Travel Writing, Reception Theory and the History of Reading: Reconsidering the Late Middle Ages

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Abstract: This article seeks to explore the value of a reader-oriented approach to late medieval European travel writing. It offers a brief overview of the development of reception theory and the ‘history of reading’ before discussing issues related to the definition of the genre in this period. Examining how medieval readers approached the celebrated accounts of Marco Polo and John Mandeville, as well as a broader range of literature pertaining to travel, it argues that reconstructing the contemporary reception of such works can help us to better understand their position in late medieval culture. Particular attention is paid to the permeability of boundaries between fact and fiction, with a case study exploring two literary imitations of travel accounts produced in early fifteenth-century Florence. The article concludes with some considerations regarding the significance of the reader for our understanding of travel writing’s historical development.

Keywords: medieval travel writing, pilgrimage, John Mandeville, Marco Polo, history of reading, reception theory

# Introduction

Since the 1960s the reader has occupied an increasingly prominent position in mainstream literary studies. Prompted by the emergence of reception theory and the material turn in cultural history, scholars have explored how and why texts were read in their original contexts and by successive generations of readers. Broadly speaking, reader-oriented criticism has had only a limited impact within travel writing studies – a situation that is somewhat surprising given the relative youth of the field, as well as its tendency to engage with critical methodologies.[[1]](#endnote-1) However, recent scholarship on the travel literature of the late European Middle Ages has underscored the value of such an approach.[[2]](#endnote-2) Particular attention has been paid to the accounts of Marco Polo and John Mandeville, often regarded as foundational for the genre, but studies have also explored the reception of pilgrimage guides, the reports of missionaries and merchants, and fictional representations of travel. Though this period remains at the margins of travel writing studies, such research has revealed much about the development of the genre in the pre-modern world.

It is crucial that we consider how and why travel writing has been read. Writing about travel carries an implicit focus on the exchange and circulation of ideas. It crosses the boundaries of literary and cultural history and demands – more than many other modes of writing – a deep understanding of the context in which it was written. Questions of readership and reception are necessarily related to our understanding of the genre’s development, yet they often remain unexplored. As Robin Jarvis observes, the absence of reception-oriented criticism can often lead to reductive and unhelpful generalisations about present-day and historical travel readers and their motivations (2015, 90).

This article seeks to affirm the value of a reception-oriented approach to the study of travel writing and its historical development. Considering issues relating to our conception of the genre in the late medieval period, it reflects on how the theoretical models of reception theory and the more recent ‘history of reading’ allow us to explore travel writing from the viewpoint of the medieval reader. Recent research in this area has revealed a broad variety of contemporary attitudes to different kinds of writing about travel, challenging modern distinctions between individual generic categories and, in particular, notions of fact and fiction. As a case study of two imitation travel accounts produced in early fifteenth-century Florence indicates, if we are to truly understand what it meant to write and read about travel in the late Middle Ages – and how this affected the evolution of the genre – we must be willing to set aside many of our modern concerns.

# Defining Late Medieval Travel Writing

The two examples of late medieval travel writing best known to twenty-first century readers are undoubtedly Marco Polo’s *Devisement dou monde* (c. 1300) and the *Book of John Mandeville* (c. 1356).[[3]](#endnote-3) Both texts were translated into over a dozen languages and enjoyed a remarkable circulation across Latin Europe, with numbers of surviving manuscripts placing them among the most widely read vernacular works of the period. Historical overviews of travel writing have sometimes discussed Polo and Mandeville together, but the texts are markedly different in both motivation and subject matter.[[4]](#endnote-4) Polo’s account describes his travels in the diplomatic service of the Mongol Khan, offering a detailed depiction of Asia through the eyes of a thirteenth-century Venetian merchant, while Mandeville’s work is presented as a guide to the Jerusalem pilgrimage and the marvellous East composed by a knight errant from St Albans. Neither of these figures can be spoken of as an author in the conventional sense of the term. The *Devisement* was penned not by Polo himself but by Rustichello da Pisa, an author of chivalric romance who (if we are to believe the text’s prologue) shared a prison cell with the Venetian a few years after his return to Europe, and fashioned his recollections to appeal to ‘lords, emperors and kings, counts, knights and burghers’ (Gaunt 2013, 82). The *Book*, meanwhile, claims to describe a real journey, but was in fact compiled from numerous sources by an author who in all likelihood never travelled far from a well-stocked library.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Mandeville and Polo are emblematic of the multifaceted nature of travel-related writing in the late Middle Ages. While long distance travel remained beyond the reach of most medieval Europeans, readers accessed information about the Eastern world in a range of textual forms. Accounts of the Jerusalem pilgrimage had circulated throughout Latin Christendom since late antiquity, but the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a marked surge in their production and dissemination. Medieval audiences were also familiar with lands further to the East. The *Romance of Alexander*, a third-century account of the legendary king’s exploits in Asia, and the *Letter of Prester John*, purportedly sent by a powerful Eastern Christian leader to the Byzantine emperor in the twelfth century, both became increasingly popular in the late Middle Ages.[[6]](#endnote-6) The reports of Franciscan missionaries to the Mongol Empire in also circulated widely, most notably the *Itinerarium* (1330) of Odoric of Pordenone, which was translated from Latin into French and Italian and served as one of Mandeville’s primary sources of information about the Eastern world.[[7]](#endnote-7) By the middle of the fifteenth century, Italian and Portuguese reports of Asia and Africa were also widely dispersed, and later supplemented by news of the New World rapidly disseminated through the printing press. Throughout this period, travel was also a key element of a wide range of literary genres, from chivalric romances to religious dream visions. As we shall see, the boundaries between real and imagined journeys were not always clearly delineated.

