Knight, Traveller, or Author? The Question of Authorship in *The Book of John Mandeville*

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Abstract

Academic studies have been paying less and less attention to the importance of Sir John Mandeville as a literary character. Given the quantity of detail the author gives about himself, he cannot be ignored. In this study, I will take into consideration the theories about authorship and authority that emerged in the Late Middle Ages while referring to some contemporary texts that questioned the role of the *auctor* as heir of an old literary tradition to arrive at some preliminary conclusions about *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1375) and the role of its alleged author in the narrative.

Keywords: *The Book of John Mandeville*; John Mandeville; Authorship; *auctoritas*; Middle Ages; Medieval English Literature; travel writing

Resumo

Os estudos académicos têm prestado cada vez menos atenção à importância de Sir John Mandeville enquanto personagem literária. Tendo em conta a quantidade de detalhes que fornece sobre si, Mandeville não pode ser ignorado. Para este estudo, irei considerar as teorias sobre autoria e autoridade que surgiram no final da Idade Média para chegar a algumas conclusões preliminares sobre *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1375) e o papel do seu alegado autor na narrativa, ao mesmo tempo que farei referência a alguns textos contemporâneos que questionam o papel do *auctor* enquanto herdeiro de uma muito antiga tradição literária.

Palavras-chave: *The Book of John Mandeville*; John Mandeville; autoria; *auctoritas*; Idade Média; Literatura Medieval Inglesa; narrativa de viagens

The identity of Sir John Mandeville, author of the most popular travel book of the Middle Ages, dominated academic studies for many years. It was only recently that the focus of study was shifted towards the text itself. The change has been overall positive, but it has caused a diminishing of the importance of the English knight as a literary character. Although attention must be given to the narrative, the information transmitted by the author about himself cannot be ignored when studying his work. It is my opinion that, by analysing the way Mandeville chose to present himself, it is possible to achieve a better understanding of his purpose in creating what is now believed to be a fictional author/narrator. In this study, I will take into consideration the theories about authorship and authority that emerged in the Late Middle Ages while referring to some contemporary texts that question the role of the author as heir of an old literary tradition. It is not my aim to do an exhaustive survey of those theories, but to compare *The Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1357) with other late medieval literary works to arrive at some preliminary conclusions about the narrative and its author.

The late medieval work known as *The Book of John Mandeville*[1] describes the journey to Jerusalem and then to Asia of a traveller who presents himself as John Mandeville, an English knight born and raised in St. Albans, north of London. Mandeville left England in 1322 and travelled for thirty-four years, making contact with the people and traditions of many strange places, full of wonders and monstrous races. When he finally returned *home* "to rest" (Seymour, *The Defective Version* 135, lines 30-1),[2] he decided to write down his adventures, a work he finished in 1366.[3] The first part of the narrative, directly inspired by previous pilgrimage narratives, is about Jerusalem, the holiest city, and the centre of the world,[4] and the various routes to it. Mandeville describes biblical sites, places where miracles took place, and some personal experiences. The sobriety of the depiction of the holy places contrasts with the second part of the book, the account of the East, *"un réservoir onirique de l'Occident médiéval"* (Le Goff and Truong 174), and of the encounters with monsters, but it is possible to find in both of them a fascination for the miraculous and the marvellous that is typical of the period and *The Book of John Mandeville* as a whole.

The Book of John Mandeville appeared first in the French region in about 1375 (*Sir John Mandeville* 8). "One of the most popular medieval books" (Moseley 125), it survives in about three hundred manuscripts and fragments in about ten European languages, including Czech, German, and Irish, produced between the fourteenth and the seventeenth centuries (Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville* 3; Yeager 160). Unfortunately, there are no known manuscript copies in Portugal or in Portuguese, and

only one survives in Spain (MS. Esc. M-III-7; end of the fourteenth century).[5] The number of manuscripts is very high by medieval standards (Bale, *The Book of Marvels and Travels* xvii). It is higher than the number of known copies of *Il Milione* (between seventy and one hundred), the adventures of the Venetian explorer Marco Polo in Asia, suggesting that, although Polo is now more famous than Mandeville, the work of the English knight enjoyed a wider readership and greater circulation in medieval and early modern Europe.

