

HOW FAR FROM JERUSALEM? TROPICAL  
CUSTOMS AND THE QUESTION OF RACE IN  
THE *BOOK OF JOHN MANDEVILLE*

Thesis by

Eric S. Mukherjee

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## ABSTRACT

The *Book of John Mandeville*, while ostensibly a pilgrimage guide documenting an English knight's journey into the East, is an ideal text in which to study the developing concept of race in the European Middle Ages. The *Mandeville*-author's sense of place and morality are inextricably linked to each other: Jerusalem is the center of his world, which necessarily forces Africa and Asia to occupy the spiritual periphery. Most inhabitants of *Mandeville*'s landscapes are not monsters in the physical sense, but at once startlingly human and irreconcilably alien in their customs. Their religious heresies, disordered sexual appetites, and monstrous acts of cannibalism label them as fallen state of the European Christian self. *Mandeville*'s monstrosities lie not in the fantastical, but the disturbingly familiar, coupling recognizable humans with a miscarriage of natural law. In using real people to illustrate the moral degeneracy of the tropics, *Mandeville*'s ethnography helps shed light on the missing link between medieval monsters and modern race theory.

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*Chapter I*

## INTRODUCTION

In the year 1356, an English knight by the name of Sir John Mandeville returned from three and a half decades spent traveling the world—first on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and then exploring Ethiopia and the maritime India beyond—and set about writing about his adventures, or so the *Mandeville*-author claims. Of course, there is no evidence that there was a John Mandeville from St Albans in the early fourteenth century, and his account of the East reads as fantastical at best. The *Book of John Mandeville*, however, despite its fictitious premise, became a widely read source, perhaps more influential in its day than Marco Polo (O’Doherty 203; Heng, *Empire of Magic* 241), and into the early modern era, perhaps even traveling with Columbus on his first voyage (Zumthor 820). Its broad reach makes it an ideal platform to study what a modern audience would call race in the very real historical medieval West.

Race, in Geraldine Heng’s memorable words, “is what the rest of the world has” (“Invention II” 281). *Mandeville*, illustrating Heng’s eloquent idea, centers Jerusalem as the source of European identity and places the all too human monstrous races at the ill-defined edges of the known world. The *Mandeville*-author is an ethnographer at heart, and his book bridges the gap between celebration of cultural differences and colonial period rhetoric that condemned all who differed from a Western cultural ideal to an uncompromisingly subhuman status.

Whether a concept of race even existed in the Middle Ages is a topic of some debate. In one sense, the period is caught between worlds: to medievalists, race is a foray into the exotic that has no place in such a well-established discipline; and to scholars of race theory, the Middle Ages are “prehistoric,” of little concern compared to the colonial eras that follow (Hahn 4). The result is

the idea that “race,” and by extension “racism,” is a purely modern invention, created to justify African slavery and Western imperial appropriation of Southeast Asian resources. In fact, Suzanne Conklin Akbari, in her chapter on John Mandeville, effectively summarizes the prevailing thought about medieval attitudes toward non-European cultures as follows:

The incredible diversity of the world, including the many bizarre “monstrous races” that so appealed to medieval readers of the *Book [of John Mandeville]*, is not indicative of chaos: on the contrary, each part is balanced—heat and cold, dryness and moisture, light and dark, orthodoxy and religious deviance, monstrosity and normalcy. (65)

At the same time, this balance is not altogether neutral. While Akbari presents it as a celebration of diversity, the fact remains that monstrosity, darkness, and religious deviance are always seen together in the *Book* while normalcy, light, and orthodoxy always function as the implicit European self in these texts.

These groupings of traits from Akbari’s chapter do not occur in a cultural vacuum. The idea of monsters dates back to ancient Greece with various constructions of specifically Indian monstrosity drifting in and out of favor over the years (Wittkower 159-160). These same ethnographies, brought into the medieval imagination through Pliny, gave way to moralizing philosophical debates of the Middle Ages (Wittkower 166; 177). Exotic people in the medieval tradition were often considered degenerate or fallen, and so the questions arose: Did they have souls? Were they rational? Such questions implicitly place ethnic diversity outside the expected bounds of Christian human morality.

Blackness was also singled out as a specific defining feature of the inferior “other”. Heng describes an illustration of a black Moor being executed while his white Christian mistress is being



saved by the Virgin Mary (“Invention I” 259). In a romance John Block Friedman cites, “a Saracen sultan marries a Christian princess who eventually converts him. Upon baptism he changes color from black to white.” In yet another episode, the child of a Tatar king and a Christian concubine is half-black, which turns to white upon baptism (Friedman 65). Certainly, these examples all play to a crusading mindset, repeatedly destroying or neutralizing a Muslim threat, but even so, to use Heng’s words, “elite human beings of the 14<sup>th</sup> century have a hue, and it is white” (“Invention I” 261). As Friedman also writes,

It was a short step from the quasi-science of . . . portraits of the Ethiopian to treatment in which he is morally inferior to Western men . . .

It is not surprising that a period that valued whiteness of skin and regularity of feature and physique should have reacted with aversion to the visual descriptions of the Ethiopian in Pliny and Ptolemy. (55)

Foreign peoples were categorized according to religion, color, and locality; a definite sense existed that whether certain people believed certain things determined whether their bodies behaved in certain ways, and what they believed—particularly with respect to Christianity—was at least partially a product of geography: the distance of their homelands from the temperate zone, moving East and South.

The modern conception of race, although linked to specific traits not applicable to the Middle Ages, is therefore an acceptable and necessary lens through which to examine the medieval cultural imagination. To effectively analyze the diversity of *Mandeville*’s world, we must proceed from Heng’s primary hypothesis “that race is a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content” (“Invention I” 268). Race,

then, is a word that we use to discuss a variety of “othering” traits that categorize and dehumanize entire cultures and produce Western ethnocentrism.

The *Book of John Mandeville* is particularly concerned with monsters, although *Mandeville* is hardly unique in this regard. From Pliny to medieval encyclopedists such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus and Vincent of Beauvais and beyond, monstrosity has been a constant fixture in the Western cosmological tradition: “maps and travel accounts inherited from antiquity invented whole geographies of the mind and peopled them with exotic and fantastic creatures . . . geographies accessible from anywhere, never meant to be discovered but always waiting to be explored” (Cohen 18). But how does one relate monsters to a theory of race? First of all, *Mandeville* is not unique in relating monstrosity to race. In the Middle Ages, it became important to rationalize monstrosity with respect to European Christianity. Bestiaries drew moral direction from Plinian races, much like they did from the pelican or the unicorn. Allegorical readings of monstrosity commented directly upon “unattractive human qualities” (Friedman 122). Saint Augustine famously philosophized that monstrous races were to humanity as monstrous births were to individual people, writing in *City of God*:

Whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in colour, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast [Adam]. (531; bk. XVI, ch. 8)

The monstrous races are part of God’s plan that is unknowable to men, “they are called ‘monsters,’ because they *demonstrate* or signify something” (778; bk. XXI, ch. 8), but they are human. Once the monsters become human, new questions arise. If all humanity follows from Adam and Eve,

then diversity needs to be explained. Monsters became a point of curiosity for the Christian philosophers and theologians.

Still, many critics take Saint Augustine's understanding to its most tolerant conclusion. If monstrous humanity is part of God's plan, then diversity must be celebrated. Similarly, in analyses of *Mandeville*, critics note that the author does not make overt claims regarding the inferiority of monsters. For example, Friedman writes of *Mandeville*'s many alphabets that "curiosity about the speech of other races . . . is often smug or moralizing. . . . [but] Mandeville is *one notable exception to this statement* [emphasis added]" (29-30). Sebastian Sobocki similarly claims, "the new and more self-confident episteme of *curiositas*, which does not attempt to explain away the "other" as a menace to religious and political stability, underlies Mandeville's astonishing encounters with foreign cultures" (342). He argues that moralizing vanishes from *Mandeville* in favor of curiosity, but assumes that these are mutually exclusive regimes of analysis. Conversely, curiosity can (and often does) operate in conjunction with xenophobia (consider, for instance, the modern fascination with Papua New Guinea and ritualistic cannibalism). As Heng notes, "the insistence that medieval absorption with freakery and monstrosity is exuberantly different from modern absorption [i.e., with race] should *not* suggest to us that medieval pleasure should be intelligible as a pleasure of a simply and wholly innocent kind" ("Invention II" 284).

