STORYTELLING THROUGH SPICES: THE OTHER AND THE EAST IN LATE MEDIEVAL NARRATIVES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Previous analyses of late medieval writing produced in Western Europe and its relationship to the East have been largely occupied by studies concerning the monstrous. Said studies dealt with how the West depicted the people of the East as "Other" and grotesque due to religious and cultural prejudice. This thesis instead looks at the othering and exoticization of the East through the use of spices as narrative symbols. By examining English-language texts written in Europe between 1250 and 1500C.E., this thesis determines the effect of spices in a narrative context through two lenses: danger and wealth. In both instances, the economic and cultural environment of Europe—i.e., the demand for exotic spices and their view of the East as Other—contributed to stories of dangerous beasts and valuable spices. These stories exemplified the reciprocal relationship of collective cultural tradition and storytelling as they influenced both each other and the everyday lives of medieval Europeans.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Storytelling has been used historically in Western academia to examine the contexts of local or familial legends, but also to explore memory and national pride as various countries used stories to create their own glorious mythologies.[1] Folklorists analyzed narratives to understand how people in specific historical moments felt about the world around them, and how those people interpreted what they saw, heard, and lived through. This included elements of everyday life such as food and drink—seemingly minor details that had a real impact on the lives of the people who consumed them. In this thesis, I examine narratives written in late medieval Europe that used spices as symbols of status and danger, leading to connotations of the Other in the East.

Of particular interest are those stories that exoticized and sensationalized the East, and my goal is to examine what part spices played in this dynamic. Examples of travel writing during this period provide insights as to how those tropes developed within the genre, engaging in the Other and exoticizing the appearance, cultural practices, and food habits of far-off lands. However, this othering was not new to late medieval Europe, with examples going back as far as Greek historian Herodotus and Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder.[2]

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[1]The United States is rife with legends about its own founding as stories compounded from various historical truths, including those of George Washington's wooden teeth and his famous cherry tree, Abraham Lincoln's propensity for the truth, and even the idealized myth of the American Dream. For nationalism and constructed myth see Fee and Web's *An Encyclopedia of American Folklore* and Richard Hughes' "The Great American Myths and a Different American Future."

[2] Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, et al. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), xliii.

The Other was *strange*. The Other was *different*. Authors during the late medieval period wrote stories about themselves and their communities, but they also wrote stories about those on the outside. The travel writings I analyze in this thesis were concerned with what the people in those "other countries" (i.e., the East) did, what they ate, and just how *different* they were from the authors' Western homeland. This made everything Other appear new and fascinating. Storytelling during the late medieval period was all about how travelers returned from India and "the Orient" (the modern-day Near East including parts of Iran, Egypt, and Israel), and that is what I will be referring to as Other. Frequently, these stories dealt with magnificent cities containing unending wine and honey or spice trees guarded by fearsome beasts, thus proclaiming to their readers that these lands had bounty greater than anything in their homelands.[3]

More specifically, the purpose of my investigation is to examine late medieval texts for stories that referenced spices such as pepper, or foods grown in the East like date palms. I propose that the use of spices in these texts contributed to the exoticization of the East, in part because the physical distance between East and West produced a sense of awe and fostered a mythologization of the cultures that Europeans were unfamiliar with. Another factor was that these stories concerned themselves more with the way Europeans saw their neighbors than any true reflection of Eastern culture. An analysis of said stories informed by a folkloristic approach reveals more about the writers than about the places and foods they describe, such as the influence of ethnocentrism and religion. Also, I have discovered these texts have not been fully examined in relationship to foodways—the

[3]Freedman, Paul, "Locating the Exotic" in *Locating the Middle Ages: The Space and Places of Medieval Culture*, ed. Sarah Salih and Julian Weiss (London: King's College London, Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies 23, 2012), 26-27

most common analysis of late medieval narratives concerns depictions of monsters and beasts. For my thesis, I will be focusing specifically on the references to spices and Eastern foodstuffs.

When I conducted my analysis, I noticed that certain patterns were used to describe spices. They were most often depicted in the context of two primary categories: danger and wealth, both of which reflected the medieval Western ambition of capitalizing on Eastern resources. In many of the stories, the danger only emerged when those resources were about to be removed from their natural habitats, and from that it is possible to infer that the original stories could have emerged when people in the East warned travelers not to take what did not belong to them. Whether the danger physically existed or not, the placement of spices in the narrative tells us more about the priorities of the storytellers than the actuality of the situation. Spices served as an important source of revenue to the people from the East who sold them, but to have outsiders attempt to encroach on their markets presented a problem. Spices were a narrative symbol of wealth and status that was linked geographically to the East, and thus a dichotomy emerged: spices represented wealth, but they also represented danger.

Background to the Problem

Spices as narrative symbols in late medieval Europe represent an overlap between Folklore Studies and Medieval Studies. Foodways have been an important part of folklore—folklorist and food studies scholar Lucy Long notes that while food was certainly a topic in oral narratives, it did not emerge as an explicit area of study until food was specifically mentioned in the inaugural mission statement of the American Folklore

Society in 1888.[4] Storytelling and stories themselves had been a subject of research even further back with Charles Perrault's 1697 collection of *The Tales of Mother Goose* and over a century later with the 1812 collections of Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm.[5] Our relationship to food culture has been written about extensively (especially combining foodways and storytelling), but recently the focus has shifted more towards culture and exotic cooking.[6] On the other hand, my concept of the other is grounded in Medieval Studies, which focuses on the Other in terms of the monstrous and grotesque.[7] My primary texts contain stories about people who are three feet tall and live only seven years, or people with no heads whose eyes and mouth reside on their chests; these are the stories that medievalists have focused on as a way to explore the ethnocentrism of Europe.[8]

In food, though, there are similar methods of examination that can provide answers about what the Other and the "exotic" meant to medieval Europeans. Spices had the appearance of abundance and fertility that lent the very land itself connotations of plenty (and sometimes mystery), because it produced food that could not be grown in

[4]Long, Lucy M, "Introduction to Part One" in *The Food and Folklore Reader*, ed. Lucy M. Long (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic 2015), 11.

[5]Long, "Introduction to Part One" (2015), 9.

[6]There has been a significant rise in foodways studies in connection to the American immigrant experience in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the present. For example, see Susan Kalcik's "Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and Performance of Identity" and Jonathan Deutsch's "Exotic Foods and Strange Foods."

[7]For depictions of the Other and the monstrous in the Middle Ages see *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations* (2002) edited by Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger.

[8]Freedman, Paul, "The Medieval Other: The Middle Ages as Other," *Marvels, Monsters, and Miracles: Studies in the Medieval and Early Modern Imaginations*, ed. Timothy S. Jones and David A. Sprunger (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 4.

European soil. One of the unique ways that Europeans viewed Eastern people differently than Eastern food is that there was disgust on one hand and desire on the other. The people in the East were demonized while their spices were coveted. Europeans wanted these spices—and exotic foods—for their tables and looked at the lands from which they came with a sort of wary fascination.[9] Spice growing was not an industry that could be replicated in Europe due to the climate, but practices such as learning how to weave silk or throw pottery could be taught anywhere.

By studying the stories of food in late medieval "wonder books" (those books which contained tales to stir the imagination couched within a larger context of exploration and discovery) and travel writings, folkloric analysis can pick up on what is largely ignored in Medieval Studies. In the course of historical research, it is common for some documents to be set aside if they cannot be verified—though this has become less common over recent years—but folklore studies uses those previously discarded stories to explore the context of the works themselves and what it meant about the people and the culture that produced them.

Research Methods

I am examining primary sources such as Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies,* Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia*, Odoric of Pordenone's *The Travels of Friar Odoric,* Jordanus of Séverac's *Mirabilia Descripta, The Book of John Mandeville*, and Caxton's *Mirrour of the World* to analyze the contexts in which they mention the foods of the East.

[9]Freedman, Paul, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" *Speculum* 80, no. 4 (2005), 1210-11.

These narratives geographically span from the modern-day countries of Turkey (then western Persia), Ethiopia, and east to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon). References to spices such as cinnamon, pepper, nutmeg, and cubeb (a dried berry in the same family as black pepper) are of particular interest as products that grew specifically in the East and served as status symbols to the rest of the world. I am also looking at passages that contain any mention of foods produced in the East such as fruits, dates, and sugar palms that European audiences only encountered as exotic imports.

Though these sources did exist in written form, due to the extremely low level of literacy it was unlikely any of the general population was aware of the books apart from word of mouth. This analysis not only covers the passages of interest, but also the contexts surrounding them: are the descriptions of fantastic spices set within larger, objective narratives? Are they surrounded by marvel narratives? Another factor is the original context of the publication, which is important because at one point in the past all these books were instrumental in bringing knowledge about the East to Europeans.

In my initial research, several themes presented themselves as worthy of closer examination. One was the correlation of spices with wealth. I am looking at passages which mention cassia trees and gold, or incense and precious gems, in an attempt to link them to the European perception of the East as an area ripe for exploitation in the late medieval period. This is in line with similar historical research concerning the transition from philosophical musings about “marvels” in that geographic area to the later serious accounts that emerged towards the end of the Middle Ages that saw the East as a place to profit from, feeding into the age of exploration that characterized the following centuries.

Another theme to be analyzed is that of spices and perceived danger, and how (in some cases) it was possible to get around that danger. This research focuses on the passages where food is correlated with any threat to human beings, be it by snakes, ants, or mythical creatures. The analysis plays into the European fear of the East as an unfamiliar place that the most people only heard about via traders and secondhand stories. Sometimes this fear was linked to religious prejudice and the belief that the regions at the edge of the map (such as the barren deserts on the Arabian Peninsula or the sub-Saharan African interior, which would not be thoroughly explored until the fifteenth century) were abandoned by God, and other times these claims were made simply to explain sights that seemed miraculous.

The relationship of spices to wealth and danger will be explored in the context of the seven primary sources mentioned above. In this case, the history and context of the writing will be just as important as their contents. Beyond word choice is of course the historical background of spices in Europe and the travel writing that was produced around the same time.

Research Limitations

In conducting my research for this thesis, I limited my primary sources to those which had been translated into English and were available through either my university library or online archives. I limited my time of interest to the late medieval period (in this case encompassing 1250CE to 1500). However, I did make one exception for Isidore of Seville, who published his *Etymologies* in the early seventh century. This was because it

remained a reliable source of information all the way into the Renaissance, in addition to influencing several of the other authors listed here.[10]

Overview of Chapters

My first chapter, as written here, introduced the topic of the thesis to my readers. The second chapter will provide a historical overview of just how the spice trade swept across the Near East and into Europe: What paths did it follow? Why exactly were spices so desired? For us today it would seem that medieval Europeans were simply looking to contend with dull, unappetizing food, but their reasons were varied, and food of that time was not actually as unappealing as we would imagine. Apothecaries desired spices because of their supposedly balancing effects on the humors of the body, something medieval peoples thought would keep them healthy. But more than that, it was one of the methods they used to protect themselves from the "bad air" that characterized miasma theory. The idea was one of several potential causes of contagion, and they thought that keeping sweet-smelling herbs and spices near always would be enough to ward of the foul stenches that spread the Black Death during the early fourteenth century. The most common reason people sought out spices, however, was the prestige that they brought to the upper class, as they were the only ones able to afford such luxuries.

The third chapter will discuss late medieval travel writings and their contexts. During this time and before, those who traveled into the East tended to write about their experiences, but it is important to know just who was writing these accounts. In many

[10] Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* trans. Stephen A. Barney, et al. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 3.

cases it began with military campaigns into new territory, such as early Greco-Persian conflicts and later the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, but it later evolved into religious excursions by friars and monks. Their reasons for writing changed as well, with theological interests replaced by outright monetary speculation. Writers were no longer consumed with wonder for the marvels of the East, and instead they sought use them to fill the coffers of Europe. Authors that fell into this category were those commissioned to write about Eastern marvels, such as Gervase of Tilbury. However, there were also authors who simply transcribed their firsthand experiences in the East, like Jordanus of Séverac.

These writers brought back images of abroad (most often through the lens of Christianity) and thus the marvels of the East were often conflated with European preconceptions about the monstrous people who lived there. Alternatively, because this area also included the Holy Land there were often detailed descriptions of areas where figures from the bible lived and worked. As the Middle Ages progressed, the increasing accuracy of geography during the age of exploration made it easier for European travelers to go farther than they had before. Previously, “the East” had been a vague region on the edge of the map, shrouded in mystery, but it became an attainable reality once cartographers were able to physically connect it to Europe.

Chapter IV is concerned with the context of the primary texts, including overviews of how the texts came about and their general compositions. This includes when they were written, whether the authors were commissioned to write their texts (if so, then by whom), and if the texts were popular in their times. Another topic is how the writers themselves viewed their marvels, including some who wrote about this process

within the texts themselves, like Gervase of Tilbury, who rails against marvels as being unbefitting reading for an emperor, who should only concern himself with matters of state. This of course conflicts with the actual writings of the book, which contains numerous marvels and wonder tales. The last subject of this chapter is folklore and anthropological theory and why it applies to stories of the Other and the East.

The textual analysis itself is contained in Chapter V. It contains passages from all seven primary sources in order to examine word choice and context. My primary sources each come with their own assumptions and worldviews which influence how their authors wrote about the perceived wonders of the East, but among these there are some themes that I will be exploring: spices and wealth, and spices and danger. One of the more important parts of the textual analysis is tracing individual stories through time over multiple texts, such as pepper groves guarded by snakes or a lake full of precious gems.

My final chapter will tie together what my discoveries mean for the fields of folklore and Medieval Studies. There are important distinctions between the historical research that has previously been conducted in similar areas and Medieval Studies that need to be explored, including the tendency of academics to focus solely on the monstrous in their analyses of the Other and the East. But more than that, I intend to address the nature of my primary sources. For historians looking for kernels of objective truth, the fact that these stories were largely unprovable meant they were often brushed aside at first, but the point of their contemporary reception is that people *believed* they were true. The writers themselves often took from established oral traditions and local legends,[11] and they presented their books as a view into the very real East. It is for that

[11]Freedman, "Locating the Exotic" (2012), 26.

reason that the food narratives of serpent-guarded pepper and fruits full of ashes survived because they were linked more closely to what Europeans thought to be important and not what was objectively true.

CHAPTER II

Spices and Europe

Before I examine the texts themselves or the specific stories of spices in late medieval works, it is important to address the state of the spice trade at that point in history. Why were spices important? What role did they play in everyday life? Who had access to them? How were they viewed by the public? The answers to all these questions influenced the ways in which they were used by medieval writers.

