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Credibility, Narrative, and Hakluyt’s Principall
Navigations*

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Schleck, Julia, "*Plain Broad Narratives of Substantial Facts*": *Credibility, Narrative, and Hakluyt’s Principall Navigations*" (2006). *Faculty Publications -- Department of English*. 196.

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“Plain Broad Narratives of Substantial Facts”: Credibility, Narrative, and Hakluyt’s Principall Navigations*

by JULIA SCHLECK

This article compares voyage narratives printed in Richard Hakluyt’s 1589 Principall Navigations to contemporaneous travel histories in an effort to contextualize the epistemological status of each group of texts and debunk the former’s reputation for greater factuality. It critiques the use commonly made of Hakluyt’s narratives in literary studies, arguing that the privileging of these texts over other sources results in postcolonial studies that ironically valorize a type of writing which promoted the colonial mindset these studies seek to expose.

1. INTRODUCTION

When J. A. Froude attacked the narrative style of Richard Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations of the English Nation* (1589) in his 1852 review of the Hakluyt Society’s first three publications, Sir Walter Alexander Raleigh (1861–1922) leapt to Hakluyt’s defense, insisting that “[There is something important] to be found in these long and dull lists of unknown names, of merchant promoters, gentlemen adventurers, intending colonists, and ship’s companies, which give so business-like an air to Hakluyt’s pages. It may be true . . . that these detailed summaries ‘leave as little impression of excitement . . . upon our minds as so many almanacks.’ But they held in them the promise of Empire.”¹ Few critics now concern themselves with the almanac-like style of many of Hakluyt’s tales; the promise of empire has attracted far more attention. Hakluyt’s sprawling collection of travel narratives now occupies a central place in the growing literature treating crosscultural exchange in the early modern period. Featured heavily in the field of early transatlantic studies for many years, the popularity of

*A preliminary version of this article was read at the annual meeting of The Renaissance Society of America in 2004. I am grateful to the panel’s respondent, Michèle Longino, for her thoughtful commentary and for her enthusiasm regarding the ideas expressed in this paper. Thanks are due as well to Ernest Gilman, John Archer, John Guillory, David Landreth, Elizabeth Bearden, and Kelly Stage, all of whom provided helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article, and, of course, to John, without whose witty intellect and support my titles (and my work) would fall entirely flat.

¹Raleigh, 120. Froude’s article was initially published in the *Westminster Review* in July 1852.

the *Navigations* has only increased with the recent expansion of the critical lens to encompass the “Old Worlds” of the Near East, Africa, and the Mediterranean.² Yet for all the visibility this collection of travel tales has achieved in modern scholarship, the *Principall Navigations* has retained one thing in common with the almanac: both are consulted far more often than they are considered as a whole.

The *Principall Navigations* has suffered more than most from the fate of many prose works in modern criticism: to be mined for short quotations which serve as textual sound-bites for generalized discussions of English attitudes towards the foreign in all its guises. This return to the archive, which characterizes the most recent direction of historicist studies, is generally laudable; however, the return to the practice of illustrative quoting associated with the inclusion of more archival material raises several methodological issues that should be kept in view as we attempt to broaden our historical knowledge and description of the period.³ Foremost among these is the historical nature of reading practices, and the necessity of being conscious of the anachronisms that can result when reading a text filtered through the lens of modern generic expectations. This article will address this issue by reading Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations* against a set of contemporaneous travel narratives, and by placing early modern generic expectations against modern ones. It argues that the frequent use of Hakluyt’s text for the purpose of illustrative quoting is based in modern generic assumptions that allow for the dissecting of a tale in a way that would puzzle early modern readers.

Critical literature on Hakluyt can easily be divided into two camps, the vast body of criticism which quotes from a few of Hakluyt’s voyages, using them as historical source material, and a considerably smaller group of pieces which either focus on a particular tale within the *Navigations* or treat the publications of Richard Hakluyt (1552?–1616) and his editorial practices as a whole. These latter studies tend to focus on Hakluyt’s complicity in promoting early colonial endeavors and the significant role his publications played in achieving that goal. As Emily Bartels succinctly summarizes,

²For a prime example of this expanding geographical lens, see Archer.

³One of the best examples of this practice can be found in the first half of Vitkus, 145–69. D’Amico aptly displays the less-felicitous but still common practice of mining the *Principall Navigations* for extremely short quotations which are then used to buttress more general cultural claims: see, for example, 50–53, 58–59, 63–66. The frequent practice of “quarrying” the *Navigations* has been noted by Payne as well, who cites it in support of his contention that “the long-term impact of Hakluyt is to be found in the transmission of texts” (21); see also 20–25.

“Hakluyt’s mission was to push the English court towards an imperialist future by crafting England’s spotty record overseas into an extensive history of continued progress.”⁴ However, this work is never acknowledged or taken into account when short quotations are snipped from a longer tale within the *Navigations*, largely because Hakluyt’s compilation is implicitly regarded as one of the least problematic of early modern source materials. As an editor, Hakluyt has long been touted as “conscientious . . . an historian’s dream”; as a set of voyage narratives, the stories in the *Navigations* are “grave, sensible, restrained.”⁵ Mainly firsthand accounts written in a sober, business-like, and all-around factual manner, the tales in the *Principall Navigations* read remarkably like modern prose nonfiction, and are usually treated as such. Almost all critics agree: whether complicit in English colonialism or not, Hakluyt’s voyages are among the most accurate and reliable English accounts of early modern nations available.⁶

The problem with this view lies in the assumed empiricism and factuality that lie behind these praises: these concepts either did not exist, or were not necessarily valued, when the text was first published. Snipping out tiny bits of text to use as illustration implies the divisibility of the details in the voyages, the ability to separate them legitimately into bits of knowledge (that is, facts) without damaging the epistemological status of the piece as a whole. If these travel tales were not understood to be so divisible at the time, the practice is anachronistic when applied to early modern texts. As such, early modern travel narratives provide us a cautionary tale about historicizing the way that texts are read, especially the way in which

⁴Bartels, 54. See also Helgerson.

⁵Neville-Sington, 68; Williamson. Fuller, 149, rightly notes that despite the utter lack of detailed biographical information of Hakluyt’s character, an indefinable matrix of the man, his editorial style, and the actual material of the *Navigations* are “not infrequently . . . described in characterological terms” (this is especially true when Hakluyt is being contrasted with Purchas, as discussed below); see also *ibid.*, 1–15, 141–74.

⁶Bartels, 54, notes with zest that “If anyone [in the Renaissance] wanted the latest scoop on Africa, hot off the press, the place to turn was Hakluyt’s *Principall Navigations*, which brought the English expeditions to Africa — and Africa as a reality — into England’s (literate) public domain. That reality is notably disjointed, sometimes contradictory and elusive, but it nonetheless — and *consequently* — challenged the stereotypes as they had not been challenged before.” Cribb, 107, labels the “faithful redactions” in the *Navigations* “actual history,” especially when graced by numerous navigational details. Fuller, 14, correctly insists that “while the politics of . . . Victorian histories have long been out of date, they continue to exert a powerful influence on the way we think about the relation of the voyages to literature,” and, I would add, to history writing, since Hakluyt’s tales appear most often in the “historical” sections of literary critical works.

nonfiction source materials — or, as the Elizabethans put it, true and credible tales — are accorded the credibility they seek.

