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T HE INVENTION OF FICTION POSTDATES the Middle Ages, according to fiction's most authoritative biographers.[1] Among them is Catherine Gallagher, who defines fiction, in part, as "believable stories that d[o] not solicit belief."[2] Simultaneously plausible and imaginary, fiction inspires affective commitment without conviction. It elicits "'ironic' assent" from a reader who entertains as credible stories that she knows to be invented (RF 347). Gallagher excludes medieval literature on the grounds that its readers confused believability with truth claims (RF 338–39). They believed what was believable, and if the story that inspired belief was made up, then it was culpably misleading. In other words, a whiff of plausibility led readers to identify either truth or fraud. Outright fantasy was unobjectionable because it did not pretend to convince, but persuasive inventions were bound to confuse. In a similar vein, Roland Barthes concludes that medieval authors made no effort to create a reality effect, perhaps because medieval readers were not equipped to experience one.[3]

Julie Orlemanski is right to argue that the secularization thesis—the linear history of Western society's progressive disenchantment and increased skepticism—underlies Gallagher's comments about premodern and early modern literature.[4] Unsophisticated attitudes toward literature as Gallagher presents them resemble unsophisticated attitudes toward religion: a simple people find truth claims under every rock. In order for literature to play with credibility, readers cannot be unduly credulous, and so the absence of fiction in the Middle Ages becomes evidence of a readership not skeptical enough to enjoy it. In other words, literature can only play a game—can only invite a sort of belief that recognizes its own as-if-ness—if the reader is in on it. Sophisticated belief is skeptical, and the people of the medieval, Latin West were childishly accepting.[5] One can hear the echo of James Frazer, the anthropologist who famously argued that societies advance from magic to religion to science. Withholding belief unless convinced otherwise, in his case by scientific evidence, becomes the mark of societal maturity.[6]

The suggestion that medieval readers were capable of only two relatively unsophisticated responses to imaginative literature (I do or I do

not believe it) is the focus of this article. Critics have long known that "truth and falsehood are not literary categories," but if medieval readers evaluated it only according to those ill-fitting terms, then they could not adequately appreciate it.[7] Complex literature would fare poorly in the hands of such diminished readers, and they in turn would leave medievalists with a meager field of interpretive options. I argue for heartier readers with the aid of medieval travel literature, and specifically of its marvels. I claim that they represent possibilities neither true nor false, offered to readers who did not need to label all textual content either one or the other. Marvels instead appeal to imagination precisely because of their resolute indeterminacy. Of course it is unlikely that all readers responded to marvels in the same way, and some were surely more concerned with their realness than others. However, the range of responses that marvels elicited is broader and richer than has typically been allowed. To mark out the breadth of that range, I turn primarily to *Mandeville's Travels* and show that it expects to find a reader who can enjoy cognitive uncertainty.

That does not make medieval readers potentially Gallagherian consumers of fiction who playfully pretend that inventions are real. Rather, they might be relatively uninvested in distinguishing the one from the other. They might even take pleasure in stories that plausibly belong to either category. The key difference between such a reader and Gallagher's lies in the possibility that medieval marvels, unlike the plots of realistic novels or even marvels in later literature, might be real. Medieval philosophers often used the example of magnets, with their improbable ability to create action at a distance, to exert force over iron without being in physical contact with it. It is a gateway marvel that, once pondered, facilitates belief in greater marvels. After witnessing it and like marvels, Roger Bacon writes, "Nothing is difficult for me to believe."[8] There was always a possibility, however remote, that a marvel could be real as long as it had not been disproven and it respected nature's laws, whether as they were currently understood or as they might be understood better. For that reason, marvels invited neither ironic assent nor a willing suspension of disbelief. They required only that readers not be preoccupied with definitively separating real from imaginary things. This is emphatically not to suggest that they were insensible to differences between the two. Rather, I claim that leaving the dividing line between them unfixed was a creative principle as much as an intellectual one. It was sometimes appropriate as a matter of epistemic and theological humility, but it could also pique imagination and generate pleasure.

Marvels serve especially well to guide an investigation into medieval reading and fictionality because scholarship has told two incompat-

ible stories about them, one about their believability and one about their impossibility. Marvels discovered in romance were protofictional inventions, but marvels discovered elsewhere, as in travel literature, chronicles, or natural philosophy, were accepted as truths. To begin with the first, literary history has long assigned a special status to the marvels of romance. As emblems of fiction, marvels are seen to anticipate the realist novel. Francis Dubost comments on the marvel's allegiance with fiction: "The marvel is in the same class as [*assimilée à*] fiction, forming the ambiguous mode of representation between being and non-being, of phantasms, of words without things, of images without substance [*consistence*]."[9] Marvels are creatures of imagination and self-contained fictions, but only in the context of romance, a genre that they help to constitute. Douglas Kelly writes that "marvels are indeed the primordial stuff—the *hyle*, as it were—of romance," which relies on them to create its imaginary otherworlds.[10] Romance without marvels would be matter without form, and as any Aristotelian knows, matter cannot survive without form. If marvels are essential to romance, and if the marvels within romance anticipate fiction, then it follows that romance is the foundation upon which fiction is built, that it should be "the novel's immediate fictional precursor" (RF 339). Through its own unmistakable inventedness, romance apparently lends marvels the patina of implausibility that they lack elsewhere in medieval culture. That is, marvels uniquely as they exist in romance might invite the skepticism that makes readers, and texts, sophisticated.

