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Sir John Mandeville

Mandeville's Travels is a work of fiction that turned into fact, a hoax of such skill that it came to be taken seriously. Scholars have shown how this appealing "eyewitness" travel account—full of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes—is in fact entirely drawn from earlier texts about eastern travel and exotic lands. Yet serious navigators like Columbus and Walter Raleigh carried copies on their voyages. Sir John Mandeville, supposedly a knight from Saint Albans in England, is probably as much an assembled fiction as the work that bears his name. The *Travels* were first written in the mid-fourteenth century, in French, and were quickly translated into most European languages. Over 250 medieval copies survive, a testimony to the work's enormous popularity.

Mandeville's Travels shifts its generic tone as geographical distance increases. "Mandeville" offers an itinerary on the model of many earlier pilgrims' guides, until his story reaches Jerusalem. Beyond that point his narrative becomes ever more fabulous and increasingly is informed by an associative and densely thematic logic, converging ever more with the geography and imagery of the Book of Revelation. It also shifts backward across time, from the site of the Crucifixion to the Earthly Paradise and the first fall of humankind.

Mandeville's exotic geography is filled with marvels and monsters that still delight readers, but it is equally a space for a loose and associative deployment of social as well as spiritual concerns. Cathay and the empire of Prester John occupy contrary poles of mercantilism and spiritual fervor. Dark deserts and beautiful places are virtually embodiments of the temptation to sin and the desire for salvation. The land of Prester John possesses an idealized feudal order and a humble yet powerful Christian prince. The institution of the "fools of despair" enfolds sexuality and its terrors, which in turn are seen as a journey into the unknown.

Mandeville's narrative moves always roughly eastward, but its cohesion and verisimilitude do not emerge from any precise itinerary. Rather, as the critic Mary Campbell has pointed out, Mandeville invites the reader's trust through a series of strategies we now associate with fiction: appeals to all the senses, assertions of the narrator's personal presence, and complex internal resonance at the level of theme and imagery. Yet, also like fiction, Mandeville's narrative voice sometimes pushes to a level of self-assertion that approaches irony or parody, and thus invites the reader to question its authenticity.

from *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*¹

from *Chapter 30: Of the royal estate of Prester John; and of a rich man who built a wonderful castle and called it Paradise*

This Emperor, Prester John, has many different countries under his rule, in which are many noble cities and fair towns, and many isles great and broad. For this land of India is divided into isles on account of the great rivers which flow out of Paradise and run through and divide up his land. He also has many great isles in the sea. The principal city of the isle of Pentoxere is called Nise; the Emperor's seat is there, and so it is a noble and rich city. Prester John has under him many kings and many different peoples; and his land is good and wealthy, but not so rich as the land of the Great Khan of Cathay.² For merchants do not travel so much to that land as to the land of Cathay, for it is too long a journey. And also merchants can get all they need in the isle of Cathay—spices, golden cloth, and other rich things; and they are reluctant to go to Pentoxere because of the long way and the dangers of the sea. For there are in many places in that sea great rocks of the stone called adamant, which of its nature draws iron to itself. And because no ships that have iron nails in them can sail that way because of these rocks, which would attract the ships to them, men dare not sail there. The ships of that part of the world are all made of wood with no iron. I was once in that sea, and I saw what looked like an island of trees and growing bushes; and the seamen told me that it was all great ships that the rock of adamant had attracted and caught there, and that all these trees and bushes had grown from the things that were in the ships. So because of these dangers and others like them, and because of the distance, they go to Cathay. And yet Cathay is not so near that those who set out from Venice or Genoa or other places in Lombardy do not spend eleven or twelve months traveling by land and sea before they arrive in Cathay. The land of Prester John is many days' journey further. Merchants who do go there go through the land of Persia and come to a city called Hermes,³ because a philosopher called Hermes founded it. Then they cross an arm of the sea and come to another city

1. Translated by C. W. R. D. Moseley. The opening selection reflects widespread belief that a Christian king, Prester John, reigned in an Asian empire beyond the Islamic lands. Mandeville locates Prester John's land beyond "Cathay" (China).

2. Marco Polo (c. 1254–1324).

the Chinese court of Kublai Khan and the wonders of his realm.