While the *Book of John Mandeville* does not pass explicit moral judgment on the ethnic "other," it also does not explicitly contradict the moralizing tone of its contemporaries. Its silence should not be mistaken for innocent approval. The *Mandeville*-author places his writing in the middle of a tradition that is impossible to ignore when reading his book. His morality is inextricably linked to his context. In this essay, I demonstrate that *Mandeville*'s primary focus is cultural monstrosity or deformity, which can be best addressed in three parts. First, I establish the

cultural context from which the *Mandeville*-author derives his treatment of the exotic. I focus on his alleged pilgrimage and on how Jerusalem forms the center of the world as a symbol of idealized Christian morality. Second, I consider how the narrator creates distance between that centered Christian morality and the foreign subject. His secondary point of reference, Englishness, acts as the source of normalcy against which he articulates deviations from the spiritual ideal. His encyclopedic narrative style then produces a degree of separation between the reader and the marvels he describes. Finally, I aim to explore the *Mandeville*-author's ethnographic episodes, specifically, how the cited differences between the people of India and Europeans are inseparable from a Christian moral perspective. The Plinian Races inherited from classical antiquity are present, but really only exist to lend believability to the recognizable humans whose resemblance to the European self is itself disturbing.

Race ascribes moral degeneracies to entire ethnic groups and, as a result, presents them as subhuman. Three areas of difference are at the center of the *Mandeville*-author's attention: religion, eating, and sexuality. The idealized Judeo-Christian morality informs his attitude toward related behaviors, and he displays heightened anxiety in the presence of differences along any of these three types of behavior. These cultural deformities *are* the equivalent of race in *Mandeville*: people with these deformities are confined to the corners of the earth, and labeling or marking their bodies is less important than cataloguing their innate spiritual and cultural failings. This simple accomplishment makes the *Book of John Mandeville* a real precursor to colonial views on race.

*Chapter II*

THE MIDDLE OF THE WORLD

Because it occupies the first half of the *Book*, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem is often taken as its main focus. However, as early as chapter three, the author digresses from the pilgrimage to show his true purpose: to enumerate marvels and monsters for a Western European readership. The *Mandeville*-author states as much, following his first of many forays into cultural commentary:

all be it þat þeise thinges touchen not to .o. way neuertheles þei touchen to þat þat I haue hight 3ou to schewe 3ou a partie of custumes & maneres & dyuersitees of contrees. And for this is the firste contree þat is discordant in feyth & in beleuee & varieth from oure feyth on this half the see, þefore I haue sett it here, þat 3ee may knowe the dyuersitee þat is between oure feyth & theirs. (13; ch. IV)<sup>1</sup>

Although these things have nothing to do with showing the way [to Jerusalem], they are nevertheless relevant to what I promised to explain: a part of the customs, manners, and diversities of some countries. And because this is the first country varying from and disagreeing with our country over here in faith and in writing, I have therefore included it so that you might know the diversity that exists between our belief and theirs. (Higgins 15; ch. 4)

Given this apparent *raison d'être*, and noting that the *Mandeville*-author remains true to this stated goal, we must re-center our understanding of the text around the marvels and monsters that stand beyond Jerusalem. Consequently, the pilgrimage of Jerusalem becomes an extended introduction, intended to guide and focus the reader's attention on what really matters: the travel narrative. This

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated, references will be to the critical edition of the Cotton manuscript edited by P. Hamelius.

is not to say that Jerusalem is irrelevant or a digression from the *Mandeville*-author's intent. Jerusalem is vitally important to framing the narrator's discussion of the exotic cultures beyond the boundaries of the western world. The primary way in which Jerusalem operates is as the spiritual and moral center for *Mandeville*, standing in for the Christian ideals that inform how we are meant to experience the African and Asian tropics described by the narrator.

The most memorable sentence of the "Prologue" explains why the location of the crucifixion is so important: "ierusalem þat is the myddes of the world to þat ende & entent þat his passioun & his deth þat was pupplischt þere myghte ben knowen euenly to all the parties of the world" 'Jerusalem, that is in the middle of the world, to that end and intent that his passion and death may be known to all parts of the world' (2; prologue; translation mine).<sup>2</sup> In doing so, the *Mandeville*-author introduces one of the fundamental characteristics of travel literature. One must define the world in which the travel takes place, otherwise the narrative wanders aimlessly without a fixed point to pin it to reality.

The construction of such a fixed point in travel writing has been extensively discussed by a number of critics. For instance, Michael Uebel, in his book *Ecstatic Transformation*, offers the thesis that one writes about travel using the language of loss and gain, and that the very act of exploring and gaining knowledge difference is a process of estrangement from the familiar. This familiar, the "fixed point of reference against which one measures loss," is what one might call "home" in travel narratives (135). Furthermore, a travel narrative in his opinion involves foreign places that are necessarily intangible. The process of estrangement from "home" is what allows the reader to move through foreign spaces, but he or she never "fully masters or possesses" the foreign

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<sup>2</sup> All translations hereafter are my own, unless specifically attributed to Higgins.

because of her alienation from “home” (138). Thus, we cannot consider travel writing without “home.”

Akbari, in her treatment of *Mandeville*, makes a slightly different claim about the nature of fixed points. She envisions a shifting set of centers, each of which occurs at a different geographic location in the narrative, rather than at a single fixed point:

Jerusalem is, as it were, the first center, which continues to be primary as the text moves along; but it is nonetheless also the first in a series of centers about which the world is provisionally and temporarily centered . . . Each of these locations offers, as it were, a double view: it displays an alien place and, simultaneously, displays a mirror image of the viewer’s own location. (59)

To Akbari, it is precisely the act of experiencing the exotic through alienation from the self that makes each foreign place a fixed point. While this is a valid argument, I would draw a distinction between the center as Uebel defines it—a point of reference against which to experience alienation and understand the “other”—and her notion of the center as a temporary vantage point. Both critics accept that foreignness needs a reference, but for Akbari that reference *is* the self while Uebel requires an external reference through which the self gains identity. The fixed point that acts as a standard against which to gauge foreign experiences and temporary vantage point from which one observes the self and others are mutually exclusive. The *Book of John Mandeville*, in my estimation, uses the former definition.

As Iain Macleod Higgins demonstrates, Jerusalem as the literal center of the world had long fallen out of fashion, going so far as to say the *Mandeville* author “takes the idea of Jerusalem’s centrality . . . much more seriously than his predecessors did” (qtd. in Akbari 58). I am not convinced that the *Mandeville*-author believes Jerusalem is a literal center of the world in the

geographic sense, but rather a conceptual center as graphically depicted in the medieval T and O *mappamundi*. In other words, Jerusalem is the “home” that Uebel describes, a fixed point of reference to touch upon and ground the narrator in his beliefs before traveling into the unknown, allowing Akbari’s vantage points to be the moments of pause along his journey. By placing Jerusalem at the “myddes of all the world,” the Eastern locations posited by Akbari act as points on the rim of a wheel, each providing a view of the center while being completely immersed in the alien.

The *Book* also supports Jerusalem’s centrality to the narrative through its structure. Throughout the pilgrimage portion, the narrator visits one holy site after another.<sup>3</sup> In Constantinople, he finds the true cross, a crucifixion nail, and the crown of thorns worn by Christ (6; ch. II), all representative of his sacrifice. In the city of Ephesus, there is the tomb of Saint John the Evangelist (14; ch. IV), Cyprus is home to the cross of the good thief and the shrines of several saints (17; ch. V), and Alexandria is where Saint Catherine and Saint Mark were martyred (36; ch. VIII). As the narrator draws closer to Jerusalem, the holy places increase from every chapter to every page: the ninth chapter includes a well Moses created in the desert (37; ch. IX), Mount Sinai and the site of the burning bush (38), and the tomb and relics of Saint Catherine (39), housed in a church where miracles regularly occur (40). The next chapter holds the cave of Adam and Eve (44; ch. X), Christ’s birthplace (44-45), and the shrine of Saint Jerome as well as milk from the Virgin Mary’s breast (45). By the time he reaches Jerusalem, it becomes a list, mixing places with Biblical stories and reports of miracles: he enters the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, inside which he finds the mount of Calvary, drops of Christ’s blood from the crucifixion, Adam’s grave, and even the

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<sup>3</sup> The following discussion was inspired by an idea presented by Patterson 141-142. The analysis and conclusion are my own.



tombs of early Crusading kings (49-50; ch. XI). *Mandeville's* itinerary of religious landmarks mirrors its spiritual focus: the holy sites begin scattered throughout various lands and accumulate dramatically around Jerusalem. Much in the same way, that the narrator is drawn to the center of Christianity, narrowing down his focus from the many routes to the city itself.

