


**Johnston, Michael. 2023. *The Middle English Book: Scribes and Readers, 1350–1500*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xvi + 288. ISBN 9780192871770.**

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Michael Johnston's new study seeks to understand the relationship between scribes and readers in late medieval England, asking how we might meaningfully categorise the great variety of surviving manuscripts. The premise of the book is that late medieval books were marked by "cultural proximity" (2) between those who produced and those who read them. This is what distinguishes books of the Late Medieval period from the Early Medieval on the one hand, and print on the other. In his own words, Johnston is writing "a recursive historiography, with a moment of generally decentralized production bookended by two, much longer periods of generally centralized production" (2). The study argues that decentralization is key to understanding the complex material evidence of manuscripts from late medieval England, where many different types of scribes produced different types of books for different types of readers: book production frequently took place in local contexts where scribes were in close contact with those commissioning, purchasing, and reading books. Focusing on these forms of cultural proximity between scribes and readers, Johnston presents a large-scale study which aims to move away from individual case studies to uncover broader developments and patterns. The book draws on an impressive corpus of a total of 202 manuscripts of four Middle English texts: *The Prick of Conscience*, all versions of *Piers Plowman*, and Lydgate's "Dietary" and "Stans puer ad mensam." This corpus, designed to be "a diverse, representative sample of Middle English literature, suggestive of the range of manuscripts scribes produced, and readers encountered" (11), is further enriched by consideration of a variety of other texts which occur alongside these four texts in different manuscripts. The investigation of this corpus draws primarily on codicological, dialectal, and archival evidence to ask how these texts were copied, circulated, and used. The study's aim is not primarily to identify individual scribes and readers, but rather to understand larger patterns of production and dissemination of late medieval literature.

Johnston very concisely identifies one of the key problems in the current state of the field—the lack of a unified terminology to describe medieval manuscript production. As he points out, labels such as "*professional, commercial, metropolitan, provincial, and amateur*" (28) have been used by different

scholars with a range of different meanings, based on varying types of evidence. In Chapter 1, “Nomenclature” (26–49), Johnston highlights this lack of precision and instead proposes a set of new categories to describe different types of medieval manuscript production. He uses the terms *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* to describe the relationship between a book’s producers and users, indicating “whether a book was made within the orbit of a manuscript’s first readers or was commissioned from somewhere outside such an orbit” (39). There is a certain vagueness inherent in these categories, too, and Johnston is aware of this when he stresses that these categories should be understood as a continuum rather than a dichotomy: some manuscripts can be more intrinsic than others depending on the proximity between scribes and readers. Using these terms, Johnston then proposes four main categories of books into which most surviving manuscripts of his corpus fall. These are “Elaborate Books,” “which were likely produced in one go, which are likely extrinsic, and for which one must posit a high degree of scribal infrastructure” (41); “Streamlined Books,” “plain and unadorned manuscripts . . . that . . . do not require much scribal infrastructure and seem to have been produced in one go” (42); “Evolving Books,” “whose production processes are more discontinuous and circuitous than the Streamlined Books,” showing “evidence of having been made in a much looser, less organized fashion” (43); and finally, “DIY Books” that were “copied out by the reader for family and personal reading” (44). These categories come with their own set of problems, and Johnston shows appropriate caution when he stresses that these are purely descriptive categories intended to describe the majority of manuscripts from the period, whilst remaining aware that there are always outliers which do not fit neatly into any of these categories.

Chapters 2–5 (50–156) are devoted to each of these four categories in turn, discussing the evidence from the study’s corpus and building up an impressively dense network of evidence on scribal infrastructures and collaboration in a variety of different settings, including urban and rural spaces, religious houses, and individual households. Johnston’s style is highly erudite whilst remaining accessible, and each chapter concludes with a light-hearted yet thoughtful summary comparing a specific type of medieval book to modern examples of bespoke or evolving production.

