theories and methodologies

Provincializing Medieval Europe: Mandeville's Cosmopolitan Utopia

The excellence of things is in the middle.

—Aristotle, quoted in Mandeville

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UTOPIA HAS ALWAYS BEEN ABOUT PLACE, THE GREEK ROOTS OF THIS WORD SQUINTING WRYLY AT THE DUAL POSSIBILITIES OF A "HAPPY place" and "no place." Even generically, the term *utopia* implies its own place, not as ambiguously poised between the ideal and "the not at all" but as a point of origin—a sign of incipient modernity—to which the medieval becomes "no place for utopia." Utopia thus marks both the geographic space of possibility and difference and the genealogical space of transition from premodernity to modernity, so the historical narrative goes. Like most historical narratives with a fondness for originary designs, this one has the effect of provincializing the Middle Ages as that time before modernity when utopianism was not possible, or alternatively when it was possible only as a religious ideal that differed fundamentally from early modern secular utopianism and Thomas More's seminal text. The Middle Ages is relegated in histories of utopia to the realm of "the before"—before secularism, before modernity, before geography. Medieval antecedents of early modern utopianism are shunted off into that "inert, sealed off space *before* the movement of history."[1] The Middle Ages is out of step with modernity to the same extent that it is out of place in utopian studies. The irony of the "middleness" of the Middle Ages is that, contra Aristotle, it is marked not by excellence but by the inertia of premodernity—it is the "excluded middle," if you will.

The question of whether different historical utopianisms existed before More has never really been raised.[2] Perhaps this is because the effort to do so is itself utopian in that it begins with the "what if?" that characterizes utopian thinking in the first place, only this "what if?" is directed at the medieval past, instead of the future or the geographically far-flung. Whether or not medieval utopianisms line up cooperatively to form a narrative of influence for More's work, they just might serve the more pressing need for alternative utopianisms

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.592 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in a world that has exhausted More's concept. In addition to their implications for the later history of utopia, medieval utopianisms tilt at the edifice of modernity insofar as that edifice is fabricated on premodern difference.

Medieval utopianism is not to be found by simply reading backward from More. A utopia unmoored, so to speak, requires a new derivation of the concept of utopianism itself and, at the same time, a shared conceptual kinship with that utopianism we associate with More—that is, the deliberate imagining of alternative worlds and the critical reflection such imagining precipitates on the presumed world of the author and readership. *Mandeville's Travels* (1356) is just such a medieval utopian text. One of those rare "crossover" medieval texts, *Mandeville's Travels* is regarded as possessing an early modern and even modern life of its own. A travelog of the Holy Land and the East, *Mandeville's Travels* continued to be popular in the Renaissance and afterward for its geographic and ethnographic information, its exotic marvels, and even—in Richard Brome's comedy *The Antipodes* (1636)—a form of delusion, "Mandeville madness" (4.1.466).

If utopianism begins in travel narratives, *Mandeville's Travels* poses a utopianism that is cosmopolitan instead of insular. This travel narrative encompasses two separate genres, the itinerary to the Holy Land and the "topographical book of wonders" (Daston and Park 25). While some readers view this hybrid travel narrative as a kind of discursive *mappamundi*, charting a geography where Jerusalem is the center of the Christian world and where pagan peripheries are receding, such a reading ignores both the variation within the *mappamundi* cartographies and Mandeville's own resistance to such schematic reductionism in his text.[3] It is true that the most famous *mappaemundi*—the Hereford, Ebstorf, and Psalter Maps—position Jerusalem at their centers, but it is equally true that many other *mappaemundi* do not. Zonal maps, for example, which configure geographic space according to seven climate zones belting the earth like geological strata, are centered on the equator and Africa, instead of Jerusalem. Mandeville adduces both the Jerusalem-centered and zonal maps in his descriptions of the roundness of the earth, thus drawing on a contradiction that existed already within the medieval cartographic tradition. I would argue that this contradiction is a strategy by which Mandeville modifies a Jerusalem-centered cartography. The geographic paradox of *Mandeville's Travels*—Jerusalem centered and zonally configured—structures a utopian geography that complements the narrative enterprise of provincializing Europe and Western Christianity.

