Beyond the Fantasy of Orcs: Orcish Transformation in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*

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Introduction

This article delves into the concept and portrayal of evil in J.R.R. Tolkien's universe. It specifically examines how Amazon's TV series, *The Rings of Power*, reshapes, revitalizes, and modifies the notion of 'evil' in the Tolkien lore, as explored in the first section. Additionally, the article explores in its second section the intricate concept of *phantazein* employed by Tolkien. This concept serves not only as a theoretical framework for comprehending what imagination is about, including depictions of good and evil, but also as a productive tool for harnessing its potential.

In Tolkien's world, Evil is often portrayed as a pervasive, corrupting force that threatens the very existence of the world. This notion is exemplified in the character of Morgoth (or Melkor), the central antagonist of the First Age in Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* (or *Legendarium*, as he himself called it). Morgoth, akin to a fallen angel in Judeo-Christian cosmology (Coutras 2016), embodies pure malevolence and seeks dominion over all of Arda, that is, Middle-earth, the Undying Lands of Valinor, and the island of Númenor, bestowed by the gods upon the noble race of Men in the late First Age. Morgoth's intention is to subjugate of all its inhabitants to his will—be they gods, elves, or men.

As the narrative unfolds, from *The Silmarillion* to *The Lord of the Rings*, evil undergoes a transformation from a nebulous, abstract force to a more personalized and incarnate entity (Walther 2020). This evolution is evident in Morgoth, and the character of Sauron, "The Dark Lord", but also the wizard Saruman, and the once-innocent hobbit turned wretched creature, Gollum. These figures, previously characterized by nobility or goodness, succumb to greed and the lust for power, illustrating how evil can adapt and become more intricate as it assumes different forms.

However, Tolkien's perspective on Orcs diverges from this pattern; the matter of Orcs is tricky. While he fought with crafting an origin myth for Orcs that aligned with his incorporation of moral theologies rooted in Augustine and Manichaeism, he maintained that Orcs should be perceived as legion, always in the plural, and created solely for total war and utter annihilation. "Tolkien's use and characterization of the orcs parallels the demonization of the enemy in wartime", Robert T. Tally writes (Tally 2019: 2). They were not conceived as singular beings with souls or an enduring purpose beyond their destructive role (Rearick 2004).

It would be unjust to claim that Amazon's ambitious and costly television series, *The Rings of Power* (McKay, Payne 2022-), completely subverts Tolkien's epitome of evil. Nevertheless, as we hope to show in what follows, the series' creators challenge and infuse it with nuanced shades, particularly concerning the concept of transformation and various instantiations of otherness. One of the significant modernizations introduced in *The Rings of Power* is a more diverse and inclusive cast of characters. While Tolkien's works were products of their time and primarily featured a homogeneous, Eurocentric world, the Amazon series makes a conscious effort to reflect the diversity of today's audience.[1] Furthermore, the series explores the allure of transformation and the underlying motives that drive individuals and entities to change – motives that are intimately connected to *phantazein*, which is Tolkien's idea of sub-creation, worldbuilding, and imagination. This will be taken up later in this article. The introduction of the character Adar (only vaguely indicated in the authoritative Tolkien lore), once an Elf and the "Father" of the Orcs, argues for the right of all living beings to coexist in the world and have a voice of their own. Here, Amazon modernizes Tolkien's tradition, not only by embracing 21st-century sociocultural themes such as racial diversity and environmentally conscious thinking but also by addressing innate moral and cultural opacities within Tolkien's works.

In *The Rings of Power*, evil takes on a tangible form and follows its own transformational trajectory. It becomes increasingly human, manifesting individuality and influencing others while simultaneously yearning for a passive existence.[2] Evil seeks to secure a stronghold, a region of the world from which it can orchestrate its malevolent designs (Tally 2016).[3] In many ways, *The Rings of Power* is a drama of how Evil's ambition is tensioned between restlessness and dwelling and craving a geographical as well as socio-cultural territory of its own.

Evil's alteration, both in its abstract and incarnate manifestations, confronts the very questions that troubled Tolkien. The origin of evil, such as

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[1] The emphasis on promoting diversity has ignited a series of controversies, particularly in the context of the show's portrayal of Elves, which deviates from their traditional Caucasian appearance. Notably, websites like Red State, known for their far-right stance, have raised objections, asserting that the series deviates from Tolkien's vision of a medieval-mythical world by casting Black and Latino actors in prominent roles, such as Ismael Cruz Cordova, who portrays the elf warrior Arondir. They argue that these roles should be exclusively reserved for white actors, based on their interpretation of Tolkien's original description of Elvish characters in his novels from the 1950s (Svetkey 2022).

[2] Spoiler alert! It wasn't until they were filming the third episode of the first season of *The Rings of Power* that producers J.D. Payne and Patrick McKay informed Australian actor Charlie Vickers he was, indeed, playing Sauron. This secret was kept from most of the cast and crew as late into the production as possible. Alluding to the idea that the formation of Evil can be strategized, it is progressive and in a way can be 'found', Vickers, being the first actor to play Sauron as a human being, likens Sauron's ability to shape-shift and fully immerse himself into being a human in order to accomplish his agenda to that of a thespian. See Vejvoda 2022.

