

Peter Mason. *Before Disenchantment: Images of Exotic Animals and Plants in the Early Modern World*.

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Descriptions of the New World in early modern literature, even those based on firsthand traveler's reports, on discoveries and explorations, have often been shown to convey more myth and fantasy than reliable information. How does this apply to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century natural historical sources and so-called scientific illustrations that introduced the exotic flora and fauna of these newly discovered lands? It has often been assumed that the sixteenth century marked a turning point in natural history and illustration, exemplified by descriptive and empirical zoological texts, devoid of the moralistic and allegorical appendages that characterized traditional animal literature, as in Pierre Belon's *De aquatilibus libri duo* (1553) and *L'histoire de la nature des oyseaux* (1555), or Guillaume Rondelet's *Libri de*

piscibus marinis (1553). From this point of view, these publications were exceptional for their time, however, Belon also transmitted unreliable descriptions and depictions of fabulous creatures derived from secondhand sources.

Peter Mason sets out to demonstrate that there are no clear boundaries between reality and fantasy in the depictions of flora and fauna from the New World. He advocates, in his words, “a ‘baroque’ reading of images of the natural world” (35). The term *baroque* is employed to define the bizarre and exotic imagery presented in these studies, where human and animal, vegetable and mineral, or botanical and zoological, as we would define them, are indiscriminately intermingled. Mason underlines the importance of non-printed sources, such as drawings, paintings, and sculpture, in addition to printed books.

In the Introduction, the author establishes the geographical and chronological focus of his book, from the Canary Islands to Pacific coast of South America between approximately 1500 till the mid-seventeenth century. The parameters of approach to the natural world in early modern Europe are established in part 1; part 2 then examines European responses to firsthand experience or reports on the flora or fauna of exotic regions. The various chapters introduce fascinating evidence of actual and imaginary natural discoveries based on a broad selection of printed and non-printed sources, with emphasis on the derivation and transmission of bizarre images, such as the dragon tree (chapter 1), birds that grow on trees (chapter 2), and hybrid creatures (chapter 3). Chapter 4 is devoted to the *Exoticorum libri decem* of Charles de l’Ecluse, whose information about flora and fauna derived from oral, written, and visual information about America following the Dutch and Spanish expeditions to the South Atlantic. Chapter 5 is a study of the *Mexicanarum Plantarum Imagines* (1613, printed 1624), a vast scientific work on the natural history of the New World, undertaken under the auspices of the Accademia dei Lincei, Rome, with emphasis on the profusely illustrated section of the *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus* and its later additions. Mason extends this chapter to illustrate the influence of the circle of the Lincei and other sources, such as the posthumous works of Ulisse Aldrovandi, on zoological depictions by Northern painters, particularly Peter Paul Rubens and Johannes Faber in the seventeenth century. Chapter 6 deals with the Peruvian “Camel-sheep,” and the hump-backed camelid, described as a hybrid by Antonio Pigafetta, chronicler of Magellan’s Voyage (in volume 1 of Giovanni Battista Ramusio, *Navigazioni e viaggi* [1550–59]), illustrated by Conrad Gesner (in the second edition of *Icones, Animalium Quadrupedium* [1560]), and perpetuated by images during the mid-sixteenth century. In Chapter 7 the author resumes his introductory debate with William B. Ashworth, Jr., who cited the *Historia naturalis Brasiliae* of 1648, as “the first book devoted to the natural history of one localized region in the New World . . . the Dutch colony of Brazil” (16) “marking a turning-point that changed the face of natural history forever” (197). The assertion that progress in the art of scientific illustration was moving in a backward direction may be somewhat controversial, but the author provides ample evidence to convince us of “the enchantment that the natural world held for its early modern observers” (222).

This book fills a void in literature dealing with New World discoveries. The questions of animal depictions, and particularly those of mythical creatures, have rarely been addressed. This is a welcome and important contribution for scholars of early modern cultural history, particularly those interested in imagery that reveals more about exotic expectations than about the impenetrable reality of foreign lands. In other words “portrayals of another culture are important for what they tell us about the observer rather than the observed” (Stuart Schwartz, ed., *Implicit Understandings: Observing, Reporting, and Reflecting on the Encounters between Europeans and Other Peoples in the Early Modern Era*, Cambridge, 1994, 1–2).

A more interpretive and contextual approach, primarily in the introduction, would have further enriched this presentation. By demonstrating the communality to be found with other genres of writing, the author might have conveyed a more comprehensive understanding of the issues. Parallels could be drawn, for example, with contemporary travel literature, geographical or ethnographical writings, and visual depictions, illustrating fantastic and imaginative perceptions and similar fascination with the bizarre. In many cases such distorted images are the result of misinformation, but the tenacity of myth and fantasy is deeply rooted. These issues open up new questions to be addressed. In addition to the wealth of knowledge it so beautifully presents, Mason’s book is an invaluable source for those who will question the motivations, whether psychological, political, social, or otherwise, that are deeply rooted in early modern perceptions of exotic worlds.

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