This article attempts to trace early modern standards of truth in prose travel writing, and the way in which credibility might (or might not) have been granted to each text. It questions the assumed reliability of Hakluyt’s tales, not by claiming that Hakluyt’s voyages are inaccurate, but by reminding us that such an evaluation is always culturally determined, and, therefore, not an ahistorical, fixed point of reference. Instead, it is a category itself available for historical and literary analysis. Following the work of Steven Shapin, I argue that the *Navigations*’ early modern popularity was not a function of its empiricism or factual-seeming narrative conventions, but of the status of its contributors, whose goals in traveling and writing were openly colonial. Hakluyt’s seeming factuality is not proof of his care to be as accurate or factual as possible, but is instead itself a function of his complicity in early colonial endeavors. I insist, therefore, that those critics who favor Hakluyt over other less-factual-seeming contemporary sources, or who enshrine short bits of his text as historical proof in their written explorations of colonial or racial themes, actually valorize a type of writing that itself promoted the very mindset they wish to expose. When truth follows the contours of power, neglecting to work against the process by which less-well-regarded ephemeral works became ephemeral means that we add our voices in support of the knowledge-power regime that perpetuated the colonial project.⁷

2. PERSIAN TALES: HAKLUYT’S *VOYAGES* VERSUS THE SHERLEY TEXTS

What was lost when Hakluyt’s narratives won the historical game of status and survival? What became relegated to the dusty archives, damned to the status of ephemera, while the Hakluyt Society and other admiring societies and writers extolled and preserved the voyages of the *Principall Navigations*? This section addresses these questions by balancing Hakluyt’s voyages against similar travel narratives printed at the time. Taking early modern English travels to Persia as a case study, it compares the accounts printed

⁷I borrow “the contours of power” from Steven Shapin, whose work on knowledge production in the seventeenth century has greatly influenced my treatment of early modern travel narratives: “If the relations of a man of honor were to be believed, then such a man might unconditionally colonize others’ minds, constituting their sense of what was the case. An honor culture molded truth to the contours of power” (65).

in the *Principall Navigations* of the Muscovy Company's multiple voyages down the Volga into Persia between 1558 and 1579 to the voyage taken by the Earl of Essex's man, Anthony Sherley (1565–1633), through Turkish territory into Persia in 1598. Sherley brought with him his younger brother Robert (1578–1628), who later married a Circassian Christian woman and settled permanently in Persia. Regional conflicts forced the Muscovy traders to abandon their northern route into Persia in the 1580s, after which the few Europeans who traveled to or lived in Persia were mainly Carmelite missionaries. Subsequently, the rationale behind the Sherleys' 1598 voyage is still a matter of some puzzlement. Contemporary texts and correspondence are conflicted about the motivations for their trip; the most likely reason for their voyage is a personal desire for wealth and fame, or a vague intention to work towards the removal of the Portuguese from the valuable port of Ormuz (which was technically within Persian territory), or both.⁸ The Sherleys' voyage is not recorded in the *Navigations*, as it just postdates the second edition; it is instead chronicled in a series of separately published pamphlets and a collaboratively written play.

The Sherley material provides a good cross-section of the types of travel reports being written at the time. Apart from the play, there is a short anonymous pamphlet reporting the latest news on the voyage, a personal account of the journey published by one of Sir Anthony Sherley's men, two pamphlets commissioned by the family to tell their story and whip up support for the Sherleys' political position on Persia, and an autobiographical narrative written by Sir Anthony himself.⁹ Despite the variety of circumstances surrounding their production, there are at least three features shared by all of these accounts that are notably lacking in the Hakluyt narratives.

First, all of these accounts at some point slow down their summary narrative in order to include extended scenes of conversation between the

⁸For a full discussion of the Sherleys and their exploits in Persia, see Davies. For a history of Safavid Persia, see Savory; for a more thorough treatment, see Floor, 1998 and 2001.

⁹The seven main narratives which deal with the Sherley brothers' exploits in Persia are *A true report*; Parry; Day, Rowley, and Wilkins; Nixon; Middleton; Cartwright; Sherley. Parr's introduction to Day, Rowley, and Wilkins, 1–20, contains an excellent summary of the Sherley brothers, their travels, and their political difficulties. The Sherleys also appear in Purchas's *Pilgrims*, but the majority of the material on their initial voyage in and out of Persia is simply an edited reprint of William Parry's pamphlet, Anthony Sherley's history, and the preacher John Cartwright's secondhand account of the Sherleys. There are some newly printed stories, but these deal exclusively with Robert's later activities as Persian ambassador, both within the borders of Persia and on his journey back through Europe.

voyagers and their foreign hosts. These scenes are presented in several different narrative formats. Least popular but still frequent are the set speeches which are reprinted verbatim for the reader as direct speech. Two good examples of this ancient historical practice are the opening speech given by Anthony Sherley upon his presentation to the Persian Shah as printed in the anonymous 1600 pamphlet — “I humblie beseech your Majestie, when you have read the Historie of the inward thoughtes of my mind” — and the brief pep talk recorded in Nixon’s 1607 pamphlet as given by Robert Sherley to a group of Persian soldiers preparing to charge a Turkish enemy under his command — “I need not (worthy Gentlemen, and souldiers of Persia) seeke to encourage you.”¹⁰ Nixon’s lengthy piece also contains an unusual instance of direct dialogue when we are introduced to “a certain Jew” who has “found the meanes to come and speake” with the third Sherley brother, Sir Thomas (1564–1633), while the latter lay in prison in Constantinople after an unsuccessful privateering venture in the Mediterranean: “after a few salutations, the Jew reasoned with him in this manner. As you are a stranger both by your birth, and language, to this Nation; so you also seeme to bee strange and ignorant of their Natures & Conditions. I have heard of your long imprisonment, and though I know not the cause, yet I grieve much at the manner of your handling.”¹¹ Direct speech, either in set pieces or in dialogue, is rather rare in these early modern histories of travel, and tends to be reserved for moments of greater significance, traditionally at battles, royal courts, or when treating matters of religion.

The most common form of representing crosscultural conversation was indirect narration by either a topical observer or omniscient narrator. These indirect reports seem to vary in distance from the conversation itself depending upon how much space is dedicated to the interaction. Sometimes the exchange is reported quite closely, as in this hostile conversation between Thomas Sherley and the Turkish “Bashaw” holding him captive: “[The Bashaw] demanded . . . why in that hostile maner against the law of

¹⁰*A true report*, sig. A3v–A4r; Nixon, sig. K3v.