Given its importance to his religion, it is hardly surprising that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre serves as the climax to the *Mandeville*-author's census of religious places. It houses the Christ's tomb (49; ch. XI), and thus is also the site of his resurrection, but perhaps more importantly for the *Mandeville*-author, it represents a confluence of events from religious history:

Also with in the chirche at the righte syde . . . is the mount of Caluary where oure lord was don on the cros And . . . on þat roche dropped the woundes of oure lord whan he was pynd on the cross. . . . And in the place of þat morteys was Adames hed founden after Noes flode in tokene þat the synnes of Adam scholde ben bought in þat same place And vpon þat roche made Abraham sacrificise to oure lorde. (50; ch. XI)

Also, inside the church on the right side . . . is the mount of Calvary where our lord was placed on the cross And . . . on that rock dripped [blood from] the wounds of our lord when he was nailed to the cross . . . And in the place of that cavity Adam's head was found after Noah's flood to signify that the sins of Adam would be redeemed in that same place And upon that rock Abraham made sacrifice to our lord.

The fact that the major Judeo-Christian events get combined in this single geographic location is telling, and we might think of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as the heart of Jerusalem. Christ died there so it, along with the remaining drops of blood, represents his suffering for humanity. It is

the location of Abraham's sacrifice, which foreshadows that of Christ. Legend has it that Adam's skull was found in the same hole that held the cross, in acknowledgement of the sin that necessitated Christ's sacrifice. Moreover, finding Adam's skull at this site claims the human race for Christianity. This holy place is the final resting place of the original man, from whom all races descend; it, and by extension Jerusalem, must be the standard against which we judge humanity.

*Chapter III*

IN SEARCH OF JOHN MANDEVILLE

Defining a geographic and moral center for his narrative, however, is far from the only identity struggle the *Mandeville*-author faces. As Uebel phrases it, “Mandeville is ineluctably suspended between two relations toward the otherness he wishes to describe: interactive subjectivity . . . and detached objectivity” (110). The *Mandeville*-author is at once a traveler and an encyclopedist, and at ease with neither identity. He alternates between the deeply personal, writing detailed accounts of his own occasionally implausible observations and conversations, and total detachment, making extensive fast-paced lists of wonders that no one could possibly have had time to experience.

The *Mandeville*-author engages with his identity as a traveler by defining the known self as Christian and European. The importance of Christian religious identity is a direct result of Jerusalem’s centrality. The early chapters of the pilgrimage present themselves as a straightforward catalogue of places, landmarks, and relics that one might expect on a pilgrimage until, rather abruptly, the narrator arrives in the Greek Orthodox territories. Many critics have read the Greeks as a solely ethnographic digression, and in some ways, they are. Greek Orthodoxy is an *internal* form of difference affecting the *Mandeville*-author’s own religion. His introduction to the Greeks supports such a reading: “ȝif all it so be þat men of Grece *ben cristene* ȝit þei varien from oure faith [emphasis added]” ‘it is true that men of Greece *are Christian*, yet they differ from our faith’ (11; ch. III). The *Mandeville*-author does not debate their Christianity at all, and yet they are strange to him. They disbelieve in the Trinity and reject the Pope’s authority (11; ch. III), and they make the

sacrament of the altar (the Eucharist) from leavened bread (Higgins 14; ch. 3).<sup>4</sup> Their beliefs are in fact heresy to the Roman Catholic church. Even in including the Greek alphabet in his writing (13; ch. III), the *Mandeville*-author confirms that their religious difference places them in the “over there” category of the marvelous and the monstrous. At the same time, the religion that alienates them also brings them closer to the reader, blurring the lines between the “other” and the Northern European Christian self (Fleck 382).

What sets the Greek Orthodox Christians apart from the exotic people we will find in the East is that their similarity supersedes their difference. The *Mandeville*-author’s real use for the Greeks is setting them up as an example for the self. What concerns him is not their difference, but their similarity in sin:

And þei seye þat Fornicacioun is no synne dedly but a thing þat is kyndely . . . And þei sey also þat vsure is no dedly synne. And þei sellen benefices of holy chirche & so don men in oþere places. . . . For now is Simonye kyng crowned in holy chirche, god amende it for his mercy. (12; ch. III)

And they say that fornication is no deadly sin, but a thing that is natural . . . And they say that usury is no deadly sin. And they sell benefices of holy churches & so do men in other places. . . . For now simony is the king crowned in Holy Church, may God amend it.

Usury and the selling of benefices were of great concern for fourteenth century followers of the Roman Church as well, and the *Mandeville*-author takes care to say “Simonye [is] kyng crowned in holy chirche,” quietly including his own church in the condemnation. The result is that this episode has two effects. The first is to demonstrate the fallen state of Western Christianity that he laments

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<sup>4</sup> The Cotton text mistranslates this as “therf” or *unleavened* (Hamelius 31).

periodically throughout the *Book*; in fact, he blames the fragmentation of Christianity for the loss of the Holy Land (3; prologue). The second effect is to create a cohesive Christian identity. By including the Christianity he knows in his discussion of sin, he implies they are both parts of the same whole derived from a single perfect template. His discussion looks back to Jerusalem as the spiritual and moral center that unites Christianity, despite its fragmentation and flaws, against the morally degenerate “other.”

The second detailed episode that establishes the *Mandeville*-author as a real traveler with a Christian identity is, ironically, both completely implausible and focused on people who are not Christian at all. At the midpoint of the *Book*, the Sultan of Egypt calls the narrator into his private chambers, and instead of revealing the true face of the East one expects, he offers a brutally honest reflection on the state of Western Christianity (Akbari 57). The Sultan tells us:

Cristene men ne recche right noght how vntrewely to serue god . . . And þerewithall þei ben so proude þat þei knowen not how to ben clothed. . . . Þei scholden ben simple meke & trewe & full of almesdede as Ihesu was. . . . And þei ben so coueytous þat for a lytyll syluer þei sellen here doughtres . . . but þei defoulen here lawe þat Ihesu crist betook hem to kepe for here saluacioun. (88-89; ch. XVI)

Christian men care not how untruly they serve God . . . and aside from that they are so proud they don't know how to dress. . . . They should be simple and meek & true & full of charity as Jesus was. . . . And they are so covetous that they sell their daughters for a little silver . . . but they break their laws that Jesus Christ bade them to keep for their salvation.

This rebuke from the Sultan is a private delineation of the myriad ways in which European Christians break God's law, entirely in keeping with the narrator's own observations with the

Greek Orthodox church. “Allas,” he laments, “[p]at is gret sclandre to oure feith & to oure lawe, whan folk þat ben withouten lawe scholl repreuen vs & vndernemen vs of our synnes” ‘Alas, what a great affront to our faith & to our [moral] law, when people that are without faith shall reprimand us & catch us unaware in our sins’ (89-90; ch. XVI). The Muslims are themselves clearly morally subordinate to Christians; the *Mandeville*-author stresses the Sultan’s observation is “gret sclandre to *oure* faith [emphasis added]” and “[p]ei gon so ny *oure* feyth [emphasis added]” ‘they come so close to *our* faith’ (87; ch. XI). Their affinity for “oure faith” simultaneously claims religious truth for Christians and acknowledges that in some ways, the Sultan is a better Christian than the *actual* Christians. He has a better understanding of scripture, and can see Christians’ sin when the European themselves cannot. This fracturing of Christianity is what ultimately gives the *Mandeville*-author the “push” he needs to go explore and find a *true* “other” in remoter corners of the globe. The profound loss of his religious superiority compels him to reclaim Christian identity by imposing moral judgment on the East.