Dipesh Chakrabarty coined the phrase "provincializing Europe" in his book of the same name, published in 2000. He did so to suggest a postcolonial strategy for exposing Europe as an "imaginary entity," an exposure based on Europe's claims to modernity and on the collusions of history with that entity. Ultimately, Chakrabarty pursues a utopian project of his own, one that projects a history of modernity that includes "the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it" (43). As a medieval utopian project, Mandeville's "provincializing" of Europe differs from Chakrabarty's understanding of the practice in three ways: (1) Chakrabarty conceives of provincializing Europe as a "practice of history," Mandeville's as a practice of ethnography, of narrating travel; (2) Mandeville's Europe is not associated with modernity and Enlightenment values but is aligned primarily with Christianity and the cultural inheritance of the Crusades; and finally (3) Chakrabarty is interested in the "capitalist transition narrative," according to which some nations are regarded as failures or incomplete evolutions by comparison with the successfully transitioned Europe. Mandeville's utopian cosmopolitanism, by contrast, might be said to interrogate the theological

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.592 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"transition narrative," according to which Muslim, Eastern Orthodox, and other religious practices are condemned as failed Christianities or as yet-to-be-converted societies (19).

Mandeville's project of provincializing Europe might more accurately be termed "provincializing Christian Europe," but his critique extends beyond religious belief and practice to technological achievement, cosmopolitan knowledge, and political governance. His guiding principle is the one he quotes from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that serves as an epigram to this essay: "The excellence of things is in the middle"[4] (35; bk. 2, ch. 9). Aristotle's famous ethical principle is most commonly associated with the golden mean, which Aristotle defines as an intermediate course between the two extremes of excess and deficiency. Aristotle is careful to distinguish his ethical middle from an arithmetic mean or a geometric center and to insist on the difficulty of locating it. "One can miss the mark in many ways," Aristotle notes, which explains "why it is hard to be good, because in each case it is hard to find the middle point" (30; bk. 2, ch. 6). Unlike the center and arithmetic mean, which are static and equidistant, the "excellent middle" is mobile and contingent; it depends on the principle of intermediacy, instead of centrality.

Mandeville invokes Aristotle in the proem to his *Travels* by way of explaining why Christ chose the Holy Land as the site of his Passion: He wished to "suffre for vs at ierusalem þat is the myddes of the world to þat ende and entent þat his passioun and his deth þat was pupplischt þere myghte ben knowen euenly to all the parties of the world" ("suffer for us at Jerusalem, which is in the middle of the world, to that end and intent that His Passion and death might be known equally to men of all parts of the world" [2; my trans.]). The Middle English word for this excellent place is "myddes," meaning "midst" or "middle," not "centre," which is the Middle English word for the geometric center of a circle. Mandeville's rubric of middleness for the crucifixion duplicates Aristotle's ethical differentiation between middles and centers. As the chosen site of the crucifixion, Jerusalem occupies a middling position—that is, its location "in the midst of the world," not at its center, enabled the crucifixion to become widely known. Mandeville's twinning of Aristotle's ethical principle of middleness with a geography of middleness establishes the utopian function of his text: to seek out middleness in his travels by way of uncovering an ethical principle for encountering the world—what I am calling a cosmopolitanism that likewise adopts middleness as its foundational principle and critical optic. By pursuing middleness in his travels throughout the Holy Land and the East, Mandeville succeeds in provincializing Western Christianity and European culture. His utopian cosmopolitanism is a project of renewal and imagination that wrests Christianity and Europe from their cosmological and epistemological center and repositions them in the sometimes tenebrous, sometimes self-critical realm of the middle. Mandeville's utopianism is thus neither an ideal place nor a mirror society: it is a "worlding" of Europe, a decentering and decircumferencing of medieval geography, and a new ethos of "in-the-midst-ness" that eschews center thinking in cosmologies, as Aristotle's *Nicomachean* dictum does for ethics.

The provincializing of the Latin Christian West in *Mandeville's Travels* is an intermittent and cumulative project made up of his geographic imaginary and ethnographic encounters. Geographically, Mandeville not only alters the medieval *mappamundi* to open up the spatial middleness of the globe, he also recasts the medieval itinerary narrative from a linear to an excursive structure. Wildly impractical as a travel guide, Mandeville's account of the Holy Land in particular treads a "spiral path" (Higgins 67), retracing its steps, lingering along the coast of the Holy Land, veering away from Jerusalem into the Sinai and Egypt, and overshooting its destination

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.592 Published online by Cambridge University Press

before finally, somewhat inadvertently, arriving. The effect of his narrative is to render the meaning of *itinerary* as "way finding" absurd: Mandeville is not so much interested in the way as he is in the ways and the midst—in the geographic fretwork that renders Jerusalem and its surrounding areas an "unshapely yet compelling assemblage of overseas bric-a-brac" (Higgins 95).

