

'WHAT'S TATERS, PRECIOUS?': FOOD IN TOLKIEN'S 'THE LORD OF THE RINGS'

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ABSTRACT

"The Lord of the Rings" by J. R. R. Tolkien offers a magnificent panorama of imagined worlds, yet this epic story has very little description of meals. The prosaic but, as it turns out, heroic hobbits are oriented to comfort, which includes frequent dining, but once beyond the pleasant confines of the Shire, the narrative and descriptions involve beings who are either too evil, too grand or too preoccupied to eat. An exceptional moment, from which the article takes its title, is a debate over raw versus cooked food between two principle and otherwise opposed characters, Sam and Gollum.

KEY WORDS

J. R. R. Tolkien, "Lord of the Rings", Fantasy Literature, Food.

CAPITALIA VERBA

J. R. R. Tolkien, "Dominus Anulorum", Litterae ad phantasiam, Epulae.

J. R. R. Tolkien, author of what is arguably the most popular work of serious fiction written in the twentieth century, was an eminent scholar of medieval philology and literature.¹ It is obvious that the culture, diction and word-forms of the northern Middle Ages infuse “The Lord of the Rings” and its allied works, and so, logically, attempts have been made to interest students in medieval literature via Tolkien’s imagination.² Yet medieval cookery plays no role in creating the atmosphere of Middle-earth in Tolkien’s grand narrative.³ There are banquets, minstrels, singing, poetry and generally all manner of medieval ceremonial, but the gastronomic content of the great feasts is invisible since they are provided by elves and the most high-born men of Middle-earth whose interest in the consuming body is minimal. In fact not very much food of any sort is on offer in the “Lord of the Rings”. What meals there are consist of rather basic items such as bread, cheese, bacon and fruit and the only group interested in the pleasures of the table are the hobbits of the Shire.

To be sure, a number of feasts are celebrated in the course of “The Lord of the Rings”, but scant account is given of any specific foods included on these occasions. This is in part due to Tolkien’s mastery at evoking vivid scenes without obtrusive or burdensome detail. Part of the magic of imagined worlds is that the mundane aspects of life, such as the constant need for sustenance, don’t have to be meticulously accounted for. In “The Hobbit”, a predecessor to “The Lord of the Rings”, the marvelous is encountered by relatively prosaic hobbits and dwarves and because hobbits are fussy about regular and tasty meals, there is much more to say about dining (or the misfortunes of not dining) than in the more grandiose epic. The members of this first quest (undertaken for treasure and not to save the world), are often famished. In “The Hobbit”, sinister and supernatural characters (elves, trolls, even the wizard Gandalf) are depicted as eating ordinary food. In the three books of “Lord of the Rings”, however, the meals become scarce and there is little mention of food at all as the perilous journey moves far from the Shire.

If a concern with food is one of the chief characteristics of hobbits and an emblem of their likeable ordinariness, it is also part of their early twentieth century Englishness whose contrast with the tropes of epic and romance are a central conceit of Tolkien’s

1. Among the most useful general studies of Tolkien’s works and their enduring popularity are: White, Michael. *Tolkien: A Biography*. London: Penguin, 2001; Shippey, Tom. *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000; Rosebury, Brian. *Tolkien: A Cultural Phenomenon*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Curry, Patrick. *Defending Middle-earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity*. Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997.

2. Lee, Stuart D.; Solopova, Elizabeth. *The Keys of Middle-earth: Discovering Medieval Literature through the Fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

3. The absence of sophisticated cooking in Tolkien’s works also reflects his personal tastes. He once wrote of himself, “I am in fact a ‘Hobbit’ (in all but size). I like gardens, trees and unmechanized farmlands; I smoke a pipe, and like good plain food (unrefrigerated), but detest French cooking...”, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien*, Humphrey Carpenter, J. R. R. Tolkien, Christopher Tolkien, eds. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981: 288-289. For a further discussion of Tolkien’s personal tastes see the entry on Food and Drink in: *The J. R. R. Tolkien Companion and Guide*, Christina Scull, Wayne G. Hammond, eds. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006: I, 320-321.