The story of the novel's emergence from romance and its marvels sits uncomfortably next to an equally authoritative and well-established account of medieval credulity. Outside of romance, marvels are still thought to inspire uncomplicated belief. Thus one of their most "disquieting" (*inquiétant*) features, according to Jacques Le Goff, is "the very fact that nobody questions their seamless presence in everyday life."[11] They are normal, as believable as anything encountered in the course of daily affairs. As they appear in travel literature, they might be accepted at face value. Regarding Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa's *Le Devisement du monde,* for instance, Suzanne Yeager writes that it "was accepted for its facts; it was perceived as an account of actual events."[12] The Middle Ages as a whole is often associated with such willingness to believe marvels, a tendency rejected at least by the Enlightenment, which "is still defined in part as the anti-marvelous."[13] The enchanted Middle Ages forms a contrast with disenchanted modernity, and attitudes toward marvels play as large a role as anything in marking the division.[14]

Even painted in such broad strokes, such readings call attention to a fundamental difference in the work that scholars ask marvels to perform,

either to inspire belief or to provide an escape from it. Both readings were proposed decades ago, and both have taken fire from scholars who recognize their inadequacies, but both persist in the absence of alternative models. They are especially useful because they align neatly with the two options that medieval readers are traditionally allowed: to believe or disbelieve. Readers did not believe marvels when they appeared in romance, but were otherwise credulous. Indeed, perhaps paradoxically, the two sustain each other: the believability of marvels outside of romance is the norm against which romance innovates. It cannot be different unless it departs from another tradition. Inversely, claims made for the inventedness of marvels in romance imply that readers accepted marvels elsewhere as facts. Nonetheless, it is hard to see how so stark a contrast can be sustained when the selfsame marvels appear in both domains. In other words, it is unlikely that a reader, upon finding a description of a rock that tests a woman's virginity in a work of natural philosophy, judged it to be real, but when he found the exact same marvel in a romance he thought it a fanciful invention. Even if we were to entertain so implausible a scenario, it would pose another conundrum. It would require a medieval reader to recognize that the *same marvel* might be either believed or disbelieved, perhaps even to be aware of her own shifting judgments about it, which is precisely what such readers were not supposed to be capable of.

Because the marvels of medieval literature and philosophy are seldom studied together, such inconsistencies have managed to escape much scrutiny. Travel literature helps to expose them because it brings together marvels of both sorts, both natural philosophers' marvels and those drawn from a long literary tradition. Returning to Gallagher's portrait of the premodern reader above, we might assume that he is perfectly suited to travel literature. Unlike romance, which consists of figments that do not pretend to be true, it is potentially persuasive literature that combines claims both true and false. According to Gallagher's model, such literature would have to be fraudulent. Because it is not obviously false, it asks to be believed and, where it invents, it misleads its reader. In a situation where medieval authors ask their readers to believe them, readers comply. Consistent with this perspective are the claims that *Mandeville's Travels* "engages in much deception" and is an "imposture."[15] Of course readers were only deceived if they believed the text whole-cloth. The marvels of travel literature therefore offer a prime opportunity to consider the supposed gullibility of medieval Western Europeans in response to literature that did not deserve their trust. This should be precisely the sort of literature that proves the credulity of the medieval reader. Instead, it reveals the capacity of medieval authors to keep their

readers in doubt about the ontological status of their objects. Such doubt enlivens imagnation, but that is not to support the reading that marvels are the seeds of fiction.[16] Possibly real and possibly not, they ask for a reader who is willing to enjoy uncertainty rather than merely pretending to do so.

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Although marvels are often mischaracterized as supposed facts, medieval philosophers understood them to be possibilities or, to be more precise, they considered them not to be logically impossible. Regarding such marvels as the reported ability to survive without food for twenty years, for instance, Nicole Oresme writes, "The causes of such particulars are unknown to us, and it is enough for me that it not be concluded to be impossible."[17] Were such a marvel to be refuted, it would be inappropriate to entertain it, but absent that, there is no harm in considering its possible mechanisms. Thanks above all to John Murdoch, scholars have written extensively about the tendency of late-medieval natural philosophers to reason *secundum imaginationem,* that is, as Hans Thijssen defines it, to reason "in all imaginable ways within the realm of the logically possible."[18] In other words, they do not confine themselves to what was known to be true of nature, or what Aristotle said about nature, but they instead entertain hypotheticals, often stemming from suppositions about God's absolute power. This method of analysis creates generous boundaries for philosophers' speculations. They confine themselves to the logically possible more than they do to the real or demonstrable. Logical impossibility does not exclude a great deal, and if marvels simply need to steer clear of it, then they can comfortably push against the boundaries of implausibility.

Arguing for the nonimpossibility of marvels is a far cry from arguing for their truth. As Oresme writes on several occasions, nobody knows the upper limits of divine potential. The "highest limit" in natural matters—how big a man might be, for instance—"is not known or knowable except by God."[19] Nature varies wildly at the level of the particular. That is why declaring marvels to be impossible was often considered an act of hubris. They should not be rejected out of hand, but those that had not been decisively demonstrated should not be upheld as certain truths or believed with dogmatic conviction either. Thus Jacques de Vitry addresses the claim that Alexander the Great encountered birds in Persia who could restore health to ill travelers who made eye contact with them. Jacques brings up Brendan, the sixth-century Irish monk who was, at the time

Jacques was writing, soon to be canonized. He too met unusual birds, including some inhabited by human spirits who were serving penance. He concludes, "Whether it is true or possible, we leave to the judgment of the prudent reader."[20] The more authoritative Brendan lends credence to Alexander, as one sort of marvelous bird lends credence to another, but even here, the intent is not to prove either marvel true. Notice that, when Jacques leaves the reader to determine "whether it is true or possible," possibility is the minimum threshold. Jacques calls for a reader who accepts that a marvel might be real because he knows that some marvels do exist, but who otherwise withholds judgment. Elsewhere, he expressly contrasts the belief that marvels ask for with the sort that scripture requires.[21] The variety of belief that secular marvels should inspire is provisional, with low stakes. It is not faith or conviction but a willingness to accept that creation has its surprises.

