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Exploring the Truths and Fabrications of Sir John Mandeville

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty and the Honors Program
Of the University of San Diego

By
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Department of English
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Honors Thesis Approval Page

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Accepted by the Honors Program and faculty of the Department of English, University of San Diego, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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May 14th, 2020
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May 22, 2020
Date

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Abstract

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville presents a unique and nuanced perspective of the Eastern World during the time of the Crusades. By critically analyzing the still-unknown author's depictions of the Eastern lands and their peoples, I demonstrate that it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of the status of Christianity during the late 14th century. *The Travels* comments upon the concepts of Eastern religions and cultural practices in a way that is remarkable and surprising — instead of reacting to such topics with hostility or aggression, the likely-Christian author of *The Travels* is willing to learn from those who hold to spiritual faiths outside his own. In recounting the painstaking details of his fictional travels, 'Sir Mandeville' created a literary work of art that would become a definitive authority amongst travel manuscripts for some two hundred years after its original publication.

Acknowledgements

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Introduction to the Text

Before delving too deep into the complexities of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, I believe it prudent to include a brief and comprehensive introduction to the text itself. Many aspects of *The Travels* remain shrouded in mystery, despite dedicated modern research on the text and its implications. The modern critical consensus strongly indicates that this piece, which is itself a medieval travel guide, was written between the years 1356 and 1366. However, complexities arise as soon as we begin to consider the author of the piece. The given name of the text's author is 'Sir John Mandeville.' Mandeville claims to be "an English knight" who "travelled from 1322 to 1356" and recorded his adventures for posterity in the years following his excursions to the Eastern world (Moseley 10). However, this is a problematic claim – there is no proof that 'Sir Mandeville' ever existed, much less wrote a book detailing his travels to the Eastern world. In fact, nearly all of the research that has been done on *The Travels* agrees on the point that Sir John Mandeville was himself a fabrication of literary creativity.

This brings us to a second crucial point – the nature of the text itself. Sir Mandeville may not have existed in the physical world, but what of the travels he describes in his text? Did the author of the text truly experience the events he details in his book, or are they just as falsified as the image of Mandeville himself? The answer to this question is more complex than one may first imagine. Elements of the text which would be laughably false to the modern reader are paired alongside intricate details of cities and medieval geography that are as close to the truth as any other source of that time period. As such, it is impossible to discount the entire text as a bizarre fabrication of the Eastern world, for many of the purported elements of the Eastern world within are likely true.

The subtle layers of truth and deception woven into this travel piece allow for the creation of a literary masterpiece of rare genius and creativity. In order to appreciate the wondrous and mystical experiences of Mandeville, one must be willing to delve deep into the realms of possibility, plausibility, and factuality – thus letting hunger for knowledge drive them on a series of travels of their own.

Defining “Sir John Mandeville,” Why That Matters, and the Christian Crusades

In all forms of text, it is important to weigh the objectives of the author in shaping their piece. As such, before exploring the intricacies of ‘Mandeville’s’ travel writings, it is vital to consider both the identity of Mandeville himself and the purpose he may have had in writing *The Travels*.

Within the opening pages of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, Mandeville introduces himself as follows: “I, John Mandeville, knight, although I am unworthy, who was born in England in the town of St Albans and passed the sea the year of Our Lord Jesu Christ 1332... have seen and gone through many kingdoms, lands, provinces and isles...” (Mandeville 2). This may seem to be a reasonable claim at first. The most successful and well-known Christian Crusades ran from roughly 1095 through 1292 C.E., so it is not inconceivable that there may have been a well-travelled Christian knight during this time period who did, in fact, document his worldly travels. When the text was published in the year 1357, the validity and presumed identity of its author would not be contested for two hundred years.¹ Even as late as the eighteenth century, there existed literary scholars who vehemently defended the existence of Sir John Mandeville, as Seymour’s analytical text claims. To be fair to these critics, there do exist “historical records of several John Mandevilles in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries” (Seymour 13). However, there is no historical connection that points to the existence of the specific ‘Mandeville’ highlighted in the text: a knight, born in St Albans, who travelled East and left detailed records of his journeys.

There is a very high chance that the persona of Mandeville is, in some fashion, loosely based on one of these aforementioned historic figures. By posing as an English knight, with all of

¹ Seymour, M. C. *Authors of the Middle Ages*. Variorum, 1993.

the prestige and respect associated with one of such social status, Mandeville immediately enhances his credibility and the validity of the tale he spins. Modern research strongly suggests that Mandeville does not exist in the sense with which he is presented in the text. Historical context and modern research have most scholars convinced that ‘Mandeville’ was simply a persona for the piece’s *actual* author to center their entire travel narrative around.