The final two chapters investigate in greater detail the reasons for the large diversity of medieval books in this period. Johnston’s argument centres on the terms *ubiquity* and *decentralization*: “by the later Middle Ages in England, book production took place throughout the country, under a range of institutional settings” (157). Chapter 6, “The Proliferation of Scribes, I: The Manuscript Evidence” (157–85), asks where manuscripts were produced using dialectal, provenance, and palaeographical evidence internal to the manuscripts themselves. Johnston shows that “books could be . . . made virtually everywhere

in late medieval England: from organized centres of production, to the remote village, to the household of a rural landowner, to the home of a priest copying texts for his own perusal" (157), and the evidence strongly suggests that most owners of literary manuscripts tended to commission books from scribes who lived near them rather than from urban centres further afield. This analysis relies heavily on data from Linguistic Profiles in *LALME* (Benskin et al. 2013), revealing some perhaps surprising insights along the way, such as the fact that the vast majority of manuscripts of the *Prick of Conscience* show provenance evidence pointing to the same region as the dialect of the manuscript, suggesting that most manuscripts continued to circulate for a long time near their original place of production.

Chapter 7, "The Proliferation of Scribes, II: The Historical Evidence" (186–212), focuses on the people who were responsible for producing these books and the institutions which supported such bookmaking. Meticulously researched, this chapter makes the case that it was the larger bureaucratic infrastructures of late medieval England which provided a ready supply of scribes who could be called upon to copy literary texts, even if their primary occupation was to copy documents. Johnston makes a compelling case that ecclesiastical, urban, and household bureaucracies tended to draw their scribes from their immediate vicinity, and that such institutions can thus account for "the ubiquity and decentred nature of all forms of writing in late medieval England—the writing of both documents *and* literary manuscripts" (212).

The Conclusion (213–30) finally casts its view further ahead towards the advent of print, arguing that from the perspective of scribe-reader relationships, print represents a break with what came before: "print distances such owners from the means of producing such books" (219). Cultural proximity gives way to distance, and book production becomes a centralised affair.

One of the great achievements of *The Middle English Book* is that it proposes a consistent taxonomy that allows us to account for late medieval manuscript production in a systematic way based on criteria of proximity between scribes and readers (whilst also allowing for grey areas and borderline cases). This approach circumnavigates many of the problems inherent to categories such as *professional*, *commercial*, or *amateur* applied to a late medieval context. As such, it has potential implications for late medieval manuscript production more broadly, beyond medieval England. Richly illustrated with 37 images, it brings together an impressive wealth of palaeographical, codicological, dialectal, and documentary evidence as a compelling study which casts its net wide, highlighting patterns which only emerge after detailed yet wide-ranging investigation of a large number of manuscripts. The book will doubtless become compulsory reading for further investigation in the field and reveal synergies with other approaches. To name but one example, it would be very interesting indeed

to see how the results of Johnston's study could speak to recent work on late medieval "communities of practice"—shared practices between communities of scribes—as outlined in Scase (2022), and what these might imply about the proximity between collaborating scribes and their readers.

Whilst the virtues of the study are manifold and its conclusions are compelling, they do raise some questions about the corpus of manuscripts selected for investigation. The corpus includes exclusively verse texts, and although some prose texts which travel with the four texts of the corpus in different manuscripts are included in the discussion, there is by definition a strong focus on poetry which may not necessarily be applicable to other genres. Would the picture emerging from the investigation be the same if other texts with a wide circulation, such as the Wycliffite Bible, had been included? Would such texts, one wonders, invite the same conclusions regarding proximity between scribes and readers, or would they suggest a different pattern? As a result of the constraints of the corpus it also remains an open question whether there is a correlation between certain types of books and certain genres not represented in the corpus—one might surmise, for example, that history writing in late medieval England would produce a much larger number of Evolving Books, DIY books (and borderline cases) than the texts included in the corpus. Even if it would be rather unreasonable to expect the corpus to include an even greater number than the already very impressive count of 202 manuscripts (a remarkable achievement!), at times it might have been useful for the reader to see a more explicit discussion of the potential biases of the corpus.

Overall, however, the study shines as an example of a meticulous large-scale investigation which allows Johnston to move beyond the constraints of case studies and small sample sizes and make a significant intervention towards greater precision and clarity in how we think about late medieval manuscript production.

## References

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