

*Trade and Romance*. Michael Murrin.

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From Alexander the Great to the Apollonius of Philostratus, Western imagination was drawn to “Farther Asia.” Although the most influential texts of biblical, Homeric, and Virgilian literature were focused on the Mediterranean basin, the lands of the East held sway to conquerors and writers alike. But it was only in the fourteenth century that Marco Polo described his journey to China — and dictated an account that furnished the first empirical information about the world that had not been described in Western writing since Hellenistic times (there were Arabic writings since the ninth century). That Marco Polo, like his father, was eager for trade and profit is crucial for Michael Murrin’s thesis in this immensely informative book. For it was trade and the writings of merchants, ambassadors, and other wanderers that gave shape to some of the great literary works from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century in Western Europe. For Murrin, and without, of course, ignoring the genius of men such as Chaucer, Tasso, Camões, Milton, and others, it was the writings of traders that inspired stories, epics, and chronicles.

“This book has three aims,” Murrin begins. First, the book explores “Farther Asia” in “European heroic literature” over a period of “four hundred years.” Second, it shows how much the “mercantile class” was behind the Asiatic thrust that produced the documents that poets consulted. And third, Murrin examines the “actualities behind what seem to be fantastic.” To do so, he consults the cartographic and geographic literature of the times, but he also travels into the many regions that he describes: east of the Caspian Sea all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Given the variants in nomenclature and transliteration, the visits to locations mentioned in the texts allow Murrin to interject personal observations about topics ranging from wind direction to navigational routes and mines (“this mine still functions in Afghanistan” [242]).

Murrin studies the Mongols (or, rather, accounts during the Mongol period), the Portuguese, and the English. In the first unit, he traces Marco Polo’s description of the so-called assassins and how much distance in time and space “creates romance” (42). Murrin analyzes the reasons why such a description should have found appeal in later

generations and locates the answer in the readership of Marco Polo's text. This matter of readership could well be a fourth theme in the book: to whom did writers address their works, be they travelers/merchants or poets? To answer this question, Murrin examines Chaucer's "Squire's Tale" and shows how it was aimed "upward to the aristocracy and downward to the urban middling sort." He continues with a discussion of Boiardo's *Orlando innamorato* and how this version of the hero's journey reflects the Western commercial interest in gold mines.

In the discussion of the Portuguese, Murrin traces the journey of Vasco da Gama and Camões's use of its subject matter in *Os Lusíadas*. While the Mongol unit largely focused on China, this unit focuses on India and the first encounter between Latin Christians and Hindus. Murrin examines other texts that contributed to *The Lusiads* and focuses on descriptions of Goa and Calicut. The English unit includes discussion of Marlowe, whose *Tamburlaine* (part 1) lends itself to geographic-commercial associations; *The Faerie Queene*, books 1 and 2; and Milton's *A Brief History of Moscovia* and *Paradise Lost*. As with earlier discussions, Murrin takes account of the vast scholarship in the field, and he traces the travels of English merchants across Russia toward the East. Again, an important part of the discussion of Spenser's epic romance is the audience and how chivalric romances, although denounced by humanists, were the reading matter that tradesmen bought (211). The discussion of Milton's *Moscovia* and *Paradise Lost* shows how the "dream" of "Farther Asia" waned. Murrin challenges the dating of the former text in order to explain Milton's disenchantment with the Russia-China venture in *Paradise Lost*. Although Milton made mistakes in his geography (much of it from Purchas and others), he did that intentionally, Murrin states, in order to inject the poem with "a sense of all the time and space in the world" (255).

This book is dense with information (and mercifully with footnotes rather than endnotes). It is a record of Murrin's own travels through merchants' histories and correspondence, and an original study of some of the greatest poets in the European tradition, and the hidden roads and regions of "Farther Asia."

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