Jerusalem and Christian morality form the definitive center of *Mandeville*’s world, but this is not to say that it is the only fixed point along his journey. Although there is some scholarly debate about *where* precisely the *Mandeville*-author composed his book,<sup>5</sup> his investment in establishing his own Englishness is clear from the moment he introduces himself: “I John Maundeville, Knight, alle be it I be not worthi, that was born in Englund, in the Town of Seynt Albones” (3; prologue).<sup>6</sup> Akbari, in her analysis argues that England is in fact an unseen central point in the narrative, “the very island that Mandeville calls home” acting as a mirror image to

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed discussion of *Mandeville*’s place of composition and the author’s identity see Anthony Bale, Introduction, *The Book of Marvels and Travels*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) ix-xvi or Iain Macleod Higgins, Introduction, *The Book of John Mandeville: with Related Texts*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2011) ix-xix.

<sup>6</sup> This same introduction is also present in the Insular French: “I John Mandeville, knight—although I am not worthy, born and raised in England in the town of St Albans,” (Higgins 5; prologue).

Prester John's Land (52-53). Leaving aside disagreement about defining a "central point", Akbari's claim is an effective one. Jerusalem's being the moral center does not exclude other points from being more familiar to the *Mandeville*-author and his readers, and these points of familiarity act as a secular counterpoint to the new cultures they encounter. As Akbari aptly phrases things, "Jerusalem acts as a fulcrum with England on the one side, balanced by Prester John's Land [the East] on the other" (63). Across Jerusalem, the *Mandeville*-author balances monstrosity with normalcy, and heresy with religious orthodoxy, although known religious orthodoxy may still deviate from Jerusalem's exemplary Christian morality.

If we read carefully, England gets its own ethnographic treatment alongside the foreign parts of the world. After encountering the Muslims' alphabet with an unfamiliar number of letters, for example, the *Mandeville*-author writes, "And wee in Englonde haue in oure langage & speche .ii. lettres mo þan þei haue in hire .A.B.C. & þat is: Þ & ȝ, the whiche ben clept þorn & ȝogh" 'And we in England have in our language & speech two more letters than they have in their ABC & that is: Þ & ȝ, which are called thorn and yogh' (92; ch. XVI). Later, in discussing India, the *Mandeville*-author compares it to the self, using geography to justify his travels:

And in oure contrey . . . we ben in the seuenthe clymat þat is of the mone. And the mone is of lightly mevyng . . . And for þat skylle it ȝeueth vs will of kynde for to meve lightly & for to go dyuerse weyes & to sechen strange thinges & oper dyuersitees of the world (108; ch. XIX).

And in our country . . . we are in the seventh clime, that is of the moon. And the moon easily moves . . . And therefore it gives us the will to move easily & to travel many ways & to seek strange things & other diversities of the world.

England's northern geography compels him to seek out marvels and monsters, but his English identity makes it a point of reference for the reader while equatorial India, in the slow-moving climate of Saturn (108; ch. XIX), remains an oddity. Jerusalem is the center, but only in the abstract, being largely unfamiliar to most; England tacitly provides the known, imperfect cultural context necessary in Mandeville's journey. When the morally degenerate exotic holds a mirror to the reader, it is Europe being reflected, not Jerusalem.

Personal identity, however, is not the *Mandeville*-author's true concern; his real "concern is . . . whether they [readers] believe that all these points of travel may actually exist, that this itinerary of marvels is a *possible* one" (Uebel 110). The *Mandeville*-author's claimed personal experience is often implausible, but whether he actually spoke to the Sultan of Egypt (to give an illustrative example) has little bearing on the intent of his book, which is to catalogue the strange and exotic, not tell the objective truth. Uebel sees this concern as the result of a fundamental difference between the expectations of medieval and modern readers. The *Mandeville*-author is not interested in being believed because his readers are not interested in believing him past lending him the authority necessary to guide them into the foreign: "Mandeville's appeal derives, then, more from his self-effacing function as a transmitter of the richness of alien culture than from his role as a traveler fashioning a narrative out of his personal experiences" (111-112). The author makes the completely incredible assertion that "you can believe me because I was there" and couples it with his tendency toward objective encyclopedism. The combination creates for the *Mandeville*-author a unique kind of authority that can produce an identifiable Southern and Eastern "other" in the medieval imagination. The author has created a world in which the marvels are believable, even if his experience is not. The marvels are thus so far removed from European norms that one cannot even determine if *his* experience is real.



An aspect of the *Mandeville*-author's narrative style further supporting the detachment of the Oriental "other" from the European self is his tendency to create lists. Reading the *Book* does not immediately call to mind an encyclopedia, but Uebel also likens it to a wonder-letter such as the *Letter of Prester John*, which operates on a similar premise. The *Book* has a tendency to draw up lists, touching briefly upon geography, monstrosity, and ethnography all in one seamless passage:

*And bezonde þat partie toward the south to passe by the see Ocean is a gret lond & a gret contrey, but men may not duell þere . . . In Ethiope all the Ryueres & all the waters ben trouble & þei ben somdell salte for the gret hete þat is þere . . . In þat contree ben folk þat han but o foot & þei gon so blyue þat it is meruaylle And the foot is so large þat it schadeweth all the body azen the sonne . . . In Ethiope whan the children ben zonge & lytill þei ben all zalowe And whan þat þei wexen of age þat zalowness turneth to ben all blak. [emphasis added] (104; ch. XVIII)*

And beyond that part toward the south, in passing by the Ocean Sea, is a great land & a great country, but men may not dwell there . . . In Ethiopia all the Rivers & the waters are murky & they are sometimes salty because of the great heat that is there . . . In that country are folk that have but one foot & they move so quickly that it is a marvel And the foot is so large that it shades all their body against the sun . . . In Ethiopia when the children are young & little they are all pale And when they grow older that pallor becomes all black.

The above example encapsulates the *Mandeville*-author's narrative style. The list-making comes with a sense of urgency, conveyed by the conjunctions "and . . . and . . . and . . ." that punctuate his

sentence structure, combined with a rhythmic repetition of formulae such as these: “a gret lond & a gret contrey”; “all the Ryueres & all the waters”.

The effect of the rapid-fire concatenation of seemingly unrelated “marvels” is two-fold, the first of which is to de-contextualize them and place them in a space he deems appropriate; the Ethiopian children and the saltiness of Africa's rivers appear on equal footing in the aforementioned passage. The marvel then can only be known “for a fleeting moment in a state of detachment and dis-order” (Uebel 113), and contemplating it in its entirety is impossible. In the first half of *Mandeville*, the experience of “home,” the center of Christian morality, appears to be fully understood with no need for additional context. The meandering road to a definite Jerusalem gives way to the unknowable infinite multiplicity of “others.” The second effect of the narrator’s encyclopedic listing is to rush the reader through a series of unsatisfying, incomplete descriptions. I would state that he deliberately stops short of a satisfactory description, instead letting the medieval reader’s imagination fill in the gaps that his own (in)experience cannot provide for them. In doing so, he unwittingly produces a new degree of separation from the exotic: “over there” now lives in the collective European imagination just as strongly as in reality.

In conclusion, *The Book of John Mandeville* works hard in its early chapters to create an “other” for its readers. First, it presents Jerusalem as the spiritual and moral center of the world, pushing the geographically exotic to the extremes. Cultures can now be judged by their removal from the heart of Christianity instead of on their own merits. Second, it uses the author’s purported home of England to provide a point of normalcy, while using his religious affiliation to provide a reference for spiritual perfection. England balances the exotic against the known self. Thus, the *Book* doesn’t simply rest by showing (later) deviations from the Biblical ideal, but also from the “normal” deviation found at home. Finally, the author adopts encyclopedic techniques to construct

and place the “other” in a category of its own, far away from the known West. The phenomena that make up foreign cultures and landmarks and marvels cannot be contemplated independently from *Mandeville*’s collective whole. These steps ensure that readers can no longer judge foreign cultures on their own merits, but must do so in terms of their distance from the heart of Christianity, and in doing so, the *Book* delegitimizes the foreign cultures’ humanity.