Showing that some philosophers and chroniclers kept an open mind about marvels hardly proves that authors of travel literature did so too, or expected the same of their readers. Such evidence is provided by travel texts themselves, and *Mandeville's Travels* makes the case especially well. Written in the mid-fourteenth century in Anglo-Norman by a person yet to be identified, it pretends to be the record of an English knight who traveled extensively. It is full of claims that its author, whom I will call Mandeville for convenience, actually visited far-off lands, and repeatedly asks its reader to believe them. Such efforts to shore up the author's authority were hardly uncommon. As Mary Campbell writes, with slight exaggeration, "The anxious, even florid, claim to veracity and reliability is a conventional feature of any premodern, first-person narrative of travel."[22] In Mandeville's case, such efforts are purely rhetorical. His text is an amplified compilation of earlier travel records and chronicles, in no sense a record of his own ambulations.

Does this mean that Mandeville lies? Some scholars suggest so. Iain Higgins, for instance, writes that *Mandeville's Travels* is one of "many medieval texts that violate the good faith" of readers "by presenting as true what is only partly so, or not even so."[23] Why should literary invention, or reinvention, qualify as dishonesty? Presumably, it is because of the text's use of the first person and because the medieval genre of travel literature does contain some verifiable facts about geography, flora, fauna, natural resources, and various cultural and religious practices. It does often record details of actual travel, even if not that of the author who presents them. But those elements never stand alone. They are always mingled with implausible marvels and elements that belong most properly to literary history. Indeed, such history often trumps experience. As Sebastian Sobecki writes, "Preferment [is] given to texts . . . over

experience," with the result that spectacular tales or objects sometimes appear even when the author might have known better.[24] Unmingled truth is simply not its goal. Even in classical antecedents like those of Herodotus and Ctesias, the genre is resolutely mixed, made up of both observation and invention.

Its composite nature has had the effect of raising the bar for the works' invented content, as though it too consists of intended facts that often fail to reach their target. Editors suggest as much by including notes that declare whether a particular detail in a medieval travel text is true, partly true, or false. They respond to marvels as though they constitute truth claims. The approach is rooted above all in the work of nineteenth-century orientalists like Henry Yule and Henri Cordier, who sought to extract truth from the texts, identifying flights of fancy so that they might be either rationalized or dismissed. Insofar as they presuppose a reader who asks, "Is this marvel real?" they respond to authors' efforts to pique their curiosity. However, they resist the open-endedness of the texts by seeking to foreclose uncertainty, to prioritize truth, and to replace possibility with conviction. They distort the texts by subjecting them to different expectations. For the texts' authors, like natural philosophers, marvels might be questions, but they resist easy answers. Often, they claim a space just shy of logical impossibility, and that is what makes them fascinating.

The authors of travel literature take advantage of the license that the philosophy of marvels also gives them. They encourage their readers to believe them with appeals of the sort, "I was there and I saw it," but partly because they recognize that their readers are quick to doubt their claims.[25] Shayne Legassie persuasively shows that travel texts inspired skepticism in their medieval audiences, who were increasingly drawn to them all the same.[26] An author like Mandeville plays with the question of belief, but not in the manner of the eighteenth-century author described by Gallagher. He knows that authors' touting of their own credibility is conventional in the genre—he was only able to borrow heavily from it because he was well-read in it, after all—and he knows that his reader will likely doubt him. A similar conviction led the thirteenth-century traveler John of Plano Carpini to ask his reader, "If for the attention of our readers we write anything that is not known in your parts, you ought not on that account to call us liars."[27] He claims to report only what he saw or heard from people he considered trustworthy, and there is no reason to doubt his sincerity, even as he writes about men who have no joints in their legs, a land where the sunrise is so loud that it kills Mongol invaders, and the Mongol use of fat gathered from human victims as fuel to burn the houses of their enemies. In contrast, there

is good reason to doubt Mandeville's sincerity, but that does not mean that we should call him a liar. He writes into a genre that covers a range of possibilities and is not necessarily assumed to be true.

Gallagher writes that fiction is like paper money: it lacks intrinsic value, but its users, knowing that, pretend otherwise (RF 347). In the same way, fiction asks us to believe in a thing even as we know better. We might be tempted to attribute to Mandeville's reader a similar perspective, which is an especially appealing prospect because the Mongol use of paper money is an object of fascination within medieval travel literature. Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa even comment on the arbitrariness of its value: "The sheet that is valued at ten bezants does not weigh one."[28] We might wonder whether the medieval reader similarly overvalues marvels. If she were similar to Gallagher's reader of realist fiction, we might conclude that she playfully inflates their value, wondering at them even while recognizing that they are unworthy of it. Such a reader, through her affect, might pay ten times what the marvel is strictly worth, and enjoy doing so. One problem with this possibility is that medieval travel literature does not require assent at all. It requires, rather, a shrugging "maybe," and perhaps nothing more than a "probably not." Also, because the marvels of travel literature might be real, unlike the objects of the realist novel, they might be worth all the wonder they can elicit. Their special power lies in that possibility, and in the difficulty of discounting it conclusively.

A reader might object that Christopher Columbus had the *Devisement* with him when he traveled to North America, that Vincent of Beauvais cites John of Plano Carpini at length, or that Roger Bacon does the same for his predecessor, William of Rubruck. Such gestures might reflect faith in the texts' contents. I have already commented on the willingness of natural philosophers to consider what is not impossible, and I think it is a mistake to read their quotations as endorsements. The absence of "pure" geography also left early explorers with little alternative than to consult such texts if they were seeking insight into lands off the beaten track. That does not mean that they failed to recognize their composite nature. Far more useful than speculating about such decisions is inquiring into the methods of the texts, which have not received enough critical attention. Seeing, for example, how Mandeville borrows from his predecessors and elaborates on them, we cannot doubt that he noticed what modern scholars do, namely that marvel stories tend to be handed down across the ages, from Pliny or Aesop to Isidore of Seville to Vincent of Beauvais and so forth. Such stories live only to change, a quality that Anthony Bale captures when he calls them memes. Using the example of *Mandeville's Travel*, he defines the meme as "a shared cultural repre-

sentation that prospers through being copied and adapted, rather than through its relationship or likeness to an original."[29] Bale's argument helpfully shifts attention away from the issue of fidelity, which is not to say that medieval readers were indifferent to it, but that marvel stories were not beholden to it. As he notes, "The meme has the capacity to be at once idea *and* thing, image *and* place."[30] Its value depends not on the recovery of an original, or on measuring the distance of a representation from it. Memes are reworkable, relocatable, and reinterpretable. Mandeville does not hesitate to put his own imprint on the stories he adopts, in some fashion like Chaucer retelling Boccaccio.

