



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

Volume 21 | Number 2 | Issue 80, Winter

Article 18

Winter 10-15-1996

Eating, Devouring, Sacrifice, and Ultimate Just Desserts

Marjorie Burns

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



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Burns, Marjorie (1996) "Eating, Devouring, Sacrifice, and Ultimate Just Desserts," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 21 : No. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol21/iss2/18>

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.



Mythcon 50

Looking Back, Moving Forward

San Diego, California

August 2-5, 2019

Eating, Devouring, Sacrifice, and Ultimate Just Desserts

Abstract

Bilbo's fear of being eaten is expanded in *The Lord of the Rings* to include the Dark Lord's "devouring". In both the nursery sense of being "eaten up" and in the more sophisticated sense of enslavement, Tolkien uses this theme to discuss selfhood and free will, and to separate those who serve from those who consume and possess.

Additional Keywords

cannibalism; communion; death; food; *The Hobbit*; *The Lord of the Rings*; morality; sacrifice

Eating, Devouring, Sacrifice and Ultimate Just Desserts

Marjorie Burns

Abstract: Bilbo's fear of being eaten is expanded in *The Lord of the Rings* to include the Dark Lord's "devouring". In both the nursery sense of being "eaten up" and in the more sophisticated sense of enslavement, Tolkien uses this theme to discuss selfhood and free will, and to separate those who serve from those who consume and possess.

Keywords: cannibalism, communion, death, food, *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, morality, sacrifice

Twenty-eight days after conception, before we have gained features or limbs or any indication of lungs, while we are still only half a centimeter in length, our embryonic selves – in anticipation of a lifetime of eating – have already developed a beginner's digestive tract. It will lie there for eight more months before we face the world, a clear indication that we are, in essence, creatures of appetite almost from the first: little Shelobs and Gollums, waiting for a meal.

There are few matters in life more elementary than food and few that so neatly cut both ways. We are eaters or we are eaten; we are feeders or we are food, and our simplest, earliest stories are based on these twin concerns. Little Red Riding Hood carries a basket of goodies and meets a devouring wolf. The wisest of the three little pigs (in the more daring versions of the story) dines on the wolf that previously ate his brothers. Hansel and Gretel nibble on the house of a child-devouring witch, a "cannibal witch," to borrow Tolkien's expression (Tolkien, 1964, p. 32). And, as Goldilocks learns, it may be splendid to indulge in porridge but not at all so pleasing to be found by three hungry, vandalized bears.

It is hardly necessary to point out the extent to which Tolkien was aware of this basic narrative concept and the extent to which eating permeates his Middle-earth stories. The greatest pleasures in Middle-earth are the pleasures of food and drink, just as the greatest risks are the risks of being devoured. But Tolkien's writing, on any topic, works on multiple levels; and his references to food reach far beyond the pleasures associated with eating or the terrors associated with being eaten, to include a complex range of ethical issues and themes.

Food as a means of alluding to moral issues is hardly unique to Tolkien; it is a device as old as the story of the Fall. But, where the Eden story is concerned primarily with the concept of obedience and the consequences of breaking rules, Tolkien's stories focus more on the nature of excess, on the ways in which the misuse of ambition or of appetite destroys the very self it seeks to embellish or feed. It is the

term *misuse* that is important here, since, in Tolkien's moral scheme, appetite and selfhood are not in themselves objectionable and even extravagance has its place.

Appetite, selfhood – and large doses of both – are, in fact, inseparable from life. They are, as well, our greatest sources of pleasure, and it is clear that Tolkien, for all his sense of morality, is by no means opposed to pleasure. Though *consuming* and *possessiveness* are, for him, negative terms (most applicable to dragons), Tolkien nonetheless understands both the pleasures of consuming and the pleasures of possessing. We see this in his celebration of food, drink, and pipe-weed, and in his obvious appreciation of decorative items, clothing, crafts, and well wrought swords and armor. And just as he believes in pleasure, he believes as well in the value of desire and the satisfaction of desire. This is why he gives highest praise, in his essay, "On Fairy-Stories," to those stories that succeed in both awakening and satisfying desire. There are risks, of course; desire, appetite, and self-promoting ambition, like the Land of Faerie itself, are highly "perilous." They can lead, all too easily, to excess; they can lead to dissipation and ravidity, to covetousness and voracity; and excesses of this sort, in Tolkien's world, are the primary sources of conflict and misery.