The sheer diversity of late medieval literature pertaining to travel makes defining ‘travel writing’ in this period problematic; it is no coincidence that general surveys of the genre often begin in earnest with the early modern period. In recent years, scholars have increasingly approached this problem by formulating broad definitions that take into account the formal diversity of travel-related writing. Ernst Bremer (1992) describes medieval travel literature as an *Objektbereich* (subject field) encompassing an extensive range of categories including Eastern travel, pilgrimage accounts and fictional works. Joan-Pau Rubiés (2000, 7) meanwhile argues that while medieval travel literature must take travel as ‘an essential element for its production’, it is not crucial for it to be ‘a theme, or even a structuring element’.[[8]](#endnote-8) Others, including Paul Zumthor (1994), have questioned whether it is indeed possible to identify travel writing as a discrete genre in the late Middle Ages.

Any attempt to categorise medieval travel writing is to some degree anachronistic. We are inevitably bound by modern literary horizons and our particular priorities: as Carl Thompson shrewdly notes, ‘what we class as travel writing, and what we exclude from the genre, are perennially matters of debate, and may vary according to the questions we bring to bear’ (2011, 12). Nevertheless, recent research has shown that there is much to be gained by seeking to understand how medieval readers approached and reacted to travel-related literature. To do so may require us to dismiss the possibility of applying a satisfactory definition to the genre in this period, and even to accept that what ‘travel writing’ meant could vary significantly between social groups and individual readers. However, by resituating these texts within their original contexts we stand to significantly enhance our understanding of travel writing’s place, influence and development in late medieval Europe.

# Reception Theory and the History of Reading

Before considering how late medieval readers approached travel writing it is necessary to examine the critical methodologies associated with the study of textual reception.[[9]](#endnote-9) The term ‘reception theory’ is often conflated with reader-response criticism, pioneered in the 1960s by North American theorists including I. A. Richards, Louise Rosenblatt and Stanley Fish who argued that the role of the reader is inseparable from our broader understanding of literature. The emergence of reader-response criticism was paralleled in West Germany by the Constance School, recognised in particular for the contributions of Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, who focussed their attention on the relationship between the qualities of the text and the reading process.[[10]](#endnote-10) Unlike Iser, Jauss was concerned primarily with broader social and historical issues related to readership, leading him to develop his *Rezeptionästhetik* (reception theory). Key to Jauss’ theory is his notion of the ‘horizon of expectations’, the frame of reference of any given reader which is based on their cultural background and preconceived notions of literary culture. For Jauss, literature represents a ‘dialogue between work and public’ and the meaning of the text in relation to the individual reader constitutes an essential element of literary study.

Though profoundly influential, both reader-response theory in general and Jauss’ reception theory in particular were criticised by contemporaries.[[11]](#endnote-11) Later reformulations of reception theory addressed many of these concerns, yet the most significant issue remained unresolved: while reader-response theorists claim to foreground the reader, they are in fact more concerned with the experiences of a hypothetical audience rather than those of actual groups or individuals. The historical focus of reception theory goes some way to countering this, yet Jauss himself offers relatively little suggestion as to how to deal in concrete terms with real historical readers.

This problem has been addressed in recent years by the emergence of the ‘history of reading’, a developing field which has been embraced with particular enthusiasm in medieval literary studies. Manuscript provenance and philological variation have long been the subject of study but are increasingly used to investigate how texts were shaped and responded to by individual scribes and readers. The work of Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton, among others, has also drawn attention to the influence of a text’s material form on the manner in which it was read.[[12]](#endnote-12) Factors including production materials, scribal hand, and peritextual elements (such as titles, chapter divisions and illustrations) all offer indications of how a text was approached in a specific context; similarly, a work’s positioning within a thematic manuscript compilation or its listing in an inventory may provide an insight into its audience and their concerns. There has also been a significant focus on marginalia as evidence for the response of the individuals to the written text, founded on the recognition that scribes were themselves readers and subsequent readers often acted as scribes.[[13]](#endnote-13) These aspects are equally relevant to the study of early printed books, where they are often supplemented by a broader range of documentary evidence for book production and sale.

Combining the theoretical methodologies of reception theory with the concrete historical analysis offered by the history of reading has allowed scholars to reconstruct the ways in which medieval audiences understood and reacted to travel writing. Such an approach is not without its drawbacks: only a small fraction of manuscripts and early printed books have survived to the present day, and any consideration of textual reception must be prefaced by the caveat that most medieval Europeans accessed literature through an oral culture that is almost impossible to reconstruct. Nevertheless, the perspective of the reader has presented a new and fruitful avenue to explore some of the best known travel accounts of the late Middle Ages, as well as others whose importance is only now being recognised.

# Reading the *Devisement dou monde* and the *Book of John Mandeville*

To refer to the *Devisement dou monde* or the *Book of John Mandeville* as a singular ‘text’, as we have so far, is at least to some degree misleading. The copying of manuscripts inevitably led to the introduction of errors which were amplified over time, but crucially this process also offered translators and scribes the opportunity to actively reshape the text. The *Devisement* and the *Book* survive in twenty-seven and twenty-five individual redactions, which vary significantly in terms of their form and content.[[14]](#endnote-14) The French version of Polo’s account, for instance, downplays the cultural and religious diversity of the Eastern world in order to represent an exotic, untranslatable other (Gaunt 2013, 100-108). Its survival in high-grade vellum manuscripts containing illustrations of marvellous beasts and monstrous races – in several instances not referred to by Polo – is indicative of a primarily courtly readership that valued the *Devisement* more for its exoticism than as a work of practical value. The Latin translation of Polo’s account made by the Dominican friar Francesco Pipino is meanwhile staunchly pro-Catholic, overwriting Polo’s neutral appraisal of Islam and pagan religion, and was associated with clerical and scholarly readers who copied the text for their personal reference (Dutschke 1993, 63-99).

