

Falsehood, Fantasy and Forgery : 16th century English discovery literature on the New World

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When it comes to writing about the New World in the 16th century, it would be fair to say that the Italians broke the news; the Spanish described it, and the Germans and Dutch mapped and published it. The French fought over it with competing cosmographies, the Portuguese turned it into poetry, and the English translated everyone else. While this article is not a thorough comparison of early European travel literature, it attempts to put English discovery literature in a European context, and also show how the English contribution began the 16th century in an interlocking pattern based on falsehood, fantasy and forgery.

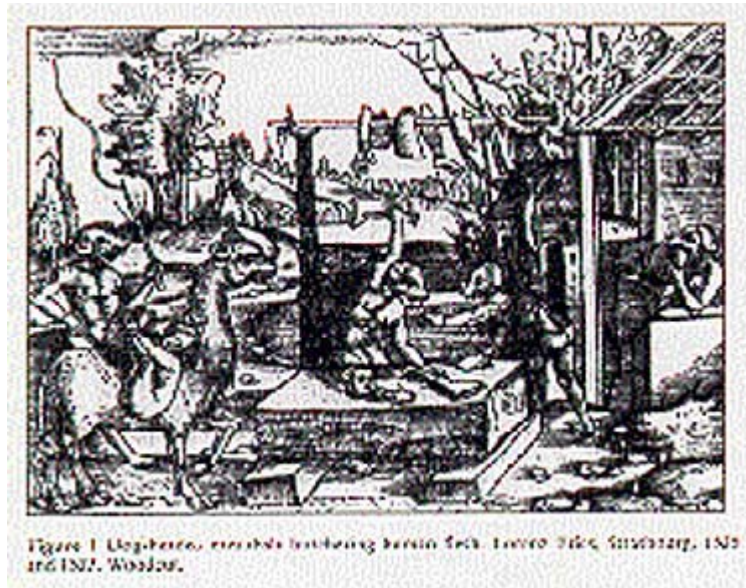
The English were the last of the Europeans to join the westward flow of discovery, and the least of the 16th century writers of travel narratives. Richard Hakluyt wrote in the introduction of his 1589 *Principal Navigations* that while in France he read and heard other nations praised for discoveries and exploration, but the English only criticized for “their sluggish security, and continuall neglect of the like attempts.”(xviii) Determined to redeem his nation’s reputation, Hakluyt began translating and publishing all the travel narratives he could find, most of them Spanish and Italian. John Cabot, an Italian sailing for England, certainly touched on the American mainland in 1497, but he didn’t write about it. Other English sailors left only sketchy accounts of travels early in the century. Thus in the beginning of the century, there was little actual reporting from England.

The English instead were writing about the edge of their universe long before they ventured out to have a look at it. Their debut into discovery literature was based on imagination, rather than observation, a door opened in the late 14th century by *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. *Mandeville* described the journey of an English knight who visited the Middle East, India and Cathay and encountered all manner of strange beings, including people with the heads of dogs. This would be easy to dismiss as medieval fantasy, but for the fact that 200 years later, English explorers took *Mandeville* with them as they journeyed west. At least one explorer (Martin Frobisher) took the book itself, and many more took the idea that quite possibly, dog-headed people, or cynocephales, lived in that new land across the ocean.

The concept that cynocephales, giants, pygmies, cannibals and other cryptids inhabit the edges of the known world goes back to the beginning of history, recounted by Pliny the Elder and Herodotus both. Then in medieval literature, two traditions flourished: that paradise exists on Earth, and its location needs only to be discovered, and that a frightening alterity lurks on the unknown margins of territory. Both ideas still make a good story (the margins are now in space: witness X-Files, Stargate, etc.). Earthly Paradise, following directions from Genesis in the Bible, was depicted in medieval maps as somewhere in the east, likely near the fabled kingdom of Prester John. One of the telltales of transition from the Middle Ages to the

Renaissance is the disappearance of Earthly Paradise from maps, and the advent of scientific measures such as meridians.

Mandeville was long considered to be a true account of an Englishman's journey, until in the 19th century, when it was shown to have been written by a French physician in Liège, who plundered much of the fantastic detail from the manuscripts of medieval monks. It was an invention, as were the cynocephales, but it spawned an industry of travel literature based on falsehood and fantasy. "Mandeville was perhaps more responsible than anyone else for popularizing the tradition as a whole," noted Robert Cawley in *Unpathed Waters* (21).



From Lorenz Fries, *Carta Marina* (1525)
(Source: Celia J. Shiffer, www.lehigh.edu/~ejg1/natimag/celia.html)

Thus the cynocephales were an easy transfer to America when explorers turned westward. In a 1525 German edition of Amerigo Vespucci's supposed letters about his voyages to the New World, the publisher included a woodcut depicting the native inhabitants as dog-headed cannibals. Columbus had in fact returned from the islands across the sea with reports of cannibals, and rumors of dog-headed people. While the cannibals were real, the idea of dog-headed people more likely was his own interior response to exterior strangeness, straight from the pages of *Mandeville*. "The result of all these mixtures is a Caribbean that belongs as much to the Other World of medieval geographic fantasy as it does to the map Columbus helped realize," according to Mary B. Campbell (10).