And just as the fault lies not in our longings, nor our physical natures, nor in the awakening and satisfying of desire, but rather in our own failure to avoid excess, so too the solution belongs to us individually and alone. It is the self that matters here, the self, of its own volition, choosing for good or ill. It is the self – swayed by narcissism, ambition, and greed – that causes abuse, insurrection, and sin. It is the self – tempered by fellowship, commitment, and kindly consideration – that allows for moral good.

It is for this reason that the citizens of Bree can belong "to nobody but themselves" (Tolkien, 1954, p. 161) or that Beorn can be "under no enchantment but his own" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 103) and still be admirable. Independence of this sort does not preclude consideration of others or loyalty to

others. Aragorn, Faramir, Galadriel, Beorn: each has his or her own individual preferences, thoughts, and desires; and yet each is capable of foregoing pleasure or security for the sake and safety of others. They belong, then, fully to themselves but serve – by choice – a larger order as well. In Tolkien's world, these are the individuals who ultimately succeed or who ultimately become fulfilled. But those others, the ones who consistently seek more than their due, those who demand more and more for the self and for the self alone, are the ones whose reward is – paradoxically – only an emptiness, a hungering, endless negation. "Lost, lost" (in Gollum's own words): "No name, no business, no Precious, nothing. Only empty. Only hungry; yes, we are hungry" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 298).

This weighing of greed and generosity, of selfishness and sacrifice, appears again and again throughout *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Greed (with its failure to acknowledge the rights or existence of others) shows itself not only in Smaug's hoard, the lusts of Shelob, or the nihilistic corruptions of Sauron but also in the simple excesses of hobbit nature, young Frodo's passion for mushrooms, for example, or Lobelia's propensity for acquiring Bilbo's spoons. So too sacrifice (expressly undertaken for others) appears in a variety of forms, from Bilbo's "painful" recognition that he, as host, "might have to go without" cake (Tolkien, 1987, p. 16), or Fatty Bolger's Crickhollow stand, on up to those wrenching oblations of self, those sacrifices that risk life, limb, or peace of mind, sacrifices that Gandalf, Frodo, or Aragorn most clearly exemplify.

Not all of this – not high-level sacrifice at least – may appear overtly related to the theme of food and consumption, and yet the connection is there. In matters of moral choice, we are takers or we are givers, and our words for expressing these concepts are rich with metaphor. In the act of taking or taking over, we *assimilate*, *incorporate*, or *absorb*, terms that are perhaps most appropriate to business, *corporate* business in particular, with its Latin root *corpus* completing the image of a body that feeds. So too, when we lust, when we long excessively for something, we are *consumed* by the desire to possess.

This particular form of overindulgence, indulgence that *consumes*, is most apparent in Tolkien in all those confrontations with beings or beasts that seize, devour and so possess those they come upon – for consuming, in its most negative sense, is nothing more than possessiveness, the extreme of isolating, self-indulgence that Shelob embodies, desiring "death for all others . . . and for herself a glut of life, alone" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 333). But when we deny the urgings of ego or flesh and choose instead to give to others, when we give up our own needs to serve the needs or lives of others, we *nourish*, *nurture*, *sustain*, and *preserve*.

These moral issues and the imagery that supports these issues are the same in *The Hobbit* as they are in *The Lord of the Rings*, in spite of obvious differences in emphasis and tone. We see Bilbo, after his escape from the Misty Mountains, deciding it is "his duty" to go back into "the horrible, horrible, tunnels and look for his friends" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 83); we see him among the spiders, fighting,

taunting, throwing stones, in order to save the dwarves. Again and again Bilbo endangers himself to benefit or rescue others, and danger in *The Hobbit* is, with very few exceptions, the danger of being eaten.

In *The Hobbit*, in fact, the fear of being eaten is presented far more blatantly and far more frequently than it is in *The Lord of the Rings*. At the same time, however, our apprehension is considerably less. We know Bilbo will escape. We know something or someone will surely turn up in time. This is, of course, entirely appropriate. *The Hobbit's* lighter, nursery-tale tone, its more open reference to being eaten, as well as its stronger emphasis on food in general, are what we expect in a book aimed mainly at children. Tolkien understood the thrill that comes from games or stories that tease about "gobbling up," and he was well aware of the ways in which food and eating specifically fascinate children. Like Kenneth Grahame and Lewis Carroll, he understood the particular pleasure children find in descriptions of plentiful, frequent meals: breakfasts, dinners and teas, complete with cakes, scones, tarts, pies, and those intriguing wines and ales that belong to the world of adults.