Middle-earth and part of the appeal of his books. It isn't appropriate do for hobbits to express their love of dining by doing so on medieval food, because they function as characters who have modern sensibilities (or at least those contemporary with Tolkien's preferences) who are thus an effective means of interpretation of a fantastic world tinged by medieval literature, but not slavishly based on it.

Landscape, memory, and weather are more important in "The Lord of the Rings" than the minutiae of everyday life. The familiar must be balanced with the fantastic and the fantastic can't be too literally medieval. It won't do to have banquets that involve dishes that are too familiar as that spoils the sense of distance and otherness, but at the same time, having already invented languages, geographies and creatures, too much attention to a wholly unfamiliar cuisine would make Middle-earth an excessively mapped-out world. Yet if the food is too consistently medieval, the uncanny and evocative but unpredictable appeal of Tolkien's world would be in danger of having an archaic rather than an imaginative atmosphere. Tolkien was adept at rationing out his medieval inspiration so that although broken swords, subterranean miner-dwarves and herb-lore are taken from the literature of the Middle Ages, the imagined Middle-earth is considerably more than a neo-medieval fancy.⁴

If the food of Middle-earth were to seem too much like that of medieval Europe (swans, game, spices) this might look like excessively literal borrowing from the Middle Ages. On the other hand, if the food were too fanciful, the story would take on the coloration of science fiction: making it part of an alternate and hence possibly irrelevant universe.⁵ "The Lord of the Rings" is a fantasy, but an erudite, controlled, complex and compelling one created through selective yet vivid details and atmosphere.

Scenes involving meals in "Lord of the Rings" highlight the hobbits' affinity with cultivated and pleasantly scenic nature over and against the supernatural realm, exemplified by the elves and other beneficent fantastic creatures such as the Ents as well as the anti-natural force of the Dark Lord, Sauron. Each of the three tiers in Tolkien's cosmology (immortal elves, humans and hobbits, and the evil beings controlled by Sauron) has a mode of food consumption specific to it and changes in character arcs are signified in part by changes in what and how they eat as they move up or down within the system. Frodo loses his hobbit's preoccupation with food as he approaches Mordor and Mount Doom; Gollum has fallen from a hobbit-like state of normal appetite to an eagerness for disgusting food; Saruman's descent is marked by an appetite for physical sustenance inappropriate for a wizard in good standing. Throughout the epic, however, different sorts of beings are associated with different levels of interest in food. The major contrast is between the hobbits, through whose eyes the story is told, and almost everyone else. The hobbits enjoy and think

4. On Tolkien and the Middle Ages see the essays edited in: Chance, Jane. *Tolkien the Medievalist*. London: Routledge, 2003.

5. See Tolkien's comments on the first feature films of *The Lord of the Rings* for an explanation of his dislike of "scientification" in stories, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien...*: 270-277.



about food (although not in great detail) while everyone else either doesn't require physical nourishment because of their supernatural power, or merely subsists.

There *is* some food and actually quite a lot of drink in the story, but not consistently. Bread, cheese, fruit, smoked or salted pork, honey, milk, wine and beer are the most frequently mentioned fare, simple items plausible in both a medieval and a modern setting. There are some exceptions and we will discuss the anomaly of the only significant cooked meal in "Lord of the Rings": the rabbit stew Sam prepares on the border of Mordor.

As we've said, the story is not bogged down by meticulous description of accoutrements or consumption. The beauty and horror of Middle-earth are vividly depicted but not its economy or the details of its material culture. One should not inquire too closely about how agriculture, land-tenure or the supply and distribution of goods function in Middle-earth. There are whole regions and many episodes in which the logistics of food are ignored completely.⁶ How, for example, do the hosts of evil land of Mordor survive? While Mordor as seen by the hobbits is almost completely desolate, Tolkien tells his readers in an aside that there were agricultural territories around Mordor's inland sea of Núrnen worked by slaves to feed the armies of orcs as well as tributary lands to the south and east⁷. The treacherous wizard Saruman's orcs, the Uruk-hai, have some kind of bread and unpleasant raw meat. The captured hobbits Merry and Pippin are also given an invigorating drink by the orc captain Uglúk, but there is no visible production of anything other than weapons in Sauron's Mordor or Saruman's Isengard and not much in the way of a culture of consumption other than that expressed by a lust for pillage⁸.

