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Death and Immortality in Jorge Manrique and J. R. R. Tolkien:
From Middle Ages to Middle-earth via Niggle's Parish

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ABSTRACT

Jorge Manrique and J. R. R. Tolkien are considered two of the most celebrated authors that have ever existed in Spanish and English literature. Their literary approaches to the ultimate questions offer an outstanding display regarding the passage of lifetime, as well as the tension between death and the longing for immortality. Therefore, the aim of this undergraduate dissertation is not only to reinforce their valuable contributions to the field of literature, but also to focus on those similarities between both authors' works, especially in relation to their understanding of death, even though at first sight it might seem difficult to find connections between Tolkien's fairy stories, and Jorge Manrique's medieval *Coplas a la muerte de su padre*.

Keywords: J. R. R. Tolkien, Jorge Manrique, death, immortality, lifetime.

RESUMEN

Jorge Manrique y J. R. R. Tolkien son a día de hoy dos de los autores de mayor renombre en la literatura española e inglesa. Sus propuestas literarias acerca de las preguntas últimas nos ofrecen una excelente introducción a temas tales como el paso del tiempo, así como la tensión entre la muerte y el anhelo de permanecer en el mundo. En consecuencia, la finalidad de este trabajo de investigación no es reafirmar sus ya de por sí valiosas aportaciones al campo de la literatura, sino más bien centrarme en aquellas similitudes que ambos autores comparten, especialmente en relación con su modo de concebir la muerte, a pesar de que a priori no sea sencillo vislumbrar los nexos de unión entre las historias y cuentos de Tolkien, y las *Coplas a la muerte de su padre* escritas por Jorge Manrique durante la Baja Edad Media.

Palabras clave: J. R. R. Tolkien, Jorge Manrique, muerte, inmortalidad, paso del tiempo.

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“Aquí yace un hombre ¹
que vivo dejó su nombre”

1. Introduction

Every artistic manifestation always draws from an earlier tradition, and literature is no exception. Certain patterns and motifs repeat themselves throughout history, since we, as human beings, have similar concerns about our lifetime and its inescapable aftermath, which is death. Indeed countless thinkers and writers have dealt with those topics, though few of them have achieved such a poignant depth in their literary approaches that they have transcended the barriers of time and space, becoming atemporal models for endless generations of readers. Among this exclusive group of literary figures, there are two peerless authors in particular: Jorge Manrique and John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. On the one hand, scholars agree that the Spanish writer Jorge Manrique (c. 1440-1479) may be paradigmatic of the poet of love, life and death (Martínez Esteruelas 1991, 197); by all means, he definitely managed to surpass the transitoriness of his medieval times, and he is still remembered nowadays for his well-known *Coplas a la muerte del Maestro don Rodrigo*. On the other hand, J. R. R. Tolkien (1892-1973) is generally recognised for being the father of high fantasy literature in English language.

In spite of the apparent absence of clear relationships –neither temporal nor geographical– between both writers, in this undergraduate dissertation I will show some of the tropes and motifs that the two of them share in regards to their anthropological conceptions of lifetime and human mortality, as well as their treatment of nostalgia and longing for immortality by defeating oblivion through their works of art.

In order to do so, I have based my research on a series of academic sources dealing with both Manrique’s and Tolkien’s ideas on death and immortality. To begin with, I followed a collection of seminar proceedings from The Tolkien Society edited by Daniel Helen (2016), which offer freshly new approaches to the aforementioned matters; in addition, I consulted pertinent scholarship by Juan Luis Alborg (1969) about

¹ [Here lies a man survived by his name]

–Epitaph for Rodrigo Manrique de Lara (d. 1476, quoted in Armon 2016, 41).

Spanish literature in the Middle Ages, together with the works by Giovanni Caravaggi (1984), Jesús-Manuel Alda Tesán (1990), and Cruz Martínez Esteruelas (1991), three of the most recognized experts on Manrique's poetry. Finally, I took into special consideration the different studies carried out by Professor Eduardo Segura Fernández, who not only has demonstrated a thorough knowledge of the 20th century English writer, but he also has written several essays about Tolkien's poetics as related to his Middle-earth masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-55), as well as one of his lesser-known short stories related to the matter of death: *Leaf by Niggle* (originally written in 1938-39). Besides, he has been the first scholar to hint at a connection between these two authors², although neither Professor Segura nor any other scholar has explored the issue so far.

That being said, since a detailed textual analysis of both Manrique's medieval poetry and Tolkien's *Legendarium* (i.e. the vast compendium of his mythological texts) is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the main objective of my research is but to delve into certain common aspects of both literary geniuses which have been somewhat left out from an academic purview. Hence, firstly I will compare their analogous ideas about the passage of time and the most representative metaphors they employ in doing so. Then, I will focus on each one's literary approach to the topic of death, and lastly I will centre my analysis on the conflict derived from the tension between death acceptance in order to achieve real immortality, since the last two in particular have been "relatively unexplored areas in Tolkien studies" (Helen 2016, 4). But before moving on to the actual examination of each topic separately, I must briefly contextualise both Manrique's and Tolkien's lives and works.

1.1 Biographical Similitudes: Historical and Religious Backgrounds

If we compare each author's biographies, certain parallelisms can be noticed, some of which are particularly tragic. Firstly, the fact that both men had to deal with orphanhood very early; in particular, Jorge Manrique lost his mother at the age of four,

² See the online interview conducted by Zenit International News Agency (Segura Fernández 2003).

and at that same age Tolkien's father passed away, preceding the demise of his mother –Mabel Tolkien, born Suffield– only eight years later.