Mandeville’s multiple versions are no less varied in this respect. One particularly noteworthy example of the *Book*’s refashioning by and for subsequent readers is the so-called Textless or Pictorial Version, which survives in a single remarkable manuscript produced in early fifteenth-century Bohemia, likely for the court of Wenceslas IV.[[15]](#endnote-15) It contains no text but a series of 28 richly illuminated images corresponding with the opening chapters. In contrast to the broader trends in the illustration of high-grade manuscripts of the *Book*, which like the *Devisement* tended to emphasise marvellous content, the manuscript focusses strongly on religious material(Tzanaki 2003, 254). Particularly significant are a group of miniatures depicting scenes from Christ’s Passion, a prominent theme in Czech art in the period before the Hussite struggles (Krasa 1983, 25), which are alluded to but not directly described in the text. This creative refashioning of the *Book* is indicative of the extent to which travel accounts could be moulded to conform to the priorities of their audiences.

Annotations and other marginalia reveal much about how travel literature was approached in specific settings. Copies of the *Book* associated with religious contexts often contain marginal crosses marking the holy sites of Jerusalem and highlight prayers and quotations from scripture in red ink, suggesting they were used as devotional prompts. There is considerable evidence to connect Mandeville with virtual pilgrimage, a devotional practice in which readers used pilgrimage accounts to conduct an imaginary itinerary around Jerusalem.[[16]](#endnote-16) Manuscripts associated with this kind of use often contain scribal interpolations encouraging the reader to picture the holy places in their mind’s eye as they read the text.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Where the provenance of manuscripts can be ascertained, annotations also offer an insight into the concerns of specific readers. A copy of Pipino’s Latin translation of Polo owned by the humanist theologian Nicholas of Cusa contains several annotations in its owner’s hand relating to Eastern Christianity and Muslim belief, providing evidence for Polo’s influence on the argument forwarded in his *Cribratio Alkorani* that Islam is a branch of Nestorian Christianity (Gadrat Ouerfelli 2015, 295-96).[[18]](#endnote-18) A manuscript of the Vulgate Latin version of the *Book* copied by the priest Leonisio Doglioni for the chapter library of Belluno Cathedral contains numerous negative comments on pagan religion, highlighting the idolatry of the inhabitants of Palombe (‘a beastly people who worship a cow’) and denouncing pagan belief in the afterlife as a ‘falsehood and diabolical abuse’.[[19]](#endnote-19) These remarks are consistent with a clerical readership encountering the *Book* in one of its more conservative redactions; more surprising, however, are comprehensive references to every mention of the romance hero Ogier the Dane, a legendary knight of Charlemagne who appears in many of the French *chansons de geste*.

The advent of print in the second half of the fifteenth century brought the *Devisement* and the *Book* to new audiences. While Polo was printed only a handful of times in the fifteenth century, Mandeville’s account swiftly became a bestseller, issued a remarkable thirty-six times before 1501 in Czech, Dutch, English, French, German, Italian and Latin. Printed almost exclusively in the cheap quarto and octavo formats on low-quality paper, it was aimed firmly at the popular market. Title pages increasingly announced the *Book* not as a pilgrimage account but as a book of marvels, accompanied by eye-catching woodcut illustrations of strange beasts and monstrous races, while early Spanish and Portuguese editions of Polo’s account were dedicated to ‘new travellers to the Indies’.

Although the letters of Columbus and Vespucci are often seen as marking a significant shift in the evolution of travel writing, for contemporary readers they were part of a longstanding tradition of writing about the world beyond Christendom.[[20]](#endnote-20) Mandeville and Polo were widely copied alongside contemporary reports in manuscript compilations and were annotated, most famously by Christopher Columbus himself, whose copy of the 1483 Latin edition of the *Devisement* contains a wealth of marginal notes drawing attention to the gold and spices of Eastern lands.[[21]](#endnote-21) The iconography of early printed travel accounts also reveals the extent of the permeability between old and new: Italian editions of Mandeville and compilations containing the letters of Columbus and Vespucci were printed with the same exotic woodcuts, while the illustrations produced by Jörg Breu for the 1515 edition of Ludovico da Varthema’s *Itinerario* depicted individuals wearing the distinctive feathered skirts and headdresses of the Brazilian Tupinambá (Voigt and Brancaforte 2014). Even in the late sixteenth century, Polo and Mandeville were respectively included in Giovanni Battista Ramusio’s *Navigazioni e viaggi* (1555-59) and Richard Hakluyt’s *Principal Navigations* (1589), monumental sixteenth-century anthologies of travel accounts that confirmed the status of travel writing as a prominent printed genre in early modern Europe. What had united these two profoundly different texts across three centuries was their textual and material mutability and the myriad ways in which they were approached by medieval readers.

# Travel and Fiction in the Late Middle Ages

Polo and Mandeville’s complex relationship with fiction is a trait shared by much other medieval writing about travel. Questions of veracity have long concerned scholars of these works, yet medieval audiences approached such issues in a fundamentally different way to their modern counterparts.[[22]](#endnote-22) Mandeville has often been accused of plagiarism, but his copying of other works should be understood in the context of the medieval practice of *compilatio*, where pre-existing material was restructured as a means of gaining authority.[[23]](#endnote-23) While the increased emphasis placed on eyewitness observation in late medieval travel accounts has often been connected to the emergence of travel writing as a genre, conformity to established textual tradition remained potent for medieval readers.

Pilgrimage was the dominant paradigm for both travel and travel writing. Recent scholarship on this period has seen a tendency to emphasise the emergence of ethnographical interests in late medieval pilgrimage literature, identifying this as representative of a trend in the development of travel writing that reached its fruition in the Age of Discovery.[[24]](#endnote-24) Such an approach has, however, marginalised the vast numbers of ‘generic’ pilgrimage accounts from this period that repeat largely identical information about the holy sites. This constant repetition of information is in part due to the highly regulated nature of the Jerusalem pilgrimage in this period, but also owes much to the complex network of textual borrowings and interpolations that characterises late medieval pilgrimage literature. As Kathryne Beebe has noted this ‘can blind us to the value of works that do not fit into our chosen pattern […] despite evidence that medieval audiences found these narratives compelling enough to be copied again and again’ (Beebe 2014, 39).

