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Robert T. Tally Jr.

Texas State University, robert.tally@txstate.edu

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Cover Page Footnote

This paper was originally presented at the "Roundtable on Tolkien Fandom and Adaptations," organized by Robin Anne Reid, at the Popular Culture Association conference, San Antonio, Texas, on April 5, 2023. I thank Robin and my fellow panelists, Bianca L. Beronio, Cameron Bourquein, Cait Coker, and the audience for their generous feedback.

Sauron: Weirdly Sexy

Robert T. Tally Jr.



You may have seen the meme on social media. (If not, here it is.) The images come from the well-known “Mirror of Galadriel” scene in Peter Jackson’s film adaption *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), but the joke is based on what happens in the first season of the Amazon Prime series *The Lord of the Rings:*

The Rings of Power (2022), which “stars” a younger version of Galadriel. In the opening scenes of that series, we discover that she is obsessed — obsessed to the point of near-madness! — with finding and destroying Sauron, who is not only the enemy of her people (i.e., the Noldor especially, plus elves more generally) but also the murderer of her beloved brother. So it’s *personal*. This vendetta and its accompanying problems animate the principal plotline of the show in Season One.

In an improbable “meet cute” upon the open ocean, the elven warrior Galadriel takes up with a mysterious human named Halbrand, who even the most obtuse Tolkien fans readily identified as Sauron-in-disguise many episodes prior to the so-called “reveal” in the season finale. (Some were hoping he would turn out to be the Witch-king of Angmar or another such character, but clearly that was just because they were so disappointed in seeing how uninspired and easily-solved the showrunners had made their purported “mysteries.”) Sure enough, the tall, dark, and handsome Halbrand does reveal himself as Sauron to Galadriel, in an odd and ridiculous sort of marriage proposal — or, is it simply a business proposal, who knows? — in which he claims that they could rule Middle-earth together as a couple. This unlikely conjugal relationship is justified by what seems an unnecessary *quid pro quo*, as Sauron says to her: “You bind me to the light, and I bind you to power. Together, we can save this Middle-earth.” It is not at all clear why or how Galadriel’s “light” would help Sauron to heal or to rule, but then the whole point of making him so sexy in the first place was likely just to create a romantic entanglement for Galadriel. She is, after all, conveniently single, having “lost” her husband years ago (but then, of course, we all expect Celeborn to show up eventually in some subsequent season). It is an iron-clad rule in television, apparently stronger than even the foundations of the earth, that two attractive and single people must be paired in some sort of romantic relationship, no matter what! Hence, Sauron has to be “weirdly sexy.”

The story of Sauron is one of the most intriguing of all those in J. R. R. Tolkien’s legendarium, but like so many “tales untold” it is only briefly sketched out in Tolkien’s writings, all the less so in the work published during his lifetime. But even there, Sauron is more nuanced than most give him credit for. He is not the hideous monster that many readers think of, nor a gigantic steel-clad titan, and certainly not the flaming eyeball or otherwise disembodied spirit of malevolence that filmgoers have been exposed to. (For example, in a letter, Tolkien describes him as being tall, but not gigantic, and having a human form [*Letters* 332]; in *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum mentions the four fingers on one of his hands [III.iii.641], registering Sauron’s obviously human and corporeal form, which persisted even after Isildur cut a finger off millennia before.) It is not just that Sauron looks like a human or is incarnated in some humane form, but he almost certainly looks good, physically at least, if not also in a broader ethical sense. Sauron is not only *not* horrible-looking, but it would clearly make far more sense

in the context of the narrative and in consideration of his history to view him as a very attractive person, in fact. In this paper, I want to push both against the gist of the meme's humor and against the many critics of *The Rings of Power's* Halbrand character by suggesting that "weirdly sexy" is in fact an appropriate, even quite accurate, characterization of Sauron, especially in the Second Age, the historical setting of *The Rings of Power*.

Let me say up front, if there is a confusion about Sauron's form, features, and characteristics, not to mention the way he wields his immense and terrible power, Tolkien himself is not the problem in this regard. It sounds odd to put it this way, especially about works that include dragons and wizards and such, but Tolkien had a profoundly *realistic* view of how the world operates, and that realism informed his sense of the geopolitics of Middle-earth in his writings. Among many examples of this, we can see how what some would have treated as the climax and thus end of *The Hobbit*, the killing of Smaug, for Tolkien only opened up further potential problems, ultimately leading the Battle of Five Armies and later Bilbo's frustrations upon his return to Bag End. Similarly, the destruction of the One Ring might seem a climactic moment in *The Lord of the Rings*, but Tolkien was aware that much, much more had to be revealed about the post-War of the Ring condition throughout many regions, not to mention the author's canny sense of the way such a narrative such "end" (although, famously, his intended epilogue was not included in the novel). This is just to say, Tolkien knew "the way of the world," and he was keenly aware of how politics worked. While it is true he used terms like "evil" to refer to Sauron and others, based largely on his moral rather than literary or political views, Tolkien established a world in which the "evil" of various actors were revealed to be connected to often pitiable weaknesses, even forgivable ones, and virtually everything that happened in Middle-earth was motivated by what we may think of as "good" intentions. Sauron is no exception.