Amerigo Vespucci also encountered cannibal inhabitants in Brazil, but his letters never mentioned cynocephales. Not even the forged ones went that far. Vespucci sailed twice across the Ocean Sea, and on the last voyage in 1501 went as far south as the Falkland Islands. He wrote three letters to his patron, Lorenzo de Medici, describing what he had seen, and in the last one, announced that the land across the sea had to be a continent. It was too large a land mass to be an island on the edge of Asia. But his letters reporting this astounding news were rather factual, dry observations that failed to meet the expectations of the fantastic raised by *Mandeville* and company. A forger went to work, and in August 1504 published *Mundus Novus*, and in September 1504, *Four Voyages*, letters attributed to Vespucci but full of errors

and anomalies that Vespucci himself could never have written. They were conclusively refuted as forgeries in 1924 by University of Palermo geography professor Alberto Magnaghi. *Four Voyages* also invented an earlier voyage by Vespucci in 1497, which would predate Columbus' touching the southern mainland.

"The demand in Amerigo's day, as in ours, was for spiced-up narratives," wrote his biographer, Frederick J. Pohl (154). "Amerigo's genuine letters had been too dispassionate, and he had presented too calmly his startling, revolutionizing idea of a New World." An example of changes made in the texts: in his genuine letters, Vespucci said he slept *among* the natives. In the forgeries, he slept *with* native women, and described their nakedness in detail. As they say in London, someone sexed up the report. And Renaissance publishers loved it. *Mundus Novus* first appeared in Paris in Latin in 1504. Over the next four years, 12 Latin editions were published in nine different cities: Augsburg, Rome, Nuremberg, Strasbourg, Rostock, Antwerp and again in Paris. German editions appeared in seven cities between 1505 and 1508; it also was published in Dutch, Italian and French. An English pamphlet based on the letters (though not a reproduction) appeared between 1510 and 1515. *Four Voyages*, with the fictional pre-Columbine voyage to the southern continent, followed a similar path.

In France, *Four Voyages* landed in the hands of scholars gathered at the Gymnase Vosgien in Saint Dié to study geography under the patronage of Rene II, duc de Lorraine. Among the scholars was Martin Waldseemüller, a cartographer working on a new cosmography, who then wrote in its introduction:

Today these parts of the earth, Europe, Asia and Africa, have been completely explored, and a fourth part has been discovered by Amerigo Vespucci, as may be seen in the attached charts. And since Europe and Asia have received the names of women, I see no reason why we should not call this other place Amerige, that is the land of Amerigo, or America, after the wise man who discovered it. (Thomas, 310)

His *Cosmographiae introductio*, published in 1507, was the first to show the new continent as such, with a new ocean on the other side of it, and the first to apply the name 'America' to its southern half. (The northern half of the continent did not acquire the name until the Mercator map of 1538.) Given the chain of events, we could thus call the baptism of America a German mistake based on an Italian deception carried out in the eastern hills of France.

The forgeries had another great impact, this time on English letters. The fraudulent letters, mostly likely in a Latin translation, were read by Thomas More, an English barrister, writer, translator, assemblyman and minister to Henry VIII. More used the forgeries as a springboard for his treatise on the possibilities for better government, *Utopia*. In the book, he meets a Portuguese traveler called Raphael Hythloday (whose name, in Greek, means talker of nonsense), who supposedly journeyed with Vespucci and spent five years in a land called Utopia (a name invented by More, a combination of the Greek *outopia* – no place – and *eutopia* – good place). More sailed on Vespucci's westerly winds to proffer ideas of a libertarian and egalitarian society far too radical to publish as his own. *Utopia* was published in Latin in Louvain in 1516 and became a popular read in Europe long before it finally was translated into English in 1551.



Sir Thomas More, by Hans Holbein
The Frick Collection, New York

Photograph by Lara Eakins (<http://tudorhistory.org/people/more/gallery.html>)

The line of succession is clear, and resting thoroughly on the side of fiction, from *Mandeville* to *Four Voyages* to *Utopia*. Like his predecessors, More did not have to leave familiar shores to find an exotic trope. And *Utopia* was yet another important piece of 16th century discovery literature that did not appear in English until decades after it was published in the rest of Europe. *Four Voyages* was not actually reproduced in English until 1895. Discovery literature in other European countries, such as France, Spain and Portugal, reflected both the fascination travel held in their societies, and their cultural preferences for expressing it. Spain and Portugal were the first nations to extend their reach westward, and their literature took various forms, from epic poem to crown-sponsored chronicle.