Not all supernatural beings are devoid of appetite. The hideous giant spider Shelob eats almost anything, including the odd orc, and has the spider's custom of consuming her prey alive, but that is her ravenous nature⁹. It is fine for supernatural beings to require nourishment if this forms part of their horrifying character, so that obviously vampires (into which Sauron transforms briefly)¹⁰, depend on the blood of the living, but unless a supernatural entity is defined by its disturbing means of subsistence, it can't participate in the banality of ordinary dining without losing some of its formidable aura.¹¹ This is true for both good as well as evil characters. The wizard Gandalf, one of the spiritual "Maiar" sent in disguise to Middle-earth by the (essentially divine) "Valar," clearly doesn't need food as he spends months isolated

6. Tolkien remarked in a letter to Naomi Mitchison that the economic organization of Middle Earth could be largely inferred without taking up much room in the story, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien...*: 196-197.

7. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955: II, ii, 201.

8. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954: III, iii, 35.

9. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977: 73-77. The voracity of spiders is exemplified by Ungoliant, the mother of all spiders (including Shelob) who allies with Melkor in "The Darkening of Valinor" before trying to eat both the Silmarils and Melkor as well. She eventually consumes herself. On the relationship between eating and being devoured, see: Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms: Celtic and Norse in Tolkien's Middle-earth*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005: 156-171.

10. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion...*: 175.

11. Burns, Marjorie. *Perilous Realms...*: 160-163 lists ways that Tolkien's heroes find themselves in danger of being eaten.



on a platform high up in Saruman's tower of Orthanc and his "rebirth" after casting down the fiendish Balrog involves weeks without any visible nutrition. Neither can the Balrog, whose essence is fire, be imagined as hungry in the ordinary sense. It is also difficult to think of Sauron, the Dark Lord, sitting down to a hum-drum lunch in his tower of Barad-dûr. In the more completely visionary and supernatural works of Tolkien's such as "The Silmarillion", there is no food except for that consumed by the human heroes Turin and Beren (the latter is a vegetarian). Nourishment is mentioned at points essential to character development, but is limited to the mortals¹².

Ordinary beings have moderate but keen physical appetites and this is part of what defines their ordinariness. Thus hobbits, who despite a few slightly fantastic traits are the most ordinary beings in the story (or certainly "English" ordinary circa 1910), eat for pleasure (stuffing oneself is referred to as "filling up the corners"). We first meet Bilbo Baggins in "The Hobbit" rushing about distractedly finding eggs, pork pie, apple-tart, mince-pie, cheese, salad, cakes, tomatoes and even wine and coffee for his uninvited dwarf guests. The dwarves are sufficiently mortal and greedy to desire the sustenance, but they also make fun of Bilbo's preoccupation with his well-organized larder and crockery. "The Hobbit", in contrast to "The Lord of the Rings", is full of food which is both a source of pleasure and a constant problem as adventures mean skipped meals and even prolonged deprivation. Bilbo frets that while it is tea-time at his home in the Shire, he has little or nothing to eat on his adventure. There's not much cooking in "The Hobbit" and rather more in the way of English pub lunches than hot dinners, but quite a few meals are described. The elves of Mirkwood import wine and dine on roast meat; the horrible trolls eat hobbits and dwarves, but also more prosaic things such as mutton, cheese, and bacon. The shape-changing Beorn has an imagined bear's diet of honey, cream and mead. Even Gandalf is shown as occasionally hungry¹³. Already, however, there is a sense that the comfortable world of the Shire is where food (and tobacco) are readily obtained and appreciated while the wild lands and the pursuit of honor and gain are inhospitable to gastronomic enjoyment. The last words of the dying dwarf king Thorin Oakenshield are addressed to Bilbo: "If more of us valued food and cheer and song above hoarded gold, it would be a merrier world..."¹⁴.

