

Sell, Jonathan P.A. 2006
*Rhetoric and Wonder in English Travel Writing,
1560-1613*
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The first English travelers who ventured across the Ocean and returned home full of marvelous stories to tell their countrymen found themselves in a position difficult to negotiate. How could they express, by means of written representations, the *newness* they had encountered in their travels? Could all these *marvels* be effectively conveyed to people who had never admired, and never would admire, them? Most prefatory material accompanying these narratives was devoted to convince readers that what they were about to read was *true*, wonderful as it might have seemed to them upon first perusal. In this enlightening study, Jonathan Sell approaches this question from what he purports to be a *new* angle. For him, rhetoric is the key element by means of which these writers, trained from school in its tenets, manage to give the wonderful, the marvelous, a necessary aura of truth. As he states in the introduction, his goal is to analyze the extent to which rhetoric was an effective ally of wonder when it came to represent new worlds in the early modern period. Rhetoric, as he sees it, brings together the intellectual and the emotional, successfully providing these traveler-writers with an effective means to organize, represent, and convey their experiences in the new worlds they had been privy to. His emphasis is on the aesthetic side of rhetoric, the interplay between the intellectual and the emotional, and he tries to escape traditional approaches in which ideological issues seemed to be always at the core of this kind of travel narratives. As he soon establishes in his introduction, his will be the first book dealing with this corpus of literature from an exclusively rhetoric perspective, and thus he tries to distance his work from that of his better known predecessors. His stance purports to be diametrically opposed to that of Stephen Greenblatt in *Marvelous Possessions* (Chicago, 1991), Mary Fuller's in *Voyages in Print* (Cambridge, 1995), or Mary Campbell's in *The*

Witness and the Other World (Cornell, 1988), clearly trying to place himself outside the fashionable circle of American new historicists or British cultural materialists. Furthermore, and as a fundamental aspect of his contribution to our present understanding of these writings, Sell claims that his analysis will also shed light on the process of “getting to know” and of knowledge itself.

One of the key elements of Sell’s study is his definition of what he calls “consensual truth.” According to him, the main mistake made by his predecessors in the analysis of these writings lies on their having measured them against the wrong kind of *truth*. The truth represented in these works is not the absolute or irrefutable truth we all seem to recognize easily, but rather a truth resulting from the *consensus* among the different members of the community in which these writings are produced. For Sell, intelligibility is necessarily linked to being culturally meaningful, and this meaningfulness is never absolute, but relative to a very specific conceptual scheme. As he convincingly states, “new and original representations can be constructed from the linguistic and rhetorical resources that pre-exist in the discourse system through which the consensus found expression” (30). This requires, he argues, an intellectual process of implication: the reader must be cued in to the *right* interpretation of the significance implied by the traveler-writer. And, for him, the central emotion of interpretation in these writings (and of cognition, in general) is *wonder*. In these writings, the affective power of rhetoric is exploited so as to move readers from the intellectual to the emotional, using wonder as both a metaphor and a cognitive framework that will constitute a first step towards achieving consensual truth.

To illustrate his thesis, Sell makes use of some of the most characteristic examples of this literary genre. As he argues, Thomas Hariot (*A Briefe and True Report*), Edward Webbe (*The rare and most wonderful things*), and Walter Raleigh (*The Discoverie of ... Guiana*), rhetorically frame their writings as *wonderful* as a means to attain credibility. On the other hand, Edward Hayes (*A report of the voyage ... attempted ... by sir Humfrey Gilbert*) dismisses the marvellous and gives expression to a new episteme in which objective reality, rather than metaphor and wonder, is preferred as the guarantee of truth. In his detailed analysis of these works, Sell tries to identify the particular rhetorical strategy each writer uses depending on his specific goal. However, while Sell truly displays a remarkable knowledge of classical rhetoric in that he manages to name each and