¹¹Nixon, sig. D4v. In contrast to his two younger brothers, Thomas’s multiple attempts to gain wealth abroad were all spectacular failures, culminating in an extended stay in a Turkish prison. At the personal request of James I, Thomas was released and returned to England, where he likely commissioned both Nixon’s 1607 pamphlet and the play of the same name to tell his story and those of his more successful younger brothers. It is unsurprising that Thomas’s adventures in the Eastern Mediterranean are given prominent place in both pieces, and their less-than-flattering outcomes tactfully turned into a tale of English heroism.

Armes, and condition of the League betwixt both kingdomes, without any leave or admittance, hee [Sherley] had landed a forcible power, with purpose to spoyle and prey in that part of the Turkes Dominion. Sir Thomas answered, that being violently driven into wants by the fortunes of the sea and his long travels, hee was compelled to land, onely to refresh his men, and the rather in that country which hee knew to bee friend unto his King. The Bashaw replied againe, that his entrance was against the law."¹² Often, however, only the occurrence of the conversation and its broad topic and outcomes are described, as when the eyewitness William Parry writes that "Sir Anthony made his Oration: which being ended, the king [Shah Abbas I, r. 1587–1629] discoursed with him of his travelles, of his native countrey, the manner of government there, and of diverse other things that accidentally became the subject of their discourse."¹³

The majority of both the directly and indirectly reported conversations between the English voyagers and their foreign interlocutors focuses more heavily on the English side of the dialogue, often just summarizing foreign responses. This tendency is perhaps unsurprising, given that foreign replies would very often have to be either translated or just surmised by the writer. However, there are some considerable exceptions to this rule, as in Sir Anthony Sherley's autobiographical account of his dealings at the Persian court. Many pages are given to reporting conversations between Sherley and the Shah, who is given long passages of direct speech in reply to Sherley's comments. Most notable is the twenty-page dispute between Sherley and the various members of the Shah's council, several of whom speak quite suspiciously and disparagingly of Sherley in front of the Shah, whose reply ends the long conversational episode.

In terms of tone and content, these scenes of crosscultural communication are sometimes exaggerated and antagonistic, sometimes quite intricate and ambiguous, sometimes formal and florid. Regardless of the tone, however, all the accounts of the Sherley voyages include several detailed and lengthy presentations of Anglo-Persian interaction, specifically in the form of verbal exchange. This is, in fact, the principal concern of several of the Sherley accounts: the anonymous pamphlet of 1600, Nixon's 1607 piece, and Anthony Sherley's long autobiographical narrative center on the words and deeds of the English travelers and their foreign counterparts. Due to the nature of the genre, it is also of course the prime — although not the only — mode of presentation in Day, Wilkins, and

¹²Ibid., D2r.

¹³Parry, 30.

Rowley’s collaboratively written play. Thus, well over half of the Sherley texts devote the majority of their narrative space to crosscultural conversation.

The second feature common to all of the Sherley texts is the presence of overt moralistic statements, either on foreign lands and peoples, the Sherleys’ conduct and particular circumstances, or the nature of travel itself. Although the treatment of the Sherleys and their story differs from pamphlet to pamphlet (as does the story itself), all of the works wax moralistic or prescriptive in their discussion of the various subject matter. Readers are instructed, sometimes quite heavy-handedly, about the appropriate response to the foreign cultures, events, and characters to which they are introduced in the course of the narrative. This can take the form of sarcasm, complaint, open preaching, or a prayer in which the reader is invited to join with the author in beseeching God to enact some particular event. Unsurprisingly, the preacher John Cartwright provides an excellent example of the latter two approaches, often deployed in combination: “As for the miserable thraldome that the poore Christians doe endure under the Turkish tyranny, we (thanks be given unto God) in these Northerne parts of the world may behold with safety, but not without pitie, when we rightly consider, how that the people among whom our Saviour himselfe conversed . . . are now become a cage of uncleane birds: filthy spirits doe possesse them.”¹⁴ Unclean birds is one of the milder metaphors deployed by the preacher, who tends to be rather colorful in his judgments. Yet despite his purple prose, the preacher remains serious in intent, which is more than can be said for the panegyric framed and translated by Thomas Middleton (1580–1627) in preparation for Robert Sherley’s return from Persia. Both Sherley and Persia are praised unreservedly in a kind of written formal posturing that often crosses the border into the ridiculous, as in “Englands Complaint to Persia for her Sherley”: “O Persia! thou glorious kingdome, thou chiefe of Empires; the Palace sometimes where Wisdome onely kept her Court, the land that was governed by none but wisemen: Yet must I tell thee . . . that against all Law of Nations, thou robbest me of my subject.”¹⁵ Readers are also lectured on the good results, both for traveler and nation, of voyaging, as in William Parry’s long opening apologia for traveling and travel writing; self-justifications on the part of the voyagers are also ubiquitous, especially in the case of the Sherley journey, which was taken under somewhat obscure and controversial auspices. The examples of

¹⁴Cartwright, 73.

¹⁵Middleton, 9.

this tendency are almost innumerable, for at bottom they indicate an approach to writing — or, more specifically, an understanding of the function and habits of the genre of travel narration — that includes the instruction of the reader, or at least the presentation of judgments on the part of the author. Clearly these authors expected that they should evaluate the foreign lands and adventures they described, as well as provide a narration of images, conversations, and events.

The final characteristic that all of the Sherley texts share is perhaps the most obvious: all center on the figures of the Sherleys themselves. The unifying device of the narrative is the thoughts, words, and deeds of the main characters; the vast majority of each tale is taken up with an account of these figures. The foreign swirls about them, intimately interacting with them, acting upon and being impacted by the English voyagers. These exchanges, and specifically the manner in which the more-familiar English character handles them, form the main interest of all of the Sherley texts. Structurally, this organizational strategy gives a narrative arc to the journey, with various departures and destinations functioning as beginning and ending points for each tale. Thus, the Sherley texts all share several characteristics: they center on the figures of the Sherleys themselves, and specifically on their interactions with foreigners; these interactions are portrayed — often quite extensively — as verbal exchanges between the English and their Mediterranean and Middle Eastern hosts; and, finally, the accounts are interlarded with evaluative language, comments, and lengthy instructional passages that attempt to guide the readers' reactions to the material presented.

On the other hand, the material in Hakluyt's volumes depicting English travel to Persia cannot as a group be said to share these characteristics. To begin, the Persian texts in the *Navigations* feature no fewer than seventeen separate protagonists, often appearing in groups of four or five, any one of which might pick up the narration or step into the role of dominant character. There are roughly sixteen separate entries in the *Principall Navigations* depicting the six voyages taken by Muscovy Company factors into Persia between the years 1558 and 1579.¹⁶ Each piece tends to recount some small aspect of the Englishmen's journey into, through, or out of Persia, and might pick up or break off at any given point within the voyage. This tendency is largely due to the format of the tales, which are most often letters sent back to London from various cities along

¹⁶All of the Persian material printed in Hakluyt can be found in 1:361–85, 413–25, and 440–55.

the way. Written by Company agents to their masters back in London, these letters are meant to update the latter as to the good behavior and success (or failure) of the former in the task for which the voyage was made: trade.