Mandeville may have been very popular but almost nothing is known about him. The only contemporary information available is the one given by him, and the credibility of his statements is easily put into question after closer analysis as there are many inconsistencies, including his origin. Whereas he assumes to be English and to belong to the most prestigious class of medieval society, knighthood,[6] there is no proof that such a person existed. On the other hand, the earliest dated manuscript (Paris, Bibliothéque Nationale NAF 4515-4516) was made in Paris, in 1371. That is why most scholars believe *The Book of John Mandeville* was created in France and, probably, in the French language, and not in England, and that it was from the French region that it made its way to English territory, where a different version was developed. The popularity of the narrative in England is attested by the number of surviving manuscripts and variations in Middle English.[7]

Given that almost nothing is known about Mandeville and that many of his claims were taken from previous works,[8] from the nineteenth century on, the text was discredited, the author was dismissed as a liar and his book rejected as pure fiction (Letts 36-7). With the start of a new century, the mystery surrounding Mandeville's identity led to the emergence of several theories,[9] which became the main focus of analysis. More recently, the attention was redirected to the work itself and its unique place in the *corpus* of medieval travel writing. Scholars such as Charles Moseley, Iain Macleod Higgins and Rosemary Tzanaky have put aside questions of authorship to focus on the narrative and what it tells about the time it was written and the intentions of its author. Tzanaky's study is particularly interesting because it analyses *The Book* from a new perspective: the reception by medieval audiences. Stressing the different influences and tones of *The Book of John Mandeville*, Tzanaky showed how the readers "treated the work as a mine of information on a variety of issues, seeing it as a pilgrimage guide, geographical study, collection of marvels, historical source of moral treatise depending on their personal tastes" (11). In the author's opinion, Mandeville knew what he was doing: he was trying to break free from conventional models "to express himself in new forms" (7).

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The Book of John Mandeville is full of information about its author. Mandeville tells his readers his name, that he is a knight, where he was born, on which date he left England and crossed the sea to the Holy Land, and when he returned *home*. He suggests he embarked on a pilgrimage because he did something wrong, not only because he wanted to see the Holy Land and what lay beyond. He also describes in full detail encounters with several important people in the East, including what they talked about, and with the Pope, whom he visited when he was travelling from the East. This quantity of detail was not usual at the time. Medieval writers rarely felt the need to publicise themselves or to give any information about their lives. Their texts were often disseminated anonymously, in thematic compilations, anthologies or miscellanies. In her study, Tzanaki showed how *The Book of John Mandeville* was included in different types of compilations depending on how it was perceived by the compilers, one of several groups of people who participated in the creation of a book. As Anthony Bale explained, in manuscript culture, there was always

> a number of authors involved in the production of any one text: sources, scribes, translations and compilers could all play a significant role in the production of narrative and the rewriting of the text.
>
> Responsibility for "meaning" was not invested in any one person.
> ("From Translator to Laureate" 919)

In the Middle Ages, knowledge was based on established written authorities (*auctoritas*) on which subsequent readers conferred a cultural prestige that made them worthy of repetition (Bale, "From Translator to Laureate" 921). These could be shaped by the tastes and preferences of those who worked in the production of manuscripts without marking their interventions (Higgins, *Writing East* 18). The concept has its origins in the prologues and introductions written by late grammarians for the works of Classical and later authors (a genre known as *acessus ad auctores*, "introduction to authors", which included background information about the *auctor* and the text), and in a deep respect for the achievements of the past (Griffiths 123) that the aphorism of dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants,[10] attributed by John of Salisbury (d. 1180)[11] to Bernard of Chartres (d. 1160),[12] summarizes so beautifully: *"Dicebat Bernardus Carnotensis nos esse quasi nanos gigantium humeris insidentes, ut possimus plura eis et remotiora videre, non utique propii visus acumine, aut*

eminentia corporis, sed quia in altum subvehimur et extollimur magnitudine gigantes" (qtd. in Eco 22).[13]

The existance of previous moldes and their variations, aspects of the major phenomena described by Paul Zumthor as *"la 'mouvance' des textes"* ("the sphere of influence of the texts"), an expression that refers to the hierarchical character of the textual production, determined the function and effects of medieval intertextuality (Zumthor 9), one of the main characteristics of the literature of the period, which was reworked by Mandeville in a very distinctive way — by resorting to previous texts to create his own (fictional) travel account, the English knight produced a "multi-text", as suggested by Higgins, "characterised both by its typical medieval intertextuality and by its own distinctive *intra*textual multiplicity" (*Writing East* 19).

