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Abstract
Examines the importance of shared meals in Tolkien's works and relates them to feast days and the Eucharist in Christianity. Identifies "a series of important parties, feasts, and banquets [...] which in differing degrees suggest the ambiance of the Last Supper or the more general Eucharist feast."

Additional Keywords
Eating and feasting in J.R.R. Tolkien; Eucharist in The Lord of the Rings; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Christianity; Charlie Dye
THE LITERARY BANQUET
AND THE EUCHARISTIC FEAST:
TRADITION IN TOLKIEN
by James Lynch

Though the workings-out of Christian concepts in the fiction of J.R.R. Tolkien comprises a huge area of criticism and has been the subject of a sizeable amount of Tolkien criticism, I wish to draw attention to this short paper to a highly concrete pattern which indicates how Tolkien’s Christianity informs his thought and measures the altitude of his imaginative flights. The pattern is composed of a series of important parties, feasts, and banquets which vary tellingly in their basic connotative value and which in differing degrees suggest the ambience of the Last Supper or the more general Eucharistic feast.

From *The Iliad* through *Beowulf*, the King Arthur tales, and *Macbeth* to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, the banquet/party scene in Western literature has exercised such a magnetic force over our best writers that scarcely too much importance may be attached to it. Common sense would tell us that eating and drinking are of such consequence to us that our literature must necessarily reflect our primal concerns over mealtimes. As usual, common sense is all too common; it is as James Joyce called it, a “beast of boredom,” and it can never understand imaginative literature. Surely the reasons why feast scenes appeal so strongly to the imagination is the virtually endless array of meanings—social, familial, emotional, and spiritual—they can convey. Tolkien knew this as well as anyone ever did, and his encyclopedic knowledge of Western literature, together with his deeply abiding Catholicism, led him to explore the values inherent in the feast as thoroughly as anyone ever did.

The banquet means communal solidarity; it means fraternity. These social implications are perhaps most evident. The banquet brings people together in a spirit of good will; it displays the communal bonds among human beings. King Arthur presides over the round table because the table is just such a scene where the ideals of the court may find their best expression: ideals of honesty among friends, peaceful cohabitation, fraternal sharing of the goods of the earth only if his crown is never to be either hollow or hollowed, sees to it that the Olympians dine together because he knows that communal feasting fosters harmony in his rule; the whimsical gods and goddesses he oversees require the image of solidarity their mutually shared banquets provide them with. The first scene among the gods in *The Iliad* is a banquet scene, as are many succeeding ones. *Macbeth*, being as shrewd as he is, decrees an imperial banquet as his first act after his coronation. He means the occasion to be a symbolic event, and it is, in an ironic way. *Macbeth*’s banquet is one of the two or three most important scenes in the entire play; the hero’s fortunes take a sharp turn downward when he cannot take his place at the table, being prevented by Banquo’s ghost. The harmonious feast dissolves into confusion: what he intended to be a visual display of order and hierarchy in his reign becomes an image and a forecast of the pandemonium he visits on Scotland. The banquet ritual is aborted; communal ties loosen; catastrophe is imminent because the central scene cannot hold. By way of contrast, the great party scene at the end of *Cuckoo’s Nest*, wherein the inmates at the state mental institution, at the instigation of McMurphy, pass around the medicinal alcohol and the marijuana joints, achieves a vision of man in such joyful communion with one another as to make McMurphy’s impending self-sacrifice an anticlimax. The party is McMurphy’s personal brand of last supper, the men receive his spirit, and shortly afterwards he is lobotomized/crucified that they may be delivered (as indeed most of them are).

But the banquet/party means more than communal solidarity to Tolkien, though that is certainly an emphasized feature of what his feasting scenes imply. Tolkien occupies a point at the opposite end of the spectrum from the host of modern writers and film directors who use the party as a metaphor for the superficiality of contemporary social relations, as an image of mass hallucination, as I am thinking of writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and directors like Federico Fellini who in *The Great Gatsby* and "La Dolce Vita" present us with pictures of massive numbers of people bumping into one another, spilling drinks over one another, clicking glasses, smiling smiles akin to grinaces, and speaking worse than small talk (puny talk?), or not speaking at all—they simply gulp in liquid, air, and various kinds of smoke as the noise of the hundreds massed together washes over them. There is no closeness at these parties; though people are jammied together, they are both literally and metaphorically spaced out.

One has only to think of Bilbo’s birthday party, or the banquet at Elrond’s house in Rivendell, or the feast with Galadriel in Lothlorien to see where Tolkien’s interests are. Tolkien’s feasts recall those at Krotchg’s meadhall, Heorot, in *Beowulf*. They are ritual centers of existence which give a sense of security, imply a personal commitment to those partaking in the feast, and suggest the idea of the family of man. One of the reasons why Grendel is such a monster is that he invades the meadhall, he aborts the banquet ritual, and he ironically perverts the feast by eating Krotchg’s men. Judas is the archetypal perverter of the feast; he breaks the communal circle as he leaves the Last Supper. After a harrowing experience on the road, Frodo and the other hobbits rest secure in their sanctuary at Crickhollow and enjoy a huge meal, specially added to by Farmer Maggot’s mushrooms, but the Riders invade the banquet sanctuary here and also later at the Prancing Pony Inn. Part of the terror they convey, like Grendel’s, derives from there being no place the Riders won’t invade, if they can. And speaking of Grendel’s perverse feast, one is reminded that Saruman promises man-flesh to the fierce Uruk-hai as a reward for their hideous service. Such cannibalism is the kind of detail Tolkien uses to measure the distance between the profane orbs and the sacred Galadris, whose meals have the flavor of the Eucharistic feast—not only of communion, but of holy communion.