In contrast to "The Hobbit", and in keeping with its less cozy, starker and more spiritual tone, "The Lord of the Rings" unfolds with decreasing culinary visibility. The Shire has gluttonous celebrations, but beyond its borders the food seems to run out. There is still a contrast between the hobbits' appreciation of a good meal and the indifference of almost everyone else to the pleasures of the table. The creatures of the great world outside the Shire (with a few ravenous exceptions) are either morally too low or too high to be bothered with eating. When Merry wakes up

12. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*...: 164, 199. See Beren's vow to kill no animal that is not in the service of Morgoth and Turin's disgrace at the feasting table of Menegroth.

13. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937: 44, 54, 121, 137, 188.

14. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*...: 299.



after his near-death experience of confronting Sauron's great servant, the Lord of the Nazgûl, his first observation in response to the question of how he's feeling is to say "I am hungry," showing both his resilience and essential nature¹⁵. Amidst the wreckage of Saruman's city of Isengard, Merry and Pippin are mocked by Gandalf and Gimli the dwarf for their tranquil pleasure in eating. Undaunted, the hobbits partake of a second lunch of captured salt-pork, bacon, butter, honey and bread that Saruman had stored for his human employees¹⁶. True, the elf Legolas joins the hobbits on this occasion (along with the Gimli and the man Aragorn), but there is not much other evidence that elves, at any rate, do much eating away from the tables of the wise Elrond's house in Rivendell. The Mirkwood elves in "The Hobbit" like to eat and especially to drink, but the High Elves of "The Lord of the Rings", though hospitable and festive, live in a more numinous world.

Reticence about food with regard to the great and good protagonists is characteristic of medieval literature. In Tolkien's favorite Anglo-Saxon works such as "Beowulf" or "The Battle of Maldon" drink and festivities occur, but no food is mentioned except what the horrific Grendel and his mother consume (in their case human beings). Feasts occur in the chivalric romances and the requisite game and highly spiced dishes are served, but it is in the character of knights to lack base appetites and of peasants to be vulnerable to hunger and other bodily needs. The upper classes, especially the lovelorn, exist outside the framework of the ordinary struggle for existence. In the romances of Chretien de Troyes or the stories of Marie de France, the landscape is dotted with splendid castles, but no one seems to be working the land; clothes and furnishings are elegant, but meals are ceremonies rather than gastronomic events.

In a few medieval works of literature characters from the upper classes dwell lovingly on luxury food, but these gourmands are not admirable. The higher clergy were thought especially liable to inappropriate gourmandise. In Antoine de la Salle's romance "Jehan de Saintré" of 1456, a low-born abbé is passionately and sinfully devoted to cuisine. He and Jehan compete for the favors of the Dame des Belles Cousines. The abbé offers her roasted lamprey en croute, soles roasted, fried and boiled with orange verjus, and eels in galantine. He also proposes spiced wine (hippocras), and toast with "poudre de duc" which included cinnamon and sugar and had supposedly sexually simulative properties.¹⁷ Preoccupation with food is here comical and the abbé, whatever his pretensions to connoisseurship, possesses a fundamentally peasant appetite.

15. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: I, viii, 145.

16. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: III, ix, 161-164.

17. de la Salle, Antoine. *Jehan de Saintré*, Joël Blanchard, ed. Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1995: 436-438. See: Szkilnik, Michelle. "Nourriture et blasons dans 'Jehan de Saintré' d'Antoine de la Salle (1456)". *Fifteenth Century Studies*, 16 (2001): 83-99. For food in other late-medieval romances see: Hyvernat, George. "Un repas princier à la fin du XVe siècle d'après le 'Roman de Jehan de Paris'", *Manger et boire au Moyen Âge*. Nice: Université de Nice, 1984: 261-265; Planche, Alice. "La table comme signe de la classe: le témoignage du 'Roman du Comte d'Anjou'", *Manger et boire au Moyen Âge*...: 239-260.



Susceptibility to hunger and the ordinary demands of the physical world is the mark of lower-class mediocrity in medieval literature and in "The Lord of the Rings". Hobbits and men who are not great warriors often feel hungry or tired while those referred to as the "great" or the "wise" (but also the evil) are never famished and seldom fatigued. Some exceptional commodities do excite desire across an unusually wide spectrum of the Middle-earth population. Pipeweed (using this term rather than "tobacco" which appears in "The Hobbit")¹⁸ is something that hobbits, men, dwarves and even wizards (both Gandalf and Saruman) crave not exactly a food item, but something involving appetite and internal bodily pleasure. It is a product of the Shire and so identified with hobbits and materiality, but it is also prized by a range of other sorts of beings. In the midst of his conspiracies Saruman has taken the trouble to acquire it.