During the late medieval period—roughly 1250 to 1500—famines and plague struck Europe, but at the same time the spice trade was nearing its peak. To Europeans, the spice trade was a link to the mysterious "Orient," which encompassed what today is the Near East, including the countries around the edge of the Mediterranean from Turkey to Egypt and then pushing east into the Arabian Peninsula (a similar term used at this time was "the Levant," which referred to only the region that is modern-day Israel and Palestine). India, though not formally included in the Levant, was often written about in the same contexts, and comes up frequently in the texts that will be discussed in Chapter V.

The spice trade was one of the most common areas where Europeans interacted with the East without travelling themselves, and a culture of storytelling emerged around the countries that most people only ever got to experience through traders, merchants, and the spices they carried with them. These stories did not always emerge intentionally, but Europeans came up with their own reasons to explain why these plants and nuts and seeds were so valuable. Perhaps they were guarded by serpents? Medieval Britain, for example, was the land of mermaids, manticore, and wyvern; it would not be an enormous

leap of logic for the people who believed such monsters roamed their hillsides to imagine even worse creatures beyond their own borders.

As a result, the Middle Ages saw an outpouring of stories centered around the East, and a culture of sensationalism sprung up around the cinnamon and pepper that traveled along the trade routes from Constantinople or Alexandria. There were quite a few reasons for the fascination with spices, and they encompassed everything from medicinal value to symbols of status and wealth. On one hand, these stories benefited the traders and merchants that sold spices in Europe by marketing the miraculous properties of cinnamon and ginger. This appeal likely made more sales than any well-organized display. The fact that these spices were *different* and *exotic* captivated the average wealthy buyer as well as those who could not purchase the spices for themselves, and crafting stories to sell these illusions was profitable. Historian Paul Freedman explains that in the first century of the Roman Empire, Pliny the Elder described (and dismissed) tales of snakes guarding black pepper bushes in India, while at the same time claiming that such stories were the work of natives attempting to drive up the prices of their goods.[12]

Europeans were *fascinated* by spices. Though monetary gain certainly motivated the spread of food narratives during the medieval period by selling the idea that spices could increase social status, there were other reasons for interest on the part of the Europeans. Monarchs in dozens of countries sent out expeditions in hopes of finding more spices, looking to increase their wealth and prestige through conquering the

[12]Freedman, Paul, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" (2005), 1210.

unknown and amassing new resources, such as when King Manuel of Portugal sent Vasco de Gama explicitly "in search of spices" in 1497.[13] Belief in restorative cures and miracle medicines also ensured that there was always a demand for exotic goods. In a different article, Freedman explores the appeal of spices as holistic cure-alls to the wealthy of Europe:

> In the Middle Ages aromatic plants were not just culinary ingredients or medical remedies: fragrance had a mental and spiritual value. With their far-away origins, spices represented the exotic, and their high price reinforced their sophisticated image. The pursuit of health divorced from the treatment of disease – the core concept of wellness – is particularly significant for understanding the vogue for spices and the cultural setting of medieval medicine.[14]

Europeans believed that these spices were valuable *because* they were exotic, and the wealthy were willing to pay exorbitantly for their "miracle cures." Most people, however, interacted with spices on a more pedestrian scale, despite similar demand, with black pepper being the most common (and often the *only*) spice on their tables.

The Spice Trade in the Late Medieval Period

The spice trade between the Near East and Europe has existed for centuries, and by the late Middle Ages the increasing influx of westerners into the Holy Land during the Crusades meant that they gained a lucrative foothold closer to the source of these spices. At their height, the Middle Ages were filled with exploration by Christian Europeans as they made their way into the Near East, both to spread their religious beliefs and to

[13]Freedman, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" (2005), 1213.

[14]Freedman, Paul, "Health, Wellness and the Allure of Spices in the Middle Ages" *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 167 (2015), 47.

search for spices and luxury foods that could make them (so they thought) healthy, wealthy, and wise.

Spices were a large part of Europe's desire for new land and trade routes through areas such as the Persian Empire, Egypt, the Levant, and India. India was the primary source of spices during this time (in both economic statistics and in fictionalized accounts), but caravans of cassia, mace, and nutmeg were then gathered in various trade cities for distribution into Europe.

> From the tenth to fourteenth century, the spice trade grew exponentially with the acceleration of Europe's economic tempo. Usually the spices were obtained by Mediterranean traders (Venetian, Genoese, Catalan, Provençal) in eastern Mediterranean ports: from Outremer before the fall of Acre in 1291, and thereafter from Cyprus, Constantinople, but most frequently from Egypt and Syria.[15]

On the continent, spices became so popular that guilds of "spicers" and "pepperers" cropped up in cities and towns, and their job was to manage the sale of spices imported from abroad.[16] As spices traveled through Egypt in the tenth century, Europe struck deals with the Fatamid Empire in order to procure their goods, content in the knowledge that any misfortune which struck the spice traders would fall on the Egyptians as middlemen.[17]

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[15]Freedman, Paul, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" (2005), 1216

[16]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2004), 103. See Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community* (1995), 52, 71,122.

[17]Ibid., 104. See Eliyahu Ashtor, *The Social and Economic History of the Near East in the Middle Ages* (London: Variorum, 1978).

The cookbooks of this time were full of recipes for spiced porridge and sauces;[18] however, they were primarily written for the wealthy elite because it was their pantries that could afford such luxuries. The price of these spices often fluctuated due to excessive demand, infatuation with the exotic, rarity, and seizure of goods en route to trade cities. In the article "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value," Paul Freedman addressed this and similar concerns about the reality of the risks associated with bringing spices into Europe from the East during the age of exploration: “Between 1500 and 1634, 28 percent of all ships that set out from Portugal bound for India were lost at sea. The anticipated profit opportunities, therefore, had to be surpassingly high, enough to offset the terrible risks.”[19] The cost was high, both for the spices and for those who traded them, but the European elite proved time and again that they were willing to pay it.

The Desire for Spices in the West

Europeans sought these exotic goods for many reasons in the late medieval period. We would assume now that spices were primarily used to flavor food, but in reality there were many reasons for their popularity, even though they were only found in a limited number of homes. It is true that spices like cinnamon, cloves, and cubeb were transported in enormously high quantities on ships and traders’ caravans until they

[18]Flandrin, Jean-Louis, “Seasoning, Cooking, and Dietetics in the Late Middle Ages” in *Food: A Culinary History from the Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 323.

[19]Freedman, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" (2005), 1213.

reached European cities, but it was through the business of the wealthy that most of these spices found a home.

Spices were not accessible to the majority of Europe given their price (a pound of mace in 1284 was 4 shillings 7 pence, or the equivalent of three sheep[20]) and thus wealthy lords and nobles took their share to display their wealth and prove to other fashionable nobles that they had the money and prestige to purchase imported goods. The most common spice across all rungs of society was black pepper, and from 1394 to 1405 it made up 75 percent of spice shipping coming into Venice.[21] It was all the rage with *everyone* at one point, but after it became popular with the peasants, its attraction waned in the eyes of the upper class. After all, if commoners were able to afford it, then it had certainly lost its appeal as something that was used to denote status. In fact, black pepper had become so popular (and so appreciated) by the average Englishman that Parliament attempted to institute a price cap on the spice in 1411 to ensure that commoners would be able to keep buying it.[22]

The second theory discussed by historians was that the spices were in high demand because they obscured the taste of subpar or rotting meat.[23] Subpar perhaps, but due to the nature of the meat industry at the time, fresh cuts of meat were delivered to markets in far less time than we think of today. In an attempt to completely cut out any

[20]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2004), 136. See Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community* (1995).

[21]Ibid., 139. See William McNeill, *Venice: The Hinge of Europe* (1974).

[22]Ibid., 138. See Bruno Laurioux, "Et le poivre conquit la France" in *Histoire* 67 (1984), 79-80.

[23]Flandrin, "Seasoning, Cooking, and Dietetics in the Late Middle Ages" (2000), 313.

enterprising butchers who sought to make money from expired meat, there was even a 1356 jurisdiction in Oxford that sought to rid markets of any "putrid or unclean" meat or fish.[24] Also important was that the lack of refrigeration meant meat needed to be eaten quickly anyway. The idea that spices concealed rotting meat did not line up with the economic reality of late medieval Europe, and that is one of many points that writer Jack Turner addressed in his book *Spice: The History of a Temptation:*

> Indeed, since most products were grown locally, it is likely that much medieval food was in fact fresher than food today. (In this connection it is worth recalling that spices went out of vogue long before refrigeration was invented.) Moreover, the argument is at odds with the economic reality. The issue of decomposing ingredients was of least concern to those in a position to afford spices, particularly noble or royal households.[25]

The bulk of imported spices went to the upper classes of society, and because they had access to fresher cuts of meat, the spices they consumed had little to do with concealing its flavor.

It was the wealthy nobles who bought the spices that filled the hulls of trade ships to prove that they were sophisticated and rich enough to afford such luxuries. They spent money on making their meals delicious while famine swept through the rest of the continent. According to contemporary sources, the Duke of Buckingham, Humphrey Stafford (along with his guests and family) ate 316 pounds of pepper and 194 pounds of ginger in a twelve-month span during the mid-fifteenth century.[26] However, it wasn't just the amount of spices that lent them status, but also the variety. Most commoners

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[24]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2009), 109. See P. W. Hammond, *Food and Feast in Medieval England* (Stroud, England: Sutton Publishing, 1993).

[25]Ibid., 108-09.

[26]Ibid., 106. See Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c.1200-1520* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 63.

could only afford black pepper if they could buy anything at all, but the nobles purchased cinnamon, mace, cloves, and a host of other spices in large quantities.

Another reason for the consumption of spices was that they supposedly possessed medicinal properties. The dietetics of the Middle Ages were based on the theory of the four humors and how, in order to maintain one's humoral balance, they needed to stay in the middle of the two scales: cold to warm and dry to wet. Food was used as the scapegoat for many illnesses which were said to make the body cold and wet, and so it was reasoned that food needed to be processed in just the right way to avoid this. According to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, a thirteenth-century scholar, "pepper is hot and dry in the fourth degrée, as it is said in Plat. And hath vertue to temper and dissolue, to consume and to wast, and to drawe." Many recipes claiming to "balance the humors" included sauces packed with warming spices, like black pepper. Sauces were common because they were a way to stretch a small amount of spice over a longer time. But the use of spices in warding off illness extended beyond what they could do in the stomach.

At this point, one of the popular perceptions of contagion was known as miasma theory, and it claimed that bad smells in the air contributed to the spread of illness. As a result, it was a common recommendation by doctors to have sweet-smelling spices and herbs on hand to keep close to the nose when nearing foul stenches. Miasma theory became incredibly important when the bubonic plague swept through Europe in the mid-1300s. A report from the medical faculty at the University of Paris at the time was to "carry sweet-smelling ingredients" such as myrrh, aloe wood, mace, and sandalwood in pomanders.[27]

[27]Freedman, "Health, Wellness and the Allure of Spices in the Middle Ages" (2015), 48.

However, there was such a difference between the recommended herbs and spices for the wealthy versus the poor that the connection to actual medical properties was tenuous at best. As previously stated by Freedman: "The pursuit of health divorced from the treatment of disease—the core concept of wellness—is particularly significant for understanding the vogue for spices and the cultural setting of medieval medicine."[28] In 1348, the year the Black Death had the tightest grip on Europe, it was recommended that the rich use a mixture of aloewood, ambergris, myrrh, frankincense, camphor, and several other substances to protect them from the plague air, while the poor were forced to make do by burning whatever sweet-smelling woods they had, such as juniper.[29] On the other hand, sometimes it was the poor who were recommended to use a host of lesser spices such as storax, mace, and sandalwood, and the rich were to use single, purer scents such as ambergris that was "undiluted by lesser (and less expensive) scents."[30]

The most basic reason of all, beyond flavoring or health, was that of status. Since it was generally the wealthy who could afford such luxuries, they became symbols of prestige to those who owned them. Enormous amounts of spices flowed through the doors of some of the wealthiest in Europe. At one point in the early fourteenth century, Jeanne d'Evreux, (widow of France's King Charles IV) stocked her kitchen with "6 pounds of pepper, $13^1/_2$ pounds of cinnamon, 5 pounds of grains of paradise, $3^1/_2$ pounds of cloves, $1^1/_4$ pounds of saffron, a half-pound of long pepper, a small quantity of mace,

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[28]Freedman, "Health, Wellness and the Allure of Spices in the Middle Ages" (2015), 47.

[29]Ibid., 49.

[30]Ibid., 48-49.

and a colossal $23^1/_2$ pounds of ginger,"[31] when the vast majority of the population could barely afford black pepper.

Part of that desire was that the wealthy simply wanted to prove they were sophisticated because *they* could afford imported spices that were a rarity in their native country. Most of the spices imported from the East could only be grown in the conditions found there—the warm climate could grow cinnamon and cardamom in abundance—and that meant that they were exotic imports by necessity. The people of the West were used to savory, leafy fare like thyme, marjoram, and sage, and once they were exposed to the distinctively fiery taste of the East it became a valued novelty.

Some spices were only taken from select parts of the East, such as frankincense from the Arabian Peninsula, but other times the spices were abundant but difficult to harvest, such as black pepper.[32] And then of course there were the rumors that the spice trees were guarded by fanged serpents and other such dangers, which made the risk appear to be even greater for those attempting to harvest them. In any case, European elite sought out spices and paid top ducat to keep themselves fashionable and well-fed.

Spices, therefore, represented wealth and wellness to the people of Europe. They were thought to prevent the spread of disease, balance the humors, and signify to the rest of the world that the wealth could not only buy goods but also prestige. But spices only held one half of Europe's interest—the other was given over to the East itself. The lands

[31]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2004), 106. See A. Franklin, *La vie privée d'autrefois,* vol. 3 (Paris: Plon, 1889), 44-46.

[32]Freedman, "Spices and Late-Medieval European Ideas of Scarcity and Value" (2005), 1212.

that these products came from were just as important to understanding the exoticization in European writing as the spices themselves.

CHAPTER III

Finding the Edges: Travel Writing and the Imagined East

Long before the late medieval period there was an abundance of travel writing that centered around the East as a place of mystery and wonder. Mary Campbell explores this very concept in her book *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600*. Works produced during military campaigns were based on what soldiers experienced firsthand, but there were also speculations by philosophers and scientists about this place that seemed to be endless. "[T]he history of travel, exploration, and discovery is mainly an achievement of men of action, and unlearned people—not of scholars… who thought they could distinguish fact from fiction and preferred the former."[33] Even those who did claim to be men of fact and logic found themselves recalling more and more fantastical sightings the closer they got to the edge of their known world. The East disappeared into the distance of what they could comprehend, and they so believed it was there that horned serpents and griffins lived beside mountains of gold and precious gems. Campbell put her finger on what appealed to the readers of such tales even if the popular theory disproved the existence of such things: "No one has ever needed a griffin, only the idea of a griffin, or the idea of a world in which griffins are possible."[34]

But even in the early literature, religion bled into the idea of the East as something that fit into the schema of a world inhabited by humans and creatures, and it sparked

[33]Campbell, Mary B, *The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400-1600* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 50.

