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BOOK REVIEWS

Amy Appleford. *Learning to Die in London, 1380–1540*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 336. ISBN: 9780812246698. US\$65.00 (cloth).

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Amy Appleford explores patterns of change and continuity in London's death cultures throughout the long fifteenth century, using deathbed manuals and devotional treatises as her primary lens. She is concerned with the significant role the *artes moriendi*, understood broadly as "texts that offer or depict a way of dying well" (4), played in London's public culture. Hers is very much a literary history, but one that pairs close readings of texts with careful examination of their specific social, cultural, political, and especially civic contexts. She is particularly attentive to manuscript contexts and networks of circulation and readership; this is a notable strength of her study, for this methodology provides much deeper insight into lay devotional practices than could be gained from textual analysis alone. The geographical focus remains on London throughout, for, as the author explains in the introduction, the nature of urban London necessitated public conversations about dying well. Appleford structures her first three chapters around the tripartite Aristotelian model "that seeks to relate three principal arenas of political and ethical action: the self, the household, and the city" (6). It is less clear how the final two chapters relate to these concepts, for the texts in chapter 4 blend themes that were more clearly compartmentalized in earlier chapters, and chapter 5 examines novel themes that emerged in death texts composed during the reigns of the first two Tudor monarchs.

Appleford's study intentionally combats the persistent historiographical stereotype that classifies late medieval death culture as "obsessive or morbid" (3), declaring that the "language of morbidity, obsession, decadence, and trauma has no useful place in its historical analysis" (9). Appleford instead emphasizes the variety of experiences and practices that characterized late medieval death culture. Her sources acknowledge and celebrate community, civic responsibility, lay devotion, increasing literacy through vernacular writing, and lay opportunities for achieving spiritual well-being to a degree previously matched only by the piety of enclosed monastics. Her study is far from morbid; Appleford's central texts, the reader will discover, are very much concerned with medieval life and civic participation. The significance accorded the *ars moriendi* is "a sign of cultural continuity across the centuries" (11). It is, essentially, "a bridging genre . . . affirming continuity in the face of personal catastrophe and rupture" (218). Yet the texts that prepared London's literate elite for dying a "good" death are also characterized by diversity and innovation. In her argument for both change and continuity over the long fifteenth century, which culminates in a discussion of the problems of periodization in the book's conclusion, Appleford reveals that late medieval death cultures were much more lively and nuanced than any "morbid" historiographical stereotypes would ever allow.

In chapter 1 Appleford examines pastoral texts concerned with the elite lay householder's responsibility for the spiritual education and welfare of his dependents (family members and domestic staff). She focuses on two versions of the anonymous paraliturgical text *Visitation of the Sick* (ca. 1380), composed as a vernacular companion piece to the standard Latin manual for visitation of the sick and dying, *Ordo ad visitandum infirmum*. *Visitation A* "offers a flexible text to guide and shape the events at a sick or dying person's bedside" (28). *Visitation E* is a major rewriting and repurposing of *Visitation A* as a "practical script for deathbed performance" (39) that also helped readers reflect on and prepare for their own deaths. Both texts mark the rise of the "even-cristen," the lay deathbed attendants (generally neighbors of the dying person) who played an increasingly significant role in deathbed ritual. This development emphasized the importance of community, elevated the status of the layperson to a "quasi-sacerdotal role" (39), and marginalized the role of parish priests. The texts in this chapter are multilayered; pastoral instruction is intertwined with reformist rhetoric and an underlying concern for civic responsibility and the economic well-being of the

capital city. The author's analysis of texts accompanying *Visitation E* in London, British Library, Harley MS 2398, a compilation oriented toward elite lay householders, demonstrates how the householder's spiritual governance over his dependents extended even to their deathbeds. The *Visitation* texts thus empowered lay readers in a number of ways: they invited readers to participate in sacred deathbed ritual and meditate on their own deaths and gave household governors the vernacular materials they needed to secure the spiritual health of their dependents at the moment of their dying breath.

