12-15-1976

The Ring at the Centre: Ėaca in *The Lord of the Rings*

William H. Green

Follow this and additional works at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore

Part of the Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol4/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.
The Ring at the Centre: Ēaca in The Lord of the Rings

Abstract
Examines instances of Ēaćen, or supernatural enlargement beyond normal power, in The Lord of the Rings, showing the influence of Tolkien's familiarity with and preferred translation of the term from Beowulf.

Additional Keywords
Power in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Influence of Beowulf; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Knowledge—Old English; Stuart Gilson
The Ring at the Centre:

Eaca in The Lord of the Rings

by William H. Green

J. R. R. Tolkien is best known to the American public as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, but his fame as a storyteller is recent compared to his fame as a scholar. Long before his fiction became popular, Tolkien was known to philologists, especially for his edition of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and for "Beowulf: The Monsters and the Critics," an essay which left its mark on subsequent medieval studies. The author of *The Lord of the Rings*, then, achieved eminence in two distinct areas, as a storyteller and as a scholar.

The interrelatedness of these two areas is obvious. Tolkien was a medievalist by specialization, for instance, and medieval echoes abound in his fiction. But an anecdote from his days at Oxford suggests how extraordinarily intertwined were Tolkien's poetic and philological impulses. Called to read a scholarly paper about medieval literature before his colleagues, Professor Tolkien offered instead a poem of his own composition, explaining that his immediate desire upon reading a medieval work was to imitate it rather than to discuss it.1 Thus his insights into the literature he studied were expressed in two almost interchangeable forms—in scholarly essays and in imaginative fiction.

Tolkien's scholarly writing offers valuable cues for the interpretation of his fiction. One obvious example is from his discussion of Old English poetic diction in his "Prefatory Remarks" to the Hall translation of *Beowulf*. The word *beoworn*, he explains there, meant 'warrior' when used in Old English heroic poetry but was still a form of the word *bear*.2 It is notable that, from the many available instances of poetic diction, Tolkien selected the word *beoworn* 'bear, warrior,' for "Beowurn" is the name of a character who is part bear, part man, in *The Hobbit*. The man-beast ambiguity of the word apparently struck deep into the imagination of Tolkien, who identified one of the "primordial human desires" as the desire to commune with animals.3 In any case, Tolkien employs the ambiguity of *beoworn* in the "Prefatory Remarks" as well as in *The Hobbit* and so supplies—whether deliberately or not—a scholarly footnote to his own fiction.

A similar interpretative cue, less obvious but more interesting, appears as Tolkien discusses the word *eaca* to demonstrate the multiplicity and imprecision of synonyms used to translate individual Old English words. Though, as Tolkien observes, Hall translates *eaca* variously with the words *staelluht*, *broad*, *huge*, and *mighty*—serviceable translations in context—the word actually meant 'enlarged' rather than merely 'large.'4 In fact, *eaca* is the past participle of the verb *eacan*, and in *DBow* the word specifically means 'pregnant' as Beaduhilde, raped by Weland, dolefully perceives *eacan wea* ('that she was pregnant'). Tolkien, then, is presenting a well-chosen example to illustrate the limitations inherent in reading a translation; but it is notable that, of all possible words to illustrate this point, the author of *The Lord of the Rings* chose the word *eaca* and, discussing it, formulates a concept applicable to his fiction. Whenever *eaca* is used in *Beowulf*, Tolkien asserts, it "in all instances may imply not merely size and strength, but an addition of power beyond the natural." Beowulf is called *eacaen* because he is endowed with "superhuman thirtyfold strength." His strength is his *eaca*, his supernatural increase.5 Similarly, it is easy to find instances of *eacaen* in *The Lord of the Rings*, occasions when characters display additional power beyond the natural; indeed, such occasions, such *eaca*, lie close to the thematic center of Tolkien's later fiction.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I use *eacaen* and *eaca* (the noun form) only in reference to freely dramatic aggrandizements of characters, unexpected unveilings of power, swift loomings up, or shadowy turnovers. The first, perhaps the definitive *eaca*, occurs in the first chapter of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when Bilbo, his will tainted by Sauron's ring, claims the Ring and implicitly threatens Gandalf with his little sword. The enlargement of the wizard is immediate and unmistakable: "Gandalf's eyes flashed. 'It will be my turn to get angry soon,' he said. 'If you say that again, I shall. Then you will see Gandalf the Grey uncloaked.'" He took a step towards the hobbit, and he seemed to grow tall and menacing; his shadow filled the little room.6 The effect is as brief as it is emphatic. When Bilbo relents, Gandalf's power is once again cloaked, and he becomes once again 'an old grey man, bent and troubled.'7 This is the pattern of the *eacaen* when they appear in characters not wholly malign: a brief revelation of unusual power erupting at need through a character's ordinary exterior, then submerging again when the need is past.