Pilgrim authors were themselves readers, and often repurposed earlier works in order to supplement their personal experiences of the Holy Land and provide readers with a complete account. Felix Fabri, a Swiss Dominican who left an account of his pilgrimage of 1453, wrote that before doing so he “collected all the stories of the pilgrimages of the crusaders, the tracts written by pilgrims, and descriptions of the Holy Land, and read them with care.”[[25]](#endnote-25) The prevalence of copying among authors of pilgrim authors often leads to long chains of readers: the 1517 account of the Norfolk parson Richard Torkington, for example, is practically a verbatim copy of the *Pilgrymage of Sir Richarde Guylforde* (1511), which itself draws extensively on both Mandeville and the *Peregrintatio in terram sanctam* (1486) of Bernard von Breydenbach.[[26]](#endnote-26) Mary Carruthers’ observation that pilgrims ‘came not to see something new, but to recollect things well known to them already’ (2000, 43) can be extended to medieval readers, whose appetite for pilgrimage literature is evidenced by the explosion in its production and circulation during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

It must also be noted that medieval audiences did not necessarily distinguish between travellers’ accounts and other kinds of writing about travel. The *Letter of Prester John* and Alexander Romance, both of which circulated widely in Latin and vernacular translations, were almost universally accepted as authentic accounts of the Eastern world. These texts fall outside the parameters of many of the definitions that have been applied to late medieval travel writing, yet they regularly appear in manuscript compendia alongside the accounts of Polo, Odoric and Mandeville: from deluxe illuminated volumes that situate the various texts within the same illustrative framework to more workmanlike owner-produced copies marked up with cross-references between the various works. The same is true of the genre of dream visions (*visiones*), a part of European literary culture since late antiquity which from the fifteenth century increasingly integrated devotional matter with descriptions of Eastern mirabilia.[[27]](#endnote-27) A fitting illustration of the close relationship between visions and real travel is the *Purgatory of St Patrick*, a twelfth-century otherworld vision that developed independently from an Irish pilgrimage site of the same name, leading to subsequent interactions between the textual and ritual traditions (Maggioni 2017).

The relationship between travel-related writing and fiction in this period is also signalled by creative engagement with the exotic matter of travel accounts. The German knight Arnold von Harff, who travelled to the Holy Land in the late 1490s, claims in his *Pilgerfahrt* to have also visited source of the Nile, the tomb of St Thomas and the islands of the Indian Ocean.[[28]](#endnote-28) Like many pilgrim authors, von Harff borrowed from Breydenbach and Mandeville for his description of Jerusalem, but more unusually he mined both Mandeville and Polo for reports of eastern mirabilia (Tzanaki 2003, 68).[[29]](#endnote-29) His self-reinvention as a fictional character in the mould of his predecessors is testament to the appeal of such information to contemporary readers. Van Harff’s success in this regarded is demonstrated by his account’s remarkable circulation among the contemporary Rhineland nobility, along with a cycle of exotic illustrations depicting him at various stages of his journey.[[30]](#endnote-30)

A similar blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction can be observed in *Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele* (c. 1490), the account of a Flemish nobleman’s pilgrimage to Jerusalem and subsequent attempt to travel to the kingdom of Prester John in Ethiopia. *Tvoyage* was written not by van Ghistele himself but by Ambrosius Zeebout, a priest from Ghent who composed the work ‘for the benefit of those who are pleased by hearing about foreign things, lands and cities’ (Gaspar ed. 1998, 1). While *Tvoyage* often accepted by modern scholars as the account of a genuine journey, Zeebout’s interpolation of material from other travel accounts – a practice he openly acknowledges – reflects the growing popularity of exotica among his identified audience.

Medieval readers were familiar with a wide range of writing about travel, but on the whole they approached the distinctions between individual categories in a far less regimented way than their modern counterparts. Many of the texts we have discussed here demonstrate a significant fluidity between pilgrimage guides, dream visions, histories and mercantile travel accounts, with authors borrowing and adapting from various kinds of travel writing in accordance with their specific concerns. It is also evident that distinctions between fact and fiction were often of little importance to late medieval authors, who readily supplemented accounts of real journeys with additional material or created entirely fictional works. As the final section of this article will explore, late medieval readers were themselves no less flexible in their attitudes towards the boundaries between travel writing and fiction.

# Imitating the Travel Account in Fifteenth-Century Florence

Florentine readers were among the most avid consumers of travel writing in late medieval Europe. Interest in geography among Florentine humanists was firmly established by the mid-fourteenth century and reinvigorated with the translation of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* into Latin by Jacopo d’Angelo in 1406, but there was also a keen appetite for travel-related writing among the city’s literate middle classes. Polo’s *Devisement dou monde* and Odoric’s *Itinerarium* were translated into Tuscan versions and circulated widely among lay readers, while pilgrimage accounts, *visiones* and handbooks for merchant travellers were written and read by Florentines and exerted a profound influence on the city’s blossoming vernacular literary culture.[[31]](#endnote-31) Florence’s engagement with travel literature in this period is in many ways exceptional, but as such it offers a unique case study of the development of the genre at this moment and, in particular, its complex relationship with fictional writing.

