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Myth and Reality: Blurring of Boundaries in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the blending of myth and reality in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, drawing mainly upon Mircea Eliade's ideas from Myth and Reality to assess how medieval travel writing blurs boundaries between the mystical and the actual. It does so while upholding the presumption that travelers keep records of their movements, the places they visit, and the men and women they encounter. Mandeville's text is a blend of real geographic knowledge and mythical elements. It shows remote and strange lands not just as physical spaces but as areas where the human imagination seems to redefine the nature of reality. With the inclusion of classical and medieval myths—such as the Cynocephali, people with one foot, the Well of Youth, and Prester John—Mandeville transforms distant regions into centers of ethical and societal contemplation. Borrowing from Eliade's notion that myths represent the sacred and the profane while determining human understanding of reality, this paper examines how The Travels serves as a narrative of both the fictional and the verifiable worlds. In medieval Europe, Mandeville's incorporation of mythical elements satisfied a dual role: giving religious lessons combined with addressing the concerns of exoticism and wonder. Using Eliade's lens to view myths, this paper discusses the ways The Travels functions as a channel for presenting humanity's inner aspirations and anxieties about the unknown, or the world yet to be known. The integration of myth and reality creates a narrative where the unknown and revered merge with the empirical. Thus, the paper serves a refreshing approach in the long-standing tradition of considering myths as integral elements of human experience.

Keywords: myth, profane, reality, sacred, Mandeville, travels

Introduction

Medieval travel writing often oscillates between realistic description and creative invention, producing texts that blur the difference between the real and the mythical. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, a fourteenth-century travelogue, is exemplary in this regard. Claiming to be the firsthand account of an English knight's journey, the text combines genuine geographic knowledge with legendary traditions, amazing tales, and mythical beings. As such, it resists easy cataloging: it is neither purely a documentary travelogue nor an absolute work of fiction. Instead, it occupies a liminal space where the empirical and the fantastical meet, building a worldview that both informs and unsettles its readers. This article attempts to uncover how The Travels of Sir John Mandeville blends real and mythical elements by applying Mircea Eliade's theory on myth and reality. While doing so, it examines the function of myth in medieval travel literature and further explores how the text merges myth with reality.

Scholars including Francis Bacon, Mark Twain, and St. Augustine acknowledge the transformative potentiality of travel. For them, travel is a rich source of knowledge, ideas, and experiences. Francis Bacon talks about how travel can be a tool for educating young minds, and for adults, it is an experience (339). St. Augustine regards travel as a book that broadens the mind of the traveler. John Mandeville's trip to the familiar and unfamiliar world expands his horizons of physical landscape and imaginative power. On the way, he encounters both usual and unusual creatures. Some are mythical and fictional as well. Cynocephali are dog-headed men, and Blemmyae are headless men. Sciapods (people with one large foot), monstrous elephants, and unicorns connote the intersection of myth and reality. Cynocephali are dog-headed creatures with cannibalistic behavior, Sciapods are one-legged beings who have a large foot to shade themselves in the sun, and Blemmyae have their faces on their chests. Along with the creatures, the places are also strange. These creatures remind humanity of its roots, traditions, and ancient culture where humans evolved as mythic creatures, often showcasing fanciful characteristics as understood these days; however, they were a part of reality as the myth suggested by Eliade, who views that myths function as a channel for presenting humanity's root culture. It further explores the inner aspirations and anxieties about unexplored and unidentified realms.

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Donald R. Howard describes Mandeville's journey as "a vicarious journey" that deals with the psychological exploration of physical landscapes (2). For him,

the journey moves from "the familiar to the exotic," moving from Constantinople through Greece, Egypt, and the Holy Land, to Damascus (Howard 6). Howard further observes, "The second part of the Travels is an exploration of 'those countries beyond' which are divided by the four rivers 'that come from paradise terrestrial'" (10). The combination of the real and celestial that maps Mandeville's journey marks a turning point in dealing with the unexplored issue of blurring myth and reality. His acquaintance with the four rivers that flow from Paradise is embedded in the mythic tradition. Similarly, Howard also discusses the strange elements or living things Mandeville encounters on the way to Jerusalem: "The multiplicity of living things which he records, all sport animals, and misshapen creatures, reflect the decline of the created nature, from its primeval state" (11). He navigates dog-headed men with horses' hooves, wild men that have horns, and dwarfs. For him, this is a journey from the real to the exotic.

