

Fall 2008

# Authenticity in Marco Polo's Story and in Honors Student Research: An Aside from the Early Renaissance

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Knox, Bill, "Authenticity in Marco Polo's Story and in Honors Student Research: An Aside from the Early Renaissance" (2008). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 67.  
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BILL KNOX

# Authenticity in Marco Polo's Story and in Honors Student Research: An Aside from the Early Renaissance

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Recently I read and skimmed editions of the writings of Marco Polo, including Komroff's *The Travels of Marco Polo* and Moule and Pelliot's encyclopedic *The Description of the World*. Apart from cataloguing details about Asian lands, peoples, and inventions fantastic in the eyes of early fourteenth-century Europeans, these, along with Laurence Bergreen's well-documented biography *Marco Polo: From Venice to Xanadu*, unexpectedly suggested to me how, increasingly in this digital age, student research projects present questions of authenticity similar to those of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts—Polo's being no exception.

In the 1960s when I first read about the Venetian merchant and emissary of Kublai Khan in middle school and watched the colorful European-produced film adaptation of his life downtown, I questioned neither the story details, the particulars of its original composition, nor the liberal translation of the textbook story to film. The twenty-plus years of Polo's often difficult Asian travel, which I studied, and the cinematic spectacle of the court of the Great Khan, which I watched, engaged my imagination more as an adolescent male excited by curious customs, siege warfare, and exotic sensuality than as a critical scholar.

As a student and professor of writing and literature for over forty years, however, I have been much more engaged in the questions of textual origins. With respect to Polo, through commentaries and Bergreen I discovered a generations-long, multi-faceted debate. One issue centers on whether he actually visited all the places he recorded. A second focuses on the veracity of details about some sites he did visit—from the descriptions of beasts and characters of the people he encountered to the "miracles" he witnessed. Third, shortly after his return from the East, while held as a prisoner after a disastrous sea battle between Venice and Genoa, Polo is believed to have dictated his story

to Rustichello of Pisa, who may have mingled his own voice with the story. Finally, *Travels* appeared over centuries in many differing manuscripts with a wide range of details, styles, and titles. Even though modern scholarship has settled many authorship issues, others may never be.

Yet we who assess honors student projects in the current age of much higher standards of publication honesty sometimes ask ourselves similar questions about the origins of some researched projects received in class: Has he done the research? Has the research been accurately presented and interpreted? Has the student done her own writing—or do we detect other voices on the pages, perhaps of another student or published expert whose work was copied or closely paraphrased without attribution?

Just as personal entertainment has shifted from the one-way, big screen production of my early teens to the interactive streaming of video on laptops and iPods today, so apparently have many students' views of ownership. Because of easy on-line accessibility to and duplication of digital music and video, static also seems to be building in the meaning of academic integrity. How could it be that despite ubiquitous stern warnings that downloading pirated songs and DVDs is theft, some simply shrug off such warnings when doing research? Since acquiring words and visuals can be just as easy, students sometimes acquire the mistaken belief, "If it's on the web, it belongs to everyone!" In academic writing, one can string together a paper for free from on-line sources, pick up a finished paper online for a few dollars, or hire a classmate to write one for money or favors. All this can drive the honest professor to despair—and to honor codes, Google, Dogpile, and Turnitin.

I wonder, however, if honors directors and faculty should be less reactive and more proactive by insisting on a different approach to assignments that would short-circuit the temptations offered by the Internet and encourage greater academic honesty by our students. We in honors programs can do a better job of showing that we promote creativity and integrity in approach, sources, organization, and composition of student work. Given the explosion of sources and acceptable academic writing styles, it simply seems less possible for faculty to have the same intimate knowledge of the scholarship in their fields as those of us who earned doctorates back when I first met the merchant-cum-explorer who acquainted the West with paper money and gun powder.

Perhaps we can provide guidance in research integrity that encourages academic camaraderie rather than threatening discovery—offering a carrot, if you will, instead of brandishing a stick.

- Promote Rogerian argument. Projects aimed at synthesis of conflicting positions are not only more intellectually challenging, but should be more difficult to locate as ready-made papers.

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- Mentor student research from start to finish. Just as group projects are more successful for students when faculty introduce, explain, and supervise, we should increase the potential for intellectual and ethnical success by guiding individual students through the research process.
- Proceed in steps. Although some students—even those in honors—cling to “one-night stand” writing, faculty can share the development of students’ projects in real time by scheduling flexible serial deadlines for the topic and rationale, initial sources, and preliminary draft well in advance of the due date.
- Encourage students to submit original research material—reading notes, questionnaire results, survey tabulations, lab reports, web sites, print-outs, and photocopies. Along with proceeding in steps, reviewing sources in their original form encourages further study, conversation, and insight into students’ research processes.
- Invite peer sources. Some of the more interesting reading in my students’ research surfaces when they include excerpts of interviews with their friends—whether as lab partners, mutually interested parties, or simply persons with first-hand experience—addressing the topic.
- Assign an annotated works cited. I find that students give more careful attention to sources when required to compose annotations of the works cited either as a step in the research or as an inclusion with the final draft.
- Have the project due several weeks before the end of semester. My students and I “close the circle” of researched writing during one-to-one conversations about the finished projects that I have already read.

None of these steps will guarantee academic integrity, some may seem old-fashioned, and all require more instructor time. Encouraging honors students along these lines, however, will likely help them gather their facts, report and interpret them critically, and create authentic voices in their research projects. Although Marco Polo scholars may never have all of their questions of authenticity answered, we in honors can help our students avoid questions about theirs.

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