Christiane Deluz credits Mandeville with a "new geography" that reorients the Holy Land and East to routes instead of places: "L'Image du monde de Jean de Mandeville est enfin celle d'un monde à parcourir. La terre est sillonnée de routes, routes terrestres ou maritimes, qui sont autant d'invitations au voyage" ("John Mandeville's world is finally a world to be traveled. The globe is furrowed with routes, land and sea routes, which are so many invitations to travel" [21; my trans.]). A striated globe configures Jerusalem in the midst—of Islamic Egypt, Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula—and resists the privileging of place or peoples. Once Mandeville moves away from the Holy Land to the farthest reaches of the globe, he emphasizes the circumnavigability of the earth, which brings travelers, sometimes unwittingly, back to their own land and plots other lands on a continuum with home. At the same time, Mandeville favors a "map of the world" characterized by hybridity instead of discreet identitarian spaces of Christian and other, of good and evil, of familiar and unfamiliar (Deluz 20). Mandeville's middle proves to be a cosmopolitan ethos that cumulatively provincializes both Christian and European perspectives by means of the excellence of the geographic and ethnographic middle.

Within this utopian middle space Mandeville's narrative pursues its own provincializing project in complex and provocative ways. I focus on just two examples that illustrate the ethos and optics of Mandeville's cosmopolitan utopianism. The first example comes from Mandeville's discussion with the sultan of Egypt, who engages him in a discussion of their respective cultures, Islamic and Christian, Middle Eastern and western European. In this crucial episode Mandeville evokes the cosmopolitan ethos of his book, shame, by means of which "the subject no longer experiences [himself] as the fulfillment of the Other's desire, as the center of the world, which now shifts away from [him] slightly, causing a distance to open up within the subject [himself]," in the words of Joan Copjec (128). As a cosmopolitan and ultimately utopian affect, shame precipitates not only the "experience of one's visibility" but also the "birth of the social" in the form of a provincializing of Europe (216).

Mandeville is, in effect, surprised by shame when the sultan engages him in a friendly discussion of their respective modes of religious practice. After inquiring how Christians govern themselves and hearing Mandeville's neutral reply of "well enough," the sultan launches into a scathing critique of the corruption of Christian priests and the pervasive greed, lechery, and dishonesty of Christians. Instead of contradicting the sultan, Mandeville asks him how he came to know so much about the state of Christendom. The sultan replies in flawless French that he sends his ministers to western Christendom to assess their mode of living. This detail is key, since it points to Mandeville's and Europeans' relative ignorance of Islamic culture and offers a comparison with the active efforts of Egyptians to learn the languages, behaviors, and beliefs of the West. Mandeville poignantly articulates his shame in the face of the sultan's irrefutable critique:

> Allas þat it is gret sclaundre to oure feith and to oure lawe, whan folk þat ben withouten lawe schull repreuen vs and vndernemen vs of oure synnes. And þei þat scholden ben conuerted to crist and to the lawe of Ihesu be oure gode ensamples and be oure acceptable lif to god, and so conuerted to the lawe of Ihesu crist, ben þorgh oure wykkedness and euyll lyuynge fer fro vs and straungeres fro the holy and verry

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.592 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> beleeve schull þus appelen vs and holden vs for wykkede lyueres and cursede. And treuly þei sey soth. For the sarazines ben gode and feythfull. For þei kepen entierly the commandement of the holy book Alkaron. . . . (89–90)
>
> Alas, it is a great shame to our faith and law that people who are without law should reprove and rebuke us for our sins. And those who should be converted to the law of Christ by our good example and acceptable life devoted to God, are instead through our wickedness and evil living far from us, and that strangers to the holy and true belief should thus accuse us and judge us wicked and cursed. And truly, they speak the truth. For the Saracens are good and faithful. For they are utterly true to the commandments of the holy book, the Koran. (my trans.)