Chapter 2 opens with a close reading of a drawing of Richard Whittington's deathbed. Whittington (d. 1423), a wealthy merchant and three-time London mayor, served as a strong spiritual role model for London's civic authorities. His deathbed scene aligns exceptionally well with themes explored in chapter 1. Here, a cast of civic authorities makes up Whittington's "even-cristen," and his death is very much a public performance. The priest and doctor are visibly sidelined, and the "center of gravity" has become "emphatically lay" (58). Appleford's focus then shifts to Whittington's pro-anima bequests, which provided for the creation of civic spaces and institutions concerned with enriching the spiritual self-government of London's citizens. Whittington's civic projects are grounded very much in his identity as a merchant and in the theological rationale that the health of his soul depended on how he spent his accumulated wealth—an example of the complicated system of medieval "mercantile salvation" (66) that Appleford stresses. The civic institutions he built—the Whittington Almshouse, a companion college of secular priests, and a religious library at London's Guildhall, among others—were decidedly anti-Lollard projects; from Whittington's perspective at least, combating heresy was as much a part of his own civic "good" death as educating London's laity in spiritual self-government. Finally, Appleford turns to a study of the civic contexts for the painting of the *Daunce of Poulys* in St. Paul's Pardon Churchyard, based on Lydgate's poem *Dance of Death*. This project, she concludes, provides further evidence that civic authorities took their responsibility for Londoners' spiritual well-being very seriously.

A particular strength of chapter 2 is the variety of its source material. In addition to straightforward textual analyses, Appleford examines the iconography of the *Daunce of Poulys*, the rationale behind the compilation of London's *Liber albus*, the will of prominent clerk and Whittington executor John Carpenter, and a spatial study of the layout of the Pardon Churchyard. Other chapters would certainly have benefited from similar attention to

the visual and material cultures that complemented late medieval death texts, for her close readings of the death iconography connected with London's civic culture are as persuasive as those of her literary and record sources. This chapter offers a productive methodological model for the naturally interdisciplinary field of death studies, and it makes for engaging reading.

In chapter 3 Appleford connects a number of death texts to a specifically ascetic lay milieu of educated readers, completing Aristotle's tripartite model with a focus on spiritual self-care. In this new lay asceticism, the "way of perfection" is "organized largely around death preparation." Sin, tribulation, pain, and suffering are constants, but this ascetic discourse "understands the spiritual pain of sin . . . as *productive*" (103). These texts present something of a counterdiscourse to the emphasis on community visible in previous chapters, for this new version of lay asceticism relies on the separation of the self from the world in order to achieve salvation. Appleford conducts a case study of William Baron (d. ca. 1480), a prominent London citizen and first owner of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 322, in order to establish the elite lay readership that consumed the manuscript's compilation of five artes moriendi alongside other eremitic works "that separate readers from worldly community." This combination, she argues, "makes best sense as the expression of a form of perfectionist lay religiosity" (111). Considered as a whole, manuscript compilations such as Douce point to a discernible cultural moment in which the spiritual preparation for death formerly reserved for eremitical institutions was made accessible to London's elite lay readers.

Chapter 4 continues to examine perfectionist discourse, centering on *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, a "prestige work of Continental piety" (144) that appears in Douce 322. Appleford accentuates the "spiritual anxiety" (143) discernible in this work and situates the text within a broader trend in perfectionist death texts on the Continent using works by Jean Gerson and Nikolaus von Dinkelsbühl. The *Craft of Dying*, which Appleford declares a successor to the earlier *Visitation* texts, witnesses the triumphant return of the deathbed "even-cristen"; considered together, these texts demonstrate a long-standing cultural shift that expanded the spiritual duties of the laity. Many of the cultural strands Appleford identifies in the course of her study culminate in this particular text, for the *Craft* is a genuinely hybrid text in which interior devotional practices prepare the reader's soul for the communitarian death. Although "death *rehearsal* remains an individual practice, death *performance* demands the reconstitution

of a renewed version of the communitarian religiosity long practiced” by Londoners (143). The *Craft*’s rationalist approach to lay asceticism, in contrast to chapter 3’s affective texts, highlights the diversity of reading material available to Londoners preparing for the “good” death in the fifteenth century.

Chapter 5 introduces an innovation peculiar to Reformation-era death texts: the spectacle of state executions. These texts do not represent a complete break with past practice, however, for Appleford diverges from existing scholarship to demonstrate thematic continuities with medieval texts. Personal preparation for death continued to be incorporated into daily devotions and contemplative exercises, and the familiar medieval anxiety about damnation was still palpable. What changed the *ars moriendi* in the Tudor era, Appleford argues, was the need to prepare for death in a “new political present” in which dying had become a frequent public spectacle (189). *A Daily Exercise and Experience of Death* (1534), for example, “vividly conveys an environment in which daily death practice is a necessity, not a sign of spiritual privilege” (196). The imaginative exercises in this text, designed to make death less fearful, encourage readers to imagine a “good” death on the scaffold. Londoners newly familiar with the scaffold’s violent entertainments may simply have developed a taste for more sensational reading material, which then spilled over into religious genres, though this is something Appleford neglects to consider. This chapter has an entirely different feel from previous chapters: The focus is on the court, not the city, and on public spectacle, not the private, neighborly deathbed; here, the monarch, and not civic authorities, assumes the role of household “governor” to his subjects. Though there is much of interest in this chapter, and it raises questions that would be fascinating to pursue, the chapter might have been a better fit as a slimmed-down epilogue.