In a similar light, another critic, Sebastian I. Sobecki, discusses the discourse of similarity—the "familiar"—and difference—the "other"—in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville. He has depicted this issue borrowing from Foucault's Transgression, which denotes "the movement of crossing the limit between that what is known or familiar to us, the Same, and that which is unknown or does to be known, the other" (Sobecki 330). Thus, traveling is a transgression itself, and the Mandeville persona "travels along the frontiers of the world known to medieval Christendom and traverses the terra incognita outside his culture's experience where imagination, myth, and fear [reside]" (330). Sobecki, in this trajectory between the known and unknown, exposes how the narrative finds familiarity and originality in Christianity but finds a threat elsewhere: ". . . the unorthodox, the new, and the dangerous—all those are names for the other, which poses a permanent threat to culture" (331). Bringing in the idea of Foucault again, he calls it a "thought of the limit." Thus, it is "Mandeville's 'thought of the limit'" (331). This "limit of the thought" promotes otherization, and Mandeville's observation of strange creatures is no more unfamiliar in their ontological reality. Combining this reality with mythic trends needs further exploration.

Andrew Fleck brings the tension between the same and the other to the fore, especially in Mandeville's perspectives of non-Europeans. Fleck also reads the familiarity of places first: "As the narrative begins, he perfunctorily describes the important sites of Western Christendom to be found on the way to Jerusalem" (382). After meeting the familiar places, Mandeville arrives in "Greek Orthodox domains, and there he reaches a sort of dual frontier: geographically, the Greeks stand between Western European culture and the exotic lands occupied by other

human beings; narratively, they form a barrier, across which will appear the increasingly strange beings that populate the narrative" (382). The journey from one place to another, starting with the known ones, serves the purpose of Mandeville's desire to move readers from the known to the unknown realm. Again, he moves to exotic places: "This is an important decision on Mandeville's part. He recognizes his audience's desire to hear about exotic people, but the first unfamiliar culture he describes, that of Greek Orthodox Christians, represents a boundary between similarity and difference that makes the distinction between 'Europeanness' (the self) and non-Europeans (the other) more than a little hazy" (Fleck 386). His attitude toward non-Europeans is clear when he reaches Java and Dondya, where he sees cannibalism: "His most detailed description of a cannibalistic people comes when he encounters the Tibetans, who practice a kind of cannibalism to honor dead fathers" (386). His projection of cannibalism on Tibetans is a mark of Western superiority.

The Potential of Travel as a Transformative Experience in John Mandeville's Tour

Travel is a lively experience. It expands social horizons and extends the possibility of becoming and knowing the world in empirical ways. The direct interaction with landscapes, cultures, and artifacts that John Mandeville undergoes results in a transformative experience. Travel is not always a neutral act; when the traveler passes subjective judgments on the subjects he or she encounters on the ground, the fact that the newer acquaintance is strange does not mean that it is uncivilized. Thus, Mark Twain opines, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime" (Twain). The issues of prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness are mostly subjective judgments.

As seen in the story of John Mandeville, the East is imagined as a land of marvels and dangers. In this regard, bringing the reference of Dipesh Chakrabarty, Karma Lochrie mentions, "Dipesh Chakrabarty coined the phrase 'provincializing Europe' in his book of the same name, published in 2000. He did so to suggest a postcolonial strategy for exposing Europe as an 'imaginary entity,' an exposure based on Europe's claims to modernity and on the collusions of history with that entity" (593). The East is imaged as "other." Exposing Europe as an "imaginary entity" is a problematic notion of otherizing the unknown. Contrary to this judgment, Francis Bacon shares that travel broadens the mind. He observes, "Travel, in the younger sort, is a part of education, in the elder, a part of experience. . . . let his travel appear rather in his discourse" (339). Travel for younger generations is a

part of education, and it is a part of experiential learning for grown-up people. He further adds, "let him be rather advised . . . he doth not change his country manners" (Bacon 341). Bacon's worry is that one should not be changed during the course of the trajectory of experiencing new cultures.

Travel is an experience of collecting data based on the real world. Thus, St. Augustine observes, "Our book is greater—the world; in it I read the fulfillment of the promise I read in the book of God" (Augustine 43). Augustine proposes that the world is a book to travel through to gain new experiences and experiments. These experiences of travel are shared by John Mandeville on his trajectory to different parts of the world. He asserts:

I, John Mandeville, knight, . . . who was born in England . . . passed the sea the year of Our Lord Jesu Christ 1332, . . . been a long time overseas, and have seen and gone through many kingdoms, lands, provinces and isles, and have passed through Turkey, Armenia, Tartary, Persia, Syria, Arabia, Egypt, Libya, Chaldea, and a great part of Ethiopia, Amazon[ia], a great part of India, and through many other isles that are about India, where dwell many diverse kinds of folk of diverse laws and shapes - of these lands and isles I shall speak more plainly, and shall describe a part of those things that are there. (Mandeville 5)

