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“Read this Book, and You Will Find all the Grand and Marvelous Things to be Found”: A Song of Ice and Fire and Medieval Travelogues

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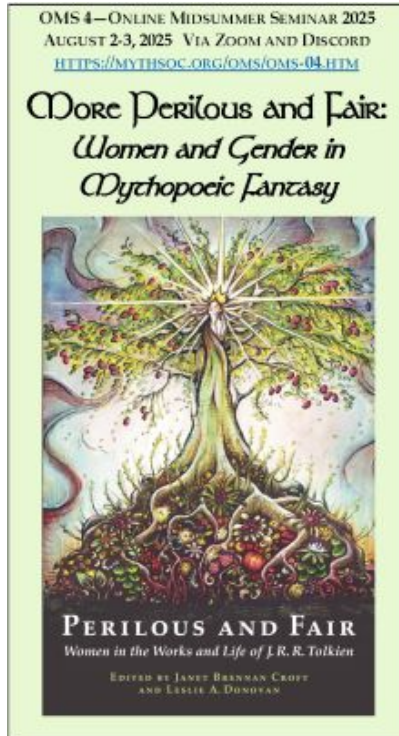
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“Read this Book, and You Will Find all the Grand and Marvelous Things to be Found”: A Song of Ice and Fire and Medieval Travelogues

Abstract

Although travel is one of the most prominent themes in the modern fantasy genre, travelogues are not usually regarded as one of the predecessors of Western fantasy. Yet a close examination of both medieval travel narratives and fantasy novels reveals many shared characteristics. The journeys of fantasy protagonists, which include encounters with foreign cultures, monsters, and marvels, tend to echo the journeys of the medieval missionaries and merchants who ventured into the Far East in the 13th and 14th centuries. This article uses George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a lens through which to explore the deep-seated connection between the two literary forms and affirm travel literature's influence on fantasy.

Additional Keywords

Mandeville, John. *Travels*; Martin, George R.R. *A Song of Ice and Fire* (series); Polo, Marco. *The Travels of Marco Polo*; Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*; Traveler's tales; travel literature; Martin, George R.R.; *A Song of Ice and Fire*; medieval travel

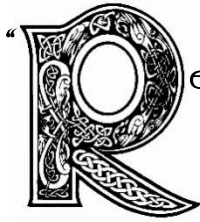
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Cover Page Footnote

Although travel is one of the most prominent themes in the modern fantasy genre, travelogues are not usually regarded as one of the predecessors of Western fantasy. Yet a close examination of both medieval travel narratives and fantasy novels reveals many shared characteristics. The journeys of fantasy protagonists, which include encounters with foreign cultures, monsters, and marvels, tend to echo the journeys of the medieval missionaries and merchants who ventured into the Far East in the 13th and 14th centuries. This paper examines the accounts of both medieval travelers and modern fantasy protagonists to explore the deep-seated connection between the two literary forms and affirm travel literature's place as a progenitor of fantasy fiction.



READ THIS BOOK, AND YOU WILL FIND ALL
THE GRAND AND MARVELOUS THINGS
TO BE FOUND": A SONG OF ICE AND FIRE
AND MEDIEVAL TRAVELOGUES

ELISABETH BRANDER

TO A 21ST CENTURY READER, TALES OF MAGICAL BEASTS and enchanted landscapes are clearly within the realm of fiction. But to a medieval European reading a travel narrative produced in their own time, such elements would not be out of place. When medieval authors described snails with shells large enough to serve as houses and humans with heads and tails like dogs, they were not simply engaging in flights of fancy; they were drawing on contemporary understanding of the natural world. But as Europeans traveled across the globe, the seemingly fanciful elements that once populated travel accounts began to fade from their pages, and a travelogue published in the 21st century is highly unlikely to mention dragons or unicorns. Those conventions of the medieval travelogue have instead found a new home within the modern fantasy genre, whose descriptions of travel and geography share many similarities with their medieval forerunners.

George R.R. Martin's epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has become one of the most well-known examples of modern fantasy literature. The first volume, *A Game of Thrones*, was published in 1996, and has since been followed by four other volumes in the main series, several side stories, and, of course, HBO's television adaptation *Game of Thrones*. Martin has always said that he set out to write a darker, more realistic fantasy than something along the lines of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, and he credits England's 15th century Wars of the Roses as a major source of inspiration. But while the society Martin created for Westeros bears little resemblance to the realities of medieval and early modern England, aspects of medieval European thought are still woven into the fabric of *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Whether intentionally or not, the way in which Westeros and the eastern continent, Essos, are portrayed is remarkably similar to the worldview we find in medieval travelogues, showing the enduring power of those early narratives.

