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Theresa Tinkle

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BY THERESA TINKLE

> I can understand a wrathful God who'd just as soon dangle us all from a hook. And I can understand a tender, unprejudiced Jesus. But I could never quite feature the two of them living in the same house.
>
> —Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*

"Always historicize": Fredric Jameson's imperative should be applied to God.[1] For the idea of God is historically and culturally specific; it changes over time. God may be one, but he or she is not always and everywhere perceived in the same way. The Jesus who climbs boldly on the cross in the *Dream of the Rood* expresses the Anglo-Saxon values of heroic, Stoic endurance: he approaches the Cross with haste, eager to climb on it, "strong and courageous," "bold in the sight of many."[2] This Jesus is not—as a representation—identical with "oure very moder Jhesu," whose womb tenderly encloses Julian of Norwich: "in the taking of oure kind he quicked us, and in his blessed dying upon the crosse he bare us to endlesse life. . . . he fedeth us and fordreth [fosters] us, right as the hye, sovereyne kindnesse of moderhed wille."[3] Whereas the *Dream* poet encourages the audience to confront death with heroic fortitude, Julian invites the reader to know Jesus as enduring, motherly love. A history of God necessarily dwells on just such changes. Religious scholar Karen Armstrong brilliantly demonstrates this principle in *A History of God from Abraham to the Present*, which focuses on major developments in three faiths.[4] However, the scope of her study requires her to leave out some centuries and many ideas. Historian Caroline Walker Bynum gives us fuller detail about the Christian Middle Ages, particularly in her influential study of *Jesus as Mother*. Part of Bynum's rationale for this collection of essays is her awareness that images of the deity reveal paradigm shifts: whereas early medieval literature and art depict "a judge and king," she argues that the eleventh- and twelfth-century emphasis falls on "Christ's humanity," and she further remarks on "a new sense of God as father/mother/lover/friend" in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.[5] Art historian Leo Steinberg no less persuasively investigates the renaissance innovation of the *ostentatio*

genitalium, a visual emphasis on Jesus's genitalia, evidencing his fully human and sexual nature.[6] Armstrong, Bynum, Steinberg, and others illuminate momentous developments in representations of God.[7] For the most part, however, medieval literary scholars treat the Christian god as a cultural constant, the character always already known apart from any particular text. They typically refer to God (if at all) in passing, as a sign that need not be examined closely. This tendency persists despite the "religious turn," and despite recent attention to the historical specificity of faith.[8]

Sir John Mandeville's *Book* challenges us to rethink our scholarly attitude toward God, for the work renders visible the deity's historical character and non-obvious symbolic density in late medieval England. Originally written in Anglo-French circa 1356 and translated into English (four translations by 1425) as well as Latin and every major European language, Mandeville's *Book* can be studied in relation to numerous literary histories. Suzanne Conklin Akbari persuasively sets forth the case for considering Mandeville in English contexts: he constructs himself explicitly as English, and that identity is important to the narrative as well as to the work's reception history.[9] I focus on the most prevalent of the Middle English versions, the so-called Defective version (circa 1400); not only did this version circulate widely, it was also the basis for early print editions.[10] Like other versions, the Defective is the product of more than one author, compiler, translator, and redactor. For the sake of clarity and precision, I distinguish between the author-compiler (Mandeville, responsible for the composition and overall shape of the work), the translator of the Defective version (the Defective-writer, responsible for the specific language), and the narrative persona (Sir John, who may or may not map onto a real-life person).[11]

Two passages will suggest the cultural specificity and meaningfulness—and, perhaps more significantly, the conceptual difficulty—implicit in Mandeville's represented god(s). In the Prologue to the work, Sir John praises the holy land as Jesus's kingdom, the place chosen "bifore alle othere londis as for the beste and most vertuous and the moost worthi of the world."[12] Jesus appears primarily in the role of king: "kyng of heuene" (*D*, 3), "kyng of that lond" (*D*, 3), "kyng of glorie" (*D*, 3), "kyng of al the world" (*D*, 4). His titles present him as at once universal (king of the world) and local (king of that land). He does not here function as a universal monarch, however, but as European Christendom's special patron. Jesus acts as a feudal lord, giving the holy land to European knights in return for military service.

Sir John advertises the holy land as a uniquely Christian and English "heritage" (inheritance): "yif we be the right children of Crist, we owe to calenge [claim the right to] the heritage that oure fader left to vs and do it out of straunge [foreign] men hondis" (*D*, 4). This version of Christianity involves both genealogical right and vassals' duty to take arms against the Lord God's enemies, the Muslims with their "yuel trowyng" (wicked belief), who long ago conquered the promised land and drove out Christian Crusaders (*D*, 4).

Toward the end of the *Book*, Sir John describes a god who does not choose one land or people above another, and who does not require military service. Now God rewards love: "I trowe that God loveth wel al these that loveth hym and serueth hym mekeliche and trewliche" (*D*, 126). Pagans as well as Christians who love God receive the same reward. The passage explicitly credits God with having "other scheep which beth not of this [Christian] foold." It cautions readers not to despise those of different religious customs, "for we wote not whom God loveth ne whom he hatith" (*D*, 127). This sentence substantially revises the Prologue, which distinguishes between the Christians God loves and the Muslims he rejects. The Prologue's god favors his chosen people so long as they follow his law and serve him in the feudal manner he requires. The later god's love extends to all who love him, regardless of creed or capacity for military service. The contradiction implicit in these two passages raises an interpretive problem: how are we to understand the character of a god who on the one hand supports the exclusive election of European Christians, and on the other promises universal salvation? God appears to be two quite distinct characters in the English *Book of John Mandeville*, and to organize quite different understandings of reality.

The difficulties in Mandeville's god(s) have received no scholarly notice. Indeed, scholars consistently treat the deity as a sign with a stable, self-evident meaning. In a study of religious difference in Mandeville's *Book*, for instance, Frank Grady refers to "the One God" without signaling that the one might at the least be internally complicated.[13] Sebastian I. Sobecki explains that "according to Mandeville, nature is ordained by God," with "nature" the problematic term and the deity exempt from scrutiny.[14] Grady and Sobecki are hardly alone in adopting a presumed medieval understanding of the deity as one and eternally unchanging. Indeed, this is the norm. Most of us treat "God" as a sign of an all-too-familiar signified, hardly worthy of scholarly attention unless she appears as a mother or otherwise dramatically violates our expectations.

The dominant historicist approach to medieval religion makes theology the basis for interpretation. This has tended to discourage close inquiry about the deity, for medieval theologians are more likely to deny than to illuminate the deity's contradictions. The most basic theological principle of the Christian Middle Ages is that "God" signifies a single, transcendent being in whom no division can exist: hardly an invitation to scrutinize representational discrepancies. A modern scholar invested in theological paradigms might most easily understand the apparent contradictions between the two passages cited above as referring to the persons of the Trinity. Jesus chose the holy land in which to be born; God the father calls all the earth to worship him. One problem with this hypothesis is that Mandeville's god(s) advance contradictory doctrines of election and diverse codes of conduct. The Prologue's Jesus requires military service in a specific land, and divine favor descends to the people as a consequence of their lords' prowess (not, interestingly, from their priests' sacrifices). At the end of the *Book*, the god of love defines service as a matter of intentionality: he accepts those with a "good entencioun," like Job, a "peynym" (pagan) whom God considers a "trewe seruaunt" (*D*, 126). Whereas Jesus endorses a narrowly European, Christian, feudal social hierarchy, the god of love validates "dyuerse lawis," not necessarily European or Christian or feudal (*D*, 127). Intentions replace swords. Each passage organizes complex values (righteousness, election, duty) into distinct symbolic systems, and each represents God as the source of that system. Theological premises about God's oneness and the Trinity, though certainly part of the work's broader historical context, give us no interpretive leverage on these conflicting symbols.