As pointed out by Alastair Minnis in *Medieval Theory of Authorship*, in the early Middle Ages, "the notion of the *auctor* as an agent engaged in literary activity was submerged" and the author interested only "as a source of *auctoritas*" (89). The authority did not reside in the person or people that gave a work its textual form but in external factors (Griffiths 123). The author was seen as the recipient of a message that originated with God, "the sole *auctor* of things" (Minnis 90). Jane Griffiths believes the concept of *auctor* was responsible for the suppression or exclusion of the names of many authors from their works. "The readers and copyists of a text were often less interested in who had written it than in the message that it contained or the function that it served", she wrote (125). There were some exceptions, though. Contrary to what was common, some authors did sign their literary works but in a way that did not challenge the traditional ideas according to which "an author was merely a channel for the material that his text contains" (Griffiths 125). Robert Mannyng, the author of a chronicle completed in 1338, explains, by underlining his name at the beginning of his text, that he is going to tell a story "als . . . wryten it fand" (qtd. in Griffiths 125), implying he is retelling something he read somewhere.

By the fourteenth century, things were starting to change. New ideas about authorship began to emerge. In the early thirteenth century, influenced by new methods of thinking and techniques of study, commentators started to follow the so-called 'Aristotelian prologue',[14] based on the four major causes that, for the Greek philosopher, governed all activity and change in the universe[15]. According to this model,

> . . . the auctor would be discussed as the "efficient cause" or motivating agent of the text, his materials would be discussed as the "material cause", his literary style and structure would be considered as twin aspects of the "formal cause", while his

> ultimate end or objective in writing would be considered as the "final cause". (Minnis 71-2)

The use of the "four causes" brought commentators closer to the biblical authors. Their human qualities and authorial role or function began to receive more attention (Minnis 72-3). The new approach influenced the attitudes of major medieval writers "towards the moral and aesthetic value of their creativity, the literary roles and forms they had adopted, and the ultimate functions which they envisage their works as performing" (Minnis 74).

In England, several writers questioned the role of the author and the duality of his relationship with his authorised predecessors. Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1340-1400) was probably the one who paid more attention to the subject. He first addressed the question in *The House of Fame* (1379-80). Described by Kathryn L. Lynch as a "highly intellectual and literary poetic performance" (*Dream Visions and Other Poems* 39), the poem describes a journey through a literary dream world by which the narrator ponders his role in the poetic tradition of the age (Pugh 15). The intention is most evident in Book III, when, after entering Lady Fame's chamber, the narrator finds himself surrounded by Statius, Homer, and Virgil, the great Classical *auctores* whose reputation withstood the test of time. The scene is a commentary on the constant confrontation between the "long shadow" of the author's illustrious ancestors and "his search for new tidings about which to write" (Pugh 21).

The subject is also present in *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400). The two tales told by Chaucer the Pilgrim, "Sir Topas" and "Melibee", explore the relationship between the purposes of literature as were understood in the Middle Ages (*solaas*, "entertainment"; and *sentence*, "moralisation") and analyse the duties of the poet as artist and heir of a much older literary tradition (Phillips 172; Benson 66). The reaction of the Host helps sustain this interpretation: Harry Bailly interrupts the telling of "Sir Topas" because it makes his "eres aken of thy drasty speche" (*The Canterbury Tales*, line 923), and praises "Melibee" by wishing his wife "hadde herd" it (line 1894). Also significant is the fact that he seems to know very little about Chaucer the Pilgrim. Bailly does not say anything definitive about him. He does not know his profession or what to call him (the question "What man artow?" is never answered). For Helen Phillips,