[3] One can observe the modern trend of portraying malevolent entities as Romantic outsiders and outcasts, as discussed by Hartinger 2012.

the Orcs, remains elusive. If they are indeed living creatures under the Sun, and if all creation is inherently good, as posited by Eru Ilúvatar (the one God of the *Legendarium*), why did they turn to evil? Some might argue, like the Manicheans, that the world inherently harbors a malevolent impulse, a proclivity for doing harm. Yet, Tolkien sought to leave an enigmatic mark on this issue, preserving the Orcs as a mystery. And why does evil, or evilness in a broader sense, shift from an elemental force in the early shape of Morgoth to a nuanced, sentient form that favours order, organization, and hierarchical power structures?[4]

Amazon's *The Rings of Power* contributes to a contemporary reinterpretation or perhaps a reimagining of Tolkien's lore. To show how, section one dives into Tolkien's stance on evil and juxtaposes it with Amazon's disruption of it, for instance how Galadriel becomes the most unlikely racist of them all. This is followed by section two in which we discuss the nature of transformation and its relation to Tolkien's conception of *phantazein*.

The nature of Evil and the (new) role of Orcs

Martina Juričková posits that Tolkien adhered to the doctrine of Christianity, which draws from Augustine's teachings, and thus believed that nothing was inherently evil from the outset. This perspective stems from the notion that everything is created in the image of God, who embodies absolute goodness (Juričková 2019: 2). In this view, true evil cannot exist independently since the essence of every entity is rooted in its mere existence, its being. Evil, in this context, arises because of a deficiency or a perversion of good and is therefore reliant on the existence of good, much like a parasite (ibid.). Good can exist independently of evil, but evil cannot exist without good as its counterpart.

Tolkien's engagement with the concept of the "theft of the unripe fruit", as seen in his unfinished work "The New Shadow" (Walther 2022), demonstrates his deep connection to Augustinian dogma where evil is understood as the act of preventing the full realization of an entity's true potential (Costabile 2017; Walther 2021). Tolkien adapts Augustine's doctrine of goodness to his own concepts of how good can be perverted or corrupted and how it can lead to disfigurement or reduction (Smith 2006). Juričková highlights that evil, in Tolkien's art, can deform or diminish one's being. An example is Sauron, who ultimately becomes a mere shadow and later just an eye. This illustrates Tolkien's belief that evil not only corrupts individuals but also dehumanizes them, stripping away their physical form. They are reduced to a bestial state, as exemplified by characters like the

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[4] Nevertheless, while Adar is depicted as a 'noble' Orc, aligning him more closely with the aristocratic and hierarchically structured world of Tolkien, the majority of Orcs in *The Rings of Power* do not espouse this societal framework. Instead, they view it as oppressive and patronizing.

wretched Gollum[5], the snake-like Wormtongue in *The Lord of the Rings*, or the facially mutilated Adar in Amazon's *The Rings of Power*.[6] In Tolkien's narratives, disfigurement is closely linked to dehumanization or, as his mythological world advances into the 'modern' ages, de-individualization (Curry 1997; Rosebury 2003). Sauron and his ideals become defaced, reduced to a necromantic entity or an Eye surrounded by "Nothingness", as Frodo witnesses in Galadriel's enchanted mirror in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. This portrayal of evil aligns with an Augustinian interpretation, where evil lacks both goodness and existence.

However, it is worth noting that while Sauron is largely depicted as lacking physicality in most of Tolkien's work, he still exerts a significant impact on other beings (Tally 2023). This influence occurs mainly through proxies: firstly, by manifesting as a psychological or pathological force that corrupts, induces despair, fosters hopelessness, and causes disorientation in different creatures. Second, he controls his operations through armies, spies, alliances, slaves, and remote repression. Third, Sauron's presence is made tangible through the very landscape and geography he occupies or has seized (Walther 2020).

Yet, within Tolkien's narratives, traces of Manichean evil are also discernible (Fry 2015). The Manicheans believed in the existence of two equally potent principles or gods – one representing good, associated with Light, and the other embodying evil, associated with Darkness. These two forces engage in a perpetual struggle for dominion over the world, influencing human actions and decisions (Juričková, p. 3). This framework gives rise to the poetic concept of "splintered light", a prevalent motif in Tolkien (Flieger 2002).

