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"The Sweet and the Bitter": Death and Dying in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (2018) by Amy Amendt-Raduege; and *Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien* (2020) by Anna Vaninskaya

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"The Sweet and the Bitter": Death and Dying in J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Lord of the Rings," by Amy Amendt-Raduege. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2018. x, 160 pp. \$30.00 (trade paperback) ISBN 9781606353059. Also available in ebook format.

Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien, by Anna Vaninskaya. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. viii, 262 pp. \$55.00 (hardcover) ISBN 9781137518378. Also available in ebook format.

Tolkien stated in a letter to Rhona Beare that *The Lord of the Rings* was "mainly concerned with Death, and Immortality" (*Letters*, 284). Author Amy Amendt-Raduege counts more than fifty named characters (nine of them major) who die in *The Lord of the Rings*. Additionally, "there are songs and ballads that commemorate events long past, ruins and monuments that link the living to the dead, tales of ghosts and restless dead that haunt borderlands, and thousands of nameless individuals who fall during the long struggle with Sauron" (7). Beyond *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien deals with death and related subjects in his other Middle-earth writings, his poetry, his short stories and essays. His preoccupation with death and dying are key reasons that readers turn to his writings to help them process death and trauma. It is not surprising, then, that several articles, essays, conference papers, and books address Tolkien's views on and treatment of death, including two recent monographs.

Amendt-Raduege maintains that Tolkien presents an array of ways to face one's own death, from the sacrificial "good" deaths of Théoden and Gandalf, to the "bad" deaths of Denethor and Saruman. She writes, "Tolkien reminds us that it is not death itself that has the final say but the way we choose to face it" (5). Her book, *"The Sweet and the Bitter"*, is a study of death in *The Lord of the Rings*, not only "moments of dying and attitudes toward death, but . . . the importance of memory, the celebration of heroism and sacrifice, and, above all, the enduring power of hope" (vii-viii). The book's back cover states that it "makes visible the connections between medieval and modern conceptions of dying and analyzes how contemporary readers use *The Lord of the Rings* as a tool for dealing with death."

Quoting Nancy Caciola, Amendt-Raduege argues that in medieval thought, "The moral significance of one's life was thought to be complemented by the specific kind of death one met" (9, qtd. from Caciola, 75). Amendt-Raduege writes, "courage, love, penitence and faith can lead to good ends . . . despair, avarice, malice, impenitence, recalcitrance and obduracy can lead to bad ones" (30). The first two chapters of her book examine a variety of Tolkien's characters and the deaths they meet as indicators of the lives they led. Chapter 1, "The Wages of Heroism" examines the characteristics of "good" deaths, according to

modern and medieval ideals, while Chapter 2, “The Bitter End,” likewise focuses on the characteristics of “bad” deaths. The good deaths include the idealized Germanic hero’s death of Théoden at the Battle of Pelennor Fields, the sacrificial death of Gandalf in the Mines of Moria, Boromir’s redemptive death at Parth Galen, and Aragorn’s preparation for and acceptance of death as exemplary of the *ars moriendi*, or the medieval art of dying well. The bad deaths include Denethor’s suicide (and attempted *filicide*) at the very time his people need him the most, Gollum’s death resulting from his covetousness for the One Ring, and the intertwined deaths of Saruman and Gríma Wormtongue who crave power and the ability to control others. Like those who meet good deaths, Amendt-Raduege asserts that “those who meet bad deaths in *The Lord of the Rings* almost inevitably bring it upon themselves” (50).

Chapter 3, “Songs and Stones” examines the cultural significance of various Middle-earth forms for commemorating the dead. Amendt-Raduege discusses sample songs and monuments from major cultures of “free peoples” of Middle-earth, for example, “The Lay of Nimrodel” and Cerin Amroth of the Elves, and “The Song of Durin” and Khazad-dûm of the Dwarves. She also briefly mentions the relationships of Middle-earth burial/memorial customs to those of Primary World cultures, particularly to those in medieval Scandinavia and England. Contrasting the practices of two human cultures—the Men of Gondor, who conceal their dead underground, and the Rohirrim, whose open-air burial mounds serve as enduring memorials—Amendt-Raduege illustrates ways in which Tolkien’s various treatments of death and remembrance can serve as potential models for readers to consider.