As we have discussed, the late medieval period saw an encounter between the authority of established textual tradition and the increasing prevalence of eyewitness observation. This is reflected in the writing of Florentine travellers, such as the pilgrims Leonardo Frescobaldi, Simone Sigoli and Giorgio Gucci whose accounts of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem in 1348 dedicate more space to local customs and topography than decription of the holy places (Elsner and Rubiés 1999, 39-40). A concern with the veracity of both kinds of report is discernible in contemporary Florentine literature. Boccaccio’s tale of Frate Cipolla, included in his *Decameron* (c. 1353), satirizes the reports of missionaries to the Mongol Empire through a disingenuous friar’s descriptions of ‘Parsnip India’ and the ‘Land of Lies’, while the poet Antonio Pucci (c. 1310-88) noted in his manuscript compendium that contemporary reports of the lands beyond India ‘seem impossible to believe as they are reported by the authors’ (Morosini 2011, 344). Two literary imitations of the travel account produced in early fifteenth-century Florence offer further indications of the interplay between travel and fiction in this setting. These markedly different texts draw explicit attention to their fictional nature, but contemporary readers nevertheless accepted them as genuine reports of the Eastern world.

The first of these works is the prose romance *Il Guerrin meschino*, composed around 1413 by Andrea da Barberino.[[32]](#endnote-32) A prolific translator of French romances, Andrea was also a *cantastorie* (street singer) well known for his performances in Piazza San Martino.[[33]](#endnote-33) Unlike Andrea’s other works, the *Guerrin meschino* is a wholly original composition that combines the material of Carolingian epic with a typically Florentine fascination with the Eastern world.[[34]](#endnote-34) It tells the story of Guerrino, disinherited heir to the kingdom of Durazzo (modern day Durrës), and his efforts to discover his true lineage and regain his rightful throne. Reflecting the interests of a Andrea’s contemporaries, Guerrino’s journey is a whistle-stop tour of exotic *mirabilia*. He spends a night in prayer in Jerusalem, encounters strange animals and peoples in the Indies, and travels to both the kingdom of Prester John and the Irish pilgrimage site of St Patrick’s Purgatory. An imitation travel account in romance form, the *Guerrin meschino* draws extensively on the accounts of Odoric and Mandeville, as well as a wide range of other sources, to portray a vision of the world that conformed to the expectations of a Florentine audience.

Andrea’s imitation of the thematic and formal motifs of travel writing reflects both his own reading of travel accounts and his audience’s familiarity with such works. The latter is shown particularly clearly in his unusual approach to narrative voice. The majority of the work is related in the third person, as in most romances, but at crucial moments the protagonist Guerrino takes on the role of narrator. These interjections are used to report ethnographical information about the Eastern world, mimicking the first-person description of travel accounts and underscoring Guerrino’s status an eyewitness observer:

Guerrino, called Meschino, stood before the admiral of Acona, who did him great honour. “There are many people in this city, and they are black; and they wear sky blue clothes made of lamb’s wool, and the poor among them wear linen clothes and have short hair. And they did great honour to me and asked where I wished to go. I replied: ‘Where I will see the lord Prester John.’” (Cursietti ed. 2005, 222.

Particularly fantastical details, however, are conveyed using a different narrative technique, with Guerrino recalling information reported to him in a conversation with a guide or other local. This citational distancing, as it has been termed by Anthony Bale (2016, 218), is a feature typical of medieval travel accounts that allowed authors to report marvels without committing to their veracity.[[35]](#endnote-35) An example of this is Guerrino’s description of the monstrous races found in India:

They told us that in certain mountains in this forest there were wild men who have the head and mouth of a dog… And they said that there were certain parts towards where the sun rises where there are men whose feet are back to front. And they said that there is a country along the river where there are men with two legs whose right foot is so big that, when the sun is hot, they use it to shade themselves. I did not see these animals – says Meschino – because I decided not to go among those wild beasts. (Cursietti ed. 2005, 139-41)

By mimicking these formal structures, Andrea blurs the boundaries between romance and travel writing: a compelling narrative strategy that demands his audience consume his work as if it were a genuine travel account.

 This theme is further explored in an important episode that takes place at the court of the Sultan of Persia. Returning from the eastern apex of his journey, Guerrino is invited to tell his story before the assembled courtiers in a mirror of Andrea’s own performative role. All present marvel at Guerrino’s account of his travels with the exception of one baron, Tenaur, who brands Guerrino ‘the greatest liar in all the world’ on account of his fanciful claims. Guerrino challenges Tenaur to a duel and, having defeated him with God’s assistance, forces him to admit ‘that I told the truth, and you the lie’ (Cursietti ed. 2005, 172). This passage can be read as a meditation on both the perils endured by a public storyteller and attitudes towards the veracity of travel accounts among Andrea’s contemporaries; it is noteworthy that annotations in Florentine manuscripts of travel accounts indicate scepticism was limited to a minority of readers.[[36]](#endnote-36)

Andrea’s reflection on the reception of travel accounts is made all the more remarkable by evidence that in certain contexts his romance was accepted as a genuine report of the Eastern world. Descriptions of the monstrous races and exotic beasts taken from the *Guerrin meschino* appear in a Ptolemaic manuscript produced in Italy in the 1460s, accompanied by citations from Pliny and the *Book of John Mandeville* (Van Duzer, 2014). As well as revealing the interplay between classical cartography and medieval reports of the East, this remarkable source indicates shows that certain readers either accepted Andrea’s work as a geographically accurate fiction or believed it to be the account of a genuine journey. A similar pattern can be observed in *Della magnificenza del Prete Gianni*, a popular verse account of Prester John written by the Florentine priest and *cantastorie* Giuliano Dati in the 1490s.[[37]](#endnote-37) In the closing stanzas of the poem, Dati cites as his sources the Greek geographer Strabo, the historical *Supplementum chronicarum* (1483), an unidentified pilgrimage account and the *Guerrin meschino*. The association of the romance with exotic travel accounts is further underlined on the title pages of its printed editions, which draw attention to its ‘description of almost all the provinces in the world, and of the diversity of men and peoples, of their diverse customs and many diverse animals’ (Cursietti ed. 2005, 581) – the precise terminology employed by early Italian publishers of Mandeville and Polo.

