



Susanna Fein and Michael Johnston, eds. *Robert Thornton and His Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts*

Robert Thornton and His Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts by Susanna Fein; Michael Johnston

Review by: Alessandra Petrina

Renaissance Quarterly, Vol. 68, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 365-366

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#) on behalf of the [Renaissance Society of America](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/681402>

Accessed: 16/08/2015 10:30

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



The University of Chicago Press and Renaissance Society of America are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Renaissance Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Robert Thornton and His Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts. Susanna Fein and Michael Johnston, eds.

York: York Medieval Press, 2014. xii + 310 pp. \$99.

In spite of its unassuming title, this book, carefully and lovingly assembled, offers much more than a collection of essays on two manuscripts. Here we find clearly defined scope, purpose, and articulation, offering readers a satisfyingly systematic exploration of the achievements of Robert Thornton as shown in the two codices he assembled and copied in the fifteenth century. Thornton left us two invaluable repositories of Middle English literature, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91 and BL Additional MS 31042; the former in particular includes precious and unique items, and both present romance narratives, devotional literature, and medical texts. In taking into account the historical, codicological, linguistic, and literary background to the compilation of these manuscripts, this book furthers our knowledge in a systematic and articulate way.

The various contributions underline the structure and rationale in Thornton's collections, as well as their fundamental linguistic unity; there is also a consistent methodological approach. Thornton is a perfect subject for an analysis in terms of microhistory, and Michael Johnston's introduction evokes Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms*. By positing Thornton as "the marginalized exception" (2), Johnston makes a bold claim, since of all late medieval manuscripts, those compiled for private use probably had the least chance of surviving; but — as most information about fifteenth-century books in England comes from monastic or aristocratic libraries — there is no doubt that exploring Thornton's collection against the background of his life and world makes this case study ideal, while the presence of some Thornton texts in other manuscripts allows scholars to gauge the extent of his intervention and alteration. At the same time, looking at the contents from the point of view of the scribe/compiler rather than the author highlights instances of textual manipulation, reading criteria, and social attitudes.

One of the risks of microhistory is that it may become extremely specialized, as it usually presupposes a knowledge of the macrohistorical background. There is no doubt that this book is not for the general reader; but it wears its knowledge gracefully, allowing for both general perusal and study of individual contributions. The footnotes alone offer a thoroughly updated and almost daunting bibliography, not only on Thornton, but on a number of related subjects; the list of contents of the manuscripts compiled by Susanna Fein will be an invaluable tool for future studies, as well as a luminous guide for future compilers. After this preliminary material, the individual contributions focus on narrower subjects. George Keiser reconstructs Thornton's life, connecting his

circumstances to the compilation of the manuscripts, though in the end the essay is paleographic rather than historical. Oddly enough, the complementary essay, "Thornton Country" by Rosalind Field and Dav Smith, set at the other end of the book, does not respond to Keiser's challenge, but prefers an antiquarian, if valiant, exploration.

The heart of the book is devoted to the codices. Joel Fredell analyzes them in the context of book production in York, highlighting significant similarities in the decoration of the Lincoln Manuscript and of Cotton Nero A.x, the sole extant witness of the *Pearl* poet. Obviously, many of his surmises lack definite proof, but even so, he draws out from minute particles of information a convincing account of the putting together of the various booklets forming the manuscripts. Such an exhaustive inquiry may also constitute a basis for future editions of some of the texts surviving in these codices, the most famous of which is probably the alliterative *Morte Arthur*. Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre's contribution explores this possibility, proposing, as the title suggests, a prolegomenon for a future edition, though the essay concentrates on the shortcomings of the current authoritative edition. As we move to detailed paleographical and textual issues, some of the microhistoriographical impulse finds new and surprising channels of inquiry: as the essays focus on *Morte Arthur* (both Mary Poellinger and Johnston) or on the apocryphal *Childhood of Christ* (discussed by Julie Nelson Couch), we find a rather disturbing trend of physical violence running through the Thornton collections, often coupled with the veneration for Christ's suffering. This allows for wider reflections on the issues of violence and race in medieval scribal communities, though Johnston's intuition is regrettably not explored in full. Julie Orlemanski complements this analysis by investigating the medical material, and the role it played within the collections.

What emerges is a reader, scribe, and collector aware of genre distinction, surprisingly curious and modern, allowing each text he gathered to reverberate across the others. This book shows great love for its subject, and encourages future scholars to focus on the role of manuscript anthologies as organic collections and expressions of their scribal community.

ALESSANDRA PETRINA, *Università degli Studi di Padova*