Without getting too deep into the posthumously published weeds, we can say that Sauron's initial "fall" from grace came when he joined the rebellious Vala Melkor, a.k.a. Morgoth (Tolkien's original *diabolus*), thus declaring war upon the "good" Valar and others at or near the very beginning of the time in a worldly sense. But we are told that he was primarily attracted to Melkor's *power*, more than anything, and Sauron sought the power to make the world orderly, safe, and peaceful. Above all, he hated chaos, and so his desire for order seems somewhat reasonable; moreover, by having the power to make the world more orderly and thus less dangerous or chaotic, Sauron likely felt he had a positive duty to do so. By cleaving to the most powerful being in the world, Morgoth, Sauron became corrupted, but his aims were to gain knowledge and power to make the world a better place, in his view, all along. (Hence, Tolkien's subtle warning about "the road to hell" and all that, particularly in the case of "reformers" in his own all too real world in the twentieth century.) After the defeat of Morgoth, we learn that

Sauron—perhaps in earnest, perhaps not—repented, but that he also strongly desired to “heal” Middle-earth of its many wounds, including those he himself had inflicted. When the Valar “abandoned” Middle-earth after the First Age ended, Sauron was arguably the most powerful being still remaining, and perhaps he felt the need to bring order to the post-apocalyptic chaos that the godlike beings had left behind them in the aftermath of the War of Wrath.

Bear in mind what the world looked like at the beginning of the Second Age. *The Silmarillion* describes the sight upon which the former prisoners of Angband gazed when the war had ended: “the northern regions of the western world were rent asunder, and the sea roared through many chasms, and there was confusion and great noise; the rivers perished or found new paths, and the valleys were upheaved and the hills trod down, and the [river] Sirion was no more” (303). Fans and scholars do not always think of it in such terms, but for those living in Middle-earth at the time, the Second Age was really a kind of post-apocalyptic world. Following the War of Wrath, the lands of Middle-earth were essentially a dystopian wasteland, a “world that was changed,” “neglected by the gods.” Although the Valar invited the elves and a handful of noble humans to leave it, giving them the almost paradisaical islands Tol Eressëa and Númenor on which to dwell and thrive, the remaining elves—including “proud” ones like Galadriel who refused the summons—as well as the men, dwarves, and (of course) orcs were left in darkness, “troubled by many evil things” (310).

Enter Sauron, assuming his role as a would-be healer and ruler of this blasted landscape. For Tolkien writes that Sauron, at least at first, had “fair motives: the reorganizing and rehabilitation of the ruin of Middle-earth,” and “he still at first considered the (economic) well-being of other inhabitants of the Earth” (*Letters* 243). (The parenthetical “economic” suggests that Sauron’s sense of well-being was itself materialist and pragmatic, as in making sure people had food, housing, and so on, as opposed to the more spiritual and less tangible aspects of wellness.) Indeed, Sauron’s “motives and those of the elves seemed to go partly together: the healing of the desolate lands” (*Letters* 152), which is what set the stage for the crafting of the rings of power, after all. The First Age ends with an apocalypse, but for those left in Middle-earth in the Second Age, life goes on, and that age’s history is a testament to humane survival in a post-apocalyptic condition. (For a marvelous analysis of the period, see Norbert Schürer’s superb essay “Second Age, Middle Age.”)

The reader’s perspective in *The Lord of the Rings* is obviously biased in favor of Sauron’s enemies, given that the narrative is presented to us as originating in *The Red Book of Westmarch*, ostensibly written by Bilbo Baggins, drawing upon elvish and Númenorean records while in Rivendell, with Frodo, Sam, and other hobbits later contributing to it (see Fimi 128). These hobbits are already on the “side” of the elves, even more so than on that of the dwarves in *The Hobbit*, despite

the fact that Bilbo is a member of Thorin’s company. (For example, in the Battle of Five Armies, Bilbo gravitates toward and stands with, not his dwarvish companions with whom he had shared such hardships or with the men from Laketown who had sheltered him, but with the elves of Mirkwood, even though they had been the enemies and captors of his own friends.) Gandalf registers a profoundly pro-elvish position, even with the “more dangerous and less wise” elves of Mirkwood (*The Hobbit* 167), and unquestionably with Elrond Half-elven and Galadriel and their people. And certainly Aragorn, ancestral enemy of Sauron, is presented in the most favorable light, a true king whose diffidence about assuming the mantle of absolute rule is a sign that he is one of the very few who can legitimately take up the role. So it is no wonder that many would find Sauron to be *simply* evil, or that they see his many allies and supporters as either being themselves inherently evil or somehow being “enthralled” to Sauron’s will. But Tolkien himself is too smart for this, despite himself, perhaps.