The book opens with images of almost excessive and certainly improbable plenty. Bilbo has not only one kitchen, one dining-room, one pantry but "kitchens, dining-rooms," and "pantries (lots of these)" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 11). The very roundness of hobbits, and even the roundness of their tunnels and doors, adds to this image of secure and well-fed comfort. Tolkien, however, is quick to insert a high level of danger into this comfortable Shire world. Bilbo's hobbit peace and habitual indulgence are soon replaced by privation and anxiety, by the fear of both doing without food and the fear of ending up as someone else's meal. Kenneth Grahame's Mole may experience the terror of the Wild Wood, Lewis Carroll's Alice may hear the fate of oysters or find herself chided by the pudding she begins to slice, but only Tolkien, of these three writers, addresses the threat of being eaten quite so frequently and with such explicitness.

Bilbo, the champion of second breakfasts, the one who dreams again and again, on the long weary trail, of buttered toast, bacon and eggs, and "the kettle just beginning to sing" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 35), faces the threat of being eaten at nearly every turn. He confronts, in order of appearance: trolls and goblins and Gollum and wolves and spiders and Smaug, every one of them perpetually hungry, and every one of them eager to remedy that condition.

There is a certain basic pattern to these fear-of-being-eaten scenes. When the dwarves and Gandalf and Bilbo are troubled or weary or suffering most acutely from hunger themselves, the threat of being eaten is most likely to occur. "We must just tighten our belts and trudge on – or we shall be made into supper, and that will be much worse than having none ourselves," says Gandalf to the desperately hungry Bilbo after the goblin caves (Tolkien, 1987, p. 87). In incident after incident, misery leads to carelessness, and carelessness leads to their nearly being devoured.

Chronologically, the first fear-of-being-eaten incident is the troll adventure – and to borrow from a thirteenth-century Icelandic text, "not much is worse than trolls" (Jónsson,

1912-15, vol. BII, pp. 141-42). The pattern of temptation that leads to adversity is presented through the trolls' alluring fire and the "toothsome" smell of their roast mutton, which brings about the dwarves' captivity and the prolonged possibility of being roasted, boiled, or squashed into jelly.

This is followed by the Misty Mountains, where the cave that should have sheltered them from cold and wind and weather opens the way to goblins, a nasty, "always hungry" breed. For Bilbo, there is Gollum as well and Gollum's increasing hunger. Not only does Bilbo's fate – to be eaten or escorted out – depend on the riddle game that Gollum instigates, but the nature of the riddles themselves accentuates the theme. Of the nine riddles asked (discounting Bilbo's dubious pocket question) three, the egg and the two fish riddles, deal directly with food; three others speak of teeth and biting and devouring. Equally suggestive are the contents of Gollum's pockets: "fish-bones, goblins' teeth, wet shells, a bit of bat-wing, a sharp stone to sharpen his fangs on" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 73). And Gollum's very name comes from the "horrible swallowing noise" he frequently makes in his throat (Tolkien, 1987, p. 68). Throughout all of this, Bilbo is terribly hungry himself. Nor does his ultimate escape from Gollum and the goblin tunnels offer much relief. Wolves are soon on their trail, as are a second installment of goblins, gleefully singing about roasting them "alive" or stewing "them in a pot" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 95).

The pattern continues in Mirkwood, where the rapid depletion of their stores is contrasted both by Bombur's sumptuous dreams and the increasingly more lavish feasts that tempt them, finally, off the trail and into the spiders' domain. And after the spiders comes Smaug, a devourer of maidens and ponies, "the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities," who knows "the smell (and taste) of dwarf – no one better" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 190-1).

In *The Hobbit*, in fact, the threat of being eaten is so dominant that even the eagles and Beorn, decent folk who give the Company food and shelter and fellowship, are likely to be touched with carnivorous possibility. The eagles, Bilbo learns to his relief, do not intend to tear him up "for supper like a rabbit" after all (Tolkien, 1987, p. 97). But rabbit is precisely what the eagles do bring them for supper, and the notion that rabbits and hobbits have something in common is one that appears repeatedly throughout the books. This rabbit association and the vulnerability it implies are nicely reinforced by the-not-entirely-safe Beorn, who pokes Bilbo in the stomach and comments that "little bunny is getting nice and fat" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 115).

