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The influence of medieval romance in the episodes of Hippocrates' daughter and the fairy of the Sparrowhawk Castle from *The Book of John Mandeville*

A influência do romance medieval nos episódios da filha de Hipócrates e da fada do Castelo de Sparrowhawk do *Livro de John Mandeville*

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The Book of John Mandeville (c. 1357)[1] is one of the most famous works of the Middle Ages and probably the most-read travel narrative of the period. It 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 the town of St. Albans, Hertfordshire. In 1322, on Michaelmas Day (29th September), during the time of Edward III, king of England from 1327 to 1377, Mandeville left his country and crossed the sea to the Holy Land and further East. His sojourn lasted thirty-four years, during which he came in contact with the people and traditions of many places, some strange, full of wonders and monstrous beings. When, tired of travelling, he finally returned "to rest" [2], he took on the task of writing down his adventures in the form of a book, which, according to the dates on the Defective Version, the oldest and most popular English variation, he finished in the year 1366[3].

[1] Like most medieval texts, *The Book of Mandeville* had no authorial title. Its medieval names included *The Book of Wonders*, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville,* and *The Book John Mandeville*. Expressions such as 'romance' or *'itinerarium'* were also used. See HIGGINS, Iain Macleod (editor and translator) – *The Book of John Mandeville with Related Texts*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011, pp. xi-xii; TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences. A Study on the Reception of the Book of Sir John Mandeville (1371-1550)*. Aldershot: Routledge, 2003, p. 1. *The Book of John Mandeville* is still the most common title, but some modern editors, such as M. C. Seymour and Iain Macleod Higgins, have adopted the name *Mandeville's Travels*, which only started to be used with Thomas East's edition of 1586. See TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 1. I have opted for *The Book of John Mandeville* because it emphasizes the intentional role of the author and deludes the idea of 'travel'. Today, it is known that Mandeville did not visit the places he describes and that his book resulted from a creative process.

[2] SEYMOUR, M. C. (ed.) – *The Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels*. Oxford: Published for The Early English Text Society by the Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 135, lines 30-31.

[3] SEYMOUR, M. C. (ed.) – *The Defective Version*, pp. 135-136. Different versions give different dates for the conclusion of the book and the departure of Mandeville. Higgins pointed out that copy errors were usual due to the use of Roman numerals. See HIGGINS, Iain Macleod (editor and translator) – *The Book of John Mandeville*, p. 5. Here, I follow the dates in the Defective Version.

In chapters 3 and 14 of this very famous book, respectively — even more famous in its time than Marco Polo's travel account[4] —, Mandeville narrates the stories of Hippocrates' daughter and the fairy of the Sparrowhawk Castle. These two marvellous stories are often seen as 'deviations' of the 'main path' in Mandeville's account, a position I disagree with. Instead, I believe they play an essential role in structuring *The Book* and reinforcing the author's position and message, which has to do with the need for moral reform through the process of reconquering the Holy Land. Also, they prove that Mandeville was inspired not only by medieval non-fiction works but also by other literary traditions of the Middle Ages, namely that of romance.

The episodes have as main characters feminine figures with supernatural characteristics that impose upon the male characters a challenge that has to be successfully overcome to give them access to a gift. The accomplishment of the task depends on them showing a set of characteristics that was expected of them as relevant members of medieval society. Knights, who are given special attention in the legend of Hippocrates' daughter, were considered the best society had to offer.

Above them was the king, who was expected to behave with dignity, in an honourable and gentle way, and to keep and defend the Christian faith[5]. However, in the episode, all the male characters (knights) fail and meet a tragic end. In the story about the Sparrowhawk Castle, although the male characters complete the challenge, they act wrongly when confronted with the possibility of asking for a reward, leading to catastrophic events. In the two stories, the gift is presented to the men by an independent female figure who herself defies women's position in medieval society. There is an old literary tradition of supernatural women who challenge men's character by imposing on them a taboo whose acquiescence results in good luck and wealth. The most famous of these figures is the half-fairy Mélusine,

[4] MOSELEY, C. W. R. D. – "The Marvels, The Mystery, The Man: Reflections on Re-reading Mandeville's Travels". *Forma de Vida. Revista do Programa em Teoria da Literatura da Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa*, n.d. formadevida.org/moseleyfdv22.

[5] Geoffrey Chaucer describes the qualities that make a good king at the beginning of "The Squire's Tale". See CHAUCER, Geoffrey – *The Canterbury Tales. The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Part I, lines 16-27. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957. quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/CT/1:1.1?rgn=div2;view=toc.

whose legends undoubtedly influenced Mandeville, who was one of the inspirations behind Jean d'Arras' romance about the mythical origins of the house of Lusignan.

Both episodes show that 'the best figures society had to offer' were no longer ruled by Christian moral values — knights do not save the damsel in need and are only interested in the profit of the fight; kings lead a sinful existence and are more interested in pursuing their personal interests and pleasures than in ruling with wisdom. In the tale of the Sparrowhawk Castle, it is the poor man's son, a future merchant, who makes the clever choice and not the king, who should be wiser. *The Book* was written at a time when merchants were gaining more importance and emerging as vital members of society, and, in a way, replacing the old institution of knighthood that was starting to decline. The deterioration process is evident in how chivalric values were becoming unimportant to the military class[6], which, at the end of the fourteenth century, boosted by a world in transformation, was starting to change[7]. However, the fact that the youngster also encounters perdition suggests a widespread moral decadence that was not exclusive to the high hanks of medieval society.