Gandalf's power is uncloaked many times in *The Lord of the Rings*. When the fellowship is attacked by evil wolves at night, the wizard grows formidable: "In the wavering firelight Gandalf seemed suddenly to grow: he rose up, a great menacing shape like the monument of some ancient king of stone set upon a hill" (I, 312). In Elrond's house Frodo is aewstruck when he sees Gandalf "revealed" as a strong, majestic figure (I, 230). And later, after his defeat of the fiery Balrog, Gandalf reveals himself spectacularly to Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas. Seeming at first to be a sinister old man, Gandalf is said to grow "suddenly tall, towering over them," dazzling them with his fiery eyes and white garments; but again, as usual, the *eaca* is brief, and he literally cloaks his superhuman power. He wraps a gray cloak around the white one as soon as the three have recognized him (II, 97-98). As Gandalf the White, a purified superhuman power, he is periodically revealed during the latter part of the story: when he cows Gríma in Théoden's hall (II, 118); when 'his voice grew in power and author-

---

4 Beowulf, pp. x-xi.
5 Beowulf, p. xi.
7 Ibid., p. 43.
ity" and he breaks Saruman's power (II, 189); when he rides out from Gondor to rescue Paramir's returning patrol, riding out as "a flash of white and silver," returning "pale in the twilight as if his fire were spent or veiled" (III, 83); and finally when he rides out to meet Paramir a second time, "unveiled once more" (III, 94). In each of these instances there is a sudden revelation of superhuman power, followed in most cases by an explicit veiling of that power when the need is past. Only at the very end of The Lord of the Rings is the source of Gandalf's hidden power revealed: he has been wearing an invisible ring, one of the three elven rings not meant to increase the power of the mere mortal character to almost equally debased appearances. When Bilbo, saintly in his old age, reaches out to touch Frodo's ring, the younger hobbit suddenly sees "a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands" (I, 244). Note the word little, the images of hungry swirling and animal-likeверес the servant man who serves his master, Sam, is similarly distorted when Sam offers to share the burden of the Ring. Frodo responds violently, calling Sam a "thief" and seeing him as "a foul little creature with greedy eyes and slobbering mouth" (III, 188). And even Gandalf seems diminished when he opposes the shadow Lord of the Nazgul, the greatest of Sauron's ring-bearers. At least, he dwindles from the Nazgul's point of view, for the wraith mocks the wizard contemptuously: "Old Fool!" he says. "Old Fool! This is my hour. Do you not know death when you see it?" (III, 103).