Long before England, fiction crossed the Atlantic with the early Iberian explorers. At the turn of the 16th century, Spanish and Portuguese explorers sailed with the hugely popular chivalric novel *Amadis de Gaula* in hand, and named California and the town of Olinda in Brazil after places and people in that series. Later, as colonization began, the kings of both Spain and Portugal appointed royal cosmographers, perhaps in an attempt to control the story, but also to lend it coherence. Thus we have more than 20 Spanish narratives written by explorers themselves, or by the official cosmographer, in the 16th century. While the majority of Portuguese narratives – at least 12 of them – are about journeys to Africa and India, a few explorers wrote about America. Portuguese outposts in Africa and India were far more important to the metropole in the early 16th century than the backwater plantations of Brazil, as reflects the proportion of ink spilled over it. Writing about both east and west, many Portuguese writers used the form of the epic poem, long out of fashion elsewhere, to recount their travels.

As in the case of England, the first explorer sent westward for France was an Italian. In 1524, Verrazano visited the northern coast of the new continent, from Cape Fear to Cape Breton, and met various groups of native inhabitants, none of whom he described as cannibals or cynocephales. His account, like that of Vespucci, was straightforward and factual. It had no literary success whatsoever. Nor did the narratives attributed to Jacques Cartier from his two trips to the Gulf and River of St.

Lawrence a decade later. But by mid-century, French explorers had spent time in Brazil and had encountered cannibalism. A nascent French colony in Brazil disintegrated over questions of religion – Catholic vs. Protestant – in a parallel to conflicts that were sharpening at home. Two cosmographers, André Thevet and Jean Léry, wrote dueling interpretations of cannibalism, Thevet from the Catholic and Léry from the Protestant point of view, each containing as much commentary on the home front as on anything happening in Brazil. Michel de Montaigne followed up on the cannibal theme in 1580, giving the French a near monopoly on the subject. The French and the English had similar approaches to discovery, but not to its literature: where the English fantasized, the French analyzed.

In contrast, England's first narratives of actual travel, rather than the armchair variety, came in 1577 and 1578 from two sailors who accompanied Martin Frobisher to Baffin Bay. They were followed by Philip Amadas and Arthur Barlow's 1584 and Thomas Hariot's 1586 descriptions of Virginia. The English were finally getting out of the gate, and writing about what and whom they encountered. The narratives also were aimed at promoting colonization in Virginia, which had been criticized by returning visitors as somewhat squalid. Hariot retorted:

These reports about Virginia have done much harm to many people who might otherwise have favored and invested in the project, thus honoring and benefiting the nation, besides making financial profit for themselves. I hope future events will bring shame to these tellers of tales.

Future events included a law forbidding criticism of English settlements in America, a censorship none of the other Europeans found necessary. But in these first narratives, the inspiration for exploration is clearly described as profit, rather than Earthly Paradise. And as a money-maker, Virginia proved disappointing.

Thus its patent-holder, Walter Raleigh, mounted an expedition for the south. Raleigh was riding in the wake of the Spanish conquista, hoping to find the equivalent of the Aztec and Inca treasures in the mythical kingdom of El Dorado, the Golden One. If he did, he wrote, he would be greater than Cortés and Pizarro, and wealthier than the Spanish king (136). However, he didn't, and his *Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana*, published in England in 1596, is as much an account of what he didn't find as what he did. El Dorado always seemed to be around the next river bend. In terms of discovery fantasies, it was the closing chapter of a book that included the Fountain of Youth, Atlantis and Shangri-La: there was always just enough reality sprinkled into the legend to make it seem possible.

But in every end is a beginning, and with Raleigh, England marked the transition from searching for the location of paradise on earth to looking for profit, power, and eventually, empire. Raleigh's search for El Dorado was the pivot on which swung both a past of medieval fantasy and a future of profitable empire. Raleigh had taken the step toward joining the Spanish and Portuguese at their wealth and colonization game, and his failures – both in South America and in Virginia – were in fact the foundation for future action by the English crown. At the end of the 16th century, as Iberian domination of the seas slipped, the English and French began to increase their transatlantic presence. Even then explorers' ideas were fueled by inner visions, but the cynocephales had been replaced with pots of gold.

In conclusion, 16th century English literature on the New World was rooted in medieval falsehood and fantasy, as well as Renaissance forgery, from Mandeville to More to Raleigh. The imagination led, while observation followed; the potential was more important than the practical. For the English, the path from the medieval to the modern, in terms of discovery literature, occurred later than the other Europeans, perhaps because the English held onto their Middle Ages longer than the others. It was hard to give up the idea of an Earthly Paradise, and English writers as late as the 17th century tried to describe Virginia in such terms.

In the end, paradise was not lost. It simply was never found.

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