The threat of being eaten appears in other less obvious ways as well. In *The Hobbit*, where it is clearly best to maintain a lighter tone, Tolkien twice shows us the dwarves engulfed in bags or comically enveloped in webbing, a sort of symbolic, pre-ingestion indicative of what nearly does occur. The "jaws" of Old Man Willow, closing tightly on Merry, work in a similar way to prepare us for the greater engulfing and the considerably more ominous spell that occurs on the Barrow-downs. But most intriguing are Tolkien's threatening entrances and his underground passageways. In both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*,

they invariably suggest a form of devouring. In a world of living landscapes, where mountains have "shoulders," "feet," and "limbs" and where caves, tunnels, entrances, and gullies have "mouths" or are described as "gaping" or "yawning," Tolkien's journeys through dark, winding passages and through gateways into dangerous realms seem very ingestive indeed. Within the darkest reaches of these inner worlds lie villains and beasts, most of whom subsist on whatever comes their way. Tolkien's exits (rather appropriately referred to as the "back door" and the "lower gate" in the Misty Mountains adventure) further add to the impression of digestive tract journeys made through the earth itself. Even Mirkwood, with its tunnel-like entrance, and the Wood-elves' cavern produce something of this effect. And when Tolkien describes the "green gums" and the "jagged teeth" of the Barrow-down episode, the image of a living, devouring, underworld spirit is unmistakable.

Particularly intriguing in this context is the word *Mordor*, a word meaning "black land" in Tolkien's elvish language, Sindarin, but a word that is also highly suggestive (through Latin roots) of both devouring and death. (*Mordant* and *mortuary* are perhaps our closest English words.) As Sam and Frodo approach the boundaries of Mordor at Cirith Gorgor, these Latin-based images are strongly reinforced. The "mouth" of the pass itself is guarded on each side by the Towers of the Teeth; here lies the iron gate, Morannon (the Teeth of Mordor). No one, unless summoned by Sauron, can pass this gate without feeling "their bite" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 244).

Names of this sort are far more suggestive of horror and risk than are comparable place-names in *The Hobbit*, with its Misty Mountains or Lonely Mountain or even its Desolation of Smaug. We are now in a world that is at once more hostile and disturbing and more noble and significant than the one Bilbo journeyed through, and impending danger is no longer presented in conversational or offhanded ways. This is certainly true of the threat of being eaten. In *The Lord of the Rings* direct references to the possibility of being eaten, to the possibility of being literally ingested, are considerably less frequent than they were in *The Hobbit*, but the threat, when it does occur, is a far more serious one. In *The Hobbit*, for example, we are told that goblins eat "horses and ponies and donkeys (and other much more dreadful things)" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 60). And it is easy enough to guess what those "much more dreadful things" might be, but it is only in *The Lord of the Rings* that Tolkien moves beyond comic/horror threats or hints and speaks directly of Saruman awarding "man's-flesh to eat" to the fighting Uruk-hai (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 49).

Cannibalism – defined here as any Middle-earth race devouring another – represents the ultimate betrayal, the ultimate failure to acknowledge the value and rights of others. It is a practice we hear of mostly among the orcs, a breed whose speech is packed with cannibal reference and threat. "You're cooked," the Isengarder orcs jeer to their rivals. "The Whiteskins will catch you and eat you" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 56). And this cannibalistic note is intensified by certain suggestions that orcs eat not just other

races but possibly other orcs as well. Even if Tolkien's allusions to orc-eat-orc behaviour are only intended as metaphor, as orcish ways of referring to death or defeat, the level of horror is increased. "Go, or I'll eat you," Shagrat threatens Snaga (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 182). "It's orc-flesh they eat," the evil-voiced Grishnákh says of the Uruk-hai, a derisive comment as much as an accusation, likely enough, but one appropriate to the breed (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 49). Finally, however, the most vivid intimation of orcs eating orcs comes not so much from threat and speech as from the image of Shagrat stabbing again the already wounded Gorbag and then pausing to lick the blade.