The second main contextual similarity has to do with the desolation that each writer experienced on the battlefields, since they were both men of letters and soldiers. Moreover, each author lived through critical turning points in history, also culturally speaking. For instance, Cruz Martínez Esteruelas (1991) depicts Manrique's fifteenth century as a period of cultural tensions that led to the end of the Late Middle Ages, and cleared the way for the start of the Renaissance in Western Europe. In a similar manner, Eduardo Segura Fernández is of the opinion that Tolkien's generation witnessed the fall of an ancient, romantic conception of the world leading to a series of turbulent years –particularly between 1870 and 1918– ruled by impiety and unlimited destruction (Arranz 2018). Furthermore, Daniel Helen (2016) adds that, in the case of the latter, “the loss of his close friends during the First World War, compounded by the loss of both parents as a child, inevitably had a profound effect on him and helped shape his outlook on human mortality” (2). In addition to this, Segura Fernández (2016) separates Tolkien from other writers who also fought in the British Army (e.g. James Joyce, Robert Graves or Wilfred Owen), and whose narrative approaches were closer to modernism. So, bearing all this in mind, we can firstly observe a tendency in Tolkien to be more related with classical lyricism far away from modernist movements; and secondly, the constant presence of death surrounding Manrique and Tolkien.

The other two common key factors are their Catholic faith together with their sense of fellowship. It is known that Tolkien formed part of at least two literary discussion groups named the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS) and The Inklings. In fact, one of Tolkien's most markedly poignant life experiences was the loss of some of his TCBSite colleagues during the Great War, though thanks to Christopher Wiseman and Geoffrey Bache Smith –two members of this society– Tolkien managed to overcome those hard times by reminding themselves that “friendship does not end in this life, that it lives on into eternity” (M. B. Rose 2016, 16). With regard to the Inklings, Catharine Stimpson (1969) underlines its members' “misty medievalism” and rational defence of the Christian faith, since they were either Anglo- or Roman Catholics (6).

Regarding Jorge Manrique, as a man from the Middle Ages it is not surprising that he overtly manifests his Christian faith in the majority of his compositions, for instance, in Copla IV:

Aquél sólo invoco yo
de verdad,
que en este mundo viviendo,
el mundo non conoció
su deidad.

Hence, Carlos Cardó asserts that Manrique may be considered “uno de los poetas más puramente cristianos que España haya jamás producido” (quoted in Martínez Esteruelas 1991, 197).

In the case of Tolkien, by contrast, although brought up in a Protestant country, he was introduced to the Catholic faith by the figure of Fr Francis Xavier Morgan, to whom Tolkien refers as “a guardian who had been a father to me, more than most real fathers” (1981, Letter 43). Morgan also guided him in his approach to Spanish literature. In fact, although academic circles have not been able to demonstrate a direct influence of Jorge Manrique’s poetry in Tolkien, the latter could receive influences from other Spanish writers. For example, Ferrández Bru suggests that one of Tolkien’s riddles from *The Hobbit* may be based on the writings of Fernán Caballero –penname of the writer Cecilia Böhl de Faber– who was Fr Morgan’s great aunt too (García-Máiquez 2011).

Besides Tolkien’s Catholicism, his works also reveal an influence from heathen medieval sources, as for example: the Norse *Edda*, the Finnish *Kalevala*, or Germanic and Anglo-Saxon epics like *Beowulf*. Moreover, in his appendix on Tolkien’s sources, Shippey (2012) mentions an Old Irish composition entitled *Imram, The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal* –also mentioned by Stimpson (1969, 41)–, which not only seems to have inspired Tolkien’s poetics, but it is also in connection with Manrique’s imagery of nature, as we will see later.

Notwithstanding, Tolkien was always reticent to accept allegorical resemblances with the stories told in his *Legendarium* as *explicitly* Christian; yet “his faith glues the place together” (Stimpson 1969, 8), and even Tolkien himself clarifies such a peculiar symbiosis in the following excerpt:

The Lord of the Rings is of course a fundamentally religious and Catholic work; unconsciously so at first, but consciously in the revision. That is why I have not put in, or have cut out, practically all references to anything like ‘religion’, to cults or practices, in the imaginary world. For the religious element is absorbed into the story and the symbolism [...]; and [I] should chiefly be grateful for having been brought up (since I was eight) in a Faith that has nourished me and taught me all the little that I know; and that I owe to my mother, who clung to her conversion and died young, largely through the hardships of poverty resulting from it. (1981, Letter 142)

In short, Tolkien’s invented mythology may be seen as a homage to the classical epopee, though without the need to apply allegories for it to be resonant.

1.2 Introducing Jorge Manrique’s *Coplas*

After having presented a summary about Tolkien and his work, now we need to contextualise briefly the other keystone figure of my dissertation, i.e. Jorge Manrique.

The importance of the Manrique family comes from some eminent military and literary relatives who also occupied important positions and titles. For instance, Don Rodrigo Manrique –the addressee of his son’s *Coplas*– belonged to an order named as “Los Trece de Santiago”, a sort of religious and military fellowship which consisted of thirteen knight commanders who were allowed to participate in the council called “Consejo del Maestre”. Historians also declare that Jorge Manrique himself formed part of this council, which was influential in Spain throughout the fifteenth century.