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To support this reading, I focus on two scenes from *Mandeville's Travels.* The first involves magicians "who perform plenty of wonders" (*qe font trop de mervailles*) at the Mongol Khan's court.[31] They make the sun and moon seem to appear and disappear, and "they make the most beautiful young women in the world dance, as it seems to the people, and then they make other young women appear carrying golden cups full of mare's milk, and this they give to the lords and the ladies to drink. And they make knights jousting in their arms appear . . . And they make hunts in pursuit of stags and boars appear along with running dogs."[32] The detail about magically transported cups full of drink, whether wine or milk, is likely drawn from Mandeville's frequent source Odoric of Pordenone.[33] It also appears in Marco and Rustichello's *Devisement*, although it is not clear whether Mandeville was familiar with the text.[34] The rest of the description is not included in Mandeville's sources. In other words, from the core detail about cups magically transported across the room, Mandeville adds illusory ladies dancing and serving, and men jousting and hunting. The marvels do not perfectly match that of the traveling cups because the cups seem to be physical objects that lords and ladies can drink from. But there is a logic to Mandeville's amplification in this scene that trumps consistency.

He draws the surrounding stories from any number of possible sources. Pre-Christian, initially oral traditions have beautiful women gathering in fields at night and troops of armed men jousting and hunting.[35] The scenes are often characterized as illusions or as products of magic, but the people seen might also be identified as corpses inhabited by demons or souls stuck in purgatory.[36] As is to be expected with legends of this sort, the history of their development is complicated, self-contradictory, and nonlinear. Nonetheless, the specific legends that Mandeville appeals

to had already arranged themselves into a trio before he adopted them. Identifying the figures involved as illusions rather than demons or souls from beyond the grave, Mandeville appeals to their popular representation. By introducing them into a scene he adopted, he insists that marvels are creative representations, expressions of an author's imagination and a provocation to the reader's.

The grouping of the separate legends about dancing ladies, knights jousting, and men hunting has precedent within natural philosophy, literature, and visual art, although scholarship has not attended to its frequent appearance in the different venues. In *Sir Orfeo*, the poet tells us that the eponymous king often sees a series of scenes on hot afternoons, as he wallows in the woods. He describes three: first, the fairy king and his men hunt; second, an army of knights appears; and third, knight and ladies dance.[37] The first two disappear as quickly as they arrive; Orfeo "nist whider þai bi-come" and "nist whider þai wold."[38] The third likewise passes by him. They might be illusions and they might not. But the *Orfeo*-poet, like Mandeville, adds one unfamiliar scene to the familiar trio. Rather than magically moving cups, *Sir Orfeo* has women hawking, and among them, Herodis. This fourth scene jostles Orfeo out of his stupor, first when the hawking reminds him of past joys, and second when he sees Herodis and follows her. The unusual response that the scene elicits from him, as he laughs and seeks human companionship relinquished many years earlier, registers the oddity of the scene. It is unlike the others. The trilogy of scenes sets the poet's variant in relief, fittingly containing his character Herodis, and advancing his plot. Situating fairyland somewhere between illusion and aristocratic play, the inherited marvels both thematize uncertainty and reproduce it.

The three appearances recur in Chaucer's *Franklin's Tale*.[39] In the company of his brother, the squire Aurelius auditions a cleric who might help him out of a bind. Aurelius will be allowed to sleep with his beloved, Dorigen, if he manages to make black rocks off the Breton coast disappear. The cleric suggests his ability to perform the vaunted feat through a display of his considerable powers. Before Aurelius and his brother, he concocts images of knights jousting, of a gruesomely detailed hunt, and of a beautiful woman (here Dorigen) dancing.[40] These are the same three illusions that we have come to know.[41]

Chaucer's scene speaks to the tale's interest in the power of illusions of various sorts. Dorigen, worried that her husband abroad will not be able to return home safely, obsesses over black rocks that might cause his ship to falter. She stares from the cliffs near her house, pondering the rocks, thinking of death: "ther wolde she sitte and thynke / And caste hir eyen dounward fro the brynke" watching the "grisly rokkes

blake" that make "hir herte quake."[42] Thinking, looking down from a
high cliff, fearing her husband's death and presumably contemplating
her own, she develops an obsession in real time, under the reader's eye.
It leads her to make an irrational promise to Aurelius: clear away the
rocks, and she will be his lover. Her fixation on one sort of illusion, the
damage that the rocks might wreak, is matched by Aurelius's with her,
and both are mirrored in the cleric's magic show. Its illusions show the
power of imagination given free rein, of the obsessed person's suscep-
tibility to images.

Whereas *Sir Orfeo* uses the three appearances to disorient both Orfeo
and the reader, Chaucer uses them to express the danger of illusions that
overstep their boundaries. Chaucer, like Mandeville, is clear that these
are mere illusions, as fleeting as Dorigen's thoughts about rocks should
be. But they threaten to be made real. Although the magician makes the
rocks merely seem to disappear, adding one more illusion to his quiver
of tricks, the magic act turns her hypothetical promise to Aurelius, and
Aurelius' promise to pay the clerk a hefty sum for his efforts, into firm
commitments. Optical illusions can have concrete consequences, either
physical or financial. The fact that illusions create the threat of unwanted
sex and of financial ruin shows their particular power, especially to those
in delicate mental states. The lovelorn are especially vulnerable to them.
In this context, it is significant that the Franklin distinguishes Dorigen's
husband, Arveragus, from the other characters because he is not prone
to imagination. "No thyng list hym to been ymaginatyf," and so he is
not consumed by illusions in the manner of his wife and her suitor.[43] As
I have argued elsewhere, it is precisely a robust faculty of imagination
that makes someone both capable of producing powerful illusions and
susceptible to them.[44] Dorigen and Aurelius, placed in implicit contrast
to Arveragus, seem to be captive to the faculty.

