

Mandeville's Travels and the 'Other'

One of the texts that had a powerful influence on the late medieval and early modern European understanding of cultural difference was *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, which was composed in the fourteenth century (Braude 1997: 115). This famous text was a compilation of some other contemporary travel books and it was translated into almost every European language and exists in over three hundred manuscripts and various printed editions (Moseley 1983: 10). In this travel book, cultures and societies are portrayed to the reader in terms of similarities and differences to the familiar European culture. There are not only similar-different cultures and people but also cultures which are in-between.

Mandeville's Travels became popular in England around 1360. Its author may have been, as he claims, a knight "that was born in Englonde in the town of Seynt Albones, and passed the see in the year of oure lord Ihesu Crist m.ccc and xxii [1322]" (*Mandeville's Travels Prologue*: 3;¹ see Spearing 2008: 1). It was believed by some earlier readers, including Christopher Columbus, that Mandeville really travelled to the places he mentions in his book (Flint 1992), but modern researches show that, as Ian Higgins writes, he "may never have travelled anywhere (except to a good library) and that most of his writing was compiled from his reading" (Higgins 1997: 8 as in Spearing 2008: 1). Even so, this paper will not question the authorship. The paper will mainly focus on an English version of the book, which dates back to about 1400 found in British Library MS Cotton Titus c.xvi, appropriately compiled by M.C Seymour, and praised by Higgins for being "quite a good proxy for the authorial version" (1997: 24; Spearing 1) .

Highly motivated to present a traditional pilgrimage narrative, Mandeville guarantees his audience that they will be presented a tale of unusual travel, and he catalogues many of the places which he has seen in order to show his aim of writing about his expeditions:

...[I] have seen and gone through many diverse lands and many provinces and kingdoms and isles; and have passed throughout Turkey, Armenia the Little and the Great, through Tartary, Persia, Syria, Arabia, Egypt the High and the Low, through Libya, Chaldea, and a great part of Ethiopia, through Amazonia, Ind the Less and the More a great part, and throughout many other isles that be about Ind where dwell many diverse folk and of diverse manners and laws and of diverse shapes of men; of which lands and isles I shall speak more plainly hereafter (*Mandeville's Travels Prologue*: 3-4).

It is made clear by Mandeville that this narrative will present the extraordinary people and customs which exist outside Europe. Mandeville is aware of his audience's interest in the unusual, and he tries to arouse this interest further.

As the *Travels* begin, he mentions some significant countries of the Western Christendom that are on the way to Jerusalem such as England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Norway, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Slavonia, Bulgaria, Livonia and Prussia (*Mandeville's Travels* 1: 5). However, after recount-

¹ Mandeville's Travels is quoted from M.C. Seymour, ed. *Mandeville's Travels*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968, cited by chapter and page number.

ing these known places, he comes to the Greek Orthodox realms, and there he experiences a kind of dilemma: on the one hand, Greece is between Western European culture and the Eastern lands mentioned at the very beginning of the *Travels*; on the other hand, they represent a window, through which will appear the extremely alien creatures that live in the world of the other. His initial response shows how he will treat the unfamiliar in his *Travels*: “And if all it so be that men of Greece be Christian, yet they vary from our faith” (*Mandeville’s Travels* 3: 13). At this point he begins to create the pattern which will aggravate his representations of the culturally unfamiliar, non-European ‘other’. For him, his Western Christian background is superior to all other nations and religions. As we shall further observe, in most clashes with the other, Mandeville studies the differences in those other belief systems through the glasses of his own, superior faith.

After he shows how the Greek faith and culture deviate from his Catholic background, Mandeville wants to explain why he presents this alien culture in detail:

And albeit that these things touch not to one way, nevertheless they touch to that that I have hight you to show you a part of customs and manners and diversities of countries. And for this is the first country that is discordant in faith and in belief and varieth from our faith on this half the sea, therefore I have set it here, that ye may know the diversity that is between our faith and theirs. For many men have great liking to hear speak of strange things of diverse countries (*Mandeville’s Travels* 4: 15).

This is a very significant decision on Mandeville’s part. He once again stresses that he knows how willing and excited his audience is to learn and hear more about alien cultures, yet the first unfamiliar culture he describes, that of Greek Orthodox Christians, stands somewhere in between similarity and difference that defines the distinction between “Europeans”(the self) and non-Europeans (the other). François Hartog writes that the quick attempt of distinguishing an ‘other’ goes back to the technique of Herodotus (1988: 109). The issue that Hartog writes about stems from creating an artificial boundary and considering that always truth is on one side and mistake is on the other side of the frontier, while the only error is to be found in the other (1988: 111). Edward Said states that this consideration is often inevitable and it allows one group of people to differentiate themselves from another: “It is enough for ‘us’ to set up these boundaries in our own minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours’” (1979: 54). The strong emphasis on the otherness of the enemy culture was not only a quality of Western discourse. Bernard Lewis reminds us that for the medieval Middle East, Europe was perceived as the “other” to the Muslim world. “The Kafir [infidel] par excellence was thus the Christian, and the countries which in their own self-image constituted Europe were perceived by Muslims as ‘the lands of the infidel,’ meaning Christendom” (Lewis 1982: 173 as in Fleck 2000: 389).