Nicholas Watson compellingly argues that many vernacular writers in the later fourteenth century, including Mandeville, are independent from academic theology, and he rightly cautions us not to treat literature as theology's supplement.[15] Watson considers Mandeville's all-saving god just such a departure from academic ideas, an excellent point so far as it goes.[16] Watson does not take into account the feudal god of the earlier narrative, and makes the later passage stand for the whole; this partial reading has the unintended consequence of constructing a theologically unified deity.[17] Although Watson insists on Mandeville's independence from academic theology, theological presuppositions constrain his analysis. No sensible scholar would deny that an understanding of theology can play a valuable role in clarifying religious ideas. We have, however, become so bound by conventional theological premises that we do not notice the details of the literary

work in front of us. Mandeville's god(s) should call attention to this methodological problem, correct prevailing critical assumptions about the deity's literary unity, and encourage us to rethink our notions about what and how "God" means and about the role of literature in creating those meanings. Setting aside for the moment the theological premise that God is one, we might become more sensitive to the sometimes disunified, often ephemeral, and always historically specific ideas of the deity that surface in literature.

The other common method of historical inquiry about religion, materialist historicism, is more promising for this work. The lord of the text's opening belongs to a feudal social and economic structure, the supposed real, and that image justifies the knight-narrator's cultural power and self-identified class status. This god sanctifies the social power of knights. The universally loving god of the later passage could be seen as creating a complementary oppressive message for the masses, who are exhorted to serve God "mekeliche and trewliche," virtues that tend to preserve the *status quo* of class power. In this analysis, both passages valorize Sir John's cultural position. This approach helps us recognize that people perceive their deities according to their own cultural norms and values, and it emphasizes the constructedness of religions. At the same time, however, the description of a universal divine love profoundly troubles the *status quo* of a Euro-centric and Christo-centric world view, the ideology of Christian supremacy, and the claim of a unique European election—all of which are crucial to the Prologue's structuring of reality. In short, materialist historicism alerts us to the deity's cultural situatedness but also reinforces the ideological gap between the two passages. We need a historical method that allows for the fact that feudal economy and social order changed greatly over the course of the Middle Ages, that contradictory ideas about the deity develop over time (this is inevitable, if only because scripture is itself contradictory), and that representations of God do not necessarily keep up with the pace of cultural change. In other words, Mandeville's god(s) need not reflect his present economic or social structure. We would expect Jesus to appear as a feudal lord in earlier centuries, at the height of both feudalism and Crusading. We would not necessarily expect that image in later fourteenth-century England. This is not to say that kings and knights have lost all interest in Crusading, but to recall that recent Crusading history is filled entirely with failures (most memorably, the fall of Acre in 1291).[18] In Mandeville's context, the feudal god of the Crusades points to a past

idea of the real and raises questions about the cultural work performed by looking backward in time.

Instead of approaching "God" as a sign that points to a known meaning (or being), I propose that we think of "God" as a text in Roland Barthes's sense of the word: "a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation."[19] This theoretical framework does not bury Mandeville's contradictions but prompts us to view the deity as entangled in historical processes and contingencies, potentially enmeshed with cultural change, and liable to the play of meaning inherent in literary works. Indeed, Mandeville's *Book* is quite literally "made up of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures": he translates and organizes texts originally written between the twelfth and early fourteenth centuries, and he imports inconsistencies as he accumulates sources. In the case of the Prologue's feudal god and the later universalism, he actually adds contradictions to his sources.[20] Between the discrepancies among sources and Mandeville's additions, the work discloses an ongoing process of historical change in ideas about the deity, in which an old feudal symbol abuts philosophical universalism, a relatively recent cultural development.[21] Barthes's theory enables us to work with (rather than against) Mandeville's god-text, taking the contradictions as themselves meaningful, if only because they disclose the diverse ideas about the deity that jostle against each other in late medieval England.

Clearly, the history of God(s) cannot be written in tidy diachronic units, with one image entirely displacing an earlier one at some particular point in time, or with a paradigm shift occurring at some identifiable moment. Instead, texts from multiple cultural origins circulate simultaneously. Barthes gives us a way to conceptualize the feudal god and the benevolent force of love as at once derived from different cultural locations, discourses, and historical eras—and still vital in Mandeville's context. As Mandeville brings these texts together, he creates new meanings adapted to his own cultural moment and perspective. Mandeville apparently needs both gods to represent his world comprehensively, suggesting that neither is in itself wholly adequate. We could push that inference further: the god-texts must make sense and create meanings in and through their dialogic relation.[22]

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz studies how religions work for diverse cultures, and his theory, somewhat modified, can usefully supplement Barthes. Geertz concentrates on the "sacred symbols [that] function to synthesize a people's . . . most comprehensive ideas of order."[23] In

Geertz's usage, a symbol is "any object, act, event, or relation which serves as a vehicle for a conception—the conception is the symbol's 'meaning'" (91). Mandeville's god(s) are typically read as just such a (reductively unified) symbol. If we think of the "symbol" as a Barthesian text, however, Geertz can productively focus our attention on the cultural functions of the deity, on the ways in which god(s) represent invented orders. The *Book*'s god(s)—contradictions included—reveal how Mandeville conceives of the world he inhabits, and how he comprehends his relationship with social and cosmic orders. The deity creates for Mandeville and presumably for his readers a basis for moral and ethical action, a comprehensible relationship between what Geertz calls a "style of life" and a particular "metaphysic."[24] Mandeville's god(s) demonstrate to readers within late medieval England how reality is organized, what meanings their lives have, how they are to act in the world, and how they are to understand their suffering. Mandeville's god(s) are in this sense cultural symbols, vehicles by which meanings are produced. Whereas Barthes enables recognition of God's contradictory multiplicity, Geertz reminds us to pay attention to the kinds of cultural work the deity accomplishes. Not incidentally, Barthes and Geertz set us up to expect that even a lay person—as Mandeville claims to be—can contribute to his culture's invention of god(s).

Let us, then, provisionally accept three principles: 1) the feudal lord and the god of love express two distinct ideas of the deity; 2) they suggest an ongoing and incomplete historical shift in conceptions of the Christian deity; and 3) they are mutually intelligible, even mutually interdependent, in Mandeville's *Book*. In light of these principles, the work opens a provocative chapter in the late medieval English history of God, and helps us understand that era's breadth of religious expression. The next two sections of this essay consider Mandeville's god(s) in greater depth, seeking to comprehend their cultural resonance and to appreciate the values at stake in each. In broad terms, I will argue that the feudal god helps Mandeville make sense of Crusading history and Christian Europe's relationship with Islam, while the universally loving god provides assurance that earnest human efforts will be rewarded, that the deity is ultimately beneficent. These are the broad terms of the argument, but each god-text also demonstrates internal contradictions, a vestige of the fact that Mandeville draws multiple discourses into his representation. His god(s) do not reduce to a single, unified cultural meaning but encompass complex, interrelated meanings that appeal to a broad and heterogeneous set of readers.

The feudal god dominates not just the Prologue but the first part of the narrative, the journey to the holy land and account of Sir John's meeting with a Saracen sultan. Throughout this narrative, Sir John insists that the holy land is Christians' unique heritage, a vast relic of Jesus's life. Sir John for the most part reflects on Jesus's life and death indirectly, through the Lord's physical contact with places and objects. He describes the "place whare oure lord was bore," decorated now with marble and richly painted in hues of gold, silver, and azure (*D*, 26). A mere three paces away, travelers will find Jesus's crib, and beside the crib the place where the star leading the three kings fell to earth. The king's splendid gifts, where they met, and whence they came are all detailed. No mention of incarnation theology finds its way into this elaborate reliquary. The baby is absent from the scene, and the objects he once touched substitute for his presence. This is less a meditation on Jesus's life than an account of the land as filled with relics.