In some regards, *The Travels* go into appreciable detail with regards to the cities, rulers, and traditions of the Eastern world. Of course, many of these details are entirely fabricated, yet it “does [not] follow that the whole work is borrowed or fictitious” (Seymour 2). Despite the inaccuracies contained within the text, literary scholars are careful to note that *The Travels* are not “merely a plagiarized travel book... [since] the author has done much more than collect materials from the reports of genuine travelers... he has selected and pruned and arranged, [and] he has imagined” (Bennett 4). Both the style with which *The Travels* was composed and the specificity of the materials within it signify that the writer was comparatively well-educated for his time. Many of the segments of the text can be traced to the original sources from which they were copied and expanded, which suggests that “*Mandeville’s Travels* was compiled in a Continental ecclesiastical library” (Seymour 10). This is vital to solving the mystery of Mandeville. First and foremost, it suggests that the real author of the text may have never actually travelled to the Eastern world at all – it is extremely likely that the entire text was composed within the safe confines of a Continental library. Additionally, this provides a vital clue as to who the author of the text may have been.

Mandeville’s Travels is told from a distinctly pro-Christian viewpoint. The author is extremely knowledgeable with regards to Christian beliefs, practices, and political occurrences within Europe and the Church. He is someone who is capable of dissecting various literary texts,

breaking them apart and synthesizing them into his own work in order to make his own points about the state of Christianity and the medieval world. As such, it has been theorized that the true author of *Mandeville's Travels* was a cleric that was based out of a library in northern France or Flanders. He must have had access to the market of book publications, for his work came to be widespread and respected far beyond the author's lifetime. Seymour identifies for us one possible match for this list of considerations: Brother Jean le Long, who died in the year 1388. As a Benedictine monk, le Long would have been prohibited from travelling by the concept of *stabilitas*.² He would have had access to the considerable resources of a Benedictine library, which contained "almost 800 manuscripts" by the end of the Middle Ages. Le Long would have also had the necessary level of education and literary skills to splice together his manuscript – such a project would have been far beyond the means of the average medieval layperson. Key giveaways as to the religious nature of the author are woven into the piece; consider, for example, when Sir Mandeville claims proudly that "Jerusalem is in the midst (center) of the world" (122). Though it could indeed be argued that this claim is sparked by a relative lack of accurate geography in the given time period, it is telling that the writer of the piece chooses the Holy City of the Christian world as the centerpiece of his world.

To understand the nature of the authorship of this manuscript is to get a glimpse into why it was written, and who the target audience of the piece likely was. Mandeville presents himself as a complexity that defies conventional explanation. On the one hand, there is the hardened knight who calls for a Crusade to retake Jerusalem from its current occupiers - "now have the heathen men held that land in their hands forty year and more; but they shall not hold it long, if God will" (Mandeville 50). Despite this outraged call to action, Mandeville expresses a subtle

² "A monastic vow of stability," whereby the priest is bound to a province or church (Schenk)

yet profound disdain for the “hypocrisy, greed, and ignorance of Christian princes and priests” (Greenblatt 29). Stephen Greenblatt explores this unique contradiction in his work *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* and dubs Mandeville “the knight of non-possession” (Greenblatt 28). Throughout the course of his travels, Mandeville is tempted by offers of extraordinary wealth, marriage, and land, and he refuses every temptation that is put before him. It is by no accident that the writer creates a narrative whereby Mandeville must resist his urges to attain power and prominence.

In this regard, Mandeville serves as a highly effective literary foil to the authorities of the Christian world. As kings, lords, and the authorities of the Church seek to gain influence through their contributions of men and materials to the Crusades against Islam in the Middle East, Mandeville is presented as a warrior who seeks to fight for the *ideal* of Christianity. As such, he seems highly unwilling to advance his own status through the simple act of performing his duties as a loyal adherent of the Christian faith. Faith, Mandeville suggests, should be its own reward. Mandeville claims to have served the Sultan of Babylon “in his wars against the Bedoynes” and matter-of-factly describes how the Sultan “would have arranged a rich marriage [for him] with a great prince’s daughter, and given me many great lordships if I had forsaken my faith and embraced theirs; but I did not want to” (59). This sentence rings with significance, captured so briefly in six simple words: *but I did not want to*. Mandeville, whomever his identity may be in reality, would prefer to die a humble Christian than a wealthy, influential traitor to his faith. It is unlikely that the majority of contemporary Christians of the time period would have shared this selfless and noble spirit.