Nevertheless, it is the leaders that Mandeville holds responsible. There are several passages in *The Book* in which he speaks about the lack of guidance from the European lords, who are more interested in fighting against each other and pursuing their own interests than in doing what is most important, which is to defend Jerusalem, the Holy Land, and the Christian religion. It is because it had been a long time since there was a crusade in the East that Mandeville decided to write his book, so people could take solace in the description of the holy places and inspire a new desire in the heart of man to reconquer the Holy City. For him, the conquest is not only a question of keeping under Western leadership a place of crucial importance for the Christian religion. The author believes that only by organising a new crusading expedition — an armed pilgrimage and a way of doing penance — can the European lords atone for their sins and reverse the process of moral decline in Europe. The situation is so unacceptable that it can only be reverted by going on a

[6] SAUL, Nigel – *For Honour and Fame. Chivalry in England, 1066-1500*. London: Pimlico, 2012, p. 358.
[7] SAUL, Nigel – *For Honour and Fame*, p. 362.

pilgrimage to the holiest of places and by seizing it from the hands of the Muslims. The salvation of Europe's lost souls is Mandeville's main preoccupation. It is what drives him[8]. It is his 'eurocentricity' that explains his position regarding Muslims and other non-Christians, which he describes with tolerance (except for Jews).

Furthermore, he is rarely unpolite when referring to foreigners, and even when referring to monstrous beings, he is overall positive, highlighting their marvellous traits instead of their abnormal features. These people's behaviour — the 'Other' — contrast with that of the Europeans — the 'Same' —, highlighting their character's faults.

As pointed out by many critics, the apology of the crusading is one of the central themes of *The Book*. It crosses the whole work. There are passages in which the issue is addressed more directly than others. Still, the question is everywhere, including in those episodes that have been regarded as pure entertainment and to break with the monotony of the itinerary description, as is the case of the legends of Hippocrates' daughter and the fairy of the Sparrowhawk Castle. The two tales are a masterful construction of the same critique, delivered in a way that both entertains and provokes reflection. This concept was first put forward by Horace in *Ars Poetica* in the first century BCE and applied by medieval authors such as Gerald of Wales and Gervase of Tilbury in the late twelfth century. They are "not frivolous entertainment"[9], as stated by the Host in the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* and later confirmed by "The Nun's Priest's Tale", a story that can be read as amusement — a fun tale about a cock and a hen, Chanticleer and Pertelote — or as an ethical lesson (*moralite*) on sin and temptation[10].

Furthermore, the two episodes reflect the author's deep knowledge of the culture and literature of the Middle Ages, which critics have widely ignored. Mandeville makes use of several romance motifs, including the supernatural, love, and chivalry,

[8] Perhaps because there was also a time when Mandeville was lost (is that why he left England and perhaps never came back?).
[9] TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 171.
[10] PHILLIPS, Helen – *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales. Reading, Fiction, Context.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000, p. 186.

elements that "might have led contemporaries to classify the work among diverse types of 'romance'"[11]. According to a survey done by Rosemary Tzanaki, *The Book* was described as romance at least in three medieval manuscripts[12], and later 'romanesque' authors borrowed from it, which demonstrates "the many different ways in which the book could be viewed and used as a romance"[13]. It also inspired the production of a later verse variation focused on the marvellous adventures of Sir John Mandeville[14]. However, nowadays, when speaking about Mandeville's sources, medieval works of fiction are rarely named, except for the so-called Alexander Romances, a corpus of narratives about the life and conquests of Alexander the Great that inspired some of the passages about the Far East.

Although it is difficult to indicate with assurance which literary works were consulted by Mandeville, there is no doubt that some influenced him. He definitely knew chivalric romances, which directly inspired the episode of Hippocrates' daughter, including Chrétien de Troyes' Arthurian romances and, possibly, Marie de France's *lais*, a genre that celebrated *gentillesse*[15], magic, love and delight[16].

Additionally, these authors were so well known that it is almost impossible for someone so well-read as Mandeville not to be acquainted with them. He was also undoubtedly aware of the "Fair Unknown" narratives and the *fier baiser* theme ("fearsome kiss"), whose best-known example in late medieval England was *Lybeaus Deconnus*, a fourteenth century romance partly based on a late twelfth century French poem. The similarities between the romance and some passages in *The Book* reinforce that assumption.

In conclusion, the episodes of Hippocrates' daughter and the fairy of the Sparrowhawk Castle rely both on medieval romance tropes, which Mandeville knew perfectly well, and the familiarity of the readers with it, to reinforce the line of

[11] TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 133.
[12] TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 135.
[13] TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 171.
[14] However, as noted by Tzanaki, "this usage has gone against or ignored the Book's underlying intentions". See TZANAKI, Rosemary – *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences*, p. 171.
[15] On the concept of *"gentilless"*, see MANN, Lindsay – "'Gentilesse' and the Franklin's Tale". *Studies in Philology*, Vol. 63/1 (1966), pp. 10–29. *JSTOR*, jstor.org/stable/4173516.
[16] PHILLIPS, Helen – *An Introduction to the Canterbury Tales*, p. 144.

thought of *The Book* and invite the audience to think beyond those stories, acknowledging the centrality of Jerusalem (both geographically and spiritually), the decadence of Western Christendom, and the necessity of spiritual and moral reformation that could be achieved by going on a pilgrimage and, perhaps even more, by leaving behind all that is superfluous and marvel at the natural world, God's most wonderful creation.

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