The pattern continues. The reader learns about the Virgin Mary's rest in a place memorialized with a church. There she expressed milk onto a marble stone, "so that yit may men se the traces white vpon the stones" (*D*, 26). The milk signifies the infant's life, supplanting the infant himself. Similarly, the place where Jesus died appears as a church that memorializes the site's long history, beginning with Adam's burial, progressing to the discovery of his head after the Flood, from thence to Abraham's sacrifice, and ending with Christian kings of Jerusalem setting up an altar. Sir John does not meditate on the Passion *per se*. He creates a material history that connects the Cross with other significant artifacts. That history advances Christians' claim to the land, realized in the Crusading kings' altar. The account presents Judaism and Christianity as continuous. Adam foreshadows Christ, as Abraham does the kings of Jerusalem. A rock beside the temple in Jerusalem similarly connects historical events: on this rock, Jacob slept when he dreamed of angels ascending and descending to heaven; on it, David saw an angel; Saint Simeon handled the baby Jesus; Mary learned her psalter; Jesus was circumcised, forgave the woman taken in adultery, and hid from enemies seeking him; on this very same rock Melchizedek offered bread and wine in "tokene of the sacrament that was to come" (*D*, 35). Revelation and sacrifice, ritual and vision come together at this holy place. Close by that profoundly meaningful rock dwelt the Knights Templar, protectors of the heritage (until the order was suppressed in 1312). Sir John's holy land expresses a totalizing

vision in which Old and New Testaments appear imbricated with each other, and with the history of the Church, lives of saints, and Crusading orders. He elides Jewish conquest and Christian Crusade, Jewish sacrifice and Jesus's Passion. Jesus symbolizes a Christian claim to the land and its multitude of relics. Christianity seems at once to fulfill and replace Judaism.[25]

Jesus's body is curiously absent from much of the narrative, his life and death known aslant through rocks and memorials. Sir John mentions Jesus's Sermon on the Mount in order to point out the chapel that marks where he sat on that occasion. Jesus's body impresses itself on the holy land, transforming places into permanent relics: "vpon that hulle stode oure lord whenne he wente to heuene, and yyt semeth the stappes of his lyft fote on the stone" (*D*, 40). The land itself signifies Jesus's absent presence, the holy body rendered visible in the traces of his footsteps, his mother's milk. Those relics are true and enduring, always available to the pilgrim. Sir John implicitly contrasts them with the many false relics he uncovers: strangely multiplying heads of John the Baptist, false fragments of the cross.

Jesus chooses this land for his birth and wins it as his kingdom by dying there: "in that lond he wolde deiye as cesid [in legal possession] therynne to leue it to his children" (*D*, 4).[26] *Cesid* signifies Jesus's claim to the land, established through his death. The verb primarily refers to possession by force, and it characterizes Jesus as feudal lord by right of conquest. He becomes king in and through his death, establishing a kingdom for his "children" who are called to follow him and "conquere oure right heritage" (*D*, 4). To *conquere*—to secure by force of arms—does not signify metaphorically. This is no spiritual battle against sin, but physical action against physical enemies. Sir John almost immediately repeats the point: the secular lords of England should "calenge [lay claim to] or conquere here right heritage" (*D*, 4).[27] *Calenge* also denotes material action in space and time. Just as Jesus won the land by his death, so his followers are called to win it by military action, perhaps by their own deaths. Sir John's *imitatio Christi* consists of specific actions (laying claim to, conquering) performed by secular lords in accordance with a feudal economy centered on land.

The Emperor Constantine epitomizes this ideal. His mother Saint Helen discovered relics of the Crucifixion in Jerusalem: the nails and cross. She brought them to Constantine, who turned the nails into a bridle for his horse. Under this sign, he conquers vast territories: "thurgh vertu of that [bridle] he ouercome his enemys," winning all the land from Egypt to Ethiopia, Syria to Persia (*D*, 30). The holy nails

symbolize *vertu*, or divine power.[28] The nails manifest Jesus's power to perform miracles, which he accomplishes by means of Constantine's physical strength (another meaning of *vertu*). This idea of the deity makes victory appear a divine mandate and sanctifies military aggression. The kingdom of Jerusalem is the soul of the vast empire thus won, the source of the relics that enable Constantine's victories, and the center from which Christianity spreads.

The same Jesus stands behind the later conquest of Jerusalem by Crusaders. Sir John repeatedly points out that at one time Crusaders won the holy land as well as vast territories besides, only subsequently to lose everything to Saracens (Muslims). Tyre was once a Christian city but has been destroyed by Saracens, and likewise Acre, Hebron, and Jerusalem. In Mandeville's time, Muslims have in fact taken over Constantine's empire. For all its conceptual power, then, the feudal idea of God appears strained in Mandeville's *Book*, stretched to the breaking point by the Crusaders' many military losses. On Sir John's various approaches to the holy land, he repeatedly memorializes military defeats: this or that place "was a cite of cristene men somtyme, but it is now destruyd" (*D*, 19). The "somtyme" of Christian triumph and the "now" of destruction form a litany of loss. The historical rise of Islamic power threatens Euro-centric explanations of world order, undermining the idea that the holy land is promised to Christians. If God declares favor through military victories, he could seem to prefer the victorious Muslims. Mandeville needs to reconcile Muslim military triumphs with the feudal god's promise that Christians will inherit the holy land.

He does so by arguing that Christians can still claim their inheritance, just as they did in the past. God has not transferred his favor to Muslims, but merely punishes Christians for their sins: "alle thilke londis [Constantine's empire] beth now in payems and Sarasyns hondis. But when God wol, right as these londis beth lost with synne of cristen men, so schal thei be wonne agen by help of God thurgh cristene men" (*D*, 31). The Crusaders failed to live up to Constantine's example. Their god remains omnipotent, but they have not translated his *vertu* into victory. The feudal idea of God accounts for both Christian triumphs (God's favor) and losses (God's punishment). God's preference for Christians is thereby reconciled with the military rise of Islam. Sir John resorts to prophecy to reinforce Christian hopes for the future: "when God wol. . . these londis . . . schal . . . be wonne agen." Mandeville's deity at once rationalizes defeat and offers a comforting hope of restitution. At no point in this narrative does the feudal god

legitimate lords' possession of land in England, explain their relations with their vassals, or mandate the lower classes' duty to the lords, as Marxist theory would lead us to expect. Mandeville does not need God to explain or defend England's social order. Rather, this idea of God draws on the powerful old semiotic system of feudalism to make sense of the rise of Islamic military power and to justify Christian imperialism. The feudal Jesus empowers European Christians against Saracens—in the cultural imaginary, if not in material reality.

Aggression against Saracens also promises to resolve Christian troubles at home. At present, Sir John laments, Christian knights compete violently with each other over limited European land, seeking to "disherite here neighebories" (*D*, 4). Medieval English readers would likely think of the French and English battles at sea (Sluys, 1340), on land (Crécy, 1346; Poitiers, 1356), and over ports (Calais, 1347, and so on) as exemplifying this problem. Far better, Sir John argues, for European knights to wrest the land of promise away from the Saracens. The focus on Christians fighting Christians signals a widespread breakdown in Europe's feudal order and unity. The feudal ideology, economic order, and system of personal bonds no longer effectively regulate knights, no longer restrain states' aggression against neighboring states (if in fact feudalism ever achieved those ends). Feudalism fails as a normative ideology at home.

Feudalism nonetheless helps Mandeville conceptualize a way forward for Europe. The feudal Jesus symbolizes Christian election and supremacy, and ultimately promises a triumph over Islam. By his death, Jesus creates his vassals' relation to the holy land, sanctifies imperialism, accounts for Crusade gains and losses, explains Christendom's proper relationship with expanding Islamic power, and establishes a just military object for European knights. Jesus defines chivalric morality and justifies military aggression—but only against Muslims. In all of these ways, the feudal Jesus enables a constructive perspective on Europe's internal and external challenges. The feudal god thus functions as an effective symbol independent of the social order that originally produced him. The belatedness of the idea is almost certainly part of its appeal in late medieval culture—there is comfort for many in clinging to the past and seeing it as a model for the future.

Victory may be promised, but it has been so long deferred that knights have found other sites for the display of valor and might—hence the fighting over scarce European land. Given the history of Crusading losses and the sheer difficulty of mounting a new Crusade,

Sir John's contemporaries would likely meet his call to arms with indifference. This representation of Jesus is unlikely to inspire a new Crusade, but the text need not work in that literal way to be effective. The feudal Jesus functions primarily to establish a conceptual order and appropriate moral code. Whether or not knights take up the Cross, Mandeville's Jesus establishes an ideological order of considerable contemporary appeal. Jesus makes the rise of Islamic power seem comprehensible, to both knightly and non-knightly classes. The feudal Lord reconciles Islam with God's special love for Christians. Jesus explains how European Christians are to imagine their place in such a world, expecting ultimate victory. If the reader is not a knight, all the better: the burden of action (warfare) then belongs to others. This could be a comforting message to many non-knightly lay readers, who could see themselves as part of a flock dependent on the military class for leadership. The feudal Jesus lays a heavy burden on European knights, but lifts it from other classes. If knights and lords must take arms, everyone else may take a pilgrimage to the holy land. Of course, readers could also go on a virtual pilgrimage, using the *Book* as a devotional guide.