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[5] Displaying schizophrenic symptoms that seem to have emerged from an unwilling descent into the murky underbelly of Middle-earth, Gollum is a captivating character within Tolkien's mythology. He introduces a more 'modern' and intrapsychic interpretation of evil, akin to the Jungian perspective, when compared to the visceral destruction caused by Melkor and the power-hungry ambitions of Sauron. Another intriguing hypothesis suggests that Tolkien might have drawn inspiration for the name Gollum from the Jewish Golem. The term golem appears only once in the *Bible* (Psalm 139:16) and is the precursor to the Golem in Jewish folklore. A connection to Christian theology entered the narrative when Tolkien revised *The Hobbit* in 1951. At this juncture, Gollum transforms into a fallen Hobbit in need of compassion and mercy. Furthermore, as an animated and anthropomorphic entity crafted entirely from inanimate matter, the Jewish golem serves as the antithesis to Augustinian (Christian) belief. If life can be constructed from pre-existing material, it implies that the distortion of being as a symbol of evil does not diminish the intrinsic essence bestowed by God upon humanity. Rather, it signifies a disruption in the ontological substance already shaped by humans or, at the very least, something that exists within the human realm. In this latter scenario, its origin remains untraceable, as it no longer traces directly back to God and God's creation. Paradoxically, the Jewish golem becomes 'unmade' within Christian orthodoxy. See also Wendling 2008.

[6] While bearing facial scars, Adar distinguishes himself from the other Orcs by not sharing in their dehumanization, disfigurement, and inherent ugliness. He aligns more closely with the archetype of the Byronic hero from the Romantic era, embodying an aestheticism that resonates with his inner moral character and the Elvish features he has retained.

A key element of Tolkien's storytelling that highlights the dual nature of evil (Laugesen & Walther, in press), straddling both Augustinian and Manichean origins, is the Ring. On one hand, the Ring is set in motion by Sauron as he invests it with his powers, making it a direct extension of the perverted good that has turned to evil within him, aligning with the Augustinian perspective (Davison 2013). On the other hand, the Ring also exhibits traits of an independent evil force in the Manichean sense (Caldecott 2009). It possesses its own will, as frequently observed by characters like Frodo and Gandalf.

Before Oromë's discovery of the Elves at Cuiviénen, during a time when the Earth was a flat sphere, Morgoth managed to abduct some of them and twisted them into the first Orcs. Tolkien believed that the creation of Orcs served as a grievous insult to the Children of Ilúvatar. Orcs served under Morgoth in the First Age and under Sauron in the Second and Third Ages. Around the year 1000 of the Second Age, the era Amazon's *The Rings of Power* focuses on, Sauron, sometimes bearing the name Annatar, reappeared in Middle-earth and claimed Mordor as his own, where he began constructing the Barad-dûr stronghold. During the War of the Elves and Sauron in the year 1700 of the Second Age, a battle led by Elrond and the Númenóreans, the Orcs served as Sauron's primary military force.

What *The Rings of Power* accomplishes, as suggested by Leon Miller in his *Polygon* column, is presenting the Orcs as "more three-dimensional villains" than in Tolkien's original work, thereby "showcasing their softer side" (Miller 2022). Episode six, titled "Udûn", features a full-scale battle between Men, Elves, and Orcs. After their defeat, the leader of the Orc pack, Adar, engages in a conversation with Galadriel about the complex topic of Orcs and their moral rights. Adar asserts that they deserve the same fundamental rights as any of Middle-earth's other sentient races and that their dubious origins should not make them any less the children of their world's god.

Galadriel responds with a recollection from thousands of years ago when she heard stories of Elves taken by Morgoth, subjected to torture, twisted, and remade into a new and corrupted form of life. To her, Orcs are "a mistake, made in mockery" of life. Adar, however, insists on being called an "Uruk" and argues that his "children" have no master, no longer serve Sauron or Morgoth, and deserve their place under the sun (even though the sun is fatal to them). 'Adar' is a gender-neutral name of Hebrew and Babylonian origin that means 'darkened', 'eclipsed', and 'majestic'. In the Silvan Elvish language that Tolkien composed, 'Adar' is Sindarin for 'father'. Adar is the father of the Orcs. "Adar is an elf who is not an elf and an orc that is not an orc", Rotem Rusak writes in a *Nerdist* column (Rusak 2022). Adar counters Galadriel by saying: "Each one has a name, a heart. We are creations of the One, Master of the Secret Fire, the same as you. As worthy of the breath of

life and just as worthy of a home". Adar's revelation implies that not only do the Orcs have a right to live but also to build a home of their own.

The fact that Adar does not get burnt by the sun is crucial.[7] In Tolkien illustrator David Day's books "Years of the Lamps" refer to the Lamps of the Valar, Illuin and Ormal, that stood upon pillars in the far north and south of the world during the Spring of Arda. They continued to shine for 1,600 Valian Years until their destruction by Melkor. The period after Day calls "Years of the Sun" that began towards the end of the First Age of the Children of Ilúvatar and continued through the Second, Third, and part of the Fourth in Tolkien's stories. Tolkien himself estimated that modern times would correspond to the sixth or seventh age. That Orcs do not endure under the sun is also a metaphor indicating that they are not 'shun upon', enlightened or behold, and thus are not genuine beings. This is in accordance with the Augustinian dogma: existence is goodness created by an external power, and it lives under the sun (or the Lamps), unless it, like the Orcs, has been tarnished, dispossessed of life, and driven to the shadows or darkness. The burning question is thus whether the Orcs can (or are allowed to) trace their cultural heritage to a point in history before or after they were burnt, chased away from the sun. The lack of permission for them to subsist under the sun means that they possess no goodness (since they are un-made, destroyed, rather than created, and no light shines upon them), and on top of that, they have no history (Sabo 2007). The Orc conundrum evidently parallels the Christian narrative of the Fall and the Original Sin very often touched upon by Tolkien (Schweicher 1996; Freeman 2022) – but in a mocking, stained fashion. And the fact that Adar, the spokesperson of the damper Orcs, even raises this question does not affect the Augustinian interpretation, but rather it confronts the socio-cultural and ethico-juridical world in which he and the Orcs are forced to live as shadowy beasts.