One of the most vivid examples of a medieval travelogue containing elements that might strike modern readers as fantastical is *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. When it was written in the 14th century, the two most prominent genres of European travel literature were pilgrimage accounts, which often

provided advice to those who were planning a journey to the Holy Land or some other prominent religious site, and the accounts of Christian missionaries who traveled to Central Asia. As noted by the Chaucerian and medievalist Donald R. Howard, the *Travels* distinguished itself by combining these two traditions to create a comprehensive work of travel lore that was by turns curious, thoughtful, and engrossing (Howard 2). This approach proved successful. The work was the equivalent of a medieval bestseller, and by the end of the 15th century it had been translated out of its original French into some ten other languages, including Czech and Irish.

It is easy to see why the *Travels* appealed to medieval armchair travelers, as it provided a vivid glimpse into the splendors of India and China that most readers could never hope to see for themselves. But Mandeville describes places that are not simply foreign; they seem almost otherworldly. Take, for example, his description of the island of Pentexoire, the home of the legendary Christian Emperor Prester John:

For in his country is the sea that men clepe the Gravelley Sea, that is all gravel and sand, without any drop of water, and it ebbeth and floweth in great waves as other seas do [...]. Also beyond that flome, more upward to the deserts, is a great plain all gravelly, between the mountains. And in that plain, every day at the sun-rising, begin to grow small trees, and they grow till mid-day, bearing fruit; but no man dare take of that fruit, for it is a thing of faerie. And after mid-day, they decrease and enter again into the earth, so that at the going down of the sun they appear no more. And so they do, every day. And that is a great marvel. (Mandeville ch. XXVII)

This land is not marvelous just because of its imposing architecture, strange customs, or exotic food. It is also a purely magical place whose laws differ from those of the mundane world, where gravel flows like water and faerie trees sprout from the earth.

These sorts of magical places are often dangerous. For example, the Vale Enchanted (also known as the Vale of Devils and the Vale Perilous) lies close the River Pison¹ and has an abundance of silver and gold, making it a tempting prospect for treasure seekers. But to go there is to invite death. Not only is the valley full of demons that strangle most men who venture there, it is home to the head and visage of a devil that “changeth and stirreth so often in diverse manner, with so horrible countenance, that no man dare not neighen towards him. And from him cometh out smoke and stinking fire and so much abomination, that unnethen no man may there endure” (Mandeville ch. XXVIII).

¹ One of the four rivers that supposedly sprang from the Garden of Eden.

Like the Gravelly Sea, the Vale Enchanted is something otherworldly. But in this instance, that otherworldliness is dangerous, harboring unnatural forces ready to prey on unwary travelers.

Faerie orchards and enchanted valleys make for engrossing reading, but the most striking aspect of the *Travels* is its descriptions of the various creatures who dwell in lands even farther east than India and China. Some of them are familiar to us, such as dragons and unicorns. Others are more whimsical, like the snails of the Island of Calonak that “be so great, that many persons may lodge them in their shells, as men would do in a little house” (Mandeville ch.XXI). Strangest of all are the various races that inhabit the islands to the far south and east of Jerusalem: creatures of “foul stature and of cursed kind that have no heads. And their eyen be in their shoulders” (ch.XXII); a race of beings who walk on both their hands and feet and “be all skinned and feathered, and they will leap as lightly into trees, and from tree to tree, as it were squirrels or apes” (ch.XXII); humanoids whose ears fall down to their knees (ch.XXII); and so on (Fig. 1).