Orcs have been fittingly intensified over the goblins we knew in *The Hobbit*, but Gollum/Sméagol, on the other hand, has to some extent and in certain ways been softened by the time we meet him again. In *The Lord of the Rings* he no longer appears to be actively seeking hobbit flesh or even orc for that matter, though there are rumours of a blood-drinking ghost that clearly apply to him, and Sam suspects him of being "not too dainty to try what hobbit tastes like" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 228). For the most part, however, and from what we actually see, he now lives mostly off lower life forms (beetles, snakes, fish, and worms), things snared in the water or dug from the earth, particularly wet earth, and possibly out of the grave, as his comments on not being able to touch the dead forms in the marshes indicate to Sam. Gollum has become less of an eater of fresh meats and something more of a grubber in marshes and pools, something more of a ghoul. In part this shift is indicative of a slow degeneration, but his apparent (and perhaps only temporary) willingness to forego hobbit flesh also makes sense in another way. Tolkien intends us to gain a certain sympathy for Sméagol. He is not yet fully lost, and he is tied to Frodo through more than simply the Ring. Hobbits, we learn, are the closest remaining links to Sméagol's own lost, "hobbit-like" race (making him a "Proto-Frodo," to quote a student of mine); and it is not until he is balancing at the edge of the chasm of Mount Doom that he bites and maims his hobbit counterpart.

Like the orcs, Sméagol also uses the term "eating" to suggest defeat or extermination, but only in connection with the Dark Lord and his destruction of other lives and other individual wills. "He'll eat us all, if He gets it [the Ring], eat all the world" is Sméagol's cry to Frodo (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 245), an opinion that is by no means Sméagol's alone but which is nowhere else expressed with such simplicity. References to Sauron's "devouring" occur throughout the books. Faramir, for example, closely echoes Sméagol when he speaks of the "destroyer who would devour all" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 280). But Sméagol's reduction, his description of the Dark Lord's intentions as mere "eating", neatly reveals the basic similarity that exists between goblin/orc voracity and the more abstract cravings that the Dark Lord represents. That the sins of this now mostly disembodied but still formidable being can be reduced to a display of excessive appetite, to something rather like greed at table, places Sauron, for a moment, in the same category as any mortal who contrives to gain more than his or her fair share. From the Sackville-Bagginses' yearning for Bag End to the Dark

Lord's lonely, raging hunger, the drive is essentially the same – the drive, that is, but not the degree.

However much Tolkien may wish us to see the ultimate cheapness of soul that binds all those who sin by acquisition or by an excessive yearning for power, he is also highly aware of position and the difference position makes. Lobelia and Gollum; Wormtongue, Saruman, Denethor: each is capable of rising only so far. Each has a limit, a glass ceiling (to borrow from present-day terminology) in ambition, influence or even in ill intent. For this reason, Gandalf explains, the One Ring could not give Gollum unlimited power but only "power according to his stature" (Tolkien, 1954, p. 63). At most he sees himself as "Gollum the Great," "The Gollum," and eating fish every day (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 241).

Just as Sméagol's reduction of the Dark Lord's devastation to a simple act of eating reveals both the elemental nature and the baseness of Sauron's transgressions, so too Shelob's role as a lesser but parallel figure accentuates His essential pettiness. She is, in fact, almost a parody of Sauron in certain of His aspects. Though Shelob, unlike Sauron, has no desire for slaves, willing or otherwise, and though there are hints of sexual appetite in Tolkien's presentation of Shelob, hints that appear in no other character, nonetheless the Dark Lord and Shelob both serve to represent the far extreme of a single negative urge. The swollen, engulfing existence that Shelob desires is little different from the expanding reaches of Mordor that the Dark Lord's destruction creates. Each brings darkness. Each brings death. Each wishes for no other power than his or hers alone. Each is an example of appetite run amuck. "All living things" are Shelob's "food" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 332), and Sauron, we are told, "would devour all."

What is emphasized by such statements is the sheer extent of Shelob's and Sauron's appetites, the insatiability each exemplifies. But in Tolkien's world it is not simply appetite that serves as a moral gauge. Virtue or corruption can also be measured through the particulars of diet alone. To put it simply, the baddies eat bad and the goodies eat good. We see this first in *The Hobbit*, where food taken from the trolls' larder must be examined and chosen with care. Similarly, Pippin in *The Two Towers* wisely rejects the "flesh flung to him by an Orc, the flesh of he dared not guess what creature" (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 54). More telling yet are Sméagol's inability to tolerate elvish food, his disgust for cooked rabbit and herbs, and his preference instead for things raw, for cold fish, worms, or "something slimy out of holes" – all of which indicate his regression, his devolution back to a primordial world of "black mud," wetness, and a "chewing and slaving" existence (Tolkien, 1965a, pp. 231-2).