Now I will turn from the living to the writing, for Jorge Manrique was first and foremost a writer, and so was Tolkien in addition to a philologist; therefore, it is their mastery treatment of words what really stands out. In the case of Manrique, his poetic compositions include new formal devices, as well as a very particular usage of the meter. Although scholars mention early manifestations of the rhyme pattern “ABc ABc, DEf DEf” in other poets, such as Juan de Mena, it was not actually spread in all its rhythmical possibilities until Manrique used it in a more malleable way (Caravaggi 1984, 31). Hence, the mentioned pattern is also named as “copla de pie quebrado” or “manriqueña” in his honour, and this meter is perfectly summarised by the literary expert Jesús-Manuel Alda Tesán as follows:

Están escritas en sextillas dobles en las que se suceden dos octosílabos, con predominio del ritmo trocaico, y un tetrasílabo, o pie quebrado, que a veces es un pentasílabo. La abundante reiteración de esta forma métrica a través de toda la obra manriqueña muestra una evidente predilección del poeta. De ello se ha derivado que esta unidad estrófica reciba desde entonces el nombre del autor de las coplas. (1990, 62)

Having said that, I have selected for my research purpose one possible way to classify the *Coplas* in three different parts, based on Alda Tesán's analysis (1990, 49), which equally relies on Juan Luis Alborg's approach (1969, 374) as well. Given this, we can enumerate the following groups:

- A general consideration on the fugacity of life (Coplas I-XIII) where the poet admonishes men to remember their mortal condition and divine destiny. So, the first 156 lines focus on the transitoriness of the mundane possessions.
- A second section (Coplas XIV-XXIV) in which Manrique lists certain examples that show the illusory deception of dignitaries and other important people as soon as they are swallowed up by death.
- The first half of this third group (from Copla XXV onwards) is a praise of the hero, i.e. don Rodrigo Manrique, and his natural virtues and deeds. After that, the climax is reached in the second half, when death is personified and starts talking with his victim. However, rather than a conversation, it feels more like a reflection of the terminally-ill person who realises his dying condition; in Alda Tesán's words: "La Muerte llamará a la puerta y va a hablar, pero casi como una voz en *off*. No se la describe para nada, y de este modo se evita la caída en el mal gusto del aparato teatral" (1990, 60).

Therefore, Manrique's lyrical composition may suggest a perfectly structured outline where the poet exhorts the worldly soul to elevate itself and to recover the consciousness of its true nature, since that will eventually allow us to contemplate –both in the sense of *seeing* and *meditating*– the passage of life (Alda Tesán 1990, 51). To finish off, the aforesaid scheme corresponds to other three categories or life *dimensions* that consist of "la perdurable o eternal, la mortal o precedera, y la de la fama que vive en el recuerdo de la posteridad" (Alborg 1969, 374).

Last but not least, at this point we can acknowledge the relevance of this medieval poet that contributed to enrich the literary field of his future generations, and whose poetry has been studied and even translated to, at least, six living languages, including Norwegian and Dutch. To this respect, it is especially worth mentioning the notable

translation into the English language, rendered by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in 1833. Tolkien might have known this translation, but there is no evidence to prove it.

2. Lyrical Approaches about Lifetime

As men of their time, Rodrigo and Jorge Manrique had a mystical understanding of life in tune with pious practices and devoted values of chivalry. So in Copla VI, for instance, Christ's incarnation is used as an argument to praise and justify our worldly deeds in life as requirements to achieve a heavenly reward, by struggling against the numerous difficult events which set up altogether the history of mankind (Martínez Esteruelas 1991, 178-179). In Tolkien, nonetheless, God does not appear as someone who “para subirnos al cielo / descendió / a nescer acá entre nos” (VI). However, we can equally appreciate a morality of praising not only a knightly heroism in some characters from *The Lord of the Rings* (e.g. Aragorn and Théoden predominantly, as we will discuss later on), but also the moral firmness of these chivalrous figures in their varied trials of life whose natural reward, likewise don Rodrigo's, is to achieve “la dignidad de la grand Caballería dell Espada” (XXXI), here referring to the already mentioned Order of Santiago, as Alda Tesán states (1990, 163). Having said that, I will focus on two metaphorical images that both authors employ in order to depict lifetime: the trope of lifetime apprehended as an ephemeral journey and the trope of lifetime understood as varied flows or streams that conclude at the eternal, unifying sea.

2.1 Lifetime as a Brief Passage: Metaphor of the Journey

The first common pattern that we must linger over is the idea that all human beings without exception have to go on a mandatory journey. Tolkien actually starts his most allegorical short story with this opening statement: “There was once a little man called Niggle, who had a long journey to make. He did not want to go, indeed the whole idea was distasteful to him; but he could not get out of it” (*Leaf by Niggle* 2014, 5). Apart from Niggle's journey on its own, which clearly symbolises the dying process in this context, Stimpson also underlines that “like all of Tolkien's fictive journeys, it is

appointed, not chosen. [...] the traveller must fare forward. Moving is proving worth”, an idea that T. S. Eliot illustrates in *Four Quartets* (quoted in Stimpson 1969, 24). We can easily trace similar instances of this leitmotif in Tolkien’s works, especially in the hobbit characters Bilbo Baggins and his nephew Frodo. The two protagonists of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, respectively, illustrate that each story is, above all, the story of an epic journey and the different things which they achieve during the process. For instance, when Frodo remembers his uncle’s past adventures, he mentions that Bilbo “used often to say there was only one Road; that it was like a great river: its springs were at every doorstep, and every path was its tributary” (1976, 87). At this moment in the story, Frodo tries to compose a brief stanza dealing with this motif; so, he recites:

The Road goes ever on and on
down from the door where it began.
Now far ahead the Road has gone,
and I must follow, if I can,
pursuing it with weary feet,
until it joins some larger way,
where many paths and errands meet.
And whither then? I cannot say. (1976, 86-87)

So far, he leaves the poem uncompleted until the end of *The Return of the King*, when it is an elder Bilbo the one who finishes it by saying:

But I at last with weary feet
will turn towards the lighted inn,
my evening-rest and sleep to meet. (1976, 1024)

To such a respect, Jorge Manrique’s stanzas connect with this metaphorical language, since he considers this world as “el camino / para el otro, qu’es morada / sin pesar” (V), and a few lines afterwards he presents a similar sequence of parallelisms:

Partimos cuando nascemos,
andamos mientras vivimos,
e llegamos
al tiempo que feneçemos;
assí que cuando morimos,
descansamos.