Fig.1 Schedel, Hartmann, et al. *Buch der Croniken vnd Geschichten mit Figuren vnd Pildnussen von Anbeginn der Welt bis auf dise vnnserer Zeit*. trans by Alt, Georg, Approximately Lator Nuremberg, Anton Koberger, 23 De, 1493. Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, <www.loc.gov/item/48040720/>

For modern readers, it is not surprising to learn that the *Travels* is a literary hoax—John Mandeville was the creation of an anonymous author, his journey drawn from literary sources rather than a firsthand account. But although Mandeville’s account was fictitious, its descriptions of geography and zoology are similar to those in found the accounts of his non-fictitious contemporaries, of which the most famous is perhaps Marco Polo the Venetian (1254-1324). Marco was born into a family of merchants, set out for Asia with his father and uncle in 1271 as a seventeen-year-old, and did not return to Europe for twenty-four years. Upon his return to Italy, Marco was captured and imprisoned by the Genoese during a skirmish between the rival cities of Genoa

and Venice. During his time in captivity, he made the acquaintance of Rustichello da Pisa, an author of romances who had previously compiled a French edition of the Arthurian legends. Marco dictated the account of his travels to Rustichello, who then compiled them into the *Il milione* (*The Million*), also known as *Livre des Merveilles dun Monde* (*Marvels of the World*).

The *Marvels of the World* is often touted for being one of the earliest accounts of China that circulated in Europe. Marco Polo might not go to the quite the lengths that the fictitious Mandeville did in his descriptions of the lands to the far south and east, but his account still contains elements that strain credulity. For instance, he describes the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Lambri who have tails “a span in length, like those of a dog, but not covered in hair” (Polo III.XI), the massive serpents of Carazan whose jaws are wide enough to swallow men whole and whose gall is a highly prized medicinal substance used to treat everything from rabies to pustules to the pains of childbirth (II.XLIX), and the people of the Island of Angaman who have “heads, eyes, and teeth resembling those of the canine species” (III.XIII).

These sorts of details were not just artistic license on the part of medieval authors. Both Marco Polo and the author of *Mandeville’s Travels* drew on what contemporary scholarship believed about the lands at the edge of the known world. The idea that the far corners of the map were home to monsters and marvels has its roots in medieval European conceptions of geography, which were in turn firmly tied to theology. Jerry Brotton, a scholar of Renaissance cartography, describes the intersection between these two disciplines in his 2012 monograph *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*. In medieval Europe, one of the most prominent cartographical depictions of the world was the T-O map. In the simplest versions of these maps, the world is divided into three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa—surrounded by the ocean, with the city of Jerusalem in the center (Fig.2).



Fig. 2. Macrobius, Ambrosius Aurelius Theodosius, et al. *Macrobius integer nitidus suoque decori a Ioanne Riuiro restitutus*. ed by Rivius, Joannes, Active Itor [Parrhisiis Venundatur ab Iodoco Badio & Ioanne Paruo, 1515] Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, <www.loc.gov/item/72229025>.

In more elaborate versions, most notably the Hereford *mappamundi* housed at Hereford Cathedral in England, Asia is covered with pictorial depictions of various myths and legends, and Paradise itself lies in the uttermost East (Brotton 85-90). This is essentially a visual representation of the idea that the farther away one moves from the (Christian) center of the world, the stranger the lands become, making them the perfect location for the wondrous and peculiar.

Another major strand of thought that contributed to medieval geography was climatic zone theory. As described by cartographic historian Chet van Duzer in "On the Geography and Cartography of Monsters," in this conception of the Earth, the area around the equator—known as the Torrid Zone—was uninhabitably hot. The frigid zones at the North and South Poles were also uninhabitable due to their freezing temperatures. Two temperate zones were located to the north and south of the equator, which were the ideal locations for humanity to flourish (Fig.3). The lands within the temperate areas, including Europe, represented nature as it was intended to be; however, the lands at the outer regions of the climactic spectrum—Asia, and especially Africa—were liable to produce various monstrous beings due to their extremes of heat and cold (Van Duzer 390-391). The various fanciful creatures that lurk at the edges of medieval maps were not just artistic flourishes meant to amuse the viewer (although they probably did); they were also depictions of what contemporary scholarship believed about the distant corners of the world.

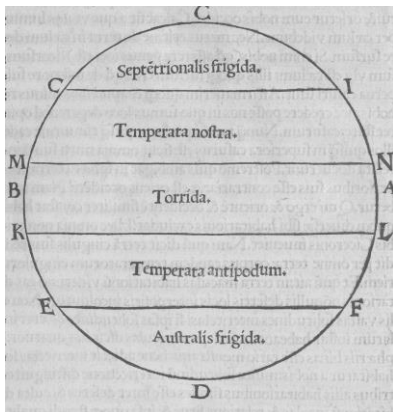


Fig. 3. Isidore, Of Seville, Saint, -636, et al. *Isidori Iunioris Hispalensis Episcopi Liber etimologiarum ad Braulionem Cesar Augustanum Episcopum scriptus incipit foeliciter*. [Augsburg, Germany: Per Gintherus zainer ex Reutlingen progenitum ..., Anno ab incarnatione domini Millesimo Quadringentesimo Septuagesimosecundo Decimanona die Mensis nouembris 19 Nov, 1472] Library of Congress, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, <www.loc.gov/item/ca18000702/>