And speaking about history: We should not forget that Adar's societal apostasy happens in a time of great turmoil and change that forms the backdrop of *The Rings of Power*. In Tolkien's mythology the Earth (Arda) went from a flat sphere with glowing Trees and later Lamps to a round globe with sun and moon to the cataclysmic downfall of Númenor where The Undying Lands (Aman and Valinor) were forever separated from the known world (Flieger 2006).

Adar implies that the Augustinian corruption of goodness might have also affected the revengeful and morally blinded Galadriel. He suggests, "It would

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[7] A prevalent motif in the portrayal of vampires is the notion that those who retain remnants of their humanity can venture into sunlight, whereas the entirely corrupted and monstrous are relegated to nocturnal activity (Höglund 2011). One theory, which echoes Augustinian theology, is that since they are soulless evil creatures of darkness, they are set apart from God (the light). Thus, when they are exposed to sunlight, it is like being exposed to God, and this is anathema to them.

seem I'm not the only Elf alive who has been transformed by darkness. Perhaps your search for Morgoth's successor should have ended in your own mirror". Interestingly, many critics of *The Rings of Power* have observed that Galadriel appears to recognize Adar immediately upon meeting him. However, her attitude towards him reflects blind rage and a complete lack of compassion. Adar's backstory, on the other hand, introduces the idea that Orcs are "no longer the horde introduced in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, tumbling off a cliff in their haste to attack their enemy, but a singular, terrifying monster", thus shedding light on "the vulnerability that comes with each version of the monster" (Millman 2022).

There is also a scene in *The Rings of Power* (episode three) where Adar performs a ritualistic mercy killing of an Orc. It feels remarkably genuine, evoking a profound sense of sorrow and compassion. Adar harbors genuine pity for these creatures and seeks to extend his assistance, rather than merely exploiting them as an overlord might. In that moment, something extraordinary unfolds within these typically reviled Orcs – a glimpse of faith, reverence, perhaps even happiness, or a shimmer of 'culture'. Their demeanor towards Adar stands in stark contrast to the fear they hold for characters like Sauron or Morgoth. There is simply a marked difference in how they regard Adar and his mere presence.

In *The Silmarillion*, readers learn how Morgoth imprisoned some of the earliest Elves (the Avari) in Middle-earth to create servants for his growing army. Coveting the creator Eru Ilúvatar's ability to create life from nothing, and unable to possess that power, Morgoth resorted to taking lives that Ilúvatar had created and twisted them to their core through unspeakable torture and dark magic. When Morgoth was first captured and imprisoned, Sauron retained his power in the northern fortress of Angband, and the number of Orcs serving the Dark Lord multiplied exponentially. Despite the creation of other dark creatures such as trolls and dragons, Orcs became the backbone of Morgoth's army due to their rapid reproductive capacity. During Middle-earth's final battle against Morgoth, the number of Orcs fighting against the alliance of Men and Elves was simply incalculable.

Tolkien himself speculated that in the Second Age, Sauron was indeed "greater" in effect than Morgoth at the end of the First Age:

> Why? Because, though he was far smaller by natural stature, he had not yet fallen so low. Eventually he also squandered his power (of being) in the endeavour to gain control of others. But he was not obliged to expend so much of himself. To gain domination over Arda, Morgoth had let most of his being pass into the physical constituents of the Earth […] Sauron, however, inherited the 'corruption' of Arda, and only spent his (much more limited) power on the Rings; for it was the *creatures* of Earth, in their *minds and wills*, that he desired to dominate (Tolkien 2022: 48f.).

As a Maia, one of the spirits that descended into Ëa to help the Valar (Ainur) shape the world[8], Sauron likely possessed a more profound understanding of the "Music" of the Ainur, the grand song of creation before the dawn of Time, than even Melkor, as Tolkien explains. (Interestingly, in the ancient Indian Hindu tradition, *Maya* stands for the true power of illusion). Consequently, Sauron never descended into the depths of "nihilistic madness" (ibid.). However, the progression of Sauron's "plans" leads to an inescapable paradox: while he initially pursued an altruistic motive to organize goodness for all inhabitants of Arda, he ultimately became imprisoned within the confines of "his own isolated mind" because the "sole object of his will" became an end in itself. Tolkien here employs a play on words, suggesting that the means to an end indeed became the End. In essence, Sauron's original intent was to do good, but the agency required to achieve it spiraled out of control, giving rise to a malevolent individualization.