The bulk of these letters tend to utilize two main generic types that can be dubbed *the travel log* and *the trade report*. The travel log is a chronological account of a journey that follows the speaker and the Company's goods as they move across the foreign domain in various forms of transportation. It is occasionally peppered with one- or two-sentence references to geographical features along the way, but otherwise continues unbroken for pages at a time. This strategy transmits valuable information to the Company in the form of distance, means, and duration of travel, as well as possible transport difficulties, whether geographical, seasonal, or sociopolitical. These details were obviously crucial considerations when planning trading voyages that might take years and absorb an enormous amount of the Company's capital and goods; timing and risk were central business concerns, then as now. Crucial as this information might have been to the Muscovy Company merchants, travel log passages make remarkably poor reading for all those not planning a voyage through early modern Asia:

The 18 day in the morning about seven of the clocke, the pavoses [small ships] being discharged, departed away toward Astracan, the winde then at Southeast, they road still with the shippe, and observing the elevation of the pole at that place, found it to be 45 degrees 20 minuts. The 19 day, the winde Southeast, they road still. The 20 day the winde at Northwest they set saile about one of the clocke in the morning, and stered thence South by West, and Southsouthwest, about three leagues, and then ankered in sixe and a halfe water, about nine of the clock beforenoone, at which time it fell calme: the elevation of the pole at that place 45 degrees 13 minuts. The 21 having the winde at Northwest, they set saile and stered thence South by West, and South untill eleven of the clocke, and had then nine foote water: and at noone they observed the latitude, and found it to be 44 degrees 47 minuts: they had they three fathoms and a halfe water, being cleare off the flats.¹⁷

While it is not the case that entire voyages are described in this manner, there are long sections of this type of narration in nearly every Persian voyage. It is easily identifiable by both its predictable content — latitude, leagues, depths, directions, landmarks, and problems with the route or vehicle — and its regularity of form. Although they are written out in prose

¹⁷Hakluyt, 443.

paragraphs and describe travel across land as well as sea, travel logs clearly derive from daily ship's-log entries, which were being rapidly and explicitly regularized by trading companies and interested parties such as Hakluyt.¹⁸ They follow a strict chronological order, are usually composed in an anonymous plural (either first or third person), and are never longer than a few sentences, regardless of the events described. Deaths of Company members from illness are given little elaboration; violent attacks are handled in only slightly greater detail: "The 19 November the winde being Northerly, there was a great frost, and much ice in the river: the next day being the 20 of November the ice stood in the river, and so continued until Easter day. Thee 22 of December departed this life John Moore the gunner of the shippe. Thursday the seventh. . . . Robert Golding desirous to understand what might be done at Shamakie, which is a daies journey from Backow, went thither, from whence returning, he was set on by theeves, and was shot into the knee with an arrow, who had verie hardly escaped with his life and goodes, but that by good hap he killed one of the theeves horses with his caliver, and shot a Turke thorow both cheeks with a dag. On the sixt day of August. . . ."¹⁹ The tendency to give daily weather conditions and death equal narrative attention is a strong testament to the perceived purpose of writing for the authors of Hakluyt's Persian material. Deaths are registered, but not commented upon or discussed in detail because the point of these documents is to encourage replication of the voyage and to assist in the preparation for such later attempts. Unlike navigational directions or weather conditions, the details of a particular man's death are fairly irrelevant to this purpose. Hakluyt's Persian tales do not editorially comment on daily events; the authors make no attempt to teach a moral lesson or to lend broader significance to anything which occurred during the course of the journey. The point of the letters written from Asia to the Muscovy Company governors was simply to account for the transport and sale of Company goods, and any events that did not directly impact upon that purpose are noted in the briefest manner possible.

Indeed, the majority of narrative space is given to the loading, unloading, shifting, showing, and selling of English goods (mainly wool cloth), with the concomitant assessment, purchase, shifting, unloading, and loading of Persian goods (mainly silk cloth), a narrative strategy that could be called *the trade report*. The point of the trade report is, of course, identical to that of the travel log: to account for the transport and sale of Company

¹⁸For further details on the log as a rising narrative form, see Fuller, 1–15.

¹⁹Hakluyt, 442–46.

goods. However, in the trade report any attempt at narrative chronology is abandoned, as are a great majority of the details of transporting people and goods from one location to another. The setting of the letter shifts from one city to another with little acknowledgement of time taken or distance traveled. Long deliberations unconnected to any narrative of events save trading are routinely included — for example, on the possibility of importing yew trees for bows or the seasonal harvesting of raw silk. Description of geography is generally limited in the trade report, and any more general cultural description appears largely in the service of trade, as per the instructions given to voyagers bound for Asia by Richard Hakluyt the lawyer (d. 1587): “Take a speciall note of theyr apparell and furniture, and of the substance that the same is made of, of which a merchant may make a gesse, as well of their commoditie, as also of theyr wants.”²⁰ Unlike the Sherley accounts, which began with the brothers’ departures and ended with their arrival at some European destination, there is usually no narrative arc whatsoever in the trade report; Hakluyt’s printing of Laurence Chapman’s account of the fourth Company voyage to Persia is an excellent example, when, after cataloging the cost of various spices for several paragraphs, the account simply ends. This strategy is truly object-oriented, and often breaks out into actual enumeration of products or currency exchange rates, such as the lists of “Commodities to be caried out of England into Persia” and “Commodities to be brought out of Persia for England” appended to the final letter of the third voyage.²¹

In both the travel log and the trade report, foreign peoples are described only tangentially, and purely in reference to trade. In these accounts, native inhabitants tend to fall into four categories: thieves, merchants, sailors and caravan leaders, and nobility and rulers. Nearly all of these groups are described purely in terms of whether they are hindrances or helps to travel and trade, and are then described only with taciturn succinctness. The exception to this rule is the more extensive treatment given to certain nobles and monarchs through whose territory the voyagers

²⁰Ibid., 460. The instructions are described as “Notes in writing, besides more privie by mouth, that were given by M. Richard Hakluyt, of Eiton in the countie of Hereford, Esquire, Anno 1580: To M. Arthur Pet, and to M. Charles Jackman, sent by the merchants of the Moscovie companie for the discoverie of the Northeast straight, not altogether unfit for some other enterprises of discoverie, hereafter to be taken in hand.” The Richard Hakluyt usually referred to as “the lawyer” or “of the Middle Temple” was Richard Hakluyt the editor’s elder cousin and legal guardian from a very young age. He was also the younger Hakluyt’s inspiration to pursue geography as a practical course of study: see *ibid.*, *2r.

²¹Hakluyt, 379–80.

needed to pass or wished to trade within. For example, fuller details are given of the English interactions with local governors, who often provide the travelers with good entertainment, armed escorts, and permission to pass through their territory. These rulers were crucial not only to the success of the trip at hand, but also to the permanent trade route the Company hoped to set up. Without the active friendship of such individuals, such a trade line would become impossible, and therefore much ink is spilled on the precise dealings the English have with each ruler. Moreover, many of the local governors and kings routed all desirable commodities through themselves, keeping a corner on the market of products such as raw silks. Thus, such rulers were not only enforcers of order but lucrative trading partners as well.

