



Book-Review:
*The Sweet and the Bitter: Death and Dying in J. R. R.
Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*

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Amendt-Raduege, Amy. *The Sweet and the Bitter: Death and Dying in J. R. R. Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings*. Kent State UP, 2017. ISBN 978-1606353059.

In a letter written in 1956, J. R. R. Tolkien states that the principle theme of *The Lord of the Rings* is “Death and Immortality” (*Letters* 246). Although scholars have engaged with Tolkien’s theme in his broader legendarium, no one has published a monograph devoted to the variety of deaths encountered in his most popular work. Amy Amendt-Raduege’s recent book, *The Sweet and the Bitter*, however, has filled the critical gap. The aims of her project are twofold. First, she catalogues and analyzes the instances of death that occur throughout *The Lord of the Rings*. Second, she assesses the influence of medieval and modern notions of “good” and “bad” deaths on Tolkien’s theme of “hope without guarantees,” as well as the corresponding memorial practices. She points out that the three great themes of death that connect medieval Northern Europe, *The Lord of the Rings*, and contemporary culture are “the way we die, the need to remember the dead, and . . . the lingering apprehension of what lies beyond the grave” (4). Her book attempts to trace each theme as it develops throughout the story. This is a daunting task for a relatively slim volume, but by limiting her scope to *The Lord of the Rings*, Amendt-Raduege has produced an insightful and comprehensive study on the thematic and contextual importance of death in Tolkien’s work.

The book divides into two sections. Chapters one and two establish the criteria and the instances of “good” and “bad” deaths. Examples of good deaths include Théoden, Gandalf, Boromir, and Aragorn. Bad deaths, in contrast, include Denethor, Gollum, Saruman, and Gríma Wormtongue. Chapters three and four consider the memorial practices of each culture in Middle-earth and their various beliefs about the afterlife. Since Tolkien was a medievalist, medieval Christian and pagan literature set the criteria for determining the moral quality of each individual death. Amendt-

Raduege, however, is careful not to assume that Tolkien was simply re-packaging medieval beliefs. Rather, she wants to “show how *The Lord of the Rings* makes visible those residual, specifically medieval, concerns about death and the nature of dying that have been often overlooked” (4).

In the opening chapters, her analysis hinges on a distinction between Anglo-Saxon heroic ideals, as seen in stories like *Beowulf* and the *Battle of Maldon*, and the Christian attitudes toward death outlined in the *ars moriendi* – a popular fifteenth century ecclesiastical guide that taught people how to prepare for death. Whereas the stories of Anglo-Saxon heroes portray good deaths as occurring while performing courageous deeds motivated by the desire for fame and glory, the *ars moriendi* teaches the average Christian to die well through a series of procedures: to accept the manner of their death, to avoid temptation, to affirm the values of the Church, and to focus on Christ’s passion as a guide for dying well. Amendt-Raduege applies this distinction in her analysis, noting the ways each character’s death adheres to and/or deviates from heroic and Christian ideals. Among the good deaths, Théoden symbolizes ideal pagan heroism, though Tolkien has smoothed “over the rough edges of Anglo-Saxon and Gothic motivations that inspired the character” by emphasizing the self-sacrificial nature of his death (12); Aragorn “follows the step-by-step process outlined by the *ars moriendi*” (28); and Boromir’s death represents a moment where “the conventions of Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse heroic ideals and the *ars moriendi* meet and merge” (27). The bad deaths have similar medieval parallels. The death of Denethor, for example, results from a form of *ofermod* – an Old English word that loosely translates as “excessive pride” and was closely associated with the fall of Satan in the Old English *Genesis B*.

In the second half of the book, chapter three analyzes gravesites, monuments, and songs as commemoration practices that “become part of the cultural identity of the peoples of Middle-earth, defining both individual cultures and the collective heritage of the free peoples” (51). Amendt-Raduege’s analysis includes Orcs, Hobbits, Dwarves, Elves, and Men. Monuments such as Balin’s tomb, Cerin Amroth, the district of the dead in Minas Tirith, and the burial mounds of Rohan bespeak each culture’s attitude toward death and its connection with the past. Chapter four shifts focus and considers the three occurrences of the haunting dead: the Dead Marshes, the Oathbreakers, and the Barrow-downs. Each instance points to Tolkien’s ability to blend “medieval folklore with modern experience” (83). The Dead Marshes has strong parallels with medieval stories of corpse candles, and the “real landscape of the Somme” during WWI (83); the Oathbreakers correspond with the medieval story of Hellequin’s Hunt (92); and Frodo’s experience in the Barrow-downs bears a close resemblance to stories of walking corpses, known as *draugar*, in the Icelandic sagas (98).

If the first four chapters primarily focus on the medieval influences underlying *The Lord of the Rings*, then chapter five reasserts the interplay between the theme of death and Tolkien’s notion of “hope without guarantees,” and the strong link between modern Western society and medieval Northern European culture. None of the characters espouse certain knowledge of life after death, yet all the good deaths demonstrate that a life well-lived affords hope beyond the grave. The uncertainty of death also establishes the foundation for the enduring relevance of Tolkien’s work. Amendt-Raduege argues that “by showing death as both a positive and negative . . . Tolkien’s text offers each of us the means to prepare for our own eventual ends” (110). Her emphasis on the practicality of Tolkien’s theme leads her into a somewhat digressive discussion about how our contemporary Western society remains rooted in

medieval practices of dying while also developing new practices in response to modern science.

The strength of Amendt-Raduege's book lies in its series of interconnected close readings. She devotes a significant amount of attention to each character and culture of Middle-earth, parsing their differences and similarities. Additionally, the robust historical context, which draws on both medieval and twentieth-century history, enhances the significance of her conclusions. At times, her generalizations of medieval history and literature tend toward oversimplification. Anglo-Saxon literature and the *ars moriendi* occupied very different epochs during the Middle Ages, so it is difficult to gauge the accuracy of a sweeping claim such as, "In the Middle Ages, perceptions of 'good' and 'bad' death were heavily influenced by societal ideals of the heroic death as well as the traditions of the *ars moriendi*" (9). The conspicuousness of this kind of generalization stems from the fact that the book also contains impressive close readings of other medieval texts. Her analysis of the Old English poem "The Wife's Lament," for example, admirably engages with the nuance and ambiguity of the poem's themes – especially regarding life after death and the potential for ghostly hauntings – by highlighting some of the translation difficulties. *The Sweet and the Bitter* is an impressive achievement: focused, nuanced, and comprehensive, and it marks what I hope will continue to be a growing area of research in Tolkien studies.

Biography: Nicholas Dalbey recently graduated with a Master of Arts in English Literature from Middle Tennessee State University. His thesis work focused on medieval literature, specifically the classical and medieval philosophical context of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. He was the editor in chief for the 2017-2018 issue of *Scientia et Humanitas*, and he currently works as a high school English teacher in Middle Tennessee.

Works Cited

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