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William H. Green

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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.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 *beorn*, 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 *beorn* 'bear, warrior,' for "Beorn" 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 *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 *ēacen* to demonstrate the multiplicity and imprecision of synonyms used to translate individual Old English words. Though, as Tolkien observes, Hall translates *ēacen* variously with the words *stalwart*, *broad*, *huge*, and *mighty*—serviceable translations in context—the word actually meant 'enlarged' rather than merely 'large.'⁴ In fact, *ēacen* is the past participle of the verb *ēacan*, and in *Deor* the word specifically means 'pregnant' as Beaduhilde, raped by Weland, dolefully perceives *ðæt heo ēacen wæs* ('that she was pregnant'). Tolkien, then, is presenting a well-chosen example to illus-

trate 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* chooses the word *ēacen* and, discussing it, formulates a concept applicable to his fiction. Whenever *ēacen* 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 *ēacen* because he is endowed with "superhuman thirtyfold strength." His strength is his *ēaca*, his supernatural increase.⁵ Similarly, it is easy to find instances of *ēacen* in *The Lord of the Rings*, occasions when characters display additional power beyond the natural; indeed, such occasions, such *ēaca*, lie close to the thematic center of Tolkien's later fiction.

To avoid misunderstanding, let me emphasize that I use *ēacen* and *ēaca* (the noun form) only in reference to fairly dramatic aggrandizements of characters, unexpected unveilings of power, swift loomings up, or shadowy towerings. The first, perhaps the definitive *ēaca*, 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 *ēacas* 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 awestruck when he sees Gandalf "revealed" as a strong, majestic figure (I, 239). 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 *ēaca* 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 crows Gríma in Théoden's hall (II, 118); when "his voice grew in power and author-

¹ Richard C. West, "Contemporary Medieval Authors," *Tolkien Journal*, 11 (1970), p. 10.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, "Prefatory Remarks," in *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, trans. John R. Clark Hall, rev. C. L. Wrenn (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1950), pp. xvii-xviii.

³ *Tree and Leaf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 13.

⁴ *Beowulf*, pp. x-xi.

⁵ *Beowulf*, p. xi.

⁶ *The Lord of the Rings*, 3 vols., (2nd. ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), I, 42. Later references to this edition.

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 under the malignant power of Sauron.

Galadriel, Queen of the Golden Wood, manifests a sudden, supernatural increase in power after Frodo observes her elven ring and offers her the One Ring. It is an *ēaca* of extraordinary clarity: "She lifted up her hand and from the ring that she wore there issued a great light that illumined her alone and left all else dark. She stood before Frodo seeming now tall beyond measurement, and beautiful beyond enduring, terrible and worshipful. Then she let her hand fall, and the light faded, and suddenly she laughed again, and lo! she was shrunken: a slender elf-woman, clad in simple white, whose gentle voice was soft and sad" (I, 381). Here, it may be noted, the *ēaca* appears to be produced by Galadriel's magic ring, the second ring of the set to which Gandalf's belongs. Galadriel's ally, Elrond, who has the other ring of the set, makes no such dazzling displays, but he is a being of extraordinary power. A river floods at his command (I, 236), and Frodo is awed when he first meets Elrond, "the Lord of Rivendell and mighty among Elves and Men" (I, 239). His extraordinary powers remain numinous and stable—half hidden, half revealed—whenever the hobbits see him; but his appearance in majesty beside Gandalf, a scene which is a specific *ēaca* for the wizard, implies that he is capable of *ēacas* equalling Gandalf's and Galadriel's. He is an *ēacen* king and a ring-bearer.