Throughout this narrative, Christians are the elect, but they are not a unified or cohesive group, and they do not all follow Mandeville's feudal lord. Christianity fragments into diverse groups as Sir John proceeds through the land. He records differences between Greek and Roman Christianity. He notes details about faith in Jerusalem, where believers "knowe not of addiciouns that many popes haue maad" (*D*, 31). These *addiciouns* appear extraneous to Christian faith. Similarly, the Samaritans, converted by apostles other than Peter, live by their own law, as do the Jacobites, converted by Saint James. The Georgians follow the law of Saint George, who evangelized them. Sir John typically reports on what people "say" they believe, without explicit editorializing. About the Jacobites, for instance, he tells us that "*they say* that men schal onely to God and noght to man schryue [confess]" (*D*, 48; my emphasis). Sir John's emphasis on what people "say" situates faith in the realm of historical human invention rather than that of absolute truth. A. C. Spearing perceptively discerns in Mandeville an "imaginative relativism," a prompt for readers to recognize "that what we regard as natural is in fact merely customary."[29] Notably, these Christians who dwell in the holy land, under tribute to Saracens, do not take up arms and drive out the enemy. The feudal Jesus is clearly a limited Christian symbol, conceptually aligned with European knights and with the Roman popes who call for Crusade. As genealogies of

apostolic and saintly succession multiply, the pope's authority becomes debatable rather than infallible (the Great Schism, 1378–1417, during which competing popes sit in Rome and Avignon, would only deepen this implication). The feudal Jesus is not relevant to Christians in the holy land, however vital the symbol is for Europeans.

In Mandeville's *Book*, "Christian" identifies not a universal church but a collection of micro-histories. Sir John regularly notes that particular sects do not conform to "oure lawe" (*D*, 31) or "oure treuthe" (*D*, 48), but rarely identifies nonconformity as error. He typically holds himself aloof from doctrinal disputes, rarely adjudicating between right and wrong. Despite their local differences, moreover, each branch of Christianity holds "somme articlis of oure treuthe" (*D*, 50). Sir John does not specify which articles are shared. He simply allows that Christians can depart from "oure treuthe" without being excluded from the fold. Sir John expects readers to take pleasure in the variety of Christian beliefs: "I haue set it [an account of Constantinople] here that ye may wite the dyuersite that is bitwene oure faith and heris, for many men haue grete liking and comfort to hure speke of straunge thingis" (*D*, 14). Diversity leads to "comfort," as if the very absence of religious hegemony were reassuring. Neither Greek nor Roman nor any other sect dominates the others. Sir John thus invites the reader to think about religion beyond his or her particular, local sect, and to view "oure faith" in a broad context, separated from specific dogma.

The narrative turns "Christian" into an abstraction, a generalized idea of an unstated consensus. At the same time, Jesus becomes a more complicated character than he began, for Mandeville draws him not only from Crusading discourses, but also from scripture, devotional traditions, and guides to the holy land. As Sir John picks his way through the holy land, he continually points out relics that memorialize Jesus's words and acts: here he was born, there he was circumcised or received into the temple, was baptized, forgave the woman taken in adultery, performed miracles, preached, was crucified, died and was buried, and appeared to Mary Magdalene and his disciples after his death. The relics recall a life devoted to others—Jesus blessing the poor, teaching the apostles, suffering for "us." Throughout this narrative, the gentle tenor of Jesus's miracles and life, and the suffering he endured to redeem humans, may seem to us strangely disconnected from the aggressive military cult that reverences him. Yet for Mandeville, Jesus's life and the call for Crusade are evidently coherent. According to the feudal model, a peaceable savior dies to win the land for his chivalric followers, who properly serve him in arms. Knights are not called to

imitate Jesus's nonviolence but to win his land back for him, and to return the relics of his life and death to Christian veneration. The feudal model at once represents Jesus as nonviolent and channels the violence of his knightly worshippers.

Jesus is perhaps most accessible to knights through his feudal character. For the rest of the laity, including the potential and armchair pilgrims Sir John addresses in this guide to the holy land, Jesus is the presence memorialized in stones and monuments throughout the land, which testify to his forgiveness of humans, his profound care for the weak and erring, and his willing self-sacrifice. The masses are not called to follow the chivalric code or take up the Cross. That is the duty of European knights, whose religion sets them apart from the other ranks, requiring of them a particular form of service. As a feudal lord, Jesus valorizes knights' service, and we might conclude that Mandeville thereby legitimates the social *status quo*. The narrative can also, however, be read as questioning knights' importance. Pilgrims to the holy land, Christians residing there, and Mandeville's devotional readers worship the incarnate god by visiting the memorials of his life, and their devotions are not entirely dependent on knights wresting those sites away from enemies. Pilgrims, knights, and readers adhere to different forms of *imitatio Christi*, but Mandeville does not present any behavioral code or god-text as intrinsically superior to the others.

Mandeville represents Jesus as at once a lord, specific to European feudal military culture, identified with military values and imperialism, and as a savior, accessible to the masses from all branches of the faith. These ideas of God derive from different cultural sites, and originally participate in dissimilar discourses (advocating Crusade, meditating on the biblical life of Jesus), potentially addressed to diverse audiences. Medieval readers would perhaps focus on one or the other god-text, privileging the passages that seemed to them most meaningful. The text (any text) allows for such partial readings, but it more interestingly enables us to recognize an inherent diversity in late medieval god-texts. Mandeville's journey to the holy land brings a narrow feudal symbol into dialogue with the life of a savior, revealing the potential for dynamic exchange between the values of militarism and affective piety. Mandeville does not so much reconcile these god(s) as foster their coexistence.

Jesus carries complex meanings in the Defective version of Mandeville's *Book*: he suffers from state-sponsored persecution, but he justifies military aggression; he is himself humble and forgiving, yet he bestows supremacy on his followers. Mandeville represents

God(s) as having tremendous power to support military ventures, but also as expressing profound concern for the least of his children, whom he accepts regardless of their class or creed. This Jesus has a very broad cultural appeal and supports a broad range of devotional attitudes, extending from hatred of the infidel to compassion for a crucified man-god. Mandeville's Jesus allows medieval English readers to feel divinely protected against the Muslim enemy, to believe that they have a secure place in a divine plan, and to know that they are loved. In short, the *Book* offers a cogent explanation of the relation between contemporary reality and biblical history: this is what Jesus was like; this is what he requires of Christians. Of course, what Jesus requires depends on where and into what class the reader is born. Jesus does not organize a single moral or doctrinal order, but a number of class- and place-based codes and systems of belief. The Jesus-text is historically and discursively various, constituted from scripture, theories of Crusade, chivalric ideology, devotional traditions, and diverse apostolic teachings. Jesus accomplishes valuable kinds of cultural work for Mandeville's English readers, but the *Book* makes it plain that those same readers would have different duties, and perceive of God differently, if they were born among the Greeks or Nestorians. Jesus obviously does not perform the same cultural work in every place, for every class. He appears less a unified symbolic center of a heterogeneous Christendom, than a complicated text to which various peoples contribute in turn.

II. THE CREATOR GOD

Sir John's journey east after he leaves the holy land presents a wide-ranging diversity of human forms as well as religions, making Christian differences seem, in retrospect, relatively trivial. Some creatures have the heads of dogs, while others have low-hanging testicles, or one large foot, or one eye. Some possess both male and female sex organs. Religion varies as fundamentally as bodies do. People in one place worship human blood, and in another the sun, oxen, idols, fire, serpents, owls, or trees. The east is a place of marvels that greatly expand the realm of what can be imagined, in religion as in many other areas of life. The extended narrative of numerous local practices reinforces the impression that religion is culturally specific. As Sir John proceeds east, moreover, he turns his attention away from a Euro-centric idea of Jesus, from feudal paradigms of social organization, and from Christian-Islamic relations. Indeed, he has little to report about Jesus, however

apprehended, in the latter half of the *Book*. He nonetheless discerns in diverse cultures a common thread of belief, a sketchy near-universal idea of God the creator, who made the world and all in it. This idea of God depends primarily on the Old Testament, particularly Genesis and the Psalms. The creator is not tied to a specific creed or dogma or moral code, or indeed to Christianity. As Mandeville develops this god, he retains some of the character contradictions evident in Jesus, particularly the impulses toward both war and peace.