*Chapter IV*

THE ALMOST PEOPLE

Moving into the second half of *The Book of John Mandeville*, one finds a completely different world from that of the spiritually-motivated pilgrimage that dominated the narrative in Mandeville's earlier travels. Far beyond the ethnographic digressions concerning Greek Orthodoxy, here we are treated to a vast array of cultures and climates that range from mere curiosities to outright monstrosities. The cultures portrayed comprise three major categories: the wise men of Cathay and Prester John's Land, the inhuman monsters stepping fully-formed from the pages of classical antiquity, and what I call the "almost-people" who populate the tropical lands.<sup>7</sup> The author devotes considerable attention to describing the Great Khan of Cathay, whom he admires as a mighty emperor, but the latter two portrayals are the focus of *Mandeville's* ethnographic insight, and so they will feature most prominently in this analysis.

Where previously the Greeks blurred the lines between "foreign" and "familiar" for the *Mandeville*-author, the Plinian Races transform monsters into people that can be judged using human values. Their imaginary presence woven throughout the text brings to light the familiarity of the degenerate tropical humans who are the real critical focus of this text. The "almost-people" are the real source of anxiety for the *Mandeville*-author, looking familiar, but falling short of *being* the European self. These humans in turn provide momentum for a proto-colonial impulse discernible throughout the narrative.

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<sup>7</sup> As we discuss later in this section, "almost-people" in *Mandeville's* taxonomy are humans that differ not in physical appearance, but in religious and cultural traits. They represent a spiritual and moral monstrosity that uses European cultures, rather than bodies, as a point of reference.

Of the three types of people, the “wise men” are unique in being true reflections of the European self, an oasis of familiarity in a land otherwise occupied by the degenerate and terrifying. However, I would argue that these lands fall beyond the scope of *Mandeville*’s ethnographic vision and thus I exempt them from the analysis to follow. One space populated by wise men is Prester John’s Land, the myth of this imaginary ruler rooted in European fears of a pagan East, fears kept alive by the Crusades. As Heng explains,

Having circulated in Europe for two centuries, John’s legend is by this time a domesticated, much rewritten, beloved local artifact. Indeed, popular investment in the legend suggests that John, a European adoptee, is now effectively a *European* figure more than an Oriental personage, despite his exotic coloration. (*Empire of Magic* 283)

Such a legend, more a product of the Western missionary tradition in hopes of a world dominated by Christianity, does not describe the East, but represents “a strong affirmation of the desire to know and thus take (re)possession of, Western realities, even when those realities are wholly indistinguishable from the illusions that serve to support and preserve them” (Uebel 140). That is to say, Prester John speaks more to an aspirational Western identity than stands as a true representation of ethnic others.

The second space occupied by wise men is the domain of the Great Chan of Cathay, which fails to represent alterity for a different reason. The first thing one notes about Cathay is its people’s affinity for Western ethics. They are men of superior wisdom whose “deuocioun” to Christian symbols often exceeds the religious fervor of European Christians at home (Sobecki 337). Explaining this phenomenon is surprisingly straightforward. Classical philosophy dictates that the world be divided according to geographic location, which was believed to determine the

constitutions of men through balances of the humors (Friedman 51). These geographic conditions have both physical and mental effects on inhabitants. At the geographic extremes, one finds that “the heat of southern men is expressed outwardly, leaving them ‘cowards of herte’; the heat of northern men is expressed inwardly, making them ‘bolde and hardy’ . . . for the heat of the sun makes men “blacke of face,” while coldness is the “modir of whitnes” (Akbari 42). Considering that Cathay is the territory we recognize as northern China, to medieval audiences it shares the geographic middle ground with Europe; surely, it is differentiated by religion and certain customs, but intellectually and morally *Mandeville* necessarily treats it as the known self. The *Book of John Mandeville* is a strongly proto-colonial work concerned more with the deficiencies of the tropical South than with the quirks of cultures intellectually and materially “equivalent” to Europe.

As previously discussed, the intense personal experience concluding *Mandeville*’s first half, the Sultan of Egypt’s remarks on Western Christian vice, is the jumping off point for the narrator to leave behind “home” and push farther to the East. But the readers also need such a push if they are to follow him. The *Mandeville*-author provides this push by plunging first into the world of the truly monstrous. Momentarily setting aside the blurred distinctions afforded by Greek Orthodoxy or by the Sultan’s people, the *Mandeville*-author seeks to enumerate those fully imaginary monsters, namely, the Plinian Races, that have long been cleanly differentiated from the West (Fleck 383). The Plinian Races, both in classical antiquity and in the Middle Ages, are inextricable from tropical and exotic geographies. As the Aristotelian five zones gave way to Ptolemy’s seven *climata* in order to account for the increasing diversity of the world, one thing remained constant: Europeans all considered themselves residents of the moderate, temperate region, unaffected by the extreme physiology that accompanied extreme geographies, and thereby assuming, at least implicitly, that non-Europeans bore the full burden of intemperate deformity

(Friedman 53). As Plinian Races represented the extremes of exotic monstrosity, all of *Mandeville's* readers could agree on these monsters' "other-ness." If Europeans could all remain safely temperate, then a discussion of the Plinian Races would have to be centered upon the farthest most exotic reaches of the world. The existence of Plinian Races, therefore, creates the illusion of distance in anticipation of the tropical humans that bore greater resemblance to the European self.

Next, the people of Chaldea serve as *Mandeville's* introduction to monsters. Although they are not historically a Plinian Race, they lack a normal—physical—humanity that lets us place them in the same category. In the *Mandeville*-author's description, the "men are handsome, and they go about nobly dressed" while "the women are very ugly and badly dressed, and they . . . are quite dark, ugly, and hideous, and they are certainly not at all beautiful" (96; ch. 17). Their dramatic sexual dimorphism, more commonly seen in insects and birds than in humans, effectively sets them apart from the Western self. Immediately following are the Amazons, women whose warlike nature and utilitarian removal of secondary sex characteristics exemplify the "noble savage" archetype by living with honor, albeit outside gender norms (97). And then there are the *Sciopods*, who use their single enormous foot as shade in the scorching sun (98). These Plinian monsters continue appearing interspersed throughout the narrative to include the *Cynocephali* in Chapter XXII, and *Cyclopes*, *Blemmyae*, *Amyctyrae*, Straw-drinkers, and *Androgini* in rapid succession in Chapter XXIII (130; 133-134).<sup>8</sup>

Andrew Fleck makes the claim that these races disappear from the narrative, making way for the "human people inhabiting India," which causes the Plinian monsters to function "like the exotic Oriental spices Mandeville also describes," more aesthetic than functional (84-85). But both

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<sup>8</sup> See Friedman 9-21 for an exhaustive list of Plinian Races, including detailed descriptions of these monsters.

these instances follow Mandeville's forays into cannibalism, as if showing the reader their familiar physical monstrosity can mitigate their horror. Thus, I would argue that the incorporation of Plinian Races seeks to contextualize monstrous humanity against a backdrop of known monsters. Plinian Races are imaginary, but represent an extreme visible monstrosity. Their presence makes the truly monstrous, those that physically resemble the European self but fall short behaviorally, more believable to readers. Put differently, the Plinian Races exist to show us that the true monsters are real.

Of course, many of the Plinian Races also have a long history of being moralized in Western thought. For a well-studied example, consider the Ethiopians. Pliny claimed only that their blackness was "symptomatic of a complete difference in temperament and attributed Africa's darkness to climate" (Cohen 10). His original phrasing is as follows:

It is beyond question that the Ethiopians are burnt by the heat of the heavenly body near them, and are born with a scorched appearance, with curly beard and hair . . . and their [bandy] legs themselves prove that . . . the juice is called away into the upper portions of the body by the nature of heat. (qtd. in Friedman 54)

Nevertheless, "moral overtones" have been added to Pliny's description as far back as Ptolemy, who argued that "in addition to being black, the Ethiopian was savage in habit and shrunken in form and *nature* by the heat [emphasis added]" (Friedman 54).<sup>9</sup> Finally, in the Middle Ages, the physical nature of Ethiopians came to signify an entirely moral failing. The *Chanson de Roland* speaks of Ethiopian "Sarrazins" as a "cursed people, blacker than ink; their only whiteness is their teeth," drawing a direct line between their blackness and morality. Similarly, homiletic writers of the period associated Ethiopians with sin, burnt black by vice rather than by the sun, and they often

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<sup>9</sup> See Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos*, book 2, chapter 2.



went to great lengths to associate them with Cain and Ham's cursed legacies (Friedman 64-65; 101).<sup>10</sup>