3. Hormuz, on the Persian Gulf, appropriately corrupted to Hermes, who in Greek myth was the gods' messenger and the protector of travelers.

called Soboth or Colach;⁴ there they get all kinds of goods, and as great plenty of parrots as there is of larks in our country. In this country there is little wheat or barley, and therefore they eat millet and rice, honey and milk and cheese and all sorts of fruits. Merchants can travel safely enough from there if they wish to. In that land are many parrots, which in their language they call *psitakes*; of their nature they talk just like a man. Those that talk well have long broad tongues, and five toes on each foot; those that do not talk at all—or not much—have only three toes.

This same royal King Prester John and the Great Khan of Tartary are always allied through marriage; for each of them marries the other's daughter or sister. In the land of Prester John there is a great plenty of precious stones of different sorts, some so big that they make from them dishes, bowls, cups and many other things too numerous to mention.

Now I shall speak of some of the principal isles of Prester John's land, and of the royalty of his state and of what religion and creed he and his people follow. This Emperor Prester John is a Christian, and so is the greater part of his land, even if they do not have all the articles of the faith as clearly as we do.⁵ Nevertheless they believe in God as Father, Son and Holy Ghost; they are a very devout people, faithful to each other, and there is neither fraud nor guile among them. This Emperor has under his rule seventy-two provinces, each one ruled by a king. These kings have other kings under them, and all are tributary to Prester John. In the land of Prester John there are many marvels. Among others there is a vast sea of gravel and sand, and no drop of water is in it. It ebbs and flows as the ocean itself does in other countries, and there are great waves on it; it never stays still and unmoving. No man can cross that sea by ship or in any other way; and so it is unknown what kind of land or country is on the far side. And though there is no water in that sea, yet is there great plenty of good fish caught on its shores; they are very tasty to eat, but they are of different shape to the fish in other waters. I, John Mandeville, ate of them, and so believe it, for it is true.

And three days' journey from that sea are great mountains, from which flows a large river that comes from Paradise. It is full of precious stones, without a drop of water. It runs with great waves through the wilderness into the Gravelly Sea, and then it disappears. Each week for three days this river runs so fast that no man dare enter it; but on the other days people go into it when they like and gather the precious stones. Beyond that river towards the wilderness is a great plain, set among the hills, all sandy and gravelly, in which there are, as it seems, trees which at the rising of the sun begin to grow, and a fruit grows on them; they grow until midday, and then they begin to dwindle and return back into the earth, so that by sunset nothing is seen of them; this happens each day. No man dare eat of this fruit, or go near it, for it looks like a deceptive phantom. That is accounted a marvelous thing, as well it may be.

In this wilderness are many wild men with horns on their heads; they dwell in woods and speak not, only grunting like pigs. And in some woods in that land are wild dogs, that will never come near to man, any more than foxes do in this country. There are birds, too, that of their own nature speak and call out to men who are crossing the desert, speaking as clearly as if they were men. These birds have large tongues and five claws on each foot. There are others that have only three claws on each foot, and they do not speak so well or clearly. These birds are called parrots, as I said before.

This same King and Emperor Prester John, when he goes to battle against enemies, has no banner borne before him; instead there are carried before him the crosses, of fine gold, which are very large and tall and encrusted with precious stones. Ten thousand men at arms and more than a hundred thousand foot soldiers are detailed to look after each cross, in the same way as men guard a banner or standard in battle or wherever. And this number of men is always assigned to the guarding these crosses whenever the Emperor goes to battle; this is not counting the main army, or certain lords and their men who are ordered to be in the Emperor's own division, and also not counting certain wings whose job it is to forage. And when he rides with his private company in time of peace, there is carried before him a wooden cross, without gold or painting or precious stones, in remembrance of the Passion of Christ who died on a wooden cross. He also has carried in front of him a golden plate full of earth, as a token that notwithstanding his great nobleness and power he can come from the earth and to the earth shall he return. And there is carried before him another vessel full of gold and jewels and precious stones, like rubies, diamonds, sapphires, emeralds, topazes, chrysolites and many others, as a token of his nobility, power and might.

