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Week 13-

The major thrust of Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* is the semiotics of the initial encounters between Europeans and the indigenous populations of the Americas. He begins by using the traveler's tale of John Mandeville, which was ultimately a fanciful description of travel in the Holy Land, Southeast Asia, Asia, and Africa. He contrasts Mandeville's supposed interactions with native peoples with the subsequent conquistador mentality. Whereas Mandeville goes to great lengths to portray non-Europeans as the cultural opposites of Europeans, there is great value attached to the rituals described. (In many ways, it can be read as a scathing critique of Christianity.) In contrast, Greenblatt argues, the interaction with those living "on the rim of the world" (as drawn on the T-O maps) treated the natives as beasts, a necessary outcome of the binary choice of defining them as beasts or gods. Greenblatt goes to some length to describe the seeming absurdity of the rituals through which Europeans claimed land for their countries.

He appears to be so steeped in relativism that he cannot ascribe a belief in objective truth to his protagonists. To wit, the need to register the fact that none of the natives objected to claiming the land was a legal fiction, but that legal fiction, for Columbus, enervated a legal fact. The difficulty for Greenblatt is that signs may have many meanings for different cultures (for example, dancing as a sign of belligerence), but multiplicity of meaning doesn't preclude assigning truth to one or more of a sign's meanings. I can't figure out if Greenblatt ascribes too much or too little objectivity to the Europeans.

Along these lines, consider the exchange of "gifts" between Europeans and natives. There are a variety of ways of valuing goods. A glass bead that has little value to Europeans may have great value to a native. Greenblatt comments on the incommensurability of valuation, but he fails to apply wonder to the natives. (He writes at some length of the role of wonder as power from the European perspective.)

The question Greenblatt's methodology raises is important for historians. History is ultimately the interpretation of signs and symbols. How we can even begin to conceive of the interpretation is a function of our cultural background and our training. As such, the book raises questions about our ability to write about "the other." Are we even cognizant of our preconceived notions?