The long-lasting series of Christian Crusades began when Pope Urban II offered to absolve the sins of all Christian warriors who participated in a war to retake the Holy Land from

its primarily Muslim ‘occupiers.’ With a proclamation of “Dues vult” (God wills it), Pope Urban kickstarted a series of conflicts that would span the space of nearly two hundred years — the traditionally accepted timeline for the duration of The Crusades is 1095 - 1291 C.E. (with several small-scale ‘Crusades’ and conflicts occurring through the 15th century).³

The opening stages of the First Crusade tell a story of abject failure and desperation. Masses of unarmored, poorly armed, and desperate peasants and low-ranking knights set off for Jerusalem in roving bands, such as the ‘People’s Crusade’ spearheaded by Peter the Hermit and his lieutenant, Walter Sans Avoir. These hastily arranged and ragtag forces found initial success in attacking vulnerable and lightly defended cities at the outskirts of Turkish territory, but were swiftly corralled and decimated by armies of highly skilled Turkish soldiers. The People’s Crusade lasted a mere six months before nearly all of the so-called “Crusaders” either abandoned their holy mission of liberation or were captured, starved, or killed in outright battle by their far stronger adversaries. Many of the original attempts to forge a path to Jerusalem ended in a similar fashion, with bands of unprepared Christians being decimated by the ranks of professional soldiers they were pitted against. The First Crusade was saved, for lack of better terminology, by Christian mercenaries. By declaring that the lands, possessions, and wealth of the Turks, the Persians, and other Islamic peoples occupying the East were up for grabs by anyone who could claim them by force, Pope Urban II caught the attention of rulers and knightly groups that would otherwise have had no interest in risking their own lives to retake Jerusalem. After the decimation of the People’s Crusade, actual Christian soldiers began flocking East in droves to ravage the lands of their newfound foes. Without the undeniable impact of these

³ Tyerman, Christopher. *God's War: A New History of the Crusades*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

trained and effective soldiers, the first Crusade would likely have been the last, as it would have ended in a series of embarrassingly crushing defeats for the forces of Christianity.

Mandeville, of course, would have known this segment of historical context quite well, as a probable member of the clergy. Thus, his inability to fully commit to the idea of Christian domination of the Eastern territories is both curious and relatively unexpected. As previously stated, Mandeville does call for a new wave of crusaders to assail the beleaguered Holy Land, but he is at the same time “gentle and charitable toward the strange beliefs of the heathen[s]” he encounters over the course of his travels (Bennett 5). This *openness* to new forms of worship, cultural traditions, and societal standards is not necessarily what one might expect from a man with the position occupied by the writer of *The Travels*. Assuming that the piece’s genuine author is indeed a devout practitioner of Christianity during the Middle Ages, one would expect a firm denouncement of all things that do not strictly align with his worldview. However, the character of Sir John Mandeville comes across as distinctly “full of reverence for God, yet free from intolerance and narrow orthodoxy” (Bennett 5). One could go so far as to call Mandeville progressive given his charitable depictions of the Eastern world, particularly in comparison to the fiery rhetoric espoused by historical figures such as Pope Urban. The differences in opinions between the leading authorities of the Christian world at the time and Mandeville could hardly be more striking.

Many of the Christian monarchs, rulers, and royals who committed forces to the Crusades seemingly did so in order to gain worldly power, riches, and influence in the Eastern realms. Few managed to gain the riches and powers they expected to win in the East, of course. However, swayed by Pope Urban’s promise of total absolution, the Crusaders committed atrocities against the lands they ravished, targeting native Muslim and Jewish populations with ruthless efficiency.

The leaders of the Crusades convinced their followers that they “were the army of God ‘fighting for Christ,’ their casualties [were] martyrs, their success assured because ‘God fights for us’” (Tyerman 27). Undeniably, some of the Crusaders believed that they were performing the work of God in their invasion of the Holy Land. However, just as many prominent commanders during the Crusades used the conflicts as a means of acquiring territory and worldly prestige — precisely the opposite of what the Crusades were meant to achieve. The purported goal of the First Crusade was to defend the pockets of Christians living in Jerusalem and the other holy cities of the Christian faith within the Eastern world. Pope Urban “imposed on [faithful Christians] the obligation to undertake such a military enterprise for the remission of all the sins” of the Turkish people who had “in their frenzy invaded and ravaged the churches of God” (Tyerman 27). Any level of violence against the occupants of the Eastern world was seen as acceptable, any atrocity committed against non-Christians was permissible, and the pillaging of entire cities was encouraged.

With the composition of *The Travels* occurring nearly two hundred and fifty years after the conclusion of the most successful and noteworthy Crusades, the contradiction between Mandeville’s tolerant attitude towards the inhabitants of the Eastern world and his support of the central tenets of Christianity provides an interesting paradox. The considerable span of time that has passed between the composition of the travel piece and the present period makes any analysis of the text challenging. However, *The Travels* seems to clearly signify that not all members of the Christian world blindly accepted the violence of the Crusades as a necessity of the medieval world. Mandeville expresses clear respect for the Sultan of Egypt, remarking that he “is equivalent to [a] ‘King’; for the Sultan is of as great authority among [his people] as the King is here” (59). He also notes the foreign ruler’s “willingness to tolerate Christianity and his

eagerness to find out more about it” (Verner 128). Mandeville, despite his self-claimed background as a knight and warrior of the Christian faith, defines himself as an open-minded figure in a time period where such an attitude seems to be remarkably out of place.

