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5 Knowledge and Its Opposite

Antiquity, Parody, and Geographical Distance in Gabriel Rollenhagen's *Four Indian Voyages* (1603)

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Early modern Europe's geographical literatures have often been addressed as marked by a confrontation of conflicting sets of knowledge. As Anthony Grafton's seminal *New Worlds, Ancient Texts* has reminded us, travel reports and direct observation challenged traditional authorities and established new inventories of geographical knowledge.¹ The rapid increase in available travel literature and global geographical information in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries transformed discourses of global imagination and questioned older accounts of faraway places. Yet older perspectives were not replaced overnight and contradicting sets of knowledge could coexist for decades and sometimes centuries, often in diffuse and ambiguous manifestations.² The simultaneity of multiple traditions and forms of knowledge production raises the question of the specific contexts, settings, and media, in which geographical information was mediatized and consumed, and under which circumstances it became obsolete and had to be updated or replaced.

One of the central fault lines in the transformation of global geographical knowledge and its dissemination was the conflicted relationship between the cosmographical traditions that emerged in the fourteenth century and newer travel reports that claimed to be authentic eyewitness reports of foreign regions. In the context of this complex dynamic between cosmographical writing and newly available travel narratives, this chapter examines a satirical-didactical publication project, the so-called *Four Indian Voyages*, first published in 1603 by the Magdeburg emblematicist, poet, and playwright Gabriel Rollenhagen (1583–1619).³ The compilatory work's rigorous source criticism reflects a crucial intersection point between older cosmographical literature and newer forms

1 Anthony Grafton, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts. The Power of Tradition and the Shock of Discovery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1995).

2 Surekha Davies, *Renaissance Ethnography and the Invention of the Human New Worlds, Maps and Monsters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 150–60.

3 The title of the first editions was *Vier Bücher Wunderbarlicher biß daher unerhörter / und ungleublicher Indianischer reysen durch die Luft / Wasser / Land / Helle / Paradiß / und den Himmel* (Magdeburg: Bötcher, 1603) ("Four Books of Previously Unheard and Incredible Indian Voyages through the Air, through the Sea and over Land, through Hell, Paradise and Heaven"). A second edition of

of knowledge production and it was reissued and expanded several times throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It appeared in at least nine different German editions between 1603 and 1717 and was also translated into Dutch.⁴ Even though Rollenhagen was only twenty years old at the time of publication and his project was little more than a first writing exercise for a wider audience, the *Four Indian Voyages* remained popular for at least two centuries and found a readership as diverse as Johannes Kepler, who mentions it in the context of his *Somnium*, or the Grimm brothers, who consulted it for their compilation of *Deutsche Sagen*.⁵ The first part of the book contained Rollenhagen's own translation of classical and medieval travel narratives, while the second part consisted of a compilation of forty false propositions about nature, science, and geography or, as he called them, "obvious lies that were nonetheless believed by many older and newer scholars".⁶ At the heart of Rollenhagen's project lies the question of truthfulness and credibility, and a central thread that runs through the book is the conflicted relationship between tradition and direct observation. While Rollenhagen is clear about the fictional status of the four translated texts, his discussion of the forty propositions reveals careful epistemological reflections about the value of observation and the question of how observations could be affected or distorted by the subjectivity of the observer and his or her latent assumptions about the world.

Situating the *Four Indian Voyages* in the German book and media landscape of its time, this chapter uses Rollenhagen's example a case study to detect changing attitudes towards older cosmographical traditions and new forms of geographical writing as well the critical reception of marvellous

the work appeared in the same year and under the same title in a cooperation between the Magdeburg publishers Johann Bötcher and Ambrosius Kirchner.