As Rudolf Wittkower explains, “[medieval] Christianity could not simply swallow this geographical and ethnographical heritage of pagan antiquity. It had to be brought into line with the authority of the Bible” (167). Friedman elaborates further on this same point, offering two explanations for the origin of monstrous races in the estimation of medieval writers:

The monstrous races were neither an accident . . . nor indicative of a failure in God's plan. They were a part of His creation whose meaning and purpose were . . . regarded in a positive light. The second point of view was negative. . . . Rather than merely manifesting the variety of the creation, the monstrous races were seen as cursed and degenerate, a warning to other men against pride and disobedience. (89)

The *Book of John Mandeville*, although often cited as the rare text that celebrates difference rather than rejects it, does not stand apart from this moralizing tradition. However, deciding whether *Mandeville's* monstrous “other” falls in the first, morally neutral, category or the second, sinful, category proves challenging. This challenge is in part due to the *Book's* “multi-textual” status; scholars are yet to agree upon a definite authorial version. To illustrate this difficulty, let us consider *Mandeville's* description of Ethiopian children in a previously-visited passage: “In Ethiope whan the children ben 3onge & lytill þei ben all 3alowe And whan þat þei wexen of age þat 3alowness turneth to ben all blak” ‘In Ethiopia when children are young and little they are all pale. And when they come of age that paleness becomes all black’ (104; ch. XVIII). The French text differs, reading instead, “In Ethiopia when the children are small they are all grey-haired, and when

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<sup>10</sup> For a thorough treatment of the relation between Cain and the Plinian monsters, see Friedman 93-107.

they become grown up their hair is all black” (Higgins 98; ch. 17).<sup>11</sup> A possibility for this discrepancy is that the English translator misread the Anglo-Norman “chanuz” as “jaune” and “cheueux” as “chanuz” (Hamelius 94). However, the distinction, how their physical differences manifests, changes the nature of their internal deformity in *Mandeville*’s ethnography.

The French “chanu,” meaning “grey-haired” or “white-haired” is an unlikely descriptor for a child. Particularly if we take into account the secondary definition of “greybeard,” it becomes altogether jarring (“chanu”). This is a marvel in line with Friedman’s first explanation, that the monstrous races are a perplexing but neutral part of God’s plan. These children start out elderly with white hair, and apparently age in reverse to a youthful black. They are contrary to nature, yes, but they are sufficiently removed from humanity to escape moral implications.

Reading the English “zalowe” leads to a different conclusion. Although it could also refer to hair color, I have translated it as paleness of complexion, as in the *Middle English Dictionary* (“yelwe,” def. 4c). Thus, in youth the Ethiopians resemble the European self and slowly with age become the black “other” the *Mandeville*-author describes. Allegorically, their transformation places Ethiopians firmly in the category of monsters as “cursed and degenerate.” Children are born innocent, pure, and physically normal, from a European perspective. As they grow older, they come to embody the fallen state of humanity that Ethiopians represented to medieval moralists, burnt and blackened by sin. Perhaps the English scribe simply decided that having white-haired children was ridiculous, but the assumption underlying such decisions reveal the particular ethnographic ideas of those writing and transmitting *Mandeville*’s message to society. What

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<sup>11</sup> “En ce pays q[ua]nt les enfans sont petis il sont tous chanus. et quant il deviennent grans il ont les cheueux tous noirs” in an early manuscript: Jean de Mandeville, *Jean de Mandeville, Voyages (version continentale)*, (MS NAF 4515, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris, 1371) 48v.

remains undeniable is that the diverging moral routes taken by two scribes emerge in a Plinian Race that superficially resembles the Christian self.

Since the *Mandeville*-author inherits the Plinian Races through Christian writers, he is understandably concerned with the more human-appearing races. His treatment of the Ethiopians and the Pygmies, two such races, bridges the gap between monsters from classical antiquity and the “almost-people” whose moral character is on trial. After the textual ambiguities regarding Ethiopia, the *Book* presents a far more coherent position when considering the Pygmies, indicating that the Cotton scribe’s biases have a basis in the French text after all. A corollary to the debates on monstrous morality is the question of whether the monsters are human at all. Considering that Adam’s descendants were created in God’s perfect image and the monsters were not, as far as medieval writers were concerned (Friedman 89), the humanity of monsters is a fair question to ask.

Friedman once again provides a summary of the extremes of the debate using examples from two prominent thinkers: Alexander of Hales posited that, since deformity is the punishment for sin, and only men possessing a rational soul can suffer sin, deformed monsters must be men. That is to say, “the monstrous men are men because only men are capable of becoming monstrous.” On the other hand, for Aristotelian thinkers “it was not possible to grant full and equal humanity to an alien race. . . . Albert the Great [showed] that, despite their many abilities, Pygmies had but the shadow of reason” (187; 196). In this case, the *Mandeville*-author stands firmly on Alexander’s side of the debate, stating both that Pygmy children are born to the “large men” who inhabit their land and that “all be it þat the PYGMEYES ben lytyll 3it þei ben full reasonable after here age & cone bothen wytt & gode & malice ynow” ‘although the Pygmies are small, they are entirely reasonable according to their age and they can distinguish well enough between wisdom

and evil' (138-139; ch. XXIII; Higgins 128; ch. 22).<sup>12</sup> The Plinian Races in *Mandeville* exist to provide readers a familiar monster—not literally, but in the sense that they are “old news” to travel writing—from the “standard” Western canon. How the narrator treats these monsters foreshadows the author’s attitude toward a far more recognizably human monster to come.

We are now in a position to consider what I mean by “almost-people.” Fleck’s assertion that the Plinian Races serve only as an aesthetic flourish in the text is correct, in the sense that the *cultural* “other” ranks highest in the *Mandeville*-author’s hierarchy of the exotic. The *Book* houses countless races that are physically human, yet too terrifyingly alien to fit neatly into a Western ethnocentric worldview. These cultures, interspersed with spices and landmarks, are ironically far more alien than their monstrous Plinian counterparts. Unlike the Plinian Races, these are decidedly not imaginary. Strikingly similar in physical appearance to the European self, they lend themselves more readily to judgment in a reference frame derived from Western Christian morality. The monstrous cultures are what I denote “almost-people” in *Mandeville*’s taxonomy. Their monstrosity occurs in three recurring categories of behavior: the heretical misapplication of religion, disorderly food appetites, and sexual deviance. It was these “everyday cultural differences” that “truly set alien peoples apart . . . and the power of these cultural traits to mark a race as monstrous persisted [from classical antiquity] into the Middle Ages and beyond” (Friedman 26). With Jerusalem fixed as the world’s spiritual center, these peripheral geographies form the disordered core of the tropics.

Sexuality, even implicit sexuality, being necessary for the proliferation of the species, becomes an enormous source of anxiety for the *Mandeville*-author. In India where men and women lie naked in rivers to escape the heat, he observes that women “hauen no schame of the men, but

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<sup>12</sup> The English translator adds “wytt” to the list, further acknowledging their humanity (“wit,” def. 2).

lyen all togidre, syde to syde” ‘have no shame in front of men, but lie together, side by side’ (108; ch. XIX). The narrator’s concern is a subtle one. That women should be shameless in front of men echoes a prelapsarian condition as described in the Bible: “they were both naked: to wit, Adam and his wife: and were not ashamed” (*Douay-Rheims Bible*, Gen. 2.25). However, the narrator is traveling in *postlapsarian* era where humanity understands sexuality and where this shamelessness is a grievous sin.

In another island, beyond Prester John’s Land, the *Mandeville*-author encounters a culture that dreads virginity and employs certain men to have intercourse with newly married women. When he asks the reason, the inhabitants tell him, “of olde tyme men hadden ben dede for deflourynge of maydenes þat hadden serpents in hire bodyes þat stongen men vpon hire 3erdes, þat þei dyeden anon” ‘in old times, some men died taking women’s virginity, for they had serpents in their bodies that stung men on their penises, so that they died’ (190; ch. XXXII). The “once upon a time” framing is necessarily fantastical, and opens them to a critique of their practices. In patriarchal cultures, virginity at the time of betrothal is vital to establishing clear familial lines, but these “almost-people” prioritize adultery. The concept of vaginal snakes makes for a decidedly phallic image with twofold significance. The snakes constitute a deformed representation of the sexual organs, narrowing the distinction between sexes. Furthermore, in a perverse way, the phallic image in this passage makes women the sexual aggressors, upsetting the correct order of nature as understood by patriarchy. These episodes focus on the female. *Women* are shameless in their nudity. *Women* have disordered sexuality. The emphasis on female sexual aggression (and male timidity in the latter example) through the eyes of a male traveler implicitly feminizes entire tropical cultures. This implicit feminization, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, subordinates them to the masculine Western self.