[34]Ibid., 86.

years of debate over where exactly they fit in. The people of the East had their own faiths, and that meant that western Christians were compelled to create a hierarchy that placed them on top. As writers got closer and closer to what they saw as the edges of the world, they described monstrosities and barren wastes that meant (to them) that in the outer reaches of the terrestrial imagination God held less control than he did in Europe. It was God's will that the lands at the edge of the world were inhospitable and wild. Later Christians then added to this by perpetuating earlier stories that placed Paradise—the garden of delights expressly forbidden to humankind—in the East.[35]

European writers then gave the East a hierarchy of its own: Jerusalem, being the seat of biblical power and important in the spice trade, became the center. However, it remained "exotic" because the average European could only construct their opinions of it based on secondhand accounts. Moving outward from the Holy Land were countries such as India and Egypt, both exotic but still important sources of commerce. On the very edges of the map were Ethiopia and Java, both of which were as far from the European peasant as was culturally and geographically possible. This meant that they were the most exotic and the least known.

Europe at this time was not entirely composed of Christians, and in fact there were various pockets of Islam and Judaism outside of the Ottoman Empire, but those that *were* Christians believed that the peoples of these far-off lands should be converted to Christianity (and if they could not be converted then they would be subjugated) as justification to leave their churches and monasteries and spread their message. As a

[35]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 86.

result, many of the travel writers of the late medieval period were monks and friars. There was a great difference between the secular writers of the early Greeks and Romans, who conveyed the marvels abundant in the East, and the later pilgrimage tales which focused more on sites in the Near East that were mentioned in the bible.[36] These were filled with descriptions of places important to Abraham and Joseph and Jesus, and so the routes they followed through the East took on religious significance.

There were even occasions where religion dictated that the more unexplainable marvels they encountered were the result of almighty interference. One of the clearest examples of this was the belief that the city of Sodom and its surrounding area were inhospitable due to God's wrath at the people who lived there. According to several authors, including Gervase of Tilbury, Isidore of Seville, and the writer of *The Book of John Mandeville*, there were trees growing there which bore beautiful and ripe fruits, but anyone who picked one and cut it open would find it full of ash and smoke as a sign of God's displeasure.[37] This was one of the few times in these stories where God was said to directly influence the food of the East beyond a simple reference to the abundance of certain regions (including precious minerals, crops, and on one occasion, dirt) as "blessed."

The people who lived in these regions were also brought under scrutiny in late medieval travel writings. Even as the goods from the East were desired by Europeans, the

[36]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 70.

[37]See Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 571, Isidore of Seville. *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*. (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press 2006), 287, and *The Book of John Mandeville, with Related Texts*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), 61.

people who lived there were considered "Other" and "exotic" in an entirely different way. They were not desired, and because they did not follow the same hierarchical structure or observe to the same religions as Europeans, they were often looked at with suspicion and fear by even the most open-minded friars. This led to subjugation, persecution, and outright violence toward the people of the East, but the texts analyzed here in Chapter V do not detail the more horrendous acts of Othering that would occur to those people the Church did not accept.

Over time, the European interest in expanding trade abroad—and the contents of their stories—changed from the theological musings of priests upon the nature of Paradise and foreign people to the monetary interests of European powers. But even though the spice trade had been thriving in Europe for the better part of a millennium, it was looked down upon by the church. In Turner's overview of the medieval spice trade in *Spice: The History of a Temptation*, he claims:

> Not until the twelfth century did the Church accept trade as a respectable occupation, and even then the misgivings endured. No trade provoked more distrust than the long-distance trade in luxuries, as much on account of the goods themselves as what getting them entailed.[38]

Not only was it conducted for the sole purpose of wealth, but it also carried high risks when crossing the Mediterranean Sea or any of the deserts. The Church's main objection, however, was that the people who had been profiting from it were those that the church were hostile towards, such as Muslims. But even with the Church's reservations, the spice trade quite literally transformed the cities in which said trade took place; in Genoa

[38]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2004), 104.

the money brought in from their trade in Eastern goods helped to fund the building of the cathedral of San Lorenzo.[39]

Much like the Church and its opinions on trade in late medieval Europe, the dichotomy of the Other meant that the foreign people were feared and reviled, but their lands and resources held the appeal for colonizers. In fact, the imagined plenty that Westerners believed they would find pressed Europeans to secure a supply of these goods. They wanted what was so abundant everywhere but their own shores, not just because it was exotic but because it would bring them wealth and prestige. As a result, the exploration of the East took on profitable significance.

Before this late medieval involvement in trade, the East was a figure of speculation and rumor. Earlier written accounts of the East as "elsewhere" cropped up in Greece, ostensibly because they came into direct political conflict with the powers there and thus had reason to take notice.[40] In the fifth century BCE, Herodotus wrote his accounts of the world and referenced frankincense trees that were guarded by winged serpents in Arabia.[41] The East was established as a place of wonders very early on, even before Europe began to press inland from the Levant toward India.

These earlier accounts were not as focused on religious themes and moral allegories as those which would come later, even though the occurrence of highly sensationalized accounts continued for centuries. Mary Campbell wrote, "[s]ecular travel

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[39]Turner, *Spice: The History of a Temptation* (2004), 134. See *Poesie* ed. Luciana Cocito, (Roma: Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1970), 563-565.

[40]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 48.

[41]Ibid., 50-51.

writing was obsessed with marvels but treated them with either kid gloves or the sword. They are to be eliminated, tamed, or merely observed from a distance…"[42] The spice trade disrupted this pattern as the age of exploration wore on and interest in the East turned exploitative.

Religion and the Other

The later European image of the Other was filled with layers of nuance that did not choose just a single geographic region or group of people to ostracize. Their concept of "us" generally stemmed from the overwhelming influence of Christianity across the continent. It was not the only religion, and there were places where it coexisted besides other faiths, such as the Muslim population on the Iberian Peninsula, but the way that it permeated most aspects of late medieval life meant that much of the popular literature was viewed through a Christian lens. An example of this would be the advent of the first Crusade in 1095 and the increased exposure to the East it brought to Europe. Much of this travel writing was written by monks and friars exploring the East, and whether their mission was one of simple exploration, pilgrimage, or of straightforward conversion, religion colored much of the interactions between these travelers and the places they witnessed.

There were also instances of othering within Europe itself by way of those people that were not considered "acceptable" and who lived on the fringes of society, such as Jewish people living in Christian cities.[43] Most Westerners drew a line between

[42]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 69.

[43]Freedman, "The Medieval Other: The Middle Ages as Other," (2002), 4.

themselves and those they deemed unfit, and this had little to do with those who lived outside of Europe—it was their internal prejudices alone. The Other and the exotic then evolved to be separate in concept as well as connotation. The Other was alienated and carried an implicit societal bias, but the exotic was desired, and it was desired *because* it was different. In the article "Locating the Exotic," Paul Freedman claims "[t]he forbidding, the attractive and even the exemplary are not contradictory but rather complimentary aspects of the exotic."[44]

There were two ways that travelers to the Near East viewed the people who lived there: for those who seemed even a little bit "civilized" to the Europeans, they presented a moral quandary about the nature of humans and why God would create societies that acted "Western" but kept their own faiths. For other people in Northern Africa and farther east, the ones that Europeans called uncivilized and unworthy, there was a possibility that they could be converted to Christianity to mend whatever wicked ways that God was believed to have cursed them with.[45] And if they could not be converted, their lands contained a wealth of natural resources that were available for the taking. The only obstacle to Europeans, then, were the beasts that supposedly guarded those treasures, or the rumors of aggression and cannibalism that plagued some accounts.

Sometimes the treasures only seemed attractive because of where they were located. The Near East was appealing because of the perceived amounts of natural resources that existed there, ripe for exploitation by the Europeans. In Freedman's words,

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[44]Freedman, "Locating the Exotic." (2012), 24.

[45]Freedman, "The Medieval Other: The Middle Ages as Other" (2002), 2-3

"[t]he medieval exotic is, at least in part, alluring. It combines the beautiful or seductive with the frightening and disorientating. The exotic is related to the marvelous, but has a more material, even commercial (if fabulous) significance."[46] After the initial travels of the religious men who took a philosophical approach to the exploration of new lands, the European elite turned their minds to profit. One of the tools they used in their justification was not just that the people in these lands did not know what they had, but that those precious resources—things like gold and pearls and jewels—were commonplace there, and thus devalued.

Historian Paul Freedman speculates that "[v]aluable products of the East were situated in the Eastern context according to a relative notion of scarcity. There was a parallel reasoning about difference that juxtaposed foreign versus European plenitude…"[47] The explorers inferred that, if the people in India or North Africa or Persia really had so many of these resources, then they either did not need them or simply didn't know their worth. One of the explanations for this abundance of wealth was physical proximity to the biblical land of Paradise.

The fountains within Paradise fed four rivers in the terrestrial world—one of which being the Nile—and because of this the river was said to be teeming with treasures washed ashore from Eden and it "overflow[ed] with… articles of trade to such an extent that it fill[ed] the world with indispensable merchandise."[48] These treasures included aloe-wood, precious gems, metals, and ambergris, and men stood patiently by the river to

[46]Freedman, "Locating the Exotic" (2012), 23.

[47]Ibid., 29.

[48]Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (2006), 287.

collect them with nets. The wealth that potentially waited for travelers was also compounded with the expectation of exploration. The East was on the edges of most medieval maps, and the appeal lay in filling in those edges by finding the riches they contained.

The Geographic Ambiguity of the East

Historically, the East did not always correlate to the cardinal direction. "The East is a concept separable from any purely geographic area,"[49] claimed Mary Campbell, but broadly speaking, what medieval peoples described as "The East" is where we today would term the "Middle East." Much of their writing interpreted the region more generally and placed it toward the edges of the map. Frequently, India and Africa would be lumped together in discussions of "the East" as scholars debated the relative merits of those places rumored to be laden with riches or mythical creatures or strange human beings. To the people in Europe, the countries that provided them with such wonders as incense and cinnamon were places of mystery, and so when it came time to explore them, the wonder often overtook the geographic reality, those written by traveling friars and monks especially.

Religion was absolutely present in these writers' descriptions of the edges of the world and the people found there due to the connection between theology and geography. One of Campbell's ideas was that the monks and friars who came to the East used the Other of the East as moral allegory. They used tales of people only three feet tall (or

[49]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 48.

people with no heads whose mouths and eyes were on their chests) as examples of moral failings and words of warning. According to Gervase of Tilbury, when the lands of the Earth were divided between Noah's sons, Ham "because he was accursed, got Africa, which is the most barren part."[50] Gervase then specified that this covered everything between North Africa and Lebanon.

From such descriptions, it was not surprising that Campbell connected them to the theological words of warning when it came to anything Other. "This was the fate of the marvels in most medieval writings… which more and more exclusively belonged to the Matter of the East, [they were] destined to be read and known as a kind of perverse Scripture, an upside-down map of the moral universe."[51] To Campbell, those marvels from abroad read as a warning to the general population of Europe. That is what happened to people deprived of God's temperance. To them, the East was a treacherous place of monstrous men and horned serpents and poisonous trees.

The moral failings of the people who lived there meant that the resources were ostensibly "better off" with the Europeans who were more "civilized." In *Mirabilia Descripta,* Jordan of Séverac makes a note of all the natural resources of the East and how abundant they appear to be. Yet, no matter how much material they had, the people who lived there were not meant to utilize it. "Persia hath abundance of silk, and also of ultramarine, but they wot not how to prepare it. They have likewise exceeding much gold

[50]Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia Imperialia: Recreation for an Emperor* trans. Banks, S. E., and J. W. Binns (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 179.

[51]Campbell, *The Witness and the Other World* (1988), 53.

in the rivers, but they wot not how to extract it, nor be they worthy to do so."[52] This was one of the reasons so frequently cited by the Europeans as to why *they* had the right to push themselves into the East and take the resources there: the people already living in the area were not worthy to possess them.

And therein lay the dichotomy of religious-based travel writing of the era: the East was both somewhere that contained massive amounts of material wealth available to take, *and* somewhere that was believed to hold actual biblical treasures. But by thinking the East was at the same time godless *and* mysterious, they could not be blamed for attempting to find those treasures and discovering that they were just out of reach. Paradise was forbidden to man, after all, and so even if they could point a finger at a location on the map, there was no guarantee of actually finding such a place. They knew Paradise was *somewhere*, and by situating it in a region such as the East they did not have to invent a reason for why they could not reach it. According to the book of Genesis, God had forbidden humans access to Paradise after the fall of Adam and Eve, and so if medieval travelers could not find Eden, they had a biblical reason why.

Adding another layer, the city of Jerusalem was thought to be a kind of earthly paradise in the style of Eden, and according to Isidore of Seville, "the Judeans considered it the land flowing with milk and honey promised to their forefathers, because in this place God offered them a foreshadowing of the Resurrection."[53] Paul Freedman refers to the city as "a kind of theological centering point, the ideal from which everything else has

[52]Jordanus of Séverac, *Mirabilia Descripta: the Wonders of the East*, trans. Henry Yule. 1st Ser., No. 31. (New York, N.Y.: B. Franklin, 1963), 9.

[53]Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (2005), 287.

fallen away."[54] Jerusalem held enormous significance to Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and it also existed as a center of trade and travel. This afforded it some protection from the bias against the East, as did the fact that it was geographically closer to Europe than a large portion of the region. However, the city's desirability also made it a target throughout the crusades because it was a site of pilgrimage and a hub of exotic trade, even as everything around it was characterized as desolate and uncivilized.

The Lure of the Exotic

One of the few things that could not be entirely explained with logic was the appeal that "the exotic" had on Europeans. They desired the precious metals and gems of the East for obvious monetary value, and some spices could be understood to mean the same, but it was the attraction to something because of its *difference* that was difficult to truly define. Freedman attempts to explain this appeal by linking the European attraction to aromatics to stories that came from the East: "Rapt fascination with ambergris, musk, and camphor—all aromatic substances of the South and East Asia unknown to classical antiquity—and lore about their origins were transmitted to Europe by the Islamic world."[55] The stories that were brought over from the East made these luxuries popular because they planted the seeds of the exotic in European minds before they ever got to taste the spices.