Bilbo’s party at the very outset of the *Rings* is a fair example of the secular meanings of food to Tolkien. In this lengthy scene, the author emphasizes the physical comforts and the pleasant feelings of camaraderie the hobbits enjoy when they gather about the sumptuous table of the aged and quirky Bilbo Baggins. For all Hobbit food means contentment; these are not an ascetic folk.

The guests were not disappointed: they had a very pleasant feast, in fact an engrossing entertainment: rich, abundant, varied, and prolonged. The purchase of provisions fell almost to nothing throughout the district in the ensuing weeks; but as Bilbo’s catering had depleted the stocks of most of the stores, cellars and warehouses for miles around, that did not matter much.

After the feast (more or less) came the Speech. Most of the company were, however, now in a tolerant mood, at that delightful stage which they called ‘filling up the corners’. They were slopping their favorite drinks, and nibbling at their favorite dainties, and their fears were forgotten. (The *Fellowship of the*
Though Tolkien underscores the physical comfort here, the feast is also emotionally satisfying: fears are allayed. With the next important meal, fears are similarly soothed over the banquet to the scene are very different. Gildor, leading a handful of wandering Elves, comes upon Frodo, Sam, and Pippin in the hills outside Hobbiton, after the hobbits' first real scare by the Black Riders. And the Elven kings invite the hobbits to dine with them. Tolkien's share is not on the splendor of the table nor even on the physical satisfaction the Elves' food gives, but rather on something like the medicinal nature of the food. The meal nourishes the hobbits in the way the modern advertisers for Wonder Bread claim their product "helps build strong bodies in eight ways." It's like a drug which supplies all the vitamins, minerals, protein, and what-not needed for the next leg of the journey, and it has an immediate effect.

The pattern expands dramatically when the hobbits reach a beautiful house on the other side of the Old Forest, the home of Tom Bombadil and the river-daughter Goldberry (the first organic gardeners in literature). The food represents the people who offer it: it is as wholesome and as psychologically sustaining as the couple is psychologically whole. Tom and Goldberry would qualify, as few other characters in our literature would, as symbols of the Self in Jungian terms; they are totally integrated personalities in harmony with themselves. The food at Tom's place renews the emotionally dragged-out, fearful hobbits, and expresses food for them a measure of their original equilibrium. Tom is a joyous upper, to use a contemporary word; his friskiness, energy, and overall "joie de vivre" are emotional and psychic jolts to the hobbits.

Here's my Goldberry clothed all in silver-green with flowers in her girdle! Is the table laden? I see yellow cream and honeycomb, and white bread and butter; milk, cheese, and green herbs and ripe berries gathered... The drink in their drinking-bowls seemed to be clear cold water, yet it went to their hearts like wine and set free their voices. (The Fellowship, 135-136) So it is: Tom's food goes to the heart; it bequeathes emotional and psychological health on a higher plane than the food at Bilbo's party could ever reach, and it differs in flavor, texture, and abundance from the brief but vitamin-enriched meal with Gildor in the hills.

Tolkien's pattern reaches full fruition with the feasts at Elrond's house and Galadriel's abode when the hobbits are among the Elves in the most impenetrable sanctuaries in Middle Earth. That the author was consciously working with the associational values of feasts becomes apparent when one considers that, while the hobbits are forever eating at Rivendell, the food there is never described. It is not mundane nourishment; it is virtually intangible—no texture, no flavor, no olfactory appeal. The implication is quite clear: the Elves' banquets are spiritual affairs, satisfying needs far more ethereal than ordinary physical ones. Bilbo's bill of fare at his party makes the eyes light up and the face smile contentedly; Tom's dishes cause the heart to take joy; but Elrond's feasts bring serenity and the knowledge of one's spiritual kinship to those in attendance at the banquet. Like Keats' "unheard melodies" which "pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone," Elrond's feast feeds one foodlessly. For Keats, the unheard melody played by a figure on an urn is sweeter than any sound because he hears in it the purest essence of sound. Similarly, the Elves' feast surpasses any particularized food because it captures the essence of feastng. This of course is not common-sensical; it is paradoxical. Common sense says that only when the belly is full can the mind and spirit be free. Tolkien tells us in his fantastic work that the body can endure whatever it must when the spirit is at peace. Frodo and Sam on their journey to Mordor are cases in point. If any corroboration of this statement is needed, consider the lembas, the waybread which Galadriel shares with the company in Lothlorien. Here is Tolkien's clearest depiction of magical, holy food. Here he comes closest to making an analogy between the meal and the Eucharistic feast. Lembas contains the spirit of the Galadrim; to say it is consecrated nourishment would not be an exaggeration. That the Galadrim think banqueting together to be a special, sacred event may be easily inferred from the following:

The Lady ended her song and greeted them. 'We have come to bid you our last farewell,' she said, 'and to speed you with blessings from our land.' 'Though you have been our guests,' said Celeborn, 'you have not yet eaten with us, and we bid you, therefore, to a parting feast, here between the flowing waters that will bear you far from Lorien.' (The Fellowship, p. 389)

It comes as a mild shock to hear that the company has not eaten with Galadriel and Celeborn in their long stay in Lothlorien, and Tolkien thereby draws attention to the importance of what's involved in sharing the fruits of the earth. It is as if the Galadrim make a deep personal pledge of faith to whomever they honor as guests at their feasts. It may not be out of place here to recall Shylock's remark to the Venetians in The Merchant of Venice: "I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."

Many other important meals flesh out the pattern of connotative values to eating in Tolkien's works, but I think the extensiveness of the pattern reaches its limits by the end of the first volume of The Lord of the Rings. It is not surprising to note, in conclusion, that important holy days in Christianity, such as Christmas and Easter, are great feast days. The feasting ritual signifies closeness and communion among humans and known and God.

*All references are to the Houghton Mifflin Second Edition.