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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***

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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

**“THE SWEET AND THE BITTER”: DEATH AND DYING IN J.R.R. TOLKIEN’S *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*.** Amy Amendt-Raduege. Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 2018. 160 p. including notes, bibliography, index. ISBN 978-1-60635-305-9. US \$30.00.

IN THIS WORK, AMENDT-RADUEGE CONSIDERS several aspects of death and dying in *The Lord of the Rings*, using the medieval *ars moriendi* as a loose framework and drawing liberally on illustrations, analogies, and parallels from Old English and Old Norse sources. In the first two chapters, she covers the “good deaths” of Théoden, Gandalf, Boromir, and Aragorn and the “bad deaths” of Denethor, Gollum, Saruman, and Gríma Wormtongue. The third chapter, “Songs and Stones,” focuses on tangible and intangible memorials to the dead, while the fourth chapter considers three apparent encounters with the unquiet dead: the barrow-wight, the Dead Marshes, and the Shadow Host of oathbreakers. These four core chapters are framed with an introduction and conclusion which help show the relevance and resonance of Tolkien’s approach in a culture that often strives to ignore or marginalize the realities of death and dying.

Amendt-Raduege repeatedly calls attention to small details of death and dying in *The Lord of the Rings* that would be easy to overlook; this is one of the great strengths and pleasures of the work. Her assembly and presentation of evidence in support of her own theme and argument allows readers to notice additional patterns that may open new lines of inquiry. For example, she notes that Théoden is among the mourners and is “first” to cast earth on Háma’s grave (71)—leaving readers to ponder whether this detail may also carry some ironic resonance in light of Théoden’s own impending death.

Among other intriguing insights, Amendt-Raduege notes several instances where death may be a blessing or release. If the oath-breakers “help [Aragorn] free Pelargir from the forces of Sauron, he will hold their oath fulfilled, and allow them to finally die” (97). Even among the “bad deaths,” she offers a nuanced discussion of how Gollum’s death shows both justice and a kind of mercy. His final moments reveal no penitence or atonement meriting a heroic death; “he robs Frodo and permanently maims him,” and “dies beseeching the One Ring to save him.” Yet, she notes, “death may be the kindest fate for Gollum,” as it “ends a life that has gone on too long, that has lost all its meaning and purpose, and breaks the circle of enslavement and betrayal which has held Gollum for so long” (43). There is much food for thought here.

I did not always find Amendt-Raduege’s analysis convincing, however. In her speculations about why Éowyn “would not and did not consider” Gríma as a possible husband or lover, for example, she finds evidence only that he was “not courageous enough” for Éowyn. She also raises, inconclusively, the possibility that Gríma might have been insufficiently

“wellborn” or “handsome” (45). But surely the text supports even more powerful reasons for Éowyn to distrust and reject him? She has seen mighty Théoden wither under Gríma’s influence, even though Gríma is merely a courtier in the king’s halls; she would rightly fear for her own fate under Gríma’s roof as his consort. And Gríma’s desire to “take” her, regardless of her wishes in the matter, is profoundly creepy (*LotR* III.6.520).<sup>1</sup> Éowyn would surely interpret Gríma’s interest as targeted primarily to his own gratification, unrelated to any desire for her happiness and well-being. If so, she is unlikely to be drawn to him—no matter how wellborn, handsome, or courageous he may be.

I found myself resisting Amendt-Raduege’s assertions and conclusions most frequently and strongly in Chapter 3, “Songs and Stones.” One might merely quibble with her assertion that “the goblins never threaten to eat Thorin and the Company” (53) in *The Hobbit*, in light of the goblins’ taunt: “what shall we do with the funny little things? / Roast ‘em alive, or stew them in a pot; / fry them, boil them and eat them hot?” (*Hobbit* VI.98). As a more substantive example, I would note that Amendt-Raduege states initially: “A great deal about each culture can be inferred through its burial practices. Elves make monuments of ethereal grace and beauty, frequently in forests, as befits a race concerned with beauty and a reverence for nature” (54). Yet she marshals no evidence of Elvish-made burial monuments of ethereal grace and beauty, whether in forests or elsewhere. Delving into *The Silmarillion*, she identifies some “mound burials, such as were raised over the Elvish heroes like Finduilas or Glorfindel.” She then identifies “one Elvish monument [...] depicted in *The Lord of the Rings*: Cerin Amroth,” which she characterizes as “a memorial and not yet a grave” (57). But Haldir describes it as “the mound of Amroth, where in happier days his high house was built” (*LotR* II.6.350). Nor does it seem to be a memorial to the dead when Aragorn and Arwen plight their troth upon “the fair hill, Cerin Amroth, in the midst of the land” (App.A.1060). While the green hill is certainly lovely with elanor and niphredil (II.6.350, App.A.1060), it does not seem to be an Elf-made monument to the dead, even though we learn from the appendix that Arwen will eventually—long after the events of the story— “[lay] herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth; and there is her green grave, until the world is changed” (App.A.1063). Admittedly, Amendt-Raduege later seems to hedge her bets on Cerin Amroth by suggesting that it “seems to be not so much a monument to

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<sup>1</sup> In confronting Gríma, Gandalf asks rhetorically, “What was the promised price? When all the men were dead, you were to pick your share of the treasure, and *take* the woman you desire? Too long have you watched her under your eyelids and haunted her steps” (*LotR* III.6.520, emphasis added). Éomer confirms that he had already observed Gríma’s unwholesome interest in Éowyn, and was prepared to slay him for it, “forgetting the law of the hall” (520).