[54]Freedman, "Locating the Exotic" (2012), 33.

[55]Ibid., 26.

More important than the subjective desires that motivated traders were the stories they brought along the way. Freedman thought that many of them originated orally within far-off kingdoms and spread along the trade routes.[56] When those tales ended up in markets and town squares, Europeans heard about the wonders of these spices before they sampled them. And in many cases, stories were the only interaction those who were not upper class or nobility had with spices. We know that only the wealthy in Europe were the ones who had access to spices on a regular basis, and so they would have the most contact with these storytellers.

The stories themselves had more of an impact than anything, as evidenced by the primary sources in the next chapter. Tales brought flavor, abundance, and riches to a populace that was struggling through poverty and plague. Wonder tales served both as an excuse for traders to talk up their products before a sale and for the poverty-stricken commoners to imagine somewhere that was full of all the food they could imagine and the wealth to take care of their troubles.

I have so far discussed the importance of spices to the people of medieval Europe and how they viewed the East. The next step is to address the sources that deal with both. Some of these sources were formally written accounts of all the various countries and kingdoms of the East, with descriptions of their resources and hierarchical structures. Other times they were writings of a more philosophical and theological nature by religious men who sought to explore this land where the holy city of Jerusalem gave way to wild and untamed desert full of unknown biblical meaning. It is important to note,

[56]Freedman, "Locating the Exotic" (2012), 26.

however, that neither of these styles of writing was immune to stories of the marvelous and strange.

CHAPTER IV

Putting Pen to Paper: The Authors and their Works

Moving away from the historical contexts of the spice trade, the East, and the Other, it is time to narrow in on the specifics of the primary texts that will be used for the textual analysis of Chapter V. This is still within the realm of historical context, but instead of a time period it presents a single text (or, in this case, seven) as worthy of examination. What follows here is a look at those texts: their authors, when and why they were written, and their popularity in late medieval Europe.

My primary sources fell into several categories, such as personal accounts or commissioned texts, and all but one was written during the late medieval period. All of them examine the world through a European lens, but only a few of them were the direct result of a writer traveling abroad. Of the seven primary sources used here, only six of them have verifiable authors and the seventh is largely a bricolage of other, earlier sources, though this fact was most likely unknown to anyone who did not have access to these earlier texts.

The one exception to the time frame of my works was Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*, whose author lived from the mid-sixth to the early seventh century. However, Isidore of Seville's twenty-book-long text was one of the most popular textbooks of the medieval era because it was one of the earliest encyclopedias of the known world. The editors of the version I am using (published by the Cambridge University Press in 2006) claimed that for the first thousand years following its initial publication it was "arguably the most influential book… in the learned world of the Latin

West," after the bible,[57] which is why I am choosing to use the *Etymologies* in this project on the late Middle Ages.

Isidore of Seville sought to write a compilation of known knowledge that pulled from different extant sources. "His aims were not novelty but authority, not originality but accessibility, not augmenting but preserving and transmitting knowledge,"[58] say editors Barney, Beach, Lewis, and Burghof. And because his book was so popular for hundreds of years after it was written, those who lived in the last few centuries leading up to Columbus's fateful voyage across the Atlantic took it just as seriously as the people who read it when it was first published.

The book was popular for close to a thousand years, and the information within it was just as influential during the time I am examining as when it was written. Isidore spoke of the origin of language and words (hence *etymologies*), but as he did so he compiled an incredible body of work which encompassed much of the known world in his time. The people of Europe both spread and built upon the stories found in this text. There is evidence that several of the other authors in this chapter also pulled from the pages of Isidore's *Etymologies.*

The next text is the *Otia Imperialia,* which was written by an administrator who lived during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Gervase of Tilbury travelled extensively and dedicated this text—which was generally referred to by the subtitle "Recreations for an Emperor," though there was at least one version titled *Solacium*

[57]Isidore, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (2005), 3.

[58]Ibid., 10-11

imperitoris (An Emperor's Consolation)[59]—to the Holy Roman Emperor Otto IV, whom historians believe he likely knew personally. Designed to be a leisure book for the emperor, the *Otia Imperialia* was something to occupy Otto IV's time with stories of the rest of the world, including the places that Gervase had visited over the course of his career. In addition to truth there was also entertainment, and because of its core premise it featured not only a working overview of the known world, but marvels from several distant countries.

The *Otia Imperialia* is written in three books—the first is a description of the creation and history of the world, reminiscent of the book of Genesis. The second is an account of all the different parts and provinces of the world, their people, and a section specifically on the Holy Land and those parts of the Levant that were important to the bible. Book three, however, is composed almost entirely of various marvels from around the world. The text could possibly be called an encyclopedia due to its breadth of information, but as certain parts focus on *entertainment* rather than sciences, it may also be a kind of storybook. He covered all that he thought the emperor ought to know, and that included historical, biblical, and fantastical accounts.

Next is another encyclopedia of the Middle Ages. *De proprietatibus rerum* was written in the mid-thirteenth century by a Franciscan monk named Bartholomaeus Anglicus. Just as the *Etymologies* was used as a textbook for the known world, *De proprietatibus rerum* served as a collection of general knowledge. To editor Robert Steele, "[i]t was, in fact, an account of the properties of things in general; an encyclopedia of similes for the benefit of the village preaching friar, written for men

[59]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), xli.

without deep — almost without any — learning."[60] According to Steele, the text was well-received and flourished during the medieval period, but that it fell out of popularity as the emerging commercial industry made spices a subject of purely financial motive, wiping out its previous mysticism. "The man who bought cinnamon at Stourbridge Fair in 1380 would have felt poorer if anyone had told him that it was not shot from a phoenix' nest with leaden arrows, while the merchant of 1580 wished to know where it was grown, and how much he would pay a pound for it if he bought it at first hand. Any attempt to reconcile these frames of mind was fore-doomed to failure."[61]

The text was divided into nineteen books and covered topics such as the biological processes of the body, the order of angels, the seasons of the year, and various plants and animals from around the world. *De proprietatibus rerum* was translated into French in 1372 and then into Spanish, Dutch, and English in 1397. Steele claimed that there was an attempt to revive the book in the late sixteenth century that failed due to the commercial concerns of early modern Europeans.

The next text was written by Friar Jordanus of Séverac-le-Château, a Dominican missionary who lived in the early years of the fourteenth century. He made several trips into the East and India during that time period. He also served as bishop at Columbum in India, which was an important seaport town that is now modern-day Kollam. By all accounts Bishop Jordanus wrote *Mirabilia Descripta* as a simple narrative about what he had seen and experienced while traveling through India and the Levant, but unlike

[60]*Medieval Lore: An Epitome of the Science, Geography, Animal and Plant Folk-lore and Myth of the Middle Age: Being Classified Gleanings from the Encyclopedia of Bartholomew Anglicus On the Properties of Things* ed. Robert Steele (London: Elliot Stock, 1893), 1.

[61]Ibid., 2.

Gervase of Tilbury, Jordanus was not commissioned to write this text and therefore had no reason to specifically describe wonders more than facts, or vice versa.

However, due to his background and the nature of his business in India, the influence of Christianity on his observations cannot be understated, including his tendency to use "Christendom" as a geographic area and not as a descriptor of a group of people; though at the time it was common to encompass the believers and their land in such general terms. He remarks in his chapter on India the Less that, "I will only say this much, that this India, as regards fruit and other things, is entirely different from Christendom; except, indeed, that there be lemons there…"[62] Generally, Jordanus regards all the plants and creatures he finds in India with an unbridled fascination and wonder, and even the people and cultures that he witnesses are written almost matter-of-factly. With comparisons to his own Christian beliefs and those in India the Less, he describes his incredulity but does not dismiss them for it, writing about those who call themselves Christian but "Nay, they believe St. Thomas the Great to be Christ!"[63]

Even when writing about human sacrifice at the feet of foreign idols, pygmy men, or places where people walked naked in public, Jordanus wrote with the same detached astonishment that revealed he was only an observer to such things. The most emotional that his writing gets concerns his awe or confusion at the sights he has seen, at one point proclaiming "[e]very thing indeed is a marvel in this India! Verily it is quite another world!"[64] However, at various points in the text Jordanus does reference the conversions

[62]Jordanus of Séverac, *Mirabilia Descripta: The Wonders of the East* trans. Henry Yule. Works Issued by the Hakluyt Society; 1st Ser., No. 31. (New York, N.Y.: B. Franklin, 1963), 15.

[63]Ibid., 23.

[64]Ibid., 37.

of the indigenous people to Christianity as one of the goals of his fellow missionaries, such as the "preaching and minor friars" in Armenia (a region that around this time is typically considered part of the East) who "...have converted a good four thousand of them, and more."[65] For the most part, however, Friar Jordanus appears content to simply recall all that he has seen or heard in lands from Turkey to India.

Another friar to write about this same subject was Odoric of Pordenone, who traveled extensively through the East and Asia in the early fourteenth century. Hailing from Friuli, a region in the northeastern corner of Italy, Odoric spent his time traveling as a Franciscan missionary beginning between 1316 and 1318 and ending with his return to Europe and subsequent death in 1331.[66] Before he died his experiences were translated into Latin by fellow monk William of Solagna.[67] *The Travels of Friar Odoric* would become highly popular, even though translator Henry Yule marks his use of exaggeration. At the same time, however, he acknowledges Odoric's travels to be genuine:

> But this seems to come rather from the fact that Odoric is a man of inferior refinement, both morally and intellectually, than that he introduces wilful figments; whilst the notes attached to his narrative will prove I trust how certainly they are the footsteps of a genuine traveller that we are following.[68]

While this condemnation of Odoric's character may simply be a product of Yule's twentieth-century sensibilities, *The Travels of Friar Odoric* was well-known in its time as

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[65]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta: The Wonders of the East* (1963), 5.

[66]Odoric of Pordenone. "The Travels of Friar Odoric of Pordenone" in *Cathay and the Way Thither* vol II, trans. Henry Yule. (London: Hakluyt Society, 1913), 9.

[67]Ibid., 12.

[68]Ibid., 24.

a reliable source of information about the East and Asia, so much so that the next text on this list was known to have referenced (and in places simply stolen) stories from Odoric.

The most fascinating of all the primary sources used in this thesis is *The Book of John Mandeville*. Originally published in French between 1356 and 1357, the author of this book, the titular John Mandeville, claims to be a knight from the English village of St. Albans who travelled through the East for close to thirty years, beginning in 1322.[69] The issue with this, of course, is that no such person existed.

> Not only has no trace of a Sir John Mandeville, or even an acceptable substitute, ever been found, but the only travels recorded in the book belong to others: the author may have traveled everywhere he says he did, or nowhere, or somewhere in between, but "what [he] can remember" about the eastern world is drawn almost entirely from other's works.[70]

The author of *The Book of John Mandeville* remains a mystery even six hundred years later, and though the text remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of the East, it is actually a compilation of earlier sources, including the *Etymologies* and *The Travels of Friar Odoric.* Mandeville often takes stories from these texts and inserts them directly into his narrative.

As translator Iain Higgins relates, the book was framed as a guide for pilgrims travelling to Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, and the author claims that all the depictions therein are from his memory of traveling there himself. Because we have no knowledge of the author's identity—and because they made no effort to come forward in the years following the initial publication—it is unlikely that the text was commissioned

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[69]*The Book of John Mandeville, with Related Texts*, trans. Iain Macleod Higgins (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2011), xvi & 5.

[70]Ibid., ix.

like the *Otia Imperialia*. Even so, Mandeville aligns himself with the "Latin Christians" like Friar Jordanus before him, taking it further by acknowledging the ongoing effects of the Crusades on the East, to the point of cheering on the conquering forces of the papacy, though (unsurprisingly) the vehement pro-Christian sentiment is most prominent within the Prologue and not so much beyond it.[71]

As the author continues with his narration (for it is storytelling more than anything else due to its lack of verifiable information) he makes a point of commenting on the economy of places that he has claimed to visit. He even criticizes the way that markets in the East sold goods in bulk, such as the city of "Thamise" (modern-day Tabriz) which was one of the best places for trade in the late medieval period. "It is in the land of the emperor of Persia, and they say that the emperor takes in more than that city as a result of trade than does the richest Christian king in the world, for they tax an incalculable amount from all the goods."[72] We have no proof of whether the Mandeville author ever actually visited Tabriz, but taking this into account is nevertheless an important window into the European opinion of the East in the fifteenth century.

The last primary source that I will be using for this analysis is the *Mirrour of the World*. It is believed that the original text was written in Latin around 1245 consisting of a 6594-line poem of octosyllabic rhyming verse, divided into three parts.[73] A French version titled *L'Image du Monde* was produced in 1464 using this poem, and scholars allege that it was most likely written by Gautier de Metz (also known as Gossouin), a

[71]*Mandeville* (2011), xx.

[72]Ibid., 94.

[73]Ibid., ix.

mid-thirteenth century French poet. Like much of the primary sources in this paper, Gautier's text was not original but rather a collection of references to earlier works—including authors such as Jacques de Vitry, Honorius Augustodunensis, and Alexander Neckam.[74] It was Gautier's *L'Image du* Monde that William Caxton translated into English in 1481. Widely regarded as the first book printed in English with illustrations, *Mirrour of the World* was "one of the earliest encyclopaedias in the English language."[75] According to editor Oliver Prior, Caxton chose to *L'Image du Monde* instead of a larger collection of similar works previously written in Latin because he was looking for a comprehensive collection of knowledge for "ordinary readers and laymen" and the other texts contained "long moral disquisitions."[76] Despite its complicated history, Caxton's English version of the *Mirrour of the World* was very popular and there were four subsequent editions published by 1520, two in Hebrew and two in French.[77]

Each of these authors wrote about the geographic regions of the East, their people, and to some extent their practices, but what I have focused on are their depictions of spices and, to a lesser extent, foods such as jackfruit or date palms. These things appear within certain contexts in the writing of all seven authors, and they are subjects I describe in greater detail in Chapter V. One of those contexts is their connection to danger. In several passages, spices are described as being surrounded by fearsome and mythical

[74]Caxton, William, *Caxton's Mirrour of the World* ed. Oliver H. Prior, Early English Text Society (Series). Extra Series; 110. (Oxford University Press [London] and New York, 1912), x.

[75]Ibid., v.

[76]Ibid., v.

[77]Ibid., ix.

beasts, sometimes even directly guarded by them. This presented something of a challenge to those attempting to travel to the East to collect these valuables for trade, because danger made these products rare, and rarity made them even more valuable. There was also danger present in the land itself; the East was viewed as hazardous to humans, be that in the form of dangerous animals or giant insects,[78] thus lending credence to the European view of the Other as threatening and perilous while at the same time containing an abundance of unique riches.

