

In chapter 4, the author presents the midcentury spelling reforms as attempts to seal up the spoken form of the vernacular within the printed medium, while chapter 5 deals with the first grammars that describe French as “both a ‘natural’ *and* an ‘artificial’ language” (187). These grammars address their readers as native speakers, not of any “natural” idiom, but of a print language: “a language simultaneously given—as their ‘own’—and withheld—as the language of the other—in a new technological medium” (190). Chapter 6 studies instances of the kings’ interventions in linguistic or printing labor issues: first, several royal ordinances that culminated with the ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts (1537), which imposed the use of *maternel francoys* instead of Latin in judicial and administrative processes; second, the intervention of Francis I in conflicts between printers and journeymen. The last chapter, entitled “Survival,” is centered on *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*, and shows that in spite of Du Bellay’s wide use of horticultural metaphors, the actual goal of his farmer-poet is to ensure his survival through a technologically reinvented French.

The main merit of this work is to bring together narratives about printing and the French language, showing how the latter was thought of as an artificial object endowed with the durable properties of the printed book, a prosthetic language that would surpass the natural one. Examining in detail sixteenth-century texts about printing, languages, medical treatises, and royal decrees, Chenoweth skillfully demonstrates how the static properties of artificial objects were idealized and seen as a solution to decay and death. Therefore, when authors like Tory urged grammarians to “reduce French in art,” they were wishing for the vernacular to die in order to survive like the classical languages.

This research is well grounded in previous scholarly works and contemporary theory. Readers familiar with Derrida’s work will find that his theory not only fits the topic and its treatment, but is also further validated by them. Taking a stand against the teleological and phonocentric perspectives in historical linguistics, Chenoweth unearths the commonality of thought and values that ties together discourses about objects usually studied apart from one another. Her reading “between the lines” of the texts will certainly inspire scholars to write a different history of Renaissance thought.

Danielle Trudeau, *San José State University*
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Literary Value and Social Identity in “The Canterbury Tales.”

Robert J. Meyer-Lee.

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Robert J. Meyer-Lee’s *Literary Value and Social Identity in “The Canterbury Tales”* is a very welcome addition to recent scholarship on how Chaucer’s social identities and

professional networks influenced his writing. The monograph joins Paul Strohm's *Social Chaucer*, David Carlson's *Chaucer's Jobs*, Elizabeth Fowler's *Literary Character*, Craig Bertolet's *Chaucer, Gower, Hoccleve and the Commercial Practices of Late Fourteenth-Century London*, and Marion Turner's *Chaucer: A European Life* in providing a more clear and more complicated view of Chaucer's literary production as it relates to his working life. Working from the Clerk's, Merchant's, Squire's, and Franklin's tales, Meyer-Lee provides a strong argument for regarding these four tales as a cohesive sequence while offering insightful analysis of each narrative performance. In so doing, he asks his readers to reconsider critical assumptions about the relationship between tale and teller, Chaucer's process for composing and compiling his *Canterbury Tales*, and how the value of any literary enterprise might be determined.

The book begins with Meyer-Lee correcting a long-standing editorial error that divided the Clerk's, Merchant's, Squire's, and Franklin's tales into two fragments (4 and 5) and has kept readers from considering the four tales as part of a unified sequence. The rest of the book's introduction and its subsequent chapters demonstrate how this sequence foregrounds Chaucer's "anxiety about the value of his writing and of literary fiction in particular" by "collect[ing] within it the very four pilgrims whose social identities most overlap with those several identities that characterized his own social experience" (2–3). These overlapping identities and the links between the narrative performances, both textual and thematic, form the basis for Meyer-Lee's "axiological" analysis of this sequence, a methodological approach that supports the book's thesis "that any ascription of literary value necessarily occurs as a mediation of other ascriptions of value" (13).

Meyer-Lee frames his analysis through consideration of literary axiology, "a tale's implicit or explicit theory of its own value" (15); the axiological person, which defines an individual's "embodied constellation of values" (15); and Chaucer's axiological apologetics, which is his term for "the literary self-justification Chaucer articulates in each stage of the 4–5 sequence" by assigning these tales to tellers with whom Chaucer "shares some amount of social overlap" (20). Meyer-Lee's careful unpacking of these axiologies in each chapter of the monograph demonstrates that neither a tale's meaning nor its claims on literary value can be determined by considering any particular aspect of a narrator's social identity or with reference to the information presented in the pilgrim's portrait. A more complex and nuanced understanding of how these identities and values emerge in response to social, political, economic, and personal concerns provides greater opportunities for appreciating the dynamics of the tale-telling contest and the individual tales assigned to particular speakers.

Each of the book's four chapters provides a fascinating examination of these tales that engages with both long-standing critical commonplaces and more recent debates while presenting original insights that arise from Meyer-Lee's careful reading of Chaucer's work within its historical context. His analysis illuminates professional and paternal dialectics at the heart of the Clerk's, Merchant's, Squire's, and Franklin's

prologues and tales, which will provide a guiding light for critics reevaluating other pilgrim performances in the *Canterbury Tales*.

This is a very rich book, one that should be of interest to Chaucerians who associate themselves with any number of critical or theoretical schools. It asks its readers to consider the relationship between a literary work's *meaning* and its *value*, and whether these two things can, or should, be separated. The historical and biographical evidence flows elegantly within Meyer-Lee's adept close reading of Chaucer's work. While a few sentences and passages may create their own hermeneutic difficulties as the jargon strains the syntax, on the whole this is a very compelling and rewarding read. *Literary Value and Social Identity in "The Canterbury Tales"* is Chaucerian scholarship of the very highest level, a necessary and timely book that significantly adds to our understanding of Chaucer's poetry and professions.

Timothy D. Arner, *Grinnell College*

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Arts of Dying: Literature and Finitude in Medieval England. D. Vance Smith. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020. x + 300 pp. \$30.

Vance Smith has built a scholarly career out of noticing literary dynamics that are so pervasive that they are, from a distance, somewhat unprepossessing, and then demonstrating that those dynamics are in fact complex, profoundly philosophical, and intimately related to literature's own sense of what it's good for. He did it brilliantly in *The Book of the Incipit*, which explored a widespread medieval difficulty with finding a stable point of origin for literary making, finding a beginning. He did it again in *Arts of Possession*, showing the ideological, historical, economic, and even formal structure of the household to be foundational to late medieval literature and philosophy. Now, he's done it yet again with *Arts of Dying*. What Smith does with death and dying is truly remarkable, and makes his book a meaningful contribution not only to the study of medieval English literature, but also to intellectual history and to philosophy.

Smith points out the strange paradox at the core of trying to talk about death: once a person is dead, you can't even say that he or she *is* at all anymore. The evacuation of being that's entailed by death makes talking about—or even thinking about—death an impossibility. And yet, of course, we are all aware, at all times, of our own mortality. We live in radical finitude, yet there is precious little we can say or know about what that final moment looks like, or what lies beyond it. There's little, that is, unless we turn to the mechanisms and movements of literary writing. It is in literature, for Smith, that the impossibility of talking about death gets dilated, examined, and processed by the aesthetic workings of literature itself.

In his reading of "Erthe toc of erthe," Smith points out that we are born of earth, and we return to earth, and that the unyielding repetition of the word "erthe" in the poem