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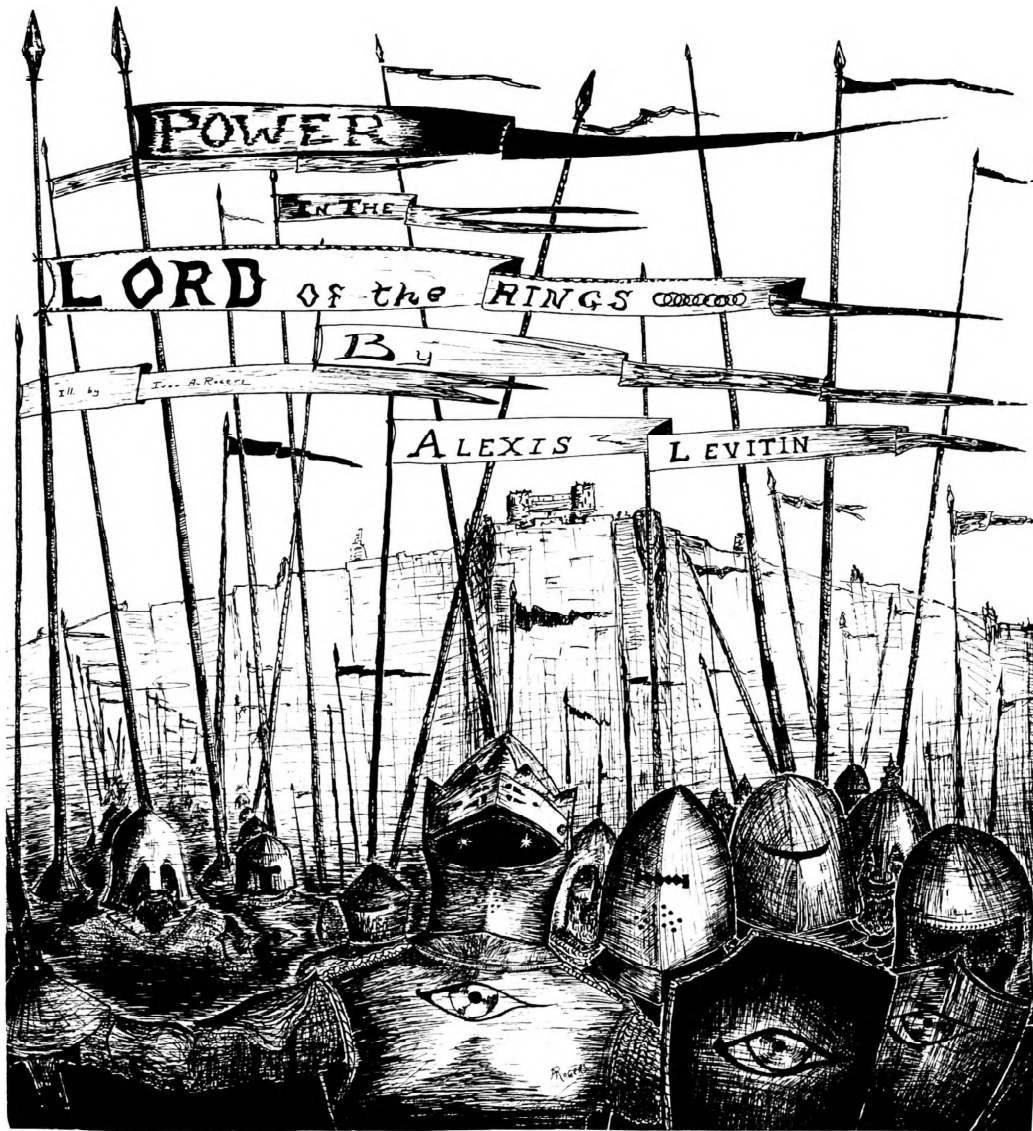
Power in *The Lord of the Rings*

Abstract

Analyzes Power and its tendency to corruption in *The Lord of the Rings*, with a discussion of the weaknesses of Evil, and the function of the Ring as a temptation to Power and Pride.

Additional Keywords

Good and evil in J.R.R. Tolkien; Power in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Objects—The Ring; Tolkien, J.R.R. The Lord of the Rings—Power



"Power in The Lord of the Rings"

Alexis Levitin

The Lord of the Rings focuses upon a particular episode in the eternal struggle between Good and Evil. Special emphasis is placed on the central role that Power plays in this conflict. Tolkien demonstrates that Power is the true weapon only of Evil, and that even in the hands of Good it eventually must result in corruption and suffering.

