Mandeville: A Package Tour of the Medieval World
By Matthew Francis
Introduction to the slides

*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* first appeared in French some time around the middle of the fourteenth century. Though the author claims to be an English knight, nothing is known for certain about his identity, or whether the claims he makes about his life and travels have any substance – though much of his material is undoubtedly derived from other manuscript sources. The book had wide popularity in the Middle Ages and afterwards; Columbus is said to have taken a copy with him on his voyage to America, which says something about the persistence of the medieval world-view. To a modern reader, the *Travels* are remarkable for the way they juxtapose the wonders of reality and those of the imagination, the crocodile and the Phoenix, Tartars and Amazons, a round world that could theoretically be circumnavigated with a symbolic map having Jerusalem at its centre.

My talk told how I discovered the *Travels*, and how I went about transforming source material from this ‘taproot text’ – the term is from John Clute and John Grant’s *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* (London: Orbit, 1997) – into my poetry sequence *Mandeville*, to be published by Faber and Faber in March 2008. The *Travels* is essentially a reference book, and my challenge was to turn it into a narrative. In particular, I looked at five poems. ‘Mandeville’s Departure’, the first poem in my sequence, transforms the opening of the *Travels*, an account of the various routes a pilgrim could take to the Holy Land, into a description of a specific departure from the South coast of England.
But it also adds the legend that barnacle geese hatched from shellfish, which is only referred to glancingly at a different point in the original text, to give a flavour of the sort of fabulous material that will come later in the sequence. In the early part of Mandeville, it was necessary to give some details about the practicalities of travel in the Middle Ages, and many of these I took from Norbert Ohler’s, The Medieval Traveller, trans. by Caroline Hillier (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1989). For example, a medieval phrasebook with useful sentences in Old High German, quoted by Ohler, gave rise to the poem ‘Of Inns’. Typical of Mandeville’s more fabulous pages is his description of giant gold-digging ants, which became my poem ‘Of Ants that Dig for Gold’. On the other hand, the Tartars or Mongols, who ruled a vast empire including China, are accurately described, with Mandeville’s characteristic open-mindedness towards other cultures, and I turned this material into an elegy for an individual warrior, a sort of Unknown Tartar. Finally, Mandeville, like other thinkers of his time, was well aware that the world is round, even if he does not always think through the implications of this fact. A story he tells about a traveller who nearly manages to circumnavigate the globe gave me the idea for my final poem, ‘Of Circumnavigation’, which brings the sequence back to its starting point.
Thirteen-syllable lines
Three-line stanzas
Unrhymed
Sequence of 40 poems
I / you
Narrative of circumnavigation
Mandeville’s Journey (My Version)

South coast of England
North coast of France
South of France
Alps
Venice
Mediterranean islands
Holy Land
Middle East (gets lost)
India (including Africa)
Tartary
China
Unknown islands (America?)
Fringes of Paradise
England (or somewhere like it)
In the name of God Almighty: he who wants to pass over the sea to Jerusalem may go by many ways, both by sea and by land depending on the countries he comes from; many ways come to a single end. But do not think I shall tell of all the towns and cities and castles that men shall go by; for then I must make too long a tale of it. But only some countries and the most important places that men shall pass through to go the right road do I briefly intend to touch on. For, if a man comes from the western parts of the world – like England, Wales, Scotland or Norway – he may, if he wants, go through Almayne [Germany] and through the Kingdom of Hungary, which borders the lands of Polainie [Poland] and the land of Pannony [Bulgaria] and of Allesye [Silesia]…

It is a great marvel. Nevertheless I said to them that it did not seem a very great marvel to me, for in my country, I said, there were trees which bore a fruit that became birds that could fly; men call them bernakles, and there is good meat on them.
Fig. 93.—Barnacle Geese.—Fac-simile of an Engraving on Wood, from the "Cosmographie Universelle" of Munster, folio, Basle, 1552.
Mandeville’s Departure

For you must know that the world is round. In its centre
the gold pin of Jerusalem holds down the twelve winds
and the three continents ringed by the Great Sea Ocean.

And our islands on the world’s edge are mere gritty dots
in that circling ocean, our shores crumbling into it,
the hills blurry with rain, the shires foundering in mud.

So all who leave them must step on to the up-and-down
of a wooden ship, as I, Sir John Mandeville, did
on Michaelmas Day of the year 1332.

A little town by the shore was my last sight of home.
It was a place that had gone grey staring at the sea,
where nets were draped on the shingle and ropes made their
nests.

I felt the sea strain against the carcass of the ship
like the man rolling a barrel on the quay, and watched
as the waves walloped a sunk-in post, half-green, half-dry.

Barnacles were clinging there, the kind that hang from stalks,
and have smooth shells, like eggs – they are called goose
barnacles.