In her conclusion, Appleford argues against the traditional medieval/early modern divide, which provides some rationale for venturing so deep into Reformation death texts in her final chapter. She urges her readers to consider new paradigms for thinking about periodization. The medieval/early modern divide is an arbitrary construction, she contends, stressing evidence for continuity in medieval death practices into a much later period. Her contribution to the discourse on periodization has very real value, particularly in the field of death studies, where the medieval perspective of death is often represented as foreign to our own modern experiences. Scholars need to compartmentalize and categorize, of course, but as Appleford demonstrates with her study, the nuances of each project

should dictate the range of dates under investigation, rather than outdated and artificial periodic boundaries.

Overall, Appleford's study is expansive and thorough. Her attention to source studies and Continental contexts provides a rich background for appreciating late medieval death texts. The chronological span of her sources is truly sprawling, incorporating Old English texts, early Christian and Greek philosophy, and patristic sources. Appleford's methodology relies, for the most part, on discerning the intended audiences for the *ars moriendi* texts. This, she argues, is vital to understanding the impact of the texts' teachings on London's lay readers. Yet she accomplishes much more than this; she also succeeds in identifying the *actual* readers of these late medieval death texts, and this is where her book makes a significant contribution to scholarship on medieval devotional practices. The personal biographies of manuscript owners that she incorporates into her study provide a welcome balance to the more analytical close readings of texts, often breathing life into the somber theological treatises at the heart of the study.

Two arguments in particular could have been worked out more fully, but both are forgivably minor flaws in an otherwise impressive study. The first is the missing civic dimension in the eremitic texts in chapter 3. The author states that "the ethos and language of household and civic death practice remains grounded in the collective deathbed language of Christian community" (98), yet the eremitic texts in this chapter completely lose sight of this "even-cristen." As a result, the civic dimensions of these texts are never clearly articulated in this chapter, and it is difficult to discern how this ascetic counterdiscourse really connected to the lay reader's role in civic government and culture apart from the case study of prominent Londoner William Baron. This chapter thus does not seem to fulfill the author's stated project goals, although the eremitic nature of the texts is probably more to blame than authorial oversight. A second incongruity lies in Appleford's contrast (in chapter 4) between the trend toward interior devotional practices and Eamon Duffy's "traditional" parish religion. Positioning the two religious cultures as oppositional does not seem productive, for traditional religion coexisted with and complemented the kind of elite ascetic devotion Appleford discusses. Moreover, Duffy's popular religion, visible even in medieval England's most isolated rural parishes, very much empowered parishioners to reflect privately on the need to prepare for their own deaths. The more accurate contrast, I would argue, lies in the range of reading materials available to Appleford's elite Londoners versus Duffy's

rural laity, rather than between the nature of traditional religion and the late medieval turn toward “looking inward.”

The major reward of reading Appleford’s book is heightened appreciation for the social relationships that formed the foundation of late medieval *artes moriendi*. Her most important contribution to medieval studies is chiefly methodological: she demonstrates a number of avenues (source studies, readership networks, iconography) for examining the very specific cultural contexts that produced and received the *artes moriendi*, situating each text “within the socially layered, devout, but also worldly elite lay milieu in which they played a vital role” (217). These were works that celebrated living in and belonging to London’s diverse lay religious cultures. To living Londoners, preparation for death was not a morbid experience, it was a path to living a spiritually vibrant life.



Sara Ritchey. *Holy Matter: Changing Perceptions of the Material World in Late Medieval Christianity*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. Pp. 248. ISBN: 9780801452536. US\$55.00 (cloth).

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How did medieval Christians understand the natural world? One might simply say that for the spiritually ambitious it was, like all material things, an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of the divine. Or one could note the medieval commonplace that nature was a book that pointed to God. Sara Ritchey considers both of these answers in this elegant and thoughtful book but ultimately provides a rather different account of early Christian attitudes toward creation, finding in the medieval texts written for and by holy women a doctrine of “re-creation” made possible by the incarnation of Christ. If, for these theologians, “nature was not a religious concern” (4), creation *was*. Theologies of creation and incarnation gave religious thinkers reasons to explore the relations among the flora and fauna of material creation, the human soul, and the presence of God. For many of these thinkers, the incarnation engendered the possibility of a “redeemed material order” (6). At the center of Ritchey’s exploration of treatments of the re-created order in medieval religious writing are trees: physical trees,