In a review comparing Tolkien's work to actual historical studies, Louis J. Halle¹ commences by saying, "The test of truth is the world as each reader understands it, and fiction may meet that test as well as history or better." He adds that "...the historian and the romancer alike are concerned with such truth as they are able to approach through the eye of the

mind." After comparing Toynbee and Tolkien, he says in discussing the theme of power: "The two prime facts of Middle-earth....are power and its consequence, suffering....In the historian's view, power is not a neutral element that can be used for good or evil. It is always evil, for it enables the wicked to dominate the world or, in the hands of the good, is inescapably corrupting."

It is apparent that Tolkien considers the influence of Power to be ultimately pernicious. He associates Power, and all its concomitants, with his wicked characters, but, for the most part, he denies them to his heroes. His attitude is illustrated by the description of the Wizards:

It was....said that they came out of the Far West and were messengers sent to contest the power of Sauron, and to unite all those who had the will to

resist him; but they were forbidden to match his power with power, or to seek to dominate Elves or Men by force or fear.²

The Wizards are endowed with great powers, but if they are to fight against Evil they must refrain from the use of force.

Tolkien unfortunately interchanges words such as Power and Force without distinction, although he does seem to distinguish between the two concepts. For the sake of clarity I will continue to capitalize the word Power, as does Tolkien, when referring to Evil Force, and will use lower type when referring to strength that is not necessarily evil.

It is clear that good people may be powerful without destroying their goodness. Gandalf, Elrond, Glorfindel, Galadriel, and Aragorn are all quite powerful, yet manage to avoid falling to evil ways. The mere possession of power, although potentially dangerous, need not lead to wickedness. It is the exertion of one's strength through Force that is corrupting. Galadriel possesses one of the three rings of power forged by the Elves themselves, ages before, under the deceitful advice of Sauron, and has the Ruling Ring come within her grasp. But she resists the temptation to use Force, recognizing that the Ruling Ring is an Evil Power that must dominate, compel, subjugate, and destroy. Frodo offers it to her and she refuses, saying:

The evil that was devised long ago works on in many ways, whether Sauron himself stands or falls. Would not that have been a noble deed to set to the credit of his Ring, if I had taken it by force or fear from my guest?³

The varying possibilities inherent in power are illustrated by the Rings. At the council where the fellowship was established, and the decision to destroy the Ring was made, Elrond says of the Three Elven Rings:

The Three were not made by Sauron, nor did he ever touch them...they were not made as weapons of war or conquest: that is not their power. Those who made them did not desire strength or domination or hoarded wealth, but understanding, making, and healing, to preserve all things unstained. These things the Elves of Middle-earth have in some measure gained...⁴

Plainly then, power for good does exist, but it is necessarily limited in scope. The power to heal and build, understand and create, is a good and marvelous power, but as such has no control over war, nor can it procure dominion over others.

When Tolkien uses the word Power he is almost always referring to the evil Force represented either by Sauron or his Ring. Force is based on fear rather than love. It is compulsive, demanding of its victims actions which they abhor, and forcing things upon them which they are too weak to resist. (It should be recalled that the powerful Wizards are sent to unite those who are willing to fight Sauron, but may not compel them to do so.) Power such as Gandalf's is personal, and vaguely spiritual. He recognizes the existence and importance of other beings. He sympathizes with them, and wants to help them in their plight. Force, such as Sauron's, is impersonal and materialistic. Sauron considers himself the living center of all existence, and the other beings with whom he must deal are only objects to him. He feels himself the real and true living Being surrounded by

things. These things he desires to rule, command, distort, destroy, in effect, treat exactly as he likes.

Sauron's Power is the greatest of its kind in Middle-earth, but it has several inherent weaknesses, one of which in particular leads to his downfall. Sauron, so mighty and so evil, cannot conceive of other beings who think differently from himself, whose attitudes toward power could be different. This lack of imagination on his part proves fatal.

In this weakness, Gandalf hopes to find the answer to their dilemma. He favors the idea of attempting to return the Ring to Orodruin and to destroy it there. This plan of marching unarmed into the heart of the enemy's stronghold with the precious Ring which he so greatly craves would seem idiotic to Sauron. Gandalf points this out at the Council of Elrond:

Well, let folly be our cloak, a veil before the eyes of the Enemy! For he is very wise, and weighs all things to a nicety in the scales of his malice. But the only measure that he knows is desire, desire for power; and so he judges all hearts. Into his heart the thought will not enter that any will refuse it, that having the Ring we may seek to destroy it. If we seek this, we shall put him out of reckoning.⁵

This weakness can be exploited because those fighting Sauron are able to guess how he looks at things. The Good can imagine what it is like to be bad, but Evil cannot imagine how it is to be good. Evil cannot imagine anyone else being different, basically, from itself. This proves its doom. Elrond, Gandalf, Galadriel, and Aragorn are able to imagine themselves as Sauron and therefore can resist the temptation to use the Ring themselves. Sauron cannot imagine that anyone who knows what the Ring can accomplish would try to destroy it, rather than use it for their own ends, and for his defeat.



