

Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540, by Amy Appleford. The Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. Pp. 320. ISBN: 9780812246698.

AMY APPLEFORD'S *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540* offers a strong addition to studies like Eamon Duffy's *Stripping of the Altars* (1992), James Simpson's *Reform and Cultural Revolution* (2002), and Julia Boffey's *Manuscript and Print in London, c. 1475-1530* (2012) that cross the period dividing the Middle Ages from the Renaissance. Combining cultural history, literary criticism, and manuscript studies, Appleford traces "the laicization of the deathbed" through the long fifteenth century (170). She corrects the impression that texts of the era are more obsessed with death than with living by studying vernacular treatises, sermons, and poems that she identifies as part of the *artes moriendi* tradition. As Appleford describes it, her project concerns "the role of death preparation in forms of good governance" (5). Her book is innovative and interdisciplinary, analyzing understudied texts from deathbed manuals to treatises on death meditation to the series of wall panels known as the *Daunce of Poullys* and Thomas Lupset's oration, *A Treatise of Dying Well*, published by Henry VIII's royal printer in 1534. It focuses on the circulation rather than the production of such texts and places them in dialogue with social, economic, and doctrinal issues. The nuanced close readings of these texts advance the diachronic argument that death culture was never a uniform system, not before and not after the Reformation; instead, Appleford reveals a dynamic practice linked to literary tastes and doctrinal debates as well as urban government and self-governance (217). Focused particularly on male urban elite readers and their networks, *Learning to Die* stresses the importance of lay male heads of household as spiritual and civic governors in fifteenth-century London and attends to the merging of lay and ascetic death practices in the late Middle Ages.

The book's five chapters are arranged chronologically following an introduction that situates medieval death culture in the larger metropolitan social and political realms. It justifies the London orientation because death texts commonly circulated there and several extant manuscripts in the tradition have known owners. Indeed, many of the manuscripts address householders, a significant detail because civic authorities at the time sought to make the *familia* part of the city's governing structure. Each subsequent chapter traces the manuscript contexts and ownership, the textual lineages, and intellectual networks of select examples of the *artes moriendi*.

The first two chapters lay out the communitarian aspects of London death

culture. Chapter 1 concentrates on lay households via the text known as the *Visitation of the Sick* and extant in multiple versions. In a signature move, Appleford carefully distinguishes between the two main versions to tease out intended readership and deathbed pragmatics. In particular, she shows that *Visitation A* was probably composed around 1380 and produced for priests, while *Visitation E* appears regularly in early fifteenth-century vernacular books addressing the laity. This close attention yields important distinctions: whereas in *Visitation A*, the priest represents the dying before God, in *Visitation E*, the *paterfamilias* takes over that role. Appleford situates *Visitation E* in manuscripts with Wycliffite materials and in less radical household compilations, fascinatingly connecting these vernacular death manuals to the broader fifteenth-century trend toward multiplying jurisdictions. Chapter 2, “Dying Generations: *The Dance of Death*,” connects both written and visual texts associated with the *Dance of Death* to specific London institutions and argues that this death discourse reinforces mercantile efforts to govern by policy rather than force. The chapter reanimates the lost space of St. Paul’s Churchyard and its famous mural the *Dance of Poulys* via analysis of John Lydgate’s poem that provides the basis for the painting.

Chapter 3 offers a counter-discourse to the communitarian death pragmatics by tracing an ascetic strand in lay treatises that advise readers to withdraw from society. It discusses early fifteenth-century texts that adapt practices associated with Carthusians to lay life. These texts include *Pety Job*, *Learn to Die*, and *Twelve Profits of Tribulation*. Appleford focuses particularly on Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Douce 322, which preserves all three and was first owned by William Baron, a wealthy Westminster bureaucrat, who left it to his granddaughter Parnel Wrattisley, a Dominican nun. The chapter concludes by analyzing Hoccleve’s *Series* to suggest that books like the Douce manuscript reveal that a shift toward an interiorized understanding of the *ars moriendi* occurred early in the century before the Reformation.

The final two chapters move into the sixteenth century and the Protestant Reformation. Chapter 4, “Wounded Texts and Worried Readers,” examines the only long text in Douce 322 not discussed in Chapter 3, *The Book of the Craft of Dying*, which derives ultimately from Jean Gerson’s pastoral treatise *Opusculum tripartitum* (1405-1414) and circulated almost exclusively in late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century London manuscripts. Appleford characterizes the *Craft of Dying* as anxious, that is, “shot through with worry about its readers’ ability to manage their own or each others’ deaths and ensure the salvation of souls” (154). Following evidence of three owners of *Craft of Dying* texts, Appleford paints a

picture of desperate efforts to prepare for death. Finally, Chapter 5 contemplates the effects of the Reformation on death culture, arguing that Martin Luther's 1519 *Sermon von der Bereitung zum Sterben* works within the *ars moriendi* tradition and not against it as has often been assumed. The chapter concludes by showing how three Henrician death treatises—Richard Whitford's *A Work for Householders* (printed 1530) and *Daily Exercise and Experience of Death* (printed 1534) and Thomas Lupset's *A Treatise of Dying Well* (printed 1534)—vividly evoke a bodily fear of death even as they seek to offer a positive understanding of death.

Overall, Appleford's careful analyses disprove the tired narrative that early modernity freed humanity from "the penitential gloom of medieval 'devotionalism'," showing that the *artes moriendi* tradition is "integral to the economic and political as well as moral management of self, household, and city" (187). It has much to offer scholars interested in urban and mercantile life and in lay devotion, and it models the careful study of miscellaneous manuscripts that is becoming increasingly possible thanks to the work of digital humanists and rare books librarians.

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