

THE FANTASTIC VOYAGES OF SIR JOHN MANDEVILLE

L. Sprague de Camp, who wrote so many great novels of fantasy and science fiction in the middle years of the twentieth century, liked to refer to fiction writers as “professional liars.” I’ve also heard the term applied to lawyers, politicians, public-relations people, and various other practitioners of the verbal arts.

I don’t like it. There are a lot of lawyers and politicians whose statements I mistrust, and I rarely accept PR statements at face value, but it seems too cavalier to dismiss all practitioners of those professions as liars. (Honest Abe Lincoln was both a lawyer *and* a politician.) And I absolutely reject the glib labeling of the writing of fiction as a kind of lying. Fiction writers—and trust me on this; I have been one for almost sixty years—do indeed make up stories, and hope that their readers will believe them at least while engaged in the act of reading. But no one past the age of seven thinks that Dante actually took a tour of the nine circles of Hell, or that Hamlet really encountered his murdered father’s ghost on the battlements of the castle, or—to come closer to our own genre—that Cthulhu slumbers in his undersea palace, dreaming of the moment when he and the other Elder Gods will emerge and reconquer our world. Those stories have a certain kind of *fictional* truth, but their writers did not expect readers to regard them as literal reports about the real world.

The phrase “professional liar,” I think, ought to be reserved for swindlers, financial manipulators, and the creators of hoaxes. That last category includes such diabolically ingenious people as John Keely, who bilked nineteenth-century investors out of hundreds of thousands of dollars by claiming to have invented a perpetual motion machine, and Richard Adams Locke, who convinced credulous

readers of the *New York Sun* in 1835 that Sir John Herschel’s powerful new telescope had revealed the existence of forests, oceans, and all sorts of strange animals on the Moon.

And then there was the fourteenth-century author of *The Travels and Voyages of Sir John Mandeville*, who, at a time when Europeans had very little knowledge of the world beyond their immediate vicinity, produced a lively and readable tale of his travels through far-off and fantastic regions full of the most amazing marvels and wonders. In a later era, he would have been a successful fantasy writer; in his own, he was regarded as an authority on our planet’s geography, and as late as the seventeenth century Samuel Purchas, who compiled a vast compendium of explorers’ journals, called him “the greatest Asian traveler that ever the world had,” which certainly he was not, though he does rank high in the roster of charlatans.

The prologue to Mandeville’s *Travels* says that he was born in the English town of St. Albans and set out to explore the world in 1332 (or 1322, according to some manuscripts), “and since hitherward [I] have been a long time over the sea, and have seen and gone through many kingdoms, lands and provinces and isles, and have passed through Turkey, Armenia the less and the more, Tartary, Persia, Syria. . . .” and on and on to India and “Amazonia,” where he beheld “many diverse manners of folk of diverse laws and shapes,” and many a land even stranger and more distant.

The part about having come from St. Albans may even have been true. A certain Jean de Bourgogne of the Belgian city of Liege seems to have confessed on his deathbed in 1372 that he was actually “Master Jean de Mandeville, Knight, count of Montfort in England. . . . Having

had the misfortune to kill, in his country, a count whom he did not name, he obliged himself to traverse the three parts of the world. . . . Although he was a man of distinguished nobility he preferred to keep himself hidden," practicing medicine and writing an account of his travels. We have no way of telling if this is true. The oldest surviving manuscript of the book is in French heavily flavored with Anglicisms. Malcolm Letts, the foremost modern Mandeville scholar, has concluded that the book was almost certainly written by an Englishman, and "the more the problem is studied the clearer it becomes, at least to my mind, that Mandeville was a man of flesh and blood, born, as he says, at St. Albans, that he practiced medicine, . . . that he fled the country, and that de Bourgogne was a name invented or borrowed by Mandeville to conceal his identity."

More than that we will probably never know. But his book is a wild and wonderful thing, very much worth reading by the connoisseur of good fantasy or good hoaxes.

Mandeville seems to have based his account of his purported travels on the narratives of such earlier medieval travelers as Friar Odoric of Pordenone, John de Plano Carpini, and William of Rubruck, who made valiant journeys to India, China, and Indonesia in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries with the intent of spreading Christianity. But whatever he lifted he embellished with magnificent fantasies of his own invention.

