

BOOK REVIEWS

DI FEBO, Martina 2025. *In un mondo di carta e di pergamena. Il romanzo dei cavalieri in viaggio*. Milano/Udine: Mimesis. ISBN 9791222320700. Paperback, € 20.

The year 2024 marked the seventh centenary of Marco Polo's death. Conferences, exhibitions and new editions brought the *Devisement dou monde* back into the spotlight. The figure of the most famous of the Venetian navigators renewed the fascination for the *homo viator*, who, travelling through unknown lands, grounded his narrative in direct experience. If the Middle Ages experienced a 'realistic' side to travel, no less significant — and perhaps even more influential — was the parallel production of imagined journeys, which claimed the same veracity as empirical accounts and often had a profound impact on the romance. It is precisely in this liminal space, between evidence and fiction, that Martina Di Febo's research trajectory is situated. When *Mirabilia e merveille: le trasformazioni del meraviglioso nei secoli XII-XV* (*Mirabilia* and *merveille: The Transformations of the Marvelous in the 12th-15th centuries*) appeared in 2015, Di Febo's work stood out as one of the most original contributions to the debate on the marvelous in the Middle Ages. This was not only due to the extent of its diachronic survey — from early medieval collections of *portenta* to late 14th-century accounts — but also to the perspective adopted: the study did not merely describe the persistence of motifs or the popularity of folkloric imagery but questioned their epistemological status. In other words, Di Febo did not merely question which creatures or phenomena populated the texts, but rather how they were legitimized, what their status of reality was within a constantly changing discursive system. What emerged was a picture of a Middle Ages undergoing a crucial process of transformation: the ontological substantialization of the *mirabilia*, guaranteed by direct witness, *oculata fide* and the *auctoritas* of the writers. Among the many paths opened up by the book, the fourth chapter offered a glimpse of a research direction destined to continue beyond the collections of *mirabilia* by Giraldus Cambrensis and Gervasius of Tilbury, touching on the uncertain threshold of fourteenth-century travelers. Analyzing those texts, Di Febo showed how visionary fiction increasingly disguised itself as odeporic narrative, adopting its stylistic

features and rhetoric: the first-person voice, the *argumentum veritatis*, the use of alleged witnesses. The otherworldly or imagined elsewhere, far from being presented as pure allegory, was anchored to a travel-related reference and an experience-supported veracity, capable of projecting the improbable into the framework of a narrated and shareable reality.

From this point of view, *Mirabilia e merveille* can be reinterpreted today not only as a complete monograph, but as the necessary premise of a research path that has engaged Di Febo since the beginning and that goes further with the most recent essay. It is where the marvelous turns into journey and literature questions its tools of credibility that *In un mondo di carta e di pergamena. Il romanzo dei cavalieri in viaggio* (In a World of Paper and Parchment. The Romance of Wandering Knights) comes into play: without abandoning the marvelous, it shifts focus to romance and traveling knights; from the substantialization of *mirabilia* to the rhetorics of the journey — real or imagined — which shaped medieval imagination and fiction.

The first chapter, *Viaggi ultraterreni, esplorazioni reali e descrizione di mirabilia* (“Otherworldly Journeys, Real Explorations, and Descriptions of Marvels”), shows Di Febo’s ability to combine philological criticism and textual anthropology. The section begins with the genre of *visiones*, showing how 12th-century otherworldly literature developed structures later central to travel writing. The catabasis of the knight Owein “in anima et corpore” in the *Tractatus de purgatorio sancti Patricii* inaugurates a narrative approach which, despite its parenetic and theological roots, takes the form of a true travelogue. At its center is the construction of the *argumentum veritatis*: the distinction between narrator and writer, the guarantee of clerical *auctoritas*, the recording of space-time coordinates that inscribe the extraordinary within an ascertainable context. From the *non credenda* to the *credenda*, narrated and transcribed, a discursive laboratory emerges where boundaries between imaginary and real blur. The element of certification *oculata fide*, already examined within the pages of *Mirabilia*, becomes here an organizing criterion, capable of illuminating both otherworldly wanderings and descriptions of natural marvels collected by authors such as Giraldus Cambrensis. The strength of the analysis lies in showing how visionary writing is not limited to a repertoire of fantastical figures, but sets the stage for a true *modus narrandi* later inherited by travel accounts. The otherworld becomes a navigable landscape, demons and chthonian ladies become encounters along a route, with Purgatory mapped like real terrain: the concretely posed model of apodemic experience provides a solid frame of reference for the orderly display of *exotica*. In this metamorphosis, the Middle Ages discovered

the narrative efficacy of travel as a cognitive device, and travel literature opened to a dialectic between *mirabilia* and veridiction.

