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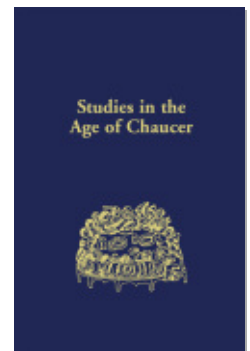
Writing East: The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville by
Iain Macleod Higgins (review)

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Studies in the Age of Chaucer, Volume 20, 1998, pp. 277-280 (Review)

Published by The New Chaucer Society

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sac.1998.0020>



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this very shift *away* from the idealist monoglossia (Alexandrian *analogy*) she finds in textual theory toward a heteroglossia, a celebration of an idiosyncratic textual *anomaly*, that the “legacy” of Auerbach is to be seen most clearly in contemporary textual studies. The “venerable *bon usage*” (p. 102) has ceded to the partial, the *avant*, and the *brouillions*, in demonstration of the continuance of those postmodernist aspects of Auerbach’s philological “character” noted by Geoffrey Green’s essay.

Even (perhaps especially) in such moments where one feels the provocation most strongly, the essays in Lerer’s book are justly Auerbachian in their setting down of a philological “challenge” which must then be confronted with all the energy, enthusiasm, and vigor that characterizes *Mimesis* itself. So what is the *final* legacy of Auerbach? Much too early to say, of course, but in a sense both Lerer’s *Literary History* and Hanna’s *Pursuing History* epitomize that legacy in their scholarship, rhetoric, and shape.

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IAIN MACLEOD HIGGINS. *Writing East: The “Travels” of Sir John Mandeville*. Middle Ages Series. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Pp. ix, 335. \$49.95.

Any book that begins its introduction by reference to Adam and Eve announces the scope of its own ambition. Iain Higgins’s ambition in *Writing East* is not only admirable but, for the most part, successfully realized. Taking its cue from the peripatetic originary pair, *Writing East* also journeys eastward, moving with Sir John, the narrator and ostensible author of the complex of texts commonly known as “Mandeville’s Travels,” from the familiar world of western Europe to the East as it was created in the medieval occidental imagination. In his own scholarly excursus, Higgins employs two guiding principles. The first guiding principle is that the East, imagined and reimagined over the course of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, is not one but many: the “Travels,” that is, encompasses a multiplicity of orients as its narrative moves through Egypt, Palestine, Constantinople, the land of Prester John, India, the Terrestrial Paradise, and back to western Europe again. In its writing of this multiplicity, the “Travels” is one of those essential

medieval “artifacts that give expression to the worldly aspirations of medieval Christian culture” (p. 13). Its ideology is thus manifested in its geography.

Higgins’s second guiding principle also concerns multiplicity—not, however, in the geography within the text of the “Travels,” but in the subsequent textual travels of *The Book of John Mandeville* itself. As Higgins explains (in his book’s most original and convincing portions), the “Travels” is not one text but many. Constituted of redactions, versions, translations, and “isotopes” (p. 26), *The Book* is best understood as a “multi-text” (p. viii), “a heterogeneric compilation,” “a multinodal network, a kind of rhizome” (p. 18). In its attention to issues of textuality, *Writing East* is a compelling response to recent theoretical controversies about the nature and transmission of medieval texts. Scholars such as Paul Zumthor, Peter Shillingsburg, and Tim William Machan (although only the first is listed in Higgins’s extensive bibliography) are among those debating whether it is possible to establish a unified and stable text, whether it is possible to trace the descent of a text from a single, identifiable, and authored (in a modern sense) manuscript source, and, in fact, whether it is desirable to do so. Higgins’s implicit answer to each of these questions is “no.” Throughout *Writing East*, Higgins demonstrates that *The Book* is not a unified text, nor is it a single text, nor is the earliest extant version authoritative. Reading it as if it were stable or stemmatically determinable is to accept modern premises that falsify the process whereby medieval texts were created. Refuting the dominant schools of modern editing practice that either establish a best text or amalgamate a variety of available texts, Higgins aims for a “palimpsestic or topological reading” that considers the manuscript versions together so as to analyze “the rhetorical strategies and ideological aims” (p. 27) of each.

