THE MEDIEVAL INVENTION OF TRAVEL

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Introduction: Travail and Travel Writing

In the Middle Ages, travel was nasty, brutish, and long. This forbidding reality—common to most preindustrial settings—was not lost on medieval travelers. In June of 1325, Moroccan jurist Ibn Battuta embarked on a heroic voyage that would span three decades and as many continents. The celebrated adventurer had scarcely departed his native Tangiers when he confronted what would be the first of many brushes with death. Stricken by a debilitating fever in the middle of the North African desert, Ibn Battuta struggled against time and delirium to secure the knot that would anchor him to his horse, fearful that he would otherwise tumble from his mount unconscious and perish alone in the sands. The following year, Dominican missionary Jordanus of Sévérac dispatched a letter to his order from Thana (Thane), India, in which he detailed the city’s recent public execution of several Franciscan missionaries. Jordanus did not neglect to mention his own, lesser martyrdoms:

Who is able to tell all the hardships I have since endured? For I have been taken by pirates, cast into prison by Saracens, been accused, cursed, reviled, and left this long time past like a good-for-nothing vagabond, to go about in my shirt, without the habit of my order. . . . I suffer continually from bodily ailments. Tortured by pains, sometimes in the head, sometimes in the chest, in the stomach, or in all my limbs.

Extreme adversity was not unique to the transcontinental itineraries of travelers such as Jordanus and Ibn Battuta. Though more modest in its geographical ambit, the 1395 Jerusalem pilgrimage of Nicola de Martoni—a diminutive notary from Carinola, Italy—was no less fraught with peril. Nicola’s closest call occurred off the coast of Damascus, when the boat
carrying him capsized. Plucked from the churning tides seconds before drowning, Nicola would soon discover that the terror of the incident had turned his hair and beard white. Earlier in the fourteenth century, Franciscan Niccolò da Poggibonsi took up a crossbow to defend his pilgrim galley from Mediterranean pirates intent on selling the ship’s passengers and crew into slavery. Though Niccolò lived to tell of his swashbuckling exploits, the Franciscans who accompanied him at different stages of his journey were not as fortunate; seven out of eight died abroad. In 1433, Margery Kempe—an English widow in her fifties—braved filth, fleas, and threats of sexual violence to go on a relatively short-range pilgrimage across northern and central Europe. In the final leg of the journey, Kempe trekked inland through the Flemish wetlands to Calais [then, an English possession], during which time she “was so wery and so ovrycomyn with labowr” that she often feared “hir spirit schulde a departyd fro hir body.” Rare is the medieval travel account that does not feature comparable—or even more dramatic—calamities.

The brutalizing conditions of medieval travel left their impress on the very languages used to immortalize the era’s remarkable journeys for posterity. In both Middle English and romance vernaculars, the activities we associate with the modern English word travel are frequently subsumed under the term travail or some variant of labor. Travel and travail have dark common origins in the Latin noun trapesulum—a three-pronged metal device that ancient Romans used to torture prisoners. In the medieval languages that inherited the word, travail signified not only torture or affliction but also the physical and psychic energies expended—irretrievably and at great pains—in the process of laboring over something. Today, travel is widely construed as a release from, or remedy for, work-related fatigue. Medieval travel was, by contrast, understood as an intensification of the pains and labors of everyday life rather than a restorative interval away from them. In the Middle Ages, there was no travel without travail.

The dangers and sacrifices inherent to medieval travel guaranteed that it would seldom be viewed as a value-neutral undertaking. For this reason, any attempt to comprehend late medieval travel writing is probably incomplete to the extent that it does not consider the cultural suspicion directed at its practitioners. During the later Middle Ages, the decision to travel was always potentially a questionable one; the decision to write about one’s travels, perhaps even more so. The travails endured by the traveler were cited in arguments for, and against, individual journeys—and indeed, for, and against, entire modes of travel. Travel writers, meanwhile, resorted to the rhetoric of travail in order to justify their dubious literary activities, constitute their authority, and manage reader response. Perhaps most significant of all, the tools and habits of literacy were steadily assimilated to the ennobling travail of the heroic journey, a process that laid the groundwork for the Middle Ages’ historically far-reaching reconception of travel.

THE MEDIEVAL RESISTANCE TO TRAVEL

Between 1100 and 1500, Eurasia enjoyed a degree of mobility and cross-cultural integration that had no obvious equivalent in antiquity. The geographical horizons of western Europe were dramatically expanded as a result—both physically and imaginatively. In the wake of the First Crusade (1095–99), the victorious Latin Christians suddenly found that they had political, economic, and spiritual interests in parts of the world that had, until that point, seemed far removed from their daily concerns. Along with the Crusades, the contemporaneous Norman conquests of England and southern Italy fueled the expansion of a French-speaking “aristocratic diaspora,” which spread from the British Isles to central Europe, from Sicily to the Holy Land. Scholarship continues to shed new light on the slightly later, but no less remarkable, expansion of Aragonese influence in the Mediterranean. The same is true of the Castilian and Portuguese explorations of the Mediterranean and Atlantic during the later Middle Ages, which paved the way for Columbus’s journey to the Americas and the circumnavigation of Africa. While all of this was going on, Venice and Genoa were busy founding commercial colonies across the Mediterranean and Black Seas, at times triumphing over powerful military rivals, including the Byzantine Empire and the crowns of France and Aragon. From these eastern Mediterranean outposts, Italian merchants and missionary friars followed land and maritime routes to Persia, India, China, and Southeast Asia. Janet Abu-Lughod rightfully cautioned against a triumphalist view of these developments, by emphasizing the belated, uneven nature of medieval Europe’s reintegration into global circuits of economic and cultural exchange. All the same, this ragtag assortment of dynastic landgrabs, colonial ventures, and emergent trade routes enabled the journeys of unprecedented numbers of missionaries, pilgrims, traders, crusaders, diplomats, and scholars. Even after the Black Death and the fragmentation of the Mongol Empire rendered overland travel through central Asia less feasible than before, maritime trade routes continued to connect India to the eastern Mediterranean and—by extension—to western Europe.