For certain of his negative characters, Tolkien adds yet another element of horror. For the orcs and Shelob (and for Sauron, the devourer of souls), the repulsion we feel over what they eat is magnified by the pleasure each takes in the willful infliction of pain. This, above all, is what gives spice to orc or Shelob meals. In a chapter full of cannibalistic hints, we hear the orcs' regret that the hobbits are to be delivered alive, that there will be no chance for "play"; so too Shelob and the Dark Lord both desire the consciousness

of those they torture and consume. Shelob, though she may wish for no other existence but her own, does not “eat dead meat, nor suck cold blood” (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 350). She wants her victims alive and “plays” like a cat with those who become her food. There is little difference between this and Sauron’s desire for unwilling, agonized slaves; and when Sauron’s emissary, the Mouth of Sauron, is sent to mislead and demoralize the Army of the West, to “play these mice cruelly” before they are to be struck and killed, the comparison with Shelob again is evident (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 164).

Tolkien’s decent and idealized characters are, of course, equally defined by what it is they eat. Their foods, which they share with others, and the warm fellowship which accompanies their meals, all serve to place them clearly on the side of the good. The inn at Bree has “good plain food, as good as the Shire could show, and homelike” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 166). Beorn, for all the danger he exudes, eats no meat but lives “most on cream and honey” (Tolkien, 1987, p. 103). Tom Bombadil’s table, laden with “yellow cream, honeycomb, and white bread and butter” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 132), the meal eaten with Faramir in the “Window on the West,” and even Treebeard’s rich, woody, invigorating water, are really much the same.

Each of these individuals shares similar, fleshless (or nearly fleshless) diets. We hear only now and then of hobbits eating meat; Strider speaks of “berry, root, and herb” to be found along the way and mentions only as a secondary possibility his “skill as a hunter at need” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 203). The highest and the best eat no meat at all; and the Elves, we are told, have an “appetite for music and poetry and tales,” which they seem to like “as much as food, or more” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 250). Their drinks (and Tom Bombadil’s) have the qualities of wine, while the less ethereal hobbits serve mostly ale or beer.

But the value of elven food goes beyond what might be called simple dietary correctness. The elven *lembas* (or waybread), carried by the Fellowship, has a symbolic meaning as well. *Lembas* feeds both the will and the body and is touched with eucharistic elements. It is “given to serve . . . when all else fails” (Tolkien, 1954, p. 386) and in the elvish language, Quenya, means “bread of life.” In the shadow of Cirith Ungol, before their journey “down into the Nameless Land,” Frodo and Sam share what Tolkien twice refers to as a “last meal,” the last perhaps they will “ever eat together.” It consists of some food from Gondor, but more telling are the “wafers of the waybread of the Elves” and the water they sparingly drink (Tolkien, 1965a, p. 320). Above all it is the *lembas* that gives Frodo the strength to continue on his march to death, burdened like Christ with the object of his own torture. Later, in “The Land of Shadow,” communion is suggested again. Though it is Mordor water they drink this time, not clear, wine-like water, it comes to them comes through Sam’s call to the Lady for “clean water and plain daylight” (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 195), a call that is virtually a prayer. It becomes, then, a form of elven water after all; and taken along the way with the remaining fragments of elf wafer and – perhaps most important – with

memories of the Lady herself, it constitutes communion.

Thoughts or memories of this sort, linking us to others (as Sam is linked to Galadriel) are themselves a form of communion. Repeatedly, throughout the grim and seemingly hopeless chapters of *The Return of the King*, it is compassionate thoughts of others that confer the strength to endeavor and persevere. It is, for example, the combination of “understanding” and “pity” that Bilbo feels for Gollum that allows him, “quite suddenly” to achieve his leap in the dark (Tolkien, 1987, pp. 79-80). After the Fellowship is separated, we hear repeatedly that they think of one another. Merry thrusts down “his own dread” through thoughts of Pippin’s ordeal (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 107). At the Tower of Cirith Ungol, Sam forces “himself to think of Frodo, lying bound or in pain or dead” (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 180). And with this he goes on. Each kind and unselfish thought brings stamina and greater resolve. In a similar way Sam gains heart from the thought that he and Frodo are part of the great story, that they too are part of the Ring’s history and on the side of the good; others have been brave before them, and brave for the sake of others; so they must be as well.