From the more than 60 French, 44 English, 103 Dutch or German, and 54 Latin manuscripts extant (plus those in Czech, Danish, Irish, Italian, and Spanish), Higgins concentrates on 10: the Continental and Insular Versions (French); the Bodley, Cotton, Defective, Egerton, and Metrical Versions (English); Michel Velsler’s and Otto von Diemeringen’s Versions (German); and the Vulgate Latin Version, discussing others as needed. These ten he chooses according to “the availability of editions and the extent of [his] own interests, training, and linguistic competence” (p. 20), a competence which is impressively illustrated throughout. After an introduction setting out the issues of the book, the middle chapters of *Writing East* follow the *Mandeville*-author’s narrative, from

the *captatio benevolentiae* of the exordium all the way to the “theological coda.” En route, readers encounter “choses estranges” in Constantinople (chapter 3), marvels in Palestine (chapter 4), diversity in “Ynde” (chapter 5), power in Cathay (chapter 6), and piety near Paradise (chapter 7). In every instance, Higgins deploys his palimpsestic method to appraise the significance of the material occurring (or not) in the manuscript versions under scrutiny.

Each chapter follows a similar design that includes, first, an overview of the predominant narrative concerns of the different versions; second, an explanation of the relations of the material to its sources, primarily William of Boldensele’s 1336 *Liber de quibusdam ultramarinis partibus* and Odoric of Pordenone’s 1330 *Relatio* (though often read through Jean le Long’s 1351 modified translation); third, an examination of some of the important redactions, showing how each is ideologically inflected; and, fourth, general conclusions on the narrative strategies and ideological foci of the different manuscripts. It has to be said that faced at times with what seems like overwhelming amounts of detail from unfamiliar texts, one’s energies flag. For the most part, however, the rewards of following Higgins’s topological readings are well worth the effort. For instance, in the fifth of nine subparts of chapter 8 (subhead: “Papal Approbation, or the Roman Route Home”), Higgins begins with Sir John’s meeting with the Pope of Rome (a locational reference that allows Higgins to set this incident within the context of the Great Schism). In the manuscripts in which it occurs, this meeting includes a description of a spherical device (possibly a globe), a *mappamundi*, and a book (known today to be Ranulph Higden’s *Polychronicon*) that together serve—the Pope himself informs the traveler—to corroborate what Sir John has written in his own book. To explain the significance of this meeting, Higgins links interpolations occurring in the Cotton, the Defective/Egerton, the Cosin (Latin), and the Velser versions: “Like the world map, the Latin text’s world sphere is said to have been made from the papal book, and this raises an intriguing possibility, given the late date of the manuscript [post-1485]. . . . The first extant globe, made at Nuremburg in 1492, cites John Mandeville several times as an authority, and it would be an even greater irony than Velser’s scrupulous honesty in the epilogue, if the corroborating sphere named in the Cosin text were the Nuremburg globe or another like it that cited the English Knight. In any case, the Latin text goes the others one better here, since it has Sir John discover the contents of his book on the pope’s world sphere” (p. 259). Higgins’s commentary here is typical of his study,

illustrating not only how carefully he reads his material but also how adroitly he brings together a number of versions to arrive at a nuanced appreciation of the subtle workings of the multitextual *Book*.

Writing East is filled with detailed accounts that are as equally insightful as this discussion of the papal interview. Yet Higgins's method of comparing and contrasting isotopic particulars has its drawbacks as well. First, because he needs to cover so much material as he travels with Sir John to the East and back again, Higgins tends to overload his text with a cornucopia of details. Second, because his methodology requires continual maneuvering among manuscripts in order to read them simultaneously and without prioritizing, Higgins is in danger of losing the reader who is unfamiliar with the redactions except through Higgins's own descriptions. Third, because his concern is "the *discursive* making and remaking of the East" (p. 6; my emphasis), *Writing East* is both wonderfully inclusive and frustratingly circumscriptive in that Higgins does not in the end present a theoretical overview that would tie the local instances together. Like its subject, *Writing East* provides "a textual space within which fundamentally distinct views of the world [can] be articulated" (p. 264). What it does not do is provide an extended theoretical discussion of issues (such as power, otherness, or orientalism) that derive from the multitextual *Book as a whole*.

Despite these drawbacks, *Writing East* is a book that should be read by all scholars interested in "Mandeville's Travels," in the genre of travel literature, in the medieval imagined East, and in the composition and transmission of medieval texts. In his study, Higgins has composed a learned, perceptive, and well-written book (even the preface is a model of its kind). There is, however, one final irony that should not be overlooked: *Writing East*, by proving its case of multitextuality so thoroughly, ends up revealing its own limitations, or rather, the limitations of any work transmitted through the medium of print. By convincing readers of the importance of attending to all manuscripts of *The Book*, Iain Higgins inadvertently frustrates those who are able to attend merely to a few. Perhaps the only medium appropriate to the fully successful realization of Higgins's laudable ambitions is a medium to which manuscript variability itself seems to aspire: hypertext.

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