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## Death and Immortality in Middle-earth (2017) edited by Daniel Helen

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*Death and Immortality in Middle-earth: Proceedings of The Tolkien Society Seminary 2016*, ed. by Daniel Helen. Edinburgh: Luna Press Publishing, 2017. xii, 206 pp. \$16.50 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781911143338. The Peter Roe Series volume XVII.

*Death and Immortality in Middle-earth* marks the seventeenth entry of the Tolkien Society's Peter Roe series. It comprises a collection of twelve essays originally given as presentations for the Tolkien Society Seminar held in Leeds 2016. Seven of these can be viewed in their original form on the Tolkien Society's website, [link to videos here](#). Auriele Bremont's seminar presentation is not included in the book. Even if one attended the seminar or watched the videos, however, one would gain something from reading the book. For one thing, several of the essays have been revised and expanded from their oral form. The essays are not in the order in which they were given in Leeds, but it could be argued that the current arrangement makes more sense, as the editor had the advantage of having a complete text before him without the spontaneity that accompanies oral presentations. Even so, links between individual essays are not always readily apparent. I have therefore imposed categorization upon the essays for the sake of clarity, though no such headings or divisions exist within the book.

The first three essays focus on historicity and Tolkien. Mike B. Rose's entry on Tolkien and the Somme says nothing particularly new, but it provides as succinct and clear an overview to WWI and the Somme as one could wish. It has the feel of being an extract from a larger work, especially toward the end, where the author begins to analyze elements of the technological horrors of WWI as inspiration for some of the monstrosities of Middle-earth. Tanía Azevedo, too, recognizes the effect of war on Tolkien, only her work draws parallels between the war-torn landscapes of Tolkien and T.S. Eliot. By her own admission, her essay is not an analysis but a comparison, consisting primarily of verses from Eliot's *The Waste Land* set against passages from Tolkien's *The Fall of Arthur*. She does, however, suggest that while Eliot concludes that hope might be found in the renewal of the seasons, Tolkien's world remains permanently marred, perhaps because of humanity's incomplete status after the Fall. Irína Metzler shifts the focus from damaged landscapes to damaged bodies. She points out that as a survivor of the Great War, Tolkien was part of a changing awareness of disabilities, both for people who had been born with physical impairments and for those who had impairments forced upon them. Some of his characters, she notes, are portrayed realistically, others reflect modern medical notions of disabilities as a condition to be overcome, and still others draw on medieval notions of the sanctity of wounded bodies.

The next set of essays moves from the physical and historical to the metaphysical and eternal. Giovanni Carmine Costabile begins by breaking down

the ways human beings confront the inevitability of death. Though Costabile does not make the point explicitly, the characters of *The Lord of the Rings* thus become simulacra for real people and real responses to death. Some characters, such as Théoden and Aragorn, react well, and their acceptance of death brings about healing and heroism. Other characters, however, react with fear, bring about the kind of cowardice that results in deaths like Denethor's. Oddly enough, Costabile leaves out some of the more interesting characters that might arise from his discussion, including Sméagol and the murder of Déagol, or the Ringwraiths. It may be that this author, too, was drawing on part of a larger work, or which this chapter was only a part. Another unusual but intriguing approach comes from the work of Asli Bülbül Candas. Instead of the usual discussion of how tedious it would be to live forever on earth, Candas expands the concept to include all creation. She thus includes the perspective of the Valar as well as Elves and Men, noting that each race is more finite than the last. Since the Valar existed *before* space and time began, they naturally have a broader view of life and death than the Elves, who exist as long as Arda exists. The Elves' view, in turn, is broader than that of mortal Men, who live in Arda only a short time and then leave it. In a natural counterpoint, Anna Milon observes that the Elves are not truly immortal because they exist only so long as Arda itself exists.

The topic then turns to genesis and generation. Andrew Higgins's close examination of Tolkien's invented words cast light on how subtle changes of definition lead toward major ideas in interpretation. For instance, the Quenya root QALA, originally simply meant "die" but quickly morphed into new forms that include concepts of "pain" and "decay" as well. Sarah Rose's essay tackles four potential seminal sources for the "Ainulindalë" (which, oddly, is never mentioned by name): the often-recognized *Kalevala* and *Völuspá*, but also Pythagoras's "Harmony of the Spheres" and Genesis. This essay contains nothing particularly new, but it is a useful synopsis, and a good overview for someone not familiar with some of the known influences of Tolkien's work. Giselle Abaléa also takes an old idea—the idea that immortality can be achieved through singing and storytelling—and applies it to Tolkien. However, she focuses primarily the symbology of trees so prevalent in Tolkien's work, transmitted through Niggle's tree or the complex genealogical family trees found in the appendices.

The last three essays turn their attention toward teleology in Tolkien's works. Massimiliano Izzo's essay traces patterns of the Fall in Tolkien's works, beginning with the Fall of Melkor himself. All subsequent falls, Izzo argues, can be laid at Melkor's doorstep, since his fall leads to all others. From that first Fall, he outlines a sort of ripple effect throughout the history of Middle-earth and beyond, following three major sentient species of Middle-earth—Ainur, Elves, and Men. Dwarves and Ents are not considered, nor are the Orcs, though they might be considered fallen Elves thousands of times over. Adam Schaeffer takes

the idea to the next level, coining the words *euformation* to indicate spiritual growth and *dysformation* to denote spiritual corruption. His essay contains the usual juxtaposition of Saruman and Gandalf, pointing out that where Gandalf creates communities, Saruman destroys them. The real focus, however, is on the binary of Saruman and Frodo. He notes that while Saruman's *dysformation* reduces the wizard to such a state that he finally dissolves, Frodo grows so powerful spiritually that he is able to travel to a land set aside for immortals. The collection ends with Dimitra Fimi's analysis of joyful sorrow in *The Lord of the Rings*. Building on the concept of *charmolyphi* (which can mean either "sorrowful joy" or "joyful sorrow"), she explains how two emotions which seem so paradoxical can, in fact, coexist. Essentially, the idea is that only one who has experienced sorrow and mourning is able to fully experience the joy of Christ in heaven. If one has known nothing but happiness, after all, any further happiness, while welcome, is simply the amplification of a familiar experience. But if someone has known anguish and suffering, the experience of joy will be that much greater. While in Middle-earth, Fimi argues, we get many glimpses of sorrowful joy, but as in the Primary World, they are glimpses only. They cannot last. And so the best parts of *The Lord of the Rings* are brief, and we must return to the ordinary world, better for having experienced joy, perhaps, but knowing we cannot remain there forever just yet.

Overall, the book is of some value, particularly to those who are new to the field. The essays are of varying length of and quality (which is expected), and many of the entries have the sense of being extractions from ongoing works (which is frustrating). One hopes that ideas hinted at in some of the works will be further developed in future publications. Typos abound. That could arise from hasty editing, a language barrier, or both. At times, it feels as if the only thing these essays have in common is that they are all more or less about Tolkien, Death or Immortality. Very few cover all three, and two hardly mention Middle-earth at all—not a terrible shortcoming, but a bit unexpected, given the book's title. That said, almost every contribution makes some excellent points, all of them have something to offer, and a few of the essays are worth the price of the book all by themselves. Some of the entries will be helpful starting points to those new to the field, while others allow new perspectives even to seasoned scholars. The contributions of Metzler, Higgins, and Fimi were especially riveting and insightful. In the end, then, the book may be of some use to those venturing to deepen their understanding of Tolkien's self-stated theme of Death and Immortality.

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