Thus he inserts into a discussion of the tomb of St. John at Ephesus the tale of a princess who was transformed into a dragon; in Jaffa he sees the "bones of a giant that hight Andromedes, and one of his ribs is forty feet long"; he informs us that the Pyramids were "the barns of Joseph that were made for to keep corn in for the seven barren years . . . as the first book of Bible tells." But much better is coming as he presses on to the Near East and then Africa. Such as the Fountain of Youth, which flows out of Paradise. He took three sips of it, "and evermore since

that time I feel me much the better and the wholer." The land of the Amazons, which he places in what is now Iraq: "in that realm is all women and no man, because that the women will not suffer no men among them." To the south he finds Ethiopia, where the sun is so strong that "in the sea of Libya is no fish, for the water is evermore boiling for the great heat." In that land "are young children white-haired, and when they are old, their hair waxes black." In the city of Saba diamonds abound, which "grow together male and female, and they are nourished with dew of heaven. And they engender and conceive, and bring forth small children, and multiply and grow all the year." Deeper yet into Africa "be folk that have but one foot and they go so blue that it is marvelous. And the foot is so large that it shadoweth all the body against the sun when they would lie and rest them."

Onward: "In a certain isle towards the south dwell folk of foul stature and of cursed kind that have no heads, and their eyes be in their shoulders. And their mouth crooked as an horse shoe, and that is in the midst of their breast. And in another isle be folk that have the face all flat, all plain without nose and without mouth, but they have two small holes all round instead of their eyes, and their mouth is flat also without lips. And in another isle be folk that have the lip above the mouth so great that when they sleep in the sun, they cover all the face with that lip to shade themselves." He continues his parade of human monsters with people with ears hanging down to their knees; people with horses' feet, who run so swiftly they overtake wild beasts; hermaphrodites, who alternately sire and bear children; eight-toed people who crawl wondrous fast on their knees, and a race that had heads like those of dogs, "yet they are full reasonable and subtle of wit," and many another remarkable tribe. In India are eels thirty feet long, "and folk that dwell near that water are ill colored, yellow and green." In Cathay—China—he enrolls in the Great Khan's army and spends fifteen months doing battle in the

Mongol conquest of southern China, a campaign that had taken place twenty or thirty years before he was born, though probably he assumed his readers knew nothing about that. As for the Khan, he says, “he passeth all earthly princes in might, noblesse, royalty, and riches.”

When he leaves China he visits the court of a monarch nearly as great, the fabled Christian king Prester John, about whom a whole cluster of remarkable tales accreted. (I wrote a long book about Prester John years ago; there is no room to tell that story here.) Prester John rules seventy-two provinces, each with a king of its own who is under subjection to him. In the sea adjacent to his country are “great rocks of the stone that is called adamant, the which of its own kind draws to him iron; and for these should pass no ships that had nails of iron,” because the magnetism pulls them forth. Prester John’s country also has “a great sea all of gravel and sand, and no drop of water therein, that ebbs and flows as the great sea does in other countries,” a river “full of precious stones, and no drop of water,” a place where men have horns and have no language, but grunt like pigs, another where birds are capable of human speech, and one where trees sprout at sunrise and “grow till midday, bearing fruit, but no man dare take of that fruit, for it is a thing of faerie. And after midday they decrease and enter into the earth, so at the going down of the sun they appear no more.”

Mandeville finds an isle of giant naked cannibals, thirty feet high, and beyond it an isle of cannibals *sixty* feet high, and one where maidens kept venomous serpents in their vaginas to defend their chastity, and one nearby where women have the power to slay men with an angry look, and beyond that one where women mourn when their children are born and rejoice when they die. He sees the spotted “gyrfaunt,” which seems to be a giraffe, “and his neck is twenty cubits long,” and the fierce “cocodrille” (crocodile), which has no tongue, and snails so

big that three or four men could live within their shells, and he visits the isle of Pytan, “where the folk neither till nor sow no land, and are nourished by the scent of wild apples.” Beyond, past a wilderness of dragons and unicorns and lions and elephants both white and blue, lies “Taprobane”—Ceylon—where ants the size of hounds dig gold from the ground, and beyond that is Thule, “the furthest isle of the world inhabited with men,” beyond which is nothing but a wilderness filled with “dragons and other wild beasts, cruel and fell.” Here he ended his journey.

It is a fabulous tale in more senses than one. One wild story tumbles over another for two hundred spellbinding pages. For centuries it was accepted as gospel, until more trustworthy explorers ventured into those parts three centuries later and, more’s the pity, were unable to find Mandeville’s marvels. Shakespeare had read the book; he refers to Prester John and the Great Khan in *Much Ado About Nothing*; and has Othello speak “of the Cannibals that each other eat . . . and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders.” I have only begun to touch on its wonders here. But anyone who loves a good fantasy will find rich rewards in Sir John Mandeville’s book of travels, which has captivated audiences for five hundred years. A very good modern edition of it can be found in the Penguin Classics series, translated by C.W.R.D. Mosely. I recommend it most heartily.

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