> . . . the many puzzling aspects of Chaucer's self-presentation . . . (described by someone else, separated from the other characters, as an inadequate story-teller,

> lacking any creative originality) raise the deepest questions about authorship: Where is the author in the text? Who is the author in the text? (173)

It is right to assume that Sir John Mandeville, a well-read and intelligent writer, was trying to answer the same questions by creating a literary character that, like Chaucer the Pilgrim, was not himself, but a figure he could use to explore what meant to be an author in a time where writing was seen as an act originated with God and directed by Him. The way he addresses the question of authorship implies a profound reflection on the topic (he did not only create a name, but a whole *persona*), which was a few later decades picked up by Chaucer and also by John Gower (c. 1330-1408). Gower distinctly addressed the issue in *Vox Clamantis*, a dream poem inspired by the Peasant's Revolt of 1381. Written in Latin, the text is concerned with the general corruption of society (including the Church), notably in England. Gower, following the tradition that sees the author as the recipient of God's words, "seems to be identifying himself as an instrumental *causa efficiens* working under the primary *causa efficiens*, God" (Minnis 335), and describes himself in terms that enable such identification (339). Mandeville's approach also gives force to the theory, supported by critics such as M. C. Seymour, that the author was most certainly an ecclesiastic, and thus with easy access to a library with books on several different subjects.[16]

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In the fourteenth century, travel literature was moving away from traditional models towards a new one in which the authority of the writer was much more important. By then, churchmen and crusaders, the usual authors of travel narratives, were not the only ones contributing to the development of the knowledge and understanding of the Far East. On the other hand, "geography was turning away from traditional modes towards a new type of interest in ethnography and science" (Tzanaki 11), of which the account of the travels of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo, full of descriptions of places and people little known in Europe, is a good example. Produced in 1298, while Polo was imprisoned by the Genoese[17], the book describes the explorer's adventures in Asia in the late thirteenth century. Originally written in French, with the help of the writer Rustichello of Pisa, the work, known in Italian as *Il Milione*[18] and in English as *Book of Marvels of the World* or simply *The Travels of Marco Polo*, was a success in its time. However, contrary to what happened with *The Book of John Mandeville*, most readers considered it to be a work of fiction rather than a true story.[19] Perhaps anticipating the doubts, Polo declares in the prologue that his book is "a truthful one" (*The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* 9 qtd. in Youngs 25).

The appeal of the travel writers' stories lay largely in the novelty and implausibility of the material collected by the authors (Daston and Park 62). That is why travel narratives place a great emphasis on eyewitnesses. This created a conflict between the old cultural patterns and the writer's personal experience, attitude and aim (being those real or imagined) that was not easy to solve. In those cases, it was required, "on the one hand, a process of deconstruction of the already known, and, on the other hand, in parallel the codification of an unprecedented reality with the consequent creation of a new and original knowledge" (Lopes 89). As highlighted by Stephen Greenblatt,

> the problem with eyewitness accounts is that they implicitly call attention to the reader's lack of that very assurance - direct sight - that is their own source of authority. The undermining of credibility is intensified in an account such as Mandeville's, with its tales of exotic wonders beyond what men can normally "conceive with their own kindly wits". (32)

It was then necessary to make sure that the ccredibility of the narrative was unquestionable.

There are several moments in *The Book of John Mandeville* when the author denotes a preoccupation with authenticity. The insertion of his name and the many allusions to what he supposedly saw and experienced firsthand is proof of that.[20] Mandeville felt the need to specify when he was speaking about something he saw or about something he heard someone speak about, as is the case of the legend of Hippocrates' daughter, which he learned from the islanders in Greece (Seymour, *The Defective Version* 15, lines 11-13). To fully convince his readers that his account was true, he says he received papal approval.[21] He describes the meeting with the Pope, which could not have happened in Rome as he says but in Avignon, where the Papacy was based from 1309 to 1376 following the Papal Schism,[22] in the final pages of his work, stating that the Pontiff had "a book vpon Latyn" that contained the same information "and myche more" (Seymour, *The Defective Version* 136, lines 12-13).