The most remarkable evidence that the *Guerrin meschino* was accepted as a genuine travel account concerns a specific and somewhat unlikely reader: the bishop and humanist scholar Francesco Chiericati (1479-1539), a papal diplomat whose acquaintances included the prominent political figure Isabella d’Este and Antonio Pigafetta, the scholar and explorer who would later accompany Magellan on his voyage around the world. Having been sent as papal nuncio to the English court, in 1517 Chiericati travelled with a group of pilgrims to the site of St Patrick’s Purgatory at Lough Derg.[[38]](#endnote-38) In a letter to Isabella d’Este, he describes consulting a book that contained a list of previous pilgrims and noting that ‘the first name inscribed there was that of Guarino da Durazzo, which I thought was an invention; but I have since found an ancient account of his journey in a parchment manuscript’ (Purcell 1987, 8). That the highly educated Chiericati sought out a copy of the *Guerrin meschino* and read it as if it were a genuine travel account indicates that the permeability between genuine and fictional travel was present at all levels of Italian society.

Further evidence of the proximity between real and imitation travel accounts can be observed in an unusual work composed in Tuscany around the same time as the *Guerrin meschino*. The *Libro piccolo di meraviglie* (c. 1416) describes the journey of the Italian knight Jacopo da Sanseverino and his three companions to the Holy Land and Egypt and onwards through Egypt to the kingdom of Prester John, India and the Mongol Empire.[[39]](#endnote-39) While the possibility that Jacopo undertook part of this journey in reality cannot altogether be excluded, the *Libro piccolo* appears to represent the imagined journey of a well-read author, mediated through his encounters with travel writing: from the accounts of Polo, Mandeville and Odoric to the *Guerrin meschino* itself. (Guglielminetti ed. 1985, 21):

Like the Andrea’s romance, the *Libro piccolo* mimics both the thematic and formal *topoi* of exotic travel accounts. Jacopo occupies a prominent position within the text as both narrator and protagonist, with his status as an eyewitness observer underlined at key junctures in the narrative. There is also a discernibly empirical tone to the description of travel, with precise dates of departure and arrival supplied and distances between cities specified in days or units of distance. Coupled with a close thematic alignment with reports of the Eastern world, such elements give the impression that the text was presented to contemporary readers as a the report of a genuine journey.

Despite this apparent concern with verisimilitude, fantastical elements are often emphasised throughout the *Libro piccolo*, in many cases almost to the point of caricature. The centrality of *mirabilia* to the *Libro*’s rationale is made clear throughout the account, from the opening declaration of Jacopo’s motivation to travel in order to ‘see a great part of the world’ to the description of the Mongol Empire, where he and his companions ‘took great pleasure in seeing strange things in order to be able to speak of them back here’ (Guglielminetti ed. 1985, 93). The lands of Prester John are populated not only by giants, pygmies and cynocephali – the standard monstrous races of eastern lore – but also by original creations which seem to stretch the bounds of credibility: horses naturally coloured blue, green, red and yellow, and ‘tinboli’, beasts that are half-lion and half-cow (Guglielminetti ed. 1985, 77). Further indications of an unclear relationship with verisimilitude are given by Jacopo’s use of invented toponyms alongside the names of locations taken from his sources. A suggestion of fabrication is discernible in the cities of Verdiletto (‘true delight’), Gioia (‘joy’) and Campofavano (‘pleasant field’) (Cardona 1986, 691; O’Doherty 2006, 247). Other place names, however, contain far less subtle allusions: the province Pensaremelo (meaning approximately ‘I imagine it’) clearly infers invention.

The presence of clearly fictional elements raises the question of whether the *Libro piccolo*’s author intended it to pass for a genuine travel account or was creating a pastiche – even a parody – of the genre. Though this problem seems likely to remain unresolved barring significant further investigation, evidence for the text’s reception suggests it was accepted as authentic. Each of three surviving witnesses appear in manuscript compendia alongside other travel-related texts copied in the same hand, including Odoric’s *Itinerarium* and the *Letter of Prester John*.[[40]](#endnote-40) The most notable of these copies is Biblioteca Apostolicana Vaticana MS Barb. Lat. 4048, a compilation in a neat, humanist influenced hand made for a female religious order in the late fifteenth century (Andreose 2000, 72).[[41]](#endnote-41) Here the *Libro piccolo* appears alongside the vernacular translation of the *Itinerarium* and Gregorio Dati’s cosmographical poem *La Sfera*, the latter accompanied by a series of illustrations and cartographic representations of Asia. A marginal gloss supplements all three works, drawing the reader’s attention to toponyms, distances and marvels, including Jacopo’s ‘tinboli’ which are listed with an alternate spelling.[[42]](#endnote-42) It is also noteworthy that the opening rubrics to both the *Itinerarium* and *Libro piccolo* describe the texts using almost the same formula, the former as a ‘journey undertaken by a noble follow of Jesus Christ, Odoric of Friuli’, the latter as a ‘journey undertaken by three tramontane knights and one Italian’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

The Vatican manuscript also contains a number of unique alterations to the *Libro piccolo* that reveal later readers of the text were specifically concerned with its authenticity. Several passages are reworked to include further anecdotal detail, foregrounding Jacopo’s eyewitness status and enhancing the verisimilitude of his reports eastern marvels (O’Doherty 2006, 248-50). One example of this is the description of the tomb of St Thomas which, in a reworking of source material from Odoric and Mandeville, is said to open in the presence of devout Christians but close if approached by an infidel. Here the Vatican manuscript contains a significant addition describing Jacopo’s efforts to verify this miracle:

And I, Jacopo da Sanseverino, asked the permission of the guardians who guarded this holy body […] to allow me to see whether there was any mechanism inside this tabernacle that opened and closed it mechanically. They said that they were content for us to do so, and so we looked and saw that there was nothing there except the holy body seated on a great throne. It was all dry, apart from the two fingers of the right hand, which were the fingers he placed in the wound of Christ: those fingers are alive, healthy and fresh like those of a living person (Guglielminetti ed. 1985, 136).