Chapter 4, “Haunting the Dead” examines three encounters with ghosts in *The Lord of the Rings*: the Dead Marshes, the Paths of the Dead, and the barrow-wight. Amendt-Raduege discusses medieval associations between unexpected death and the occurrence of hauntings. She writes, “Such stories represent a kind of communal unease with the manner of death, particularly in cases where there is a sense that death was too sudden or too violent” (82). These expressions of fear concerning the unquiet dead embody “both medieval and modern anxiety about the dead and the places they inhabit” (83). However, Amendt-Raduege argues, Tolkien’s hauntings by the Dead also serve as lessons for the Living: the enticing corpse-candles in the Dead Marshes remind Frodo and Sam not to stray from their path; the Oathbreakers who haunt the Dwimorberg remind the Living to fulfil their vows; while the barrow-wight reminds characters to live a good life in order to enjoy a peaceful afterlife.

Finally, Chapter 5 “Hope without Guarantees” examines the applicability of Tolkien’s depictions of death and dying to the modern reader. How can we have a good death rather than a bad one? Do we wish to hide and forget the dead in lonely mausoleums like the Gondorians, or use our monuments, like the Rohirrim,

“to evoke emotion and remembrance, to recall the deeds of the dead and give the living a focus for their grief” (66)? Amendt-Raduege asserts, “the promise of *The Lord of the Rings* is that each death, all deaths, mean something . . . and that anyone can die like a hero” (111). Further, she writes, “*The Lord of the Rings* functions as a proverb of consolation for the inevitability of death” (111). Active duty military, cancer patients and their families, priests, therapists, and all kinds of readers have treasured Tolkien’s book for the consolation it provides.

I have only one minor quibble: the source of her book’s title is not acknowledged until page 110 (of 121 pages of text). Even then, the connection to Amendt-Raduege’s arguments is not as clear as it could be. She writes, “By showing death as both positive and negative, ‘*the sweet and the bitter*,’ Tolkien’s text offers each of us the means to prepare for our own eventual ends” (Amendt-Raduege 110, italics added). In *The Return of the King*, the phrase is spoken by the Elf Arwen Evenstar describing her choice to remain in Middle-earth with her mortal lover, Aragorn, and thus to eventually die rather than live an eternity in the paradisiacal West without him. Arwen says, “for mine is the choice of Lúthien, and as she so have I chosen, both the sweet and the bitter” (*RK*, VI, vi, 252). A direct explanation of Amendt-Raduege’s choice for the book title would have been beneficial at the beginning of her text, rather than at the end, to frame her arguments. Certainly, many readers of *The Lord of the Rings* will recognize the title’s reference without such an explanation, but a statement of the author’s intentions and mind-set at the outset would help to contextualize the book, particularly because her first two chapters consider death as a dichotomy (“good” vs. “bad”) rather than as a spectrum (that all deaths have both positive and negative aspects). But this is only a minor objection.

Amendt-Raduege’s familiarity with medieval, particularly Anglo-Saxon, literature allows her to identify numerous connections with Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*. And, although she supports her arguments with a wide array of scholarly sources, her clear prose and explanations render this text truly accessible to the general reader. For example, she writes:

The experience of others, even fictional others, teaches us about the myriad ways of facing death, whether with dignity and courage or fear and despair, and in doing so provides us with blueprints for the ways we might face our own deaths when the time inevitably comes. *The Lord of the Rings* is an important text because it provides its readers multiple models for their own moments of passing. (8)

Such a volume serves an important function at any time in the human experience. Amendt-Raduege has crafted a powerful, extended meditation on facing the end of life, preparing for a good death, avoiding a bad one, and memorializing those

who have passed from this world. General fans of *The Lord of the Rings* as well as specialists will appreciate this book.

In *Fantasies of Time and Death: Dunsany, Eddison, Tolkien, Anna Vaninskaya* takes a more academic approach to the subject of Tolkien and death, situating him in context within the fantasy canon, along with contemporaries Lord Dunsany (1878-1957), E.R. Eddison (1882-1945) and, to a lesser extent, Hope Mirrlees (1887-1978), and the Victorian precursors, William Morris (1834-1896) and George MacDonald (1825-1905). Vaninskaya writes, “All six fantasists were ultimately aiming for one thing: to capture humanity’s attempts to come to terms with its transience” (14). However, she argues, Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien are particularly noteworthy for their extensive world-building—*cosmopoiesis*—and that: “The bodies of work they created, running into many thousands of pages, are characterised by an obsession with temporality, mortality, and eternity” (7).