A Sauron who was purely evil would hardly be as effective, but as I have discussed in my *Representing Middle-earth: Tolkien, Form, and Ideology* and touch on below, Tolkien utterly denied the very idea of “absolute evil.” As for his widening spheres of influence among the peoples of Middle-earth, Sauron is influential not because of his power to enslave but because of his power to *seduce*, and in most cases those who are seduced likely believe it is in their interest to be on Sauron’s side. If one wishes to seduce, one needs to be seductive, to state it rather tautologically.

Famously, when seducing the elves of Eregion in the Second Age, Sauron took on a “fair form,” presenting himself as Annatar, Lord of Gifts. Sauron almost certainly was the greatest craftsman left in the world, and being in reality a Maia of Aulë (i.e., the Vala most closely associated with powers of craft, smithing, and invention), Sauron-as-Annatar was undeniably alluring to a race of elves typified by their love of arts and crafts. Moreover, as noted above, Sauron’s actual motives may not have been wholly bad. Tolkien says that Sauron, at least at first, truly did repent his “evil deeds” of the First Age, and thus Sauron hoped to heal the world for whose destruction he was in part responsible. Elrond himself, in *The Lord of the Rings*, states plainly that “nothing is evil in the beginning. Even Sauron was not so” (II.ii.267).

Even if we recognize the “evil” in Sauron, focusing on his malicious intentions while seducing Celebrimbor’s people, one cannot help but wonder at how much his words *rang true* for such elves, especially considering that “they had at first much profit from his friendship” (*Silmarillion* 343). As Sauron (in the guise of Annatar) explained to them,

Alas, for the weakness of the great! For a mighty king is Gil-galad, and wise in all lore is Master Elrond, and yet they will not aid me in my labours. Can

it be that they do not desire to see other lands become as blissful as their own? But wherefore should Middle-earth remain for ever desolate and dark, whereas the Elves could make it as fair as Eressëa, nay even as Valinor? And since you have not returned thither, as you might, I perceive that you love this Middle-earth, as do I. Is it not then our task to labour together for its enrichment, and for the raising of all the Elven-kindreds that wander here untaught to the height of that power and knowledge which those have who are beyond the Sea? (343–344)

Sauron-as-Annatar's speech inspires deeds of greatness and nobility, essentially tasking the elves with using their own vast powers to make the world a better place for all who dwell within it. In this context, perhaps it is also worth noting that the three elven rings—created by Celebrimbor, unsullied by Sauron's touch, and wielded with apparently benign effectiveness by Elrond, Galadriel, and Gandalf [given to him by Cirdan] in the Third Age—nevertheless would not have been possible without the ringlore provided by Sauron himself; thus, one could argue that much of the “good” such ringbearers were able to accomplish owed something to Sauronian technology. Hence, even those who rejected his counsel at the time benefitted from it later, so little wonder that others among their kind who profited from his friendship would heed his words, particularly when they resonated with such a noble calling. Sauron's rhetoric in this speech is seductive, yes, but there is nothing it that would be an unreasonable thing for the elves of Eregion to desire.

Parenthetically, I would add quick note regarding the “Annatar” gambit. Although we know Sauron to have been a shape-shifter in the mythic First Age, taking on the form of a vampire bat or a great wolf at need, I tend to think of Sauron of the Second Age here not less as a literal shape-shifter than as a shrewd politician. Elrond says that, at this time, “he was not yet evil to behold” (II.ii.242), which appears to say more about the beholder's perspective than about the actual visage of the one beheld. True, he disguised his identity, but “fair form” seems to me to be more metaphorical. I suspect he would have been physically attractive, sure, but his “fairness” here really just refers to having a pleasing form, and what would most please Celebrimbor's artisanal folk is knowledge and craftsmanship, not merely a pretty face. By way of comparison, we might examine Tolkien's explanation of “the voice of Saruman” in this regard. Tolkien insisted that there was no actual “magic” being employed. Rather the effectiveness of this “voice” had to do with Saruman's eloquence and rhetorical power: “Saruman's voice was not hypnotic but persuasive. Those who listened to him were not in danger of falling into a trance, but of agreeing with his arguments” (*Letters* 276–277). Along those lines, I think that when we hear that Sauron in the Third Age can no longer take on a fair form, this is not a sign of a literally ugly or monstrous visage or even a changed physical appearance at all, but rather it indicates that the elves and their allies would no

longer be fooled by his efforts to win them over or charm them with seductive speeches. In other words, Sauron does not become monstrous to look upon; he just becomes recognized for who he is, and no degree of sexiness will lead the elves to agree to work with him again.