I shall now tell you of the arrangement of Prester John's palace, which is usually in the city of Susa. That palace is so wealthy, so noble, so full of delights that it is a marvel to tell of. For on top of the main tower are two balls of gold, in each of which are two great fair carbuncles, which shine very brightly in the night. The chief gates of the palace are of precious stones, which men call sardonyx, and the bars are of ivory. The windows of the hall and the chambers are of crystal. All the tables they eat off are of emeralds, amethysts and, some, of gold, set with precious stones; the pedestals that support the tables are, in the same way, of precious stone. The steps up which the Emperor goes to his throne where he sits at meals are, in turn, onyx, crystal, jasper, amethyst, sardonyx, and coral; and the highest step, which he rests his feet on when at meat, is chrysolite. All the steps are bordered with fine gold, set full of pearls and other precious stones on the sides and edges. The sides of his throne are of emerald, edged in fine gold set with precious stones. The pillars in his chamber are of gold set with precious stones, many of which are carbuncles to give light at night. Nevertheless every night he has burning in his chamber twelve vessels of crystal full of balm, to give a good sweet smell and drive away noxious airs. The frame of his bed is of sapphire, well set in gold, to make him sleep well and to destroy lustful thoughts—for he only lies with his wives on four set occasions in the year, and even then for the sole purpose of engendering children.

This Emperor also has another palace, rich and noble, in the city of Nise, and he sojourns there when it pleases him; but the air is not so good there nor as healthy as it is at Susa. Throughout all Prester John's lands men eat only once a day, as they do in the court of the Great Khan. You must know that every day in his court Prester John has more than thirty thousand people eating, not counting those who come and go; but thirty thousand people neither there nor in the court of the Great Khan consume as much in one day as would twelve thousand in our country. This Emperor always has seven kings in his court to serve him; and when they have served for a month, they go home and another seven kings come and serve for another month. And with those kings there always serve seventy-two dukes and 360 earls and many other lords and knights. And each day in his court twelve archbishops and twenty bishops dine. The Patriarch of Saint Thomas⁶ is there rather like a Pope. All the archbishops and

4. Cambay, on an arm of the Arabian Sea.

5. Belief in the land of Prester John involved a yearning

for a Christian ally beyond the military and religious threat of Islam.

6. St. Thomas was thought to have converted India to Christianity.

bishops and abbots there are kings and lords of great fiefs. Each one of them has some office in the Emperor's court; for one king is porter, another steward, another chamberlain, another steward of the household, another butler, another server, another marshal—and so on, through all the positions that there are in his court. So he is very richly and honorably served. His land is four months' journey in breadth; in length it is without measure. Believe all this, for truly I saw it with my own eyes, and much more than I have told you. For my companions and I lived with him a long time and saw all I have told you, and much more than I have leisure to tell. * * *

from *Chapter 31: Of the head of the devil in the Vale Perilous; and of the customs of the peoples in different isles round there*

A little way from that place towards the River Phison⁷ is a great marvel. For there is a valley between two hills, about four miles long; some men call it the Vale of Enchantment, some the Vale of Devils, and some the Vale Perilous. In this valley there are often heard tempests, and ugly, hideous noises, both by day and by night. And sometimes noises are heard as if of trumpets and tabors and drums, like at the feasts of great lords. This valley is full of devils and always has been, and men of those parts say it is an entrance to Hell. There is much gold and silver in this valley, and to get it many men—Christian and heathen—come and go into that valley. But very few come out again—least of all unbelievers—for all who go therein out of covetousness are strangled by devils and lost. In the middle of the valley under a rock one can clearly see the head and face of a devil, very hideous and dreadful to see; nothing else is seen of it except from the shoulders up. There is no man in this world, Christian or anyone else, who would not be very terrified to see it, it is so horrible and foul. He looks at each man so keenly and so cruelly, and his eyes are rolling so fast and sparkling like fire, and he changes his expression so often, and out of his nose and mouth comes so much fire of different colors with such an awful stench, that no man can bear it. But good Christian men, however, who are firm in the faith, can enter that valley without great harm if they are cleanly confessed and absolved and bless themselves with the sign of the Cross; then devils will not harm them. Even if they do get out without bodily hurt, they will not escape without great fear; for devils appear openly to them, menace them, and fly up and down in the air with great thunders and lightnings and awful tempests. Good men as well as evil will have great fear when they pass through, thinking that perhaps God will take vengeance on them for their past sins. My companions and I, when we came near that valley and heard all about it, wondered in our hearts whether to trust ourselves totally to the mercy of God and pass through it; some turned aside and said they would not put themselves in that danger. There were in our company two Friars Minor of Lombardy, who said they would go through that valley if we would go with them; so what with their encouragement and the comfort of their words, we confessed cleanly and heard Mass and took Communion and went into the valley, fourteen of us together. But when we came out we were only nine. We never knew what became of the remainder, whether they were lost or turned back, but we never saw them again. Two of them were Greeks and three Spaniards. Our other companions, who would not cross the Vale Perilous, went round by another way to meet us. And my companions and I went through the valley, and saw many marvelous things, and gold and silver and precious