- 4 The total number of the *Four Voyages*' editions must have been even higher. As the Stettin printer David Reichard announced, he had already published four editions of the work by 1614. See Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher wunderbarer biß daher unerhörter und unglaublicher Indianischer Reysen [...]*. (Stettin: Reichard 1614), title page. It is therefore reasonable to assume eleven German editions of the full text and at least two of the second part without the translations (see footnote 11). The only known Dutch translation was published in Amsterdam in 1682: Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Wonderbaarlyke en ongeloofelyke reizen, door de lucht, water, land, hel, paradijs, en hemel. Gedaan en beschreven door den grooten Alexander, Gajus Plinius Secundus, den filosooph Lucianus, en den abt St. Brandanus* (Amsterdam: Janssonius, 1682).
- 5 On Kepler as a reader of Rollenhagen, see Arthur B. Evans, "The Origins of Science Fiction Criticism: From Kepler to Wells." *Science Fiction Studies* 26, no. 2 (1999), special issue "A History of Science Fiction Criticism", 165. On Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's use of Rollenhagen, see Marianne Rumpf, "Wie war zu Cölln es doch vordem mit Heinzelmännchen so bequem", *Fabula: Zeitschrift für Erzählforschung* 17, no. 1 (1976), 68.
- 6 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 200: "Zugabe etlicher wahrhaffter, aber bey vielen alten und neuen Gelehrten glaubwürdiger Lügen". The exact number of these "lies" differs in the various editions. The first edition contained twenty-five main propositions and fifteen sub-questions and the catalogue was expanded in the later editions.

accounts around 1600. Rollenhagen's critical interrogation of traditional knowledge resembles a mode of critical examination that is now most prominently associated with the later empiricist tradition that emerged in the wake of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (1620). Some of Rollenhagen's refutations of widespread "Lies" resemble those in Sir Thomas Browne's *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), and refer to the same erroneous assumptions, for example the existence of the basilisk and the phoenix and other marvellous animals, even though Rollenhagen tends to draw more radical conclusions than Browne.⁷

Reading Rollenhagen in the line of such epistemological reflections on truth and falsehood reveals an *ex negativo*-engagement with another tradition of knowledge transmission. If we pay attention to the structure and the body of "false" knowledge, the *Four Indian Voyages* also appears as a diatribe against Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia*, a book that embodied and exemplified the sixteenth-century cosmographical tradition in Germany and Europe. In many parts of Rollenhagen's book, the propositions in fact follow the order of the *Cosmographia* and refute their statements about nature and geography.⁸ It is the very paradox of the *Four Indian Voyages* that it disseminates "false" knowledge about the world at full length and with relish, only in order to address the truth behind these erroneous assumptions. Preserving and repeating false claims as a form of entertainment, Rollenhagen's work illustrates a tension at the heart of travel accounts and geographical literature of its time: texts were marketed, sold, and read as sensational accounts of a distant world, but they also had to assure their readers of their facticity and credibility. Rollenhagen's case allows for an insightful examination of the contradictory relationship between these two seemingly opposing elements, and reflects the dialectical relationship between the marvellous and the factitious in travel discourses around 1600. As this case illustrates, truth claims did not just eliminate older forms of marvellous imagination, but they also depended on such exotic imaginations of the non-European world, as new knowledge became only productive in the context of the older and often outdated frameworks, be it only *ex negativo*.

Learning by Lies

Both parts of the *Four Indian Voyages* are concerned with the exposition of "obvious lies" and the four translations in the first part gleefully unmask the

7 See e.g. Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, 6th edition (London: Ekins, 1672), 130–34, 144–49.

8 Sebastian Münster, *Cosmographia. Beschreibung aller Lender durch Sebastianum Munsterum, in welcher begriffen Aller völker, Herrschafften, Stetten und namhafftiger flecken, herkommen: Sitten, gebreüch, ordnung, glauben, secten vnd handtierung, durch die gantze welt, vnd fürnemlich Teutscher nation. Was auch besonders in iedem landt gefunden, vnnd darin beschehen sey. Alles mit figuren vnd schönen landt taflen erklet, vnd für augen gestellt.* (Basel: Petri, 1544). The most obvious references to Münster are from the fifth and the sixth book.

fictitiousness of the classical and medieval originals. The *Voyages* opens with the fictitious account of Alexander the Great's Indian campaign (327–325 BC), as described in the Pseudo-Alexander letter to Aristotle, and then turns to a selection of texts from Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, with a focus on its passages on enigmatic and monstrous human races. The third chapter recounts Lucian of Samosata's *True Story*, a text that is of special significance for Rollenhagen's project as a whole and serves as an intertextual bridge to the added questions section, titled *Wahrhafftige Lügen*, which could be understood as "obvious lies" but also as "truthful lies". While the first two texts in Rollenhagen's compilation were not explicitly marked as fiction – Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* was still regarded a source of information by many early modern readers – Lucian's *True Story* was designed as a satire that mocked the naivety of his Roman audiences who mistook mythical events for contemporary and ancient texts for historical facts.⁹ The voyages described in the *True Story* not only include travels to exotic continents and regions but even to outer space, which inspired a wide range of modern science fiction writers.¹⁰ The first part of the *Four Indian Voyages* and the eclectic mix of fantastic accounts ends with the translation of the travels of Saint Brendan, whose textual tradition dated back to the ninth century and which serves Rollenhagen as an illustration of an assumed medieval gullibility.