What's intriguing is that this transformation, from Morgoth's visceral, primal dominance to Sauron's more refined, noble, and human equanimity, parallels the shift from the countless Orcs to the singular individual, particularly exemplified in the character of Adar and his intricate story. Along with this deepening of character and moral complexity comes a yearning for order and structure (Guanio-Uluru 2015), akin to the civilized and 'natural' evolution of the earthly and tainted forces of the First Age. Sauron's fixation on order, which represents a departure from the crude chaos of the original evil, encapsulates his essence and his relentless pursuit of bringing it to Middle-earth, with Adar presumably being just a means to that end.

In a letter to his publisher Milton Wadman, where Tolkien offers perhaps the most extensive analysis of his own body of work, as quoted in the newly published *The Fall of Númenor*, he reflects on Sauron:

> 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 (Tolkien 2022: 47f.).

And later:

> [Sauron] lingers in Middle-earth. Very slowly, beginning with fair motives: the reorganizing and rehabilitation of the ruin of Middle-earth, 'neglected by the gods', he becomes a reincarnation of Evil, and a thing lusting for Complete Power – and so consumed ever more fiercely with hate (especially of gods and Elves) (Tolkien 2022: 48).

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[8] Wood (2003) speculates that the semi-divine nature of the Maiar and the fact that they can be sent on missions to work out the divine purpose of Eru Ilúvatar makes them much like the angels of Christianity.

In Angband, located north of Middle-earth, Sauron was regrouping Morgoth's forces and devising his next moves. Sauron's further experiments on his own creations, the Orcs, aimed to discover how to gain complete control over others, a pursuit that ultimately pushed Adar to his breaking point. Adar claims, in his conversation with Galadriel, to have "split" Sauron open and killed him. Although viewers are aware that Sauron hasn't been completely vanquished, it is essential to remember that Adar's actions might be driven by a desire to ascend the hierarchy of darkness. His leadership's primary objective was to secure a land they could call home, ideally in the Southlands – a region southeast of Middle-earth, situated east of the Anduin River and the future kingdom of Gondor, including the forthcoming Mordor.

Galadriel finds this proposition unacceptable and informs Adar that the Uruk have "hearts that were created by Morgoth". However, as previously discussed, Adar counters by asserting that they were created by the same god who brought all things into existence, including herself. In an Augustinian fashion, Adar argues that the Uruk cannot be inherently evil.

However, there's a caveat to this argument. When Adar is presenting his creation myth, he employs a form of exclusionary reasoning. He is specifically referring to his *own* species – the Elves who were initially created ex nihilo by Eru Ilúvatar and subsequently corrupted or bred into a 'false' species, later known as the Orcs. Adar, therefore, excludes those Orcs who are his "children"; they were indeed moulded by Morgoth. This essentially means that the Augustinian argument, asserting that the essence of evil lies in the corruption of being or the complete absence of existence, only applies to the Orcs in Morgoth's lineage, not those created by Eru Ilúvatar (that strictly speaking were only Orcs *in potentia*).

So, is Galadriel exhibiting a form of racism?[9] Yes, throughout the series she's a chauvinistic and xenophobic Warrior Princess. And when it comes to Adar and his Elvish lineage, she fails to recognize not only that he is just as entitled to moral autonomy as she is but also that they share a common origin – they are both Elves. However, this bias does not extend to Morgoth's offspring; they are simply programmed to fit into a good-versus-bad dichotomy.

In conclusion, what does *The Rings of Power* has to say about the nature of evil? *Evolution of Evil:* Over the course of history, evil transforms from the amorphous and colossal force embodied by Morgoth, portrayed vividly and almost cartoonishly in *The Rings of Power*, to the cunning and scheming

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[9] Kiona Delana Jones writes in *Gamerant* that Galadriel's portrayal in *The Rings of Power* is a departure from her serene and wise persona in *The Lord of the Rings* movies. The younger Galadriel in *The Rings of Power* is angry, hungry for vengeance, and willing to use weapons against her enemies (Jones 2023). Discussing the inherent racism of Galadriel when confronted with Adar, Edward Sission ponders on the widespread audience rejection of Amazon's Galadriel being a racist. Galadriel is cast exactly to Tolkien's specifications, he asserts. She is a beautiful, long-haired, blonde white woman, and Amazon regrettably stereotypes her as the "inner Sauron" in every blonde (Sisson 2023).

essence personified by Sauron, known as the character Halbrand. This transformation reflects the shift from the chaotic and primal evil to the more subtle and strategic evil we encounter in the character of Sauron. *Duality of Evil:* Evil in the narrative becomes a matter of grappling with the tension between two opposing forces, one representing good and the other evil. This duality echoes both Adar's experiences, which have a Manichean quality, and Galadriel's Augustinian conviction. Galadriel, although perhaps holding a loftier stature, exhibits bias as well, believing that the true moral essence of Adar (or any other Orc) is eternally corrupt and, in a sense, stripped of existence, thus warranting their eradication. *Moral agency:* Adar also exercises a moral choice, or rather, he yearns for the societal right to make a choice. Having been passed from one evil lord (Morgoth) to another (Sauron), both merely the "makers of his misery", Adar aspires to attain communal and genuine agency. He seeks to escape his predetermined fate and the biased perceptions others (the Elves) hold about his destiny. He longs to act as an autonomous being with equal and unequivocal rights, with the capacity to transform in accordance with his autonomy. In essence, Adar desires to break free from the constraints of Tolkien's lore and yet still preserve its unique concept of *phantazein* or creational change, to which we now turn.