Even Gandalf’s gentle chiding to Bilbo, not to disbelieve prophecies he helped to bring about, and not to imagine it all had occurred for his benefit alone, makes the same point. In our own small way, Tolkien believes, each of us inexorably belongs to the story and can play a hero’s or a villain’s part. And if we accept the discrete and appropriately veiled connections to Christ’s sacrifice and our own roles in a world that calls for relinquishing, sharing, and freely given service, we become part of the Christian body and have taken of the body of Christ. We are a fellowship and a community, and we share in a communion that nurtures us even when we believe ourselves alone.

It is all there in Gandalf facing the Balrog, in his falling and rising from death; it is there in the Rangers, who, unacknowledged, continue to protect the Shire; in Faramir remaining at his lonely outpost; in Galadriel choosing for the benefit of Middle-earth rather than for glory; even Butterbur – though only “on the edge of very great troubles” (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 272) – contributes to the cause. “I also am a steward,” Gandalf says (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 31); and, in truth, we are all stewards, those of us who serve the good and give of ourselves through willing service and aid.

The contrast with Shelob’s blubbing over the wound Sam gives to her “beloved flesh” or Gollum’s “whistling and gurgling” self pity, “horrible to listen to” (Tolkien, 1987, pp. 77-8), are highly indicative. The “beloved” in Shelob’s reference to her own flesh (like Gollum’s evoking of “Precious”) has almost a religious ring, a Biblical and devotional tone; she is her own deity, a goddess of self. “Her Ladyship,” says one of the Mordor orcs, quite appropriately, for Shelob is a distorted queen, a ruler of darkness and death, the antithesis of the “Lady” Galadriel, whose demeanor carries its own religious associations and who is a bestower of light and life and who willingly accepts her own and her people’s diminishing for the sake of a greater good.

Sacrifices, such as the one Galadriel makes in rejecting the Ring and relinquishing her position in Lothlórien and

Middle-earth, are invariably freely given. Circumstances may urge an undertaking or a renunciation, but the choice must always remain one's own. But relinquishings of this sort, though they entail loss, though they may require sacrifices of life or limb or rejections of power and glory, do not mean failure, ruin, or permanent deprivation. When Galadriel, rejecting the Ring, speaks of diminishing, this is not a diminishing of self or soul. Like Milton's Eve, she has been tempted by the title of "Queen"; but she – unlike Eve – passes the test; and, in rejecting the Ring's invitation, she will, in her own words, "remain Galadriel" (Tolkien, 1954, p. 381). Her better self has grown, and she may now return to the West. It is only Pippin and Merry who grow in actuality, whose service and hardship for others are marked by a representative increase in size, but all those who give and serve and nourish others gain or grow in one sense or another. Gandalf is now Gandalf the White. Aragorn is king. Faramir is the Steward of Gondor and marries Éowyn; and Frodo, who has suffered the most, who has lost his easy hobbit joy and who has been outwardly (and almost ritualistically) marked by the loss of a finger, has grown too, as Saruman knows and bitterly resents. Frodo will have his reward; he has gained something of an elvish nature and will go to the West and heal.

Those who give, then, gain; those who take less for the sake of others ultimately become more. They gain in fellowship as well; and it is through fellowship that we find earth's finest rewards. It is this that the dying Thorin has learned when he speaks of valuing "food and cheer and song above hoarded gold" (Tolkien, 1987, p. 243). And what Thorin learns is what Tolkien wants us to learn as well; he wants us to look closely at our choices and our commitments and to consider where they lead. Thorin, like Boromir, chooses a path that seems to offer appropriate and warranted power but which leads instead to disruption, to early death and defeat. In Thorin and Boromir, then, Tolkien shows us the soul in balance, the soul that falters and fails, but he shows us as well that the soul – at the moment of death – can turn again to the good, as both of these characters do.