The second theme in which spices were featured was the correlation between depictions of spices and descriptions of wealth. I discussed previously how important spices were as a status symbol to the upper class in Europe, and some of that same imagination bled into these narratives. However, said wealth was sometimes at odds with the depictions of the "foreign" or "uncivilized" people that lived in the same region. Other times it was equated specifically with foreign rulers such as the king of Java or Prester John, who merited ownership of such wealth by virtue of their positions in society. Both themes lend insight into what spices represented to the people of Europe and to those that wrote about them.

The Authors and their Marvels

It is all well and good to say that these stories were written, read, and passed around Europe, but how does this relate to our understanding of the late medieval world and its people? In this case, bringing in concepts of storytelling, nationalism, and the

[78]For stories about mythical beasts such as griffins and phoenixes see Gervase of Tilbury's *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 186-187 and Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* (2005), 286. For references to giant ants see *Mandeville* (2011), 178-79.

Other from Folklore Studies can help to explain why food interacted with ideas of danger and wealth and abundance in the ways I have described.

The writers themselves even pondered what merit these wonder tales had—for example, why they endured and why they were popular. Gervase of Tilbury prefaced the third book of the *Otia Imperialia* by musing upon the virtues of marvel writing in his goal to entertain Emperor Otto IV.

> To be sure, it is not proper that an emperor's leisure should be contaminated with the prattling babbling of players; on the contrary, the crude falsehoods of idle tales should be spurned, and only those things which are sanctioned by the authority of age, or confirmed by the authority of scripture, or attested by daily eye-witness accounts, should be brought to his venerable hearing in his leisure hours.[79]

This passage alone gives us a glimpse into the perception of wonder tales during the early thirteenth century. Because he was writing for the emperor himself, the implication emerged that what was not "proper" for the emperor's leisure may be allowed for those of lower stature.

Gervase's use of "the prattling babbling of players" tells us that these tales were already popular, and that, combined with "idle tales," paints a picture of a storytelling tradition that is already common among those who indulge in said idleness (which is implied to be those lower than the emperor and his retinue). Facts and truth were the domain of the emperor and fanciful tales were for those less occupied with the day-to-day workings of the Holy Roman Empire. What this also tells us is that everything Gervase included in the *Otia Imperialia* was what he considered to be the truth.

[79]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 559.

The acceptable tales, on the other hand, those "sanctioned by the authority of age," may also reference Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies,* both in this text and others in the late medieval period. Many of these—most prominently *The Book of John Mandeville,* as discussed previously—are known today to be compilations of earlier works. However, we can only speculate whether that fact was known to anyone in medieval Europe, as most of the population would not have had access to (nor the ability to read) older texts in order to make the connection. Perhaps these compilations followed the same principle that Gervase proposed, that those stories which were well-known and that remained unquestioned for a lengthy period of time were considered truth because they could not be disproven. If the *Etymologies* had been circulated (and believed) since its release in the seventh century, then I don't think it out of place that it would fall under the category of "authority of age."

Gervase also described how the human mind was more favorable towards novelty and because of that, "the oldest things will have to be presented as new, natural things as miraculous, and things familiar to us all, as strange."[80] Following this, it may be easy to understand why Gervase included marvels in his text when he professed earlier that they held no worth or merit to the education of an emperor. He even goes so far as to describe the categories by which he defined a novelty: the four criteria being originality, recentness, rarity, and strangeness.[81] Recentness plays into what I discussed above and the "authority of age," but the other three are harder to define.

[80]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 559.

[81]Ibid., 559.

"Strangeness" can be interpreted to mean that which seemed unreal, or perhaps provoked horror or disgust. This could mean stories of very small but otherwise unremarkable pygmy men[82] or tales of cannibalism in which the skull of a deceased father is retained as a drinking vessel and described as a "preposterous and abominable custom."[83] "Originality" and "rarity" can go hand in hand, but they also have minor differences between them. For the former, Gervase might consider a story that is not found anywhere else—whether it is confined to a single historical text or a single geographic area—and for the latter there may be several versions of a single story, but only one is not commonly known.

Gervase of Tilbury was not the only writer to muse upon the appeal of marvels in their own work, however. In Caxton's translation of the *Mirrour of the World*, he speaks to his audience, claiming "…be not admerauylled of suche thinges as ye have founden wreton in this present booke, the whiche may seme to yow moche strange, dyveurse & moche diffycile to bileuve…"[84] However, the rest of that same paragraph is taken up by the claim that it is by God's will that these marvels exist and that the common man was in no position to understand why God does such things.

> His only wille & playsir in the erthe many meruaylles and many werkes to be meruaylled on, by cause that noman knoweth by no waye the raysons wherefore; and therfore we ought not to mysbileuve in no wise that we here redde ne tolde of the meruaylles of the world unto the tyme we knowe it to be so or no…[85]

[82]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 186-187.

[83]Odoric, *The Travels of Friar Odoric* (1913), 253-254.

[84]Caxton, *Mirrour of the World* (1912), 96.

[85]Ibid., 96.

The author of this text both makes the assertion that God is responsible for marvels and that, for that very reason, the readers ought not to dismiss any marvelous tales because they are inherently holy.

He even goes so far as to make the case for why all people should read marvels and consider them a worthy object of fascination: "ffor it is a good & prouffytable thing to every man to understande & reteyne, to thende that he may lerne of whiche he be not abasshed whan he heereth speke of suche thinges, and can answere to the trouthe."[86] It is the author's opinion that such marvels broaden the scope of our knowledge and that, as fantastical as they may be, they are still beneficial to keep around. More than just marvels, though, was the importance of travel writing itself and that these tales were very often a part of their narratives. The *Mirrour of the World* looked at early travelers and claimed them as seekers of truth and knowledge, not fanciful stories:

> Ther were many other philosophres that serched the world, as moche as was possible for them to doo, for to knowe better the good and the euyll; and spared for nothing, ffor they beleuyd not lightly a thinge tyl they knewe it wel by experience, ne alle that they fonde in their books to fore they had preuid it, for to knowe God the better and loue hym.[87]

In this passage, the goal of early travelers (as far as the author claims) was to "know better the good and the evil," and this supports the idea discussed earlier, that travel writing about the East was first philosophical before it turned fiscal.

But what does this mean for food to make an appearance in these marvels? Spices featured right alongside griffins and holy miracles, and from that perhaps we can begin to understand just how important they were to trade as well as to the way Europeans

[86]Caxton, *Mirrour of the World* (1912), 97.

[87]Ibid., 166.

perceived the East. For those who could not travel during the late medieval period, listening to stories brought back by people who had was their only source of information concerning the world beyond their borders.

In "The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other," author David R. Blanks takes care to mention that most of the non-elite—of course the largest portion of the population—were generally illiterate and uneducated. These stories would be spread by word of mouth from village to village after they trickled down from those who read the texts. In Europe, the opinions of the Other and the exotic in relation to the self were unintentionally curated by multiple factors. "People were operating within a framework of shared assumptions about authority, empiricism, logic, and the demands of faith even if they never resolved upon any particular pattern of interpretation of the "other" that we can recognize as such."[88] The people of late medieval Europe worked with a very different idea of what constituted their "social imaginary," or their perception of what existed out in the rest of the world.

Blanks also quotes Italian medievalist Umberto Eco when he claims that "[m]edieval culture was based, not on a phenomenology of reality, but on a phenomenology of cultural tradition."[89] The collective imagination of the East was compiled from numerous sources, most of which were influenced by the profession they were associated with. Those who did business with the constant flow of people in and out of villages, such as millers and weavers, tended to take in a broader amount of

[88]Blanks, David, "The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other" *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 3 (2019), 9.

[89]Ibid., 5. See Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4. Originally published in 1959.

information, but on the other hand soldiers and sailors were seen as fanciful rather than enlightened because they actively travelled abroad. Blanks claims that this was because they were "contaminated" by their contact with outside elements.[90]

But in analyzing this connection between those who wrote about the East and the opinions that informed their words, we fall back on considering the context of how the East was represented in Europe at the time. Spices were important enough to mention, repeatedly and over great lengths of time, but why? It made sense to acknowledge the wealth that these foreign kingdoms contained because it was in direct opposition to stories of the uncivilized peoples living there (wealth had an appeal all its own to those aspiring to travel for monetary gain), but the value of spices made them just as attractive as pearls or precious gems. To those people in medieval Europe, spices were not attractive merely for their associations with expensive materials, but because they were themselves expensive. We saw from Chapter II that only the wealthy had regular access to spices (barring black pepper), specifically because they were luxuries. Spices meant many things to the people of Europe—they were status symbols and medicinal cures—but much of that interest became a driving force in the expansion of Western power.

As spices were mentioned in these particular contexts (i.e., danger and wealth), the stories were carried from text to text over several hundred years, sometimes with some criticism as to their veracity, but generally they were maintained and expanded upon by authors who pushed the idea that the East was full of resources and a never-ending horizon.

[90]Blanks, "The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other" (2019), 15-16.

The Other and Narrative Theory

When tracking the appearance of spices throughout all these narratives, Folklore Studies proves useful when viewing them as specific elements in late medieval storytelling. Said stories are both reflections of their contemporary time and geography, but also the attitudes of the people who wrote them. So, what does the inclusion of spices and similar food products of the East represent in these stories? What does their use indicate? To this effect, I look at both the nuances of story and the use of the Other as symbolic context.

When we study the writing that Westerners published about the East, it is far more about European hegemony and perception of what they thought lay in the East than about the East itself. Folklorist Steve Zeitlin took an optimistic view of the power of storytelling in bringing disparate cultures together in his article "The Folklore Fundamentalist: Notes on the Politics of Storytelling." In reference to stories shared between cultures in conflict, he said "[i]n the shadow of conflagration, folklorists and other spinners of tales have a role in creating tolerance through stories, tales without borders that can be shared because they can be apprehended and appreciated whether or not the listener believes they are 'true'."[91] In his opinion, the stories that Europeans had about the East had the potential to bring those peoples closer together, but the specific circumstances in medieval Europe at the time led to a different conclusion.

In 1978 Edward Said published his incredibly influential book *Orientalism* regarding the view of the Post-Enlightenment British and French towards the Near East

[91]Zeitlin, Steve, "The Folklore Fundamentalist: Notes on the Politics of Storytelling." *Storytelling, Self, Society* 11, no. 1 (2015), 32.

as a result of their empire-building. However, much of his reasoning can be easily transferred to the time period of this paper. The storytelling of the late medieval period essentially followed a similar format to what Said described: "The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences."[92] The East (with a capital "E") existed primarily in the minds of Europeans who had a particular image of that place fixed in their heads. This was the result of years of stories transmitted from traveler to traveler until they made it from India to England. So, when people wrote about the East, the resources or aspects of life that were emphasized as a result were primarily echoes of what the European sensibility deemed important, such as material wealth.

The East existed as something for Europeans to define themselves against. It was something that became popular as "not us;" the Eastern Orient to the European Occident. "The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other."[93] Another author, Shirin Khanmohamadi, emphasized this quest for identity in her book *In Light of Another's World: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages*. However, she gave medieval writers more credit to their worldliness, much like Zeitlin, by arguing that these encounters with the Other changed and improved the European image of the self, often for the better.

[92]Said, Edward, *Orientalism.* (New York: First Vintage Books Edition, 1979), 1.

[93]Ibid., 1.

> The result, rather than a consolidation of European cultural identity through the encounter with difference, or a European self-confidence prefiguring that to come in the era of New World conquests, is the loosening, revitalizing, and redefining of European identity through such encounter.[94]

But what both these authors agreed on was that the self-defined European identity influenced how westerners wrote about the East (or the Orient) in a way that highlighted the existing social structure on the continent.

The concept of "us" and "them" has been explored extensively, and folklorist Hugh Jansen wrote an article entitled "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" to define how such stories come about. According to him, "The esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself and what it supposes others think of it. The exoteric is what one group thinks of another and what it thinks that the other group thinks it thinks."[95] What this meant was that esoteric referred to the stories told by a group about *itself*, and exoteric referred to what one group thought of a *different* group. In essence, the stories that we are analyzing in this paper fall into the second category as we (perhaps erroneously) lump together those people that live in the East against those who live in the West.

Although Jansen primarily uses his terminology to refer to much smaller groups of people than entire nations (e.g., sports teams or a black janitor working at a white college) similar principles apply concerning the formation of stories about various groups, specifically for those we are concerned with here. Between the West and the East. cultural expectations created groups of "us" versus "them" (like Eco's

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[94]Khanmohamadi, Shirin A, *In Light of Another's Word: European Ethnography in the Middle Ages* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2014), 5.

[95]Jansen, William Hugh, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" *Fabula* 2, no. 2 (1959), 206-207.

phenomenology of cultural tradition) that then came into conflict with each other. "The exoteric aspect of the factor is, at least in part, a product of the same sense of belonging, for it may result from fear of, mystification about, or resentment of the group to which one does not belong."[96] To the West, the East was a source of mystery, wealth, and the promise of a world outside their own. The proliferation of stories about the East merely strengthened those beliefs, just as we will see specific sets of stories laid out in Chapter V as being carried from one book to the next over the years, weighed down by Gervase of Tilbury's "authority of age."

Jansen cites several reasons as to why this esoteric and exoteric lore may emerge among cultural groups, and in this case if we take Freedman's speculative claim that some of these stories originated orally in the East and were then picked up by Western travelers then it becomes a case of esoteric folklore becoming exoteric. The local stories get picked up and exaggerated into what we see in the primary texts. Another reason that these tales exist is that one group was more isolated than the rest. This provoked the creation of exoteric lore around that which society at large did not understand. In this case there was physical distance between Europe and the East; Rome and Jerusalem are nearly 2.5 thousand miles apart over land, and the journey was even more unpredictable by sea (in the fifteenth century a Catholic canon reported that it took him forty-two days to sail from Venice to Jaffa, but it took him seventy-three to sail back[97]).

There is also the "mystification" mentioned previously. Exoteric lore was created around those groups that contained something to be marveled at or envied. In this case,

[96]Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore" (1959), 207.

[97]Blanks, "The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other" (2019), 34.

the East was home to several lucrative resources like incense, palm oil, and of course spices, but the appeal of the Holy Land also played a large role. The destination of pilgrimages for anyone of Christian, Muslim, or Jewish faith, Jerusalem drew people from all over Europe into the East and became another source of stories about the resources and people who lived there. To the people in Europe, it all started with the stories.

