

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

Susanna Fein and Michael Johnston, eds. *Robert Thornton and his Books: Essays on the Lincoln and London Thornton Manuscripts*. Rochester, NY & Cambridge, UK: York Medieval Press, 2014. xii, 316p., ill. ISBN 9781903153512. £60 / US \$99 (hardback).

Robert Thornton was a mid-fifteenth-century Yorkshire gentleman who compiled and wrote two miscellanies for household use: Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 91 and London, British Library, Additional MS 31042. Lincoln's three main booklets contain romance, religious, and medical texts, respectively, reflecting an interest in world history; the less neatly organized London explores sacred history "and raises similar questions about genre and devotion" through its textual pairings and sequences. The current volume toggles productively between technical book history and literary analysis, opening with a new and very useful "descriptive list" of the contents of both manuscripts by Susanna Fein, and concluding with an afterword on "Robert Thornton Country" by Rosalind Field and Dav Smith demonstrating the cultural vitality of medieval Ryedale. The essays in between provide a wealth of material on late-medieval English book-making practices, and on fifteenth-century textual cultures and habits of reading more generally.

The volume opens with paired introductory moves, conceptual and practical. Michael Johnston's introduction resurrects late twentieth-century historiographical debates between *longue-durée* narrative and "micro-history," framing Thornton as a "marginal" book producer who offers as such a "richer, and more accurate, perception of cultural attitudes" (6). Skipping ahead, Johnston's contributing essay persuasively asserts Thornton's "cultural agency" as *scriptor*, *compiler* and *commentator*, making him representative of (rather than marginal to) a unique moment in book history. Any conceptual weaknesses here are more than made up for by Fein's superb description of the manuscripts. Organized by booklet, her list has been "updated" to single out Thornton's "framing words" and signatures (14, 20). Individual entries are carefully researched, richly describing not only the contents of texts but also their layout and decoration, marginalia and transmission in both contemporary manuscripts and modern editions. The result is an invaluable resource for Thornton scholars and a model for others.

The essays that follow demonstrate the mutual value of technical studies in book history and literary-critical approaches. George R. Keiser analyses Thornton's experimentation with letter-forms in order to elucidate his evolving scribal confidence and creative vision. We learn here that London's *Northern Passion* and *Siege of Jerusalem* were copied together early on, setting the tone for the volume; or that Lincoln's opening *Prose Alexander* and the *Perceval* that closes the romance booklet were both added late, framing the collection. And in seeing this, we can see more clearly Lincoln's parallel exploration of earthly and heavenly glory, or London's central obsession with vengeance on the Jews for the crucifixion. Joel Fredell's study of decorative patterns illuminates not only Thornton's own developing investments, but also key elements of Yorkshire book culture in the fifteenth century, from pamphlet circulation to the complex interrelation of romance and devotional materials (witnessed also by *Sir Gawain*'s MS Cotton Nero A.x., c. 1400). Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre, in turn, offer a rigorous and bracing discussion of dialect forms and alliterative metrics in the *Morte Arthure* as prolegomenon to a "more satisfactory" edition of

Lincoln's flagship romance (155).

As the anthology pivots to foreground literary analysis, it keeps sight of such technical elements while retaining an interest in Thornton's complex generic sensibilities. Mary Michele Poellinger traces a shared language of violence in Lincoln's Passion and Arthurian narratives, which transfers some of the affective power of the Passion to the suffering of romance heroes and invites us to judge their sacrifices in light of Christ's. Julie Nelson Couch offers the volume's smartest reading of interplay of devotion and romance in Thornton's opus, and of his parallel interest in history. Locating Lincoln's *Childhood of Christ* in relation both to that manuscript's Passion narratives and to the Crusading romance that follows it, *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, Couch suggests that the manuscript as a whole develops a Passion-based historiography "setting the Passion as "the beginning and the end of history" and making history itself "a matter of the Passion and its vengeance" (217, 224). Finally, Julie Orlemanski turns to what might seem the generic outliers of the corpus, Thornton's medical texts: Lincoln's final booklet, containing the *Liber de Diversis Medicinis* and fragments of an herbal; and a partial copy of Lydgate's *Dietary*, which appears among the Lydgatiana of London's Booklet 2. Medicine, like vernacular literature, was a young and burgeoning field of discourse in the period; medical genres were themselves "flexible" and "porous" to other kinds of instructional discourse. What, Orlemanski productively asks, do romance, religion and medicine have to say to and with each other in compilations like these? What, for such books and their readers, did it mean to be "profitable"?

This volume will be of great benefit not only to scholars working on Thornton or his texts, but to anyone interested in (lay, vernacular) bookmaking in the period just before print. It is a good model for anyone looking to place a single manuscript or scribal output "under the microscope of a team of scholars" (12), as Johnston puts it, showing how our various specialized skills as book and literary historians can inform each other.

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