The most extended discussions are reserved for the Persian Shah, from whom the Muscovy Company sought broad privileges in the hope of setting up an alternate trade route for Eastern silks and spices. The traditional route through Ottoman territory was controlled by the Turks and the Venetian factors working within their domains; the English sought to divert goods across the Caspian Sea and north through Russia, whose ruler had by that time entered into a close relationship with the Company.²² These reported conversations are unique in the Persian letters, as they are practically the only occasions when authors admit to speaking in depth with any of the hundreds of foreigners with whom they must have come in contact during their years-long journeys. Even when others are mentioned, the interactions are only implicit in the text or, at most, are described in the third person by a speaker who relates few to no details, preferring instead to retain the neutral stance of uninvolved witness or passive mouthpiece of important trade information. It is therefore quite striking when discussions with the Shah are reported in considerable depth, and occasionally even lapse into direct speech. In many respects these royal interviews are the climax of both the travel log and trade report, as the outcome of such interactions will determine the state of trade in the area for years to come and, thus, are ostensibly the *raison d'être* for the journey. The first such conversation with the Shah did not go well, culminating in a religious debate that marks one of the only extensive sections of directly reported speech in all of Hakluyt's Persian material: "hee reasoned with me much of

²²The English trading voyages to Persia took place between the early 1560s and 1581; this period coincided with the reigns of Tahmasp I (1524–76), Isma'il II (1576–77), and Sultan Mohammed Shah (1578–87) in Persia. In Russia, the Muscovy Company had formed a strong alliance with Ivan IV, "The Terrible" (1533–84), who facilitated their voyages down the Volga to the Caspian Sea.

religion, demanding whether I were a Gower, that is to say, an unbeliever or a Muselman, that is, of Mahomets lawe. Unto whom I answered, that I was neither unbeliever nor Mahometan, but a Christian. What is that sayd hee unto the king of Georgians sonne, who being a Christian was fled unto the sayd Sophie, and hee answered that a Christian was he that beleeve in Iesus Christus, affirming him to bee the sonne of God, and the greatest prophet: Doest thou beleeve so sayd the Sophie unto me: Yea that I doe, sayd I: Oh thou unbeliever sayd he, we have no neede to have friendship with the unbelievers, and so willed me to depart.”²³ Later interviews were more successful, but regardless of the outcome of the conversation, all of the accounts agree in reserving the most extensive narrative coverage for this particular crosscultural exchange. Even then, however, the report is limited to matters of trade, politics, and religion; as one narrator puts it, all other matters are “here omitted.”²⁴ Indeed, trade was too centrally embedded in these voyages and in the minds of those involved for any cultural observations entirely to escape its pull. As Mary Fuller writes, “there was alongside the process of material exploitation and profit, the loop of voyage, report, repeated voyages, repeated investment, a process of textual generation and accumulation with which Hakluyt is identified”: trading and writing were intertwined and mutually generative activities.²⁵

3. PROSAIC TRUTH: EARLY MODERN STANDARDS OF TRUTHFUL WRITING

To the average modern reader the tales in the *Principall Navigations*, graced by “so business-like an air,” seem considerably more trustworthy than the Sherley texts, which smack of exaggeration, if not outright falsehood.²⁶ Dialogue seems suspicious (especially so given the elision of translators), so-called verbatim speeches appear entirely fabricated, and evaluative comments render the whole narrative overly biased in tone. However, there is considerable evidence that in early modern England both of these sets of texts could easily be regarded as equally credible pieces of travel writing.

The small, well-bounded epistemological units that today we call *facts* were in the Renaissance more often referred to as *particulars*, and their

²³Hakluyt, 370–71.

²⁴Ibid., 370.

²⁵Fuller, 149.

²⁶Raleigh, 120.

presence characterized the genre of history writing, both natural and civil (which included prose relations of both past and current events).²⁷ However, these details — which in a modern fact-based regime of knowledge production are considered the collective repository of a text's claims to be true — were in the Renaissance much less important to the social process of evaluating a story's truthfulness. Both classical and medieval precedents for history writing presented such particulars as subordinate to overarching moral lessons, rendering them far less crucial to the truth-value of a given text. Historical particulars were therefore altered, eliminated, or added by authors when such changes were seen as reinforcing the moral or religious truth of a history. A fact-based regime guards these particulars, noting changes, labeling certain details historically false and others true; earlier regimes of knowledge production viewed particulars largely as the vehicle by which a greater moral or religious truth was communicated.

Even a clear lack of fidelity to narrative particulars did not necessarily impugn an early modern history's claim to truthfulness. The perception of historical truth inherited by the Elizabethans from previous generations was not conceived as a process of sifting the objective truth of events from subjective statements purporting to describe those events.²⁸ On the contrary, similar to many religious communities today, historical authority resided in cultural tradition and in traditional texts such as the Vulgate Bible and the works of Aristotle. Historical narratives that were seen as validating these traditional texts and knowledges were considered to be true.²⁹ As the theorist Hans-Robert Jauss has put it, "History was what was willingly believed."³⁰ Or, in the words of medievalist Suzanne Fleischman, "for the Middle Ages and even well beyond, historical truth was anything

²⁷I understand *facts* to be verbal and epistemological constructs that purport to describe things or events. One characteristic of these constructs is that facts are understood to be in some way short, small, or bounded enough so that they can function like bricks in a wall, as singular building-blocks of knowledge. Daston argues that this brevity is due to the historical function facts came to serve within scientific communities looking to build consent and avoid violent quarrel over various interpretations of aspects of the natural world.

²⁸Dear traces the history of objectivity.

²⁹Of course, by the Elizabethan period these traditions and texts, and their guardians in the Catholic Church and the universities, were being challenged by Protestant vernacular translations and rereadings of the Bible, as well as humanist interest in classical authors other than Aristotle. They would be further weakened in the latter half of the seventeenth century by the fact- and objectivity-based regime of knowledge production that developed outside of the universities in communities such as the Royal Society.

³⁰Translated in Fleischman, 305; Jauss, 65: "sont historiques . . . tout événement et toute expérience qui veulent être crus."

that belonged to a widely accepted tradition.”³¹ As Philip Sidney (1554–86) mockingly quotes in his *Defense of Poesy*, histories were “the witness of the ages, the light of truth, the life of memory, the governess [in the sense of either “teacher” or “ruler”] of life, the herald of antiquity.”³² Such histories are often described as “providential”: history as the manifest working out of God’s will on earth.