Phantazein

When Madame d'Aulnoy (1650-1705) termed her works *contes de fée* (fairy tales)[10], she invented the term that is now generally used for the genre, thus distinguishing such tales from those involving no marvels. In Tolkien's "On Fairy-Stories" (orig. 1939), where he expounds upon his own craft of storytelling and examines the role of imaginative literature, enchantment emerges as the defining characteristic of fairy-stories. According to Verlyn Flieger, *Fäerie* represents "the place and practice, the essential quality, of enchantment" (Flieger 2002). It's noteworthy that 'enchantment' traces its origins to Old French *encantement*, signifying both a magical spell and the act of singing, concert, and chorus. Latin *incantare*, derived from *in* and *cantare*, meaning to sing, is also at its root. Elves are inherently enchanting; they possess beautiful singing voices (Silk 2022), although their melodies may be perilous to Men, as Tolkien labels it a "perilous realm". The very world, Arda, initially conceived as a product of imaginative perception and then materialized matter, and inhabited by the Ainur (Valar), owes its existence to music, as expounded upon in Tolkien's cosmogony, the *Ainulindalë*. Consequently, fairy-stories not only captivate by immersing their audiences into a coherent and otherworldly realm[11] but also participate

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[10] It is worth bearing in mind that d'Aulnoy's fairy tales were written in a style suitable for entertaining in adult salon gatherings, and not with a child audience in mind.
[11] While Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic focuses on the unsettling, ambiguous nature of the genre, where the line between the real and the supernatural is blurred (Todorov 1975), Tolkien's notion of fantasy is characterized by the creation of immersive and internally

in the act of creation (Northrup 2004; Hart & Khovacs 2020). Essentially, Tolkien suggests that they aren't merely conceived but crafted.[12]

Fairy-stories offer four essential elements to humans: Fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation. Among these, Tolkien asserts that Fantasy is the most significant, as the other three responses to fantasy derive from it. He further emphasizes that Fantasy is both a mode of thought, born from imagination, and the tangible result of that thought. This duality mirrors the process of writing and the world it creates, not to mention the interplay between language and the world it inhabits (Ekman 2013).

Hence, *Fäerie* relates to both change and fantasy, that is, creation. Flieger posits that the term 'fantasy' is etymologically connected to 'phenomena'. While phenomena are associated with the appearances of the Primary World, fantasy involves the construction of a Secondary World supported by human language, a "device" well-suited for the creation of fantasy. The word 'fantastic', therefore, signifies 'making visible' or 'revealing appearances' (Flieger, ibid. p. 45). This might lead us to speculate whether human language possesses an even more potent, materialistic, or creative power, where *phantazein* not only signifies the ability to make things appear but also to *make* the things themselves that are imagined – revealing appearances *for the mind* or revealing *in plain sight* (Walker 2009). This appearance, born from the fusion of conception and execution, takes the form of *aletheia*, the Greek term for disclosure or truth, which clearly denotes the stripping away of the outer skin of things to reveal their true interiority. In Tolkien's philosophy of language, *phantazein* represents words that not only have the capacity to create the 'fantastic' (because they are cogently arranged into a sub-created world) but also to bring the imagined 'things' into existence. This dual nature of the fantastic bridges the divide between perception and creation, the purely imaginative and the ontological-material realm, connecting the noumenal and the phenomenal (in the Kantian sense).[13] The real question regarding fantasy and its place in the modern world lies in its potential to yield physical (ontological) change, not merely epistemological.

Throughout his body of work, Tolkien grappled with the concept of change, often highlighting its negative consequences (Shippey 1982; 2000). Among others, he saw the devastating impact of deforestation (a grim pastime

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consistent imaginary worlds where the presence of the magical and mythical is taken for granted.

[12] Fez Silk writes: "The metaphor of music […] in Tolkien's work serves both as a means of describing an Enchantment of the secondary-world characters, and as a means of enchanting the readers themselves" (Silk 2022: 101). Silk further notes that the etymology of 'enchantment' might be compared to the similar Modern English term 'spell', which derives from Old English *spel* and its Germanic cognate, meaning 'story', 'recital', or 'tale' (Silk 2022: 108). Tolkien himself speculates in "On Fariry-Stories" that 'spell' refers both to a story told and formula (or token) of wonder.

[13] Tolkien's idea of an ancient mytho-poetic rendition of language that would bridge the gap between symbols and reality was very much inspired by the philosopher and poet Owen Barfield (1973). See Flieger 2002.

of Orcs), as highly applicable to the modern wasteland. He conceived of the corruption of fairy magic, intricately linked to the created Earth, as intimately connected to the rise of the "Machine" that dominates life. And he reflected on the transformation of noble valour into the horrors of total war.