As travel of various kinds became a more familiar feature of the late medieval cultural landscape, so, too, did concerns about this reality. In
many cases, the medieval resistance to travel was a prudent reaction to its uncertainty. The time, expense, and danger involved in even relatively short journeys demanded a careful reckoning of the potential consequences of a prolonged—or possibly permanent—absence from one’s home. It was for this reason that pilgrims and crusaders settled outstanding debts, appointed powers of attorney, and wrote wills before departing for the Holy Land.\textsuperscript{11} Even when travelers managed to return from their journeys relatively unscathed, their homecomings could be marred by tragic news of what had transpired in their absence. Having dwelled in India and China for twenty years, Ibn Battuta returned to Damascus to discover that the infant son he left there had died long ago, as had his father back in Morocco.\textsuperscript{14} Shortly after, he returned to Tangiers, where he learned that his mother had also perished.\textsuperscript{15} Away on pilgrimage less than a year, Nicola de Martoni was shattered to discover that his beloved wife, Constanza, had succumbed to illness while he was striving to survive the perilous journey back to her. Nicola ends the account of his pilgrimage with a moving Boethian reflection on her death and includes a transcrip­tion of the verse epitaph that he composed to honor her memory.\textsuperscript{16}

Perhaps not surprisingly, questions about the ethics of travel animate some of the period’s most influential works of fiction. The tension between the knight’s domestic obligations and the allure of distant adventure is a defining theme of chivalric romance, from Chrétien de Troyes’s 	extit{Erec and Enide} to Cervantes’s 	extit{Don Quixote}. Canto 16 of Dante’s 	extit{Inferno} explores the consequences of unchecked wanderlust through the figure of Ulysses. For no other reason than to see what lies beyond the Pillars of Hercules, Ulysses abandons his family a second time, on a voyage so perilous that Dante characterizes it as “mad.”\textsuperscript{17} In a soaring oratorical set piece, the Homeric hero convinces his men to disregard the risks involved in sailing through the Straits of Gibraltar, in the process sealing their collective doom. For this abuse of his rhetorical talents, Ulysses is confined for eternity to the circle of the false counselors.

Concerns about the maintenance of social order also fed the medieval resistance to travel. The movements of late medieval pilgrims were singled out for particular scrutiny, occasioning satire, moral panic, and—increasingly—institutionalized surveillance. In the early Middle Ages, monastic orders were the most vociferous opponents of pilgrimage, on the grounds that devotional travel exposed monks and nuns to the worldly enticements that they had renounced in taking their vows.\textsuperscript{18} Throughout the high to late Middle Ages, malefactors of all stripes were accused of exploiting the pious façade of the pilgrim to indulge in vice and crime. Inquisitors routinely alleged the Cathars of Languedoc disguised themselves as pilgrims in order to disseminate their heterodox teachings undetected, a charge that seems to have had some basis in reality.\textsuperscript{19} Female pilgrims had to contend with the suspicion that their devotional travels were simply a pretext for engaging in adultery, fornication, and/or heretical activity.\textsuperscript{20} In late medieval England, the crackdown on “false pilgrims” was part of a larger postplague effort to curb the mobility of laborers and—by extension—their power to negotiate their wages; it was also a feature of renewed campaigns against heresy and sedition.\textsuperscript{21} Valentin Groebner has documented parallel developments in German-speaking regions of fifteenth-century Europe.\textsuperscript{22}

Literal works of the period do not merely 	extit{reflect} this circumspect stance toward the pilgrim; they stoke the flames of stereotype with unapologetic glee. Latin and vernacular texts alike teem with “false” pilgrims bent on infamy. A few examples will suffice to illustrate the longevity and pervasiveness of this phobic motif, which effortlessly transcended linguistic, geographical, and generic boundaries. The obscene twelfth-century poem “Farrai un vers, pos mi sonell” (“I will write a song since I am falling asleep”) by Occitan troubadour William IX of Aquitaine relates the story of a sexual threesome involving the poet and two married women (with an unhappy—and enigmatic—assist from a ferocious red cat). En route to Avignon, the poet is hailed by the two women, who address him as “Sir Pilgrim” (\textit{don pelerin}). The crafty William pretends to be a deaf-mute in order to take advantage of his interlocutors, who presume that they will be able to take sexual advantage of him without anyone—including their husbands—finding out.\textsuperscript{23} In Old French fiction, tricksters such as Reynard the Fox, Eustache the Monk, and Faus Semblant donned the pilgrim’s mantle to see their devious schemes to completion.\textsuperscript{24} In the thirteenth-century Latin exemplum collection of Caesarius of Heisterbach, the devil appears “in the form and apparel of a pilgrim” (\textit{sub forma et habitu peregrini}) in an effort to lure a pious knight into damnation.\textsuperscript{25} In Juan Ruiz’s fourteenth-century \textit{El libro de buen amor}, the cowardly Dame Lent attempts to slip out of her imminent battle with Don Carnival by appre­aling herself as a pilgrim and absconding to Jerusalem.\textsuperscript{26} Reputed sodomite Álvar Rodríguez—a Christian squire (“sucedario”) with a penchant for Muslim youths—was a favorite target of satirical Galician-Portuguese poetry who supposedly “voyaged to the Holy Land and [after] used to say that he had lived as a Moor while he was over there (\textit{andou ailen mar e dizia que fora aló mouro}).\textsuperscript{27}