This stanza is especially solemn in terms of what life is really about for this writer. Thus, Caravaggi presumes that Manrique is trying to point out that birth, life and death concur as the three decisive moments of men’s pilgrimage on earth (1984, 23),

among all the other perishable, fragile worldly flatteries in life which turn to be vacuous in the end.

From this perception of life, we may also fathom another way of seeing lifetime as if “cualquiere tiempo passado / fue mejor” (I). Yet, this controversial last line from Copla I must be clarified, for Manrique is not suggesting the common thought of a superior quality of what happened in the past; rather he is emphasizing the instability of present times by means of the melancholic feeling that appears a few lines before, when the slumberous soul is “contemplando / cómo se passa la vida; / cómo se viene la muerte / tan callando” (I), and therefore it would be better to embrace the most of things by seeing them as bygone (Alda Tesán 1990, 51). Such a transcendental view of lifetime can be observed in Coplas XII and XIII too, and it is a key factor in Tolkien as well, who would probably have agreed with this idea in Copla I, whose theme is equally well-summarised in *The Lord of the Rings* by the character of Legolas the Elf with the line: “For such is the way of it: to find and lose, as it seems to those whose boat is on the running stream” (1976, 399). To conclude, this is likewise related to what Gandalf wisely comments in Peter Jackson’s cinematic adaptation of *The Return of the King*: “Death is just another path, one that we all must take” (2003).

2.2 Lifetime as Water in Perpetual Movement: Metaphors of the River/Sea

Let us move on now to the second most iconic metaphor in Manrique’s *Coplas*: the metaphors of the rivers and the sea, which appear explicitly in his famous Copla III:

Nuestras vidas son los ríos
que van a dar en la mar,
 qu’es el morir;
allí van los señoríos
derechos a se acabar
 e consumir;
allí los ríos caudales,
allí los otros medianos
 e más chicos,
allegados, son iguales
los que viven por sus manos
 e los ricos.

This treatment of the flowing water echoes a literary device of yesteryear that has been manifested in very different periods and traditions. For example, rivers mirror the

human souls in Langston Hughes' modernist piece "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (1921); nor is this imagery anecdotal in Spanish literature, as we can read in this stanza from *El diablo mundo*, by the 19th-century Romantic writer José de Espronceda:

Isla yo soy del reposo
 en medio el mar de la vida,
 y el marinero allí olvida
 la tormenta que pasó;
 allí convidan al sueño
 aguas puras sin murmullo,
 allí se duerme al arrullo
 de una brisa sin rumor. (1993, 198)

Concerning this metaphorical shipping, Tolkien connects with Manrique's vital symbols of the rivers and the Sea. One possible explanation for this, as I mention before, comes from the fact that Tolkien was inspired by reading an Old Irish narrative –in part Celtic, in part Christian– entitled *Imram, The Voyage of Bran Son of Febal*, which is basically the story of this hero's journey across the western sea to reach the Otherworld. Some of that background may be noticed in the Grey Havens from *The Lord of the Rings*, as Tolkien explains: "But it was an old tradition that away over there stood the Grey Havens, from which at times elven-ships set sail, never to return" (1976, 58). So, for both authors the open sea suggests an eschatological perspective of life whose termination is expressed under the epithets "the Sundering Seas" and "the Uttermost West", terms coined by Tolkien for his Middle-earth mythology. An eloquent example is the verse sung by Legolas, which reads as follows:

To the Sea, to the Sea! The white gulls are crying,
 the wind is blowing, and the white foam is flying.
 West, west away, the round sun is falling.
 Grey ship, grey ship, do you hear them calling,
 The voices of my people that have gone before me?
 I will leave, I will leave the woods that bore me;
 for our days are ending and our years failing.
 I will pass the wide waters lonely sailing. (1976, 992-993)

Moreover, another fragment in which Tolkien propounds his own melancholic treatment of rivers and ships is at Boromir's funeral, primarily when his brother Faramir remembers him later and he cries: "*Where is thy horn? Whither goest thou? O Boromir!* But he was gone. The boat turned into the stream and passed glimmering on into the night. [...] And I do not doubt that he is dead and has passed down the River to the Sea" (1976, 692-693). Concerning this, Pat Reynolds asserts that "with the image of death-

as-journey it is not surprising that boats are an important component in many forms of the funeral in the prehistoric north. [...] The ship as a symbol can be traced back to the earliest times” (2016, 4).

Finally, it is worth citing Tolkien’s Valinor, i.e. the mythical location which is somewhat associated with the hereafter in the mentality of Men, Hobbits, and mainly Elves. As Anna Milon underlines:

Their native land, Valinor is a land of immortality, where ‘naught faded nor withered’ (*The Silmarillion* 1977, 38). However, Tolkien names, consciously or unconsciously, the West ‘Annun’, after the Celtic Underworld, creating the association between Valinor and death. Aman and the Sundering Seas that separate it from Middle-earth are established as ‘a word of fear’ and ‘a token of death’ (*The Lord of the Rings* 1976, 19) among the Hobbits. (Milon 2016, 102)

Consequently, by means of this fictional place, Tolkien is actually adhering to a concept that is also present in Manrique’s stanzas, which is the univocal and flowing dimension of life –of all lives– towards the ultimate sea, an unknown place that brings all human destinies together. Although Manrique does not tell what awaits us beyond that sea, Tolkien does succinctly in his poem “Bilbo’s Last Song”:

Lands there are to west of West,
where night is quiet and sleep is rest.
Guided by the Lonely Star,
beyond the utmost harbour-bar,
I’ll find the havens fair and free,
and beaches of the Starlit Sea. (Tolkien Gateway 2015)

In conclusion, these two authors equally manage to convey the idea of death as a mystery, which has been recurrent since the old Celtic myths.