Elements of Exaggeration, Truth, and Religion Within the Travels

Mandeville offers particularly accurate and striking descriptions of physical places. Take, for example, his description of Jerusalem, which can be seen on page 30 (Figure 1) as it was imagined in the medieval mindset. Mandeville says that “to speak of Jerusalem the Holy City: ye shall understand, that it stands full fair between hills, and there be no rivers ne wells, but water cometh from Hebron... before the Church of Saint Sepulchre, toward the South, at 200 paces, is the great hospital of St. John, where the Hospitallers had their first foundation” (76, 80). This description is vivid, clear, and extremely precise. Moreover, there is no reason for us to suspect that this description—likely taken from an actual eyewitness account of the city—is false. Mandeville’s depiction of the Holy City of Christianity is touched with undeniable nostalgia and wistfulness. He describes the “church of Saint Markaritot,” where “there is still a painting which portrays the great grief and mourning made” when Jesus perished at the hands of Roman soldiers (77). He calls the sight “a piteous thing to look on” — a marked difference from earlier segments of the travel manuscript, where the author simply described the elements of the world that he ‘encountered’ with matter-of-fact precision and a relative lack of emotional investment (77). He cannot manage to distance himself from this element of his subject material, however.

Mandeville offers other poignant descriptions of the many lands he encounters over the course of his travels, many of which are likewise true depictions of the physical layout of the Eastern world. However, the author’s implicit Christian bias shines through even in his depiction of geography and space, as he confidently declares that “Jerusalem is in the midst (center) of the world” (Mandeville 122). This therefore places the Holy City before all others in terms of its importance and location — as “proof” of his observation, Mandeville points towards “a spear that is pight into the earth... that sheweth no shadow on no side” (122). The detailed description

of Jerusalem thus pits the elements of reality and fantasy against one another. On the one hand, many of Mandeville's observations about the Holy City are likely accurate; however, at the same time, many of his supposed "facts" are carefully fabricated to fit the author's narrative.

Mandeville's faith shapes his view of even the most simple and proven facts in life, for even concepts such as geography are not beyond the author's bounds and creative guile. Many of the piece's descriptions are carefully embellished in such a way as to not appear too outlandish or immediately unbelievable to the casual reader.

As the text follows Mandeville's excursions away from Jerusalem, a mixture of authentic claims continue to be worked into the text. The reader is first taken on an adventure to the "hills [of the land of Job], where men get great plenty of manna in greater abundance than in any other country" (Mandeville 102). This description brings to mind the long trek Moses and the dispossessed Israelites made across the desert, having escaped the rule of Egypt — "the Lord said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you" (Exodus 16:4). This connection is almost certainly intentional, considering the likelihood of Mandeville's clerical background. The pastoral image of hills, used so often to juxtapose a peaceful image like that of a shepherd at rest, is utilized as a bridge between the natural world and Christianity, and between the past and present ages. Similar religious parallels practically leap out of the text to anyone with a basic knowledge of the Christian faith, which would have included most of Mandeville's contemporary readers, as reading was primarily a skill of the upper-class of medieval society. The text, even had it been read to a historic audience of medieval citizens, would likely still have induced immediate recognition with its overt references to the Christian faith and practices.

Mandeville mentions a certain species of deadly "trees that bear venom, against the which there is no medicine" (126). It is nearly impossible not to therefore consider the serpent

that deceived Eve into eating from the Tree of Knowledge, thus banishing humanity from the Garden of Eden. Or what of a mystical isle that Mandeville encounters where “there is a great marvel, more to speak of than in any other part of the world... for all manner of fishes, that be there in the sea about them, come once in the year” (Mandeville 128)? The concept of ‘plenty’ and the idea that nature is enough to sustain both the body and the soul are clearly on display here. However, this supposedly “real place” can once again be connected back to the Bible, when Jesus meets his first disciples. Jesus “said to Simon, “Put out into deep water, and let down the nets for a catch.” ... When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break” (Luke 5:4,6). Both in the Biblical story and in Mandeville’s own account, the natural world is shown to sustain the works of men possessed of faith and goodwill. Mandeville is hardly subtle in his comparison of the mystic isle and Jesus’s miracle, either. “For because that [the king of the isle] multiplieth so the world with children, therefore God sendeth him so the fishes of diverse kinds of all that be in the sea” (Mandeville 129).