The figure of the nefarious pilgrim gave rise to another pejorative commonplace: the idea that the speech of pilgrims—even bona fide ones—was frivolous and unreliable. Chaucer’s \textit{House of Fame} embodies useless gossip
in the form of "shipmen and pilgrimes, / With scrippes bret ful of lesinges [bags filled to the rim with lies] / Entremedled [Mixed] with tydnyges [news]." It was thanks to Chaucer that, during the English Reformation, the term *Canterbury tale* became a synonym for *fable or lie.* Several of the novellas in Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* feature riotously spurious tales of travel, most notably the fraudulent pilgrimage account of Friar Cipolla in day 6, story 10. Given this context, it would seem that accused heretic William Thorpe was not at his most heretical when he dismissed pilgrims as "grete iaglelers [janglers], tale tellers, and lyeris."  

The dim assessment of pilgrim discourse extended to the geoethnographic claims that devotional travelers made about the places that they visited. Antoine de La Sale wrote his travel account *Le Paradis de la Reine Sibylle* (1437) for no other reason than to debunk the supernatural yarns of pilgrims who descended into the subterranean caverns of Mount Vettore, located outside the Umbrian town of Norcia. Jacques de Vitry maintained that pilgrims' "exaggerated reports of the East" were ultimately harmful because, even though they spurred others to journey to the Holy Land, they did so for the wrong reasons, thereby compromising the spiritual orientation of the pilgrimage from the start. For similar reasons, fifteenth-century travel writer Santo Brasa lamented that many of his fellow pilgrims went to Jerusalem for the sole purpose of boasting about what they had seen to those not fortunate enough to travel there themselves.  

Given the widespread disparagement of the pilgrim's tale, it is little wonder that would-be travel writers—laymen and clerics, pilgrims and non-pilgrims—entered into their projects with apprehension. Clerical pilgrims to the Holy Land like Wilbrand of Oldenburg and Thietmar feared that they would be charged with vainglory for presuming to publish a travel account. Franciscans John of Plano Carpini and Odoric of Pordenone anticipated that their incredible-but-true descriptions of East Asia would be dismissed as a pack of fables. Around 1350, Petrarch repeatedly referred to his epistolary travel narratives as fripperies, reluctantly dashed off at the behest of friend and patron Giovanni Colonna. In 1499, Arnold von Harff opened the German account of his globe-trotting adventures by deriding the vast number of "careless and troublesome chatterers [Kläffer]" who—no believing in anything they cannot see in their native lands—"maintain that every traveler's [Pilger] story is a lie."  

As von Harff's defense suggests, whatever chilling effect moralists may have had on the practice of travel writing, their carping did not prove decisive. In fact, during the late Middle Ages, Latin Christians produced a staggering—and, indeed, unprecedented—number of travel accounts, written by a geographically widespread and socially diverse assortment of authors. Travelers and travel writers alike sought to preempt objections to their undertakings by appealing to the inherent dignity of travel.  

**TRAVAIL AND AUTHORITY**

In the Middle Ages, as in antiquity, the inevitable hazards of travel endowed it with a heroic aura. As Eric J. Leed has noted, the bodily signs of rigorous wayfaring are already treated as marks of distinction in *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* The opening invocation of Homer's *Odyssey* celebrates its anonymous hero—"the man of ways" (*polutropos*)—for having successfully "wandered" land and sea. In Homer’s Greek, the word *sea—pontos—shares etymological origins with *panthiā,* or "difficult passage." As Silvia Montiglio has noted, the two most common Greek words for "to wander" (*alaoetai* and *planaomai*) are middle passive verbs; what this means is that, in classical Greek usage, when someone "wanders," that person is doing something, but at the same time, something is also being done to him or her. Embedded in Homer's key terms, then, is the assumption that travel entails a heroic effort to overcome inertial forces and outflank death. These same beliefs inform the subterranean descent of Virgil's Aeneas, a journey that, following Homeric precedent, literalizes the notion of heroic travel as an improbable triumph over mortality.  

In penitential pilgrimage, classical idealizations of travel found a distinctively medieval articulation. The obligatory pilgrimage of Christian penance apparently originated in sixth-century Ireland. By the thirteenth century, it had been appropriated by political authorities across Europe to punish violations of secular law. Perhaps more significant, penitential journeys were increasingly undertaken on a voluntary basis. This development explains, for example, why Margery Kempe says that she suffered "gret thirst and gret penawes" en route to Calais, even though she [controversially] undertook her pilgrimage without the knowledge of her confessor. The penitential pilgrimage offered a legitimate, widely recognized, and adaptable set of propositions that Kempe and many others used to rationalize novel, or potentially circumspect, journeys. Crusading was originally conceived as a kind of pilgrimage (*peregrinatio*). The crusader accrued spiritual blessings because he voluntarily subjected himself to the perils of both warfare and long-distance travel. It was not long after the emergence of the Franciscan and Dominican Orders at the turn of the thirteenth century that friars started referring to their dangerous missionary campaigns as "pilgrimages." The quest of Arthurian romance incorporated elements of both
pilgrimage and crusade. Underlying all of these reorientations of penitential pilgrimage is the ancient conception of the peregrinus as an exile or an alien—a person within the Roman Empire who lacked the full legal protections of citizenship. When Augustine spoke of human life as a peregrinatio oriented toward the heavenly Jerusalem, he was drawing on the ancient political resonances of the term. Augustinian metaphysical abstraction wagers its intelligibility on a widely shared assumption that those displaced from the familiar guarantees and privileges of home must, like Homer’s Odysseus, grapple heroically with exceptional levels of adversity.