3. Addressing the Conception of Death

To begin with the analysis of the theme of death per se, we can consider Tolkien’s Ring Verse a good introductory stanza –in particular, the third line that says “Nine [Rings] for Mortal Men *doomed to die*” (1976, 5; my italics). Despite this ominous statement, some researchers such as Mario García González (2017) are of the opinion –based on a passage from *Morgoth’s Ring* called “Athrabeth Finrod ah Andreth”– that Tolkien deliberately describes men as mortal in a positive sense, though he blames one of the Ainur called Melkor (a.k.a. Morgoth) for having manipulated the Fall of Men in

the sub-created mythology of the Middle-earth, which somehow mirrors the biblical Fall of Men too, despite the lack of an Original Sin. As García González points out:

This sub-created story is a reflection of Men's death in the real world. Humans believe that Death is a punishment, as we associate the term to others like shadow, emptiness, and darkness. Andreth tells Finrod that it is Melkor who has changed the immortal nature of Men into a mortal one, but Finrod is right: Melkor is not God –this is Eru indeed– and He is the one who punished Men and condemned them to be only 'hosts' in Arda [...] because of their rebellion against the Divine plans. (2017, 23)

Moreover, Tolkien's consideration of death as a gift by God to Men, rather than a curse, is also reflected in his tale *Leaf by Niggle*. According to Segura Fernández:

Hoja, de Niggle es la reflexión de Tolkien en forma de cuento –no podía ser de otro modo–, entre otras cosas, sobre el afán del hombre por escapar a la muerte, por pervivir incluso más allá de las fronteras del tiempo. En los cuentos de hadas de Tolkien los personajes no escapan a la muerte. De hecho, la muerte es el *don* que los hombres reciben de Eru-Ilúvatar, y que los elfos envidian. (2008, 19)

We will see in the following sections a similar positive attitude by Jorge Manrique about embracing death. Concerning Tolkien, nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of this essay to go further into the complex treatment of death in the varied races of the Middle-earth; so in the next parts of my essay I will present a series of exemplifying motifs –some of them conducted from a medieval perspective– in both Manrique's and Tolkien's conceptions of human death, together with some of their own personal approaches.

3.1 Medieval Motifs about Facing Death

By the time Jorge Manrique wrote his *Coplas*, there had already been a whole cultural assortment of literary topics on experiencing death, mostly from a religious point of view. For instance, Alda Tesán (1990, 37-38) highlights the following ones:

- The commencement from the biblical *Book of Ecclesiastes*: “Vanity of vanities! All things are vanity!” (1:2).
- The Latin formula *Ubi sunt qui ante nos in hoc mundo fuere?*, i.e. where are those who were before us?, which is the central topic at the body of Manrique's *Coplas*, especially from XV to XXIV.

- The analogously ominous guidelines called *Memento Mori* and the allegorical Dance of Death or *Danse Macabre* during the Late Middle Ages. With regards to the latter, in the fourteenth century there was a radical shift in the way people would see death afterwards; thus, the consolidation of the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a more comfortable world encouraged society to protest against death, so to say, and it became a fatefully truculent character basically for being unavoidable (Alda Tesán 1990, 39). This scholar also quotes Italo Siciliano, who presents the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries as a period from which death is depicted as the most important character in the “lugubrious drama”, as well as the “coryphaeus” of the popular macabre dance (1990, 39-40).

Having said this, we may assume that all these precepts inspired the minds of Jorge Manrique and possibly Tolkien too. In the case of the former, scholars agree that he could receive some influences from the writings of other poets such as Juan Ruiz, Arcipreste de Hita, and Pedro López de Ayala –Manrique’s wife’s great-grandfather. (Martínez Esteruelas 1991, 125).

So, I now proceed to describe separately how Jorge Manrique and J. R. R. Tolkien borrowed some of these traditional tropes and motifs in literature, and the way in which those ideas either converge or differ depending on their own personal perspectives.

3.1.1 Manrique’s New Lyrical Approach to Death

It is extremely difficult to guess what a man from the fifteenth century would have thought about his own mortal condition and his acquaintances’ deaths. Yet, in the case of Jorge Manrique, we know that he dealt regularly with the loss of his loved ones³, as Tolkien did. Furthermore, Manrique would have been prone to think about the topic of

³ See, for instance, these lines from his “Obras amatorias, I”:

Ved qué congoja la mía,
ved qué queja desigual
que me aqueja,
que me crece cada día
[...]
que la muerte anda revuelta
con mi vida. (Manrique, *Obra completa* n.d.)

the *ubi sunt*, although he perhaps bore it in mind in a more altruistic way, so to speak. This is the reason why Martínez Esteruelas believes that what the Spanish poet wants to emphasise in Coplas XV-XXIV is not really a question that seeks an answer, but simply the expression of his anguish: “La pregunta es, en verdad, muy otra: ¿Por qué no estás aquí?, ¿por qué no te he precedido?, ¿por qué esta condena?” (1991, 119).

However, what is also innovative in his *Coplas* is the way death looks like a saviour or “a messenger” (Martínez Esteruelas 1991, 172), a character that talks to the victim, don Rodrigo Manrique, in spite of the typical portrait of the Grim Reaper as an executioner, which was the usual way of representation, for example by means of the *Danse Macabre*. Furthermore, regarding this conversation in Coplas XXXIV-XL, Alda Tesán observes that, though Manrique’s splendid scene seems quite simple, he achieves a much more vivid and truthful poetic result, compared to the rather melodramatic gestures at that time (1990, 60). Such a new positive approach can also be seen in the following instance:

No tardes, Muerte, que muero;⁴
ven, porque viva contigo;
quíereme, pues que te quiero,
que con tu venida espero
no tener guerra conmigo. (Manrique *Obras completas* n.d.)