Storytelling is also closely tied to contextual analysis in Folklore Studies. Categorizing story structure is important to understanding context, such as Richard Bauman's exploration of storytelling and performance that used studies of oral narratives collected in Texas between 1971 and 1986. Bauman took the time in this book to slam folkloric traditions that, in his mind, tended to favor elite, Western literary traditions, and it is with some chagrin that I realize that is also what I am doing here. It is unfortunate that I cannot go back to the late medieval period and listen to contemporary oral narratives (which would have been their primary mode of circulation), but what I have set out to do instead looks at *representation*. And to this effect Bauman's theories of performance come into play when looking at travel writing as a performance of the Other.

In Chapter III I discussed how the Other was typically viewed in conjunction with the "us" that Europe represented to the authors of these works, and Bauman acknowledged this in his criteria for assessing oral narratives as well:

> Oral performance, like all human activity, is situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes and events—bounded segments of

> the flow of behavior and experience that constitute meaningful contexts for action, interpretation, and evaluation.[98]

Those culturally defined scenes and events influenced the authors of the primary sources, and they created the European view of spices before they even heard the stories. And it was not only oral narratives that did this—as we know from the preservation of texts like the *Etymologies* or *Mirrour of the World.* In "Orientalism: The Making of the Other," Shehla Burney pulled from Edward Said's work to explain how the perpetuation of these stories helped to solidify preconceptions.

> …the older texts - the classics, the travelogues, the popular mythologies that [were] already prevalent - work like a palimpsest, or a trace, on which yet another ambiguous picture is imposed. Thus, set by set, image by image, trace by trace, the concept or idea gets sedimented and normalized into the cultural discourse of representation of the Orient/Other.[99]

In this way, the stories told between the East and the West helped to reinforce the binary that was "us" and "them."

In this case, greed was one of the motivating factors in that binary. To Europeans, spices represented value and exoticism because they did not have access to such things in their home countries. The stories of the pepper groves and the apples of Sodom and Gomorrah (though they most likely began as esoteric lore) are here presented as exoteric lore because the Western authors were writing about what they saw and what they *believed* about the East. And that belief was formed by their perceptions that the East was both valuable and dangerous.

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[98]Bauman, Richard, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* Cambridge Studies in Oral and Literate Culture; 10. (Cambridge [Cambridgeshire]; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 3.

[99]Burney, Shehla, "Chapter One: Orientalism: The Making of the Other" *Counterpoints* 417 (2012), 29.

Spices were an exotic luxury, but the places they came from were literal uncharted territory. The elite of Europe in the late medieval period used spices to literally bring a piece of the Other into their homes. The primary texts contained stories that fed the appeal of interaction with the East, but as we will see in the next chapter, those interactions sometimes spelled danger, even in the pursuit of wealth.

CHAPTER V

Risk and Reward: Spices and Danger

After considering the history surrounding spices and the East during the late medieval period, the time has come to examine the actual appearance of spices in the primary texts of that time. What stories commonly included mentions of spices? Were spices contextually good or bad? As discussed previously, spices emerged in writing not as independent entities, but as linked to a couple key concepts. The first was danger.

In the primary texts, the spices of the East existed in proximity to dangerous creatures, but these references did not just include foodstuffs. Luxury items such as myrrh or incense, and in some cases precious gems, were mentioned just as frequently. The fact that spices were also included in these references meant that their appeal—both for monetary value and for novelty—was heightened by the hazards of their origins.

Many of the narratives centered around black pepper. I described to some extent in Chapter II what black pepper meant to the commoners of Europe, and their desire led the spice to become the most popular on the continent, but that also meant it was the subject of much storytelling. I mention other spices when they are present in the texts (such as cinnamon and cassia), but black pepper seemed to be at the forefront of these authors' thoughts. The most common tale involved pepper being guarded by some kind of snake, which would need to be frightened away to ensure a safe harvest. Of my sources, the earliest reference is in the *Etymologies*. In Book XVII—titled "Rural Matters"—Isidore of Seville includes a section on "aromatic trees" where he describes this phenomenon.

> The pepper tree (*piper*) grows in India, on the side of the Caucasian range that faces the sun. Its leaves are like the juniper's. Serpents protect the pepper groves,

> but the inhabitants of that region, when the peppers ripen, burn them, and the serpents are put to flight by the fire—and from this flame the pepper, which is naturally white, is made black.[100]

Isidore then goes on to describe the different kinds of pepper that are grown in India and that appear in European markets:

> In fact there are several kinds of pepper fruits. The unripe kind is called 'long pepper; that unaffected by fire, 'white pepper'; but that which has a wrinkled and bristly skin takes both its color (i.e. 'black') and its name (cf. [πυρ] "fire") from the heat of the fire. If a pepper is light in weight it is old; if heavy, it is fresh. But the fraud of the merchants should be guarded against, for they are wont to sprinkle litharge or lead over very old, moistened pepper to make it heavy.

Taken together, Isidore puts the story of the snakes in the pepper groves alongside worries of being cheated by spice vendors because, to the people of medieval Europe, these were both real fears.

We know that the *Etymologies* was considered to be a textbook for hundreds of years, and the beginning of that section even gives straightforward geographic information about the pepper trees themselves, much like what we would find in a modern encyclopedia. To the readers back in Europe (who, on the whole, had not been to India or nearby countries to see this for themselves) this was their encyclopedia, and they regarded the story about pepper groves being guarded by serpents to be as true as any other carefully considered statement.

There is also the precise way that Isidore incorporated the serpent tale into the rest of the passage. He used the claim that harvesters scared away the snakes in the pepper groves with fire to provide an explanation as to why the pepper berries appeared black and shriveled by the time they appeared at market. By grounding his account to what the average European physically experienced (they couldn't travel to India, but they could

[100]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 349.

buy its pepper in the village square), Isidore set the stage for the story to circulate throughout Europe. It is also possible that Isidore unknowingly referred to the preservation process of the peppers themselves, as drying them (generally by leaving them under the warm Indian sun) ensured that they would not rot as fresh pepper berries would along the time-consuming route from harvest to market.

The fire answered both the question of how to harvest the pepper without being set upon by snakes and why the fruit appeared the way it did in European markets, but the snakes themselves are *not* explained. Isidore does not say whether they guarded the pepper groves because it was their natural habitat, or if they were there due to some higher purpose (perhaps as a punishment from God to make the spice difficult to access). Given the religious influence of many of these works, it would not be out of place for Isidore to have created an explanation to push the latter theory, but the fact that he did not is significant because it implies that he was deliberately pulling away from the commonly cited religious explanation for such marvels.

Chronologically, the next piece of evidence is from the *Otia Imperialia,* and Gervase of Tilbury uses the story of the snakes in the pepper groves in a section titled "The Eastern Part of Greater Asia," which in this instance includes India. "Pepper grows in their territory: it is really white in colour, but it forms a natural habitat for snakes, and when they are driven away by fire, the pepper is blackened by the conflagration."[101] This passage is not (like the previous example) written within a carefully detached description of the geographic area. Instead, it follows an account of the pygmies that live in the Indian mountains; "…human creatures two cubits high, who fight with the cranes. They

[101]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 187.

give birth at the age of two, and are old by the time they are seven."[102] This first passage falls within the first two books of the text, which are meant to be honest overviews of the known world, but it also creates another degree of separation between the people in Europe and their spices. It is not grain or barley that grew surrounded by wonderous marvels—that was saved for the exotic imports like black pepper.

Immediately following this passage about the snakes and the pepper trees is a reference to the *macrobii*; "…human creatures twelve cubit high, who fight with the griffins. Griffins have the body of a lion and the wings and talons of an eagle."[103] All of these creatures and people—the pygmies, the Macrobii, the griffins, and more—are found in India according to Gervase, and this distinction implies that the dangers would pose problems for anyone harvesting the goods found there.

This is not the only reference to peppers and serpents in the *Otia Imperialia*. The third book of this text is full of specific marvels from around the world, and just before the following passage there is a note from the translators that the information in this and the following nine sections of the book are actually from a letter, originally written in Greek, called the *Letter of Pharasmanes to Hadrian.*[104] The translators—Banks and Binns—write that the letter was most likely also used by Isidore of Seville some 500 years earlier. The letter was a fictional account of Asia and its marvels, and because it was used both by Isidore, who was essentially writing a textbook of the world, and

[102]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 186-7.

[103]Ibid., 186-7.

[104]Ibid., 694-96 note 1.

Gervase, who was writing a narrative to entertain the nobility, we can see the way that stories were carried through different texts over the years.

The concept of taking other people's personal narratives was relatively common at this time, especially between scholars who would need to use previously written sources to supplement portions of their narratives to cover places they themselves had not travelled. Banks and Binns made no reference as to why they thought that Gervase was using this text to reinforce his narrative. However, I do not think it would be amiss to claim that—between several translations over hundreds of years and its inclusion in the *Etymologies*—he likely considered it to be a reliable source of additional detail he could add to his own account.

Gervase kept the information of the letter consistent except for where he added information from other sources, but "[o]therwise the changes he makes generally have the aim of improving the style, cutting out uninteresting details such as statements of distances, abridging prolixity, and paraphrasing obscurity."[105] In this way, Gervase carefully stitched together separate texts until they formed a cohesive narrative.

In the third book of the *Otia Imperialia*, section seventy-two is a short page concerning "Serpents," which contains this passage:

> Bordering on [Sidonia] is its neighbor Arabia, uncultivated on account of the serpents called cerastes. They have rams' horns, with which they gore and kill people. A great quantity of pepper grows there, over which the serpents in the region keep watch. But when people have established that the pepper is ripe, they set fire to the area, and thus get rid of the serpents by burning them out; and as a result the natural color of the pepper changes, and it becomes black from the fire.[106]

[105]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 696.

[106]Ibid., 697.

The first thing to note in this passage is that the pepper trees were supposedly in Arabia and not India as in the last two examples. India is most traditionally associated with black pepper, and it is odd that the location of the spice would be moved just for this one story. As with the previous passage from this text, Gervase uses the fire to explain both the blackening and shriveling of the pepper and the way to clear the groves of snakes and harvest the pepper safely.

In *De proprietatibus rerum*, Bartholomaeus Anglicus used almost the same wording as Isidore, including the reference to a specific mountain range and the fact that the leaves looked like those of the juniper bush.

> Pepper is called *Piper*, and is the séed or the fruit of a trée, that groweth in the South side of y^{e} hill *Caucasus*, in the strong heate of the Sun, as Diosc. sayth *li*. 17. The leaues thereof, be like to the leaues of *Iuniperu*s, and serpents kéepe the woods that pepper groweth in, and when the woods of pepper be ripe, men of that country setteth them on fire, and chace away the serpents by vyolence of fire, and by such burning, the graine of pepper, that was white by kind, is made blacke and [ripely].[107] (italics in original)

Bartholomaeus defined the fire as "violent" and the process of burning the peppers as ripening, even though the pepper grains were already ripe, necessitating the fire. Like Gervase, he connected the use of the fire to the ripening process and to the final appearance of the peppers in European markets.

Surprisingly, Friar Jordanus did not mention snakes at all nearly a century later in 1330. The fact that his book was written as a simple travel journal (even though the book is subtitled "Wonders of the East") was perhaps the reason that he made no mention of the snakes and the pepper trees. If he saw no evidence of this tale as he traveled through

[107]Anglicus, Bartholomaeus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (2011), 313.

India, he would have left it out of his firsthand account. However, Jordanus refuted the fire portion of the narrative itself: "[pepper] is at first green, then when it comes to maturity it becomes all black and corrugated as you see it. 'Tis thus that long pepper is produced, nor are you to believe that fire is placed under the pepper, nor that it is roasted, as some will lyingly maintain."[108] This passage was set within Jordanus's description of India the Greater, and he even made a point of saying that pepper was not found in other regions. "There is no pepper in [India the Less], nor any kind of spice except ginger."[109]

Jordanus perpetuated the connection we saw above between spices and improbable creatures. He said that on the island of Java "the finest aromatic spices" grew (as well as pygmy men who are the size of three-year-old boys and are shaggy like goats). However, he takes explicit care to say pepper is not among those spices: "There too are produced cubebs, and nutmegs, and mace, and all the other finest spices except pepper."[110] These specific claims narrowed down the location of the black pepper in the real world, moving along the same lines that we observed in Chapter III that saw the Western concept of "the East" coalesce into a physical location with the increasing accuracy of cartography and desire for global exploration. It also reduced the amount of valuable land—in this instance, the land that produced spices worth selling to the larger world—to India the Greater.

In the passage above, Jordanus spoke to the reader of the book, urging them not to believe the stories they had been told concerning the harvesting methods of black pepper.

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[108]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta* (1963), 27.

[109]Ibid., 23.

[110]Ibid., 30-31.

Perhaps this was told by the spice merchants to customers in Europe to spread interest in the spice, but we do not know for sure. This warning by Jordanus supported the idea that the story of the serpents guarding the pepper groves was well-known to the people of Europe at the time. It was a danger relevant enough that he sought to warn his audience not to believe such marvels.

In *The Book of John Mandeville*, the story of the snakes and the pepper trees evolves again. Mandeville did not dispute the fact that black pepper was guarded by serpents, but instead sought to provide a more definite location by placing it in the forest of Combar in the land of Lombe (which was somewhere in India). He claimed that "…[pepper] grows nowhere else in the whole world except in this forest" and that the land was fertile even if it was extremely hot.[111] Mandeville went on to describe the pepper plants themselves; how they grew and what they looked like, and when he wrote of harvesting them, he did not add anything supernatural to the tale. "They are thus harvested just as grapes are, and then they are dried in the sun, and then in an oven, and they become black and wrinkled."[112] The changing details of this story also gave us a hint as to the evolving process of black pepper production—now the drying is hastened by ovens as well as the sun.

However, the Mandeville author did not forget the fire or the snakes—though he did take the creative liberty of adding crocodiles into the mix—as he explicitly refuted that part of the story like Friar Jordanus before him.

[111]*Mandeville* (2011), 104.

[112]Ibid., 105.

> … and some people say that when they wish to gather the pepper they make a fire and burn round about so as to make the snakes and crocodiles flee. But with all due respect to those who say this, if they burned around the trees that bear the pepper, they would burn them and wither everything and anything, and they would do much harm.[113]

The fact that Mandeville did not further the popular story of fire is interesting in the context of the text itself. We do not know who the author was and so cannot gauge their true intentions, be they for entertainment, diversion, or for true information, but we cannot underestimate the impact that his work had on those who had access to it. Author Donald Howard made his opinion of Mandeville's influence very clear when he said "[w]hether this makes him a fraud or an artist, he created, from a shelf of books, a world of his own devising, a world conceivable enough to have been taken seriously by Christopher Columbus, Sir Thomas More, Johnathan Swift, and readers over Europe well into the nineteenth century."[114]

It appeared that *The Travels of John Mandeville* was taken seriously by most people in the immediate aftermath of its publication, and this may explain why the author attempted to "clarify" these well-known stories to his audience. The writing acknowledged that the snakes and the fire were not something he himself believed, but he also attempted to appeal to the audience with logic, i.e., "if they burned around the trees that bear the pepper… they would do much harm."