The association of travel with asceticism proved a valuable rhetorical resource to defenders and critics of various modes of medieval travel—and of pilgrimage, in particular. The satirically drawn Palmer of William Langland’s fourteenth-century poem Piers Plowman solicits the admiration of others by flaunting the labors of his travels. The Palmer festoons his person with dozens of badges and amulets, which he has procured at fairlie shrines such as Mount Sinai and Santiago de Compostela. These trinkets—or, as the Palmer calls them, “signs”—are meant to be “read” both as forensic confirmation of his exceptional itinerary and as quantifications of his travail: “Ye may se by my signes that sitten on myn hatte / That I have walked[well] wide in weet and in drye.” In his pease to Holy Land pilgrimage, fifteenth-century Dominican Felix Fabri also alludes to somatic “signs” of the pilgrim’s pious suffering, which include a “long beard growing from a face which is serious and pale on account of his labors and danger.” According to Fabri, the semiotic conventions that enable the pilgrim to manifest his devotion of purpose by refraining from shaming predate Christianity itself, having been instituted by a pagan: the Egyptian “king” Osiris.

In the fifteenth-century trial of alleged Lollard William Thorpe, travel became a flash point in a public disputation about the legitimacy of pilgrimage as an institution. The defendant’s examiner, Archbishop Arundel, took issue with Thorpe’s condemnation of pilgrimage by citing “the grete travaile” to which pilgrims subjected themselves. Thorpe scorned this argument, observing that racy singers and bagpipe players furnished the most common soundtrack for these putatively austere journeys. Curiously, Arundel did not contest the accuracy of this generalization; instead, he defended boisterous music on the grounds that it helped the barefoot pilgrim persevere in his progress whenever he “smythith his tog ayons a stoon and hurtith him soore and makith him blede.” For his part, Thorpe retorted that, insofar as most pilgrims “trauellen soore [their] bodies,” they did so in pursuit of fleshly—rather than spiritual—delights, thereby rendering their suffering execrable.

The travel of international merchants also sparked moral debates in which travel, or the alleged absence thereof, proved central. In his De regimine principum, Thomas Aquinas cited Aristotle’s Politics to the effect that “commerce is more at odds with military prowess than are most other occupations. Merchants rest in the shade without toil, and while they enjoy delights their spirits grow soft and their bodies are rendered weak and unfitted for military exertions.” Popular preacher Bernardino of Siena (1380–1444) asserted that merchants’ prolonged absences from their wives softened their libidinal resolve, encouraging them to engage in sodomy and other forbidden sex acts. Petrarch criticized the empty, materialistic aspirations that prompted merchants to embrace the potentially lethal dangers of maritime travel. A fourteenth-century manual written for Catalan merchants offers a contrasting perspective, extolling the mercantile profession as “the best and most profitable [la millor e pus profitosa] of the masculine arts,” in part because long-distance trade requires young men “to withstand great travails and perils [sostenir los grans trabalis e perilis].” This statement of occupational pride might be seen as a rebuttal of the arguments mounted by the likes of Bernardino, Petrarch, and Aquinas.

As several of the above-mentioned examples suggest, the concept of travel encompassed both the dangers and discomforts inherent in travel as well as the techniques used to manage and overcome them. The argument between Thorpe and Arundel, for instance, turns on the question of whether rowdy, profane song can be viewed as a legitimate component of the pilgrim’s ascetic struggle, or whether, by its very nature, it should be considered the negation of pious travail. The assimilation of reading and writing to heroic ideals of travel proved a far less controversial affair. Over the course of the Middle Ages, an expanding array of literate practices and literary paradigms was absorbed into the regimes of self-discipline that conferred distinction on the experiences of the traveler.

**TRAVEL AS LITERATE LABOR**

Most experts in postmedieval travel writing acknowledge that travel is a loaded term and have felt obliged to confront this semantic fact. In modern English, the word travel assumed new class-based valences at the turn of the nineteenth century, when it began to align itself in opposition to tourism. The advent of the travel-tourism binary was a reaction to the rise of travel agencies and steam-powered transportation, which enabled the middle class to visit the cultural capitals that had formerly been the reserve of the Grand Tour. As James Buzard has shown, the “traveler” came to be identified with
a refined sensibility deemed lacking in the “tourist.” This allegedly superior sensibility was founded on the ideals of individualism, self-restraint, an informed appreciation of foreign surroundings, and a “proper” relationship to reading and writing—both during and after the journey.54

Mindful of these elitist connotations, some scholars of modern travel writing have rejected travel as their keyword of choice, opting instead for terms such as displacement or mobility. The aim of this rhetorical wager was to dislodge the voluntary, leisure-time experiences of white, upper-class European men as the normative model for knowing the world, thereby facilitating the study of the more constrained (and usually less prestigious) movements of women, slaves, refugees, domestic servants, and so on. James Clifford has proposed a different—and, to my mind, more useful—solution to the problematic origins of travel. Clifford maintains that travel is an ideal term for recovering lost histories of subaltern mobility precisely because of its exclusivist connotations, which can be harnessed to confer dignity on previously marginalized experiences, while at the same time inviting considerations of how disparities in wealth, status, and power affect any traveler’s experience of the world.55 What all of these critical discussions have in common is the acknowledgment that the activities that have been graced with the honorific travel presume the mastery of certain rhetorical postures and forms of cultural literacy that were, by design, historically accessible to few.

