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Redefining *Ars Moriendi* in J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*

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In Elizabethan literature, authors and patrons alike hold that one must live a godly life in order to die peacefully. At the moment of death one faces a “moment of truth,” when a person is given a choice either to repent or to deny the mercy of God, and the wrong decision can lead to downfall. According to the concept of *ars moriendi*, “the art of dying well,” one must live a virtuous life in order to die a good death. Indeed, as Nancy Lee Beaty points out, in the traditional sense, death was regarded as “the final touchstone for evaluating the quality of his [a man’s] life” (70). Although the idea of a noble death was familiar even as far back as Ancient Greece, the Elizabethans took the idea to heart, making it an integral part of their literary tradition. One has only to examine Christopher Marlowe’s Dr.
Faustus to understand the role that this tradition plays in the literature of the Elizabethan period.

Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* is an Elizabethan work that illustrates a failure to live well, resulting in a death that is anything but peaceful. Faustus is a man who defies the power of God and is seduced by the assurance of power offered by the Evil Angel. Faustus allows himself to be swayed by the corrupt being and spends the next twenty-four years living as sinfully as he possibly can. He fails to listen to those who warn him that he is headed for a painful death and eternal torment in hell. Nevertheless, Faustus may still achieve redemption by escaping the evil that grips him. As he strays ever further into the wickedness wrought by avarice, unbelief, hatred, and despair, the Good Angel tells Faustus, “Repent and they [demons] shall never raise thy skin” (*Dr. Faustus* 5.256). But Faustus is not ready to listen, nor is he ready to listen when the Old Man tells him, “Then call for mercy, and avoid despair” (*Dr. Faustus* 12.47). Although God offers Faustus the opportunity to be saved, he remains wrapped up in sin and despair, refusing to repent. Faustus fails to live well and thus does not achieve a peaceful death. In this way, Christopher Marlowe makes good use of this Elizabethan concept, applying it in *Dr. Faustus* to set his main character up as the perfect example of one who fails to live well and so also fails to die well.

While even an unconventional writer like Marlowe makes a fairly straightforward use of the *ars moriendi*, let
Consider the following question: Does the tradition stand the test of time and remain consistent in later writing or does it undergo revision? *The Lord of the Rings* provides an answer. In this monumental trilogy, J.R.R. Tolkien revisualizes the “art of dying well” through the lens of Anglo-Saxon literature.

Tolkien offers us different views of achieving a virtuous death. Take, for example, the character of Boromir whose confrontation with evil parallels that of Marlowe’s Faustus in many ways. The Ring seduces Boromir, a proud man of Gondor and heir to Denethor II, with promises of power in the same way that the Evil Angel seduces Faustus, filling his mind with images of wealth and power. And just as Faustus fails to listen to the warnings he receives about his evil ways, so too Boromir fails to listen to warnings about the Ring’s power. Boromir tries to resist the Ring, but he eventually succumbs to the overpowering visions of power and strength that the Ring offers him and tries to take it from Frodo, thus choosing the path of destruction.

At this point, Tolkien introduces a different twist on what it means to die well: atonement. Unlike Faustus, Boromir realizes the error of his ways and tries to make amends. Indeed, as Marion Zimmer Bradley writes, “Boromir weeps in passionate repentance after his attack on Frodo,” which further serves to illustrate that he understands the wickedness of his actions (110). For Faustus, the only way to achieve a good death is to repent, to ask for
God's mercy. Boromir, however, is offered a chance to atone for his sins, and rather than refuse his chance at redemption as Faustus does, Boromir accepts the opportunity. By confessing his transgressions and fighting to save Merry and Pippin, Boromir is able to atone for his sins. In the end, Boromir does what Faustus cannot: he confesses his sin, makes atonement, and dies at ease, in peace at last, for as Tolkien writes: “There Boromir lay, restful, peaceful, gliding upon the bosom of the flowing water” (3:7-8). According to Greg Wright, “[f]or Boromir, death is heroic; it is redemptive, gallant and noble” (“Death and the Swift Sunrise”).