John Mandeville travels the world from his birthplace of England to overseas, crossing many kingdoms, lands, provinces, and isles, namely Turkey, Persia, Arabia, and Ethiopia, to name a few among many others. However, he is not sure of Paradise: "Of Paradise I cannot speak properly. For I was not there. It is far beyond. And that forthinketh me. And also I was not worthy. But as I have heard say of wise men beyond, I shall tell you with good" (Mandeville 200). He cannot share his ideas about heaven, of which he cannot speak properly. The implication is that he has a faint idea about this. Along with this issue, his encounter with strange creatures owes to mythic conventions pinpointed by Mircea Eliade.

Eliade observes, "Myth is not an explanation in satisfaction of a scientific interest, but a narrative resurrection of a primeval reality" (20). Myth does not describe reality the way science does; rather, it builds its foundation on mythic implications that "brings back a sacred, original time" (20). Myth, as a story, is not based on the rational exploration of the world but on fictional possibilities and the narrative resurrection of reality based on an ancient model. Eliade observes myths as powerful sacred mechanisms: "It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality . . . is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; it is not an idle tale . . . These stories . . . are to the natives a statement of a primeval, greater, and more relevant reality" (20). Myth organizes people's

beliefs, enhances ethical implications, and further plays a role in shaping reality and fictional possibilities located in mythic time. In this regard, Eliade further observes, “The Mythical time of origins is a strong time because it was transfigured by the active, creative presence of the Supernatural presence” (18). The beginning of time in the sacred era reflects the creation of life, practices, and the world. It holds a deep significance regarding the existence of supernatural beings.

In the trajectory of Mandeville, the narrator mentions Cynocephali: “After that isle men go by the sea ocean, by many isles, unto an isle that is clept Nacumera, that is a great isle and good and fair. And it is in compass about, more than a thousand mile. And all the men and women of that isle have hounds' heads, and they be clept Cynocephales” (Mandeville 130). These mythical creatures are a part of myth and reality. They are like supernatural worlds but exist in the real timeframe of the ancient world. All the men and women of that isle where Mandeville has reached have hounds' heads, and they are called Cynocephali.

Similarly, he also encounters the Well of Youth that stands for immortality and longevity of life. The Well of Youth reflects human desires for immortality: “Some men clepe it the well of youth. For they that often drink thereof seem always young-like, and live without sickness. And men say that that well cometh out of Paradise, and therefore it is so virtuous” (Mandeville 113-14). This lake contains the virtue of immortality: “In that isle is a great mountain. And in mid place of the mount is a great lake in a full fair plain; and there is great plenty of water. And they of the country say, that Adam and Eve wept upon that mount an hundred year, when they were driven out of Paradise, and that water, they say, is of their tears; for so much water they wept, that made the foresaid lake” (Mandeville 131). This lake has historical and spiritual significance. Elana Gomel, in this regard, brings in the reference of Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray: “Dorian's invulnerable picture is the immortality of discourse, freed from the taint of materiality that returns to the discarded, loathsome corpse” (80). Dorian’s wish for immortality resembles the events of the Well of Youth.

Eliade, in this regard, shares his ideas on how myth and reality are entwined to bring reality to the fore. These mythic substances were once real parts of the then-existing society. He asserts that myths help humans understand the world. The sacred and the profane shape perceptions of reality. Myth functions as a bridge between past and present knowledge. Mandeville’s mythic text goes on constructing (an imaginary) geography. For example, mythical beings and places like Cynocephali (dog-headed people), Sciapods (one-footed people who use their foot for shade), and the Well of Youth (a fountain granting eternal youth) are

based on both fiction and reality. Prejudice, as suggested by Mark Twain, is perceived when Mandeville thinks of non-Europeans as "other." These myths reflect medieval Europe's imagination of the 'Other.' It asserts and reinforces Christian and moral values.

Donald Howard observes, "He travelled through many lands and proposes to report as best he can remember" (3). It is here Mandeville blends fact and fiction, myth and reality. For Eliade, reality at present is the consequence or event of the past: "I am what I am today because a series of events occurred before I existed" (13). For him, the past and present are interconnected; the present exists in relation to the past. Then, what modern man can do is know a partial version of the past, as one who "does not feel obliged to know the whole . . . but obliged to know mythical history and re-enact a large part of it periodically" (Eliade 13). By re-enacting them, he is able to "repeat what the Gods, the Heroes, or the Ancestors did ab origine" (13). Thus, knowing myths serves as a pathway to study history, culture, and heroes that once could have existed as a part of society.