The “Introduction” begins with a brief discussion of the “fantasy” genre and the fantasy canon (perhaps unnecessarily, considering the academic audience), and then offers short examinations of the themes of death and immortality in the works of Morris, MacDonald, and Mirrlees. The three major sections, as the book’s subtitle indicates, focus on Dunsany, Eddison, and finally, Tolkien.

Chapter 2, “Lord Dunsany: The Conquering Hours” primarily considers Dunsany’s short-story collections, *Fifty-One Tales* (1915), *Time and the Gods* (1906), and *The Gods of Pegāna* (1905), as well as his novel, *The King of Elfland’s Daughter* (1924), though other works are also mentioned. Vaninskaya writes that *Fifty-One Tales*—“an omnium-gatherum of motifs from across Dunsany’s oeuvre”—contains approximately forty tales which “deal centrally with time or death” (26). She divides these into overlapping concerns, including the extinction of the human race, the exile or death of the gods, Time as the enemy of mankind and all his works, and poetry, song, and dream as bulwarks against time and death. The chapter culminates in a study of the sublime *King of Elfland’s Daughter* where Alveric, lord of the mortal village of Erl, spends a substantial portion of his life seeking his wife, the titular daughter who was recalled to Elfland by her father. Vaninskaya writes, “Living only in memories and in the past, [Alveric] becomes a matter for the songs and romances of others” (50). Art, she argues, can preserve the memory of the dead and departed, for “they live on in memory, and memory lives on in art” (57). However, she counters, Dunsany undermines “the hope of memory” as frequently as he proffers it (57). For instance, when the King subsumes Erl into Elfland, Alveric is reunited with his bride, but he and his people pass out of time and “the remembrance of men” altogether (50). Vaninskaya observes, “What is this but death by another name?” (50). “Time always has the last laugh,” she writes of Dunsany’s stories in general, and human fame “is as transient as the works of Ozymandias” (59).

Chapter 3, "E.R. Eddison: Bearing Witness to the Eternal" focuses on, likely, the least familiar of the three authors. While Dunsany's *King of Elfland's Daughter* views immortality as an endlessly extended lifetime in the realm of Faërie, Eddison's *Zimiamvia* trilogy—consisting of *Mistress of Mistresses* (1935), *A Fish Dinner in Memison* (1941), and the incomplete *The Mezentian Gate* (1958)—views immortality as serial reincarnation. In Eddison's earlier *The Worm Ouroboros* (1922), eternal recurrence manifests as the return to life of all those killed in a devastating global war so that they might fight their battles all over again. Verlyn Flieger writes, "On this hinge, the whole book swings round to its beginning so the action may re-commence. This is Ouroboros, the serpent that swallows its tail, the eternal return whose end is its beginning, whose beginning is its end" (43). In *Zimiamvia*, eternal recurrence manifests as the serial incarnations of the lovers/gods Zeus and Aphrodite in the persons of several mortal couples whose stories are variations on the theme of eternal love. Vaninskaya writes, "Eddison's vision is not an easy one to relate to . . . because of the literal unrelatability of his central characters. There are few ordinary people in the *Zimiamvia* books, few reader-representatives or flawed protagonists so typical of other foundational works of British fantasy" (72). This eighty-two-page chapter, the longest and most complex of Vaninskaya's three major chapters (compared to forty-four pages for Dunsany and seventy-five for Tolkien), is, in places, as dense as Eddison's writings themselves, and as such, it is the hardest to unpack. It feels either overly-long for a book focusing upon three authors or overly-short for a monograph focusing on Eddison alone (which may have been a better format for this material, as it is obvious Vaninskaya has much to offer Eddison studies). A much shorter and clearer introduction to Eddison's themes of time and eternal love is found in Flieger's four-page *Mythlore* article, recommended reading for anyone struggling with Eddison.