Even though medievalists have successfully adapted postcolonial critiques of modern ethnography in discussing the travel writing of the Middle Ages, they have not engaged the related scholarly debates about the concept of travel. However, it is important not to take travel for granted, since the Middle Ages were by no means innocent of the kinds of ideological distinctions found in postmedieval travel writing. In fact, a strong argument can be made that many of the elitist assumptions that are baked into modern idealizations of the traveler originate in the late medieval reinvention of travel as literate labor. As literacy of various kinds assumed a more prominent place in the heroic journey, the traveler’s claim to prestige increasingly rested on the question of which literate dispositions and aptitudes had shaped his or her explorations of the world, and to what ends.

The tendentious contrast between the Latinity of clerical travel writers and the “illiteracy” of their lay counterparts was the earliest and most commonly invoked axis of differentiation. In his thirteenth-century Narratio de mirabilibus urbis Romae, the English cleric known simply as “Magister Gregorius” repeatedly derides his fellow travelers’ assertions about the monuments of Rome. Gregorius reliably discredits the geographical investigations of the laity by equating them with orality and superstition. In the process of describing the tomb of Romulus, Gregorius pauses to gripe about pilgrims who “erroneously claim (mentiuntur) that [it] is the granary heap of the apostle Peter, which was transformed into a stone hill of the same size when Nero confiscated it.” He adds: “It’s an utterly worthless (futivum) tale, typical of those told by pilgrims (peregrini).”56 By contrast, Gregorius attributes his self-professedly superior insights into Rome to his mastery of Latin and, by extension, to his social access to the scholarly and ecclesiastical elite: “I shall give a wide berth to the worthless stories (vanas fabulas) of the pilgrims and the Romans . . . and shall record what I’ve been told by the elders, the cardinals, and the men of greatest learning (vitae doctissimis).”57

As the Narratio also makes clear, the day-to-day self-discipline of the pilgrim is predicated on his or her relationship to reading and writing. Deficits in the traveler’s learning express themselves externally, in the form of undignified interactions with Rome’s monuments. According to Gregorius, the superstitions that surround the obelisk falsely identified as “St. Peter’s Needle” encourage ignorant pilgrims to disseminate heretical beliefs—and to make a risible spectacle of themselves in the process: “They make great efforts to crawl underneath [the monument], where the stone rests on four bronze lions, claiming falsely that those who manage to do so are cleansed from their sins having made true penance.”58 Elsewhere, Gregorius strikes a more skeptical note about his own mastery of the art of travel, suggesting that the very Latinity that inoculates him against the contagious stupidity of the masses just might predispose him to other forms of waywardness. Gregorius’s appreciation of classical aesthetics spurs him to explore Rome’s ruined bathhouses and to admire a skillfully rendered statue of Venus, which, to his eyes, appeared “to blush in her nakedness.” The problematic nature of Gregorius’s reaction to the pagan statute is suggested by the fact that it occasions a lapse in his self-governance. This loss of control is registered spatially, as a kind of semivoluntary displacement: “Because of this wonderful image, and perhaps some magic spell that I am unaware of, I was drawn back three times to look at it despite the fact that it was two stades distant from my inn.”59

Under the influence of many other intellectual traditions and cultural practices, late medieval travel writers from a variety of social backgrounds viewed the travel account as an opportunity to advance their own propositions about travel and its relationship to literacy. Though they come to a variety of conclusions on this question, travel writers tend to speak of travel as a method-governed mode of geonographic investigation that—when done correctly—confers benefits on the individual traveler and on readers...
of travel writing. By the end of the Middle Ages, travel is widely understood as an art of literate self-discipline, and its best practices equally relevant to pilgrims and adventurers, to those visiting Caracorum or Cologne.

OVERVIEW

The Medieval Invention of Travel is organized into three parts, each consisting of two chapters. This three-part structure mirrors the tripartite division that has shaped the study of medieval travel writing (i.e., texts written about journeys to East Asia, the Holy Land, and Europe/the Mediterranean). While these section divisions are an acknowledgment of the analytical advantages of this conventional schema, the arc of the book’s argument is an attempt to highlight—and think beyond—its inherent limitations.

Part 1, “Subjectivity, Authority, and the Exotic,” considers a body of travel writing about East Asia published between the mid-thirteenth and mid-fourteenth centuries. Interest in accounts of East Asian travel is responsible for galvanizing the study of medieval travel writing, in general. Animated by the rise of postcolonial theory and by the publication of Edward Said’s Orientalism (1978), in particular, books such as Mary B. Campbell’s Witness and the Other World (1988), Stephen Greenblatt’s Marvelous Possessions (1991), as well as the more recent studies by Joan-Pau Rubiés (2000), Geraldine Heng (2003), Suzanne Akbari (2009), Kim M. Phillips (2014), and Shirin Khanmohamadi (2014) have focused predominantly on questions of ethnographic representation, they have been especially interested in exploring how the Middle Ages may have contributed to the ideas that justified modern European imperialism. Phillips gives voice to an assumption that informs the majority of these studies when she remarks that most of the period’s travel writing is so invested in geoethnographic description that its authors “pay little or no attention to the subjective experience of travel.”

