

Representing the Dead: Epitaph Fictions in Late-Medieval France. Helen J. Swift. Gallica 40. Rochester: D. S. Brewer, 2016. xiv + 334 pp. \$130.

With this monograph, Helen J. Swift invites us to rethink the common approach to epitaphic writings as texts solely concerned with commemorating a past life. The title of the study functions as a double entendre signaling that alongside the goal of speaking for the dead, these works reveal a metatextual drive to reflect on the process of writing about the dead. Swift develops the idea that writers who deal with the dead betray a troubling awareness of the unstable and contradictory nature of death as a stage in the medieval life experience rather than an end point. Our modern tendency to read these works as fixed, monolithic pronouncements has systematically overlooked this signature preoccupation with process rather than product. That is, Swift shows that epitaphic writings are deeply interested, for example, in the transformation of a dead body into a textual exemplum, the impact of death on identity formation, and the threshold status of an epitaph that confers life posthumously on the dead. To grasp fully the import of these texts, Swift proposes that we pull back from the epitaphic moment to take in the frequent metatextual framing that often reflects on the production, reception, and transmission of the epitaph itself. The concept of “epitaph fictions” announced in this study’s subtitle thus introduces not simply a sub-genre of metafiction, it also proposes a fresh and productive way of approaching the medieval literary treatment of death.

Swift draws on an impressive corpus of forty-one late medieval works concerned with the dead (dating from 1424 to 1538). Many of these works are predictable, such as François Villon’s writings or Jean Lemaire de Belge’s *Temple d’honneur et de vertus*, but it is important to highlight that unexpected additions are also present, such as the continuations of the *Belle dame sans mercy* that Swift identifies as a particularly rich example of epitaph fiction. The introduction places Swift in dialogue with current scholarship by both medievalists and postmodern thinkers on the subject of writing about the dead. Through this treatment of related scholarship, she argues that the framing narrative of epitaphs signals the precarious nature of identity formation and the porousness of the boundary between life and death at the same time that they reveal the intellectual productiveness of thinking of both death and writing as a process. Subsequent chapters provide an abundance of pertinent and rich close readings that set out to upend common assumptions about epitaphic writing. For example, framing chapters argue that narrative strategies generally considered to stabilize epitaphs, including the foundational syntagms of the epitaphs—“ci gist” and “je suis” (chapter 1)—and common architectural frameworks, from cemeteries to temples (chapter 4), have the opposite effect since they frequently introduce questions of presence and absence rather than provide a secure anchoring for the dead. The central chapters, 2 and 3, explore the fraught question of who gets to tell the story of the dead and the destabilizing effect intertextuality can have on attempts to retell a life story. When treating the

querelle tradition that issued from the *Belle dame sans mercy* or the influence of Boccaccio's treatment of the dead on French epitaph fictions, Swift uses these case studies to point to the important role intertextuality and, by extension, informed readers play in the construction of epitaph fictions. In an afterword, Swift approaches illustrations decorating late medieval epitaph fictions in manuscript and print as evidence of how early readers struggled with the inherent instability of the genre.

This study is well researched and presents a complex argument that is sure to spark further reflection on death literature. One area in particular that Swift opens to further exploration concerns the briefly discussed contributions of Dante and Boccaccio to epitaph fictions. The density of the ideas presented are made palatable by the author's engaging writing style, but it should be noted that the use of acronyms to identify the many works treated in this study has a disorienting effect, especially given the unfortunate decision to provide a key that is chronological rather than alphabetical. But the reader who works through this inconvenience will be rewarded with a thought-provoking new take on death writing in late medieval French literary culture.

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The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne. Philippe Desan, ed.

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As pointed out in the acknowledgments, *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne* is the first Oxford Handbook devoted to a French author. It is probably the most extensive introduction of its kind, with forty-two entries from both new and established authorities. While *montaignistes* will find much of it to be familiar territory, it is an invaluable resource not only as a reference tool for specialists, but as a guide for scholars looking to add Montaigne to their repertoire, and especially for instructors interested in incorporating the *Essais* into courses. With this audience in mind, Philippe Desan introduces Montaigne as “a bridge between what we call the early modern and modernity” (1).

The book is divided into three parts. The first, “Historical Montaigne,” grounds Montaigne in his historical, literary, and cultural context, and calls into question many of the myths surrounding his life and writing. For example, in “Montaigne's Education,” George Hoffmann demystifies the image of a young Montaigne who spoke only Latin thanks to the language immersion program devised by his father, and stresses the oft-underestimated influence of the Collège de Guyenne on the essayist's thought and style. Timothy J. Reiss's “Montaigne, the New World, and Precolonialisms”—though not the first study to assert that “‘otherness’ is the least of what interests Montaigne” in the New World essays “Des cannibales” and “Des cochés”—provocatively argues that Montaigne is interested in Native Americans out of a genuine respect for their