⁷ Ganges.

stones and many other jewels on each side of us—so it seemed to us. But whether it really was as it seemed, or was merely illusion, I do not know. But because of the fear that we were in, and also so as not to hinder our devotion, we would touch nothing we saw: for we were more devout then than we ever were before or after, because of the fear we had on account of devils appearing to us in different guises and of the multitude of dead men's bodies that lay in our path. For if two kings with their armies had fought together and the greater part of both sides been slain, there would not have been a greater number of dead bodies than we saw. And when I saw so many bodies lying there, I was very astonished that they were so healthy, without corruption, as fresh as if they had been newly dead. But I dare not affirm that they were all true bodies that I saw in that valley; I believe that devils made so many bodies appear so as to frighten us; for it is not likely that so great a multitude of folk should have really been dead there so freshly that there was no smell or corruption. Many of those bodies I saw seemed to be wearing the clothing of Christian men; but I well believe they came there from covetousness of the gold and other jewels in that valley, or because false hearts cannot stand the great fear and dread that they had on account of the horrible sights they saw. And I assure you that we were often struck to the earth by terrible great blasts of wind, thunder and tempests; but through the grace of Almighty God we passed through safe and sound.

Beyond that valley is a great isle where the folk are as big in stature as giants of twenty-eight or thirty feet tall. They have no clothes to wear except the skins of beasts, which they cover their bodies with. They eat no bread; but they eat raw flesh and drink milk, for there is an abundance of animals. They have no houses to live in, and they will more readily eat human flesh than any other. Thanks to them no pilgrim dare enter this isle; for if they see a ship in the sea with men aboard, they will wade into the sea to take the men. We were told that there is another isle beyond that where there are giants much bigger than these, for some are fifty or sixty feet tall. I had no desire to see them, for no man can go to that isle without being promptly strangled by those monsters. In these isles among these giants are sheep as big as oxen, but their wool is thick and coarse. I have often seen those sheep, and some men have often seen those giants catch people in the sea and go back to the land with two in one hand and two in the other, eating their flesh raw.

There is another fair and good isle, full of people, where the custom is that when a woman is newly married, she shall not sleep the first night with her husband, but with another young man, who shall have ado with her that night and take her maidenhead, taking in the morning a certain sum of money for his trouble. In each town there are certain young men set apart to do that service, which are called *gadlibiniens*, which is to say "fools of despair." They say, and affirm as a truth, that it is a very dangerous thing to take the maidenhead of a virgin; for, so they say, whoever does puts himself in peril of death. And if the husband of the woman find her still virgin on the next night following (perchance because the man who should have had her maidenhead was drunk, or for any other reason did not perform properly to her), then shall he have an action at law against the young man before the justices of the land—as serious as if the young man had intended to kill him. But after the first night, when those women are so defiled, they are kept so strictly that they shall not speak to or even come into the company of those men. I asked them what the cause and reason was for such a custom there. They told me that in ancient times some men had died in that land in deflowering maidens, for the latter had snakes within them, which

stung the husbands on their penises inside the women's bodies; and thus many men were slain, and so they follow that custom there to make other men test out the route before they themselves set out on that adventure.