The second chapter, *Viaggi reali: breve panoramica* (“Real Journeys: A Brief Overview”), begins with Latin odeporic accounts, where author, protagonist, and narrator coincide, and authority is guaranteed by the direct testimony of the writer. This seemingly solid balance is disrupted in the *Devisement dou monde*, where Marco Polo’s voice is intertwined with Rustichello da Pisa’s. The Franco-Italian redaction (ms. F) retains signs of instability that later versions try to resolve by making the voices more coherent and hiding the gap between actual experience and literary structure. Di Febo shows how this tension does not only concern the *Devisement*, but more broadly affects the genesis of travel writing, whenever the informer’s voice relies on an editor. This tandem method, common in medieval travel discourse, combined the knowledge of an *auctor-dictator*, bearer of information and memories of the itinerary, and the editorial skills of an *auctor-scriptor*, responsible for the stylistic form and editorial shaping of the text. Francesco Pipino’s Latin translation of the *Milione* finds an eloquent parallel in Jean le Long’s work on Odorico da Pordenone’s *Relatio*: in both cases, the intervention of the translator-writer tends to suppress the dual authorship of the text, obliterating the writer’s voice (Rustichello for Marco, Guglielmo da Solagna for Odorico) in favor of a homogeneous and coherent narrative. Thus, the polyphonic testimony still visible in earlier versions is progressively stabilized, leading to the legitimization and normalization of the genre. The strength of Di Febo’s analysis lies in the constant attention to manuscript tradition, considered not simply as a medium but as a dynamic space of tension, mediation, and rewriting. For it is precisely in the comparison between different versions and translations that the fluid identity of travel writing emerges: a genre that finds its own identity not in fixedness but in the unstable negotiation between its component voices.

The third chapter, *Viaggi immaginari, viaggi immaginati: dalla scrittura odeporico-enciclopedica alla parola romanzesca* (“Imaginary Journeys, Imagined Journeys: From Travel Writing and Encyclopedic Writing to Fiction”), identifies a 14th-century turning point: first-person accounts became central, overcoming the informer/writer split still present in the *Devisement dou monde*. The *Livre des merveilles du monde* by Jean de Mandeville fits into this context. It is the second major vernacular travel narrative after the *Devisement*, but entirely fictional. The *Livre* is constructed around the central figure of an *auctor/agens* who presents himself as a traveler and guarantor of his own experience, while

drawing on a vast library of sources: the autodiegetic mask binds disparate materials, lending coherence and authority to a composite discourse.¹ Di Febo shows how this disguise allowed rewriters to add interpolations that end up modifying the main narrator's voice. This process of *mouvance* reflects the narrator's polysemic performance, turning the work into a privileged laboratory for medieval textuality.

Once again, the analysis is based on a careful examination of the *Livre's* manuscript tradition, through its different versions — continental, insular, and the so-called *Ogier version* — each with distinct strategies of enunciation and veridiction. The traveler's 'I' often yields to the impersonal tone of a treatise, marked by historical present and third person. In this sense, the *Livre* shows a structural affinity with Marco Polo's *Devisement*, while adopting different strategies: whereas the protagonists of 'real' accounts sometimes tend to downgrade narratives perceived as fictitious, Mandeville tends to confirm and validate, in the name of experience, a series of marvels with a distinctly literary flavor.² The result is a hybrid text that expands historiography by blending registers from encyclopedic treatise to Arthurian romance. This hybridization produces a dialogical form that unites encyclopedic knowledge, epic legacy, and fictional motifs under the sign of the 'parchment' knight. Around this figure, Mandeville reconfigures the boundaries of travel, opening them to an ever-expanding spatiality and a conception of the marvelous as a shared experience.³