But the monsters at the edge of the map could not hold firm against ever-increasing amounts of global travel. As more Europeans ventured farther abroad and the demon-infested valleys and magical creatures described in earlier centuries failed to materialize, they faded out of travel narratives. But accounts of monsters and marvels did not vanish entirely; they simply moved

more firmly into the burgeoning realm of fiction. One of the key texts that illustrates this development is Jonathan Swift’s 1726 novel *Gulliver’s Travels*. Like John Mandeville before him, Lemuel Gulliver encounters numerous fantastic races as he ventures away from his native shores and toward the edges of the map.² The race he meets first is the Lilliputians, who live on an island to the northwest of Tasmania and are slightly under six inches tall (Swift I.1). He is later blown off course to Brobdingnag, which is located off the coast of North America and home to a race of giants. Their monstrosity is made clear in his vivid description of a breastfeeding nurse:

No object ever disgusted me so much as the sight of her monstrous breast [...]. It stood prominent six feet, and could not be less than sixteen in circumference. The nipple was about half the bigness of my head, and the hue both of that and the dug, so varied with spots, pimples, and freckles that nothing could appear more nauseous. (Swift II.1)

Stranger still are the Yahoos, whose “shape was very singular and deformed [...]”. Their heads and breasts were covered with a thick hair, some frizzled, and others lank; they had beards like goats, and a long ridge of hair down their backs” (Swift IV.1). These fantastic races, which in true medieval fashion flourish far from the realms of Christianity, would fit into the narratives of John Mandeville or Marco Polo just as easily as they fit into Swift’s satire.

The key difference between Mandeville and Swift is that while *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* was a fictional work masquerading as an authentic travelogue, *Gulliver’s Travels* was always understood to be satire. But is it fantasy? According to J.R.R. Tolkien, the answer is “no.” In his essay “On Fairy-Stories,” Tolkien claims that works such as *Gulliver’s Travels* or *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen* cannot be considered fantasy because they belong “to the class of travellers’ tales. Such tales report many marvels, but they are marvels to be seen in this mortal world in some region of our own time and space; distance alone conceals them” (Tolkien 34). For Tolkien, one of the most essential characteristics of true fantasy literature is the creation of what he calls a “secondary world,” a world that has its own internal consistency and that stands in contrast to the primary world in which we live. It doesn’t matter to him that Lilliput and Brobdingnag are fictional countries inhabited by fictional creatures; the fact that Swift positioned them within the boundaries of our real world is enough for Tolkien to disqualify it as a work of fantasy.

² One interesting detail is that while the medieval travelogues viewed the lands of Asia as the mysterious Elsewhere, Swift’s strange races live near the Americas and in the South Pacific. The concept of the East could be easily adapted to whichever part of the globe was most unfamiliar to contemporary authors.

A *Song of Ice and Fire* is of course, one of the most famous examples of secondary world fantasy and is complete with its own history, political system, religions, and mythology. While most of Martin's story focuses on the events in Westeros, the storyline belonging to Daenerys Targaryen, a princess of Westeros's previous ruling dynasty, takes place "across the Narrow Sea" in Essos. Over the course of the first three books, the narrative follows her journey across this vast continent as she slowly grows into her role as a ruler. Even though Martin's Essos does not have the theological overtones of classic T-O map geography, the parallels with the medieval worldview are obvious. Westeros (Europe) is the normal, mundane world, but Essos (Asia) remains a stronghold of mystery and magic. Daenerys's travels in the East bear many similarities to those of Marco Polo's and are characterized by her encounters with a foreign culture and the resulting sense of curiosity, disorientation, and amazement.