This pattern begins as Sir John leaves the holy land, when he sums up the Saracens' faith, focusing on its closeness to Christianity. Every shared tenet of faith suggests to Sir John that the Saracens may be easily converted. Saracens' words become his most important witness to shared truths: "we [Saracens] trowe in God that made heuene and erthe and alle other thingis that beth ymade, and withoute hym is no thing ydo, and we trowe the day of dome whare eueryche man schal haue as he hath deserued, and we trowe that al is sooth that God hath spoke thurgh mowthis of his prophetis" (*D*, 58–59). The Saracens apprehend, at least partially, Sir John's own creator, and he does not object to these tenets of his own faith. The creator becomes the touchstone for faith throughout the rest of the narrative, though this deity never accrues the sort of intimate detail attached to Jesus, feudal lord and suffering savior. Mandeville simply affirms several times over that God created all things, and he credits this knowledge to diverse peoples. The deity's global existence is thus confirmed by those who believe in him and describe him in similar language. Much of the narrative reduces the god-text to mere epithets.

In Canaa, for instance, people recognize that the idols they reverence are not the "God of kynde [nature] that made alle thing" (*D*, 73). They nonetheless see their idols as expressing a truth about a divine being. When these people worship the sun, they do so with the conviction that God loves the physical world he created. Sir John touches a similar note in his description of Lamory, where people "trowe in God that made Adam and Eue and alle the world" (*D*, 78). Lamorians even possess parts of the Latin Christian Bible, though they interpret it in a way European readers would find novel. They know God's command to Adam and Eve, "*Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram,* that is to say, Wexeth and beth multiplied and fulle the erthe" (*D*, 78). The Lamorians read the verse as exhorting them to enjoy promiscuous sexual couplings. Sir John does not condemn them for this, any more than he judges them for going naked. He repeats the Lamorians' own interpretation of their nakedness: they believe that God made them,

and, since God could not create anything shameful, their nakedness signifies their inherent human dignity as part of divine order. Despite their one "yuel custome"—they find human flesh toothsome—Sir John presents the Lamorians as a rational people in possession of some truth. Similarly, in Cathay people "trowith wel in God that made al thing" (D, 104). These peoples express a simple, unelaborated belief in a creator who organizes diverse social customs and does not mandate a particular moral code, let alone coherent doctrines. The Defective-writer relies entirely on epithets—God "that made all the world," "that made Adam and Eve"—to identify the deity, thus leaving his portrait indistinct. The creator is distant and generally recognized rather than intimately known. God's revelation of himself in the east seems cryptic in comparison with Jesus's in Europe and the holy land.

God is no longer identified with the holy land, with a material-spiritual inheritance in that place, or indeed with the Christian faith. He appears universal, though perceived in radically different ways within diverse cultures. To be sure, not all people apprehend his existence, but many do, Christian and non-Christian alike. Throughout the journey east, Sir John emphasizes the creator's cosmic reach. He reflects, for instance, on the mistake unlearned men make, imagining that they would fall off the earth if they tried to pass around it. Unlike these fools, Sir John trusts the god who said, "*Non timeas me suspendi terram ex nichilo*, that is to say, Haue no drede that Y haue hongid the erthe of nought" (*D*, 81). The capacity to suspend the world from nothing testifies to the creator's existence apart from his creation. God reassures Sir John not to fear the vast creation, suggesting his concern for his creature and making him seem benevolent as well as powerful.

Sir John several times draws on scripture to express his idea of the creator. At one point, he describes an extraordinarily high tide, so high it comes up to the clouds, and so great it covers the land. His wonder reminds him of the psalm: "therfore seith Dauid, *Mirabiles elaciones maris*, that is to say, Wonderful beth risynges of the see" (*D*, 88). The biblical verse dignifies the place description, fostering a heightened emotional response, and encouraging awe at creation. A rising sea, wherever encountered, witnesses to the deity's power. In another place, when darkness covers a land to protect Christians from their enemies, Sir John turns again to the psalmist: "therefore thei may say with Dauyd thus, *A domino factum est istud et est mirabile in oculis nostris*, that is to say, Of oure lord is this ydo and hit ys wonderful in oure iyen" (*D*, 110). The psalmist praises the miracles that prove the creator's power. Here and elsewhere, the writer uses the Psalms

to develop an authoritative universalizing message: the whole world praises a creator god, who reveals himself in the separation of light from dark, sea from land.

The creator is supposedly fully accessible through the book of nature, and the similar epithets used to identify him—"that made all," "that made Adam and Eve"—suggest a single divine being.[30] Yet Mandeville actually describes a wide variety of faiths devoted to the god of nature. Indeed, diverse people contemplating nature and scripture arrive at contradictory ideas about god(s), so these forms of revelation become progressively less reliable. Several episodes demonstrate this effect: the descriptions of Cathay, the land of Prester John, that of the Bragmen (Brahmins), and Synophe (the Gymnosophists).

People in Cathay believe in the "God that made al thing," and their deity somewhat recalls the feudal Jesus. Suggestively paralleling the legend of Constantine, the great Chan of Cathay has a vision of a white knight sent by "God that is almighty," who promises Chan "shalt wynne all the londis that beth aboute . . . and thei schal be in youre subieccioun" (*D*, 95). Chan institutes a code of law and requires his people to "be obedient to God almighty" (*D*, 96). So far, the episode recalls Constantine and his god. Chan then orders the sacrifice of first-born sons and, on the strength of that blood, he "wan all the londis aboute hym," fulfilling the prophecy (*D*, 96). Chan's ritual slaughter of first-born sons conforms to a pagan understanding of blood sacrifice; the action implicitly denies Jesus's redemptive death. Chan's people conflate a war god and a creator. They also worship idols and owls, so symbolic clarity does not seem the point. Despite the fuzzy theology, Chan founds a greater empire than Constantine or the Crusaders did in the holy land, without benefit of relics from the Crucifixion—indeed, without benefit of Jesus's death to establish the inheritance. Chan's people apprehend a creator but not the Incarnation.

Further on in the journey, Prester John, a Christian, goes into battle under the sign of the Cross. The parallel with Constantine would be stronger if John were not tied by marriage to Chan. Constantine, Chan, and Prester John all demonstrate their gods' support for empire and military exploits, but the diversity of their faiths makes it impossible to comprehend what these gods favor beyond military prowess. In one place, Jesus's sacrifice redeems; in another, sons are sacrificed; in a third, men follow the Cross, but not to the holy land. God(s) appear local, known in particular ways by particular peoples, a projection of specific cultural values. The idea of a martial god is not static, or necessarily feudal, but emerges whenever a culture valorizes masculine aggression.

God almighty in these cases symbolizes the might that makes right. In other words, Mandeville establishes diverse, culturally specific ideas about gods of war, not a continuous portrait of the feudal Jesus.

Although imperialist warfare looks divinely sanctioned in these contexts, the Brahmins fervently challenge martial religions. Describing this righteous non-Christian people, Mandeville idealizes their faith and creates them as the foil of all military cultures. The Brahmins adhere to the "lawe of kynde" and "fulfille the ten comaundementis," following both natural and scriptural laws (*D*, 125). They avoid precisely the sins Sir John elsewhere charges to Christians: envy, pride, covetousness, lechery, and gluttony. Like the Saracens and Chan's people, they "trowith in God that made alle thing and hym worschipe thei" (*D*, 125). In response, God "loueth hem wel and is wel apayd of here lyuyng and of here fey" (*D*, 125). God is so pleased with them that he protects them from storms, hunger, war, and tribulations of all sorts. The Brahmins conform to "kynde," and their creator grants them a kindly natural world to inhabit. The Brahmins function as an example to Christians: go thou and do likewise. Yet the Brahmins do not worship a martial god, and they shun imperialism. When Alexander the Great sets out to win their land and subjugate them, they chastise him for his false values, pointing out that their treasure is "pees and accord and loue," which Alexander lacks despite his great power (*D*, 125). God supports the Brahmins and defines their virtue as superior even to Christians'—after all, Christians are never exempted from tribulation as a reward for the Crusades or for any other virtuous action. The Brahmins bring into the narrative an idea of a benevolent, loving god, a creator who asks only to be recognized and worshipped. This god appears again in Synophe, a nearby isle, home of the Gymnosophists, a people "moche lyke" the Brahmins, full of "good fayth and treuth" (*D*, 126). They too rebuke Alexander's pride and send him away morally chastened. Warfare seems in their eyes a decadent pursuit of riches, a folly and a sin.