Mandeville's shame before the critique and superior piety of the Saracens both undermines the fantasy of Christian triumphalism and offers the possibility for a new understanding of the other. Through his shame Mandeville suggests that Christian wickedness, not Saracen difference, creates the distance between the two religions. His shame is, in effect, "an ethical wake-up call, the dissolution of the anxious subject's phantasmal self automatically revealing the world beyond it" (Fernie 6). In Mandeville's case, the shaming of the Christian subject serves the salutary end of rupturing his complacency, thereby opening up an ethical relation to the other. The singularity of Christian doctrines and beliefs is challenged by Mandeville's account of the Saracen embrace of many fundamental Christian principles, and the presumptive superiority of Christian devotion is demolished. Although Mandeville distinguishes between true and false faiths in this passage, his own analysis undermines this distinction, for, as he writes earlier in this same chapter, Saracens "gon so ny oure feyth" ("approach so closely to our own faith" [87; my trans.]) that they are easily converted. Conversion testifies to the fact that Islam is not so different from Christianity and, therefore, that the devoutness of Muslims resembles true Christian devotion more than it differs from it. His wistful appeals to the convertability of Muslims is thus less a call to Christian missionary zeal than it is a recognition of this similarity and of the blowing open of his world to plural and diverse religions and cultures. Mandeville's shame provides the affective and ethical foundation of this recognition of his larger project of provincializing Europe.[4]

The corollary of Mandeville's cosmopolitan shame is his embrace of cultural and religious difference. Near the end of his book, Mandeville describes two sets of peoples who inhabit the edges of the known world and live devout lives without institutional Christianity. The "Bragmans" ("Brahmans"), Mandeville tells us, are a people of honesty and good living. The Gynosophes, too, are people of "gode feyth," despite their ignorance of Christianity. From their example Mandeville goes on to defend difference explicitly, adducing scripture to maintain that "noman scholde haue in despite non erthely man for here dyuerse lawes. For wee knowe not whom god loueth ne whom god hateth" ("No man should despise any earthly creatures for the difference of their laws. For we know not whom God loves nor whom He hates" [197; my trans.]). Mandeville's paean to difference is more than an expression of tolerance: it is an insistence on the provincialism of European knowledge, Christianity, and cultural achievement. In this insistence lies the utopian possibility of his cosmopolitan ethos.

The second example from *Mandeville's Travels* discloses an optic for his provincializing project. In the land of the great khan of Cathay, Mandeville remarks on the marvelous craft of the emperor's court, including mechanical birds and peacocks. Mandeville confesses his ignorance of the secret to this craft, despite his efforts to discover them:

> Þei ben the moste sotyle men in all sciences and in all craftes þat ben in the world. For of sotyltee and of malice and of fer castynge þei

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2009.124.2.592 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> passen all men vnder heuene. And þerfore þei seyn hem self þat þei seen with ii eyen and the cristene men see but with on be cause þat þei þen more sotyll þan þei. For all oþer naciouns þei seyn ben but blynde in conynge and worchinge in comparisoun to hem. (143)
>
> They are the most clever of all the world in all the sciences and crafts. For subtlety, malice, and foresight, they surpass all men under the heavens. Therefore they say that they see with two eyes and Christian men with only one because they are more clever than Christians. By comparison to them they say that people of other nations are blind, as far as knowledge and craft are concerned. (my trans.)

Mandeville's remarks are derived from Jacques de Vitry, who argues for tolerance of differences by speculating that the one-eyed Cyclopes view all two-eyed creatures as marvels even as "we marvel at them" (qtd. in Daston and Park 35). Mandeville borrows the idea from Vitry that Western Christians are the "one-eyed monsters" with respect to technological knowledge and craft. He also crucially alters Vitry's trope to reverse the dynamic of marvels, rendering the observing Western Christian the marvel possessed not of a penetrating knowledge, as in most books of marvels, but of deficient intelligence. His epistemological provincialism is rendered physical in his single eye, while the breadth of Cathayan cultural achievement and knowledge of other cultures is figured in their two eyes. Although Mandeville continues to regard Cathayan culture with wonder, the register of the marvel encounter has shifted decidedly from one centered in the observer to one centered in the object of observation.

Discourse of the marvelous depends on a center-periphery epistemology that, in turn, depends on a series of binary oppositions of natural/unnatural, knowledge/ignorance, and rational/irrational. This epistemology is undone through the "en-marveling" of Mandeville—that is, through the reversal of the marveling gaze and an expanding of the field of the marvelous. Mandeville as European Christian subject is once again stymied because he can no longer see the other in terms of its lack; instead, he sees himself as the one lacking technological savvy. The one-eyed Christian becomes the figure of a provincialized Europe and the optical corrective to Mandeville's imperial gaze, as well as a reminder of the "asymmetric ignorance" on which his gaze depends (Chakrabarty 28).