The other most notable inspiration from late medieval times in Jorge Manrique is his distinction between the “three kinds of lives” that his father achieves when passing away. So, together with the traditionally Christian promise of an eternal life, there are two more lives addressed in Coplas XXXV and XXXVI. Caravaggi (1984) also traces this triad in Petrarch under the names of “Triumph of Death, Triumph of Fame... [and] Triumph of Eternity” (24). As a result, Manrique’s goal is fundamentally to claim don Rodrigo’s eternal reward due to the latter’s code of chivalry, by means of the exaltation of his great deeds (e.g. in Coplas XXV-XXXIII), which leads to an uplifting aftermath for such an ideal lifestyle:

Esperad el galardón
que en este mundo ganastes

⁴ Such a paradoxical lyricism equally reminds of the popular lines which Santa Teresa de Jesús would write a hundred years later:

Vivo sin vivir en mí,
y tan alta vida espero,
que muero porque no muero. (1961, 116)

por las manos;
 e con esta confiança
 e con la fe tan entera
 que tenéis,
 partid con buena esperança,
 qu'estotra vida tercera
 ganaréis. (XXXVII)

This model is also present in Tolkien, as we will see below, epitomised in the characters of King Théoden of Rohan and King Aragorn of Gondor.

Lastly, I need to refer to two more Coplas from Jorge Manrique's that share some accurate similarities with Tolkien's. In the first one, we are told how and where Rodrigo Manrique meets Death:

Después de tanta hazaña
 a que non puede bastar
 cuenta cierta,
 en la su villa d'Ocaña
 vino la Muerte a llamar
 a su puerta. (XXXIII)

These ending lines match perfectly with the scene from *Leaf by Niggle* where the protagonist is suddenly visited by Death, personified in this case under the figure of a driver "dressed all in black" (Tolkien 2014, 10) who knocks on Niggle's door. And secondly, there is another similarity between Manrique's last Copla and the Tolkienian treatment of death as "the gift of the One to Men" (1976, 1076) that must be given back:

Assí, con tal entender,
 todos sentidos humanos
 conservados,
 [...]

dio el alma a quien gela dio
 (el cual la ponga en el cielo
 en su gloria). (XL)

Therefore, as Sarah Rose concludes in this regard, "since all things were created by Ilúvatar, *to him all things return*. [...] Not only Elves, but Men are *the Children of Ilúvatar*, so if they live by his word, then he is their hope, and death is but the gateway to neverending life in Ilúvatar's home" (2016, 132; my italics).

3.2 Tolkien's Own Lyrical Approach to Death

The first eschatological feature is set by Tolkien in the opening chapter from *The Silmarillion*, where he includes his own vision of the Apocalypse, only correlated to some extent with the one from the *Book of Revelation*. So, for instance, in the Bible we can read that, at the end of the world, God “shall give some of the hidden manna”, as well as “a white amulet upon which is inscribed a new name, which no one knows except the one who receives it” (2:17). Bearing this in mind, we therefore can observe a similar gifted treatment in the Tolkienian God in the following excerpt:

It has been said that a greater [music] still shall be made before Ilúvatar by the choirs of the Ainur and the Children of Ilúvatar after the end of days. [...] for all shall then understand fully his intent in their part, and each shall know the comprehension of each, and Ilúvatar shall give to their thoughts the secret fire. (*The Silmarillion* 1977, 15-16)

There is another sort of revelation in *Leaf by Niggle*, which is also the moment of anagnorisis in the story when the protagonist, after having passed away, realises that the natural landscape where he dwells now –designated as “Niggle’s Parish”, an intentional pun by Tolkien consisting of both the main characters’ names– is very similar to the one Niggle was attempting to paint, though at this new stage of consciousness it seems for him utterly “finished”. Then, Niggle feels overwhelmed and he can simply exclaim: “It’s a gift!” referring not only to his art, but also to the result, “but he was using the word quite literally” (2014, 16). Also, Dimitra Fimi underlines this boon by saying that “Tolkien’s own ‘fairy-stories’ do include moments of eucatastrophe as he described it, moments where –beyond all hope– a sudden joyful turn occurs” (2016, 186). In *Leaf by Niggle* this unexpected recompense is well-deserved, as we know from the two mysterious Voices who justify Niggle’s actions by “looking at the Records”. Thus, they conclude that even though he was only a painter in a minor way and “a little man [who] was never meant to be anything very much”, still “he took a great deal of pains with leaves, just for their own sake. But he never thought that that made him important” (Tolkien 2014, 13). In conclusion, what Tolkien pretends to emphasize is –in connection with don Rodrigo Manrique’s merit retrieved in Copla XXXVII– that if people devote their lives to one great thing without pretending or expecting any return, then those actions will radiate into one’s glory not only in this life, but also in eternity.

Likewise, in *The Lord of the Rings* Appendices, at the moment when Aragorn is about to die, he tells his beloved Arwen: “in sorrow we must go, but not in despair. Behold! We are not bound for ever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!” (1976, 1076). Regarding this deferential attitude, Stimpson argues:

Simply men they must obey the dictates of natural law. At best, they are heroic. The Rohirrim, led by Théoden (the Anglo-Saxon *Peoden* means chief of a tribe), are like the men of *Beowulf*. Heathens, they were born too soon for grace, but they are too splendid for damnation. (1969, 35)

So, together with the men of Gondor ruled by Aragorn, the Rohirrim are the other mortal heroes that mirror some sort of medievalism. In fact, according to Carmine Costabile (2016), both Aragorn and Théoden would share the Middle Ages literary topos of “the premonition of death”, since it can be equally traced in several works from this historical period, such as *The Song of Roland*, *The Romance of Tristan and Iseult*, and also later in Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* (67). By means of the men of Rohan and their King, Tolkien reveals his erudition and passion for the Anglo-Saxon tradition. So, for example, when Théoden is slain on the battlefield, he mentions one aspect that could be located in the Latin *comitatus* or the Germanic *heroic ethos*, i.e. when he states to Meriadoc Brandybuck –one of the hobbit members of the Fellowship of the Ring– these last words: “Farewell, Master Holbytla! [...] My body is broken. I go to my fathers. And even in their mighty company I shall not now be ashamed [...] A grim morn, and a glad day, and a golden sunset!” (1976, 875-876).