The ceremony by which Boromir is laid to rest is strongly tied to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, wherein, as Lawrence C. Chin points out, ship burials were common for the elite and nobility. According to Pat Reynolds, “a ship burial is particularly appropriate for a hero” (“Death and Funerary Practices in Middle-Earth”). By giving Boromir a hero’s ceremony, Tolkien—who was himself an Anglo-Saxon scholar—indicates that Boromir did achieve a noble death. Had Boromir not redeemed himself, he would have been unworthy of the ship burial. As Ruth S. Noel indicates, the peacefulness with which Boromir is carried away, as well as his reappearance to Faramir, “suggests that Boromir’s repentance was accepted by his companions and the Guardians of the World” and thus he was “assured spiritual rest” (78). With Boromir, Tolkien effectively redefines the ars moriendi: one can achieve a good
death not only by living a good life but also by atoning for one’s sins.

In modifying this Elizabethan tradition, Tolkien draws from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of dying heroically in battle. One of the clearest examples of Tolkien’s redefinition of the Elizabethan concept of *ars moriendi* is the death of Théoden, King of the Mark. Having lived the life of a warrior, Théoden cannot achieve virtuous death by the traditional standards. But by implementing Anglo-Saxon ideals into his redefinition of the *ars moriendi*, Tolkien enables warriors like Théoden to die well despite their warrior-like ways. Théoden bravely leads his men in battle against the forces of the evil Sauron, well aware that their chances of success are slim. As Katharyn F. Crabbe notes, the inevitability of death is a strong theme throughout Tolkien’s trilogy, but it is Théoden’s willingness to fight in the face of such odds that exemplifies this theme more readily than Boromir’s death does (75). Despite the fact that he recognizes that his death is imminent, Théoden still chooses to charge into battle because he knows that honor demands it. Théoden is the ruler of his people, and, as with the Anglo-Saxons, to be king meant that one had to be willing to fight and even die for one’s people even when the odds of success were slim. While Boromir shows a willingness to fight, his pride in himself as a warrior keeps him from acknowledging the odds against him. Théoden, on the other hand, fully understands that the odds of success are remote when he rides into battle. As Alexandra H.
Olsen and Burton Raffel describe, “people who accepted their destiny with dignity and courage could achieve a good name and fame that outlived them” (xiv), and Théoden certainly shows an acceptance of fate as he charges into battle without any assurances that he will survive.

The bravery and leadership with which Théoden leads the Rohirrim parallel the qualities of Earl Byrhtnoth in the *Battle of Maldon*, an Anglo-Saxon work with which Tolkien would have been familiar. *The Battle of Maldon* recounts a battle in which the Anglo-Saxons were hopelessly outnumbered. In spite of the odds, Byrhtnoth still leads his men bravely against the attacking Vikings without regard for the danger. As the tide of battle shows signs of turning against the warriors of Rohan, Théoden, like Byrhtnoth, rallies his men to him, crying, “To me! To me... Fear no darkness!” (3:113). Even as things look grim, Théoden faces the shadow of darkness with courage and fortitude to inspire his soldiers. In the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Théoden is mortally wounded, and he dies before the outcome of the battle is clear. The goal of the Anglo-Saxon hero, according to Olsen and Raffel, was to die in such a way as to be remembered and praised, and Théoden achieves this end (xiv). And just as Anglo-Saxon warriors Ælfnoth and Wulfmaer die in service of Bryhtnoth, so too do many of Théoden’s loyal soldiers die in battle. As Kevin Crossley-Holland points out, it is fitting that devoted warriors give “their lives in defense of their lord” (15). While Théoden’s loyal guards are unable to save him, they do not
flee from the Witch-King but stand their ground, refusing to abandon their lord to his fate. In this, Roger Sale writes, they hold to the belief that “brave men die well in defense of their lord and their honor” (80).

Tolkien’s use of the Anglo-Saxon tradition is also apparent in the manner in which Théoden’s death is honored. Upon returning to their homeland, his warriors laid his body to rest and “over him was raised a great mound” (3:275). Such barrows, Shawn Rider points out, were built by Anglo-Saxons to honor their departed elite and nobility; because of his status, Théoden was entitled to such a distinction. As the “dutiful thanes” in Beowulf “mourn him with lays as they circled the barrow” (2792-96), so the men of Rohan circle the mound upon their horses, singing the praises of the fallen Théoden, who died heroically and honorably.