> . . . Y made my wey in my comyng hamwarde to Rome to schewe my book to þe holy fader þe pope and telle to hym merueyles whiche Y hadde seye in dyuerse cuntreez, so þat he wiþ his wise counseyl would examyne hit . . . he seide þat he hadde a book vpon Latyn þat conteyned þat and myche more, after whiche boke þe mappa mundi ys ymade, which book he schewid to me. And þerfore þe holy fader þe pope haþ

> ratefyed and confermed my book in alle poyntes. (Seymour, *The Defective Version*, lines 3-15)

The book of Mandeville is approved by the Pope because the leader of the Catholic Church knows of a previous work (*auctoritas*) that attests to what the English wrote. By describing the scene in "Rome", Mandeville is, thus, presenting his readers with two different forms of legitimisation: written *auctoritas*, in the form of the Latin book; and eyewitness, because he saw the manuscript held by the Pope that confirms what he wrote "in alle poyntes" (Seymour, The Defective Version, line 15).

For Ján Elsner and Joan-Pau Rubiés, the way Mandeville gathered and reworked different types of information to achieve his vision implies a personal preoccupation with the impact of the narrative which constitutes an innovation in the history of travel literature in late medieval Europe, stressing that it was not present in the genre before Polo (39): "Mandeville in this way represents both a conservative attempt to reinstate a past vision in a period of doubt and a concession to the new authority of the traveller as a direct observer" (Elsner and Rubiés 39). This can help explain the decisions the English knight made regarding his literary *persona*. By giving the author a name, Mandeville was not only trying to give credibility to his narrative but also highlighting the role of the *auctor* in the process of creation. In *The Book of Mandeville*, the travel writer is not a vessel for God's words; he is trying to assert himself as a creator. Because of that, I do not agree with Tzanaki when she says that Mandeville asserted his authority solely by relying upon "his traveller-persona" and "not on the written *authoritas*" (7). He found a way of doing both things by playing rather intelligently with the traditional medieval notion of authority.

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[1] In general, medieval works had no title and this one is no exception. *The Book of John Mandeville* is also referred to as *The Travels of John Mandeville* but the first title is more common. Personally, I prefer the first one to avoid it being mistaken for the book of Marco Polo, known in English as *The Travels*.

[2] Mandeville never says where he returned to, so it is impossible to know if he ended his days in England, possibly in his hometown, or if he established himself in another country, maybe France, where the book first appeared. What is clear, though, is that he left the East and travelled back to the West. The sentence in the Defective Version is the following: "And I loon Maundeuyele kniȝt, þat went out of my cuntre and passid þe see þe ȝere of oure lord a m.ccc.xxx. and tweye, and haue ypassid þurȝ many londis, cuntrez, and yles, and now am ycome to rest; I haue compiled þis booke . . ." (135, lines 28-31).

[3] This is the date given in the Defective Version (135, lines 30-1), the oldest English variation of *The Book of John Mandeville* (produced after 1377) and the one I will refer to in this study because of its precedence in England. Different versions give different dates for the conclusion of the book and also for the departure of Mandeville from England. Higgins pointed out that copy errors were usual due to the use of Roman numerals (*The Book of John Mandeville* 5).

[4] In the Middle Ages, it was believed that Jerusalem occupied the centre of the world. The origins of the myth, popularized by pilgrim and travel narratives, are obscured. See Higgins, Iain Macleod. "Defining the Earth's Center in a Medieval 'Multi-Text': Jerusalem in T*he Book of John Mandeville*." *Text and Territory. Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*. Edited by Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles. University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998, pp. 29-53. Mandeville was one of the medieval authors who gave more attention to the special geographical localisation of the Holy City. See Chapter 7 of *The Book of John Mandeville*.

[5] See Temperley, María Mercedes Rodríguez, editor. *Juan de Mandeville: Libro de las maravillas del mundo y del Viaje de la Tierra Sancta de Jerusalem (Impresos castellanos del siglo XVI)*. Edición crítica, estudio preliminar y notas de María Mercedes Rodríguez Temperley. IIBICRIT-SECRIT, 2011.

