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Abstract
Examines instances of ēacen, 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. 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 beorn, he explains there, meant 'warrior' when used in Old English heroic poetry but was still a form of the word bear. It is notable that, from the many available instances of poetic diction, Tolkien selected the word beorn 'bear, warrior,' for Beowulf 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. In any case, Tolkien employs the ambiguity of beorn 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 eacan in The Lord of the Rings to demonstrate the multiplicity and imprecision of synonyms used to translate individual Old English words. Though, as Tolkien observes, Hall translates eacan variously with the words stálwaer, bæod, hæge, and myhti—serviceable translations in context—the word actually meant 'enlarged' rather than merely 'large.' In fact, eacan is the past participle of the verb eacan, and in DBeor the word specifically means 'pregnant' as Beaduhilde, raped by Weland, solely perceives but heo eacan wæs ('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 Beowulf and, discussing it, formulates a concept applicable to his fiction. Whenever Beowulf 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 beowulf because he is endowed with "superhuman thirtysfold strength." His strength is his beowulf, his supernatural increase. Similarly, it is easy to find instances of beowulf in The Lord of the Rings, occasions when characters display additional power beyond the natural; indeed, such occasions, such beowulf, lie close to the thematic center of Tolkien's later fiction.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I use beowulf and beowulf (the noun form) only in reference to fairly dramatic aggrandizements of characters, unexpected unveilings of power, swift looming up, or shadowy towerings. The first, perhaps the definitive beowulf, occurs in the first chapter of The Fellowship of the Ring when Bilbo, his will tainted by Saruman'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 uncleared.' He took a step towards the hobbit, and he seemed to grow tall and menacing; his shadow filled the little room." 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." This is the pattern of the beowulf 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 uncleared many times in The Lord of the Rings. When the fellowship is attacked by evil wolves at night, the wizard grows formidable: "In the waverng 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" (1, 312). In Eldron's house Frodo is astruck when he sees Gandalf "revealed" as a strong, majestic figure (1, 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 beowulf 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 (11, 97-98). As Gandalf the White, a purified superhuman power, he is periodically revealed during the latter part of the story: when he cows Gárma in Théoden's hall (11, 118); when "his voice grew in power and author-

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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 Faramir'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 Faramir 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 taken back by the Ring-bearers. More notably, the Ring reduced characters to almost equally debased appearances. When Bilbo, slyly 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 dwarfing and animal-like eien, and the servant 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 shadowy Lord of the Nazgûl, the greatest of Sauron's rings: at least, he dwindles from the Nazgûl's point of view, for the wreath 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). When Frodo 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 shadow, Sauron is not, and the Nazgûl are invisible. Therefore, they have no specific éacac in the sense the Gandalf, Galadriel, Frodo, and Sam do. It is their perverse nature to be always éacac, swallowed with unnatural power. Animals hate them. Their mere presence broadcasts waves of fear and despair. They are consistently described as enormous, vast, threatening. They are the Nazgûl threats, Gandalf, his very arrival is as éacac: "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 éacac early in the story, when he seems to "grow tall and menacing" and his shadow fills the room (I, 42). The only time the Nazgûl'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 a "black shape," a "black world" as "the Captains gazed south to the Land of Mordor, it seemed to them that, 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 the Nazgûl. Sauron is enormous, vast, and threatening. As Gandalf seems to fill a room in the first éacac, so Sau­ ron, 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 direct: He is the Lord of the Rings, and his éacac continues the previously suggested connection between magical rings and éacaca. The characters in The Lord of the Rings who may be called éacac, then, include Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond, Frodo, Sam, and perhaps even Aragorn. 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 éacaca are invariably linked. The one notable exception is Aragorn, the true king. He seems to grow taller and more kingly as he rises to his noble ancestry to the King (I, 183). So Sam has a brief career as an éacac hobbit, but his career nearly ends when he returns the Ring to Frodo. In the scenes involving Gollum and the hobbits, there are several instances of what might be called éacaca, 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 untainted by Saur­ on's pride and, thus, agrandise their owners without diminishing others. But when the self-centered éacaca 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 éacaca. More noteworthy, however, is the debasement éacaca to almost equally debased appearances. When Bilbo, slyly 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 dwarfing and animal-like eien, and the servant 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 shadowy Lord of the Nazgûl, the greatest of Sauron's rings: at least, he dwindles from the Nazgûl's point of view, for the wreath 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). 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he is crowned king before the people (III, 246). In all these eacae, Aragorn wears no ring. Symbolic objects are, in fact, involved in all of Aragorn's eacae, objects which link the ring-eacae 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 Callahan 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 eacen in the strictest sense—his powers are not added beyond the natural. They are his nature. He is eacen, 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 eacae is thematically interesting: the ring-eacae 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-eacae 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 eac 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 eacen, 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 eacae as instructive demonstrations to prevent a hobbit's giving away the One Ring; Gandalf uses eacae to reveal himself to the Three Walkers and, in great haste, to nullify the despair of Wormtongue and the wizardry of Saruman. These are benevolent eacae and essentially dramatized statements, acts of communication. Gandalf's eacae function as weapons only against ringwraiths, when they are clearly just and necessary—supernatural power against supernatural power. Gandalf becomes hostilely eacen 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 eacae 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.