Although historical truth was perceived in these more general terms, and the epistemological concept of the modern fact did not fully exist in the early modern period, the word *fact* does routinely appear in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century texts, an occurrence which causes widespread misreadings in scholarly works on the period. Derived from *faict*, the medieval past participle of the French verb *faire* (“to make, to do”), in Hakluyt’s time a fact was something done, an action completed, a deed accomplished. The word originally entered English through the juridical system, which since the Norman invasion had employed French as its transactional language. The common phrase *matters of fact* referred at the turn of the seventeenth century to the domain of witnesses in the courtroom, who were called upon to clarify the specifics of past deeds, or facts — in this case, criminal actions — so that the jury might come to a conclusion regarding what really happened: the *facts of the matter*. The early modern fact, therefore, was a highly contested deed, in which firsthand witnessing was the most credible evidence for its occurrence, followed by second- or thirdhand accounts, and finally documentary evidence.³³

³¹Fleischman, 305.

³²Sidney, 89, misquoting Cicero’s *De oratore* 2.9.36: “testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis.” Note that Sidney quotes in Latin only: the English translation has been supplied by the editors.

³³The progress of the *OED*’s definitions for *fact* broadly trace the shift in meaning of the term from its early modern sense of “something done” to the more familiar usages common to the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries: “1. A thing done or performed. **a.** in neutral sense: An action, deed, course of conduct. Occas. = effect. Also, action in general; deeds, as opposed to words. *Obscure*. **b.** A noble or brave deed, an exploit; a feat (of valour or skill). *Obs.* **c.** An evil deed, a crime. In the 16th and 17th c. the commonest sense. *Obs.* . . . 4. **a.** Something that has really occurred or is actually the case; something certainly known to be of this character; hence, a particular truth known by actual observation or authentic testimony, as opposed to what is merely inferred, or to a conjecture or fiction; a datum of experience, as distinguished from the conclusions that may be based upon it. [The *OED* attributes this sense of *fact* primarily to the late seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries.] . . . 6. **a.** That which is of the nature of a fact; what has actually happened or is the case; truth attested by direct observation or authentic testimony; reality. [The *OED* examples list this sense as occurring most heavily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.]”

In this courtroom evaluation of the facts one can see the origins of modern standards for judging nonfiction writing; indeed, Barbara Shapiro contends that both the modern fact and modern history standards derived from these juridical beginnings.³⁴ Concern over the ability to prove the reality or accuracy of observable events or particulars — even when one was a firsthand witness to them — grew considerably as the century continued, and eventually overtook older notions of truth in history writing.³⁵ However, what is often overlooked is that in 1589, 1600, or even 1615, these concerns existed alongside older conventions of history writing. Especially in the subgenre of travel histories, the growing practical need for reliable cultural, financial, and navigational information coincided with generic expectations that sought an engaging story full of English protagonists who interacted with their foreign counterparts and were judged by the narrator for the moral edification of the readers.

Usually called “perfect,” the model of this type of history “consisted of extended narratives [of recent events] dealing with military matters and the affairs of state written by firsthand observers who were experienced men of public affairs.” Perfect history writers were both expected to weave a rhetorically-skillful narrative of events, and also to “provide lessons and explanations and discuss the causes” of the matters related.³⁶ Several of the Sherley narratives — notably Anthony Sherley’s autobiographical history — seem clearly to have aspired to this recognizable and high-status subgenre of history. The Sherley narratives as a whole shared more of the goals of history as understood at the time, fulfilling the old maxim about history being philosophy teaching by example. Indeed, the prevalence of moral instruction, judgement, and general editorial commentary in almost all of the Sherley texts falls directly in line with the expectations for sixteenth-century history writing. The narrative arc and unbroken storyline which characterizes most of these texts is likewise consistent with the high rhetorical requisites of the genre of history. As travel histories in particular, they fall well within the range of what was being published at the time.

³⁴See Shapiro. The changes in the practice and epistemology of history writing in the seventeenth century have been the subject of long debate. Classic works in this field include Fussner; Ferguson; Levine; Pocock.

³⁵The development of this concept is also of considerable importance in the history of science. For interesting treatments of the evolution of facts, factuality, probability, and objectivity, see, for example, Shapin and Schaffer; Daston; Dear; Licoppe.

³⁶Shapiro, 37–38. The term *perfect history* is discussed in *ibid.*, 37–39, 53–55.

The Hakluyt voyages, on the other hand, are in many respects quite unusual publications. As mentioned above, the majority of these texts are not histories at all, but letters written by Company factors to their superiors back in London. At the point of composition, these authors could have had little suspicion that their letters would be published as travel histories, taking their place alongside printed material such as that describing the Sherley brothers. Indeed, as so many critics from the nineteenth century forward have touted, Hakluyt's massive collection of short travel documents was unique in England; particularly unusual were the official Company records and business letters published in the first edition of the *Navigations*, as they had never previously been published for popular consumption in Elizabethan England.³⁷ In addition, the majority of Hakluyt's "voyages" make no effort to draw morals, present social or religious truths, or conform to the formal and rhetorical standards of traditional history writing. As such, Hakluyt's collection of largely unpublished Company material differs significantly from the mass of travel histories published at the time.

There is no particular evidence to indicate that the tales within the *Navigations* were therefore perceived as untrue, but neither is there considerable evidence for the opposite claim that Hakluyt's voyages raised the epistemological standards for prose history writing. Modern scholars generally accept that Hakluyt's text had a significant long-term impact upon the nature of travel writing; specifically, that it pushed the genre in the direction of greater factual accuracy through its empiricism and stylistic brevity. Yet while the formal characteristics of many of the tales in the *Navigations* coincide with the conventions of later fact-based, nonfiction prose writing, there was no way for Hakluyt to know this. What the editor did know was that by publishing his collection as a book of travel tales, he was deliberately placing it within a long generic tradition that included

³⁷Out of the 258 voyages and observations printed in the 1589 version of the *Navigations*, only some eighty had been previously published elsewhere. (Numbers are based on a count of listed sources in Quinn, 2:341–77.) Richard Eden, who translated Peter Martyr's *De orbe novo*. . . (often titled simply his *Decades*) into English in 1555, and Richard Willes, whose *History of travayle* appeared in 1577, are among the immediate predecessors of Hakluyt, and whose works are frequently cited as smaller, less-ambitious, and more international models for Hakluyt's later collection of almost purely English travel tales. The *Navigazioni et viaggi* (1550–59), a large collection of travel relations edited by the Venetian Giovanni Battista Ramusio, is the closest continental predecessor of Hakluyt's *Navigations*. For an extensive discussion of early geographical works likely to have influenced Hakluyt, see Taylor, 1934; see also the many detailed discussions of Hakluyt's influences, methods, and sources included in Quinn.

Herodotus (484?–425? BCE) and Abulfeda (or Abu al-Fida, 1273–1331), as well as Battista Ramusio and Peter Martyr. Hakluyt would have seen his heavy tomes on sale in the same bookseller's shops that peddled the Sherley texts, as well as innumerable other travel accounts in all shapes and sizes. Hakluyt published a set of travel histories that bucked generic expectations: generically speaking, this makes the public evaluation of his tales less, not more, predictable.