It is not, in fact, very much demanding for Mandeville to build an ‘other’ when he wishes to form one that is undeniably distinct from the Western self: what he has to do is just to appeal to the readers’ understanding of the fictitious, monster-like descent of the other. The medieval appeal of the monstrous races, as Valerie Flint has shown, stems mostly from their function in feeding the medieval audience’s desire for the unfamiliar (1984: 71 as in Fleck 2000: 383).

Mandeville’s narrative is an echo of the common Western perception of the East as a marvelous place inhabited by odd or monstrous peoples and animals. In the opening chapters of the *Travels*, several instances of weird incidents and wonders are narrated. In further chapters, Mandeville tries to do

his best to make an appeal to his audience's desire for the unusual about the 'other'. At one point in the narrative this desire reaches a peak. Mandeville writes about the people of Ethiopia where the waters are too salty, which causes the people of this country to live shorter. They are people of diverse shapes; some have one foot and can run very fast with this one foot. When it is sunny they cover themselves with this foot (*Mandeville's Travels*, 17: 121-122).

Various representations of fantastic peoples indicate that Mandeville's initial aim is to depict a totally alien world, an unknown world greatly different from Europe. This depiction has two functions: firstly, it allows the writer to use his imagination and creativity, and, secondly, it is enjoyable for the reader. Friedman writes that the monstrous races appearing in the medieval visions of the world fulfilled an important philosophical-aesthetic purpose as they were necessary to complete the divine harmony of the universe (Friedman 1981: 35 as in Fleck 385). They are included in Christian cosmography as they constitute an attractive contrast, an evidently non-human other, to the reader's understanding of self. The readers of the *Travels*, considering themselves as possessing the cultural heart of the globe, need an 'other' on the edges of their world as a kind of self-possession to their conception. This may account, in part, for the literal marginalization of the monstrous other "in cosmographies and maps, at the outmost borders of the familiar world" (Flint 1984: 71 as in Fleck 385). Their inevitably monstrous bodies serve to establish "absolute difference between the reader and the subject" (Hall 1996: 27).

As Mandeville tries to keep extreme cultural and religious distinctions between the Western European Christian self and the Eastern other, the differences that he wants to maintain meet challenges on some levels. In the chapter about the lifestyle and belief system of the Saracens, for instance, Mandeville stresses how the Muslims' belief in heaven and hell consists of thoughts that "*their faith fail[s] in*" (*Mandeville's Travels* 15: 104). Apart from this, he continues, although in their holy book it is said that Christ was a significant person, they do not recognize the truth of some facts, many of which stand at the heart of Western Christianity, like the crucifixion and resurrection (*Mandeville's Travels* 15: 104).

While Mandeville initially represents Muslims as completely different others in his travels, he gradually comes to discover similarities between the two cultures, especially as regards the religions. He notices that the Saracens' belief system is in part more similar to the primary tenets of Christianity than it used to be thought. This leads to his conviction that conversion is possible and necessary. This is a very important moment in the narrative. Defensive as a consequence of the Muslim charge that Christians defame the one, true God by attributing an injustice to him in the murder of the innocent prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, Mandeville summarizes the points of faith not in contention between Christianity and Saracens and concludes that they believe in most of the essential tenets necessary to become Christian and reach salvation. Although the Muslims he comes across seem different, he recognizes they are not irredeemably different and could perhaps be brought to accept Christian beliefs (Fleck 387).

In this faileth their faith. For they acknowledge well that the works of Jesus Christ be good and His words and His deeds and His doctrine by His gospels were true and His miracles also true; and the Blessed Virgin Mary is good and holy maiden before and after the birth of Jesus Christ; and all those that believe perfectly in God shall be saved. And because that they go so nigh our faith, they be lightly converted to Christian law when men preach them and show them distinctly the law of Jesus Christ and tell them of the prophecies (*Mandeville's Travels* 15:104).

Contemporary studies dealing with Mandeville's attitude towards Eastern people mainly focus on Mandeville's manner which alters when he gets closer to the Muslims. In the end, Islam appears to the author very similar to Christianity, but it only lacks the true teaching of Christian missionaries to be fully perfect. In many of the studies, he is seen as a tolerant traveler to the East and these studies suggest that Mandeville's subjective evaluation of Muslims and other Eastern cultures overlaps with the contemporary religious discussions on the Christianization of the nonbeliever (Campbell 1988: 156). There is, without doubt, a historical context for discussing whether non-Christians could be saved. "Scholastic philosophy had prepared the ground for this discussion. James Muldoon finds that the debate continued in the later thirteenth century with Innocent IV's defense of heathen rationality, through which non-believers had access first to natural law, and eventually to salvation" (1991: 118 as in Fleck 388). Much of the scholarship dealing with the *Travels* puts heavy stress on this context and concentrates on the relativism and religious toleration Mandeville seems to express in his representation of other religions and different cultures. Yet, Mandeville's argument does not directly and clearly show that his concern is to save the heathen even when he considers the Muslims as possible objects of conversion.