Amroth as a visible mnemonic, meant not so much [as] a means to honor a fallen king as a means of recalling the glories of the past to mind" (59). Yet it remains the cornerstone of her discussion of Elvish commemoration of the dead.

Nor, in connection with her discussion of Elvish mourning in this chapter, does Amendt-Raduege offer evidence for her assertion that "the immortal Elves [...] know, just like Gimli does, that 'memory is not what the heart desires'" (57). The proposition is not self-evident in the immediate context of the conversation between Legolas and Gimli. As readers may recall, Gimli is desolate on leaving behind the "light and joy" of Lothlórien (*LotR* II.8.378), rather than accepting Celeborn's invitation to "remain here, for a while" (II.8.367). In consolation, Legolas suggests that "the memory of Lothlórien shall remain ever clear and unstained in your heart, and shall neither fade nor grow stale" (II.8.378). But Gimli rejects this as cold comfort, based expressly on his understanding of the differences between Elves and Dwarves:

Memory is not what the heart desires. That is only a mirror, be it clear as Kheled-zâram. Or so says the heart of Gimli the Dwarf. Elves may see things otherwise. Indeed I have heard that for them memory is more like to the waking world than to a dream. Not so for Dwarves. (II.8.378-79)

Gimli suggests they "talk no more of it" (II.8.379) and thus has the last word on the matter. Surely it requires some explanation to counteract this exchange and demonstrate that Gimli has misunderstood the Elves' special relationship with memory.

Given her treatment of Gandalf's fall as one of the "good deaths" in *The Lord of the Rings*, it is also curious that Amendt-Raduege apparently overlooks the laments for him in Lothlórien. For example, one might glean something of Elvish commemorative practices from this passage:

Often they heard nearby Elvish voices singing, and knew that they were making songs of lamentation for his fall, for they caught his name among the sweet sad words that they could not understand.

*Mithrandir, Mithrandir* sang the Elves, *O Pilgrim Grey!* For so they loved to call him. But if Legolas was with the Company, he would not interpret the songs for them, saying that he had not the skill, and that for him the grief was still too near, a matter for tears and not yet for song. (*LotR* II.7.359)

And it seems inaccurate to say that Bilbo's song in Rivendell is "the only hobbit song that deals with death overtly" (Amendt-Raduege 55), when Frodo's lament for Gandalf not only remembers Gandalf's life but expressly refers to his death:

He stood upon the bridge alone  
and Fire and Shadow both defied;  
his staff was broken on the stone,  
in Khazad-dûm his wisdom died. (*LotR* II.7.360)

I am also reluctant to overlook Sam's own humble but heartfelt contribution to this song.

Finally, for those who notice such things, the frequency of typos may be a little distracting; on average, I spotted one every ten pages. This will not trouble everyone, of course, and I would hasten to add that such errors are not necessarily attributable to the author, as they may be introduced later in the editing or printing process. But they can nonetheless undermine one's confidence in the author's care and attention to detail.<sup>2</sup>

Amendt-Raduege acknowledges from the start that her project must necessarily "leave out much that should be said," particularly concerning deaths of major characters in Tolkien's legendarium beyond *The Lord of the Rings* (6). There is much to admire and enjoy in the work she has put together, but there is clearly much more to be done. In that spirit, readers may appreciate her initial identification and analysis of a fruitful area for further reflection and study.

– Laura Lee Smith

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**FIRE AND SNOW: CLIMATE FICTION FROM THE INKLINGS TO *GAME OF THRONES***. Marc DiPaolo. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2018. 333 pp. ISBN 9781438470450. US HB \$95.00; PB \$30; Kindle \$28.45.

BETHAN FORREST COUSES IN AN ARTICLE on the *Huffington Post* website that "Literature is always a comment on the times in which we live regardless of the period in which it is set. This is potentially politically, economically, socially or now—environmentally." The current recognition that climate change is not only real, but its effects are camping out on our collective doorstep has led to a recent rise in media in the genre dubbed climate fiction or *cli-fi*. Described by

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<sup>2</sup> In the Bibliography, for example, Janet Brennan Croft's middle name is spelled "Brennen" (145, emphasis added), although it appears correctly elsewhere (13, 155).