later records of pre-existing “bodies of story” (Flieger, *Interrupted Music* 12) that have been informed by a specific “perspective, understanding, and worldview” and collected, rather than actually created, by a single individual (45). And, as we have also seen, seduction supports this purpose by providing Tolkien’s in-text mythmakers, the Elves, with a rationale for the existence of evil: evil exists because created beings misuse their free will, and it is transmitted as those beings deceive others into misusing theirs.

At first glance, this process seems very straightforward, and its benefits are evident. Seduction apparently offers a final answer to the practically theological “problem of evil” in Arda, as cosmogonic Evil is continually revealed as a misappropriated, sub-creative shadow of the power that only truly comes from, and ever returns to, cosmogonic Good.

The addition of Tolkien’s mythopoeic project, however, complicates such a tidy reading. Myth remains a product of culture, whether this is the imagined culture of Tolkien’s Elves or an actual culture we recognize from our own past or present, and as such a product, myth must inevitably be shaped by both the needs and the beliefs of its originating culture. In the primary world, for instance, we can observe this impulse in the ways that a dominant culture’s prominent narratives tend to vilify or ignore its enemies and pariahs. In Tolkien’s mythmaking, though, the narratives of seduction itself can be put to this use.

Much like Baudrillard argues that seduction is only an illusive mimicry of power, Jean Bethke Elshtain maintains that evil itself is similarly seductive: its figures may seem alluring, even when their deeds are not, because at least they appear to have the power and impunity to commit such deeds (Elshtain 81). The narratives of seduction, however, hold the same lure for the mythmakers and storytellers who use them: such narratives seem to promise explanations of how their tellers differ from those tellers’ enemies. Although Tolkien’s Arda does provide a setting in which the eucatastrophic ending can

12 Thanks to Leah Davydov for requesting this clarification.
feasibly happen, “we cannot escape the conclusion that stories about such beings and their defeat are ultimately less ‘factual’ than functional” for their in-text creators (Nagy 130). The presence of a seduction narrative before or during a momentous event in the legendarium seems to signify the Elven mythmakers’ own stake in that narrative rather more than it attempts to explain the presence of evil there. For instance, narratives that the mythmakers would want to end well can be shaped in a way that emphasizes one part of the seduction process over the other: Celebrimbor’s repentance, for instance, is made material in the survival of the three elven rings, which ultimately redeems his image in the mythmakers’ eyes. Furthermore, the in-text mythmakers can use seduction as a signifying shorthand when little or nothing can possibly be remembered of an event, as in the seduction of Mairon. The ultimate result, then, is that Tolkien’s mythmakers may seem less concerned with fighting evil than with defining it to their own benefit.

On the textual or mythopoeic level, we as readers can understand the need for such convolutions: Tolkien himself writes that he intended for Sauron to be the last “mythological” evil in Middle-earth (MT 404), and his mythmakers are meant to be understood as working during a narrative present in which that last mythological evil has finally been defeated, thus legitimizing their culture’s struggles over the last several millennia. On the in-text or mythic level, though, we might be disappointed that our scrutiny has revealed Tolkien’s mythmakers to be as biased—or, we might even say, as human—as we are.

However, even this disappointment has its uses. As Ursula Le Guin once claimed, “Those who fault Tolkien on the Problem of Evil are usually those who have an answer to the Problem of Evil—which he did not” (174). Because Tolkien’s legendarium is ultimately a mythopoeic undertaking, it explores and represents the “problem of evil” via mythmakers whose culture has been shaped by contact with cosmogonic figures of that problem. As such, readers should keep in mind that neither Tolkien nor his mythmakers mean to offer us such an explanation—as easy as it is to be seduced into thinking that myth does hold the answers.
Works Cited

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