The *Travels'* Christian author guides his reader to a faraway, strange land, surrounded by people whose traditions are presumed to be foreign. However, in this moment of confrontation, the religious discrepancy between Muslims and Christians starts to fade away with Mandeville's examination of essential similarities between the two. He raises religious and cultural difference between himself and the Saracens, but that distinction recedes as Mandeville points out cultural common ground. The Saracens' opinions about Christianity give rise to an uneasy rejection in Mandeville and as a result of this he attempts to show that Islam is almost the same as Christianity. In one early postcolonial formulation of the impossibility of supplying the self/other division, Abdul R. Jan Mohamed argues that "faced with an inexplicable and miscellaneous alterity, the European theoretically has the possibility of reacting to the Other in terms of identity or difference" (Mohamed 1986: 83 in Fleck 391). In Mandeville's case of confrontation with the Muslim formulation of faith, he at last prefers to define the identity in the other. As Mohamed suggests, such a choice causes the European subject to tend to ignore the significant divergences and to judge the Other according to his own cultural values (Jan Mohamed: 84 in Fleck 391). This is exactly what Mandeville experienced with his understanding of Islam. He recognizes some basic similarities, which enables him to ignore important issues such, for instance, as the nature of the Trinity. For Mandeville, Islam becomes a familiar phenomenon and he accepts it as a different version of his own faith.

Recognition of similarity does not necessarily lead to toleration. In spite of the fact that some scholars evaluate Mandeville as a tolerant visitor to the East, in the *Travels* he mostly shows intolerant attitudes towards the Muslims and continuously speaks of the need for conversion. Mandeville reminds us of the heroic crusaders who were highly motivated to save the Holy Land and, while doing that, convert or put to the sword as many Muslims as they could. Mandeville is no crusader so he tolerantly saves them the sword, but, as a self-confident Christian scholar, is willing to extend to the Saracens the excellent teachings of Western Christianity: "They [Saracens] have many good articles of *our* (emphasis added) faith, albeit they have no perfect law and faith as Christian men have. And therefore, be they lightly converted" (*Mandeville's Travels* 15: 105).

The Muslims Mandeville came across might just as well have been assuming that Christians 'become so interested in *our* (emphasis added) faith' that they could be easily converted to Islam if they

are shown the right way (Fleck 2000: 389). The Muslim understanding of their Western neighbors consisted of "a sizable body of literature on Christian belief and practices" (Lewis 1982: 173) so they could have easily and efficiently used some of the rhetorical maneuvers of Mandeville in their narrative against the Christian West. Seeing the truth as 'ours' is a natural tendency in all of us and so Mandeville claims that the truth definitely belongs to Western Christians. This postponing and intolerant attitude of Mandeville's is seen by Stephen Greenblatt as a general quality of early European thought and political practice. "If," he puts forward, "in the account of the other we above all learn something about the writer of the account, then *Mandeville's Travels* reveals the hegemonic desire of pre-colonial Western Christianity" (Greenblatt 1991: 14 in Fleck 2000: 390).

Being rather confident in his superior Christian identity, Mandeville finishes his travels with a message which puts stress on the need for missionary activity in the East. He has already shown in his narrative that Islam and Christianity are more similar than they are thought to be and this without doubt makes a way for an easy conversion of the infidel. He tells his readers:

And ye shall understand that of all these countries and of all these isles and of all the diverse folk that I have spoken of before and of diverse laws and of diverse beliefs that they have, yet is there none of them all but that they have some reason within them and understanding – but if it be the fewer – and that have certain articles of our faith and some good points of our belief; and that they believe in God that formed all thing and made the world and clepe Him God of Nature, after that the prophet saith, *Et metuent omnes fines terrae*, and also in another place, *Omnes gentes servient ei*, that is to say, All folk shall serve Him. But yet they cannot speak perfectly, for there is no man to teach them, but only that they can only devise by their natural wit. For they have no knowledge of the Son nor of the Holy Ghost, but they can all speak of the Bible and namely of Genesis (*Mandeville's Travels* 34: 241-242).

By concluding his *Travels* in this way, Mandeville once again speaks of the other, but now, though still different, the other is the tamed, or the manageable other, as religion has proved to be not a point of divergence but a common denominator between his culture and those foreign and distant ones. Higgins sees Mandeville's Christianity working here as an interpretative tool of his material: "The Book of John Mandeville, more than any other medieval travel book [...] represents the earth not merely geographically as a physical arrangement of lands and water but theologically as the site of salvation history" (1998:31).

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STRESZCZENIE: Wśród wielu innych utworów tego samego rodzaju, Podróże i wyprawy Sir Johna Mandeville'a to książka podróżnicza szczegółowo opisująca muzułmański styl życia i praktyki religijne widziane oczami Europejczyka. Niniejszy artykuł koncentruje się głównie na sposobie w jaki Sir John Mandeville traktuje i przedstawia muzułmanów w swojej książce, i omawia doświadczenia Mandeville'a z saraceńskim stylem życia i praktykami religijnymi. W analizie podejścia Mandeville'a do "innych" obecna jest nie tylko kultura muzułmańska, ale też chrześcijańska.