These exaggerations seem to be relatively harmless, as they seem to serve to highlight the appeals of remaining loyal to the Christian faith. However, not all of Mandeville’s descriptions deal specifically with the places he encounters over the course of his worldly adventures. He also touches upon the people he meets and experiences he has in the Eastern world. As in the rest of his travel guide, aspects of his remembrances are based upon apparently true accounts of the East, whereas others are fully fabricated.

A particularly striking experience that Mandeville describes relates to the dangers associated with the Vale Perilous, where “the valley is full of devils and always has been, and men say it is an entrance to Hell” (173). He continues on to describe the enormous quantities of temporal riches hoarded in the valley, in the form of gold and silver, which convinced “many

men [to] come and go into that valley” (173). Those that succumb to the vice of greed “are strangled by devils,” thus earning the punishment of death for their prioritization of worldly resources (173). The punishment for the crime does not distinguish between the religion of the thief, as the “subsequent punishment” falls upon “Christian and non-Christian” alike (Verner 141). Mandeville subtly slips a piece of social commentary into this description of his travels — in his passages dealing with the Vale Perilous, he seems to implicitly claim that “trade is good but materialism is evil” (Verner 142). Those who do not take from the treasures of the Vale Perilous may leave the valley unscathed, whereas those who take even the most inexpensive coin are killed for their actions.

Mandeville takes a clear interest in the people he encounters in the East. He describes a place whereby “men of that country when their friends be sick they hang them upon trees, and say that it is better that birds, that be angels of God, eat them, than the foul worms of the earth” (Mandeville 129). No other historian of that time period seems to have recorded a civilization that would hang those members of their community who fell ill (whilst still alive). The closest practice to this that is remotely comparable is a contemporary custom, in some areas of the Philippines, whereby the dead are buried in hanging coffins nailed to the sides of cliff faces - whilst being *most certainly* already dead (see Image 2 for reference). In this surprising claim, Mandeville curiously chooses to connect the image of birds with religion. Birds seem to represent the freedom and air of unpredictable *wildness* inherent in the natural world. They fly, free, across the sky without earthly restraints to weigh them down - which is quite possibly what Mandeville was considering when he connected them with the idea of angels. However, this metaphor is a rather gruesome one, when it is fully considered. The supposed ‘angels’ are

literally devouring the ‘sick friends’ of the isle Caffolos, which is most likely not the visual one would first think of when thinking of either angels or birds.

The depictions in Mandeville’s travels continue along an ever-more-strange line as he reaches the isle of Milke, where he encounters a race of men that “delight in nothing more than for to fight and to slay men” (Mandeville 130). These berserkers are “behoveth that every of them shall be accorded drink of other’s blood,” which is a strange and disturbing habit to say the least (Mandeville 130). Were it not for the literal vampiristic qualities, it would perhaps not be too much of a stretch to compare this warlike race with the ancient Philistines, who fought many wars against the peoples of Israel. If nothing else, the berserkers sum up the violence of the Eastern world as Mandeville imagines it. However, not all of the peoples that Mandeville encounters are nearly as grotesque and bloodthirsty as the men of Milke.

Mandeville talks favorably of the “Pigmens, who are men of small stature... [who] do marvelous work in silk and cotton, and other such delicate work — much more delicately than other men” (Mandeville 140). Mandeville accredits the Pigmens, who in modern society may be more recognizable as ‘pygmies,’ with great cleverness and wit — they are “perfectly sensible according to their age, and can judge between good and evil” (Mandeville 140). This glowing introduction highlights all of the best aspects of the Pigmen’s society, while acknowledging neither physical nor mental flaws or weaknesses. Rather, Mandeville utilizes the Pigmen to “exemplify good qualities that are of use specifically on the secular realm” by ascribing praise to their treatment of luxurious materials (Verner 146). Not one comment on the religious nature of the Pigmen is forthcoming in Mandeville’s text, thus leaving the reader free to appreciate the value of fine craftsmanship, with no strings of religious morality attached.

When Mandeville discusses the people of Lamory, the secular perspective with which he regards the Pigmen is entirely absent. Lamory is a place where it is always “extremely hot;” thus, the people there “go completely naked and are not ashamed to show themselves as God made them” (Mandeville 127). These people go so far as to treat anyone who wears clothes with contemptuous disdain, stating that “God made Adam and Eve naked, and men ought not to be ashamed of what God has made” (Mandeville 27). This practice of total nudity, while certainly out of place in the medieval mindset of the mid-1300’s, is not one that would likely be regarded by the average observer as harmful. However, Mandeville claims that the people of Lamory use Christian scripture for other purposes as well: “in that land, there is no marriage between man and woman... because God said to Adam and Eve, *Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram*, that is to say, ‘Increase and multiply and fill the earth’ ” (Mandeville 127). This complete misinterpretation of Christian scripture serves as an excuse for lust, promiscuity, and infidelity — all traits which would have horrified the Christian believers of the European world. These allegations would have been shocking in their implications, and the worst is yet to come with regards to the men and women of Lamory.