The second part of the book and its discussion of the forty erroneous statements repeatedly refers back to the four fictional or fictionalized travel accounts of part one. Similar to the form of Laurent Joubert's list of medical errors, first published in 1587, the *Four Indian Voyages* lists errors or "lies" concerning natural history and geography but also touches topics such as history and theology.¹¹ Rollenhagen's polemical stance against traditional knowledge also borrows from confessional polemics, and popular assumptions and falsehoods are also framed as errors in doctrinal terms. Raised as a devout Lutheran, Rollenhagen polemically claims that legends such as Saint Brendan's travels were commonly believed by medieval Catholics who were misled by their "monks".¹² Rather than reflecting a prefiguration of later enlightenment projects, his critical stance is primarily motivated by his

9 Aristoula Georgiadou and David H. J. Larmour. *Lucian's Science Fiction Novel True Histories. Interpretation and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). On the early modern reception of Pliny, see Auge Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia. The Reception of the Natural History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

10 See e.g. Greg Grewell, "Colonizing the Universe: Science Fictions Then, Now, and in the (Imagined) Future." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature* 55, no. 2 (2001): 25–47.

11 See Laurent Joubert, *Erreurs populaires et propos vulgaires touchant la medecine et le regime de sante* (Paris: Claude Micard, 1578).

12 See e.g. Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), fol. A4r. Rollenhagen also present Luther as a critic of marvelous ancient accounts and points out that the reformer refused to refer to Biblical animals by their medieval names, and thereby "cleansed" scripture from basilisks and dragons (Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* [1603], 211)

Protestant outlook, in which traditional authorities can be inoffensively criticized as long as they are associated with the Catholic tradition. In the forty “obvious lies that were nonetheless believed by many older and newer scholars”, Rollenhagen compares widespread misconceptions to the latest available information, often from new travel reports. The list of errors was expanded throughout the seventeenth century and the 1614 edition already contained fifty-nine “lies” and the second part now equalled the first one in length.¹³

These “truthful” or “obvious lies” soon developed their own publication history and in addition to the nine to eleven full editions of the *Voyages*, the catalogues of lies also appeared separately at least twice, in 1640 and 1680. Curiously, the editors and publishers of these separate editions ascribed the work to Rollenhagen’s father, Georg, and expanded and changed the list of the errors and “lies”.¹⁴ These false attributions to Gabriel’s father were most likely a result of Georg Rollenhagen’s lasting popularity, whose rich and diverse oeuvre of satirical epics, plays, and poems overshadowed the work and indeed the memory of his son. However, the influence of the elder Rollenhagen on the *Four Indian Voyages* should also not be underestimated. Gabriel was still a student in Leipzig when the first edition appeared and, as he mentions in his preface, it was his father who encouraged him to translate and publish his texts.¹⁵ Not only the preface but also the list of errors are full of references to Georg Rollenhagen, and all editions contained a dedicatory poem by Georg to Christoph von Dorstadt, a family friend who allowed Gabriel into his private library in order to consult relevant literature for the *Voyages*.¹⁶ In the third edition of his son’s book, published in 1605, Georg also added a short preface to the second part.¹⁷ The oeuvres of the two Rollenhagens are related in many ways, and the question of credibility and

13 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1614), 131–262. The list of “lies” is divided into twenty-six main errors and thirty-three subpoints.