In connection with this, the topic of the *ubi sunt* is also explicit in Rohan’s iconography. Thus, when some members of the Fellowship arrive in this kingdom, one of the first things they behold is the “great barrows where the sires of Théoden sleep”. This image provokes in them such a poignant feeling that, right afterwards, the text says that Aragorn “began to chant softly in a slow tongue unknown to the Elf and Dwarf; yet they listened, for there was a strong music in it” (1976, 530). The lyrics that Aragorn recites in the language of the Rohirrim are complementary with Manrique’s Coplas XV-XXIV:

Where now the horse and the rider? Where is the horn that was blowing?
Where is the helm and the hauberk, and the bright hair flowing?
Where is the hand on the harpstring, and the red fire glowing?

Where is the spring and the harvest and the tall corn growing?
 They have passed like rain on the mountain, like a wind in the meadow;
 the days have gone down in the West behind the hills into shadow.
 Who shall gather the smoke of the dead wood burning,
 or behold the flowing years from the Sea returning?

“Thus spoke a forgotten poet long ago in Rohan [...] so men still sing in the evening” (1976, 530), the narrator concludes in this passage. In the fourth section of this undergraduate dissertation I will discuss more in depth the issue between remembrance and oblivion, though we can already see that songs are capital devices in Tolkien’s conception of his *Legendarium* in order to achieve immortality.

The last example from *The Lord of the Rings* to this respect, also in connection with Manrique’s stylised lament, is the elegiac song of the Mounds of Mundburg, which is based on the sixth-century Welsh poem *Y Gododdin* (Piittinen 2013). This song appears at the end of the chapter “The Battle of the Pelennor Fields”, and it serves to remember those slain in that battle, including King Théoden. However, it is not a lament for great names only, since in lines 20-22 it says:

Death in the morning and at day’s ending
lords took and lowly. Long now they sleep
 under grass in Gondor by the Great River. (1976, 883; my italics)

This aspect is likewise quite present in the Spanish poet, for example in Copla III (“allegados, son iguales / los que viven por sus manos / e los ricos”), and in Copla XIV:

Esos reyes poderosos
 que vemos por escrituras
 ya passadas
 con casos tristes, llorosos,
 fueron sus buenas venturas
 trastornadas;
 assí, que no ay cosa fuerte,
 que a papas y emperadores
 e perlados,
 assí los trata la muerte
 como a los pobres pastores
 de ganados.

Therefore, great heroes and average people share indeed the same tension regarding oblivion and memory through laments, songs, and artistic creations in general. Given this, in the following section we will discuss how for Manrique and Tolkien everlasting heroism involves performing feats that are worth remembering.

4. Tension between Death and Immortality

To some extent, both Manrique and Tolkien deal with the anthropological duality between death and immortality, and regarding the latter, Tolkien even acknowledged in one of his most cited letters that the core of his literary work could be summarised as follows:

The real theme for me is about something much more permanent and difficult: Death and Immortality: the mystery of the love of the world in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ to leave and seemingly lose it; the anguish in the hearts of a race ‘doomed’ not to leave it, until its whole evil-aroused story is complete. (Tolkien 1981, Letter 186)

In this fourth and final part of my essay, I will start by briefly pondering on some cases which are not considered as *true* immortality by Tolkien. In particular, those characters called “Ring-bearers” who, at some point of the story, end up being obsessed with longing for immortality and try to escape death. Indeed, Tolkien makes several allusions to this issue throughout his epistolary production by referring, for instance, to “the desire for deathlessness” (1981, Letter 203); “limitless serial longevity” or “clinging to Time” (1981, Letter 208); and “hoarding memory” (1981, Letter 211).

The most representative figures are the nine fallen kings of Men known as the Ringwraiths or the Nazgûl. It is quite significant to consider –and Tolkien certainly did– one of the three possible etymological origins of the root “wraith”, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary. To this regard, the word may come from the Old English term *wrað*, which literally means “tormented, twisted” (*Etymonline* website 2001-2018). Given these semantic connotations, Gandalf’s explanation is quite plausible in *The Lord of the Rings* when he describes these wraiths by saying: “A mortal [...] who keeps one of the Great Rings, does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he *merely continues*, until at last *every minute is a weariness*” (1976, 60; my italics). Thus, not only these Nazgûl epitomise “the result of these artificially prolonged lives thanks to the power of the rings” (Abaléa 2016, 137), but also they “cannot be considered truly alive” (Milon 2016, 101). Therefore, if someone possesses the One Ring for too long, he or she does not end up living forever, but rather their existence turns to be an agony, so they develop a self-destructive dependency on this Ring of Power, as we also notice in other bearers such as Gollum or Bilbo Baggins, to a lesser degree.

In this regard, the narrator of *The Lord of the Rings* describes the character of Gollum as “an old weary hobbit, shrunken by the years that had carried him far beyond his time, beyond friends and kin, and the fields and streams of youth, an old starved pitiable thing” (1976, 742). Moreover, in chapter one we already listen to an exhausted Bilbo who feels “all thin, sort of *stretched*”, and he employs the simile “like butter that has been scraped over too much bread” (1976, 45). As a result, Bilbo’s wish to go to Rivendell is but the previous step to eventually stay in the Undying Lands, which is a metaphor for death acceptance, “for which he is prepared since he feels old and does not mean to return from his journey. The journey of no-return *par excellence* is, of course, death” (Carmine Costabile 2016, 56).