Each stalk had a nodule on the end, gripping the post,
like the head and beak of a tiny goose. Underneath,
feathery tails hung down from the shells, skimming the sea.
On dark nights, these outlandish creatures hatch into birds
and fluster up together into the winter air,
splaying out against the clouds in a figure of wings.
Then they are called barnacle geese, and frequent the winds,
as once they did the waves. But they must return to breed.
Under their feathers pulses the slime of a shellfish,
and therefore it is lawful to eat them on fast days....
Who are you. (Wer pist du)? Where are you from (Wanna quimis)? From which direction have you come (Fona weliheru latskeffi sindos)?
Where are you from, brother (Guane cumet ger, brothro)? - From my lord’s house.
From what country do you come (Gueliche lande cumen ger)? - I was in France (or I was in another village).
What were you doing there? I was sent there.
I didn’t see you there. - And I didn’t see you there either.
Where did you find lodgings last night? In the Count’s house.
Did you see my master at early mass? - No.
Where is your master? - I don’t know.
My master wishes to speak to you. - I want to speak to him too.
I want to ride on now. (E guille har uthz rite); give me my horse (Gimer min ros); saddle my horse (Guesattilae min ros); give me my shield (my spear, my gloves, my staff, my knife, a candle).
Where is your wife (Guar es taz wip)? Why weren’t you at early mass? - I didn’t want to go.
You went to bed with your wife. If your master knew that, he would be angry with you, I warrant!
I would like something to drink (Erro, e guile trenchen). - Would you like some good wine?
Yes, I would. Have you fodder for the horses? (Yes, I have (or no I haven’t, or not enough, or a little).
Think of yourself! - I always do think of myself.
God greet you. - God bless you.

[Excerpted from Norbert Ohler, *The Medieval Traveller*]
Of Inns

Bread fire milk candle beer soup meat wine horse oats stable bed straw blanket man woman cloak sword staff saddle knife ride walk eat drink sit lie fight make merry say prayers.

Have you come far? Yes, I have come many miles since dawn.
What is the news? There is none. I bring news. I must eat.
Will your boy take my horse? I have money. Give me bread.

Give me soup. This wine is bad. What have you put in it?
I am a pilgrim. A merchant. I am lost. Help me.
I am sick. Tired. I am wounded. I have hurt my foot.

Now I will go to bed. Where is it? Give me a light.
There is no blanket. This straw is fouled. There is no room.
A man in my bed is snoring. Singing. Go to sleep.

Good morning, fellow. Where are you from? Where do you go?
Are you a heretic? In my country we do thus.
I need food for the journey. I must ride far today.
In this isle of Ceylon are great hills of gold, which ants busily look after, purifying the gold and separating the fine from the unfine. Those ants are as big as dogs here, so that no man dare go near those hills for fear that the ants might attack them; however, men win that gold by a trick... They take mares who have young foals and hang on each side of the each mare an empty container with the mouth of it uppermost, trailing near to the ground, and then send them forth in the early morning to pasture round the hills where the gold is, keeping the foals at home. Then these ants, when they see these empty containers, go and fill them with gold, for it is the nature of the ant to leave nothing empty near them—there is no hole or cranny or anything else that they will not fill. And when it is thought that the mares are fully laden with gold, the men let the foals out, and they neigh after their dams. Then the mares hear their foals neighing and hurry quickly to them, laden with gold. And in this way men get a great deal of gold; for the ants easily tolerate all sorts of animal, man excepted.
Of Ants that Dig for Gold

You have seen ants in the grass, held one on your finger. You have watched them weave and unweave their tickling footsteps, study their path with their horns, or manhandle a seed.

And you were pleased with the fiddliness of their concerns, the fumbled meetings and stalk-clinging. It seemed to you like a smallness of your own you had stepped away from.

But this is a place where the ants are as big as dogs, and yet like those you know they are busy with the earth, which is of gold here, loose hills of it mingled with dirt.

All day long they crawl over the scree, worrying out the nuggets and letting them roll away down the slope, then gathering them into scabby heaps of glitter.

Who knows what they want with gold? They will fight to keep it, and everyone is afraid of their pincering jaws, so if you want to enrich yourself you must trick them, using a mare and two clay pots, hung so she drags them with their mouths clunking along the ground towards the ants, which cannot see a hole without putting gold in it.

Then lead her foal as close as you dare to call her back with her two pots behind her, shaking out raw money, the earth’s shiny droppings. Is this what you are after?
The women of that country who are married have on their heads something like a man's foot, made of gold and gems and peacock feathers, beautifully made and glinting in the light; this is a token that they are under the rule of a man.

You must know that I and my companions were living with the Great Khan for sixteen months as soldiers against the King of Manzi, for they were at war when we were there...

In the land of the Great Khan every man has as many wives as he want, for some have a hundred, some forty, some more, some less...

Their houses are made of sticks, are round, and have but one window, where the light comes in and the smoke goes out. The roof-covering and the doors are of felt. And when they go to war they carry their houses with them upon carts, as men in other countries carry tents and pavilions. They make the fire in the middle of their houses... They believe in one God who made all things; but nevertheless they have idols of gold and silver, of felt and cloth to which they offer the first milk of their animals and the first morsels of their meat and drink before they themselves eat or drink any of it...