4. "TRUE AND CREDIBLE REPORTS": EMPIRICISM AND CREDIBILITY

Determining how books were read in previous centuries is notoriously difficult; tracking down evidence for reader response to a particular work is even more so. Few critics try, preferring instead to limit their treatment of the reception of the *Navigations* to a few enthusiastic adjectives; those who have made a more extended effort, like James P. Helfers — upon whom Hakluyt's collection "impresses a sense of specificity, factuality, and comprehensiveness" — often end up with a combined discussion of (what is clearly a modern) reader response, and implied motivations on Hakluyt's part. Indeed, the latter are much discussed in the literature; however, proving that Hakluyt "intended . . . to provide as much information as possible (whether foreign or domestic) for English explorers and colonists to use" does not prove that the *Principall Navigations* were read that way by most of its audience.³⁸ Moreover, Hakluyt frequently acted as a consultant for trading companies and the crown and as an earnest petitioner for crown support of navigational instruction and colonial funding. The oral advice he gave, the letters he exchanged and passed around, and the colonial tracts he circulated through manuscript publication to the relevant parties, all accomplished this purported goal of facilitating informational exchange between merchant and colonial travellers — without printing or selling anything. The elaborate presentation of both historical and contemporary travel texts to the public via the printing press seems more likely to have been done for propagandistic purposes: to stir up interest, enthusiasm, and national pride. (Indeed, the phenomenal rise of small investors in merchant companies during the decade immediately following the second edition of the *Navigations* might well be a reflection of the

³⁸ Helfers, 165. Helfers is, on the whole, an excellent discussion of critical mistreatments of both Purchas and Hakluyt. The tendencies I criticize here are shared by almost all those who treat Hakluyt extensively in their work.

book’s success in this vein.)³⁹ However, it is not important here either to prove or disprove critical guesses on Hakluyt’s intent in publishing the *Navigations* — indeed, they are in the end forever unknowable.⁴⁰ The point is that few to no critics make any effort to place Hakluyt’s collections within their generic context, and instead tend implicitly to project modern evaluations and approval upon a set of texts that, according to early modern travel-history-writing standards, were neither fish nor fowl.

To the extent that comparisons with other early modern travel histories are made, they are usually made (briefly) with the other vast collection of tales published shortly after Hakluyt’s death, Samuel Purchas’s *Hakluytus Posthumous, or Purchas, his Pilgrimes* (1625). In what are usually rather judgmental essays, critics deplore Purchas (1577–1626) and praise Hakluyt for two main reasons: first, the editorial prose of the former is condemned for its fussiness, and that of the latter feted for its invisibility (allowing the “business-like air” of his sources to come through); second, Purchas is reviled for his indiscriminate hacking and rewriting of (so-called) genuine historical documents while Hakluyt is lauded for his commitment to empiricism — a point then related to his noninterventionist editorial style. Purchas has recently been well defended by Helfers, who points out that the two editors wrote for disparate audiences and for quite different reasons.⁴¹ However, Helfers does not treat the anachronistic application of the criteria of empiricism to these two early modern travel collections, which is often the strongest claim that Hakluyt’s proponents make on his behalf.

Hakluyt’s insistence that those who had travelled were responsible for bringing “certayne and full discoverie of the world” to “us” — presumably

³⁹See Rabb, 74, who quotes the impressive statistic that “one out of every 30 gentlemen, knights and peers in the country contributed to some kind of overseas venture in this period” and that out of 3,800 investors able to be classified according to social position, “little more than 23 percent turned out to be gentry or nobility,” which strongly supports his argument that these voyages “drew on the resources of the entire nation, both landed and mercantile wealth.”

⁴⁰I think there is considerable evidence for modern critical claims that Hakluyt’s collection was well received and used by Company travelers to further their own voyages. See, for example, Fuller’s claims that “by 1602, the *Principall Navigations* was already becoming recommended equipment on long-distance trading voyages” (147); Payne’s survey of Hakluyt’s “impact and readership” (20–21); and Neville-Sington’s assertion that “eye-witness descriptions of long sea voyages were of considerable strategic value” (69). Nevertheless, anachronistic suppositions about epistemological standards in early modern history writing and unsupported assertions of contemporary approval do not assist in proving these claims, and often hinder them.

⁴¹For a survey of contemporary criticism on Purchas in relation to Hakluyt, see Helfers, 167–68; see also Fuller, 150.

the armchair travellers of the day — and his decision to “refer every voyage to his Author, which both in person hath performed, and in writing hath left the same,” has been regarded by critics as indicative of his integrity as an editor and his devotion to high documentary standards.⁴² Indeed, this quotation is usually seen as sufficient evidence for the attribution of empiric superiority (and is often the only evidence marshalled on its behalf).⁴³ However, it seems worthwhile to be cautious when awarding accolades for precocious empiricism. After all, at least ten percent of the material in the second edition of the *Navigations* is antiquarian, and the majority of the “Ambassages, Letters, Privileges, and other necessarie matter of circumstance appertaining to the voyages” cannot precisely be classed as empirical observation of foreign lands.⁴⁴ Hakluyt’s guardian and inspiration, his cousin Richard Hakluyt the lawyer, had along with John Dee (1527–1608) debated the possibility of navigating a northeast passage to Cathay — that is, to China, by sailing along the northern coast of the Asian continent — basing their arguments entirely upon such authors as Pliny and Ishmael Abulfeda.⁴⁵ Empirically-gathered knowledge was desirable, but it was not always privileged over other, more traditional forms of knowledge. If anything, classical and contemporary works provided competing models of authority and knowledge acquisition throughout the period of Hakluyt’s life.

Moreover, there is another explanation for Hakluyt’s attribution of each tale he printed in the *Navigations*: credibility. Hakluyt published his collection within a subgenre of history that was growing more and more unstable as readerly interest shifted from having social truths related in an entertaining fashion — philosophy by example — to the credibility that could be extended to particular facts — that is, highly contested deeds —

⁴²Hakluyt, 3v.

⁴³Note specifically the language used to discuss the generation of the *Navigations* in, for example, Neville-Sington, 68; Cribb, 104–05; Fuller, 2; see also Bartels in n. 6 above. Payne, 18, makes the connection between empiricism and reliability explicit when he prefaces the usual quotation used to discuss Hakluyt’s intentions with “Hakluyt is quite clear about the organization of his work and its grounding in reliable first-hand reports.”

⁴⁴The *Navigations* are divided into “Voyages” and “Ambassages, Letters, Privileges, and other necessarie matter of circumstance appertaining to the voyages.” See Hakluyt’s division of material at the head of the *Navigations*, unnumbered pages *5–*8 (r–v).