The power and his agents are not as dramatic as those of the elves and mortals, for evil beings have become so utterly identified with their supernatural increases of power that they lack a natural form. They cannot, like Sam, feel their ordinary bodies robed in distorted shadows because they have no ordinary bodies. They are shadows. Sauron is named shadow, and the Nazgul are invisible. Therefore, they have no specific vocab in the sense the Gandalf, Galadriel, Frodo, and Sam do. It is their perverse nature to be always Boc an, swollen with unnatural power. Animals hate them. Their mere presence broadcasts waves of fear and despair. They are consistently described as having supernatural vocab of the good characters, though wholly negative terms. When the Lord of the Nazgul threatens Gandalf, his very arrival is an Boc: "A great black shape against the fires beyond he loomed up, grown to a vast shadow of despair" (III, 102-03). He "loomed up"; he has "grown"; he is a "vast shadow"—terms which suggest Gandalf's own Boc early in the story, when he seems to "grow tall and menacing" and his shadow fills the room (I, 42). The only time the Nazgul's master, Sauron, is seen as a full figure is on the occasion of his fading from the world as the Ring is destroyed, and this time he appears in the form of a shadow only. The Captains gazed south to the Land of Mordor, it seemed to them, black against the pall of cloud, there rose a huge shape of shadow, impenetrable, lightning-crowned, filling all the sky" (III, 227). The descriptive words here parallel those for Gandalf; it is the same shadow, only another; Sauron is enormous, vast, and threatening. As Gandalf seems to fill a room in the first Boc, so Sauron, who knows no proportion, seems to fill "all the sky." Sauron is not, of course, himself a ring-bearer; but the heart of his power is the Ring. He is like a fairy-tale ogre with an external heart. As Gandalf explains early in the story, Sauron put a large part of his former power into the One Ring, and in some way the Ring's very existence maintains his baleful empire on Middle-earth. Even when Frodo has the Ring, Sauron retains power analogous to the Ring's, for he put only part of his former power into it. Thus, though he is not a ring-bearer, his association with the Ring is most intimate. He is the Lord of the Rings, and his Boc continues the previously suggested connection between magical rings and Boc.

The characters in The Lord of the Rings who may be called Boc, then, include Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond, Frodo, Saruman, the Lord of the Nazgul, and, for Sauron, the Lord of the Rings, they all bear magic rings, and they are the only persons in Middle-earth who do. So far, rings and Boc are invariably linked.

The one notable exception is Aragorn, the true king. He seems to grow taller and more kingly as he bears his noble ancestry to the Noldor. The Rings, for Galadriel confirms her kingship with a name and a jewel (I, 391), as he enters the country he is destined to rule (I, 409), and especially as

During the brief interval when Sam possesses the Ring, he too becomes Boc. Merely wearing the Ring, he feels himself "enlarged, as if he were robed in a huge distorted shadow of himself" (III, 177). And when he clutches the ring in his hand to confront a hostile orc, he manifests power so clearly beyond that which is his by nature. Instead of a frightened halfling trying to hold a steady sword, Sam appears to be a formidable elf-warrior, "a great silent shape, cloaked in grey shadow, looming against the wavering light behind." Two talismans are specifically credited with striking fear in the orc's heart—the ancient elven sword and the hidden Ring—but the River-slain, Frodo, seizes the greatest effect as "some nameless menace of power and doubt" (III, 183). So Sam has a brief career as an Boc hobbit, but his career is gracefully ended when he returns the Ring to Frodo.

In the scenes involving Gollum and the hobbits, there are several instances of what might be called reverse Boc, the apparent dwindling and debasement of a character as he is seen, either by a ring-bearer or in relation to a ring-bearer. The motif does not occur with the three elven rings, presumably because the rings are unainted by Sauron's pride and, thus, aggrandize their owners without diminishing others. But when the self-centered Boc of one of Sauron's rings operates, there is often a corresponding debasing of someone near the ring-bearer. It has already been noted that Gollum is reduced to a whining cur when Frodo commands him, but this may not seem very notable, for Gollum is doglike much of the time, even when Frodo is not present. More notably, the Ring produces hobbits who are almost equally debased appearances. When Bilbo, saintly in his old age, reaches out to touch Frodo's ring, the younger hobbit suddenly sees "a little wrinkled creature with a hungry face and bony groping hands" (I, 244). Note the word little, the images of hungry swirling and animal-like.
he is crowned king before the people (III, 246). In all these ćaca, Aragorn wears no ring. Symbolic objects are, in fact, involved in all of Aragorn's ćaca, objects which link the ring-ćaca with his by their very existence but which distinguish his by their variety. Rings and only rings confer transcendent power on the other characters, but Aragorn's noble nature is unveiled by anything associated with his kingship: a broken sword, an elven brooch, stone statues, or a jeweled crown. Aragorn is, as Patrick Calahan has pointed out, a unique person in Middle-earth, possessing naturally, as charismatic king, powers which would be unnatural in others. Thus, Aragorn's power, even when suddenly and dramatically manifested, may not be ćac in the strictest sense—his powers are not added beyond the natural. They are his nature. He is ćacc, like Beowulf, in the sense that he has extraordinary god-given powers; but no magical technology, either for good or for evil, has added power to his innate complement as king. The uniqueness of his ćac is thematically interesting: the ring-ćaca of wizards, elves, hobbits, and wraiths manifest the dwindling magical powers of elves near the close of the Third Age; and the powers of Aragorn usher in the Fourth Age, the age of men. After the One Ring is destroyed, the giant shadows and gleaming figures appear no longer. Only Aragorn seems to grow taller then.