More commonly, however, the great are preoccupied with power, ideas and passions while the lesser folk wonder where their next meal is coming from.¹⁹ As the hobbit Ring-bearer Frodo becomes transfixed by the Ring and the struggle of the quest, he grows less hobbit-like, less interested in hearing about food and water supply problems and closer to entering into the power of the Ring. In the last ordeal Frodo's companion Sam is the exclusive manager of the real world of physical survival and it is he who procures water and rations it along with their elven *lembas* bread and the soldier's fare provided for them by Faramir, the commander of Gondor.

This contrast between master and servant is reminiscent of the more comical pair Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The impractical knight takes no thought of nourishment, for his books and quest have made him indifferent to food, whereas Sancho is perpetually trying to manage to acquire something to eat. Once he has become ruler of his "island," Sancho's doctor won't allow him to eat anything so his peasant appetite is unable to profit from his apparent rise in fortune.

On a prosaic level there is plenty of beer and ale in the Shire and on its borders. Pippin regrets that the detour to avoid the Black Riders means they won't be able to stop at the "Golden Perch" in Stock ("the best beer in the Eastfarthing")²⁰. Opportunities to describe what is served at feasts, however, are not taken up by Tolkien. The fêtes at Rivendell, the coronation banquet at Gondor, and the farewell meal at Lórien are grand events, but no menus are given. There is more information about drink than food in "The Lord of the Rings", so that Elrond at Rivendell and the elves of Lórien are shown consuming a restorative cordial called *miruvor*, but here again, it would be inappropriate to imagine such ethereal beings as elves tucking into a meal. The Ent or "tree-herder" Treebeard drinks an "Ent-draught"

18. In fact *The Hobbit* ends with Bilbo reaching for his tobacco jar and exclaiming "thank goodness" at being told that he is quite a minor figure in the world's doings.

19. The exception, as in so many other instances, is in the house of Tom Bombadil and his wife Goldberry. They are ur-supernatural beings who have been part of Middle-earth longer than anyone, but they enjoy and serve cream, honey, bread, butter, milk, cheese, herbs and berries. This is natural food that doesn't involve cooking, but nevertheless it is recognizable to humans or hobbits.

20. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1954: I, iii, 97.



that soothes and energizes the hobbits Merry and Pippin²¹. This encounter of mortal beings with marvelous nourishment takes away the hobbits' ordinary hunger for the time being and in the long term causes them to grow taller.

Under ordinary circumstances the hobbits have the appetites of the better-off sort of rustics, yet if they live in a comfortable environment of mild gluttony, their actual cuisine remains a mystery. The great party that opens the tale involves lots of provisioning, open-air kitchens, the recruitment of cooks from nearby inns, but there is no mention of any specific food in the Shire except when Farmer Maggot serves Frodo and his companions bacon and mushrooms²².

At the inn at Bree the hobbits dine on unspecified hot soup, unspecified cold meats, bread, butter, cheese, but also (more elaborately) a blackberry tart. Bree is a borderland, where both hobbits and men live, but beyond, as the journey becomes more magical, food almost evaporates. English farmhouse cuisine gives way to no food, or at least no visible food. There are things that allow for subsistence on the road, such as *cram*, a chewy kind of hard bread or biscuit, and its more elegant Elvish cousin *lembas* which comes in the form of thin cakes wrapped in leaves. But these were originally conveniences to explain how provisioning in the wilderness and desert is accomplished, although *lembas* gradually evolved in Tolkien's imagination into something much greater.²³