Sauron's debilitating blindness is mentioned periodically as the action progresses. Viewing from a height the city of Caras Galadon, home of Galadriel, Haldir, an Elf, remarks to Frodo: "In this high place you may see the two powers that are opposed one to another; and ever they strive now in thought, but whereas the light perceives the very heart of the darkness, its own secret has not been discovered. Not yet."⁶ This concisely states the case for the moment, but provides rather precarious comfort. Haldir's words are soon reinforced by those of Galadriel herself. She tries to reassure the shaken Frodo, who has just had a vision of Sauron's sleepless Eye searching for the Ring which he bears, by saying: "I say to you, Frodo, that even as I speak to you, I perceive the Dark Lord and know his mind, or all of his mind that concerns the Elves. And he gropes ever to see me and my thought. But still the door is closed!"⁷ Although the Enemy has more Power than they, he is less of a mystery to those opposing him than they are to him.⁸

There are other elements intrinsic to Sauron's evil nature which prove of great detriment to his cause. He is filled with a lust for domination which drives him to extremes of cruelty far beyond the point of usefulness. This characteristic is known to Gandalf who, even before the adventurers set forth, tells Frodo that Sauron, having become aware of their existence as a result of Bilbo's succession to the Ring, now hates the Hobbits:

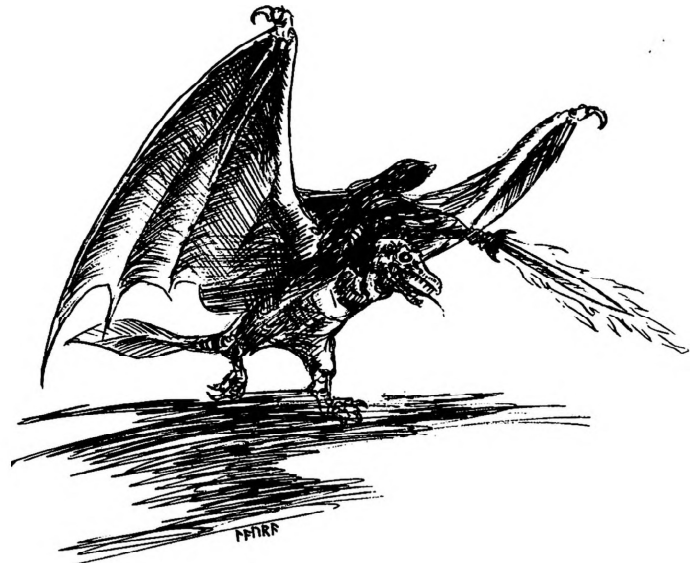
...your safety has passed. He does not need you--he has many more useful servants--but he won't forget you again. And hobbits as miserable slaves would please him far more than hobbits happy and free. There is such a thing as malice and revenge!⁹

Sauron's craving to hurt others drives him to illogical actions. When Pippin foolishly looks into the Palantir of Orthanc, the magic stone which communicates with Sauron, the Enemy has only to question him, and all may very well be lost. After Pippin's narrow escape, Gandalf explains:

If he had questioned you, then and there, almost certainly you would have told all that you know, to the ruin of us all. But he was too eager. He did not want information only: he wanted you, quickly, so that he could deal with you in the Dark Tower, slowly.¹⁰

A third weakness of Evil is its inability to command solidarity in its forces. An evil being only loves himself, and will not willingly help another for his own sake. The orcs, converted by Sauron into a thoroughly wicked race, always bicker and struggle amongst themselves. They serve Sauron, but only out of fear. In fact, they would never serve for any other reason, unless it were the enticement of great reward. Saruman, the renegade wizard, is an independent evil power who, although under Sauron's dominion, tries treacherously to gain the Ring for himself. He is first of all a traitor to the good cause which he originally served, and secondly a traitor to the Evil One who partially has enslaved him. He wants Power, incarnate in the Ring, for himself alone. The good, on the other hand, are able to unite, for they only want the end of the Ring of Power, so that all can be at peace.

Wormtongue, Saruman's cunning henchman, gradually becomes a slave to the powerful wizard, and grows to hate his master. Enveloped in hate for Gandalf as well as Saruman, he throws the Palantir of Orthanc, Saruman's greatest treasure, down at Gandalf, standing at the foot of the tower. Gandalf recovers the missile and reflects, "Strange are the turns of fortune!"