The fourth chapter, *Proliferazione di viaggi immaginati: epigoni di Mandeville?* ("Proliferation of Imaginary Journeys: Followers of Mandeville?"), broadens the focus to late medieval texts that draw on Mandeville's model. The *Libro del conocimiento de todos los reynos del mundo*, Raimon de Perelhos' *Viatge al Purgatori*,⁴ Antoine de la Sale's *Paradis de la reine Sibylle*, and Jacopo da Sanseverino's *Viaggio dei quattro cavalieri* share with the *Livre des merveilles* the centrality of

1. In a previous essay (DI FEBO 2016), devoted to the dialogue between the *Livre* and the *Roman d'Alexandre*, the author showed how the merveilles of the Alexandrine corpus, from literary fictions, rise to the status of factual reality through Mandeville's enunciative and veridical strategies.

2. On these aspects, see also DI FEBO (2021).

3. Similarly, at the beginning of the 15th century, in the travel diary of the conquerors of the Canary Islands (*Le Canarien*), "the adventures of the heroes of parchment acquire the status of factual truth" (DI FEBO 2021, 93), tracing the lines of a path of exploration entrusted to the emulation of the exploits of fictional knights.

4. See DI FEBO 2013a, 2013b.

a traveling *I* as guarantor, the hybridization of encyclopedic repertoires and *mirabilia*, and the concealment of literary sources behind the veil of experience: they replicate the enunciative and veridictive dynamic established by Mandeville as a model. Di Febo shows how the autodiegetic voice of the traveling knight becomes a replicable device, crossing genres and extending the boundaries of travel literature.

The journey ends with a look towards the East, a place where the 13th and 14th centuries projected the adventures of paladins, expanding the epic universe through new directions. Indeed, the final chapter, *Paladini e cavalieri in Oriente: epica, romanzo e relazione di viaggio* (“Paladins and Knights in the East: Epic, Romance, and Travelogue”), examines how the Levant becomes, like the Breton forests, a liminal space. The hypotext remains that of the Alexandrian galaxy, but later knights travel as questing heroes, suspended between marvel and faith. The *Entrée d’Espagne* takes Roland to the East on an adventure, while the *Roman d’Alexandre en prose*, in the version attested by the Stockholm manuscript KB Vu 20, shows a plurality of voices, blending homodiegetic narration with the referential style of scientific treatises. However, it is with Andrea da Barberino that this process finds its accomplishment. The *Guerrin Meschino* is not only an adventure romance but a profound reconfiguration of epic and romance discourse: an encyclopedic, polyphonic text where the knight errant becomes narrator and witness, absorbing the *auctor/agens* function. Andrea da Barberino brings together Mandeville’s legacy and epic-romanesque accounts, turning *Guerrin Meschino* into a compendium of knowledge and a model for later chivalric fiction. It is no coincidence that Cervantes, in chapter XLIX of *Don Quixote*, has the *hidalgo* of La Mancha protest against those who discredit books of chivalry, claiming the irrefutable reality of figures such as “Guarino Mezquino”:⁵ proof that Guerrin’s allure and legacy remained alive well beyond his life of paper and parchment.

Arising from the pages of this monograph is the awareness that the Middle Ages found in travel — whether real or imagined — a device capable of interweaving different genres and registers, experimenting with new forms of veridiction and narration. The odeporic pattern lies at the crossroads between informative discourse and fiction, creating tension and often mixing textual models that refer to different traditions. The figure of the traveling knight, at the center of this laboratory, becomes the emblem of a kind of literature that, far from being fragmented into parallel traditions, transforms them into a single plot. The result is a coherent and innovative

5. See DI FEBO 2021, 69–70.

account that illuminates the continuity between odeporics and romance, recognizing their founding role in the cultural history of the Middle Ages. This perspective, capable of decoding travel as a generative device rather than a simple repertoire of themes, reveals the innovative potential of this monograph and its original contribution.

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