[6] See Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville* 11-15.

[7] The story of the production and dissemination of *The Book of John Mandeville* is a very complex one. Given the aim of this study, it is impossible to do a comprehensive account, which would fill several pages. It is also relevant to note that there is very important work to be done in this area. Since M. C. Seymour's critical studies, no major work has been done about the different versions of *The Book*, be it in France or in England. Because of that, most works ignore the new discoveries regarding manuscripts and are outdated. Given the current state of the art, I do not feel confident in suggesting any reading. In my master's thesis (about *The Book of John Mandeville*), I will give a full and updated account of all the manuscripts of the Defective Version.

[8] See Letts, 29-33; Higgins, *The Book of John Mandeville* 219-21.

[9] See Letts, 13-22; Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville* 25-36.

[10] See Eco 22-6.

[11] One of the foremost philosophers of the so-called Twelfth Century Renaissance. See Sinkler, Georgette. "John of Salisbury." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, op. Cit., p. 454; "John of Salisbury." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. First published Wed Aug 10, 2016; substantive revision Wed Apr 27, 2022. plato.stanford.edu/entries/john-salisbury/. Accessed 26 August 2023.

[12] Humanist, philosopher, and head of the school of Chartres. See Jordan, Mark D. "Bernard of Chartres." *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Second Edition. Edited by Robert Audi. Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 86; Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Bernard de Chartres." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 30 Apr. 2020. britannica.com/biography/Bernard-de-Chartres. Accessed 30 December 2022.

[13] In English (my translation): "Bernard of Chartres used to say that we are like dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants. If we can see further is not because our height is greater and our sight shaper, but because we are standing on their shoulders."

[14] See Minnis 79-81.

[15] From the middle twelfth century onwards, there was a rediscovery of the works of Aristotle as a result of a process of translation of new rediscovered manuscripts in Greek and Arabic in places like Syria, Constantinople, and Spain. Until about 1100, Aristotle's work was only known from fragments and commentaries, most of them composed by Boethius (c. 480-524). Plato was, for the most part of the Middle Ages, considered 'the Philosopher'. See Knowles, David. *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*. Second Edition. Edited by D. E. Luscombe and N. L. Brooke. Longman, pp. 167-74.

[16] See Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville* 10.

[17] See Youngs 25-8; Maraini, Fosco, and Peters, Edward. "Marco Polo." *Encyclopedia Britannica*. britannica.com/biography/Marco-Polo. Accessed 24 January 2023.

[18] The title probably derives from the traveller's nickname *Il Milione*, from the description of the millions of things he saw in the Mongol empire. See Maraini and Peters, *op. cit*.

[19] *Il milione*'s reputation suffered a terrible blow in 1553 when Giovanni Battista Ramusio commented that Polo's family name meant "the liar". See "The World Translated" 156-7. The discussion about the authenticity of the work goes on till today. See, for example, Wood, Frances. *Did Marco Polo Go to China?* Secker and Warburg, 1995.

[20] The preoccupation with authenticity is not exclusive of Sir John Mandeville. It can also be found in other texts of the same period, namely *Piers Plowman* (c. 1377-9). During a conversation with the figure of Anima in the "B-Text", William Langland, the presumed author of the dream poem, says his name "is Long Wille" (ed. Schmidt 1987: XV.152 qtd. in Griffiths 126). Similarly, Mandeville introduces himself at the beginning of his book. Like Langland, he was trying to lend an impression of authenticity to his narrative. For Langland, as for Mandeville, *authoritas* was not enough; they both felt the need to reinforce the credibility of their works by presenting themselves.

[21] According to Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park, the Latin Vulgate Version of *The Book of John Mandeville* (a Latin translation of a French version produced in 1375) circulated together with what was supposed to be a papal certificate declaring the narrative to be true. (62).

[22] See Mollat, G. *The Popes at Avignon*. Translated by Janet Love. Harper & Row, 1963; Logan, F. Donald. *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages*. Routledge, 2005, pp. 297-314.