Another isle is to the southwards in the Great Sea Ocean where there are wicked and cruel women, who have precious stones growing in their eyes. They are such a nature that if they look upon a man with an angry intention, the power of those stones slays him with a look, as the basilisk does.

Near there is another isle, where the women make great sorrow when their children are born and great joy when they are dead. They call their friends together and make a feast and take the dead child and throw it into a great fire and burn it. And women who loved their husbands well, when they are dead, throw themselves with their children into the fire to be burned. It is their opinion there that they are purged by the fire, so that no corruption shall ever after come by them, and, purged of all vice and all deformity, they will pass to their husbands in the next world. The cause why they weep and sorrow at the birth of their children and rejoice when they die is that when they are born into this world they come to sorrow and trouble, and when they die, they go to the joy of Paradise, where rivers of milk and honey and plenty of all kinds of good things are, and a life without sorrow. In this isle the King is always elected; they do not choose the richest or noblest man, but him who has the best character and is the most just and true, they make their King. They also ensure that he is an old man and not young. In that isle too are very righteous judges; for they do justice and right to every man, to poor as to rich, and judge every man according to his guilt and not according to his state or degree. The King also may not put anyone to death without the assent and advice of all his barons. If the King himself commits a trespass, like killing a man or some other such notable thing, he shall be killed for it. But he will not be killed by a man's hand; rather they shall forbid any man to be so bold as to keep company with him, or speak to him, come to him, or give him food or drink. And so he dies for pure need, hunger, thirst, and the sorrow in his heart. No one who is convicted of a trespass is spared, neither for riches, high estate, dignity, high birth, nor for any kind of gift; every man shall have according to his deeds. * * *

Chapter 33: Of the mountains of gold, which the ants watch over; and of the four rivers that come from the Earthly Paradise

East from the land of Prester John is a large fertile land called Taprobane.⁸ There is a rich and noble King in that isle, subject to Prester John. He is chosen by election. Here there are two summers and two winters in a single year, and harvest also twice in a year. And at all times of the year their gardens are full of flowers and their meadows green. Good and rational people dwell in this isle; there are many good Christian men among them who are so rich that they do not know the total of their goods. In former times, when people sailed there from the land of Prester John, they used ships of such a type that they needed twenty days to sail thither; but in the ships we use now they can do it in seven days. And as they sail they can often see the bottom of the sea in several places, for it is not very deep.

On the east there are two isles near this one, of which one is called Oriell and the other Arget;⁹ in those two isles the earth is full of gold and silver ore. And they are near the Red Sea, where it enters the Great Sea Ocean. And in those isles no

8. Sri Lanka, formerly called Ceylon.
9. In the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636),

these islands are called Chryse and Argyre, for their production of gold and silver.

stars can clearly be seen shining, except for one they call Canopus;¹ nor can the moon be seen there except in the second quarter. In this isle of Ceylon are great hills of gold, which ants busily look after, purifying the gold and separating the fine from the unfine. Those ants are as big as dogs are here, so that no man dare go near those hills for fear that the ants might attack them; however, men win that gold by a trick. For the nature of the ants is that when the weather is hot, they will hide in the earth from mid-morning till after noon; and then the men of that country come with camels and dromedaries and horses, load them up with that gold, and go away before the ants come out of their holes. At other times of the year, when the weather is not hot and the ants do not hide in the earth, they use another trick to get this gold. They take mares who have young foals, and hang on each side of each mare an empty container with the mouth of it uppermost, trailing near to the ground, and then send them forth early in the morning to pasture round the hills where the gold is, keeping the foals at home. Then these ants, when they see these empty containers, go and fill them with gold; for it is the nature of the ant to leave nothing empty near them—there is no hole or cranny or anything else that they will not fill. And when it is thought that the mares are fully laden with gold, the men let the foals out, and they neigh after their dams. Then the mares hear their foals neighing and hurry quickly to them, laden with gold. And in this way men get a great deal of gold; for the ants easily tolerate all sorts of animals, man excepted.