every one of the tropes employed by these writers, this section occasionally undermines the validity of some of his larger claims. The classification of each writing according to the predominant rhetorical strategy used by the author comes across as rather “straitjacketed,” rather *ad hoc*, even. Sometimes, Sell seems to be at pains to make everything fit his theoretical mould, almost as if trying to tell these writers how they should have used rhetoric in order to make their arguments more efficiently. Some questions immediately come to mind: if what these writers really wanted was to obtain something very specific in return (material gain, royal favor, public recognition), why would they be interested in framing their work as *wonderful*? Also: if they were so successful in the use of these rhetorical strategies as Sell seems to defend, why were there so many “slanderers” accusing them of being liars? Were these “slanderers” against whom most of this prefatory material was written outside the “consensual truth” Sell takes as the basis for his theory?

In the last two chapters of the book, Sell expands on what he had already pointed at in previous sections: how the representational episteme changes from the metaphorical to the kinetic, turning the body of the traveler, marked by the “travails” of the voyage, into a securer referent for truth. Far from the wonder implied in most of these writings as a means to convey an experience beyond the realm of knowable truth, Hayes’s text exemplifies the move away from wonder and towards denotative representation using the traveler as an object of wonder itself: “It is the traveller’s body that becomes evidence of wonder, a token of truth inscribed with the scars of encounters with new worlds beyond the consensually known and knowable” (146). For Sell, this use of the marked body of the traveler as evidence of experienced wonder and as testimony to the truth of what is written constitutes nothing less than the demise of the metaphorical episteme. But the move is also generic: Hayes’s text represents the transition from narrative to drama. The traveler-narrator exemplified in Harriot, Raleigh, Sherley, or Barlowe gives way to the “traveler-turned-thaumaturge,” the traveler-dramatist epitomized in Hayes. Sell ends up his discussion framing this epistemological transition within the larger picture in which words acted on stage superseded words written in books during the period under scrutiny: “Drama can pull off the illusion of absolute truth; words in a book cannot, because in the act of reading, the mind is constantly engaged in fleshing out, in finding bodies to match with words – in supplying the very absences implied by

linguistic signs” (174). Sell closes his book with a discussion of a dramatic piece which, for him, epitomizes the collision of the two epistememes he sees at work in the travel texts under analysis. As he convincingly argues, William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a favourite with some of those critics whose emphasis solely on “ideology” Sell had previously censored, is rhetorically shaped by the discourse of contrived wonder. Shakespeare articulates both art and power around the concept of wonder, representing wonder as a practical tool on which both art and power rely to guarantee their ideological or aesthetic foundations. Sell sees the characters of Miranda and Caliban as emblematic of the two colliding epistememes in the rhetoric of wonder. For him, Miranda is “an intellectual significance whose only substance can be rhetorical figures used to express her”; on the other hand, Caliban is “the body as ‘lively’ evidence, the immediately signified with its own unique signifier, the exaltation of the mimetic power of the body to unleash illusions of truth” (187). But Caliban’s body is crudely fleshed out in the play, made into an object of wonder, only to be controlled and rejected afterwards. In line with his previous arguments dismissing an exclusively ideological reading of these texts, Sell concludes his study relocating *The Tempest* within the literary panorama of the period: “More than an intervention in the discourse of colonial power, *The Tempest* is a meditation on the way power invents a discourse of wonder to prevent consensually indecorous bodies [like Caliban’s] from jeopardizing or claiming a stake in that power” (188). Caliban, in our own world, is used by Sell as a cautionary tale illustrative of the possible ill effects of generating wonder to satisfy power’s circumstantial needs, only to eventually fall victim to the power that wonder sometimes generates in and of itself.

Enlightening, fresh, rigorous, and definitely well written, Sell’s book is both a welcome and important contribution to our understanding of travel literature in early modern England. Even though he sometimes falls prey to the ideological traps he condemns in others (his escape from the ideological and towards the aesthetic is not consistently successful), there is no question that his work manages to state the predominant role of rhetoric in the composition and subsequent analysis of this corpus of writings.

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