Mandeville drops the following description into the text: “Merchants bring children there to sell... those that are plump they eat; those that are not plump they feed up and fatten, and then kill and eat them” (127). With this revelation, the reader realizes that the “Cannibals are not merely sadly mistaken about scripture but are genuinely evil,” as they see nothing wrong with consuming the flesh of the innocent (Verner 147). Mandeville’s grim depiction of the Cannibals seems to hint at “the difficulty of constructing societal guidelines from Biblical principles” (Verner 147). The Cannibals of Lamory genuinely believe that their actions are divine and in good service to Christian beliefs. Thus, Mandeville seemingly expresses the belief that the

acknowledgement and rigorously structured following of scripture can have serious unintended consequences.

Not all of the races that Mandeville encounters during the course of his travels have such strong secular or religious attachments. Some of the men and women that Mandeville encounters are sufficient in their strangeness, while others are so ‘evil’ and ‘monstrous’ that Mandeville simply offers the most simplistic descriptions of their appearances and practices.

In terms of the former, Mandeville gives extremely brief descriptions of some of the peoples one may encounter in the Eastern isles. Upon one island are “people whose ears are so big that they hang down to their knees,” in the next isle are “people who walk on their hands and their feet like four-footed beasts,” and in yet another isle is a race of people who “have only one foot, which is so broad that it will cover all the body and shade it from the sun” (Mandeville 137). A visual depiction of some of these fantastic peoples can be found in Figure 3. Mandeville offers neither endorsement nor judgement upon these diverse peoples. Rather, the reader is left to enjoy the entertaining account upon the bizarre traits of the island dwellers, with no pressure to make a snap judgement regarding morality, religion, or ‘goodness.’

However, Mandeville also introduces numerous races of island dwellers that are clearly meant to be seen as depraved and evil. One of the peoples that Mandeville encounters is “a race of great stature, like giants, foul and horrible to look at; they have one eye only, in the middle of their foreheads” (137). In similar fashion to the depraved Cannibals of Lamory, these giants eat the flesh of humans, in addition to raw fish — questionable dietary decisions, to be certain. In another region are “headless men whose eyes and mouths are on their backs,” and “there are in another place folk with flat faces, without noses or eyes” (Mandeville 137). On a surface level, it may seem as though these islanders are similar to those mentioned above, in that they simply

have physical deformities that set them apart from normal men and women. However, the peoples that Mandeville does *not* express judgement upon have mutations that benefit them in some way — the men and women with large ears have finely attuned senses of hearing, the people with only one foot can use it to shade themselves from the sun, and so forth. In striking comparison, the cannibal giants, headless people, and flat-faced people benefit not from their transfigurations. Rather, they are “cursed,” which may indicate a carry-over from Mandeville’s original source materials, “in which an odd physical shape was sufficient to imply an equally hideous soul” (Verner 149). It is clear that the reader is meant to regard these specific islanders with immediate horror and disdain, despite the brevity of their inclusion in the travel piece.

To study the entirety of Mandeville’s Eastern encounters would be a daunting commitment — these descriptions have been but a few of Mandeville’s most prominent accounts of his travels, approached with his creative blend of humor, exaggeration, and downright fabrication. At this point, it is worth considering the significant and lasting impact that Mandeville’s travel writings had upon the European world especially. For some two hundred years after its composition, *The Travels* were widely read and, in many cases, accepted as a *true portrayal* of what one might expect to encounter in the Eastern lands. As revealed by Seymour, there existed scholars and historians who wholeheartedly believed in the existence of Mandeville and the veracity of his travels through the mid-19th century.⁴ Mandeville’s work had a direct impact on the travels of other historic figures of the times — figures such as Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés were influenced by the text and used it as a reference for what they could expect to find on their own excursions. Columbus’s written accounts of the “Indians” that he encounters on his journeys are markedly similar to the exaggerated accounts of native peoples

⁴ Seymour, M. C. *Authors of the Middle Ages*. Variorum, 1993.

that Mandeville gives in his *Travels*. It is likely that Columbus styled his “remembrances” of the places he explored, in some fashion, after Mandeville’s own travel narrative.

The Travels remain to this day an undeniably complex account of the Eastern world and all of the wonder, beauty, and mysteries contained within the region. The lasting impact that they had in shaping the adventures of other explorers of the time period cannot be ignored — *The Travels* maintained cultural relevance long after the mysterious ‘Mandeville’s’ death, and still serve to instill curiosity and wonder in readers up to the present day.