Mandeville understands rituals, tradition, and culture in multi-dimensional ways to regain his connection to these cultures and realms of knowledge. He acknowledges that history can be forgotten but cannot be eliminated: "For things passed out of long time from a man's mind or from his sight, turn soon into forgetting because that mind of man ne may not be comprehended, for the frailty of mankind" (Mandeville 6). He assumes that knights, lords, and supernatural beings existed or exist beyond the sea or far away. He realizes his own origin is traced back to those super beings. The creative presence of supernatural beings in the mythic culture makes it distinct from ordinary events at a time when people have lost their connection to oral history. These myths help to formulate rules, customs, and rituals at present. Thus, for Eliade, the present does not exist in isolation, and sickness at present can be cured by chanting mythic hymns: "Sometimes a solemn recitation of the cosmogonic myth is enough to cure certain sickness or imperfections" (30). Such myths give hope and resilience—in the words of Eliade, "rebirth."

Mandeville's encounters with mythic creatures serve as evidence where he feels strong and superior. It is because he is a part of the larger whole of ancient time where Super Heroes existed: "And there make men great feasts for him every year, as though he were a saint. And at his altar they holden their great councils and their assemblies, and they hope, that through inspiration of God and of him, they shall have the better council" (Mandeville 12). Modern people have hope and aspirations from Gods. Karma Lochrie, in this context, discusses his utopian

perspectives: “Within this Utopian middle space Mandeville's narrative pursues its own provincializing project in complex and provocative ways” (595). He achieves such hope at this time by ignoring the transformative potentiality that comes via contact with the East. Lochrie observes, “Ultimately, Mandeville's utopianism offers an alternative history to the narrative of Utopia derived from Moore’s utopia” (598). His hope brings the concept of utopia to the fore.

Mandeville, during his trip, realizes that he is repeating the great deed of traveling by heroic ancestors, which gives him satisfaction. Eliade in this regard asserts, “Whatever man does is in some way a repetition of the preeminent deed, the archetypal gestures of the Creator God, the Creation of the world” (32). Men’s heroic jobs at present remind them of the archetypal experiences of God. Thus, Mandeville presents himself as a semi-God, acting like God during his travel. He takes on the challenges of going through a difficult journey: “But for to fulfil their pilgrimages more easily and more sikerly, men go first the longer way rather than the nearer way” (Mandeville 36). For him, courageous men should follow longer ways, not the easy ones. Isaac Jackson also views, “The danger was evidently real enough to the Mandevilles, as they were specially excepted from the general pardons of that generations” (468). Mandeville’s life was full of struggles.

For Eliade, myth consists of a variety of things, including the history of the acts of the Supernaturals. The history is considered true and sacred because myth is always related to a creation—it tells how something came into existence. “. . . and by knowing myths, one knows the origins of things” (Eliade 18). Myth, for him, is not just fiction; it is a lived reality that once provided guidance and shape to society. Myths narrate sacred events that occurred in ancient society. Moving beyond the trajectory of stories, they are blueprints of reality. Science alone could not capture reality; myth is necessary to trace reality.

Conclusion

Myth and reality are not separate but intertwined. The mysterious lands often depicted as divine or cursed, with features of exoticism and wonder, are part of mythic reality. The medieval fascination with the unknown explores how myth came into existence. Empirical observations coexist with mythical observations. The medieval worldview accepted travel narratives as partly real, partly allegorical. Myth serves as a narrative tool for religious, ethical, and cultural explorations. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville showcases the blurred boundary between fact and fiction. The text reflects medieval Europe’s aspirations and anxieties about the unknown.

Thus, this exploration of the blending of myth and reality in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville serves as evidence for the historical significance of myths that have left a series of traces upon modern time. This is investigated drawing mainly upon Mircea Eliade's ideas to assess how a medieval literary piece of travelogue remaps boundaries between the mystical and the actual. While doing so, it upholds the assumption of keeping records of movements, the mapping of landscapes, the places visited, and the men and women encountered along with animals. Mandeville's text consists of real geographic knowledge and mythical elements. The distant and strange lands serve not only as physical spaces but as an imaginative realm where creative force meets fancy and imagination, blending with reality. By mentioning mythic creatures and things like the Cynocephali, people with one foot, the Well of Youth, and Prester John, Mandeville transforms the distant regions into centers of rethinking where myth and reality merge into one category. Myths represent the sacred and the profane while determining human understanding of reality. Mandeville's incorporation of mythical elements provides both religious lessons and their connection to ground reality. Therefore, the Travels that Mandeville goes through function as a channel for presenting humanity's inner aspirations and anxieties of the unexplored, serving the transformational potentiality where newer experiences are traced out.

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