Daenerys's journey begins with her marriage to Khal Drogo, a warlord of the nomadic Dothraki people. Her wedding thrusts her into the midst of a culture that she has no understanding of, and the experience leaves her notably off-balance:

She had never seen so many people in one place, nor people so strange and frightening. [...] Men and women alike wore painted leather vests over bare chests and horsehair leggings cinched by bronze medallion belts, and the warriors greased their long braids with fat from the rendering pits. (Martin, *Game of Thrones*, 83)

This introduction unfortunately relies on tropes regarding barbarian warlords—tropes that can be seen in medieval accounts as well—and makes no attempt to portray a fleshed-out society. Yet her initial trepidation eventually fades away as she embraces her new life as a Dothraki *khaleesi*, and the sights she encounters on their journey across the steppes of Essos astonish and intrigue her. Each morning she mounts her horse eager to see "what wonders waited for her in the lands ahead": trees whose trunks are as wide as city gates, Valyrian roads a thousand years old, lemurs with silver hair and purple eyes (193). When they eventually reach the sacred city of Vaes Dothrak, she finds it "ancient, arrogant, and empty," and thinks that the grass mansions, marble-fronted pyramids, and log halls left open to the sky are queer, but it does not strike her as a stronghold of savagery (326). Above all else, Daenerys is curious—she's had her first real taste of the wider world, and now she wants to see what else it holds.

Daenerys's time among the Dothraki contains similarities to the accounts of medieval travelers who spent time among the Tatars in Central Asia. The 13th century Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck, for example, often describes the Tatars in ways that make them seem much more rustic and less

sophisticated than the society he’s left behind. In his account, they are a people whose dwellings consist of hoops of interlaced branches covered first with felt, then with chalk or white clay (73) and who “never wash clothes, for they claim that this makes God angry and that if they were hung out to dry it would thunder: in fact, they thrash anyone doing laundry and confiscate it.” (90) He was also by no means immune to the prejudices of 13th-century European and referred to them as barbarians and idolators. But like Daenerys, William has enough adventurousness to be open to the good things about the place he has found himself in. When he first tastes *kumis*, or fermented mare’s milk, he has no idea what to expect: “I broke out in a sweat all over from alarm and surprise, since I had never drunk it before” (99). Upon drinking it, however, he is surprised to find it quite tasty, and declares that it “leaves on the tongue a taste of milk and almonds. It produces a very agreeable sensation inside and even intoxicates those with no strong head” (81-82). The same sense of surprised pleasure occurs when he encounters fresh horse sausages, which he claims are superior to ones made from pork (79). Small moments like these show his readers that he is not closed off to new experiences, despite his sometimes unflattering views of the Tatars.

While Dothraki society is meant to depict a relatively simple, nomadic lifestyle, Daenerys also encounters cities of a grander sort. The most prominent example of this is Qarth, “the greatest city that ever was or ever will be” (Martin, *Clash of Kings*, 317), which she travels to after wandering through the so-called Red Wastes following her husband’s death. This is no idle boast. Qarth is surrounded by three thick walls, each of which is covered with fanciful carvings; the inhabitants all dress in “linen and samite and tiger fur”; and the city proper is decorated with a “bronze arch fashioned in the likeness of two snakes mating, their scales delicate flakes of jade, obsidian, and lapis lazuli” and “elaborate fountains wrought in the shapes of griffins and dragons and manticores” (317-318).

Daenerys’s impression of Quarth is similar to Marco Polo’s impression of the Chinese city of Quinsai.³ This wonderful city holds “pre-eminence to all others in the world, in point of grandeur and beauty, as well as from its abundant delights, which might lead an inhabitant to imagine himself in paradise” (III.LXXVI). The picture he paints is one of luxury and indulgence: markets that sell all kinds of delicious fruit, including pears that weigh ten pounds; women who dress in silks and jewelry whose costliness “can scarcely be imagined”; pleasure barges painted with a variety of colors and scenes that offer views of the city’s “grandeur and beauty, its palaces, temples, convents, and gardens [...] whilst at the same time you enjoy the sight of other boats of

³ Hangzhou.

the same description" (III.LXXVII). The phrasing here—that Quinsai is like paradise, that its delights confound the imagination—deliberately emphasizes the sensation of being removed from everyday reality and transported into a world of unbelievable splendor.