On the other hand, of primary interest to readers of this journal is the very accessible (in terms of writing style and underlying conception) Chapter 4, "J.R.R. Tolkien: More Than Memory." Vaninskaya maintains that humankind is characterized by their line in the Ring verse—"Mortal Men doomed to die"—yet, "In a world created by the One God, transcendence is always possible; the fallen could be redeemed, the dead could live again" (155). When Tolkien writes that one of the main concerns of *The Lord of the Rings* is immortality, he is not referring to Alveric's extended life in Dunsany's Elfland, nor Zeus and Aphrodite's serial longevity in Eddison's *Zimiamvia*, but, rather, to an afterlife that transcends the created world and exists only in the eternal realms of the One God. Vaninskaya begins by surveying the development of Tolkien's ideas on the eschatological differences between Men and Elves from his early cosmogony, "The Music of the Ainur" in *The Book of Lost Tales*, to his late philosophical debate, "Athabeth Finrod Ah Andreth" (published in *Morgoth's Ring*). Next, she

discusses hope and faith in the face of existential uncertainty (for Men in the ages of Middle-earth have not yet experienced divine revelation, and receive all their theories on the afterlife from the Elves, or Morgoth and Sauron). The despair of Denethor is contrasted against the hope of Sam Gamgee and the faith of Aragorn, in an argument similar to Amendt-Raduege's. Vaninskaya characterizes the obsessive embalming of the Númenóreans and Gondorians as a form of futile "nostalgia—the refusal to accept and move on, to look backward in regret, as opposed to the gaze forward in hope" (191). But, where Amendt-Raduege focuses upon Arwen's choice as both sweet and bitter, Vaninskaya characterizes Arwen's grief after Aragorn's death as backward-looking nostalgia contrasted against Galadriel's relinquishing of Lothlórien and her forward-looking gaze to Valinor. Vaninskaya concludes her chapter on Tolkien with an examination of his ever-present longing for Paradise. She calls this no mere longing "for territorial or existential expansion, life endlessly extended, but for a true home that cannot be found in Arda Marred. One could call it nostalgia for transcendence" (196). Based on a variety of sources, both from Tolkien's writings and his influences, Vaninskaya traces the development of his conception of Valinor—Tolkien's cognate of the Irish *Tír-na-nÓg* ("Land of Youth"), the Arthurian Avalon, and St. Brendan's Land of Promise—from its early depictions in *The Book of Lost Tales* in the late 1910s, to the final Middle-earth poem, "Bilbo's Last Song" from the late 1960s. All-in-all, this is the best-written and most accessible of the three major chapters even if it does not particularly break new ground.

Nevertheless, Vaninskaya's erudite research from a wide variety of sources and the deep readings of her chosen texts produce three admirable chapters on three major, early fantasy writers. Individually, each chapter is a signal work on the portrayal of death and immortality in each author's writings. Yet, they are three distinct chapters written in three distinct voices, and they do not hang together as a unified monograph, for the book lacks a clear, overarching hypothetical frame or conclusion. The two-page "Envoi" at the end of the text is not really a "Conclusion" in that it fails to synthesize the author's findings around an organizing theory. Stating "there can be no summing up or conclusion where it comes to a subject like time or death" (229), Vaninskaya raises the question of why she chose to group Dunsany, Eddison, and Tolkien together in the first place? A more fulsome consideration of the views of Morris, MacDonald, and Mirrlees might have helped to flesh out some general rationale for the prevalence of death and immortality in the foundational canon of modern fantasy, if that, in fact, was Vaninskaya's aim. The regular use of theoretical jargon at the expense of accessibility also limits the likely audience for this book to academics and researchers. However, that specialist audience will be rewarded with abundant mind-food, especially in the chapter on Tolkien, for above all, Vaninskaya is an excellent researcher.

Tolkien's works are filled with a lifetime of ponderings on death and loss by an author who experienced more than his share of both. These issues also weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of his readers and commentators, particularly in times of war, economic strife, and ravaging disease. Amendt-Raduege and Vaninskaya both consider the role of fantasy literature in the examination of death and eternity, but each approaches the topic in her own unique way. Comparing their books to one another is comparing apples to oranges, or perhaps hearts to minds: Amendt-Raduege's book seeks to console the former, while Vaninskaya's feeds the latter.

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