Whereas Cathay connects a creator god with warfare, the Brahmins and Gymnosophists firmly sever that connection. The creator and god of war are—and are not—one. The creator god is unstable in this version of Mandeville's *Book*, defined by various local perceptions and embedded in particular cultures. Diverse local ideas about creator god(s) foster confusion about his character, his seeming multiplicity. The god "that made all" has no generally accepted qualities beyond his power to create—a quality that apparently transcends cultural differences. As a consequence, the narrative produces a contradictory

god-text that functions as a highly abstract symbol of creation, of a nature that in some places but not others supports military aggression. Both the war-loving and benevolent sides of divine characters remain in play in the latter part of the narrative. Throughout, Mandeville holds these god(s) in irreducible tension, precluding the dominance of any one idea about or attitude toward the deity. Cathayan and Brahmin perceptions of god(s) are apparently equally legitimate. These particular contradictions, however, undermine Mandeville's capacity to symbolize moral order and coherence. Although the creator is universal, his moral standards clearly are not; morality is entirely a matter of local custom. The deity does not establish a particular moral order, but instead accomplishes disparate kinds of cultural work. Mandeville nonetheless reassures his medieval readers that the Bible promises that many peoples will worship the Christian god, and that this prophecy has already come true in far-flung parts of the world. Readers would readily accept the various god-texts as representing the same, ever-present divine being, their own god, however diversely he is apprehended in various cultures. The repetitive epithets and Mandeville's use of scripture foster this interpretation. From this perspective, Mandeville's creator imposes a reassuring degree of normality on the narrative encounter with numerous Others.

The Brahmins and Gymnosophists know their creator as a benign power, and serve him with peacable love, gaining his love or perhaps always already having it. Directly after describing these peoples, Mandeville sets forth a theory of universal salvation that turns their example into a theological rule. "Y trowe," Sir John affirms, that "God loueth wel al these that loueth hym and serueth hym mekeliche and trewliche" (*D*, 126). Here as elsewhere the "artycles of oure faith" are unnecessary to salvation. Christians are no longer the apparent center of God's plan for the world, no longer the unique elect people—no longer superior.[31] The narrative excursions into Cathay and numerous other places anticipate this conclusion, in the sense that the creator(s) obviously do favor many different peoples. Along with the Brahmins and Gymnosophists, Job now provides a model for redemption: Job is "a peynym whom he [God] held for his trewe seruaunt" (*D*, 126). None of these people has access to the New Testament, or expresses faith in Jesus's redemptive death. Jesus speaks in this passage, but only to marginalize Christianity. He foretells many people's salvation "thurgh the mouth of his prophete Ysaye: *Ponam eis multiplices leges meas*, that is to say, I schall putte to hem my lawis manifold" (*D*, 127). He repeats the message in the gospel: "*Alias oues habeo que non sunt ex*

hoc ouili, that is to say, I haue other scheep whiche beth not of this foold" (*D*, 127). Jesus does not declare the nature of his "lawis," though the context argues that paganism is included. It is counter-intuitive that Jesus would minimize the role of Christianity in salvation history, but that is precisely what he does here.[32] The contradiction with the feudal Jesus could not be more acute.

The idea that God loves everyone who loves him is remarkable. According to Nicholas Watson, two of the Defective-writer's contemporaries, Julian of Norwich and William Langland, conceive of a Christocentric universalism: since Jesus died to save all, all may be redeemed by his death.[33] Mandeville elsewhere prophesies the conversion of Jews and Saracens to Christianity, alluding to a theology consistent with Julian's and Langland's formulations, but at this point the conception is more radical. The Defective-writer does not require all people to convert to Christianity, but only to love a creator and follow the laws of nature revealed to them. Of course, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, Jesus and the creator are one, so worship of a creator does not exclude Jesus. The Defective-writer does not, however, mention Jesus's sacrificial death in his accounts of Job, the Brahmins, Gymnosophists, or numerous other peoples. The feudal Christianity with which the *Book* begins now appears potentially but one of God's "lawis manyfold." Election has become an individual matter: not a question of which doctrines are followed, which sect joined, or which leader followed, but a question chiefly of affective devotion, of whether or not one loves God. The work here de-authorizes the institutional European Church and situates the individual at the center of his or her own religion, offering nature as the best guide in matters of faith. Mandeville seems to forget that his own narrative shows that nature leads people to nudity, sexual promiscuity, cannibalism, and child sacrifice. He is not a particularly thoughtful theologian and does not carefully work out the implications of his bold idea. Rather than explicitly reconciling the many versions of creator-gods scattered through the narrative, Mandeville simply asserts divine transcendence, claiming that diverse cultures share some idea of the deity, in much the way that diverse Christian sects agree about some (unspecified) general idea of Jesus. At this moment in the narrative, God(s) require only love.

A creator-god appears again toward the end of the *Book*, in a passage that adds to Mandeville's sketch of a universal religion. A diffuse idea of a god who endorses "lawis manyfold" here informs Sir John's principles of faith:

> alle these men and folk of whom Y haue spoke that beth resonable haueth somme articlis of oure treuthe. If al thei be of dyuerse lawis and dyuerse trowynges, thei haueth somme gode poyntes of oure treuthe. And thei trowith in God of kynde which made al the world, and hym clepe thei God of kynde as here prophecys seith, *Et metuent eum omnes fines terre*, that is to say, And alle endis of erthe schal drede [fear, respect] hym; and in another place thus, *Omnes gentes seruient ei*, that is to say, Alle folk schal serue to hym. (*D*, 134)

"Our truth" and "their truth" alike consist of the universalizing message of the Psalms, which promise that all people will worship God. Sir John's authorized religion becomes awed reverence for a god known in and through the creation. In terms of scriptural sources, this is the god of Genesis and the Psalms rather than the Jesus of the Gospels. Religion finally consists solely of "dreding" God and serving him. The believer does not need all the (seemingly fussy, certainly redundant) articles of "oure treuthe." Sir John dispenses with doctrinal debates and focuses religion on what can be known by reason and by the clear revelation of scripture, which, in the end, seems to bear entirely straightforward and unambiguous meanings. Mandeville's universalism finally offers readers an easily comprehended religion, without all the complicated rules and doctrines and dogmas of diverse Christian sects. He advocates an affective piety that consists entirely of reverencing God, and he alludes to a seemingly clear moral code for "alle folk." Christians can imitate pagans in loving and serving God.

Mandeville attempts here to reduce his own irreducible god-text, but he has created too complex a deity to achieve that purpose. This is merely one more passage in a work that favors multiplicity, and that over and over again displays profound and irreconcilable differences in humans' perceptions of god(s). Although scholars typically treat this passage as Mandeville's definitive message about salvation, we should recognize that it is countered by many others that focus on God's preference for, say, Christians or Cathayans. Mandeville advances multiple notions about god(s) rather than a single definitive idea, and he consequently produces an unstable god-text, open to diverse interpretations. Just as God both does and does not favor war, so God's love both is and is not inclusive. The text counterbalances oppositions, in effect creating paradoxical truths. Readers may begin to feel a profound epistemological uncertainty about god(s), or they may simplify the text by privileging one passage over another. For those readers inclined to embrace the text's contradictions, militant religion and affective piety could seem complementary rather than

mutually exclusive frames of reference. Indeed, the deity's contradictory characteristics can promote a productive dialogism: the work as a whole balances judgment with mercy, an exclusive Christian idea of salvation with the possibility of natural reason leading all peoples to acknowledge the same "God of kynde" (nature). Medieval readers would likely imagine their Christian faith to be entirely compatible with Mandeville's universalism; they might thereby view themselves as part of a larger family of believers, encompassing many from the past and many in all parts of the world. The differences Mandeville describes among the religions and cultures of the world could then be seen as superficial rather than fundamental.