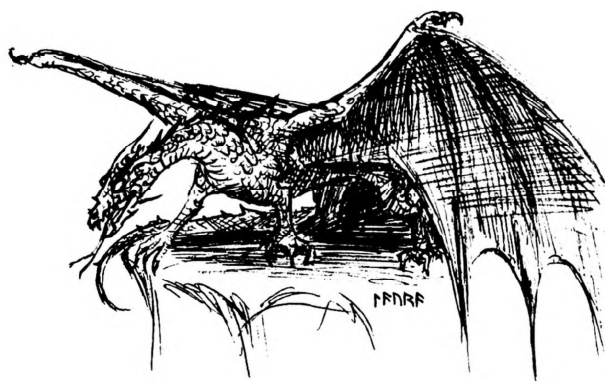
Often does hatred hurt itself! I fancy that, even if we had entered in, we could have found few treasures in Orthanc more precious than the thing which Wormtongue threw down at us."¹¹ Wormtongue and Saruman continue to torture each other until finally the oft-crushed slave revolts and kills his overbearing tormentor. Evil gnaws at itself with fatal results.

As Power's role in the eternal struggle between good and evil is of central importance in The Lord of the Rings, some additional comments upon the Ring which dominates this tale are in order.

The Ring plainly is a symbol of Power. It can provide unlimited Power to its possessor, but he is forced to lose his freedom and become a slave to that Power. Even the best intentions in the world will eventually be smothered by the Ring's insidious influence upon its user. Gandalf and Galadriel both refuse to wield the Ring, knowing that their good beginnings would be followed by evil results. Elrond explains the dangers of the Ring at the council preceding the setting forth of the fellowship:

We cannot use the Ruling Ring. That we know too well. It belongs to Sauron and was made by him alone, and is altogether evil. Its strength...is too great for anyone to wield at will, save only those who have already a great power of their own. But for them it holds an even deadlier peril. The very desire of it corrupts the heart. Consider Saruman. If any of the Wise should with this Ring overthrow the Lord of Mordor, yet another Dark Lord would appear. And that is another reason why the Ring should be destroyed: as long as it is in the world it will be a danger even to the Wise.¹²

I think it important to stress the fact that the Ring attacks its victim through Pride, the primary sin of Christian theology. Boromir and his father Denethor, both noble men, fall prey to the lure of Power, entrapped by thoughts of the grandeur of their nation and of them-



selves. When Gandalf discovers that King Denethor desires the Ring for himself, he tells the king that his son Boromir would have been unable to deliver it up to him--"He would have stretched out his hand to this thing, and taking it he would have fallen. He would have kept it for his own, and when he returned you would not have known your son."¹³ Saruman the White, at one time a good wizard, also falls to evil through desiring the Ring, which he has never even seen. In a long speech calculated to win over Gandalf to his designs, Saruman reveals how far he has been corrupted by the desire for Power:

The Elder Days are gone. The Middle Days are passing. The Younger Days are beginning. The time of the Elves is over, but our time is at hand: the world of Men, which we must rule. But we must have power, power to order all things as we will, for that good which only the Wise can see....A new Power is rising. Against it the old allies and policies will not avail us at all. There is no hope left in Elves or dying Numenor....We may join with that Power. It would be wise, Gandalf. There is hope that way. Its victory is at hand; and there will be rich reward for those that aided it. As the Power grows, its proved friends will also grow; and the Wise, such as you and I, may with patience come at last to direct its courses, to control it. We can bide our time, we can keep our thoughts in our hearts, deploring maybe evils done by the way, but approving the high and ultimate purpose: Knowledge, Rule, Order; all the things that we have so far striven in vain to accomplish, hindered rather than helped by our weak and idle friends. There need not be, there would not be, any real change in our designs, only in our means.¹⁴

It is of interest to note the striking similarity of Saruman's proposal to certain political doctrines which have gained widespread influence in the twentieth century.¹⁵ That the resemblance is not accidental becomes clear when one remembers Tolkien's introductory statement that this work is "presented to Men of a later Age, one almost as darkling and ominous as was the Third Age that ended...long ago."¹⁶

NOTES

¹The quotes all come from Louis J. Halle's article, "History through the Mind's Eye," which appeared in the *Saturday Review*, XXXIX (January 28, 1956), pp. 11-12.

²111, 455.

³1, 473.

⁴1, 352.

⁵1, 352-353.

⁶1, 456.

⁷1, 472.

⁸Cf. W. H. Auden's articles, "At the End of the Quest, Victory" in *New York Times Book Review*, January 22, 1956, p. 5, and "Good and Evil in *The Lord of the Rings*" in *Critical Quarterly* 10 (1968), pp. 138-142.

⁹1, 79.

¹⁰11, 254.

¹¹11, 243.

¹²1, 350.

¹³111, 104.

¹⁴1, 339-340.

¹⁵Cf. James Robinson, "The Wizard and History: Saruman's Vision of a New Order," *Orcrist* 1 (1966-1967), pp. 17-23.

¹⁶*Fellowship of the Ring* (Houghton Mifflin: New York, 1954), p. 8. All other quotations from *Lord of the Rings* in this paper are taken from the revised Ballantine edition, but this foreword was not retained by Tolkien in the second edition.