This sense of a soul in balance also applies to Gollum and greatly increases the significance of his character. For all his slow degeneration, he too is not fully lost; he too may yet be redeemed. He is, as well, an indication of what Frodo may become, of what Frodo nearly does become; and he serves, then, as a warning to us, a reminder that we are capable of good but that the drive to seize and consume is ever with us, that the possibility of failure or sin or moral deterioration is therefore ever with us as well. We cannot have it otherwise, as Tolkien fully understands. We are of the body; we live by consuming, and consuming has its inevitable, orcish side. It is for this reason that Tolkien speculates in "The New Shadow," about the orc within us all, about the ways in which we must inevitably appear as destroyers and adversaries to those other forms of life we consume or feed upon. To trees, whose wood we cut and whose fruit we take and devour, we wear (at least in part) the face of enemies.

This mixture of innocence and rapacity, innate to the human/hobbit condition, is neatly suggested at the conclusion

of *The Lord of the Rings*. In the midst of Tolkien's exhilarating description of the regenerated Shire, one brief but faintly chilling picture stands out in contrast to the otherwise idyllic scene, the picture of hobbit children sitting – surrounded by abundance – eating countless plums and piling up the stones like "the heaped skulls of a conqueror" (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 303). Certainly, a hobbit child, amassing the skulls of vanquished plums, is a long way from becoming a Sauron, but the instincts of a conqueror and devourer are there just the same.

And Tolkien wants us to recognize this; he wants us to recognize that we are creatures of appetite and ego and that simple, instinctive gratification can lead to overstepping, to excess, to claiming as our own whatever comes our way. But he wants us to remember as well that we are capable of becoming more than egos and appetites. We can choose to give as well as to receive; we can learn to relinquish as well as to possess. And if we stretch ourselves beyond our earthly natures, if we serve and share and sacrifice in small ways and in great, we, like Tolkien's small and larger heroes, shall receive our rewards and be more than we were before.

But those who take, those who seize, hoard, and consume and consider only the self will be served otherwise. Their reward will be a hollowness and a void; they wished for distinction and singularity, a power theirs *alone*, and they end with singular loneliness; they end – often enough and most dramatically – by wasting or fading away, by a dispatching by fire or a dispersing by wind. We see this first with the envying, hungering Barrow-wight, whom Tom orders to shrivel like "cold mist" and whose "long trailing shriek" fades away "into an unguessable distance" (Tolkien, 1954, pp. 153-4).

At the end of *The Return of the King*, Tolkien replays this scene in a number of ways. In a passage highly reminiscent of the demise of Orgoglio (Pride) in *The Faerie Queene*, the Nazgûl Lord, who threatens Éowyn that her "flesh shall be devoured" and whose "great shoulders" rise over her moments before his defeat, falls into instant nothingness. His cry, which fades to a "shrill wailing, passing with the wind," becomes "bodiless and thin," dies and is "swallowed up" (Tolkien, 1965b, pp. 116-7). Later, as Mordor itself steams, crumbles and melts, the last of the Nazgûls tear "like flaming bolts" through the sky, utter a piercing cry, and then crackle, wither, and go out (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 224); the spirit of Sauron, rises into "a vast threatening" but impotent shadow that fills "all the sky" before it is taken by the wind and "all blown away" (Tolkien, 1965b, pp. 227). Even Gollum, with his final "shriek" and "wail" fading into the fiery depths of Mount Doom, comes to a similar end. And, finally, Saruman – in imitation of Sauron to the last – gathers into a grey mist that rises "like smoke from a fire," then bends away in the wind, with a "sigh" that dissolves "into nothing" (Tolkien, 1965b, p. 300).

These are the just desserts. The eaters are unbodied; the eaters are eaten. Those who would have more and everlastingly more end by becoming less; those who serve none but themselves end by being alone. This is as true of the Master of Dale, deserted by his companions and starving in

the wilderness, as it is of the Dark Lord himself. But those who follow the path of true service and loyal fellowship move through pain and loss and misery to peace and reunion and grace, to that ultimate blessing which, in Tolkien's own words, is a joy as "poignant as grief", an echo and vision of "evangelium" (Tolkien, 1964, pp. 60 and 62).

References:

- Jónsson, Finnur (ed.). 1912-15. *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal-Nordisk forlag.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1954. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1964. "On Fairy-Stories," *Tree and Leaf*. London: Allen & Unwin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1965a. *The Two Towers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1965b. *The Return of the King*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Tolkien, J. R. R. 1987. *The Hobbit, or There and Back Again*. London: Unwin Hyman.