But the ring-ćaca represent the dominant powers during the greater part of The Lord of the Rings, and the story may be clearer if we understand the implicit rules governing ring use. First, it seems that the ćac of the ring is manifest at the choice of its owner. Gandalf and Galadriel grow tall and shining as deliberate acts of will, responses to need, and Frodo and Sam grow large whenever, bearing a ring, they set their wills against Gollum or some other rival. Evil beings, always ćacc, are presumably always setting their wills against anyone not Sauron's slave, and even the slaves often quarrel. A second point, the danger of using Sauron's rings, is obvious. Gandalf warns Frodo never to use the One Ring, and the hobbit is weakened or wounded whenever he disobeys, ultimately becoming a slave to the Ring on Mount Doom. The ring-wraiths, habitual users of Sauron's rings, have been reduced to bodiless, loathsome shapes of pure evil; and Gollum has become almost reptilian. But even the good rings of the elves are apparently not to be used lightly and not as weapons except against other ring-bearers. Gandalf and Galadriel stage ćaca as


instructive demonstrations to prevent a hobbit's giving away the One Ring; Gandalf uses ćaca to reveal himself to the Three Walkers and, in great haste, to nullify the despair of Wormold and the wizardry of Saruman. These are benevolent ćaca and essentially dramatized statements, acts of communication. Gandalf's ćaca function as weapons only against ringwraiths, when they are clearly just and necessary—supernatural power against supernatural power. Gandalf becomes hostilely ćacem only as a referee, to neutralize evil beings who, by attacking ordinary men with magic, have themselves broken the rules.

The best ring-bearers, Gandalf and Galadriel, obey the rules. The mixed beings, Frodo and Sam, break the rules in part and are partly corrupted, their corruption proportional to their infractions. The evil beings observe no moderation and are therefore totally corrupted. These points illustrate a function which rings—especially the One Ring—perform in The Lord of the Rings. The One Ring tests those who come into contact with it. It is a sort of wandering moral inspector, revealing the degree of selfishness, the ethical balance, of characters by evoking responses to itself. As Elrond explains at the Council of Elrond, "The very desire of it corrupts the heart" (I, 281). But only hearts already corrupt or long exposed to temptation capitulate to this desire. Threading through The Lord of the Rings is a series of temptation scenes in which the Ring, either by its presence or its imagined availability, tests Bilbo, Frodo, Gandalf, Saruman, Tom Bombadil, Galadriel, Boromir, Faramir, Denethor, Gollum, and others. Orcs invariably fail the test, of course, quickly betraying one another; and Sauron and the wraiths, defined by their unconditional lust for the Ring, reject the basis of the test. The major characters who are partly good assume relationships with one another—places in the moral scheme of Middle-earth—determined by their performances in these testing scenes. Thus, the testing scenes and the ćaca scenes make a line of thematic continuity in the story, one of several mountain ranges dominating the long highlands of The Lord of the Rings.

William H. Green received a Ph.D. in English from Louisiana State University in 1969, dealing in his dissertation with the medieval analogues to The Hobbit, and he is currently teaching at Clayton Junior College near Atlanta. He has published an article in Notes on Teaching English and poems in several journals, and has had a short story accepted for publication by Fantasy and Terror.