All the men and women of that land are good archers, and the women are as good warriors as the men and will run as fast. And the women do all kinds of crafts, for example tailoring and cobbling and other such trades. They commonly drive the plough, the cart and the wagon; and they are carpenters as well as men, and make houses and all other necessaries — bows and arrows and other weapons excepted, which the men alone make. Women wear breeches there as well as men...

When they go to war, they behave in a very warlike and wise manner, and do all they can to win, and conquer their enemies. Each one carries two or three bows, many arrows and a great battleaxe. The nobles carry whort sharp swords at their sides; they have breastplates and helmets made of cuir-bouilli, and armour for their horses of the same material. They slay anyone who flees in battle. When they besiege a castle or walled town, they promise the besieged such fair terms that it is a wonder to hear them; for they will grant whatever conditions they ask. But as soon as the besieged have capitulated, they slay them and cut off their ears, and souse them in vinegar to make a dainty dish for their great lords...

It is very dangerous to pursue the Tartars when they flee in battle; for they will shoot to their rear and kill men as well as if they were in front of them...

All the Tartars have small eyes and small, thin beards. They are usually treacherous, for they keep no promises they make...

When any of them is dying they stick a spear in the earth by him; and when he draws near to death, everyone leaves the house until he is dead; and when he is, they carry him into the open plains and bury him in the earth.
Of the Tartars

When one of these men is dying, his friends stab his spear into the earth floor, and leave him in the tent of sticks he lived in, letting the felt door flop down behind them.

He has taken this house to war with him on a cart.

His life weighed as little as the smoke that breathes out through the chimney-window, and it leaves him now the same way.

By this fire he has eaten the meat of dogs and rats, horses and lions, and wiped the grease from his fingers, making himself tipsy on the sour froth of mare’s milk.

He will die alone, who had thirty or forty wives to wear the wiry shape of his foot as a head-dress, and visited them in their huts to have dalliance, women who could shoot with a bow as straight as he could, and run without a sound in their loose shirts and breeches, drive a plough or a wagon, put together a hut.

In his silk undershirt, his breastplate of boiled leather, with three bows and a battleaxe, he was to be feared riding away, for he could turn right round like an owl.

No one could trust his promises. He has killed many and cut off their ears to be pickled in vinegar and served to the lords after the town has been taken.

He believed in one God, who made all things, and offered the first milk of his animals, the first lump of meat to the idols of felt and cloth he carried with him.

A man with small eyes and a scrap of beard, one of those who rode with the Great Khan over the plains of Asia, and I rode among them against the King of Manzi.

Now the hut is cooling and he lies in the smoke haze as his friends return to take him out and bury him in the flat green that is their idea of forever.
I have often thought of a story I have heard, when I was young, of a worthy man of our own country who went once upon a time to see the world. He passed India and many isles beyond India, where there are more than 5,000 isles, and travelled so far by land and sea, girdling the globe, that he found an isle where he heard his own language being spoken. For he heard one who was driving a plough team say such words to them as he had heard men say to oxen in his own land when they were working at the plough. He marvelled greatly, for he did not understand how this could be. But I conjecture that he had travelled so far over land and sea, circumnavigating the earth, that he had come to his own borders; for if he had gone a bit further, he would have come to his own district. But after he heard that marvel, he could not get transport any further, so he turned back the way he had come; so he had a long journey!

...That could well be, even if men of limited understanding do not believe that men can travel on the underside of the globe without falling off into the firmament. For just as it seems to us that those men there are under us, so it seems to them that we are under them. For if it were possible for a man to fall off the earth to the firmament, all the more reason for the earth and sea, which are very heavy, to fall thither too. But that cannot happen, as God himself witnesses when he says, Non timeas me, qui suspendi terram ex nihilo, that is to say, 'Have no fear of me, who have hanged the earth from nothing.'
Of Circumnavigation

I have heard of a man who left our shores and set sail for France, then crossed the Alps to Venice, where he took ship past the islands of the West Sea to the Holy Land.

He was lost in the mountains, found the Great Sea Ocean and the many Indias, one after another, and afterwards journeyed to Tartary and Cathay, and islands whose people were melted into strangeness. He sailed past the fringes of Paradise, and arrived at a grey country where a man was ploughing a field.

He thought he had been there before, or somewhere like it: the smell of rainy wind, the man’s bow-legged trudging as he turned the clods hoping to scrape up a summer.

What do you call this, fellow? Ox. What is this? A plough.

Earth water sky clouds field hill house farm village church man.

They were the same words with a different heft on the tongue.

He turned to his companions. We have almost reached home.

Over that hill we may find a road to take us there.

But his friends stayed clumped together under the drizzle. We have travelled across the world and received only sores, blisters, fever, wounds, chills, sunburn, hunger and thirst.

We are tired. And this may be some spell or delusion.

So the man and his friends sailed back where they had come from.

Yet I believe they might have gone a few miles further and arrived home. For you must know that the world is round.