Frodo and Sam manifest superhobbit powers several times in *The Lord of the Rings*, a sequence of *ēacas* leading up to Frodo's claiming the Ring on Mount Doom. The first occurs when Frodo, invoking the power of the Ring, demands an oath of obedience from Gollum, whose will has been utterly eroded by the Ring. When Frodo, as bearer of the Ring, insists on his demand, he grows visibly in power and size. He becomes an *ēacen* Hobbit: "For a moment it appeared to Sam that his master had grown and Gollum had shrunk: a tall stern shadow, a mighty lord who hid his brightness in grey cloud, and at his feet a little whining dog" (II, 225). Later, as he and Gollum approach their showdown atop Mount Doom, Frodo is again unveiled as a lordly power, and again the Ring is central to the scene. The two rivals face each other, and Sam again sees Gollum shrunken, his master towering. Gollum has become a defeated shadow, "and before it stood stern, untouchable now by pity, a figure robed in white, but at its breast it held a wheel of fire" (III, 221). The figure is, of course, Frodo, now almost wholly dispossessed of his identity by the Ring, which is the wheel of fire. Finally, at the end of his quest, Frodo undergoes yet another *ēaca*. A moment before he vanishes before Sam's eyes, he speaks out to claim the Ring as his own; and his voice is unnaturally strong, "a voice clearer and more powerful than Sam had ever heard him use" (III, 223).

During the brief interval when Sam possesses the Ring, he too becomes *ēacen*. 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 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 Ring has the greatest effect as "some nameless menace of power and doom" (III, 180). This menace stays with Sam throughout his adventure in the orc-infested tower. Even though he is no longer touching the Ring, it remains "a cowering menace to the slaves of Mordor" (III, 183). So Sam has a brief career as an *ēacen* hobbit, but his career necessarily 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 *reverse ēaca*,

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 Sauron's pride and, thus, aggrandize their owners without diminishing others. But when the self-centered *ēaca* 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 *ēacen*. More notable is the reduction of admirable characters 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 dwindling and animalistic debasement. Frodo's vision of his devoted 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 ring-bearers. At least, he dwindles from the Nazgûl'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 *ēacas* of Sauron 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 never shown as a body, only as eye, and the Nazgûl are invisible. Therefore, they have no specific *ēacas* in the sense the Gandalf, Galadriel, Frodo, and Sam do. It is their perverse nature to be always *ēacen*, swollen with unnatural power. Animals hate them. Their mere presence broadcasts waves of fear and despair. They are consistently described in terms suggestive of the dramatic *ēacas* of the good characters, though wholly negative terms. When the Lord of the Nazgûl threatens Gandalf, his very arrival is an *ēaca*: "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 *ēaca* 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 the sky as a huge, an ultimate *ēaca*: "And 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 from other *ēacas*: Sauron is enormous, vast, and threatening. As Gandalf seems to fill a room in the first *ēaca*, 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 of all. He is the Lord of the Rings, and his *ēaca* continues the previously suggested connection between magical rings and *ēacas*.

The characters in *The Lord of the Rings* who may be called *ēacen*, then, include Gandalf, Galadriel, Elrond, Frodo, Sam, the nine Nazgûl, and Sauron. Except 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 *ēacas* are invariably linked.

The one notable exception is Aragorn, the true king. He seems to grow taller and more kingly as he reveals his noble ancestry to the hobbits (I, 183), as Galadriel confirms his kingship with a name and a jewel (I, 391), as he enters the country he is destined to rule (I, 409), and especially as

he is crowned king before the people (III, 246). In all these *ëacas*, Aragorn wears no ring. Symbolic objects are, in fact, involved in all of Aragorn's *ëacas*, objects which link the ring-*ëacas* 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.⁸ Thus, Aragorn's power, even when suddenly and dramatically manifested, may not be *ëacén* in the strictest sense—his powers are not *added, beyond the natural*. They are his nature. He is *ëacén*, 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 *ëacas* is thematically interesting: the ring-*ëacas* 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-*ëacas* 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 *ëaca* 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 *ëacén*, 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 repitilian. 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 *ëacas* as

instructive demonstrations to prevent a hobbit's giving away the One Ring; Gandalf uses *ëacas* 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 *ëacas* and essentially dramatized statements, acts of communication. Gandalf's *ëacas* function as weapons only against ringwraiths, when they are clearly just and necessary—supernatural power against supernatural power. Gandalf becomes hostilely *ëacén* 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 *ëacén* 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*.

⁸ Patrick J. Callahan, "Animism and Magic in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*," *Riverside Quarterly*, 4 (1971), 244.

