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## Barnacle Geese and Sky Burials: Relativism in The Travels of Sir John Mandeville

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As a medieval travel narrative, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* was immensely popular for everyone from bookworms to world travelers in 14th and 15th century Europe; Christopher Columbus actually carried a copy with him on his cross-Atlantic trip in 1492. Given its popularity, and the period in which it was produced, one might expect the fictitious travelogue to display an incredible level of intolerance towards the various peoples and cultures it depicts. However, the *Travels* frequently surprises modern readers with its message of tolerance towards greater humanity, and its recognition of the universality of human experience as it is mirrored in the lives of people of different ethnic and cultural groups. Even with his infamously nonfactual material mixed in with semi-accurate second- and third-hand accounts of the world, Mandeville displays an attitude of proto-cultural relativism which will surprise the modern reader, to whom the medieval period often represents a time of ultimate intolerance. In order to understand Mandeville's radical efforts to relate tales of the wider world through a relativistic lens, one must explore strange material, such as tales of geese that grow on trees, as well as the concept of sky burials. Mandeville's account can open our eyes to the cultural sensitivity that was thinkable in the medieval period, and what such sensitivity can teach us today.

As way of introduction to the method by which Mandeville presents his relativistic view to medieval readers, it is helpful to discuss a belief prevalent in England at the time of his writing, which will seem quite strange from the perspective of the modern reader. Because observers were never able to witness the breeding habits of a species known as the barnacle goose, it was thought that this goose grew on trees, dropped into the sea, and there developed into mature birds. The barnacle goose becomes significant in the *Travels* when Mandeville writes of an encounter with a fictitious fruit containing the meat of an animal like a lamb. This fruit is supposedly eaten by the people of a land he calls Cadhilhe, which scholars now identify as

possibly modern-day Korea. “It is a great marvel,” Mandeville writes of the lamb fruit, “Nevertheless I said to them that it did not seem a very great marvel to me, for in my country, I said, there were trees which bore a fruit that became birds that could fly... And when I told them this, they marvelled greatly at it” (165). To many critics, this account speaks strongly to Mandeville’s relativistic aims in writing the *Travels*. By emphasizing the reaction Mandeville receives from the people of Cadhilhe in telling them of his own land, Mandeville makes a point about how people of different regions see one another’s differences with wonder. England, he indicates, is just as strange in its way as the region of Cadhilhe, even with its lamb fruit. One critic points out that this scene is clearly intended as instructive to Mandeville’s medieval European audience, and is used to demonstrate that Eastern peoples respond to Western wonders just as Westerners respond to Eastern wonders (Higgins 138). Indeed, many of Mandeville’s accounts within the *Travels* reflect a similar underlying message.

Mandeville leads his reader to his relativistic philosophy slowly and through familiar, nonthreatening paths. He begins the *Travels* with in-depth descriptions of how one might undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem by several possible routes, detailing various wonders a traveler may encounter along the way. This format, used to begin his literary exploration to the far East, would have been a familiar genre for readers. Commonly, early Christian writers of pilgrimage guides formatted their work by identifying religiously significant locations and then explaining their spiritual history to prompt introspection (Vernor 9). Thus, readers would have been comforted by the familiarity of the material at the beginning of the *Travels*. Yet as Mandeville progressed further into his account, readers would have encountered more and more instances of the author’s tolerant rhetoric towards cultures which might otherwise have been treated as beyond understanding or perhaps monstrous.

Theresa Tinkle argues that Mandeville presents multiple characterizations of God in his travelogue, and that these various versions of God become more tolerant in later sections of the *Travels*. The first of these iterations of God in the beginning of his writing, advocates taking over the holy land and overtly favors European Christians. The other, developed towards the end of his account, is capable of loving people in other social systems as well as Western Christianity. Tinkle writes of Mandeville's first sections, "Whereas Jesus endorses a narrowly European, Christian, feudal social hierarchy, the god of love validates 'dyuerse lawis,' not necessarily European or Christian or feudal. Intentions replace swords" (434). Tinkle's observation as to the changing representations of God, first in a way that is familiar to medieval readers, and then in a more radically accepting way, indicates that Mandeville may have appealed to the common European sense in the prologue before revealing his tolerance and relativism. By the time he begins to describe experiences he supposedly had with the Saracens in the sultan's land, modern readers note "his open-mindedness with regards to Saracen moral stature goes a bit beyond what is necessary to provoke shame and rehabilitation in the Christian conscience" (Vernor 7). His radical usage of accounts of foreign societies, real and imagined, becomes clear with the knowledge that Mandeville in many cases altered source materials to present a more evenhanded description of foreign peoples.