Mandeville took from those who had written before him (including Isidore of Seville) and instead of relying on the familiarity of the story, he chose to call it into

[113]*Mandeville* (2011), 105.

[114]Howard, Donald R, "The World of Mandeville's Travels" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 1 (1971), 1.

question. And in fact, he went so far as to offer an entirely different solution to the issue of the snakes, who he did choose to keep as the dangers of the pepper groves.

> They would never set fire [to the pepper groves], but [instead] they smear their feet and their hands with the juice of lemons and of other things whose scent the snakes fear, and thus the snakes flee before them because of the scent, and they go harvesting in complete safety, for then they do not have to watch out for any worms approaching them.[115]

The translator of the edition I am using here, Iain Macleod Higgins, made a note of saying that Mandeville's remedy may have been derived from a defense against leeches mentioned by Odoric of Pordenone: "But that they may be able to enter the water in safety they take lemons and bruise them well, and then copiously anoint the whole body therewith, and after that when they dive into the water the leeches do not meddle with them."[116] Mandeville also added to this story by including crocodiles among the creatures that guard the pepper (the term "worm" is understood to be reptilian in nature as well).

But black pepper was not the only thing guarded by dangerous beasts in the East. On the island of Ceylon, Friar Odoric wrote about a mountain with a lake at the top that contained many precious stones and pearls, but that the water "greatly aboundeth with leeches."[117] He described the same remedy with the lemons as previously mentioned for those who wished to obtain the precious stones: "Because of the vermin that are in it, they smear their arms and legs with the juice of lemons (it is a kind of fruit like small peaches), and then they do not worry about crocodiles or other vermin."[118] Mandeville

[115]*Mandeville* (2011), 105-06.

[116]Odoric, *The Travels of Friar Odoric* (1913), 171-72

[117]Ibid., 171.

[118]Ibid., 172.

later used this same story in his narrative, only according to him the lake was full of "many crocodiles and snakes and leeches."[119]

The danger that the lake presented could be overcome with lemon juice, just as fire was used to drive the snakes away from the pepper groves. A solution was presented to those who would wish to profit from the precious stones in the lake, even if they were messy (the smearing of fruit juices over the body) or potentially dangerous (setting fire to the pepper groves) because the prizes were worth the risk, especially to foreigners. However, the precautions against the dangers on Ceylon may not have applied to the adventurous Westerners who sought the resources there. Both Odoric and Mandeville even went so far as to claim that the beasts on the island would never hurt foreigners, and that they only attacked those born there.

> In this island there be sundry kinds of animals, both of birds and other creatures; and the country folk say that the wild beasts never hurt a foreigner, but only those who are natives of the island.[120]
>
> It is commonly said on this island that the snakes and the wild animals of the country never touch nor do any harm to any foreigner that enters the country, but only to those born in the country.[121]

This is unique in its explicit divide between "us" and "them" that we had only seen before in the abstract. However, both authors hedged their bets by claiming that this is not original information—Odoric claimed that "the country folk say" this and Mandeville that "it is commonly said on this island…" Even so, this story made itself part of the

[119]*Mandeville* (2011), 122.

[120]Odoric, *The Travels of Friar Odoric* (1913), 172-73.

[121]*Mandeville* (2011)., 122.

larger narrative and thus presented an opportunity for foreigners to circumvent the dangerous creatures of Ceylon.

India, the source of such wonders as the tales above, was also—according to Isidore of Seville—home to mountains of gold protected by dragons, griffins, and "human monsters of immense size."[122] Friar Jordanus mentioned the golden mountains and the griffins as well, only he placed them in Ethiopia and added "…serpents and venomous beasts, of vast size and venomous exceedingly."[123] Mandeville described similar mountains of gold but this time in Sri Lanka, where they were guarded by ants as large as dogs who separate the pure gold from the impure. But rather than suggesting fire or strong-smelling substances to scare them away, he proposed an act of subterfuge.

The simplest action was to wait until "it is intensely hot," and "the ants hide in the ground from terce until none, and at this time the people take camels, dromedaries, mares and other animals and they go to load them very stealthily and then they flee before the ants come out of the ground."[124] But he also described an elaborate ruse in which horses were saddled with large, empty containers and sent to graze near the ants and the mountains of gold. Because Mandeville claimed that "[t]heir nature is such that they leave nothing empty around them, whether a hole in the ground or anything else," the ants filled the containers with gold, allowing the people to simply call the horses back to

[122]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 286.

[123]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta*. (1963), 45.

[124]*Mandeville* (2011), 178.

retrieve their treasure.[125] Giant ants therefore joined the pantheon of beasts for medieval travelers to be on the lookout for.

A point in favor of these stories adding to the appeal of the East is that they each posed their own solutions to the danger. The authors gave audiences ways to get around snakes and leeches and crocodiles in order to stay safe. They were presented with a quest that already contained the answers, but that was not the only hazard to exploration: the land itself was also dangerous to travelers. As mentioned in Chapter III, it was rumored that the area around the Dead Sea (near the legendary locations of Sodom and Gomorrah) grew trees with fruit that looked beautiful and ripe but when opened were full of smoke and ash. In the *Etymologies,* the fruit dissolved when picked.

> Once this land was more fertile than Jerusalem, but today it is deserted and scorched, for due to the wickedness of its inhabitants fire descended from heaven that reduced this region to eternal ashes (Genesis 19:24-25). A kind of shadow image of it is visible to this day in its ashes and trees, for in this area there is flourishing fruit with such an appearance of ripeness that it makes one want to eat it, but if you gather it, it falls apart and dissolved in ashes and gives off smoke as if it were still burning.[126]

Both Gervase of Tilbury and John Mandeville further specify the legend by making the fruit trees explicitly into apples:

> In the land of Sodom apples grow which are very beautiful to look at. They grow in the usual season, and come to full ripeness in due time; but then if they are broken open, they yield only smoke and ashes.[127]
>
> And also trees grow nearby that bear very beautiful apples of a beautiful color to look at and seemingly fully ripe, but whoever breaks them open or slices them

[125]*Mandeville* (2011),178-79.

[126]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 287.

[127]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 571.

> through the middle will find nothing inside but ashes as a sign that through God's wrath the cities and the land were burned with Hellfire.[128]

Whether this was a deliberate reference to the Western belief that the forbidden fruit of Eden was an apple is unclear, but in all the accounts the reason for the corruption in this case is not the inherent threat of the East but lingering biblical malice. It was not enough that the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were struck from the map by biblical fire but, according to these writers, the land was forever tainted afterward. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah was used to explain how the fertility that marked the rest of the East was taken away until all that was left was the illusion of abundance.

There was danger lurking in the East greater than any beast. Besides bountiful spices and fruits, there were deadly horned serpents and giant ants guarding mountains of gold. That danger, however, was often directed at those who wanted to harvest these products. The serpents did not need to be driven away from the pepper groves unless the trees needed to be picked. To get the gems at the bottom of the lake on Ceylon, the leeches needed to be dispersed. It seemed initially as though anyone wandering into the East in search of riches was destined to put themselves in danger for the pursuit of wealth, but then that idea was challenged by the claim that foreigners were left alone by the numerous beasts that lived there.

In the same vein that led to the age of exploration just a few decades later, these stories offered up opportunities that could be taken advantage of. They offered ways around the danger to get to the resources that the East provided. But to be worth risking

[128]*Mandeville* (2011), 61.

such perilous conditions in the first place, the value of spices needed to be clearly articulated. That leads us to the next category: spices and the wealth they represented.

"Temples Built from Cinnamon and Blocks of Gold:" Spices and Wealth

There were many occasions when the description of lands laden with spices and native fruits were correlated with wealth, both because the spices themselves were valuable and that the lands (and rulers of such) which grew them were wealthy for that very reason. Sometimes it was simply that the "great abundance" described in the stories included both cinnamon and gold as valuable resources, or that emeralds grew out of the ground and thus provided easy sources of wealth.

Many of the wealthy kingdoms were said to be rich with precious gems and spices, and that the cities that became centers for trade such as Alexandria or Constantinople were full of merchants looking for wares. At the same time, there were claims that the people of these countries did not know how to take advantage of that wealth.[129] Religious conversion was the goal to many of these travelers when they encountered the people who lived in the East. Friar Jordanus praised the exploits of a fellow Catholic missionary when he said "[f]or one archbishop, a great man, Lord Zachary, was converted with his whole people; and we trust in the Lord that in a short time the whole residue shall be converted also, if only the good friars go on so."[130] These

[129]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta* (1963), 9.

[130]Ibid., 5-6.

were some justifications for Europeans to either convert the people there to Christianity or to take their riches and use them in the way they were "meant" to be used.

Many of the references to spices and luxury foods outside of Europe came to be conflated (or at least mentioned in conjunction with) the wealth of a specific region, city, or ruler. The presence of spices was not only appealing because it represented a profit to be made, but because Europeans saw themselves as better than the native people of Africa or India, and thus they had more claim to their resources. Friar Jordanus even says in *Mirabilia Descripta* that the people of Persia have "…much gold in the rivers, but they wot not how to extract it, nor be they worthy to do so."[131]

Often, when Near East or Africa are mentioned, the "riches" they contain are precious metals or gems, but in many instances, there are also great varieties of fruit trees or spices. According to Gervase of Tilbury on the "island of Heliopolis" in Ethiopia there are "two temples, very much alike; they are constructed of cinnamon and blocks of gold," and in the same passage Gervase emphasizes the island's olive and laurel trees as abundant resources as well. The temple on this island also contained "the sun's couch," which was made of "pure gold and ivory, inlaid with precious stones."[132]

This passage came from the last book of the *Otia Imperialia*, which was introduced with this descriptor: "Here begins the third book, containing marvels from every province, not all the marvels, but a selection from the total."[133] It is the section intentionally written to be diversionary. He also claims that the priest of the temple lived

[131]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta* (1963), 9.

[132]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 705-07.

[133]Ibid., 557.

"on a diet of frankincense and balsam" and that he "[slept] on the jeweled floor under the vines."[134] Instead of picking known foods that already had connotations of wealth, such as exotic meats or fruits, the Gervase picked non-edible, aromatic products specific to the East to enhance their use as items of status.

Status and spices came back into play when Mandeville wrote about the island of Java and its king, who was a rich and powerful lord. The author took the time to describe that the king's wealth lay not only in material riches but in what he grew. "All spices grow more abundantly there than in other places: such as ginger, cloves of gillyflower, cinnamon, setwall, nutmeg, and mace."[135] This was followed by a description of the traditional wealth (exemplified by precious metals) that lined his palace:

> The king of the country has a most noble and wonderful palace, and richer than any other in the world. For all the steps that rise to the halls and the rooms are of alternating gold and silver; and also the floors of the halls and the rooms are of alternating gold and silver; and all the walls on the inside are covered with gold and silver plating.[136]

That these passages fell one after another ties them together in describing the King of Java's wealth. He owns an abundance of silver and gold, yes, but spices also contribute to both his monetary and social value.

India was also the source of a large amount of wealth in the form of fertile lands and a variety of spices and precious gems. Isidore of Seville wrote that the country produced:

> …human beings of color, huge elephants, the animal called *monoceros* (i.e. the unicorn), the bird called parrot, a wood called ebony, and cinnamon, pepper, and

[134]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 707.

[135]Ibid., 117; Setwall was a common name for the herb valerian.

[136]Ibid., 117.

> sweet calamus. It also yields ivory and precious stones: beryls, chrysoprase, and diamonds, carbuncles, white marble, and small and large pearls much coveted by women of the nobility.[137] (italics in original)

Exotic animals and precious gems were easily imagined as commodities to be sold to the highest bidder—and as Isidore so helpfully said, the pearls were even coveted by the nobility. However, he did not specify whether that was the Indian or European nobility. Gervase of Tilbury made a very similar claim about the bounties of India using nearly the exact same wording,[138] which indicates to me that the text was most likely taken directly from (or influenced by) Isidore, a sentiment that Gervase's translators agree with. But spices were more practical and slightly more attainable to the lower class than precious gems. The fact that pepper and cinnamon are listed alongside diamonds does more to hammer home their importance than simply stating that they were coveted.

As mentioned in the previous section, gold was also said to be common in the East, and it remained an object of desire even if it was often guarded by dangerous beasts. Gemstones were also popular in these stories because they (like spices) were practical, portable examples of wealth, and both were used as representational examples of affluence. Isidore claimed that the woods of Arabia produced "both myrrh and cinnamon: it is the birthplace of the bird phoenix, and one finds precious stones there: the sardonyx, *iris* crystal, malachite, and opals."[139]

Other foods produced in the East were counted as wealth. Fertile soil was an object of interest, and as a result there were descriptions of the many fruit trees that grew

[137]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 286.

[138]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 191.

[139]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 286.

there. Jerusalem is in what is known as the Fertile Crescent, an area between the Nile River and the Tigris and Euphrates River valleys. In the writing it was known to be "wealthy in various resources, fertile in fruits of the earth, renowned for its waters, [and] rich in balsam-trees" according to Isidore of Seville.[140] He also stated that the land in Hadrumetum in Libya was so rich that seeds sown there returned crops nearly a hundredfold.[141] Friar Jordanus claimed that "[t]here be many other fruit trees of [diverse] kinds, which it would be tedious to describe in detail"—however, he took the time to marvel at such things as jackfruit, breadfruit, lemons, pomegranates, dates, coconuts, and "a fruit so sweet and delicious as it is impossible to utter in words."[142] On this last count the translator Henry Yule assigned that expressive description to the mango, though the author's definition is not specific enough to truly say on that account.[143]

In two separate instances, the soil of the East was seen as valuable beyond simply its ability to grow things worth selling. Gervase of Tilbury and John Mandeville both included passages (and of course Mandeville's may be a direct reference to its predecessor, but that does not negate the influence of either) that centered around the dirt near Hebron in Damascus. In the *Otia Imperialia*, a field of red soil "is dug up and eaten, and is taken to be sold in Egypt, where it fetches as high a price as the most costly spices."[144] The translators of this text attribute the value of the soil to the fact that, it was

[140]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 287.

[141]Ibid., 292.

[142]Jordanus. *Mirabilia Descripta* (1963), 13-15.