Exploring The Theologies of *The Travels*

As briefly mentioned earlier, Mandeville sets himself apart from the prevailing theological mindset of the Crusading era in many noteworthy ways. Mandeville's text serves to "provide the untraveled faithful with a vicarious pilgrimage, allowing them to call to mind those spatially and temporally distant places, persons, and events known to them from sacred history" — given that the author of the travel piece likely did not see any of the places he describes, this goal comes across as particularly ironic (Higgins 93). However, Mandeville veers away from the explicit biases and culture-shaming seen in many of his source texts. Instead of condemning the practitioners of Islam and other Eastern cultural traditions as heathens, Mandeville acts as "a modest observer who does not pretend to understand the ways of God... [with] the sympathetic imagination to credit the remote people dwelling on the other side of the earth with the feelings, desires, and human failings which he had observed at home" (Bennett 5).

Mandeville's portrayal of the Sultan of Egypt, whom he alternatively refers to at points as 'The Khan,' is a telling indicator of Mandeville's charitable attitude towards the native peoples of the Eastern world. As one of the most prominent leaders of the Islamic world, it would have been easy for Mandeville to smear the Sultan as a diabolical enemy of the Christian world. However, Mandeville takes care to point out that the Sultan's court is a place of knowledge and reason — "beside the Emperor's table sit many philosophers and men learned in different branches of knowledge" (Mandeville 151). Despite their clear differences in religious beliefs, Mandeville shows himself to be more than willing to give credit where it is due, in his acknowledgement of the enlightened members of the Sultan's court. He shows clear respect for the Sultan's advisors, philosophers, and servants. He also notes that "there are also in [the] court many barons and other officers who are christened and converts to the Christian faith through the

preaching of good Christian men” (Mandeville 153). It should be evident that it is beyond difficult to confirm the authenticity of this statement, as medieval historians cannot say for certain precisely *which* of Egypt’s many rulers Mandeville was ‘acquainted with.’ However, if Mandeville’s claims are to be believed, they reveal a surprising level of cooperation and coordination between members of different faiths in the Eastern world.

According to Mandeville, the advisors that the Sultan “trusts most [are] the Christians” (153). While this admittedly comes across as a blunt advancement of the Christian faith, the simple fact that the Sultan would even allow the followers of a rival religion to hold prominent positions in his court speaks volumes to his progressive and pragmatic mindset. The Sultan is willing to put aside religious differences in order to ensure that his realm is managed properly and that all of his people are cared for — elements of society that Mandeville would seemingly like to see reflected in European societies. He pointedly remarks further upon the Sultan’s tolerance of the Christian faith: “he very willingly hears men speak of God, and allows Christians to live in all parts of his land; for he forbids no man to believe whatever faith he wants” (Mandeville 156). This line, seemingly simple in its declaration of acceptance and cross-faith relationships, seems to have been so upsetting to some medieval translators that they appear to have edited it out of some of the following transcriptions of Mandeville’s original travel piece. As noted by the modern translator Charles Moseley, “this passage [is] missing in the Egerton [manuscript] and partly in the Defective,” but it occurs in many of the earliest translated manuscripts (Moseley 156). Clearly, the fact that Mandeville’s text warranted such an aggressive level of copyediting is a telling indicator as to how Mandeville’s worldview clashed with the prevailing views of the ruling class of the Christian world.

Now, if the copyeditors of Mandeville's text had been so upset by Mandeville's acknowledgement of the Sultan's generosity and cross-culture accessibility, they must have been absolutely infuriated by some of the earlier chapters of the text. Mandeville notes that the spiritual beliefs of the Saracens and Christians are remarkably similar — the Saracens “freely admit that all the deeds of Christ, His sayings, His teaching and His gospels are good, and true... and because they come so near to our faith in these points, it seems to me that they could be easily converted to our creed” (Mandeville 106). Not only does Mandeville acknowledge the uncanny similarities between the Islamic and Christian faiths, he also states that previous followers of Islam could easily become a part of the Christian church. This is a statement that few prominent members of the medieval Christian clergy would have dared to actively advocate for. Even so, Mandeville relentlessly hammers his message of inclusivity home: “thus it seems that the Saracens have many articles of our faith, if not perfectly” (107). With this phrase, Mandeville doubles down on his message of inclusivity. By explicitly bringing to light the ways in which the two religions are similar, he proves himself open to the exchange of thoughts and traditions over traditionally-closed religious lines. Transitioning from his advocacy for the effective melding of the Christian and Islamic worlds, Mandeville launches into a description of a conversation that he ‘once had’ with the Sultan of Egypt.