It seems Mandeville was right in leading his readers to his conclusions slowly and gently, as it is apparent that even with these efforts, his attitude of relativism seems to have troubled some translators and transmitters of the text. Some of these editors went so far as to include passages putting Mandeville's relativism into a more "holy" light. One translation by Von Diemeringen adds a passage which stresses a "theology of wonder" to help readers integrate Mandeville's descriptions of the Eastern world (Higgins 130). Another manuscript, Hakluyt's

edition, does so with a “persuasio” which “begins by making readers lift their gaze above the ‘orbis terrae,’ collapsing the boundary between secular and religious wonder, and asserting that God, his decision to create the world, and the created world itself are all marvels” (Higgins 130-1). Such changes made Mandeville’s message closer to a religious worldview that would have reinforced rather than challenged the perception of Western society’s exceptional closeness to God’s will.

In short, it seems that Mandeville’s message of relativism was received by at least some of his readers and redactors, given that these changes respond to his intentions. His wide readership may have been due not only to his use of the popular religious travelogue model, but also to his representation of various wonders and strange customs which drew those who enjoyed the novelty. Even these, Mandeville uses to his purpose, and scholars note that the many marvels described in the *Travels* not only serve the function of entertainment, they also seem intended to spark reflection and act as “speculative mirrors of human behavior and social organization, both actual and possible” (Higgins 127). One of these potentially frivolous or sensationalist accounts, which Mandeville uses successfully to further his empathetic worldview, describes a custom which the modern reader may at first glance be tempted to include among the untrue absurdities included in his volume.

Mandeville describes a funerary custom in the land he calls “Ryboth or Kyboth” (186) now identified as Tibet. In this custom, a man’s deceased father is honored by being beheaded and cut into pieces by priests, after which the body is eaten by raptors. At this point, Mandeville says, the son of the deceased serves his friends the boiled flesh of his father’s head and makes a cup from the skull (Mandeville 186-187). This practice, though reported with several significant inaccuracies in Mandeville’s account, correlates in reality to the funerary custom known in

modern Western pop culture as the Tibetan sky burial. Margaret Gouin, a scholar of Tibetan funerary customs, describes this practice as, “the procedure by which the body is cut up and fed to carrion birds” (60). Sky burial, also known as exposure, remains a favored form of body disposal in Tibet in the current day. In fact, in 2010 Gouin reported that there were 1,075 recorded sky burial locations in Tibet (Gouin 62). In reference to cultural relativism, it should be noted that “burial [in the ground] is not a favoured form of dealing with the corpse in Tibetan cultural areas, and indeed is frequently regarded with abhorrence” (Gouin 70). Perhaps as much as Mandeville’s readers may have read about sky burials with distaste and confusion, so too might those accustomed to exposure and other non-burial methods of body disposal have looked with distaste on accounts of Europeans burying their loved ones in the ground to rot with their possessions.

Despite the fact that the form of body disposal described in the *Travels* does exist, several aspects of Mandeville’s account are inaccurate. Gouin assures scholars that there is no evidence associating sky burials with cannibalism, for example (Gouin 71). In addition, sky burials are not the only method of body disposal used in Tibet, as Mandeville’s account would suggest. Despite media focus on sky burials which continues to indicate to outsiders that exposure may be the only or primary funerary custom in Tibet, Gouin reminds those not familiar with the complexities of body disposal in the culture that focusing solely on sky burials places a false emphasis on this practice (72). Gouin offers a highly relevant suggestion as to why sky burials have received so much interest from Western audiences and devotes a brief section to an analysis of “‘Sky burial’ in Western perception” in which she states that “It fits the category of ‘exotic foreign rite’ nicely, being qualified as ‘gruesome’ and ‘terrifying,’ the corpse of the deceased being described as ‘mangled’ or ‘mutilated’ by ‘butchers’” (72). This modern analysis seems to

characterize the motivation for Mandeville's inclusion of sky burials in his *Travels* as well. His sensationalized account drew readers with such novelties and gruesome details.