Mandeville integrates Christianity into the universal order of things by dissolving all that constitutes the faith, including the theory of redemption by Christ's sacrifice. Jesus is not present in this final passage—any more than he is in the Brahmins' religion or Job's, both of which are limited to the revelation of the Old Testament. This idea of salvation is—to say the least—surprising. Orthodox medieval readers would doubtless assume that Jesus is implicit in the "God of kynde," the deity who saves all who serve him. It is nonetheless significant that the representation veers away from Christian specificity and toward a more generalized faith. At this point in the *Book*, Sir John commends a people merely because "thei can wel speke of the bible and specialiche of Genesis and of the book of Moyses" (*D*, 135). Here as elsewhere in the latter part of the narrative, Mandeville makes selective passages in the Old Testament the ground of universal faith. In the process, he imports a historically earlier age of faith into the present, fashioning a simpler religion than he encounters in his survey of Christians, Saracens, pagans, and all the rest. He constructs this universal religion from the texts of ancient Judaism, gaining thereby the authority of antiquity. At the same time, he abjects Jews, constructing his idealized commonality in opposition to an essentialized Other.[34] Mandeville's universalism thus implicitly supports a triumphalist version of Christianity.

Mandeville's god of nature remedies many of the problems besetting late medieval Christendom. As Sir John visits diverse Christian sects in the course of his journey, he uncovers extensive doctrinal and theological controversies, as well as numerous differences in praxis—despite many sects' authoritative foundations in the apostles' teaching. Rather than adjudicating among the sects, he finally simplifies faith, separating the essential (belief in a creator) from the inessential ("our" or "their" doctrines). He thereby renders inconsequential the

many Christian differences he records in the course of the journey. Many late medieval English lay readers, immersed in controversies about vernacular theology, would probably appreciate Sir John's rule of faith: they need do no more than believe in the "God of kynde" and worship him. The work implies that the English Christian may comfortably avoid hermeneutic subtleties and religious debates, just as Brahmins do. By charting a safe path through religious controversy, this idea of a creator-god could perform a valuable function for medieval readers. Despite the extraordinary boldness of Mandeville's universalism, moreover, his final theological message is conservative by the standards of the time: he avoids argument about the sacraments, teaches his readers to shun sin and follow the Ten Commandments, and exhorts them to hope for heaven; he limits what the laity must know in order to be saved. These are unexceptionable teachings even after Archbishop Arundel's *Constitutions* of 1409, which severely censor English vernacular theology.[35] Mandeville's *Book* fosters inquiry into religion while avoiding dangerous points of controversy—an achievement that supports the work's extraordinarily broad circulation in the repressive climate after 1409.

The god of nature who loves all who love him could function for Mandeville's English readers in an additional and perhaps even more significant way. This work's encyclopedic rendering of a heterogeneous creation, filled with discordant reports about creator-gods, could foster uncertainty about the relation between the Christian god and other manifestations of the divine. Mandeville's universal creator ultimately reassures medieval readers that their god is indeed supreme, the ancient root of all religions. Since there is only one nature, there can be only one god of nature. Nature stabilizes the idea of God(s).

III. SIR JOHN'S GOD(S)

Taken as a whole, Mandeville's narrative foregrounds the late medieval deity's discursive multiplicity, encompassing as it does Crusade rhetoric, meditations on the life and Passion of Jesus, scholastic philosophy about natural religion, the wonders of the east, and assorted examples of Christian and non-Christian affective piety. Through it all, Mandeville repeatedly returns to several principles. Whenever the deity presides over war, he validates masculine aggression and creates legitimate purposes for it; he enables various peoples to understand their victories and defeats as merited, not haphazard or meaningless. This is doubtless an important meaning for the deity to bear in

medieval culture. As we have seen, Mandeville needs the feudal Jesus to give meaning to Crusade losses, to make those losses comprehensible as punishment for sin. This strategy limits the perceived impact of the Crusades on the knightly class and indeed on the church that promoted them. It allows Europeans to incorporate the military rise of Islam into a belief in Christian superiority. It gives them an idea of what they must do—repent of their sins—in order to reverse their military losses. A similar logic informs the portraits of Alexander's, Prester John's, and the Cathayans' war god(s) in the latter part of the narrative. These passages show a god's power to ensure military victory for those he elects, not only in present-day Europe but throughout world history. Deities' roles in warfare make sense of the rise and fall of empires, giving history a recognizable meaning and purpose. Since god(s) intervene in history in order to bring about justice, victory and defeat alike are filled with import. God(s) give war comprehensible social meanings.

It is therefore surprising that Mandeville breaks this pattern with the Brahmins and Gymnosophists, whose god teaches them to shun warfare. These idealized peoples unequivocally classify war as sin. Their voices contest the foundational principle of the Crusades as well as all other imperialistic wars. The text both supports a militant Christianity and offers a rationale for eschewing religious warfare. In this, Mandeville captures the cross-currents of his culture, the compelling contemporary arguments from religion in favor of armed imperialism and pacifism. The *Book* presents both arguments as tenable, obviously subject to debate, and apparently not in urgent need of collective resolution one way or the other. Mandeville's god(s) function ambivalently to channel violent aggression, and to acknowledge that nature itself abhors that violence. The deity cannot be reduced to a simplistic, dominant ideology. Indeed, the representation captures the culture's vital heterogeneity, its reception and production of diverse intellectual, literary, and devotional traditions. Mandeville's god(s) epitomize the Barthesian text, encompassing the contradictory ideas, multiple perspectives, and schools of thought that circulate within late medieval culture.

The *Book* does not set forth a universal or totalizing concept of God, and theological premises about one God merely obscure what is going on in this text, as well as the cultural work it is capable of performing for medieval readers. Whereas the feudal lord functions in the first part of the narrative primarily to create an exclusive Christian lineage and inheritance, the god of nature finally functions to downplay religious

differences and to advance an ideal of inclusivity. If war god(s) require heroic exploits, the creator-god(s) as finally conceived require readers merely to love him and do well, follow the Ten Commandments, and turn away from sin—lessons that even the most conservative churchmen would approve for the laity. Mandeville's meaning arises from the interplay between these divine characters: medieval readers would perceive that their god not only sides with Christians but also loves all who love him; these readers would doubtless welcome the cheerful conclusion that "our" god is known and worshipped throughout the world. Mandeville's *Book* thus suggests the kind of cultural work god(s) could accomplish for late medieval readers: channeling their aggressions, allowing them to perceive purpose even in military defeats, legitimating their desire to love and be loved, and reassuring them that their piety meets with divine approval. Mandeville's representations make better sense as affective artifacts, expressions of desire and need, than as fully developed theological arguments. His god(s) satisfy medieval readers' conflicting desires for triumph over enemies as well as peace with aggressors, for the privilege of being a chosen people as well as the reassurance that their deity is universal and all-powerful.

Within the *Book*, god(s) are juxtaposed one against the other, often enough manifesting as quotations from specific cultural locations (they say God is . . .). In this way, Mandeville exposes the entangled strands of thought that make up the deity in any age. The several characters of God—the biblical Jesus and the feudal lord, the gods of nature and the gods of war—often inhabit discrete discourses in the later Middle Ages. By folding diverse sources into his work, Mandeville creates a dialogic text suggestive of ongoing cultural change, wherein older feudal ideals and newer scholastic views of nature, the Old Testament and the New, provide complementary explanations of reality and guides to moral living. Mandeville's *Book* thereby renders visible the diverse traditions from which god-texts are fashioned in the later Middle Ages. The work may serve to remind us that the idea of a divine being persists and becomes culturally vital precisely because it is symbolically dense, irreducible, and complicated. In the end, the *Book* demonstrates an important point for modern literary scholars: produced in multiple discourses, and drawn, as s/he must always be, from innumerable texts, the deity represented in literature is an unstable semiotic construct, continually evolving, full of contradictory meanings, and yet the symbolic center of pre-modern writers' most intense efforts to make sense of the world in which they dwell. By bracketing theological dicta about God's oneness, we may begin to

apprehend how authors of imaginative literature invent and reinvent the deity in every age. In the process, we will begin to historicize God.

University of Michigan

NOTES

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[1] Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 9.

[2] "Dream of the Rood," in *The Vercelli Book*, ed. George Philip Krapp (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), lines 40–41, my translation.

[3] Julian of Norwich, *Revelation of Love*, *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: "A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman" and "A Revelation of Love"*, ed. Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins (University Park, PA: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 321.

[4] Karen Armstrong, *A History of God from Abraham to the Present: The 4000-year Quest for God* (London: Heinemann, 1993).

[5] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), 16, 19.

[6] Leo Steinberg, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*, 2nd ed., revised (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996).