[143]Yule leaned towards mango because Jordanus used the term *aniba* to describe the tree, which was similar to the Persian word for mango, *amba*. However, Yule also admitted that it was equally similar to the Arabic term for grape, *einab*.

[144]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 811.

in “this field that God formed Adam; Adam and Eve returned there when they were expelled from paradise, and it was there that Cain killed Abel, and Adam was buried…”[145] The blessed nature of this dirt fell in opposition to the biblical curse upon the lands of Sodom and Gomorrah.

In Mandeville there was mention of “something reddish… extracted from the land that they call *Cambil* that people eat instead of spices, and is taken away to sell.”[146] In this instance, translator Iain Higgins posited that the reddish substance may have been powder from the flowers of the kamala tree, which were reported to have medicinal benefits. All these implications together pointed to the idea that the very soil of the East—at least in this valley—was valuable precisely because it was edible. It was sold at market, where it fetched prices “as high… as the most costly spices.” Both the *Otia Imperialia* and Mandeville also claim that no matter how much soil is carted away to be sold or eaten, no matter how deep the hole is dug, it will refill itself within the next year by the grace of God.

> However widely and deeply this field has been dug up, when the year comes to an end it is found to be rejoicing in the restoration, by God’s disposition, of the same amount of soil.[147]
>
> The pit cannot be made so deep or so wide that within a year’s time it is not completely full again and just the same, by God’s grace.[148]

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[145]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 810 note 1 and *Mandeville* (2011), 40-41.

[146]*Mandeville* (2011), 41.

[147]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 811.

[148]*Mandeville* (2011), 41.

Where we previously explored fruit trees cursed with hellfire, this valley was instead blessed to provide for those who lived there—not only in its miraculous edible property but in its ability to replenish itself year after year. It's unclear whether this perceived blessing came from the region's ties to great biblical events, but it was an excellent example of the perceived appeal of the East and its mythical place in the mind of the West.

The wealth of the East came from its geographic location, but its ascribed value came from the connotations. According to Mandeville, the gardens in Egypt "bear fruit seven times a year. And very many beautiful emeralds are found lying in the earth, and therefore they are cheap."[149] By this implication, the soil was so rich that it produced abundant harvests of fruits and spices, but also conventional riches from the very soil.

The East contained wealth in the form of spices, precious gems and metals, and an abundance of natural resources. This prompted the West to covet what they could only gain through trade. The stories painted a picture of Eastern resources as something foreign but potentially attainable, and the increased exploration that followed the late medieval period made that potential a reality.

[149]*Mandeville* (2011), 30.

CHAPTER VI

Spices as Narrative Symbol: The East from Afar

We have explored the historical context of both the spice trade and the Other in late medieval Europe. We found while examining the primary sources that the popularity of the spice trade led to narratives of wealth and power, but that the exoticism of the Other lead to narratives of possibility and adventure. What this revealed was that spices were indicative of the specific characteristics that defined the exotic: danger and desire.

Combining the historical and literary contexts, we know that spices were heavily valued, frequently sought after, and guarded by dangerous beasts. My analysis of the texts proves the first two and offers a solution to the third. If we look at the stories of snakes and pepper groves, apples that turn to ash, and temples made of gold and cinnamon, we find that they are reflections of the authors and their Western environment more so than the lands and the people they visited. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the connotations of wealth and danger were represented in the text frequently, but what did the spices mean? In the scheme of the late medieval period and the stories therein, what did they stand for?

Anthropologist Sherry Ortner explores this concept in her article "On Key Symbols," where she defines several categories which symbols could fall into. In her estimate, a symbol is "a vehicle for cultural meaning,"[150] and in this analysis spices indicate cultural meaning not only to the author but to the audience as well. Ortner defined two broad categories for her symbols—one was "summarizing" and the other

[150]Ortner, Sherry B, "On Key Symbols" *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 75, no. 5 (1973), 1339.

"elaborating." The first referred to a kind of synecdoche, a symbol which referenced an entire system due to reverence or prominence within society, but the second referred to a symbol that had the "capacity to order experience" and were known to appear in cultural behavior.[151]

Ortner then breaks down elaborating symbols into two further subsets: "root metaphors," which are symbols that a society built their culture around and "key scenarios," which are symbols that referenced "clear-cut modes of action appropriate to correct and successful living in the culture." I would argue that spices fall into the latter category if we consider the cultural capital ascribed to those who had access to them in medieval Europe. As the wealthy bought enormous amounts of spices, they were given greater status in society: they were seen as successful because of their interactions with the spice trade. This is an example of the power Ortner would give key symbols in their ability to order reality, or that Umberto Eco would call "a phenomenology of cultural tradition."[152]

The effect of wealth on the reality of late medieval Europe was an easy enough connection to explain if we looked at the time period of these works and their proximity to the age of European expansion and empire that would arise in the sixteenth century. The desire for the East was not exactly due to land—the climate from Jerusalem to Ethiopia and east to India contained numerous deserts that were unfamiliar to the more temperate Europeans—instead, their desire was in resources as a form of wealth.

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[151]Ortner, "On Key Symbols" (1973), 1340.

[152]Blanks, David, "The Sense of Distance and the Perception of the Other" *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1, no. 3 (2019), 1-48, see Umberto Eco, *Art and Beauty in the Middle Ages*, trans. Hugh Bredin (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 4. Originally published in 1959.

Securing a steady supply of such products by way of trade deals or straightforward expansion were common methods of expanding wealth. Spices represented an abundant source of income that could be taken advantage of, and the language used in travel writing: i.e. "All spices grow more abundantly there than in other places"[153] and "wealthy in various resources, fertile in fruits of the earth… rich in balsam-trees"[154] emphasized the amount of such resources with the potential to add to the status of Europe's elite.

It was not just physical resources, though. Despite the number of deserts and the high heat of the Near East, this geographic region produced a tremendous amount of organic growth. As Friar Jordanus noted: "There be many other fruit trees of [diverse] kinds, which it would be tedious to describe in detail" even as he filled sentences with descriptions of jackfruit, lemons, pomegranates, grapes, mangoes, coconuts, and date palms immediately preceding *and* following that statement.[155] This and the numerous references to spices such as cinnamon, ginger, and black pepper are symbolic of a different type of wealth. The fruits and spices signified fertile land and abundance that most likely appealed to those who lived in the cities of Western Europe—i.e., the ones who would most likely be able to read these primary sources and who would have been most impacted by the plague and famine that swept through the continent.

Friar Jordanus, Gervase of Tilbury, and the Mandeville author latched onto those things in the East that appealed to Western sensibilities, and those included spices. In Stefan Halikowski Smith's article "Demystifying a Change in Taste: Spices, Space, and

[153]Gervase, *Otia Imperialia* (2002), 117.

[154]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 287.

[155]Jordanus, *Mirabilia Descripta:* (1963), 13-15.

Social Hierarchy in Europe, 1380-1750," he examined how the appeal of spices manifested in Western society:

> Spices fitted into wider social currents of taste, both owing to their civilizing associations and as objects of value, symbols of prestige. Spices, as aromatics both rare and of inherent aesthetic pleasure, had been considered luxuries and thus a manifestation of civilization and a symbol of high society since the age of Sumerian legend (c.3000 BC).[156]

We learned how much spices mattered in the West in Chapter II, as symbols of wealth, treasures to be sought, and key scenarios to the medieval cultural tradition.

Spices acted as a touchstone for the limited audience these stories found in the West. The people in Europe were far more likely to come across black pepper at market then they were to see a griffin or pygmy. Due to their prices, spices were known but just out of the reach of most European peoples. They were recognizable but still a luxury that was known to come exclusively from the East.

But it's more than that: the depiction of spices that we see represented in the primary texts are quests and temptations—written by Europeans about resources they didn't own in places they viewed with caution. These stories illustrate the dichotomy of spices in the East as seen by Europeans in the late medieval period. On one hand, the East is dangerous and full of beasts, venomous serpents, and remnants of biblical hellfire. On the other, it is the source of riches—precious metals and gems, pearls, cinnamon, and sweet calamus.

My original claim was that references to spices in late medieval texts contributed to the exoticization of the East in the European consciousness, but what I had not

[156]Smith, Stefan Halikowski, "Demystifying a Change in Taste: Spices, Space, and Social Hierarchy in Europe, 1380-1750" *The International History Review* 29, no. 2 (2007), 245. See D. Erasmus "Institutio Principis Christiani" (1516), trans. and annotated N.M. Cheshire and M.J. Heath *Collected Works of Erasmus* (Toronto, 1974), xxvii, 262.

anticipated was the breadth of impact these stories had on all facets of social life in medieval Europe. The importance of spices had economic, religious, and cultural importance, all of which I have explored here. The appeal of Eastern spices was reflected in the way that they were written about, and it added another layer to the historical dichotomy of "us" versus "them." While Medieval Studies' focus on the monstrous and grotesque is the most popular example, this thesis introduced foodways as an alternate starting point because it came from a similar context of European writers viewing the Eastern world through the filter of their own beliefs. Food in medieval Europe has been studied in the past, as has the cultural effect of the spice trade, but this thesis combined the two by looking at the narrative symbolism of both together.

Using food to explore othering is not a new idea in Folklore, but there is room to explore it further in the context of Medieval Studies; an era largely been defined by its monsters and not its food. The next step to take in continuing the research begun in this thesis would be to analyze the use of spices in late medieval works produced in the *East*. Instead of an exoteric view of the issue, this would provide an esoteric one. This would expand our understanding of how spices were used as narrative symbols between 1250 and 1500 C.E. by addressing more perspectives.

The interplay of "us" and "them" as Western authors wrote about the East was a fitting example of sensationalism and exoticism. Spices were grown specifically in the East, and they were desired heavily by Europeans, leading to increased interest not only in the foods themselves but in the lands they came from. And the stories that emerged generated curiosity because they offered up chances to acquire those spices and precious commodities. Writers suggested scaring snakes, repelling leeches, and outsmarting giant

ants to access their treasures. For learned Europeans, reading about such things must have seemed like adventure.

Modern Spice

These stories were not just confined to the pages of books, though. They were influenced by the cultural nuances of society just as much as had an impact on them. When Ortner connected storytelling with its ability to order reality, she also called to mind Bauman's ideas on narrative. He said "[o]ral performance, like all human activity, [was] situated, its form, meaning, and functions rooted in culturally defined scenes and events,"[157] which aligned with the impact that Western society had upon its writers' outlook on the East. This manifested sometimes in the narrative importance of certain things known to be prominent in Western society—black pepper for one, which took up a large portion of these narratives—or the reference to pearls in the *Etymologies* specifically because they were coveted by the nobility.[158] Other times it was the transposing of Western religious ideas on the landscape of the East, such as the apple trees driven to desolation due to the wrath of a Christian God.[159] But Ortner's "key symbols" brought this idea full circle: as the cultural values of a society influenced its literature, said literature also reinforced these cultural values.

The view of spices as exotic led to their depiction as commodities worth exploring far-off lands to acquire, and this image influenced those who used the stories as

[157]Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (1986), 3.

[158]Isidore, *Etymologies* (2005), 286.

[159]Ibid., 287.

an excuse to go out and find these treasures. Following the example of Vasco de Gama in 1497, explorers from the sixteenth century onward set out "in search of spices" at the behest of their kings and queens. The spice trade was so valuable that, during the age of exploration, European powers sent their explorers by sea to gain independent footholds to undercut the Eastern middlemen that had historically brought spices into Europe for so many years. In 1511 the same King Manuel I of Portugal who sent de Gama into the East also ordered Afonso de Albuquerque to capture Malacca (now a part of Malaysia) for this very reason.[160]

The most easily seen example of the reciprocal relationship of cultural tradition and storytelling today is its use in marketing. In Chapter IV, Robert Steele explained the way that the increasing commercialization of industry in the post-Medieval world contributed to the decline of the more marvelous aspects of marketing, but I think it has just become more subtle. Today, spices are not as mythical or expensive as they once were—though perhaps the latter depends on the spice—but that does not mean spices are no longer tied to their historical roots in exoticization or mythic connotations. Terms still float around today such as "Madagascar vanilla," "Columbian roast," or "Ceylon cinnamon," all phrases that provide a kind of shorthand for high quality goods in a commercial setting. Today this shorthand has become the same kind of marketing scheme as the stories in the late Medieval period, driving up prices and creating an image in the popular consciousness of ascribed value.[161]

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[160]Brás de Albuquerque, 1557 *Comentários do Grande Afonso de Albuquerque* ed. António Baião (Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade, 1923), part II ch. XVII.

[161]For more on food and geographic indicators see Sebastian Felix Schwemer, "Food for Thought — Revisiting the Rationale of Law-Based Food Origin Protection," and for exoticism and food see Faustine Régnier, "Spicing up the Imagination: Culinary Exoticism in France and Germany, 1930–1990."

And yes, these can indicate national pride in the popularity of a product, but sometimes these terms are not even geographically accurate—Ceylon cinnamon (ignoring the fact that Ceylon has been Sri Lanka since 1972) is grown commercially in India and Indonesia. Cardamom is used in most chai spices in India, but the bulk of it now comes from Guatemala. Many of these are now relics from the age of expansion and discovery when those spices were unearthed by Westerners and subsequently named after their explorations.

The fact that we still use these terms, that they still carry connotations of quality and geography that no longer apply, speaks to the way that those ideas have burrowed into our collective subconscious. The persistence of the story of snakes guarding the pepper groves and the fact that it spanned a minimum of six hundred years between the *Etymologies* and the *Otia Imperialia* shows the endurance of our exoteric understanding of spices. Western stories about the East resurfaced with a vengeance in the Orientalist art and academia of late-nineteenth century Europe, and they were brimming with the same desire and fear that permeated late medieval narratives.

In all these stories, food was the thread that tied them together. Food was an important part of considering the Other in Medieval Studies. There were lots of stories about the monstrous and twisted depictions of humanity that emerged out of Western fear of the East, but the othering occurred in everyday settings as well. Black pepper and pearls were innocuous on their own, but through a sensationalistic author they became something more. While the monstrous of the East was confined to depictions of distant experiences, spices found their way into the markets and cities of Europe where they became concrete commodities to the people there.

Spices still play a part our everyday lives, and our stories have evolved with them. We have new age cacao ceremonies meant to boost spiritual health just as our ancestors thought pepper could balance their humors. We have commercials of people picking coffee beans in the Columbian rainforest meant to link “us” with “them.” Mandeville, Gervase, Isidore, Jordanus, and the rest of these late medieval authors transmitted stories of spices that persist today and continue to ascribe meaning—both to them *and* their Eastern roots.

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