Together, chapters 1 and 2 challenge this assumption, by highlighting the indispensable part that the discourse of travel played in the conception and reception of works of exotic travel writing (even in the cases of works that lavish little narrative attention on the experiences of their authors).

Chapter 1, “Exoticism as the Appropriation of Travail,” focuses on two accounts of travel into the Mongol Empire: the Itinerarium of Franciscan William of Rubruck [written ca. 1255] and the Divisament dou monde of Marco Polo and Rustichello da Pisa [ca. 1398]. The Divisament is often compared dismissively to the Itinerarium, principally on aesthetic grounds. Modern readers have tended to prefer the “more subjective” narrative of William to the catalogue of grammatically impersonal descriptions dished up by Polo and Rustichello. However, the stylistic differences between the Itinerarium and the Divisament are not—as is widely held—a token of their authors’ disparate literary aptitudes. On the contrary, each of these works renders subjective experience in a way that reinforces its ideological stance toward exoticism, a politically oriented mode of aestheticism that—in the Middle Ages—was founded on the symbolic appropriation of the traveler’s travel. The prominence of William’s “I” in the Itinerarium is a key component in the story of how he resisted Mongol rulers’ attempts to exoticize his religious teachings and to spin his presence at their courts to their political advantage. By contrast, the deliberate marginalization of Polo’s voice in the Divisament is foundational to the work’s attempts to teach its European readers to emulate the exoticism of Khubilai Khan. This popularization of elite exoticism relied on the rise of luxury bookmaking at French-speaking courts. The illuminated courtly manuscript provided an ideal medium for reifying and redistributing the prestige that accrued to travelers like Polo by virtue of their travels.

Chapter 2, “Travail and Authority in the Forgotten Age of Discovery,” examines the different ways that John of Plano Carpini’s Historia Mongolorum [ca. 1247], Odoric of Pordenone’s Relatio [1330], and The Book of John Mandeville [ca. 1305–1371] leverage the mystique of travel to variously sidestep, supplement, and contest clerical notions of auctoritas. Emergent practices of bureaucratic writing were an essential resource to these authors and to their medieval readers, who imagine the relationship between authority and travel in strikingly diverse ways. The composition and reception history of these three works furnish a vital corrective to the ruinism that, in the Middle Ages, geographical knowledge was dominated by academic protocols of knowledge production. This misconception has obscured the complexity of medieval debates about the basis of the traveler’s authority and about the disruptive implications of geographical discovery. It has, moreover, been routinely evoked in order to define the Middle Ages as the antithesis of “modernity” in historical surveys of travel, serving as an alibi not to think about the period at all.

Part 3, “Pilgrimage as Literate Labor,” argues that pilgrims to Jerusalem were at the vanguard of the reinvention of travel as literate labor. Drawing on long traditions of devotional and scholarly activity in the Holy Land, the authors of pilgrimage accounts viewed reading, writing, and their associated aptitudes as an essential part of self-discipline that distinguished the heroic traveler from his frivolous counterparts. In the process, they reimagined travel as an artful regulation of mind, soul, and body, oriented toward self-examination and the creation of useful geoethnographic knowledge. The
full import of this contribution to the history of ideas about travel has, however, gone unnoticed. This oversight is largely the result of the fact that the most illuminating studies of the medieval pilgrimage account have tended to treat their subject in overstrict isolation from related medieval and post-medieval approaches to travel writing.

Chapter 3, "Memory Work and the Labor of Writing," argues that pilgrims to Jerusalem influentially identified heroic travel with regimes of self-discipline organized around the activities of reading and writing. Around the turn of the thirteenth century, clerical pilgrims to the Holy Land consolidate what I call the "synthetic tradition" of travel writing about the region. Influenced by monastic theories about the role played by memory in written composition, the synthetic tradition placed a premium on the traveler's ability to render a vivid, coherent verbal map of the places he had visited during his pilgrimage. Synthetic travel writers portrayed deliberate self-regulation during the journey as a prerequisite for success in the post-pilgrimage labor of composing the written account. In the fourteenth century, an alternative to the synthetic tradition emerged: the travel diary. The diary made the habit of writing part of the pilgrim's daily regime and ultimately raised the bar in terms of what counted as success in the recollection of one's travels. Originating in bureaucratic writing practices, the travel diary took root in Italy among lay and clerical pilgrims, and was quickly picked up by travelers from other parts of Europe. The astonishing popularity of the diary prompted latter-day practitioners of the synthetic tradition to champion disciplined note-taking in the field as an essential part of Holy Land pilgrimage. By the close of the Middle Ages, taking notes during any journey was an unambiguous mark of authority and trustworthiness on the part of the would-be travel writer.