[7] Bynum and Steinberg have debated the nature—and fact—of change: Bynum, "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," in *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1991), 79–117; Steinberg, "Ad Bynum," in *Sexuality of Christ*, 364–89. From my perspective, Steinberg's work does for the renaissance what Bynum does for the high Middle Ages, which is to reveal that the idea of God is historically and culturally specific and prone to paradigm change.

[8] See, for example, the admirable essays on "Literary History and the Religious Turn," a special issue of *English Language Notes* 44 (2006): especially 77–137 on medieval topics; and the excellent special issue of *Religion and Literature* 42 (2010), in which medievalists reflect on the "religious turn." The historical and cultural specificity of religion also emerges brilliantly in the essays edited by Susan L. Mizruchi, *Religion and Cultural Studies* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001).

[9] See Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100–1450* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2009), 53, 64–65.

[10] For details about the manuscripts and versions, see M. C. Seymour, "The Early English Editions of Mandeville's Travels," *The Library* 29 (1964): 202–7; C. W. R. D. Moseley, "The Availability of Mandeville's Travels in England, 1356–1750," *The Library* 30 (1975): 125–33; Iain Macleod Higgins, *Writing East: The* Travels *of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 17–23; and Rosemary Tzanaki, *Mandeville's Medieval Audiences: A Study on the Reception of the* Book *of Sir John Mandeville (1371–1550)* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 1–21.

[11] The authorship of Mandeville's *Book* is an unsettled question, and scholars have identified a number of viable candidates. For a review of prior arguments and a new candidate for author, see Seymour, *Sir John Mandeville* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1993), 1–2, 11–15, 23–24. Josephine Waters Bennett, *The Rediscovery of Sir John Mandeville* (New York: MLA, 1954), 170–216 proposes one of the English Mandevilles as author.

Michael J. Bennett, "*Mandeville's Travels* and the Anglo-French Moment," *Medium Aevum* 75 (2006): 273–92 adds new evidence to this hypothesis and argues persuasively for a (now unidentifiable) English author writing in a context of Anglo-French cultural exchange.

[12] *The Defective Version of Mandeville's Travels*, ed. Seymour, Early English Text Society o.s. 319 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 3. Hereafter abbreviated *D* and cited parenthetically by page number. I take the liberty of modernizing thorns (th) and yoghs (y, g, gh).

[13] Frank Grady, *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 13. See also "one God" (45), "the one God" (53), and "the right God" (64).

[14] Sebastian I. Sobecki, "Mandeville's Thought of the Limit: The Discourse of Similarity and Difference in *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*," *The Review of English Studies* 53 (2002): 340.

[15] See Nicholas Watson, "Visions of Inclusion: Universal Salvation and Vernacular Theology in Pre-Reformation England," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 27 (1997): 145–87. Watson lays much of the groundwork for this argument in "Censorship and Cultural Change in Late-Medieval England: Vernacular Theology, the Oxford Translation Debate, and Arundel's Constitutions of 1409," *Speculum* 70 (1995): 822–64.

[16] See Watson, "Visions of Inclusion," 151–52.

[17] John Ganim, from a completely different theoretical position, similarly treats the later passage as representative of the whole, "Cosmopolitanism and Medievalism," *Exemplaria* 22 (2010): 23–24. While enlarging on earlier studies of Mandeville's theological context, Shirin A. Khanmohamadi likewise makes the later passage epitomize Mandeville's thought. See *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 129–37.

[18] Suzanne M. Yeager persuasively situates the *Book* in the context of contemporary English Crusading interest, *Jerusalem in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 118–24.

[19] Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 148.

[20] The Prologue has no source; for sources and authorial additions to the latter passage, see Seymour's notes to the *Defective Version*, 169, notes to page 125, line 1 to page 126, line 8; and page 126, line 9 to page 127, line 13.

[21] Armstrong offers a good general overview of the medieval shift from feudal to philosophical discourses in *History of God*, 228–41. For specific late medieval English developments, see Watson, "Visions of Inclusion," 145–87; A. C. Spearing, "The Journey to Jerusalem: Mandeville and Hilton," *Essays in Medieval Studies* 25 (2008): 12–14; and Khanmohamadi, 129–37.

[22] I am indebted to Higgins, who proposes that the work's many "unsettling contradictions," the result of Mandeville's extensive borrowing from earlier works, are best seen as dialogic (11).

[23] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 89.

[24] Geertz, 90.

[25] I study Mandeville's supersessionism in Tinkle, "God's Chosen Peoples," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113 (2014): 443–71.

[26] Middle English Dictionary, s.v. "seisen," v., 1a, b, 2a, c, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED39243.

[27] Middle English Dictionary, s.v. "chalengen," v., 4a, b, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED7196.

[28] Middle English Dictionary, s.v. "vertu," n., 9, http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED51027.

[29] Spearing, 7, 10. See also 6–14.

[30] Donald R. Howard discerns a link between Mandeville and Scholastic theories of "natural religion" and natural reason: "The World of Mandeville's Travels," *The Yearbook of English Studies* 1 (1971): 8–12. See also Howard, *Writers and Pilgrims: Medieval Pilgrimage Narratives and Their Posterity* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1980), 69–74.

[31] Stephen Greenblatt arrives by a different path at a similar conclusion about Mandeville's "refusal to grant the universal authority and ontological priority of Christian orthodoxy" (*Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991], 46). See also David Lawton, "The Surveying Subject and the 'Whole World' of Belief: Three Case Studies," *New Medieval Literatures* 4 (2001): 22–32 for a reading focused on threats to Christian hegemony. My analysis also substantially agrees with that of Karma Lochrie, who argues that Mandeville "provincializes" Christian Europe, challenging Europeans' supposed superiority ("Provincializing Medieval Europe: Mandeville's Cosmopolitan Utopia," *PMLA* 124 [2009]: 595). Ganim, 5–27 develops a wide-ranging analysis that productively complicates Lochrie's; he discovers tensions between universalism and xenophobia in medieval cosmopolitanism.

[32] I agree with Spearing: this is "not a distinctively Catholic or even Christian truth but simply acceptability to a loving God" (14). Other versions of the work lead to less radical conclusions: see Higgins, 231–38. Some scholars discern an impulse toward Christian hegemony in the *Book*, but their readings owe more to post-colonial theory or to details in other versions of the work, than to the evidence of the Defective version. The emphasis on Mandeville's scientific knowledge—a foundational premise of post-colonial readings—begins with Christian K. Zacher, *Curiosity and Pilgrimage: The Literature of Discovery in Fourteenth-Century England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976), 130–57. See also Andrew Fleck, "Here, There, and In Between: Representing Difference in the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*," *Studies in Philology* 97 (2000): 379–401; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), 239–305; and Grady, 57, 61. Akbari, 20–66 develops what seems to me a more persuasively nuanced argument; in her account, the *Book* brings out the defects of Christianity rather than its supremacy or capacity for domination. Khanmohamadi, 136–37 explicitly rejects Orientalizing, colonialist analyses of Mandeville.

[33] See Watson, "Visions of Inclusion," 153–66.

[34] I lack space here to take up Mandeville's complex attitudes toward Jews, so I'll point the reader to some excellent existing studies: Benjamin Braude, "Mandeville's Jews among Others," in *Pilgrims and Travelers to the Holy Land*, ed. Bryan F. Le Beau and Menachem Mor (Omaha, NE: Creighton Univ. Press, 1996), 133–58; Scott D. Westrem, "Against Gog and Magog," in *Text and Territory: Geographical Imagination in the European Middle Ages*, ed. Sylvia Tomasch and Sealy Gilles (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 54–75; Kathleen Biddick, "The ABC of Ptolemy: Mapping the World with the Alphabet," in *Text and Territory*, ed. Tomasch and Gilles, 268–93; Linda Lomperis, "Medieval Travel Writing and the Question of Race," *Journal of*

Medieval and Early Modern Studies 31 (2001): 147–64; David B. Leshock, "Religious Geography: Designating Jews and Muslims as Foreigners in Medieval England," in *Meeting the Foreign in the Middle Ages*, ed. Albrecht Classen (New York: Routledge, 2002), 202–25; Akbari, 112–54; Miriamne Ara Krummel, *Crafting Jewishness in Medieval England: Legally Absent, Virtually Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 69–88. I contribute to this discussion in "God's Chosen Peoples."

[35] For the controversy about vernacular theology and the effects of Arundel's *Constitutions* on literary production, see Watson, "Censorship and Cultural Change," 822–64.