Yet, along with his record of sky burials, Mandeville includes a cursory description of the religion in the area of Tibet, comparing the religious leader to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, the religious leader most familiar to Mandeville. He continues making cultural parallels with the statement, "just as priests in our country sing for the souls of the dead *Subuenite, sancti Dei*, so those priests there sing" (Mandeville 186). We see that Mandeville uses his inclusion of Tibet's religious practices to further his aim of extending human understanding to those his readers may consider foreign beyond all empathy or understanding.

It should be noted that Mandeville's relation of the custom of Tibetan sky burials seems to originate in the written account *The Travels of Friar Odoric*. Odoric was a missionary in the East, where he seems to have witnessed such a funeral. His first-hand description of the funeral is much the same as Mandeville's, which has led scholars to identify Odoric as the source for the section of Mandeville's tale that describes Tibet. However, Mandeville's description of the funeral practice of exposure contains several significant changes from the ideas of Odoric, demonstrating his relativistic attitude towards the practice. While Odoric ends his account of sky burials with the derisive comment, "And they say that by acting in this way they show their great respect for their father. And many other preposterous and abominable customs have they" (254), Mandeville takes a different tack. He declines to make any such overtly judgmental statement.

Instead, Mandeville's account reveals a willingness to imagine the experiences of those who engage in a funerary practice so different from what was acceptable in his own cultural worldview. We see this in the way he interprets and expands on Odoric's description of the son's emotional experience during the sky burial. Odoric recounts,

[T]he eagles and vultures come down from the mountains and every one takes his morsel and carries it away. Then all the company shout aloud, saying, 'Behold! the man is a saint! For the angels of God come and carry him to Paradise.' And in this way the son deems himself to be honoured in no small degree. (254)

Here, Odoric's brief description refuses to humanize the participants and does not expand on the experiences of those attending the funeral. However, Mandeville extends the ideas presented in Odoric's account, adding a speculative human element by guessing how the son must perceive the attendance of each bird at the sky burial. In contrast to Odoric, Mandeville writes,

[P]riests there sing... 'Regard and see how good a man this was, whom the angels of God come to fetch to Paradise.' Then the son and all his friends think that his father has been greatly honoured when the birds have eaten him. And the more birds that arrive the more joy have all his friends, the more they think the dead man is honoured. Then the son goes home taking all the friends with him, and he gives them a great feast; each one tells the others in their mirth how ten or sixteen, or twenty birds came, just as if it were a great cause for rejoicing to them. (186-7)

As it turns out, Mandeville's speculation as to the son's pride in seeing more rather than less birds attending the funeral correlates with the reality of sky burials. According to Gouin, if enough raptors do not arrive and consume the body, attendees of the funeral draw negative conclusions about the moral actions of the deceased during their life (Gouin 70). Surprisingly, Mandeville's effort to project himself into the experience of the mourning son in his account produced a somewhat accurate relation of the social reality surrounding this funerary practice. This speaks to his empathetic and speculative abilities. He plagiarized Odoric's experiences and altered them with a mind open to the realities of other, equally valid and human cultures.



In the context of Western literature, particularly that subset which represents foreign cultures, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* has a complex legacy. Although riddled with mistruths and sensationalized accounts, the *Travels* can also be said to present a proto-relativistic view of Eastern cultures. Significantly, Mandeville managed to popularize his account, and therefore spread his forward-thinking viewpoint, in a time when otherness was more often than not equated to evil. He slowly leads readers to his empathetic views by first introducing them to the near East via his pilgrimage guide in the beginning of the *Travels*. As his account moves further East, his relativistic philosophy becomes more apparent, especially in his treatment of the fictional Cadhilhe lamb fruit, and the real-world Tibetan sky burial.

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