In this conversation, Mandeville utilizes his fabricated encounter with the Sultan to lambast the inefficiency, corruption, and selfishness of the rulers of the Christian world. Using the Sultan as a mouthpiece for his critiques, Mandeville expresses disgust at how “priests do not serve God properly by righteous living... [they] commonly deceive one another, and swear the most important oaths falsely” (Mandeville 107). If this was not a brutal enough summary of the Christian world, the Sultan goes on to express disappointment at how “Christians are so proud,

so envious, such great gluttons, so lecherous, and moreover so full of covetousness” (Mandeville 107-108). Mandeville does not merely express the supposed opinion of the Sultan in his text; he clearly agrees with the critiques he places in the Sultan’s mouth, and utilizes the Sultan as his method of delivery in order to shame future Christian readers into changing their ways.

Mandeville wryly states that “it seemed to me then a cause for great shame that Saracens, who have neither a correct faith nor a perfect law, should in this way reprove us for our failings, keeping their false law better than we do that of Jesus Christ” (Mandeville 108). This segment of the travel piece adequately sums up Mandeville’s status as an exasperated Christian. While the text is told through a definitive Christian perspective (albeit far more open-minded than that of comparative religious texts of the time), Mandeville offers bluntly accurate critiques of his own religion. He shows himself as more than willing to give credit to the followers of other faiths when they act admirably, while he is unwilling to simply accept the status quo of the European world. Mandeville gives the Sultan one of the most “extensive and positive portraits” of any of the Eastern world’s leaders at the time — this is clearly not a mere accident (Higgins 95).

Mandeville utilizes the Sultan as a clear literary foil to the priests and princes of Christendom. By doing so, he shows the heights that the Christian world could potentially have reached, if it had genuinely taken into consideration some of the more open-minded practices of the Eastern world. The Sultan is gracious and accepting of all faiths, and he is willing to question himself and his advisors in order to guarantee the best possible outcome for his realm’s longevity. If such practices were adopted in the European world, Mandeville argues, the Christian world would be strengthened through rationality, faithful devotion, and critical self-reflection. Through this story of thoughtful discourse and cross-religious relationships, the author

of the piece challenges the prevailing 'medieval narrative' of religious non-acceptance, violence, and hatred of all things unlike oneself.

Conclusion

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville presents a deeply complex and nuanced worldview of the Eastern world that comes into direct conflict with many of the prevalent pillars of medieval Christianity. Whoever the author of *The Travels* may have been, he successfully created a long-lasting, thought-provoking literary piece that deserves genuine consideration. Medieval readers and contemporary literary critics alike do the piece a disservice when they take every passage of Mandeville's adventures at its face value. It would be uncharitable to treat the entire work as nothing more than a fantastic misrepresentation of imaginary places. Mandeville's writing is as much a critique on the immorality and greed of the Christian church as it is a story about an English knight who had the fortune to travel around the Eastern world. To this day, some of Mandeville's more prominent thoughts and opinions about the world around him remain relevant to modern culture and practices. As such, to ignore the importance of the piece's underlying themes and progressive worldview is to entirely miss many of the most important and relevant points of *The Travels*.

Associated Imagery



Figure 1 — A medieval rendition of Jerusalem by Jean Miélot (above)



Figure 2 — *The Hanging Coffins*, Reshma Narasing (above)



Figure 3 — *People of the Isles*, William B. Ashworth (above)

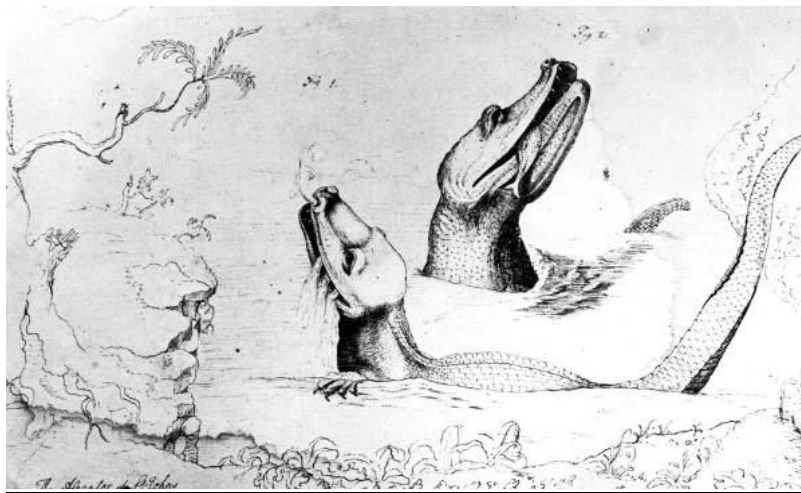


Figure 4: “Mandeville’s Monsters,” *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (above)

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