Accordingly, this attitude by mortal beings pretending to be in control of their own deaths seems to annoy both Jorge Manrique and Tolkien. In fact, Gaële Abaléa claims that “in Tolkien’s mind death is not a curse but a gift and to try and escape death comes from a perversion of the intention of the creator” (2016, 142). In that way, Manrique also takes a similar stand against this perversion of perpetuation, as he voices his own opinion in don Rodrigo’s last words in the following verse:

Non tengamos tiempo ya
 en esta vida mesquina
 por tal modo,
 que mi voluntad está
 conforme con la divina
 para todo;
e consiento en mi morir
 con voluntad plazentera,
 clara e pura,
que querer hombre vivir
cuando Dios quiere que muera,
es locura. (Copla XXXVIII; my italics)

This pleasant, clear and pure will is actually the key point for the poet in order to accept the transition to the afterlife. Alda Tesán explains it in this way:

La muerte no es ya el sujeto de un *matar*, es el hombre quien realiza la acción de un *morirse*, y lo hace con limpieza y con elegancia, con estilo y como sabiendo que él es el protagonista y en definitiva, el vencedor. El individuo Muerte como simple instrumento, y el individuo muerto que ahora se entrega. (1990, 46)

4.1 Immortalisation by Defeating Oblivion through Art and Songs

Consequently, Manrique as much as Tolkien would agree that *real* immortality needs to be won by means of a rough time or “trago”, as the former says in his Copla XXXIV, in which Death encourages don Rodrigo “to leave this deceitful and flattering world”, in order to be finally remembered thanks to the labour of minstrels such as the Rohirrim maker of songs Gléowine. Concerning this, Stimpson says that “characters even seek to be the subject of a song. *The Lord of the Rings*, lacking a complete eschatology, makes poetry a version of the afterlife” (1969, 36-37). This idea is absolutely present throughout Jorge Manrique’s stanzas, not only in order to conquest a heavenly life for his father; beside this, Manrique’s *Coplas* is but a way to sing “la fama gloriosa” (XXXV), as well as to be remembered. Therefore, it is not just a coincidence that the poet finishes his last Copla with the word “memory”, which is the basis for “estotra vida tercera” (XXXVII, quoted in Alda Tesán 1990, 47).

In a similarly *eucatastrophic* way, Tolkien averts the demise of Niggle and Parish, and he rescues both of them from oblivion at the end of the story by giving to that region the name of “Niggle’s Parish” (*Leaf by Niggle* 2014, 22), in order to achieve eternal fame and be remembered thanks to this place that they helped to create. In that sense, the blissful location in this short story shares a comparable utility with the western paradise-like Valinor in Tolkien’s *Legendarium*. Thus, all those “Faerie’s secondary worlds” –a term coined by this author– become ideal dwellings of rest and redemption for those who need them, as privileged places for “escape, recovery, and consolation” (Segura Fernández 2008, 230).

To conclude, we can deduce a clear parallelism between Tolkien’s role of songs and poems on the one hand, and Jorge Manrique’s on the other, who employs poetry as a device to immortalise his father’s fame and memory forever. Otherwise, if it were not for his *Coplas a la muerte de su padre*, contemporary readers would probably have never heard of don Rodrigo or Jorge Manrique.

Eventual oblivion is also present in Tolkien. Indeed, he wrote about such a bitter end in *Leaf by Niggle*, when the reader is told how Niggle’s canvas was left to the Town Museum, so “for a long while ‘Leaf: by Niggle’ hung there in a recess, and was noticed

by a few eyes. But eventually the Museum was burnt down, and the leaf, and Niggle, were entirely forgotten in his old country” (2014, 21). Notwithstanding, Segura Fernández (2008) is of the opinion that, although the work of art may be forgotten, art will always be eternal. This paradox is described as follows:

Tolkien sabía que el arte había sido redimido, y por eso se trataba de una tarea digna de interés, amor y atenciones, igual que cualquier otro trabajo o tarea humana. De hecho, una de sus más profundas convicciones era que él servía a la humanidad por medio de sus investigaciones académicas y de sus libros. Dedicó su vida a subcrear un mundo donde cada uno pudiera encontrar una rama en la que posarse y descansar, como hacen los pájaros en el Árbol de Niggle; una comarca llena de belleza, lágrimas y alegría. El Árbol no es solamente *El Señor de los Anillos*; es más bien la completa mitología de Tolkien, su investigación filológica directa y su «vicio secreto», la invención de idiomas. (237)

To sum up, even though Tolkien seems not to redeem Niggle at the end of the tale, a more detailed reading would suggest that he certainly did: Tolkien specifies that the protagonist only was “entirely forgotten *in his old country*”, what makes us resume to Aragorn’s farewell when he wisely realises that, regardless of the bitter end, beyond the circles of the world there is more than memory.

5. Final Conclusions

This undergraduate dissertation provides a thorough attempt to identify an important number of similarities between Jorge Manrique and J. R. R. Tolkien regarding the issues of death and immortality. After having analysed some late medieval tropes and other recurrent literary motifs, it is evident that Tolkien can be arranged with Manrique’s old lyricism of his *Coplas* in several aspects. Therefore, not only they managed to display lifetime as a brief and unidirectional passage, but also they were able to connect the theme of death together with the tension that appears in all mortal beings when immortality comes into play. This essay offers a converging approach on varied topics, and in particular to the qualitative function of songs and poems in these two authors, i.e. as the ideal form to defeat oblivion by means of different artistic manifestations. Thus, the genuine legacies we have received from these two outstanding writers is the intrinsic outcome of their profound lyrical creations, which were composed, in essence, as altruistic gifts to the world. Yet, by doing that, Manrique and

Tolkien also managed to fight “the long defeat”, as the latter would say, by gaining permanent recognition and fame not only for their loved ones, but also for themselves.

To conclude, despite an approach from the days of old, they were also able to adapt their own literary styles in such a poignant and peerless way, that it is undeniable both their success to conceive like immortal works of art which definitely will be revisited in the future, proving the necessity for further research on these literary phenomena.

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