The Elves possess the secret of *phantazein* and have access to it. However, the Elves can choose to actively convey the apparition of fantasy to our perception, especially that of Men. Lothlórien, the forest kingdom of Galadriel, the vast woodland realm of the Galadhrim Elves located near the lower Misty Mountains in northern Middle-earth, as depicted in *The Fellowship of the Ring*, offers natural beauty, growth, and fertility. When Frodo the Hobbit enters this dominion, one can draw parallels with Kant's concept of the sublime and Longinus' *Peri Hypsous*. The qualities of light, shape, and colour become heightened, pointing to the faculties of reason and recognition. However, simultaneously, the perceived objects, "drawn at the uncovering of his eyes", elude the constraints of language:

> It seemed to him that he had stepped through a high window that looked upon a vanished world. A light was upon it for which his language had no name. All that he saw was shapely, but the shapes seemed clear-cut, as if they had been first conceived and drawn at the uncovering of his eyes, and ancient as if they had endured forever. He saw no colors but those he knew—gold, white, blue, and green—but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had, at that moment, first perceived them and coined new and wonderful names. In winter here, no heart could mourn for summer or spring. No blemish, sickness, or deformity marred anything that grew upon the earth. In the land of Lórien, there was no stain (FR, II, vi, 365).

Frodo's pictorial experience[14] in the realm of Elvish immortality appears to be a result of an artistic perspective—a moving camera or eye, adjusting itself to a "vanished world". The imagery of brilliance and the absence of decay or evil is framed through the lens of a "high window", akin to an artist's perspective. This elevated perspective introduces an element of distance and an aerial storytelling, contrasting with the grounded events unfolding during the Fellowship's journey. Frodo's initiation into Lothlórien's ageless realm may hint at Tolkien's own views on the role of fantasy, as we examined

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[14] In Tolkien's writings, a recurring theme is the infusion of ethics into the landscapes that characters encounter, highlighting his profound belief in the symbolic potency of language. However, when we examine the passage about Lothlórien, it becomes apparent that it not only emphasizes the vitality of the natural world and the names that give life to its elements, but also employs a subtle layer of allegory (which Tolkien famously disliked). In other words, this description is 'coded' with allegorical elements, manifesting as the *locus amoenus*, the idyllic landscape often with connotations of Eden or Elysium (Walther 2020). The tradition goes back to Homer's depictions of the grotto of Calypso and the garden of Alcinous (Curtius 1968). In contrast to the locus amoenus, we encounter the *locus horribilis*, a representation of the mundane incarnation of hell, reminiscent of Tolkien's Mordor. Overall, Tolkien held that the purity of the province is derived from its undeveloped state and therefore its closer proximity to nature and to God, whereas the urbanized and industrialized location has been tainted by the advent of manmade structures and attitudes, i.e., "the Machine" (Jacobs 2012).

above. Stories rooted in fantasy challenge conventional naming—"for which his language had no name"—while simultaneously offering renewed insight. Through the "high window", we witness an artist's portrayal of a specific agenda in writing, one in which fantastic objects not only appear but also empower the ability to create. Note the active sense in the passage: A reborn Frodo can now "first" perceive the colours in the land of Lothlórien and craft "new and wonderful", almost Adamic names for them. Lothlórien inculcates a power linked with language, enticing the artist (Frodo) to emerge as a maker.

The transformation that Lothlórien's scenery triggers in Frodo occurs across three dimensions: epistemologically, as a new appreciation of the wonders of crafted nature; societally, through an enhanced sense of moral goodness and a reverence for nature; and ontologically, as names suddenly come to naturally represent or even inhabit the things they signify.

Tolkien's perspective on language mirrors Plato's dialogue, *Cratylus*, where it is posited, that language undergoes a dual transformation, distancing itself from the real (the Idea). Words become representations of objects, which in turn are reflections of abstract concepts. This process results in language losing significance and value as it moves further from the Idea it seeks to emulate (Ewegen 2014). However, Cratylus presents an alternative viewpoint, much like that of Frodo or Tolkien himself. In Plato's eponymous text, language is seen as possessing a hidden, genuine name or naming capacity that closely aligns with the original Idea.

Phantazein can thus be seen as an idealized concept, from Plato to Lothlórien, bridging the gap between the perceptual and the phenomenal. One might even argue that the very notion of what *phantazein* can achieve is a fantasy in itself. Originally (i.e., in Tolkien's mind), its powers were reserved for Elves and later extended to Men in the retelling and reshaping of the sub-created World. However, here is where contemporary change enters the picture. In Amazon's *The Rings of Power*, with its anticipation of physical transformation and its lesson of respecting the queer or the other (Chance 2005), fantasy also becomes applicable to evil incarnated, Sauron, and to Orcs. Or perhaps we should say to *an* Orc.