Daenerys's time among the Dothraki is reminiscent of William of Rubruck's time among the Tatars, and her time among the great cities of Essos echoes Marco Polo's impressions of China, but her story also contains examples of the inherently supernatural places mentioned in *Mandeville's Travels*. The concept of Essos as a place of magic and marvels—as opposed to Westeros, where those have long since started to fade away—is established early in *A Game of Thrones*, when Daenerys thinks that:

Magic had died in the west when the Doom fell on Valyria and the Lands of the Long Summer [...] but Dany had always heard that the east was different. It was said that manticores prowled the islands of the Jade Sea, that basilisks infested the jungles of Yi Ti, that spellsingers, warlocks, and aeromancers practiced their arts openly in Asshai, while shadowbinders and bloodmages worked terrible sorceries in the black of night. (Martin, *Game of Thrones*, 197)

While the theological overtones of the medieval T-O maps are not present here, the parallels with the medieval worldview remain apparent. Westeros (Europe) is the normal, mundane world, but Essos (Asia) remains a stronghold of mystery and magic.

One of the most striking examples of magic in Essos is the House of the Undying in the city of Qarth. This structure serves as the headquarters of a conclave of warlocks who invite Daenerys to an audience. When she first arrives, the warlock Pyat Pree tells her that once she enters, she must always take the first door to her right, always go up, and never enter a room until she reaches the audience chamber. He then orders her to drink a glass of shade of the evening, the wine of warlocks that will open her mind to the truths that will be revealed to her (Martin, *Clash of Kings* 524-525). The supernatural nature of the House is almost immediately apparent. As she wanders the corridors, she sees visions that include four little men ravaging a beautiful woman, a man with a wolf's head sewn on his neck, and a man with silver hair playing a harp (527); and although she continues to climb upward and upward, she recalls that the House had seemed to have no towers (528). This is clearly a House of the Uncanny, where the line between reality and unreality becomes blurred.

Essos is also the site of the Valyrian Archipelago. This was once home to a mighty, magic-wielding Empire, but it was destroyed in a cataclysm long before the series begins. While rumors persist that the ruins of Valyria are home to powerful magical artifacts, such as a dragon horn that is six feet long and

covered with magical runes (Martin, *Dragons*, 834), the ruins have acquired a sinister reputation. According to legend, the red glow that is always present in the sky above them is not simply the flames of still-burning volcanoes, but the fires of a wrathful god that mortals should be wary of looking into, and anyone who lays eyes on the coast is doomed (446). Like the Vale of Enchantment found in Mandeville's account, Valyria showcases the dangerous side of places of power: they can offer great rewards, but at an equally great price.

The world of Daenerys Targaryen and the world of Marco Polo are, of course, divided by several centuries and the boundaries of imagination. Yet if we scratch the surface, they are perhaps not so different after all. As travel literature became a genre rooted in facts and first-hand observation, the unimaginably splendid cities, strange beasts, and perilous landscapes described in the medieval travelogues simply found a new home. They entered what Tolkien refers to as the "cauldron of story"—the great collective imagination where the strands of history, mythology, religion, and folklore come together in a seething mass and are then regurgitated in different forms—and reemerged wrapped in Western fantasy. Although not as many 21st century readers peruse copies of *Mandeville's Travels* or the *Marvels of the World* as *A Song of Ice and Fire*, those earlier works are part of the bedrock upon which the modern genre is built—and at their heart, both the travelogue and the fantasy novel want their readers to "find all the grand and marvelous things to be found" (Polo Book 1 preface), whether those are in the distant corners of our own world, or another world altogether.

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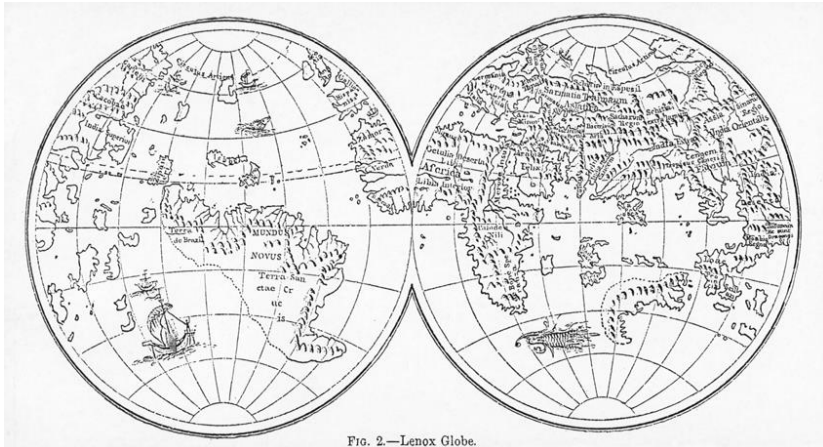


FIG. 2.—Lenox Globe.