There are not so many men in "The Hobbit", which is populated mostly by dwarves, elves and hobbits, but the grander scheme of "The Lord of the Rings" involves the triumph of men and the eventual passing of many other beings into oblivion. It is noteworthy then that men, mortal and grasping though they may be, are seldom depicted eating or displaying any particular interest in food. In the Peter Jackson movie trilogy Denethor, Steward of Gondor, is shown eating alone, greedily, a sign of his obdurate selfishness and unreason and although this is quite a compelling cinematic image, it is not part of Tolkien's portrayal. In the book Denethor interrogates Pippin, giving him wine to drink and white cakes to eat. Pippin finds this snack far from adequate after the long ride with Gandalf from Isengard. Neither Gandalf nor Denethor shows the slightest interest in food during this interview and eventually Pippin obtains from the tower guard Beregond the usual modified English "Ploughman's Lunch" of bread, butter, cheese and apples (along with wine)²⁴. The extension of the absence of food to the human world is partly in order to highlight the "humanity" and attractive but deceptive ordinariness of hobbits. Humans like to drink (as at the inn in Bree) and presumably eat as well, but it is only the humans at the borders of the Shire, men such as the innkeeper Barliman Butterbur and his tavern patrons, who are shown as enjoying food.

21. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers...*: III, iv, 57.

22. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Fellowship of the Ring...*: I, iv, 93.

23. *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien...*: 288. Tolkien describes how *lembas* evolved in his mind from a device for sustaining characters in the wilderness to a *viaticum* with links to the medieval Eucharist. See also the entry on *lembas* in *The Peoples of Middle-Earth*, Christopher Tolkien, ed. Boston: Harper Collins, 1996: 403-408 for more information on its cultural and quasi-religious significance.

24. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King...*: V, I, 29-35.



Hobbits then are naturally (or at least culturally) fond of food and it is a mark of Frodo's ordeal that he is permanently affected by the darkness of his burden. He has entered the furthest into the non-hobbit supernatural and in Mordor is unable to remember tastes or other aspects of the sensory world as the Ring's power over him increases²⁵. Even after the Ring has been destroyed Frodo cannot enjoy the restoration of safety and beauty. Although this is put in terms of the landscape of the Shire and in contrast with Sam's pleasure in his return (and speedy settling down to family life), the magnificent larder of the Baggins residence, we can surmise, is not what it once was.

Amid the general turning away from food in the marvelous lands of Middle-earth there is one exceptional moment in which cooking is suddenly thrust into the foreground. In the chapter entitled "Of Herbs and Stewed Rabbit," Frodo, Sam and Gollum have arrived in Ithilien, a surprisingly charming region given its close proximity to the dread realm of Mordor. Sam cooks rabbits hunted by Gollum, and the two have a Lévi-Straussian colloquy about the virtues of raw versus cooked food, a scene that has obtained a certain cult following because of Sam's longing for "taters" and Gollum's memorable question, "What's taters precious, eh, what's taters?" Sam spells it out "Po--ta--toes" and then observes that potatoes are "the Gaffer's delight, and rare good ballast for an empty belly." Sam goes on to express a longing for fish and chips. In the closest thing to friendship that has or will exist between Sam and Gollum, the former proposes that if Gollum behaves himself and turns over a new leaf, he'll cook him some fried fish and chips. "You couldn't say no to that," to which Gollum responds "Yes, yes we could. Spoiling nice fish, scorching it. Give me fish now and keep nasty chips!" Sam ends the discussion by exclaiming, "You're hopeless, get some sleep²⁶".

Gollum is described as originally a member of a people like hobbits who lived by the Great River. He partakes of the same earthly nature as Sam but has descended to a lower level through his greed and the overpowering mastery of the Ring which he possessed for many years. Gollum's taste has suffered accordingly and he is capable of eating things hobbits (or humans) would find repulsive or impossible. In "The Hobbit" Gollum is depicted as eating orcs when he could get them to supplement his diet of raw fish, and his desire to make a meal out of Bilbo demonstrates his eagerness to engage in something approaching cannibalism²⁷. In "Lord of the Rings", traversing the Dead Marshes, Gollum roots through the slime under the rocks for his meal and Sam has reason to suspect that he has at least tried to eat the corpses of the swamp that create the marsh-lights²⁸.

Yet there are things Gollum refuses to eat. He has sought out a meal in the muck in preference to the offer of the elves' *lembas* bread, the mere smell of which made him ill²⁹. Gollum's own choices, in addition to his long association with the Ring,

25. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, ii, 195.

26. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, iv, 263.

27. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Hobbit*...: 80.

28. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, ii, 235-236.

29. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, ii, 229.



have caused him to fall below his original proto-hobbit nature so that he prefers raw or even rotten meat to cooked food. When the orcs of Mordor caught sight of him they associated him with no less depraved a gastronome than Shelob. Gollum is so far below the numinous nature represented by the elves that food associated with their magical realm sickens and revolts him. Frodo is speaking about more than gastronomy when he comments that the way-bread of the elves would do Gollum some good if he would only try it³⁰.

It's not remarkable that Sam would take pleasure in stewed rabbits or that Frodo would be pleasantly stupefied but only vaguely aware of the meal. The missing potatoes are surprising, however because their absence (or rather presence in the narrative) brings up the question, usually deftly avoided, of Middle-earth's relationship or likeness to medieval Europe. On the one hand there were no potatoes in Europe before the arrival of the Spanish in the New World and only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did potatoes become a common item and then a staple. On the other, Middle-earth is not literally medieval Europe, after all, so there's no compelling reason why there shouldn't be potatoes (just as there is something very much like New-World tobacco). The absent potatoes of Ithilien function as another form of Shire nostalgia.

More remarkable is that Sam's food longing then extends to Fish and Chips, a modern British favorite. Fried fish as street food appeared only in the 1830s (a fried fish warehouse is mentioned in Dickens' "Oliver Twist"). Potatoes were also offered as poor-people's takeaway food in the 1840s, but not until 1860 at the earliest were the two combined.³¹ Fish and Chips has been a modern urban working-class pleasure and sustenance, not part of the sensory patrimony of the countryside and Tolkien of course knew this. The introduction of such a jarring token of lower-class urban culture of contemporary Britain is different from the casual mention of coffee and tea in "The Hobbit". Fish and Chips are part of the hobbits' "humanity" as against the habits of fantastic and sinister creatures, but the dish is not only unmedieval, but requires a lot of quick heat, quantities of oil and special cooking equipment to prepare, unlike anything else served up in Middle-earth.

Reality (within the fictional world) soon returns. The rabbits/coneys are eaten without the potatoes, the fire has attracted notice, and the encounter with Faramir is ushered in. Held and questioned by the commander of Gondor, the hobbits eat again in the cave behind the waterfall, and despite the earlier rabbit hors d'oeuvre they are still desperately hungry. The second meal consists of yellow wine, bread, butter, salted meat, dried fruit and red cheese³². After an interlude of actual cooking we're back to unadorned, minimally prepared food.

The final stage of the journey, into and within Mordor, involves a sustained ascent from nature into super-nature, but some form of nourishment remains imperative. Frodo and Sam begin by eating the provisions supplied by Faramir since they are

30. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, ii, 229.

31. Spencer, Colin. *British Food: An Extraordinary Thousand Years of History*. New York: Grub Street, 2002: 264-266.

32. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, iii, 285.



perishable as well as less potent than the *lembas* bread given to them by Galadriel³³. Following Frodo's imprisonment and during the escape from the tower of Círieth Ungol he corrects Sam's opinion that the orcs, who are evil, must eat poison. The orcs as a race began life as higher creatures. Tolkien hints that they were once elves who were captured and twisted by the dark powers. Since the darkness cannot create life, neither can it devise new forms of sustenance or make its slaves immune to hunger and thirst³⁴. In fact, Mordor's military water-supply depots make the dry, thirsty journey across the plain of Gorgoroth possible for Frodo and Sam.

Nearing the end of the quest, the two hobbits rely entirely on the *lembas* bread to keep them alive and Tolkien highlights the difference between natural and supernatural sustenance.

The *lembas* had a virtue without which they would long ago have lain down to die. It did not satisfy desire, and at times Sam's mind was filled with the memories of food, and the longing for simple bread and meats. And yet this waybread of the Elves had a potency that increased as travelers relied on it alone and did not mingle it with other foods. It fed the will, and it gave strength to endure, and to master sinew and limb beyond the measure of mortal kind³⁵.