In Tolkien’s writing, the practice of self-sacrifice, as demonstrated with Boromir, becomes both a means of atonement and of a noble death. In this regard, consider the death of Gandalf. When the Fellowship is besieged by the Balrog, a demon of fierce renown, Gandalf urges the others to go onward while he turns to face the demon “Fly! This is a foe beyond all of you. I must hold the narrow way. Fly!” (1:370). While he defeats the Balrog, Gandalf is unable to save himself, for as Tolkien writes, he “staggered and fell, grasped vainly at the stone, and slid in to the abyss,” leaving the sad fellowship to continue their journey without him, their hearts heavy (1:371). Thus,
Crabbe writes, Gandalf "sacrifice[s] much for the greater good," and his "sacrificial offering of himself is none the less heroic" (79). Gandalf's subsequent return from the grave in *The Two Towers* in no way detracts from his willingness to die for his friends. The idea of self-sacrifice is not only a Christian ideal but also an Anglo-Saxon one, for as the warrior Dunnere calls out in *The Battle of Maldon*, "He must not waver, who thinks to avenge / His lord among the people, / Nor can he love his own life!" (qtd. in Anderson 93). Among the Anglo-Saxons, warriors were asked to sacrifice themselves for their lords, and the willingness they showed to do so parallels Gandalf's own willingness to die.

Throughout the trilogy, Tolkien offers examples of less-than-honorable deaths, which in turn serve to emphasize the noble deaths that other characters achieve. Boromir's father, Denethor, is a character who fails to achieve a good death for his corruption leads him to insanity and eventual suicide. In his insanity, Denethor, instead of sacrificing himself, sacrifices scores of his people, sending them to their deaths in a futile attack on Osgiliath. He fails to lead his people in the fight against their enemies, abandoning them to face Sauron's army alone and thereby destroying his chance at a noble death. Like Faustus, Denethor was corrupted by his search for a wisdom that was not meant to be his, and, as Noel points out, he refuses to accept the help offered to him (77). Instead, in his despair he lights a funeral pyre, preparing to kill himself and sacrifice his only surviving son, Faramir. Rather than take
Gandalf's advice and attempt to atone for his actions, Denethor is prepared to act as the "heathen kings...slaying themselves in pride and despair, murdering their kin to ease their own death" (Tolkien 3:129). Unlike Théoden, Denethor is unable to face the possibility of impending death at the hands of Sauron's forces, thereby failing to do what the Anglo-Saxon heroes were called upon to do in order to have a commendable death. Through Denethor, Tolkien offers a vision of death that lacks the atonement required for a good death. Set against the manner in which Denethor dies, the honorable deaths of characters such as Boromir and Théoden stand in sharp contrast.

Like Denethor, Gollum, the ancient Ring bearer, ultimately fails to achieve a noble death. Unlike many of Tolkien's characters, he does not perceive his actions in terms of good or evil; and, as a result, Gollum does not attempt to atone for anything he does. Gollum's actions all center on the Ring, with his goal being to regain possession of it at any cost. Without any perception of the evil of his actions, Gollum cannot rightly atone for them; this failure to recognize and atone for his sins cripples Gollum's ability to achieve a good death. Although one might argue that Gollum's destruction of the Ring signals atonement, this action is unintentional, and it does not qualify him for an admirable death. As Richard L. Purtill points out, when given the opportunity to be saved, Gollum, unlike Boromir, "chose not to be saved," thereby sharing the fate of Faustus (60). Gollum failed to achieve a good death in both the
traditional sense and in Tolkien's definition of a noble death, for he neither repented of nor atoned for his sins.

For the characters in *The Lord of the Rings*, an honorable death can be achieved even by those who have lived sinful lives, and what makes a good death is more than just leading a Christian life. In the traditional *ars moriendi*, the majority of Tolkien's characters would have failed to achieve a virtuous death because of their militaristic lifestyles. For Tolkien, however, men like Boromir and Théoden are able to die well despite their belligerent ways because both men either atone for past misdeeds or die in such a way that they achieve honor in death. In Tolkien's definition, then, a good death is still attainable despite a lifetime of sin.