Religion is central to the narrator's own identity and, as a uniquely human trait, it is an important marker of cultural degeneracy for the *Mandeville*-author. In the same church where Saint Thomas is buried, Indians engage in idol worship (115; ch. XX), and "like the image of St. Thomas, a figure of true faith hidden among the idols of perverted Indian religion, a latent similarity to Christianity can be found within their devotional practices" (Fleck 393). The Indians go on pilgrimage and cense the idol as one would in a Catholic church (116; ch. XX). The *Mandeville*-author reports their traditions with wonderment, writing thus:

And summe of hem fallen doun vnder the wheles of the chare & lat the chare gon ouer hem . . . & all this don þei for loue of hire god ingret devocioun. And . . . the more ioie þei schull haue in another world And schortly to seye 3ou, þei suffren so grete peynes & so harde martyrdoms for loue of here ydole þat a cristene man I trowe durst not taken vpon him the tenthe part the peyne for loue of oure lord Ihesu crist. (116-117; ch. XX)

Some [pilgrims] let themselves fall under the wheels of the chariot [in which the idol is carried] and let the chariot pass over them . . . And all this they do out of love for their god in great devotion, and . . . so the closer to God they will be . . . In short, they perform such great acts of penance and suffer such great bodily martyrdoms for love of their idols that no Christian would scarcely dare undertake to do a tenth as much for love of his Christ. (Higgins 109; ch. 19)

Nonetheless, the behaviors he describes are horrific, and more so to a Western audience. Placing the descriptions of their acts in close proximity to their Christian counterparts serves only to highlight this horror and undermine their uncanny similarities with European Christendom. If these personal acts of devotion seem extreme, further traditions among them are outright barbaric. The

Indians sacrifice children to this idol and engage in ritual suicide, both of these being sins in Christian doctrine. That these Indian acts of faith might be comparable to saints' lives, claiming "þat þei ben gloriouse martyres & seyntes & putten hem in here wrytynges & in here letanyes" "that they are glorious martyrs and saints, and put them in their writings [hagiographies] and litanies" (117; ch. XX), seems to be a mockery of Christian tradition at best.

The narrator's destination following Saint Thomas's tomb is the island of Lamory, which, despite deceptively pleasant appearances, is introduced as "evil" from the very beginning. In keeping with the earlier tropes of sexual deviance, both men and women go naked to combat the heat, but they justify their transgressions by quoting scripture, claiming that "þei seyn þat þei þat ben clothed ben folk of another world or þei ben folk þat trowen not in god" "those who are clothed are people of another era, or they are people who do not believe in God" (118; ch. XX; Higgins 111; ch. 20), that is, the same Judeo-Christian God that created the world.<sup>13</sup> This same Judeo-Christian tradition of the Middle Ages, however, on account of that single creation of man, extended the logic regarding Plinian monsters to deny people leeway for being physically or culturally different. Men such as those in Lamory, who did not wear clothes, "were quite likely to be explained by a corruption of the human species through some crime or sin" (Friedman 89). The *Mandeville*-author and his readers had sufficient scriptural knowledge to grasp the theological implications, and the specific textual references to the Christian God highlights, rather than normalizes, their cultural differences.

Finally, the narrator differentiates the "almost-people" by their eating habits, presenting other human beings as their preferred source of food despite the tropical plenty that surrounds them. The *Book* argues that monstrous cultures take eating, the act of nourishment, and transform it

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<sup>13</sup> Higgins also notes that the French "*siècle*" could translate to "world" as in the Middle English text (111 n. 378).

into an act of violence. In the islands surrounding Java, there are people who teach dogs to strangle their sick friends, and the *Mandeville*-author explains, “whan þei ben þus estrangled þei eten here flesch in stede of venysoun” ‘when they have been thus strangled, they [the men] eat their flesh instead of venison’ (129; ch. XXII). Clearly the men have access to animal flesh, but the enforced distortions of the tropics lead them to eat one another. On another nearby island live a warlike people, and as the narrator observes, “þei drynken gladlyest mannes blood the whiche þei clepen DIEU” ‘they willingly drink human blood, which they call God’ (129; ch. XXII). Here cannibalism does not serve a nutritive purpose, but constitutes instead an act of conquest, and the fact that they call the blood “God” can only be a perversion of the Eucharist. The *Mandeville*-author concludes his list with the Plinian *cynocephali* as if increasing moral degeneracy produces a physical transformation from man to monster (130; ch. XXII).

Returning to the people of Lamory, the most obvious vice is undoubtedly their cannibalism, and the *Mandeville*-author makes no attempt to hide it:

But in þat contree þere is a cursed custom, for þei eten more gladly mannes flesch þan ony oþer flesch And ȝit is þat contree habundant of flesch, of fisch, of cornes, of gold & syluer & of all oþer godes. Bider gon marchautes & bryngen with hem children to selle to hem of the contree & þey byȝen hem . . . And þei seyn þat it is the best flesch & the swetttest of all the world. (119; ch. XXI)

But in that country there is an evil custom, for they eat more readily human flesh than any other flesh. And that country has an abundance of meat, fish, wheat, gold & silver & all other goods. Merchants go there & bring with them children to sell to those of that country & they buy them . . . And they say that it is the best meat & the sweetest of all the world.



In Greek antiquity, “a race’s dietary practices were an important sign of its humanity or inhumanity” (Friedman 27), and the Middle Ages felt no differently. *Mandeville*’s cannibals are entirely human—misguided, but fundamentally men—until one finds that they eat people, at which point they are transformed into monsters. They do not suffer from lack of other food, and yet human flesh, specifically *children’s* flesh, is the focus of their disordered appetites. The word “cursed,” which both Higgins and I have rendered as “evil,” has more complex connotations in Middle English. Beyond straightforward evil, a “cursed custom” is more specifically sinful or “condemned as being sinful” (“cursed,” def. 3a), or even “profane, impious, *unholy* [emphasis added]” (def. 4). Their cannibalism, a gross miscarriage of God’s natural laws, sets them apart as a fallen state of humanity. They may be human, but only just: their superficial familiarity draws even more attention to the monstrosities that sets them apart.

Lamory may have disordered practices pertaining to both religion and food, but the land of Byboth combines these problems in a way that is unique in *Mandeville*. Spiritual and physical nourishment have a precedent for appearing inextricably combined in the Christian tradition, as in the “supersubstantial bread” of the Lord’s Prayer (Matt. 6.11). Food sustains the body just as Christ sustains the soul, and they are brought even closer together by rituals such as the sacrament of the Eucharist. The people of Byboth, a country in modern day Tibet, appear to follow Zoroastrian funeral rites, using their bodies to feed birds. However, the customary cannibalism that accompanies this ritual gives one pause. The cannibalism found in Byboth is a special case; it is not an act of violence or conquest, but an act of religious fervor, undertaken to show devotion to their saint-like dead.

The *Mandeville*-author no longer compares these people to Christians, but their distortion of Christian ritual is heavily implied in his description. Their practices are utterly alien; the flesh of

the deceased is left on mountains for birds to eat, and a son honors his dead father by eating his head (206; ch. XXXV). This act of cannibalism is what is striking to the reader, at once utterly foreign and all too familiar:

And þanne the sone bryngeth hoom with him all his kyn & his frendes & all the oþere to his hows & maketh hem a gret feste . . . And whan þei ben at mete, the sone let brynge forth the hede of his fader & þere of he ʒeueth of the flesch to his most specyall frendes. . . . And of the brayn þanne he leteth make a cuppe & þere of drynketh he & his oþer frendes also, with gret deuocioun in remembrance of the holy man. (206; ch. XXXV)

And then the son brings home with him all his family & his friends to his house & makes them a great feast . . . And when they sit down to eat, the son serves the head of his father & thereof, he gives the flesh to his most special friends. . . . And of the skull he makes a chalice & thereof he drinks & his other friends also, with great reverence in remembrance of the holy man.