Chapter 4, "The Pilgrim as Investigator," argues against the repeatedly discredited—yet seemingly indestructible—stereotype that depicts the medieval pilgrim to the Holy Land as an uncritical tourist who does little more than recycle hoary observations about well-worn routes. In reality, pilgrimage to the region entailed active, skeptical, and often painstaking investigations into past and present realities. Mindful of the limitations of authoritative sources and faced with a continually changing landscape, medieval travel writers developed a number of approaches to unearthing evidence and evaluating competing claims about the Holy Land. At the turn of the twelfth century, the labor of investigation assumed a particularly prominent place in the ideal pilgrimage. As a consequence, travel writers began to engage and debate the investigative methods, interests, and emphases of their predecessors and contemporaries. At the end of the thirteenth century, a handful of particularly influential Dominican authors drew on the precedent provided by exotic travel writing in order to extend their investigations into the less familiar world beyond the Holy Land. The advent of the travel diary in the fourteenth century fostered the opposite impulse, encouraging pilgrims to bring the techniques previously used to investigate Jerusalem and East Asia to the European and Mediterranean locales that they visited en route to the Holy Land. This inward geographical turn contributed to an increased self-consciousness about different approaches to knowing the Holy Land and conferred legitimacy on writing about shorter-range journeys.

Part 3, "Discovering the Proximate," takes an in-depth look at Petrarch and Pero Tafur, two travel writers who drew on and reorient the impulses of both exotic travel writing and the pilgrimage account. Petrarch and Tafur conceive of travel as an art of geochronographic investigation and as an occasion for acute self-examination. For both travel writers, the elite journey is governed by techniques that can—in theory—be abstracted from any particular itinerary. Prior to the fourteenth century, a journey was normally deemed worthy of a written account if it yielded useful knowledge about sacred centers and/or remote, unknown places. With Petrarch and Tafur, the cultivation of new perspectives on familiar destinations, or even on the activity of travel itself, is justification enough.

Chapter 5, "Becoming Petrarch," focuses on a group of letters written by Petrarch during three different journeys, undertaken over the course of ten years (1333–43). Petrarch collected these letters in his epistolary anthology Letters on Familiar Matters (1350). Through the editorial manipulation of his correspondence, Petrarch traces an autobiographical arc, in which his youthful enthusiasm for travel and vernacular poetry transitions to a more mature period of civic-minded engagement with Latin philology and classicizing poetics. The final batch of letters, written from Naples in 1343, announces Petrarch's world-weary realization that literature is unlikely to effect political change, and signals his doubts about the benefits of subjecting himself to the rigors of future travel. Ultimately, Petrarch distinguishes himself from most of his contemporaries by resisting the tendency to assimilate literate labor to the art of travel. In the years following 1343, Petrarch will increasingly speak of travel as a toilsome, and often unprofitable, distraction from the daily reading and writing undertaken in his library, a routine of self-discipline rooted in the home and focused principally on moral—rather than political—reform.

Chapter 6, "The Chivalric Mediterranean of Pero Tafur," considers the fifteenth-century Castilian knight's account of his travels, now com-
monly known as the Andaças. Like Petrarch, Tafur writes about places with which his readers are almost certainly familiar, many of them Mediterranean ports of call. In contrast to Petrarch, chivalric romance provides Tafur with the literary lens through which he idealizes his travels. Tafur speaks of his journey as an elite mode of education, one that relies on his intimacy with Muslim and Greek Orthodox hosts. At numerous junctures in Tafur’s narrative, these sentimental ideals come into conflict with his conception of knighthood travel as a sequence of dangerous, prowess-honing travails, undertaken in defense of the cultural and territorial integrity of Latin Christendom. Tafur’s account never entirely reconciles the competing impulses to view religious others as peers and role models on the one hand, and as mortal enemies on the other. It does, however, take a decisive stance on another question, championing the educational value of travel within Europe and the Mediterranean while rejecting more perilous and exotic itineraries in East Asia. This position allies the otherwise adventurous Tafur to Petrarch, and more generally to the gentlemen-humanists of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the age of the Grand Tour.

The coda, “Beyond 1500, or, Travel’s Labors Lost,” explores the implications of this book’s arguments about the Middle Ages by entertaining a thought experiment: what if the sixteenth century were seen as the end point of the phenomena discussed in this book rather than 1500? The perfection of the steam engine was a technological achievement that transformed humanity’s experience of time and space. Many of the people who witnessed the triumph of steam power were forced to ponder what would be left of travel once the certainty of travel had been rendered a thing of the past. Their expressions of uncertainty arguably signal a historical rupture far more significant than the arbitrary, field-defining fence erected between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

A FINAL NOTE ON KEY TERMS

Developing a working definition for travel writing is a rite of passage for all studies on the subject. The apparent timelessness and ubiquity of stories about travel encourages a broad, inclusive approach to defining the term. Walter Benjamin imagined the tales of the overseas voyager as one half of a primordial dialectic that gave rise to all storytelling (the other being the local yarns of the stay-at-home peasant). Meanwhile, Michel de Certeau famously pronounced: “Every story is a travel story.” For obvious reasons, few studies of travel writing adopt such generous definitions. They therefore face the task of explaining which titles have been included and which excluded, whether fictional or pseudohistorical works should be considered alongside letters and diaries, which texts should be grouped together and on what grounds, and so forth.

The quandary is perhaps even more pronounced in the case of the Middle Ages. As Fredric Jameson has observed, the advent of print capitalism furnishes publishers with a profit-oriented incentive to ensure the transparency and stability of literary genres. The literary cultures of the Middle Ages wield generic terms in ways that sometimes seem chaotic and contradictory. With a few notable exceptions (i.e., legal documents and lyric poetry), medieval writing was seldom organized into coherent and stable generic systems. Faced with the exceptionally complex terrain that nourished medieval travel writing, scholars have developed a number of resourceful approaches to classifying works.