As Marianne O’Doherty argues, instances such as these indicate the redactor of this later version of the text was aware of potential scepticism among his audience and perceived a need to offer readers more concrete and convincing explanations of *mirabilia* (2006, 249).

The version of the *Libro piccolo* preserved in the Vatican manuscript also includes several reports of marvellous material altogether absent from the original text. A number of these have been inspired by further reading of travel accounts: a description of a tree in Ireland whose fruit becomes either birds or fish depending on whether it falls on water or land is a variation on the legend of the barnacle goose, reported by both Odoric and Mandeville. Other additions are seemingly entirely original, among them an encounter with a giant spider in north Africa that devours one of the company’s horses and the description of a tower near Nice that moves along streams of mercury. Such descriptions may seem outlandish to the modern reader; yet, like the modifications described above, their interpolation appears to have been prompted by a desire to ensure the *Libro piccolo* conformed to the expectations of an audience intimately familiar with exotic travel writing. This conclusion is reinforced by the later redactor’s repeated assertion of Jacopo and his companions’ motivation ‘to find marvels that have never been seen before, and to seek the truth of that which we have heard and read’ (Guglielminetti ed. 1875, 132). The report of a fictional journey that was later supplemented with further borrowed and invented details, the *Libro piccolo* meets few of our modern conditions for travel writing and may also fall outside the boundaries we choose to apply to the genre in the Middle Ages. However, like the *Guerrin meschino*, this did not preclude its acceptance by a medieval audience for whom notions of compilation, comparison and imagination were closely wrapped up with what it meant to write – and read – about travel.

# Conclusion

Reader-oriented criticism offers a fresh and valuable perspective on the multifaceted and sometimes confusing genre of late medieval travel writing. Questions of reception allow us to glimpse how travel writing was perceived, approached and responded to by contemporary readers, and can also help us to better comprehend the elusive identity of the genre in the pre-modern world. Medieval readers were capable of exploring the same text in profoundly different ways, yet there is significant evidence that they did not always distinguish between different categories of writing about travel as we do today. Pilgrimage guides, accounts of the exotic East, histories and dream visions circulated together and, in many cases, exerted a mutual influence. Furthermore, medieval authors and readers did not necessarily differentiate between factual and fictional depictions of travel, which were often inextricably intertwined. Considering travel writing in this period through the lens of reception is far from straightforward, and will not necessarily provide conclusive answers to our questions, but in many cases such an approach will help us to better understand travel writing’s myriad medieval forms and the literary culture of which they were a part.

Examining the reception of travel writing in the late Middle Ages also stands to reveal much about its development into the genre we recognise today. Attention to the thematic and formal features of travel accounts in fictional works such as the *Book of John Mandeville* and the account of Arnold von Harff indicates that authors were closely aware of the expectations of contemporary audiences, while evidence for the reception of such works suggests that the vast majority of readers readily accepted them as genuine. Our discussion of imitation travel accounts in early fifteenth-century Florence has shown that readers were intimately acquainted with the formal and thematic elements of travel writing and attentive to contemporary debates surrounding textual authority and eyewitness observation. The fact that *Il Guerrin meschino* and the *Libro piccolo di meraviglie* were sought out specifically as sources of information on the Eastern world should not be taken as evidence of credulity on the part of a popular audience, but rather as indicative of the permeability of boundaries between genres and, particularly, factual and fictional writing. Contemporary readers approached these texts as part of the broad, fluid corpus of travel-related literature, and they can be understood as prompting and discussing many of the questions that led to the stabilisation of the genre in early modern Europe.

Beyond this, considering late medieval audiences enables us to reflect on the value of reception studies for the study of the travel writing over a broader chronological period. A focus on the reader permits us not only to observe how travel writing has been understood within specific historical and cultural contexts, but also to appreciate individual texts from a new standpoint. Seeking to define travel writing in terms of its contemporary readership will not be appropriate in every situation; yet if we are interested in travel writing’s development and cultural significance then questions of reception will always be relevant. If the late medieval period can help us to reflect more broadly on the dimensions of this unique genre, then it surely deserves to be more closely integrated within the field of travel writing studies.