Although the narrator does not mention it, these rituals are eerily reminiscent of the Eucharist. The son gathers his closest friends together for a final meal in honor of his father. How they approach their meal mimics and inverts the concept of transubstantiation. Where Christ took food and said, “this is my body, which is given for you. Do this for a commemoration of me” (Luke 22.19), the son serves human flesh and names it food in commemoration of his father. The Middle English “cuppe” translates most readily to “chalice,” but it also carries a host of ecclesiastical connotations, all centering around the Eucharist (“cuppe,” def. 2). Likewise, “deuocioun” primarily pertains to religious awe (“dēvōciōun,” def. 1-2). Their treatment of the skull-chalice certainly echoes Christ’s

instruction, “drink ye all of this” (Matt. 26.27), but their reverence is misplaced in the material object instead of its contents.

Nearing the end of the *Book*, the narrator turns around to return to Europe, and in doing so he encounters one final cannibalistic people. Byboth comes conspicuously at a point where Mandeville has fixed his gaze back on the West, and the immediately preceding moral heights of Cathay and Prester John’s Land place further emphasis on its distortion of Western Christianity. As Fleck notes, “a cannibalistic ritual serves at this point in the narrative as a kind of mimicking inversion that causes instability in the perception of a distinct self and other at work during the encounter” (394). The Tibetan practices are an imperfect reflection of Christianity’s own rituals, as if the central defining characteristics of “home” are filtering through the corrupt East like sunlight seen through a dirty window. Fleck argues, and I agree, that the purpose is to show a “practice that might be corrected by reforming it to match Western practice” (395). Ironically, Byboth receives the least explicit judgment from the *Mandeville*-author, but the grotesque inversion of Christian ritual would have been obvious to his readers. Where earlier tropical peoples were monstrously dissimilar from the European self, Byboth, for all its horrors, represents something possibly redeemable. The parallels with true Christianity transform alien cultures from unknowable monsters into something human—still inferior, but open to being molded to match a Western ideal.

The second half of the *Book of John Mandeville* takes the narrator beyond Jerusalem to explore the tropical lands found in Africa and Asia. Far from being an innocent traveler who simply catalogues marvels, the *Mandeville*-author immerses himself in a moralizing tradition that uses Christian ideals to undermine the humanity of foreign cultures. First, he introduces the classical Plinian Races, imaginary beings whose exaggerated physical monstrosity helps the reader accept the monstrous humans as real. Second, he introduces the idea that there may be a bio-

cultural basis for spiritual deformity in his treatment of the more human-passing Plinian Races, the Pygmies and Ethiopians. Last, the *Book* describes the real or imagined cultural practices of the “almost-people,” monsters who physically resemble the European self, to show that they too suffer from the same spiritual and moral deformities. Their transgressions regarding religion, food, and sexuality denote them, not as irredeemable monsters, but as a degenerate state of humanity relatable to the European self. This last point is key; their degeneracy is an immutable characteristic from birth, but their humanity lets us view them as potentially reformable. *Mandeville’s* ethnography arguably enables the thought processes that inspired the colonial expansions of the early modern era.

*Chapter V*

## CONCLUSIONS

The *Book of John Mandeville* engages in creating an identifiable “other” through both its stylistic decisions and its representation of the many races the narrator allegedly finds along the way. Structurally, the *Book* neatly forms two parts: the meandering trip to the center of the world, and the journey to the indistinct edges of the earth. This first part, although superficially a pilgrimage narrative, operates as an extended introduction, telling the reader how to approach the second half, by providing the spiritual and cultural frame of reference for understanding its marvels and foreign cultures. The centering of Jerusalem specifically is a vitally important decision. Having long fallen out of favor with geographers, Jerusalem represents the human heart of *Mandeville*, providing a specifically Christian context against which to judge the moral degeneracy found in the remotest corners of the world. Further direction is provided by the negative space of the author’s own European identity, which, coupled with his detached encyclopedism, works to provide a sense of the “other.” The world he describes is believable, but only just. The author takes pains to indicate that his *Book* occurs in an “elsewhere” that lives primarily in his reader’s mind.

How do these cues from the first half of the *Book* relate to the catalogue of exotic places found in its second half? The *Mandeville*-author’s encyclopedic tendencies alienate the reader from the East; he places its landscapes and people in extensive lists, never including enough information to make them seem real. By immersing himself in the African and Indian tropics, the narrator enters an entirely different world no longer governed by a linear trajectory: whereas the route to Jerusalem was navigable by means of the roads joining its well-defined cities and religious landmarks; by contrast, in the East, Mandeville seems to float between fundamentally unknowable

spaces. The author is far more able to describe what marvels he found on a particular island than how he arrived there. Without a doubt, these foreign places, and, by extension, the people that inhabit them, exist outside any familiar measure of time or space.

The relationship of Jerusalem to *Mandeville's* African and Asian landscapes is more difficult to identify. How can we claim a contribution from a concrete place that is absent for the remainder of the text? Much scholarship has focused on how readily *The Book of John Mandeville* celebrates difference, but such analyses ignore the religious-cultural context for this treatment of the exotic. Framing *Mandeville* as a pilgrimage narrative sends a message: Christian theology lurks as the background of the entire journey. Several ethnic groups claim Christianity, but *Mandeville's* narrator, an Englishman, is the only true heir to Christian identity. Each of the other ethnic groups is revealed to misinterpret scripture to heretical ends. Sexual deviance, especially female sexual deviance, reveals misplaced, sinful appetites. The appetitive feminine islanders are juxtaposed with the rational male Christian observer, who (one assumes) would value propriety and continence over impropriety and sexual promiscuity. Cannibalism is already a misapplied appetite, and horrific of its own accord, but *Mandeville* takes it a step farther, and portrays it as a perverted mockery of the Eucharist. In short, Jerusalem is supposed to live in our judgment of the tropics. The tropical races are “other” because they do not, and *cannot*, live up to the European cultural and spiritual ideal.

Although I have neglected to name it as such in my analysis, *Mandeville's* ethnography is a pre-colonial exercise in writing about race. In the colonial era, the Plinian races disappeared into the background, much like John Block Friedman and Andrew Fleck have argued they already had by *Mandeville's* writing (196; 384-385). However, the “almost-person” whose sole physical distinction was their unspoken ethnicity, endured. Amerigo Vespucci “described them in terms of

their lack of social institutions . . . and social niceties,” found cannibals that ate children, and found “danger” in women who bit off men’s penises in sexual encounters (Morgan 171-173). On an island he calls “Quaris,” Columbus, who is known to have studied *Mandeville*, found a single instance of monstrous humanity:

[It] is inhabited by a people who are regarded in all the islands as very fierce and who eat human flesh. . . . They are no more malformed than the others [Indians], except that they have the custom of wearing their hair long like women. (14-16)

These descriptions come from real travel narratives, but share striking similarities with the cultures we have covered. Cannibalism remains an anxiety for these colonial explorers, placing the tropical “other” firmly in the category of monstrosity against nature. The only major difference is that early modern explorers completely combine sexual threats and cannibalism. They present feminized appearances alongside appetites for human flesh; *Mandeville*’s women harboring vaginal snakes transform into Vespucci’s women who consume men’s sex organs. Neither explorer ties race to color as strongly as they tie it to bio-cultural moral failings.

The *Book of John Mandeville* is not a strictly factual text, but its place in the history of racial discourse is undeniable. More widely distributed than many true travel narratives, ethnography in a fictional work such as *Mandeville* represents a developing—specifically European—idea of the rest of the world. The tropics are separated not only by imagined monsters, but by real humans whose spiritual and cultural practices dictate their degeneracy. In Europe, sin is a transgression by individuals; in the tropics, sin is necessitated by biology. The ethnic “other” in *Mandeville* is defined by locality, which results in intrinsic moral and intellectual defects. To modern readers, race is synonymous with skin color, but digging deeper, it is not the *color* that is intrinsically flawed, but what it represents. Color is simply an easy, external, indicator of internal

deficiencies shared within ethnic groups. *Mandeville*'s ethnography encompasses all qualities present in the modern social construct of race with the sole exception of phenotypical difference. The *Mandeville*-author's emphasis on similarity does not reveal tolerance, but an imperialist leaning that delineates how the degenerate racialized "other" might be overcome using European Christian ideology.



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