14 See Georg [sic] Rollenhagen, *Etlicher Warhaffter / aber bey vielen Alten und Newen Gelerten glaubwürdiger Lügen. Unsern lieben Teutsche[n] zur Lehre und kurtzweiliger ergetzung / auß Griechischer und Lateinischer Sprach mit fleiß verdeutschet*. (Hamburg: Bartsch, 1640); Georg [sic] Rollenhagen, *Georgen Rollenhagen Warhaffte Lügen / von Geistlichen und Natürlichen Dingen / oder Beschreibung etlicher warhafftiger / aber bey vielen alten und neuen Scribenten und Gelehrten / Geistlichen und Weltlichen/ eingerissener ausgebreiteten Glaubwürdigen Lügen*. (Wahrenberg: LügenFeind, 1680). Georg [sic] Rollenhagen, *Etlicher Warhaffter [...] Lügen*; Georg [sic] Rollenhagen, *Warhaffte Lügen*. Both the publisher “LügenFeind” (“enemy of lies”) and the indicated place (“Wahrenberg”) of publication of the 1680 edition are obviously fictitious and there is no direct evidence for the identity of the printer or publisher behind the programmatic indication. Like the 1640 and 1680 editions, the last known publication of the *Voyages* from 1717 indicates Georg Rollenhagen as the author of the second part. See Gabriel Rollenhagen, *Indianische Reisen, Wahrhaffte Lügen von Geist- und natürlichen Dingen* (Frankfurt: Nicolai, 1717), unpaginated 2nd title page.

15 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), “Vorrede”, 1–2.

16 Ibid, fol. A2r-A3r.

17 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1605), 204–05.

the transmission of reliable knowledge are central themes in the works of both. Georg Rollenhagen's *Der post Reutter* ("The postal rider") for example, is a media-critical satire on the credibility and incredibility of printed and oral news.¹⁸ In the form of a dialogue, the text stages a postal rider and his counterpart, "the crippled messenger" ("der hinckende Both"), who embodies the unreliability of circulating information and rumour.

The critical evaluation of information was a theme that connected the works of both Rollenhagens and there is no reason not to take the preface to the *Four Indian Voyages* and the identification of Georg as an important mentor to his son at face value. Originally trained as a theologian, Georg Rollenhagen saw himself as an educator of Magdeburg's youth and served as the head of the town's famous *Gymnasium* for forty-two years.¹⁹ A substantial part of his publishing activities was devoted to textbooks for his students, and despite several calls to prestigious professorships and positions as a preacher and clerical superintendent elsewhere, he remained true to his pedagogical commitment to Magdeburg.²⁰ His academic interests were wide and diverse and reached from theology to natural history and astronomy, but even though he corresponded with scholars such as Tycho Brahe, most of his publications appeared in German rather than in Latin, and contained prefaces that specifically addressed youthful readers and students.²¹ Despite his learned networks and his literary activities, Rollenhagen the Elder primarily saw himself as an educator and in his preface to the second part of the *Voyages*' third edition, he introduces the forty "lies" as examples of the pedagogical methods he used in the upbringing of his own children and the students at the *Gymnasium*.²² As a learning exercise, he assigned his pupils discussions of such erroneous statements and propositions and admonished them to identify logical errors and fallacies. His son's project needs to be understood in this pedagogical context and the introductory paratexts to the *Voyages* present the

18 [Georg] Rollenhagen, *Der post Reutter*.

19 On Rollenhagen the Elder, see Gerhard Dünnhaupt, "Georg Rollenhagen (1542–1609)", in *Personalbibliographien zu den Drucken des Barock*, 6 vols, ed. Gerhard Dünnhaupt (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1991), V, 3476–3491.

20 Carsten Nahrendorf, *Humanismus in Magdeburg. Das Altstädtische Gymnasium von seiner Gründung bis zur Zerstörung der Stadt (1524–1631)* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 175–76.

21 See e.g. Georg Rollenhagen, *Froschmeuseler. Der Frösch vnd Meuse wunderbare Hoffhaltunge / Der Frölichen / und zur Weißheit / und Regimenten erzogenen Jugend zur anmutigen / aber sehr nützlichen Lehr / aus den alten Poeten und Reimdichtern und in sonderheyt aus der Naturkündiger / aus vieler zahmer und wilder Thiere Natur und eigenschafft / bericht*. (Magdeburg: Gehne, 1595), unpaginated preface. See also Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1605), 204. On Georg Rollenhagen's didactic and pedagogical programme, see Ludger Lieb, "Krieg der Sprichwörter. Zur fragwürdigen Autorität von Erfahrung und Lehre in Georg Rollenhagens *Froschmeuseler*", in *Tierepik und Tierallegorese. Studien zur Poetologie und historischen Anthropologie vormoderner Literatur*, ed. Bernhard Jahn and Otto Neudeck (Frankfurt: Lang, 2004), 251–77.