The following formal/generic terms underpin the central arguments of this book: travel writing, travel account, travel narrative, and travel book. Travel writing is the most general of the four concepts and resembles Joan-Pau Rubíes’s notion of “travel literature,” which he defines as “a varied body of writing” that “takes travel as an essential element for its production” but in which travel is “not necessarily a theme, nor even a structuring element.” My use of travel writing encompasses first-person travel accounts as well as works of descriptive topography, whether or not the knowledge conveyed in them is the result of the author’s own travels. I use travel account to refer to works that contain a significant amount of geoeconomic description that purportedly derives from the travels of the text’s author or of someone close to him or her. The travel account may be dominated by the first- or third-person voice, and may or may not focus primarily on the experience of the voyage that underpins its claims.

The term travel narrative is deployed in an even more specific way. Drawing on the familiar formulation of Jan Borm, I define travel narrative as:

any narrative characterized by a non-fiction dominant that relates [almost always] in the first person a journey that the reader supposes to have taken place in reality while assuming or presupposing that the author, narrator, and principal character are but one or identical.

Also relevant is Mary B. Campbell’s more straightforward assertion that travel narrative is “fully inhabited by its narrator” and tends to “be fully narrative”—meaning that geoeconomic description is embedded within, and subordinated to, the relatively continuous story of the journey.
There is a common misconception that travel narrative as I define it above is rare, or virtually nonexistent, in the Middle Ages. This alleged dearth supposedly reflects the Middle Ages' aversion to empiricism, its disinterest in individual experience, and its dogmatic fixation on theological authority. It is true that some of the most successful works of medieval travel writing—including the accounts of John of Plano Carpini, Burcchio of Mount Sion, John Mandeville, and Marco Polo/Rustichello da Pisa—privilege geoethnographic description over the narration of experience. However, as my analyses of these works suggest, each of them appears to do so with different aims in mind, and not because they all subscribe to the same benighted set of epistemological beliefs. In any event, the truism that travel narrative is rare in the Middle Ages does not withstand scrutiny for long once one focuses on texts written after 1350, many of which were composed by pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Finally, travel book refers to the work of travel writing in its dimension as a material object, usually a manuscript codex. This term is particularly useful in situations in which the form and content of a given text are somehow illuminated by a consideration of the material practices and social networks that sustained its production and circulation. Though this nested set of terms was not used by medieval authors and readers, it will hopefully furnish basic coordinates that will facilitate synchronic and diachronic comparisons of various works of travel writing without fetishizing or overlooking their formal differences.
INTRODUCTION TO TRAVEL AND TRAVEL WRITING


2. C.W.T. 2:129.


7. Kelie Robertson and Michael Uehel, eds., The Middle Ages at Work (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 4, observe that, in English, labor has connotations of pain and sacrifice that work does not. Work, labor, and work can be seen as three different vantage points from which to view the same process. Influenced by Nicola Masciandaro, The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), I treat work as a view of the productive process that has its eye trained almost exclusively on the final result or object of the laborer’s effort. Labor frames the productive process more subjectively, focusing on the producer’s sacrifices of time, energy, health, and material resources while still usually gesturing to some degree toward the end product of the process. Work is the least object oriented of the three terms, emphasizing pain and expenditure, often to the total exclusion of the end result. This constellation of English words has been helpful to my understanding of medieval travel writing, but it is not meant to replace the complicated and evolving uses of work and related terms in the various languages discussed in this book.


15. Ibid., 4:925.


42. Sumption, Pilgrimage, 357.


44. See chap. 3, p. 118.

45. See chap. 2, p. 66–74.

46. See chap. 5, p. 174.


30. For details, see chap. 4, p. 152.


42. Kempe, Book of Margery Kempe, 223.


45. See chap. 3.


63. This observation is so common that I will simply cite the most memorably worded example: “As a literary form, travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where very different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the story, the prosa poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscernable hospitality.” Thanks to Jonathan Rahan, For Love and Money: Writing-Reading-Travelling, 1968–1987 (London: Picador, 1988), 253–54.


INTRODUCTION TO PART ONE


—Donne, vedete, colui che va ne l’inferno e torna quando gli piace, e qua su reca novelle di coloro che li gio sono!—Alla quale una dell’altra rispose semplicemente:—In verità tu sei di vero: non vedi tu come egli ha la barba crepata e il color bruno per lo caldo e per lo fummo che è la gio?—Le quali parole udendo egli dir direo a sé, e conoscendo che da pura credenza delle donne venivano, piacendogli, e quasi contento che esso in corte opino fosseco, sorridendo alquanto, passò avanti.

2. Ignorant of basic literary concepts such as title, genre, divisio, and allegory, the women misconstrue Dante’s fictive, allegorical pilgrimage as a recurring deed of real-life hermeneutics. As Boccaccio would later argue in his Expositions on the Comedy, Dante christened his poem with its seemingly incongruous generic title precisely in order to underscore the moral-philosophical significance of the upward trajectory of his journey from hell to paradise. See Giovanni Boccaccio, Boccaccio’s Expositions on Dante’s “Comedy,” trans. Michael Fazio (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 41–43.

CHAPTER ONE


3. Particularly influential on this current study are Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (New York: Routledge, 1992); James Clifford, ed.