As Chaucer extends the power of illusions to the physical world, so
Mandeville gives them a concrete home within it. He places the magi-
cians who produce such illusions on the map, specifically inside the
Mongolian empire. However, he imports such tricks to a different end.
Uninterested in the power they might exercise over susceptible minds,
he treats them as the prodigious feats of the most masterful magicians.
Prestige marvels advertise the learnedness of the people and cultures that
produce them. Fantastic marvels were often associated with foreign lands,
and so William of Auvergne writes that "fantasies of illusions abound to
the greatest degree now" in Egypt, and Odoric of Pordenone writes of
India that "in the whole world, there are not such and so many marvels
as there are in this region."[45] While marvels involving monstrous peoples
and fantastic beasts can come from any region that is, from the author's

perspective, far off and unfamiliar, marvels produced by enchanters or magicians tend to come from cultures deemed sophisticated, such as Egyptian, Indian, and Persian. This is not surprising, since expertise in illusion-making and related acts of magic was thought to be the product of advanced learning.[46] By assigning this particular set of marvels to Mongol enchanters, Mandeville flatters the Mongols. As Geraldine Heng notes, early Christian visitors to the Mongols sometimes painted them as backwards or as savages, while later visitors more often saw them as civilized, the inheritors of Chinese cultural authority who were led by a great ruler.[47] Mandeville's enchanters are philosophical prodigies in a first-tier civilization.

When Mandeville takes a prearranged collection of marvels and places it on a map, he projects imaginative content onto geographical space in an unmistakably literal way. Of course geography had long been imaginative, organized according to theological, literary, or moral principles rather than strictly cartographical ones. What is distinctive about Mandeville is his decision to plot marvels, realizing the double-meaning of the word "plot" by creating a map that follows the contours of a preestablished narrative. The particular marvels that he entrusts to the Mongols make the imaginative component of his geography all the more salient because they were thought to emerge from the imagination. William of Auvergne specifically addresses two of the illusions here under discussion—the dancing ladies and knights in battle—and roots both in imagination. He sets out to determine what sort of being the objects seen possess. Are the knights real, are they riding real horses, and are they wearing real arms?[48] His favored interpretation is that they are not. Demons instead make images of them appear, whether to tempt deluded people into serving them, or to act as agents of God and inspire penitence for sin. He writes, "All that seems to be there or be done there is only there and done through a vision or an illusion or a phantasm."[49] The illusions are, in other words, one of three sorts of imaginative phenomena; the distinction here involves little difference.

As he addresses two of Mandeville's three illusions, William refers his reader to his earlier explanation of how such illusions can be created, which itself gives pride of place to the faculty of imagination. Demons, he there explains, use it as their canvas, making whatever they want appear within it. Speaking specifically of demonic possession, he writes, "No thinking person today doubts that evil spirits spiritually attack holy men by means of their thoughts and imaginations: how can this be if the spirits do not have access to their souls, and if they do not have the ability to paint thoughts of this sort in their imaginations, and perhaps in their intellective power?"[50] As a natural faculty, imagination lies in

demons' purview, and they can use it to manufacture illusions that are indistinguishable from the images gleaned through perception. Their power lies in their ability to confuse purely mental phenomena with ex-tramental ones. They rely for this devious work on imagination because it is both the repository of sensed images and the source of illusions, such as those that feature in dreams. It can confuse the two, leaving someone incapable of distinguishing between them. This very indeter-minacy enlivens imagination, which is uniquely capable of creating it.

Whether or not Mandeville was familiar with the well-established link between illusions and imagination, as Chaucer appears to have been, his additions to the story of the self-moving cups are striking insofar as they subject the Mongol enchanters' illusions to his own imagination. They are at once spectral and witnessed, tied to a geographical location that gives them a sort of realness, but placed there by Mandeville's inven-tion. This example shows with special clarity how marvels play with the possibility of their own realness. They are at once notional and situated in geographical space. The different layers of play, one created by the marvels themselves and another by the use that Mandeville makes of them, create a puzzle that is not meant to be solved. However, it is not just the puzzle that elicits interest but the possibility it contains, namely that magicians can create illusions such as the ones that Mandeville describes. The marvels entice the reader because they cannot easily be classified. In this respect, the reader is much like Aurelius and his brother, enthralled by the illusions placed before them in part because they cannot account for them.

One point to stress is that marvels such as the ones Chaucer and Man-deville play with by no means act like facts or fact-aspirants. They admit of imaginative alteration and thematic repurposing, and they change in the light of day, without any effort at concealment. The same features appear in another familiar marvel adapted by Mandeville, women who have two pupils in a single eye. Mandeville might have drawn the story from any number of sources, although he does so with a twist. The usual claim is that a certain group of people, usually women (Pliny includes men) from Scythia, known as Bithiae, have double pupils or "pupillas geminas" in one eye, which gives them the power to kill or bewitch oth-ers. Such is the report of Ovid, Pliny, Solinus, Bacon, Vincent of Beau-vais, and others. Mandeville instead claims that women with "precious stones in their eyes" kill people by looking at them, just "as the basilisk does."[51] The substitution of "pupillas gemmas," or pupils that are gems, for "pupillas geminas," or twin pupils in one eye, is a clear minim error; "geminas" and "gemmas" would look the same in the absence of strong ligatures. The error is perhaps original to Mandeville; I have found it

nowhere else. It is more likely that he intended to include a well-attested marvel than invent a new one.