⁴⁵For an account of this debate, and of Mercator’s involvement in it, see Taylor, 1935, 1–66. Hakluyt prints three of the letters exchanged between Mercator, Dee, Richard Hakluyt the lawyer, and the men undertaking the expedition, Arthur Pet and Charles Jackman, in the *Navigations*: see Hakluyt, 459–66, 483–85.

included within the histories.⁴⁶ By the time Hakluyt was collecting his tales, travellers were notorious for stretching the truth; as William Parry writes at the opening of his history of Anthony Sherley’s travels, “It hath beene, and yet is, a proverbiall speech amongst us, that Travellers may lie by authority.”⁴⁷ Despite this rooted skepticism toward travel histories, the intensity surrounding the debates over the usefulness of travel and the reliability of travel reports — quarrels that were revisited in nearly every narrative of any length and rhetorical seriousness — speaks to the urgency perceived as inhering in such questions. Reputations were at stake, both personal and national, as well as a great deal of money in the form of trade. Hakluyt’s statement of support for empirically-inspired narrative — that those who had travelled were responsible for bringing the world back to English readers — should thus be seen as being mediated by an important consideration: the bearers of such discoveries were never merely neutral carriers of information. On the contrary, each must “answere for himselfe, justifie his reports, and stand accountable for his owne doings.”⁴⁸ The identities and reputations of the travellers themselves must always stand as the guarantor of their reports. Empirical evidence was useful in large part because contemporary voyages provided a stock of firsthand witnesses, whose testimony could be judged as more or less credible based on the standing of the witness himself.

As Steven Shapin argues, “the distribution of imputed credit and reliability [in early modern England] followed the contours of authority and power.”⁴⁹ In other words, credit was extended to those deemed worthy of credit, rather than upon the abstract merits of the claim; empirical accounts were judged not so much on the tale but on the teller. The tellers who claimed the most credit in this highly-stratified society were those who occupied the places of authority and power: the high nobility and clerics. Commoners, who had to work for their living, were seen as less reliable because more financially constrained, and therefore less disinterested. As Shapin elegantly summarizes, “the moral economy of premodern society located truth within the practical performances of everyday social order.”⁵⁰

Taken as a whole, the status of Hakluyt’s authors was considerably higher than that of the average author of a published early modern travel

⁴⁶Evidence of this shift can also be seen in the early modern genre of news pamphlets and newsbooks.

⁴⁷Parry, 3.

⁴⁸Hakluyt, *3v. For a similar reading of this quotation, see Fuller, 151.

⁴⁹Shapin, 69.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 410.

account. Indeed, many narrations were not published by firsthand witnesses, or were printed anonymously. The average author, while possibly gentle, was usually much lower on the social ladder; as is well-known, high nobility did not tend to publish their writings at all. The Sherley family, although well-established country gentry, was at the turn of the century in great disgrace with the queen, deeply in debt, and was in the process of losing family lands permanently because of debts to the crown.⁵¹ Their credit was not exactly high, either in monetary or social terms. On the other hand, Hakluyt's list of authors must have had something of a superstar status: the *Navigations* were patronized by Francis Walsingham (1568–90), and featured letters by the queen and other princes, narratives by court favorites like Raleigh, accounts of crown-backed travelers such as Humphrey Gilbert (1539–83), and innumerable letters by highly-regarded and creditable agents of the wealthy Muscovy Company. Hakluyt's *tour de force* of exalted and influential authors could hardly fail to receive far greater credibility than the average published travel account. The very method of publication seconded this status hierarchy: in contradistinction to the quarto pamphlets treating the Sherleys, Hakluyt's compendium was done in two, and then three, gorgeous folio volumes.

Thus, critics who tout the great leap towards empiricism and factuality made with the publication of the *Navigations*, citing its instant and sustained popularity as evidence for their claim, are — insofar as they are considering seventeenth-century standards at all — confusing epistemology with credibility. The voyages' similarities to modern conventions of non-fiction prose writing were not indicative of a superior truth value accorded to the tales at the time. Empiricism was only beginning to join authority as an arbiter of truth, and the probability of particulars was not yet the only standard of truthfulness in a tale. But if the *Principall Navigations*' epistemological status was uncertain (or at least beyond current scholarly

⁵¹Although both Thomas Sherley the elder and younger were hereditarily knighted, neither Anthony nor Robert held an English title. Anthony was made a Knight of Saint Michael by Henry IV of France in 1593 for his valiant service to that country; however, upon Anthony's return to England, Elizabeth furiously insisted he return the title. Anthony's refusal to do so landed him several months in Fleet prison, and provoked much laughter in the French court since, as Henry put it, the Knighthood of Saint Michael was purely an honorary title, the French equivalent of being dubbed a Knight of the Round Table. The title had become so common in France it was known as the "collar to fit all dogs" (Davies, 37). Anthony was later awarded the title of count in Spain, but this also carried little status or financial reward. On his first embassy for the Shah in 1608, Robert was named a count and a chamberlain of honor by the pope. For biographical details about the Sherley family, see Davies.

evaluation), its credibility was not. What counted for a narrative's credibility was the social standing of its author(s), and Hakluyt's compilation had status in excess.

5. CONCLUSION

If contemporary credibility was extended to Hakluyt's collection of travel narratives not so much on the basis of its epistemological superiority or its narrative style, but rather on a contingent faith in witness testimony delivered by those of acceptable social standing, then contemporary scholarship is participating in several large historical ironies. First, according to the generic standards for truthfulness in history writing at play in the early modern period, colorful narratives such as those detailing the Sherleys' exploits could be regarded as just as true as the Company letters that make up the majority of Hakluyt's Persian collection. The credibility actually extended to each set of tales likely differed, but this difference was due in large part to authorial status, and not necessarily to preferences in prose style. The narrative style that, according to many modern scholars, seems to render Hakluyt's tales more factual or worthy of our own credit arose primarily from the function these letters were supposed to serve: the promotion of trade and, subsequently, of English wealth and power. In other words, these particular travel tales were designed to establish and expand the economic foundations of what was later to become the British Empire, an outcome that Hakluyt would have fully approved. Hakluyt's contemporary popularity was not the result of a resounding approval of a new narrative style that more effectively transmitted the truth about foreign nations, but of an implicit faith in the testimony of witnesses whose credit in the society was higher than normal. Critics who explicitly praise Hakluyt's factuality have thus committed a grave anachronism, the result of which is that the complexity of verbal exchange has been eclipsed by lists of commodities and prices, and foreign peoples demoted from lively interlocutors to tools of commercial profit — a truly colonial outcome.

Second, in taking only snippets of these narratives, literary critics have abdicated their traditional practice of close reading with these prose texts, the result of which is an eclipsing of the writer and the writing process itself, a mediatedness which ironically formed the very basis by which early modern readers would have determined the credibility of a given travel tale. The result is articles that briefly resemble intellectual history, a practice which, like all methodologies, has its strengths and weaknesses, and which I will not debate here in general. In reference to Hakluyt's *Principall Navigations*, this critical practice and written format have encouraged critics to treat Hakluyt's tales as the modern factual accounts that they formally

resemble, at the cost of any real understanding of the generic and historical context in which this text was published. This is neither good history nor good literary criticism. In the future, if we wish to provide context for our readings of literature, we might do best to consider adopting some of the reading methods of our sixteenth-century forebears, and exercise greater skepticism toward the “true and credible” tales in Richard Hakluyt’s book.

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