

*Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540*. Amy Appleford. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015. ISBN 9780812246698.

The morbidity of the “Dark Ages” and the accompanying preoccupation with death is not only a trope in popular assessments of the era but permeates the thinking of many religious historians, medievalists, early modernists, and literary scholars. However, in her book *Learning to Die in London, 1380-1540*, Amy Appleford is determined to leave the macabre and its attending obsessions behind. She instead chooses to speculate on how intimacy with mortality helped shape social and civic structures in the long fifteenth century. To achieve this, she provides close readings of *artes moriendi*, texts which “depict a way of dying well” (4). From the new emphasis placed on the experience of the dying individual, to the obligations of the heads of households, to the government structure of London itself, she demonstrates that all levels of society became responsible for helping others die well, and this, in turn, helped them live well.

Given the complexity of the argument, Appleford’s book is surprisingly readable. This is largely due to the format, which uses clear, thematic chapter divisions to show how each circle of responsibility works on its own and then builds on the others in succession. Thus, she begins with spiritual governance and the household, focusing on two different versions of the deathbed manual the *Visitation of the Sick*. In chapter two, she ties this discourse to London’s civic government by examining the wall panels known as the *Daunce Poulys*, which feature text based on John Lydgate’s *Dance of Death*. Chapter three turns inward, with *Learn to Die* by Henry Suso, a treatise on death meditation, which helps Appleford address personal identity in death culture. Chapters four and five move toward the end of the fifteenth century and into the sixteenth century, focusing on another deathbed manual, *The Book of the Craft of the Dying*, which shows the interplay of traditional theological doctrine and innovation on the ecclesiastical and practical level. The final chapter shows how these trends begin to change in the first decade

of the Reformation, when death comes to be taught as a triumph of faith. This structure makes her multitiered argument understandable in both its individual parts and in how those parts connect to the larger whole.

Appleford also does an impressive job navigating the language differences between Old English and modern English, without depriving the reader of the original text. For readers unfamiliar with Old English, in-text, parenthetical translations are provided for words that do not have intuitive modern counterparts. Appleford does shift quite frequently from quotation to analysis, which, at times, makes the book hard to follow. A statement of what the quotation means in a literal sense would have helped non-specialists through these translations. Similarly, some of the long Old English passages can be difficult to understand for a person outside the field. In those cases, the text would have benefited from a footnote with a full translation. However, the necessity of reading the actual text to understand the writing of the time mitigates most of these difficulties. The medieval field can be daunting even to those who study it, and Appleford's efforts to make it accessible should not be overlooked.

Appleford is also highly persuasive in her argument that death culture is not a result of a medieval obsession with the morbid. Though her book addresses a period that took place barely a generation after the Black Death, she convincingly sets aside preoccupations of death as merely the psychology of the medieval mind. Instead, she shows the way the plague created a changed civic order. With fewer priests and a massive increase in deaths, laymen took on more ecclesiastical roles out of necessity, an ultimately irreversible change. In fact, the specter of the Black Death only strengthens Appleford's argument that knowledge of death and how to die became an issue of practicality.

She further notes that the changes presented in the first three chapters occurred simultaneously with heretical movements such as Wycliffism. These movements often criticized the Church and existing ecclesiastical officials, encouraging lay people to take more responsibility over their own salvation and that of others. The progression from *Visitation of the Sick* Version A, found exclusively in manuscripts for priests, to the *Visitation of the Sick* Version E, a later adaptation found in household religious compilations, reflect the practical changes Appleford highlights. Less emphasis is placed on the priest and more emphasis is placed on the Christian neighbors, or “even-cristens,” who are to watch the death both as a form of duty to their fellow Christian and as a way to begin to prepare for their own death.

The main weakness of an otherwise convincing argument is Appleford’s tight focus on London and, specifically, literate, elite laymen. Appleford acknowledges that due to this limitation, she cannot assess to what degree the ideas of the *artes moriendi* were put into practice or referenced by a more diverse population. This does not render her argument obsolete, but it does qualify it significantly. Without an idea of the traction these ideas had throughout Europe, or even the rest of Britain, it is hard to gauge how central these texts are to the greater shift Appleford demonstrates. It also makes it hard to substantiate her claim that “to the extent that spiritual perfectionism became a mainstream concern of devout lay Londoners, they themselves joined the international mainstream: falling into step, some decades behind, with their counterparts in urban centers across much of Continental Europe” (139). Since this problem is due mostly to Appleford being the first to explore this topic in depth, the only solution is the additional research she urges.

Overall, this book provides an impressive in-depth study of literature and ideas that are often neglected, and the originality of Appleford’s argument is engaging. But she leaves her most

compelling argument for the conclusion. Here, she entreats others to test the boundaries of traditional labels and urges fellow scholars to recognize that religion is not either public or private; history and text are not either religious or secular; years are not either medieval or early modern. Indeed, the entire book is a testament to the efficacy of this genre fluidity, and it is ultimately what allows for such a nuanced argument. As Appleford explains, the “most urgent function” of the *artes moriendi* is “to make smooth the passage between life and death” (218), and the lesson scholars should take from that is clear. In the end, learning to die necessitates leaving behind all of life, one muddled mass, no easier to define than it is to let go.

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