The fact that Mandeville compares the women to the mythical basilisk makes his reference most similar to that of Bacon. In a chapter that begins by observing "there is no harm in truth," piquing its reader's interest with the promise of shocking truths that might seem harmful, Bacon quickly outlines his doctrine of the multiplication of species.[52] He adopts from al-Kindī the idea that all things, animate and inanimate, celestial and terrestrial, send off invisible images of themselves, or species, through which they affect other things, as the magnet does when it attracts iron. Such images or rays are what the senses perceive, and in the case of various marvels it is how agents of various sorts influence one another. In this way, "The basilisk kills with its sight alone" and, a few sentences later, "In Scythia there is a region where women have two pupils in one eye" and have the power to kill men by looking at them.[53] They can exercise such power when enraged, and indeed it is often the case with marvels of this sort that strong emotion is necessary for the imagined harm to take effect.

Bacon's aim in grouping the two marvels is to comment on the particular powers of the soul, which can express themselves through the eye. The marvels ultimately show that the "dignity of human nature" makes it capable of doing greater deeds than other creatures.[54] He does not attribute such feats to imagination in particular, though philosophers in the Latin West reassigned bewitchment and like marvels to the imagination in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[55] Bacon nonetheless highlights the power of the mind to shape the world in its image. The double-pupiled women can enact the harm they envision, realizing through their eyes the soul's ability to turn mental images into physical realities. The soul exercises its dominion over matter, which is inferior to it. Through this marvel, Mandeville again registers the fact that many marvels were thought to originate in the mind, even if they also find a place in the world.

Mandeville imports the marvel of the double-pupiled and now be-gemmed women into the domain of travel literature. Its wide-ranging sources—poetic, philosophical, and historical—make it hard either to dismiss as a complete fabrication or to accept as established fact. It is potentially familiar to the reader, but as with the marvelous illusions discussed above, it becomes more concrete by being fixed on a map. Mandeville places it not in Scythia but on an island seemingly near India. More importantly, he surrounds the women with similarly unusual women on nearby islands. The women with gems for eyes are followed by a description of an island where men fear that women have serpents

in their vaginas, and so they pay other men to take their wives' virginity. After that comes a story about women who mourn childbirth and celebrate the death of their children.[56]

The text uses thematic connections to determine geographical ones. The stories of the women are not just grouped in the text but also in the world, with all proximate and located in the "Ocean Sea." They are like each other and near each other, as though reminding the reader that *topos*, or place, is the root of "topic." The unusual women are therefore "near" in two respects, conceptual and physical. The text acts like a rhetorical exercise, assigning places to different inherited ideas, projecting mental content out onto the world with its synapses intact.[57] Its use of marvels that themselves originate in the mind's images has special import in this context. They show travel literature to itself be invested in the potency of the mind's contents, which breathe it into being. As idea becomes text, so its marvels breach the distance between the mind and the world outside. They invite the reader to live in the same intermediate space, to enjoy the possibility that spectacular things might exist without passing firm judgment.

Travel literature is not representative of medieval literature as a whole, but it does help to establish a range of possibilities for what such literature can be. Through arresting marvels that flirt with their own impossibility, it suggests that medieval readers were not jurists, tasked with the separation of truth from falsehood, but were capable of enjoying indeterminacy and maximizing the boundaries of possibility. This does not make travel literature a precursor to realist fiction, which is a claim that has been made about travel literature as well as romance. Mary Campbell, for instance, suggests that we might understand *Mandeville's Travels* as "realistic prose fiction," and Paul Zumthor comments on travel literature's "unavoidable kinship with fiction."[58] Travel literature instead combines the real and the imagined in a distinctive way. Existing things—countries, religions, animals—submit to creative representation. They are real, not realistic, and yet they too signify as possibilities. There is surely a sense in which the accuracy of various of travel literature's details shores up the fictions that accompany them. But the fictions likewise color the truth we discover about, for instance, Mongol feasts. The real and the invented inform each other, with the result not just that invented things look like real ones, but that real things look like invented ones. They are difficult to disaggregate, and do not ask to be disaggregated.

* * *

This article argues that the marvels of travel literature act as unlikely possibilities that are not meant to be judged either true or false and that excite the imagination precisely because they are indeterminate. It is fitting to conclude with Umberto Eco, who observes that the Western European Middle Ages showed little interest in compartmentalizing truth and falsehood. This is a feature of what he characterizes as the period's encyclopedic approach to knowledge. He creates a contrast with ancient philosophers for whom knowledge was concerned with classification, with identifying "man" as a species of "animal" and "flower" as the genus of "daisy." In the encyclopedic Middle Ages, understanding a rock meant not properly locating it in a classificatory system but understanding its properties. The result was something more like an encyclopedia entry, but distinct from a modern encyclopedia in one key respect: the medieval encyclopedist, following Pliny, "does not make the slightest effort to separate reliable empirical information from legend."[59] That is, he does not distinguish fact and fiction as separate categories.

Even limited exposure to medieval natural philosophy shows what he means. Thomas of Cantimpré, describing animals in sequence, includes *caco* or Cacus, the fire-breathing giant killed by Hercules, alongside *capra* (she-goat) and *cefusa* (monkey).[60] Jacques de Vitry transitions from camels to mythical creatures, like manticores and eales, and then back to hyenas without observing any difference in kind among them.[61] The transition from scientific information to creatures from legend can be jarring because a fundamental organizing principle in the contemporary classification of knowledge, as Eco notes, is that the two should be partitioned, the real from the imaginary.[62] Gallagher shares his perspective, writing that "the primary categorical division in our textual universe is between 'fiction' and 'nonfiction'" (RF 336). Eco's observations can be applied to medieval travel literature, which likewise tends toward inclusion rather than exclusion, and which encourages connections across seemingly dissimilar phenomena. Climate, character, marvels, and other features are correlated. For instance, the people of Kerman, on the edge of Persia, have a better temperament than their Persian neighbors because of the soil. When it changes, so too does their character.[63] The world pretends to be coherent, and marvels help to make it so. The instinct here is to draw things of different sorts together, not to pull them apart.