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1. Key exceptions include the contributions of Robin Jarvis (2012; 2015) and Wendy Bracewell (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The chronological breadth of the late medieval period is open to debate, if not entirely subjective. For the purposes of this article, it should be taken refer to the period between c. 1250 and c. 1500 AD. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There is a rich bibliography on these works and their complex manuscript traditions. Essential contributions on Polo include those of Benedetto (1928), Conte (2008), Critchley (1992), Gaunt (2013), Larner (1999) and Münkler (1998); for Mandeville, see in particular Bennett (1954), Deluz (1988), Higgins (1997) and Seymour (1993). There are numerous critical editions of the various versions of each text. Moule and Pelliot’s edition (1938) provides an English translation of the earliest known manuscript of the *Devisement* (F), with variations from other redactions. Bale’s edition (2012) of the Defective version of the *Book* and Higgins’ translation (2011) of the French Continental text provide a good starting point for Mandeville. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See for example the overview offered by Youngs (2013, 25-29). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Mandeville’s true identity remains unknown but is a subject of perennial debate. A recent overview of critical opinion is given by Bale (2012, x-xvi). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. A recent examination of the legend’s sources and historical development is given by Keagan Brewer (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Odoric’s account has until recently received limited attention in Anglophone scholarship. For biographical information and an introduction to the *Itinerarium* see Moule (1920-21). For the reception of the text in its Latin and vernacular versions, see O’Doherty (2009; 2013, 105-99). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The identity of medieval travel writing has been discussed in detail by many other scholars, including Borm (2004), Campbell (1988), Richard (1981) and Westrem (2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The application of reception theory and the approaches of the history of reading to travel writing have been discussed in detail by Jarvis (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Holub (1984, 53-106) provides a good overview of Jauss and Iser’s theories. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. On this subject see Newton (1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. See in particular Chartier (1991; 1995) and (Darnton 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Important contributions in this area include those of Dagenais (1994), Jackson (2001) and Sherman (2008). On the agency of the scribe, see in particular Wakelin (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Ian Macleod Higgins’ notion of the ‘multi-text’ (1997, 19) can be applied to both Mandeville and Polo. On the numerous versions of the *Book*, see in particular Higgins (1997). For the reception of Polo, see Critchley (1992, 130-177), Larner (1999, 116-183) and Gadrat-Ouerfelli (2015). Important contributions on Mandeville include those of Bremer and Röhl eds. (2007), O’Doherty (2013), Röhl (2004) and Tzanaki (2003). For a comparative discussion of the reception of the two texts, see Yeager (2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. London, British Library MS Add. 24189. See Krasa (1983) for a facsimile and discussion of the manuscript; see also Tzanaki (2003, 36, 73-4, 127, 254). Digital reproductions of the images can be accessed via the British Library’s online catalogue of illuminated manuscripts. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. On virtual pilgrimage see the fundamental studies of Rudy (2011) and Beebe (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. An example of this is London, British Library MS Additional 41329, a fifteenth-century Italian copy of the *Book* produced near Padua. On this manuscript see Coneys (2018). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. London, British Library, MS Additional 19952. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Belluno, Biblioteca Lolliniana (Seminario Gregoriana) MS 39, fols. 2r and 34r. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. On the emergence of the theory of travel in the early modern period and its relation to travel accounts, see Stagl (1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Although it is often suggested that Columbus was inspired by reading Polo to undertake his first voyage in 1492, this copy was not in his possession until 1497. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. On questions of fiction in the Middle Ages see Agapitos and Mortensen eds. (2012), Green (2004) and Bergkvist (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. It is noteworthy that the epilogue to *Book* refers to Mandeville as a compiler, not an author. For introductions to this subject see Parkes (1976) and Minnis (1979). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See for example Elsner and Rubiés, who note that this trend results ‘from the growth and transformation, rather than the exhaustion, of the traditional ideologies of pilgrimage, crusade and chivalry’ (1999, 31). On the continuation of pilgrimage and pilgrimage literature in the early modern period, see Noonan (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Stewart ed. and trans. (1896, vol. 1, 50). Beebe (2014) has provided a recent and important study of Fabri’s audiences. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Tzanaki (200, 68); Lutton (2013, 58-64). For a similar chain of Italian pilgrim authors see Coneys (2018). Ross (2014) offers an insightful discussion of Breydenbach’s text and its reception. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Examples of this include *Viaggio dei tre monaci al paradiso terrestre*, which circulated in Italy alongside the works of Polo and Mandeville, and Christine de Pizan’s *Chemin de longue estude* (1402-3), which draws heavily on Mandeville to describe an imaginary journey through Jerusalem, India and Cathay to the heavenly court of Queen Reason. For an overview of *visiones* and related traditions, see Lynch (1988) and Morgan (1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Another similar account is the *Itinerarius* (c. 1389) of Johannes Witte de Hese. Supposedly a priest from the diocese of Utrecht, Witte claimed to have travelled as a pilgrim to Jerusalem before continuing onwards to India, Purgatory and the islands of the Indian Ocean. Westrem (2001) provides a comprehensive discussion of this fascinating text. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Jacob Presser’s notion of the egodocument provides a useful framework to consider this kind of writing. On its application to historical works see Dekker (2002). [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Jorgensen and Ferré (1991) provide a detailed overview of the manuscripts. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. For Tuscan manuscripts of Polo and Odoric and their audiences see O’Doherty (2013, 147-60). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. The most complete study of Andrea and his work is provided by Allaire (1997). For a thorough critical bibliography see Cursietti (2005, xlii-xlvii). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Degl’Innocenti and Rospocher (2016) offer a good introduction to the *cantastorie* tradition. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. For a brief introduction to questions of fiction with relation to medieval romance see Little and McDonald eds. (2018, 4-6). A more thorough discussion is provided by Green (2004). [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See, for instance, Mandeville’s description of the Earthly Paradise: ‘About Paradise I would not know how to speak to you properly, for I was not so far forward, because I was not worthy. But what I have heard said by the wisest men over there I will willingly tell you’ (Higgins ed. 2011, 179). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. O’Doherty notes only a single example of an Italian reader who left traces of sceptical attitude (2013, 152). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. On Dati’s poem see Olschki (1938). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. For an overview of the physical pilgrimage site and its development see Carroll (1999, 81-104). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. This title is given by the text’s modern editor, Marziano Guglielminetti, who provides a thorough introduction (1985, 9-48). For further discussion of the *Libro piccolo* see O’Doherty (2006, 245-50). [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Florence, Biblioteca Laurenziana MS Palatino 115 (Tuscany, fifteenth century); New Haven, Connecticut, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library MS 928 (Venice?, fifteenth century); and Vatican City, BAV MS Barberino Latino 4048 (late fifteenth century). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. For descriptions of the manuscript see Andreose (2000, 72-73, and Monaco (1978-79, 189-90). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Vatican City, BAV MS Barberino Latino 4048, fol. 43v: ‘a[nima]l timboli o tinboli’. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Vatican City, BAV MS Barberino Latino 4048, fol. 28r; fol. 42v. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)