Similarly, I think it is also clear that Sauron's many allies, including men from various cultures and regions, not to mention orcs and other more literally demonized creatures, were not themselves "evil" or in any way "enslaved to his will." They are not forced against their own will to fight for his side, at least, no more so than any other soldiers in wartime would be, as the conversation between Gorbag and Shagrat makes plain in *The Lord of the Rings* (see IV.x.735–742). Rather, these were people who had seen Sauron as an ally, and perhaps also a leader and protector, who would help them and their people, improving their lot and perhaps aiding them in securing a future worth living in. Glóin's statement during the Council of Elrond, in which he describes emissaries sent by Sauron to Erebor to help gain the support of the dwarves there (see II.ii.241), is enough to prove that Sauron used diplomacy and negotiation, rather than brute force, in the attempt to win allies and to achieve his ends. Notwithstanding the language often employed in the text, featuring words like "evil" or "slaves" and so forth, it is clear from the conversations amongst orcs that were overheard by Pippin and by Sam that even those creatures are in no way in "thrall" to Sauron or Saruman, and they are perfectly capable (again, like soldiers everywhere) of debating strategy, questioning their leaders' competence, and even rebelling against their so-called "masters." Presented as it is from the somewhat elvish ideological perspective of Bilbo, Frodo, and others, the narrative of *The Lord of the Rings* can easily have readers believing that Easterlings or Haradrim or the Wild Men of Dunland are themselves "evil," but clearly those who fight for Saruman or Sauron do so because they believe it is in their interests to do so. Moreover, that such men fight alongside orcs at Helm's Deep or in the Battle of the Pelennor Fields suggests that the orcs are themselves not demons, but merely other men — indeed, distinguished only from other men by a racial and racist characterization, as Charles W. Mills has so eloquently pointed out — who are also fighting for the side they are on for good reason, presumably in their own rational self-interest.

This does not mean that readers must sympathize with the enemies of Rivendell, Lothlórian, Rohan, and Gondor, only that they should imagine them *as* "enemies," not as beings of pure evil or as monsters. Demonizing the enemy is common enough, especially in wartime, but Tolkien knew that this practice was just as dehumanizing — thus just as wrong — as anything you imagine your "demonic" enemy to be doing (see, e.g., *Letters* 111, 195). Various kingdoms, cultures, and peoples from various regions did actually support Sauron, actively lending their efforts in support of his campaigns. This fact enriches our sense of the world system of Middle-earth, just as Tolkien's nuanced and complex depictions

of the moral vicissitudes in many characters enrich our understanding of the spiritual constitution of this world: Bilbo's transformation from bourgeois homebody to adventurous non-heroic "hero," Saruman's tragic fall from grace, Galadriel's redemption in the scene at her Mirror, Denethor's sad decline into hopelessness and madness, Gollum's near repentance before it was dashed by Sam of all people (e.g., Tolkien mentions this as "the most tragic moment in the Tale," one that proved that much "evil" in the world is done by "the good" who act with the best intentions [*Letters* 330]), and so on. Noting that "Satan fell," Tolkien denies the existence of "Absolute Evil," and although he continues to allow that word to be used throughout the narratives, Tolkien states flatly, "I do not think that at any rate any 'rational being' is wholly evil" (*Letters* 243). Sauron, too, cannot be wholly evil, but one can imagine that whatever evil deeds he performed or suborned, he likely used his powers to seduce, as well as power to intimidate, to destroy, or to rule, along the way. Being weirdly sexy would undoubtedly help.

If Sauron later proved monstrous to some who had first trusted him, that does not mean he was not personally alluring beforehand. His followers were many, and included at times even some of the most noble. Seducing others to his side in an effort to reshape the geopolitical order to fit his own designs, Sauron's immense power might even be at its most visible when he is being seductive. In a sense, then, Sauron's being "weirdly sexy" is about the most Sauron-like way that he could be. A sexy Sauron is far more dangerous and threatening than any flaming eyeballs, that's for sure.

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