Eco's reading of the Middle Ages sharply opposes Gallagher's. Where she sees a preoccupation with truth and falsehood, along with an over-eagerness to discover truth, he finds an instinct toward inclusivity that deemphasizes the very opposition. He does not claim that people in the period or its encyclopedists *failed to recognize the difference* between, say,

manticores and hyenas, and that point is worth stressing. Neither does he pretend that his observation holds across genres. His would not be a fair characterization of medieval Christian theology, surely. For my purposes, the great value of Eco's analysis lies in a conclusion that he does not draw: that medieval depriviling of the opposition between truth and falsehood might be viewed as a choice, even an aesthetic choice. It does not need to imply a gullible people who believed what they were told, a nondiscriminating people who thought mythical creatures were as real as the ones on their farms, or a simple people who were slow to make rational judgments. This is crucial, because the assumption that medieval readers were not in charge of their affective or cognitive responses to texts, that they were reactive rather than deliberative, is an especially pernicious one. All the same, it easily dissolves through a single act of the will. We can instead imagine medieval authors as agents who use particular devices to cultivate particular responses, and readers who are self-conscious about them. The evidence supports such possibilities, and they in turn support more satisfying interpretations of medieval texts.

It is important to make the case for purposefulness in medieval marvels because claims about medieval credulity continue to rely on them. Eco puts his finger on the key impediment to understanding them, which is a medieval tendency not to discriminate categorically between legends and facts. Much follows from recognizing this now-disfavored form of nondiscrimination. Among other benefits, it helps to make authorial choices visible as choices. When Dante places real-life characters alongside mythological ones in the afterlife, he makes a specific point about an afterlife that synthesizes lived and read experience. When a natural philosopher includes the philosopher's stone—supposedly able to convert base metals into precious ones—in a list of stones, mundane and otherwise, he suggests that what does exist is as exciting as what might exist. When Mandeville scatters implausible marvels across the globe, he manufactures a world as vivid in its reader's imagination as it is in its supposed reality.

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NOTES

1   Some medievalists have contested this exclusion. Julie Orlemanski critiques its assumptions in "Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (2019): 145–70. Laura Ashe instead argues that fiction first appears in the twelfth century. See Ashe, "The Invention of Fiction," *History Today* 68, no. 2, (2018).

2   Catherine Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in Franco Moretti, ed., *The Novel*, vol. 1, *History, Geography, and Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), 340–41 (hereafter cited as RF).

3   Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1986), 143–44.

4   Orlemanksi, "Who Has Fiction?" 146.

5   See Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* 103, no. 1 (2008): 1–29, for a strong argument against the common claim that belief came easily to people in the Middle Ages.

6   James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1922).

7   Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 17.

8   Roger Bacon, *De secretis operibus et de nullitate magiae* 6, in *Opera quaedam hactenus inedita*, ed. J. S. Brewer (London: Longman, 1859), 1:437. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

9   Francis Dubost, "Merveilleux et fantastique au moyen âge: Positions et propositions," *Revue des langues romanes* 100, no. 2 (1996): 19.

10   Douglas Kelly, "The Domestication of the Marvelous in the Melusine Romances," in *Melusine of Lusignan: Founding Fiction in Late Medieval France*, ed. Donald Maddox and Sara Sturm-Maddox (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996), 33. For a similar reading, see Karen Sullivan, *The Danger of Romance: Truth, Fantasy, and Arthurian Fictions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018), 93.

11   Jacques Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval: Essais* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1985), 26.

12   Suzanne M. Yeager, "The World Translated: Marco Polo's *Le Devisement dou monde*, *The Book of Sir John Mandeville*, and Their Medieval Audiences," in *Marco Polo and the Encounter of East and West*, ed. Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Amilcare Iannucci, with John Tulk (Buffalo, NY: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2008), 159.

13   Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 368.

14   Scholars have disputed both sides of this contrast. See, for instance, Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" and Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001). For an endorsement of medieval enchantment and an argument that it ought to persist in the modern world, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2015), 9.

15   Iain Higgins, *Writing East: The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), 75; and Shayne Aaron Legassie, *The Medieval Invention of Travel* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017), 92.

16   The seminality of marvels is a position most often advanced by scholars of medieval romance, which is a genre I do not have space to consider here, but see my *Medieval Marvels and Fictions*, in progress.

17   Nicole Oresme, *De causis mirabilium* 3.4, in *Nicole Oresme and the Marvels of Nature: A Study of His* De causis mirabilium *with Critical Edition, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. and trans. Bert Hansen (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1985), 220.

18   Hans Thijssen, "Late-medieval natural philosophy: Some Recent Trends in Scholarship," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales* 67, no. 1 (2000): 173. For more on reasoning "secundum imaginationem," see John Murdoch, "From Social into Intellectual Factors: An Aspect of the Unitary Character of Late Medieval Learning," in *The Cultural Context of Medieval Learning*, ed. John Emery Murdoch and Edith Dudley Sylla (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Kluwer, 1975), 271–339, and Edward Grant, *The Nature of Natural Philosophy in the Late Middle Ages* (Washington, DC: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2010), 238–39.

19 Oresme, *De causis mirabilium* 4.6, ed. Hansen, 288. Oresme gives the example of a man's size in *De causis mirabilium* 4.3, 276.

20 Jacques de Vitry, *Historia orientalis* cap. 90, ed. and French trans. Jean Donnadieu (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008), 374.

21 Jacques de Vitry, *Historia orientalis* cap. 92, 406.

22 Mary B. Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1988), 141.

23 Higgins, *Writing East*, 75.

24 Sebastian Sobecki, "New World Discovery," *Oxford Handbooks Online* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 6.