Mandeville's cosmopolitan utopianism is not without its cracks—its blind spots, if you will. As many scholars have pointed out, one of the exceptions to his remarkable cosmopolitanism is his representation of Jews. Three separate remarks, in particular, suggest an abiding anti-Judaism that rests uncomfortably alongside his otherwise generous depictions of other cultures and religions. First, he emphasizes Jewish agency in the crucifixion of Christ, along with a conspiracy to hide Christ's cross. Second, Mandeville alludes to the medieval myth of a Jewish conspiracy to poison Christians in his discussion of a poisonous tree found in Borneo. Third, Mandeville conflates the ten lost tribes of Israel with Gog and Magog, prophesying the emergence of the Jewish people from their imprisonment in the Caspian mountains in the last days and the Jews' destruction of Christendom.

Mandeville's remarks about Jews, however, do not warrant some of the more alarmist scholarly assessments of the "shadow that falls across" his book, his "unremitting virulence toward Jews," or his "matter-of-fact hostility that borders on paranoia."[5] Mandeville's remarks about Jews are hardly unremitting, and he even pairs Christians with Jews in some of his criticisms and in his account of their mutual descent from the offspring of Noah's son, Japheth, in at least one version of *Mandeville's Travels*.[6] This is not to deny that his remarks are anti-Judaic or that they pose problems for his cosmopolitanism. The question becomes whether Mandeville's blind spot utterly compromises his cosmopolitan,

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utopian vision in the rest of the book. I do not think it does, particularly when that blind spot is read in terms of, instead of against, his cosmopolitanism. Read in this way Mandeville's cosmopolitanism criticizes and corrects his own limitations by chastening the presumptive Christian perspective. Perhaps the most salutary accomplishment of cosmopolitan utopianism lies not in its perfection but in its capacity to exceed the limitations of its visionary, even as Mandeville's vision exceeds and in fact implicitly critiques his anti-Judaic episodes in his book.

Ultimately, Mandeville's utopianism offers an alternative history to the narrative of utopia derived from More's work. Instead of a mirror society fashioned on an isolationist ideal, Mandeville's utopia is an aggregated one emphasizing the relationality that middleness implies and demands. Unlike most utopian imaginary communities that serve "to 'estrange' or momentarily distance its audience from the norms and values" of sixteenth-century England, Mandeville's utopianism does something entirely different (Wegner 17): it brings its cosmopolitanism to bear on Europe and Christianity to expose "the West" as "an imaginary entity" (Chakrabarty 43). This too is a kind of estrangement, but one that differs fundamentally from More's utopian dynamic, for Mandeville wrests European culture and religion from its normative distance and relocates it in that excellent middle that Aristotle identifies as the locus of all virtue.

At a time when the utopianism derived from More has experienced something of a death knell, Mandeville's cosmopolitanism offers a new possibility for its revitalization. It is true that his is a nonmodern utopianism, but perhaps that is precisely what is needed today—that is, according to Sheldon Pollock and his coauthors, "new archives, geographies, and practices of different historical cosmopolitanisms" that might reveal "a cultural illogic for modernity that makes perfectly good non-modern sense" (587). Mandeville's middle way ultimately points toward just such a utopian cosmopolitanism in which "centers are everywhere and circumferences nowhere" (Pollock et al. 588). The excellence of utopias might just lie, perhaps, in the Middle Ages.

Notes

1. This quotation is from Davis's characterization of Edward Said's Middle Ages in *Orientalism* (112). For an argument for the deprovincializing of the Middle Ages in postcolonial studies, see Kinoshita.

2. For discussions of medieval utopianism, see Coleman and Graus. The one recent exception to the failure to look for utopianism before More is Uebel's work, but he understands utopianism as primarily a trope for encounters with otherness, and thus his work fails to address the historical claims of utopianism for modernity.

3. See Woodward on the varieties of *mappaemundi* cartographies. On the *mappaemundi*, see Higgins, who writes, "*The Book* (in its authorial form) retains the theological geography of those *mappaemundi* that give pride of place to Jerusalem and Paradise" (63); Heng 258–59.

4. Linklater discusses shame as a "cosmopolitan emotion" that creates "the possibility of global empathy and sympathy" (19). Such an understanding of cosmopolitan shame is consistent with the emphasis on hospitality in the work of Emmanuel Kant and Jacques Derrida, according to Linklater, and Mandeville too stresses hospitality in connection with his cosmopolitan ethos.

5. Greenblatt 50; Heng 429n11; Higgins 81.

6. The Paris manuscript of the *Travels* links Europeans and Israel to Japheth, while other manuscripts follow the more traditional association of Israel with descendants of Shem. See Braude 117–18.

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