Beyond these isles I have told you of, beyond the deserts in the empire of Prester John, going still east, there is no inhabited land, as I said earlier; only wastes and wilderness and great crags and mountains and a dark land, where no man can see by night or day, as we were told. That dark land and those deserts last right to the Earthly Paradise, in which Adam and Eve were put; but they were only there a little while. And in the east of that place the earth begins. But that is not our east, where the sun rises for us; for when the sun rises in those countries, it is midnight in our land, because of the roundness of the earth. For, as I said before, God made the earth quite round, in the middle of the firmament. The hills and the valleys that are now on the earth are the result only of Noah's flood, by which soft earth was moved from its place leaving a valley, and the hard ground stayed still and became a hill.

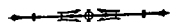
Of Paradise I cannot speak properly, for I have not been there; and that I regret. But I shall tell you as much as I have heard from wise men and trustworthy authorities in those countries. The Earthly Paradise, so men say, is the highest land on earth; it is so high it touches the sphere of the moon. For it is so high that Noah's flood could not reach it, though it covered all the rest of the earth. Paradise is encircled by a wall; but no man can say what the wall is made of. It is all grown over with moss and with bushes so that no stone can be seen, nor anything else a wall might be made of. The wall of Paradise stretches from the south to the north; there is no way into it open because of ever burning fire, which is the flaming sword that God set up before the entrance so that no man should enter.

In the middle of Paradise is a spring from which come four rivers, which run through different lands. These rivers sink down into the earth inside Paradise and then run many a mile underground; afterwards they rise up out of the earth again in distant lands. The first of these rivers is called Phison or Ganges; it rises in India

1. Canopus, the second-brightest star in the sky.

below the hills of Orcobares,² and runs eastwards through India into the Great Sea Ocean. In that river are many precious stones and plenty of the wood called *lignum aloes*,³ and much gold in the gravel. This river is called the Phison because many waters collect and join it, for "Phison" means roughly "gathering." It is also called Ganges after a king who was in India, whom men called Gangaras; because it runs through his land it was called Ganges. This river is clear in some places, disturbed in others, in some places hot, in others cold. The second river is called Nile or Gyon; it rises out of the earth a little way from Mount Atlant.⁴ Not far thence it sinks down again into the earth and runs underground until it comes to the shore of the Red Sea, and there it rises again out of the earth and runs all round Ethiopia, and so through Egypt until it comes to Alexandria the Great; there it enters the Mediterranean. This river is always disturbed and is therefore called Gyon; for "Gyon" means the same as "troubled." The third river is called the Tigris, that is, "fast running"; for it is one of the swiftest rivers of the world. It is called Tigris after an animal of the same name, which is the fastest animal on foot in the world. This river rises in Armenia under the Mount Parchoatra and runs through Armenia and Asia to the south, and then turns into the Mediterranean Sea. The fourth river is called Euphrates, which is as much as to say "bearing well"; for many good things grow along that river. That river runs through Media, Armenia and Persia. And men say that all the fresh rivers of the world have their beginning in the spring that wells up in Paradise.

You should realize that no living man can go to Paradise. By land no man can go thither because of the wild beasts in the wilderness, and because of the hills and rocks, which no one can cross; and also because of the many dark places that are there. No one can go there by water either, for those rivers flow with so strong a current, with such a rush and such waves that no boat can sail against them. There is also such a great noise of waters that one man cannot hear another, shout he never so loudly. Many great lords have tried at different times to travel by those rivers to Paradise, but they could not prosper in their journeys; some of them died through exhaustion from rowing and excessive labor, some went blind and deaf through the noise of the waters, and some were drowned through the violence of the waves. And so no man, as I said, can get there except through the special grace of God. And so of that place I can tell you no more; so I shall go back and tell you of things that I have seen in the isles and lands of the empire of Prester John, which, relative to us, are below the earth.



Margery Kempe

c. 1373–after 1439

Spiritual quest and literal travel converge in *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Daughter of a mayor in the prosperous market town of Lynn, Margery began her adult life quite traditionally, married to the burger John Kempe. A mental and religious crisis followed the birth of her first child, influencing Margery to take up a holier form of life. Her highly expressive spirituality

2. Perhaps the Himalayas.

3. A precious, fragrant wood, used in incense, mentioned

in the Bible.

4. Mount Atlas.