

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.

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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

sets up the poem's final (and formal) revelation: focusing on the poem's hypermetrical final line, Smith shows how "the very repetition that had been a formal principle until then" (82) ruins the line. "Earth" ruins "Erthe toc of erthe," and does so in a way that reminds us aesthetically and lexically of the beyond of embodied, mortal, earthly life. "What at first seems simple becomes almost unthinkably complex: a poem composed almost entirely of one of the most primal, concrete words imaginable dissolves into intractable abstractions" (84). It's a beautiful reading, alive to all the tiny formal intricacies of a poem that is, at its core, a riddle about being and nonbeing.

Smith's account of Chaucer—comprised primarily of treatments of *Book of the Duchess*, "The Pardoner's Tale," and "The Knight's Tale"—reveals for us not the ironic, mirthful, socially conscious and politically minded scrapper that we are used to, but a somewhat tortured existential philosopher, who wrestles again and again with death, though always in a way that speaks to death's unspeakability. As someone who sees Chaucer as a rather dark poet, I found Smith's readings satisfying, particularly of *Book of the Duchess*. He shows how the confusion and interpretive slowness of the narrator of the poem serves a philosophical end: to get readers to contend seriously with how very unspeakable and even unthinkable death actually is. The speaker of the poem is fundamentally ill at ease with himself, and with the terribly mortal world he inhabits. The poem's digressiveness and instability are manifestations of that fundamental discomfort, and we, as readers, are invited to participate in the existential confusion along with the narrator through the tortuous forms of the poem.

For Smith, the work of dying is something we are all always engaged in, like it or not, and literature helps us to process that reality by meditating on dying through poetic form, but not in a defanging way; instead, literature models the ultimate unknown, so that all the imponderables, formal intricacies, and feints in the literature of dying pre-form readiness for death. No one can fully grasp the problem of death, and certainly no one can do anything about it—we can't resist, avoid, or slow it down. But literature provides a way to engage with it from a curious distance, to help us decide how to live in view of our own finitude.

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Gaming the Stage: Playable Media and the Rise of English Commercial Theater.

Gina Bloom.

Theater: Theory/Text/Performance. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018. xii + 276 pp. + color pls. \$34.95.

Gina Bloom's *Gaming the Stage* is a fascinating read that elucidates the history of gaming and the ascent of commercial theater in England through detailed analysis of several early modern plays that feature scenes of gaming, including *Gammer Gurton's Needle*,