Tolkien's understanding of *lembas* as a single sustaining element also has precedents in medieval religious literature. In "The Lives of the Desert Fathers", a chronicle of Egyptian hermits in the late antique and early medieval periods, the monks are often described as living entirely on the consecrated host for extended periods of time while their bodily health is not only sustained but improved by the practice.³⁶ Sam's perception of Frodo's elf-like appearance at this stage marks the transition from the natural world of hobbit-life into the supernatural world of creatures that live beyond mortal appetites and needs.³⁷ Yet, once the Ring is destroyed and Frodo and Sam give themselves up for dead, longing for the Shire (and, importantly, its food) is the most poignant emotion for Sam and he is only too happy to descend back into the natural world once his task is complete³⁸.

Two other characters take a journey in the opposite direction toward anti-nature and their diets change accordingly. Saruman, a Maia like Gandalf and one of five wizards entrusted with the care of Middle-earth and its protection against the Enemy, betrayed that trust and attempted to carve out a realm to rule as his own in

33. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*...: IV, vii, 305.

34. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Silmarillion*...: 50.

35. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, ii, 213.

36. Abba Sourous is recorded as eating only food given to him by angels for the rest of his life following his conversion while the monk John ate only the Communion brought to him by the priest on Sundays for three years: Russell, Norman. *The Lives of the Desert Fathers: The Historia Monachorum in Aegypto*. Oxford: Mowbray, 1981: 83, 93.

37. Frodo takes on the appearance of a shining Elf-lord when he commands Gollum to allow him to complete his quest.

38. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, ix, 311. Sam is granted the closing line of the trilogy when he returns from the Gray Havens to Shire and his growing family after watching Bilbo and Frodo sail into the west, "Well, I'm back."



defiance of both Sauron and the Order of Wizards³⁹. So long as he had pretensions to greatness his predilection for bodily pleasures remained a secret. However, once he is overthrown, Saruman's descent from the supernatural into the natural world becomes obvious and Tolkien signifies this through, among other things, his eating habits. We have already mentioned the pipeweed from the Shire which made its illicit way to Isengard before the war, and when the hobbits finally confront the mysterious Sharky in Bag End they discover a well-fed Saruman⁴⁰. Once he is killed they find out that his many ascetic ordinances were inspired not by a desire to eliminate gastronomic pleasures but to reserve them for himself and his cronies⁴¹.

Saruman's creature, the treacherous human, Gríma "Wormtongue," began as a lesser soul than Saruman and falls even further. Though he enjoyed the best of Théoden's table at Meduseld, Wormtongue is reduced by Saruman to near starvation in the Shire and stripped of his dignity as a human being. Shortly before Wormtongue murders him, Saruman hints that Gríma had resorted to something as terrible as eating hobbits after Saruman forced him to kill Lotho Baggins in Bag End⁴². This episode recalls Gollum's actions in the Dead Marshes and together Wormtongue and Gollum represent the nadir of the gastronomic scale, low points for two important character arcs. Their desire for the flesh of rational creatures has put them on the level with orcs, trolls and spiders. Each of these three, Saruman, Wormtongue, and Gollum, falls below his created state and this is reflected in their changing diets.

While carefully rationing out his knowledge of the European agrarian economy of the Middle Ages, Tolkien was able to employ differential attitudes toward food as a device for illustrating a tripartite moral and ontological system that governed his Middle-earth. The hobbits, with whom we identify in part because they love their victuals, are flanked on either side by those who are above the need for that particular pleasure, such as elves and wizards, and those who are unable or unwilling to rise to it, such as Gollum and Wormtongue.

Food is thus symbolically important in "Lord of the Rings", despite its relative scarcity. With the notable exception of the stewed rabbit, the food that is mentioned is mostly uncooked or cured and could serve as the basis for either a medieval or modern meal. The absence of food in part serves to avoid burdening the story with an excessively medieval aura but it also underlines the transition from the comfortably prosaic Shire to the extraordinary realms beyond where the struggle over fate of the world tends, except for a few key moments, to obscure the question of what's for dinner.

39. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, viii, 299.

40. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, viii, 297.

41. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, ix, 302.

42. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Return of the King*...: VI, viii, 299.