In *The Rings of Power*, a notable distinction emerges between the Evil of Sauron and the malevolence of the Orcs. Sauron's descent into the abyss of burgeoning industrialization or instrumentalism sets him apart. He may exhibit, Tolkien confesses, a level of refinement far beyond the mere "nihilistic madness" of Morgoth, his predecessor. Yet, Sauron is ensnared by his own process of individuation—an inner fantasy—both liberating and imprisoning him. This internal struggle culminates in his insatiable desire and boundless hatred. Conversely, the corruption of Adar stems from external influences, particularly the spiteful forces of Morgoth and Sauron, from which Adar yearns to break free. When cornered, whether by Morgoth, Sauron, or Galadriel, Adar asserts his right to change and expresses a profound longing

to discover a suitable home for his sun-sensitive children. To put it bluntly, Sauron speaks of power while Adar dreams of agency.

Returning to the discussion of Augustinian concepts of good and evil, it is possible that the occurrence of *phantazein* in an ontological sense depends on whether a person remains unaltered, preserving their existence. Typically, this is not the case for Orcs, who are often portrayed as hordes of ruthless warmongers hardwired for total war and annihilation. This perspective aligns with the portrayal of Orcs in *The Lord of the Rings* (the books and Peter Jackson's film trilogy). However, as we have seen, the story of Adar in *The Rings of Power* presents a different narrative.

Adar not only possesses the capacity to contemplate the nature of good and evil, whether viewed as an internal 'godlike' state of mind (reminiscent of Manicheism) or the corruption and eradication of one's being (in the Augustinian sense), but he also carries a significant amount of Elvish heritage. This heritage is evident in his adherence to Elvish rituals, such as the planting of new life as an act of defiance against death before going to war (as depicted in episode six). Additionally, Adar expresses a genuine longing for the sun, suggesting a connection with the Elves that transcends racial dominance. Could it be that *The Rings of Power* secretly tells the story of an Orc's resurrection?

Conclusion

In this article we have tried to extrapolate the complex and multifaceted journey and fabric of evil in Tolkien's Middle-earth, as exemplified in Amazon's *The Rings of Power* and the Tolkien lore. The philosophical and moral roots of Augustine and Manicheanism reflect Tolkien's own evolving perspectives on the nature of malevolence and shape the style of his prose, as we witnessed in the Lothlórien passage. The deep connection to Augustinian ideas of evil is evident in his belief that nothing is inherently evil from the outset. Evil, in his view, is a perversion or deficiency of good and cannot exist independently. This perspective is exemplified in the gradual transformation of evil across different ages, from the primordial and colossal Morgoth to the cunning and scheming Sauron. It highlights how evil can corrupt and dehumanize individuals, stripping them of their physical form and reducing them to shadows of their former selves.

Turning to *The Rings of Power*, the duality of evil is a recurring theme that echoes both Augustinian and Manichean interpretations. Characters like Adar and Galadriel embody this duality, representing the tension between opposing forces of good and evil. Adar's quest for moral agency and recognition underscores the desire for autonomy and redemption even in the face of biased and suppressing perceptions. *The Rings of Power* invites new audiences to contemplate the intricacies of evil in Tolkien's world, emphasizing the ever-evolving nature of malice and the potential for redemption and transformation. It challenges them to reconsider preconceived notions about

the origins and essence of evil, highlighting the complexity of moral choices and the yearning for agency and change in a world defined (but not limited) by its mythical lore.

We furthermore scrutinized the key concept of *phantazein,* a term signifying the power of fantasy and creation, particularly in the context of the sub-created world of Middle-earth. This concept intertwines with Tolkien's examination of the transformative nature of language (Fawcett 2007) and its potential to bridge the gap between perception and reality. *Phantazein* resonates with the enchantment found in fairy-stories, emphasizing the role of imagination and language in crafting secondary worlds. The Elves are inherently enchanting since they possess the ability to create and convey the apparition of fantasy. This process involves both an epistemological transformation, where one gains a new appreciation of the world, and an ontological change, where names come to represent or even inhabit the things they signify.

Presumably the Orcs do the exact opposite: They can neither imagine, create, nor sing the world into existence. Their creation is not *out of nothing* (ex nihilo) but *into nothing* (in nihilo), a tearing down of creation which their masters (Morgoth, Sauron, Saruman) then alter – disfigure or mutilate – into something different. It is exactly this blind and sullied destruction or anti-creation that sickens Adar and which he rebels against.

The portrayal of Lothlórien, a realm of Elvish immortality, perfectly illustrates the power of *phantazein*, as it transforms the perception of beauty and goodness in the world. Through the lens of a "high window", the landscape becomes an arty perspective, and language gains the ability to craft new and wonderful names for things, reinforcing the connection between language and creation. Tolkien's exploration of change, both positive and negative, highlights the consequences of the transformation brought about by fantasy. While the long-gone Elves are the primary bearers of this power, contemporary adaptations (or reimaginings) like Amazon's *The Rings of Power* suggest that even Orcs, traditionally depicted as forces of evil, may have the potential for change and agency.

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