25 Hayton of Corycus, *Flos historiarum*, ed. Dulaurier et al., *Recueil des Historiens des Croisades*, Documents Arméniens (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1906), 2:129.

26 Legassie, *Medieval Invention of Travel*, 59–93.

27 John of Plano Carpini, *Historia Mongolorum* pref., in *Storia dei Mongoli*, ed. Enrico Menestò (Spoleto, IT: Centro Italiano di Studi Sull'Alto Medioevo, 1989), 228.

28 Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa, *Devisement du Monde* 96, in *Milione, Le Divisament dou monde*, ed. Gabriella Ronchi (Milan: Arnaldo Mondadori, 1982), 440. English translation by A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, *Marco Polo, The Description of the World* (London: George Routledge and Sons Limited, 1938), 1:239, modified.

29 Anthony Bale, "'ut legi': Sir John Mandeville's Audience and Three Late Medieval English Travelers to Italy and Jerusalem," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 38 (2016): 208.

30 Bale, "'ut legi,'" 210.

31 John Mandeville, *Le livre des merveilles du monde* 25, ed. Christiane Deluz (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000), 394.

32 Mandeville, *Le livre des merveilles du monde* 25, 194–95. Higgins, *The Book of John Mandeville with Related Texts* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, Inc., 2011), 142, modified.

33 Odoric of Pordenone, *Relatio* 30, in *Itinera et Relationes Fratrum Minorum Saeculi XIII et XIV*, Sinica Franciscana, ed. Anastasius Van Den Wyngaert (Florence: Ad Claras Aquas, 1929), 1:482.

34 Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa, *Devisement* 75, 403.

35 Claude Lecouteux, *Chasses fantastiques et cohortes de la nuit au Moyen Age* (Paris: Imago, 1999), 8. For more on the distinct legends, see Lecouteux, *Chasses fantastiques*, 13–25, 45–52, and 81–124. On the wild hunt, see also Richard Firth Green, *Elf Queens and Holy Friars: Fairy Beliefs and the Medieval Church* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 172–78.

36 Green, *Elf Queens*, 177–78.

37 *Sir Orfeo*, 2nd ed., ed. A. J. Bliss (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), ll. 283–302. Neil Cartlidge considers analogues for *Sir Orfeo*'s wild hunt and wild horde in "Sir Orfeo in the Otherworld: Courting Chaos?" *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 201–9.

38 *Sir Orfeo*, ll. 288, 296.

39 Robert Cook notes the similarity between the two scenes in "Chaucer's Franklin's Tale and *Sir Orfeo*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 95, no. 3 (1994): 333–36.

40 Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1987), ll. 1189–1201.

41 The version of the story in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the fifth story on the tenth day, does not contain them.

42 Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, ll. 857–58, 859, 860.

43 Chaucer, *Franklin's Tale*, ll. 1094.

44 Michelle Karnes, "Marvels in the Medieval Imagination," *Speculum* 90, no. 2 (2015): 327–65.

45 William of Auvergne, *De universo* 2.3.23, in *Guilielmi Alverni, Opera omnia* (Orleans-Paris, 1674; rpt. Frankfurt am Main: Minerva, 1963), 1:1065aA. Odoric of Pordenone, *Relatio*

18, ed. Van den Wyngaert, 457. Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa write that Indians are especially skilled in the diabolical arts and enchantments. See *Devisement* 74, *Milione*, 94.

46   Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 100–1.

47   Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2018), 290, 359.

48   See William of Auvergne, *De universo* 2.3.24, 1:1065–67.

49   William of Auvergne, *De universo* 2.3.24, 1:1066aF. William broaches demons at 1:1066aG. He touches on souls in purgatory briefly at 1:1067aC-D.

50   William of Auvergne, *De universo* 2.3.23, 1:1061bD. William holds open the possibility that demons can act on the intellect directly, but scholastics more often reject this. See, for instance, Albertus Magnus, *In Sententiarum* 2.8.10, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vivès, 1890–95), 27:185; and Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 3.104, in *Opera omnia iussu Leonis XII P.M. edita* (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta S.C. de Propaganda Fide, 1882–1976), 14:325–26.

51   John Mandeville, *Le livre des merveilles du monde* 31, ed. Deluz, 449.

52   Bacon, *De secretis operibus artis et naturae* 3, 528. On Bacon's doctrine, see David Lindberg, *Roger Bacon's Philosophy of Nature: A Critical Edition, with English Translation, Introduction, and Notes, of* De multiplicatione specierum and De speculis comburentibus (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), liii-lxxi.

53   Bacon, *De secretis operibus artis et naturae* 3, 529. In the following sentence, Bacon paraphrases Ovid's description of the same marvel.

54   Bacon, *De secretis operibus artis et naturae* 3, 529.

55   For example, Oresme attributes the power of the basilisk to "a forceful thought or imagination," *De configurationibus* 2.38, in *Nicole Oresme and the Medieval Geometry of Qualities and Motions: A Treatise on the Uniformity and Difformity of Intensities known as* Tractatus de configurationibus qualitatum et motuum, ed. and trans. Marshall Clagett (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 382.

56   See Mandeville, *Le livre des merveilles du monde* 31, ed. Deluz, 449–51.

57   On topics as places of invention, see Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 151–78; and Mary Carruthers, *Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 33–39.

58   Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World*, 123; and Paul Zumthor, "Dire le voyage au Moyen Âge," *Liberté* 35 (1993): 79–94, 86.

59   Umberto Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth: Historical Studies on the Sign and Interpretation*, trans. Anthony Oldcorn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2014), 26.

60   Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum* 4.19–21, ed. Helmut Boese (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1973), 120–21.

61   De Vitry, *Historia orientalis* 88, ed. Donnadieu, 360.

62   Eco, *From the Tree to the Labyrinth*, 28.

63   Marco Polo and Rustichello of Pisa, *Devisement* 35, 343–44.