22 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1605), 204.

publication as the result of a training that prepared Gabriel for his critical readings and the sharp refutations of widely-held erroneous assumptions.²³

One implicit line that runs through the refutation of lies and errors in the *Voyages*' second part is motivated by confessional polemics. In the paratextual comments, Gabriel Rollenhagen does his best to present medieval and ancient travel accounts as integral parts of "backward" Catholic learning and education, including the legendary journey of Saint Brendan. As he writes in his preface:

As impertinently crude and obvious the lies in these aforementioned writings [Pseudo-Alexander, Pliny, and Lucian] might be, the godless and dishonourable monks were not ashamed to impute such Lucianic antics to their innocent saints, to neglect Scripture and instead preach obvious cock and bull stories. [...] A particular example of this can be found in the legend of Saint Brendan.²⁴

Even though Rollenhagen greatly exaggerates the degree to which Brendan's legend was mistaken for a factual account, its first German print editions – published between 1476 and 1486 in Augsburg – included the equally fictional epic *Herzog Ernst*, but also the travels of Hans Schiltberger, a fourteenth-century German lesser nobleman, who was taken captive by Ottoman armies and then joined Timur's campaign to India.²⁵ The account of Brendan's Atlantic travel was thus indeed marketed as part of non-fictional travel compilations and the degrees of fictionality sometimes remained obscure, which gave Rollenhagen the opportunity to depict it as a part of "superstitious" Catholic culture. The later editions, published after 1614, contain even more polemical anti-Catholic broadsides, especially in the "lies" section of the second part.²⁶ The attacks on the "obvious lies" were not just directed against outdated forms of knowledge but also never overlooked the opportunity to ridicule confessional antagonists. Both Rollenhagens leaned towards the Philippist camp within German Lutheranism that identified itself with the intellectual heritage of Philipp Melanchthon, and Georg did not eschew controversies with orthodox Gnesio-Lutherans.²⁷ Their emphasis on critical

23 Ibid, 205.

24 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), fol. A4r.

25 *Das buch sagt von hertzog Ernst. Auch von dem Schildtberger. Und von den seltsamen wundern so sy erfahren und gesehen habent auf dem meere und auf dem land* (Augsburg: Anton Sorg, 1477). On the publishing history of the German Saint Brendan-account, see Walter Haug, "Brandans Meerfahrt und das Buch der Wunder Gottes", in *Raumerfahrung - Raumerfindung. Erzählte Welten des Mittelalters zwischen Orient und Okzident*, ed. Laetitia Rimpau and Peter Ihring (Berlin: Akademie, 2005), 44. Rollenhagen based his account on the Latin version of the Basel *Passional*, published in 1517 by Adam Petri. See Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 153.

26 See e.g. Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1614), 225–29.

27 Nahrendorf, *Humanismus in Magdeburg*, 174.

inquiry and scrutiny should not simply be taken for an idiosyncratic form of proto-enlightenment scepticism, but needs to be understood in the context of confessional polemics. The repeated call for a critical mistrust of every claim to truth and knowledge is always attached to the authoritative centrality of Scripture and even though confessional authorities are seldom explicitly mentioned in the *Four Indian Voyages*, the compilation does not hide their Lutheran conviction.

Rollenhagen the Younger demonstrates remarkable skills as an independent and critical reader and interpreter of his sources. Without formulating a clear-cut epistemological theory or method, he approaches the forty propositions with a fundamental mistrust and often seeks to provide alternative explanations for obscure or inexplicable claims. In several passages he explicitly reflects on criteria of credibility and authority, and as he asserts, there are only two fully authoritative and credible sources of knowledge: Scripture and direct observation. His judgment on taking ancient authorities at face value is scathing: neither Aristotle nor Pliny can be relied on without further evidence and they can only be believed if their propositions can be empirically verified. Specific examples from the natural world serve to prove Rollenhagen's point. Discussing Pliny's ideas on the brooding behaviour of ravens and the parents' assumed incapacity of recognizing their offspring after seven days, he writes:

But we are blind, foolish, and mad to believe and preach things that are said or written by others, but in fact contradict the innate nature of all creatures as well our own our own experience.²⁸

With regard to the brooding raven, Rollenhagen is surprisingly well-informed on the history of Pliny's reception. As he correctly notes in his annotation to this section, it was the author of the German *De natura rerum* or *Puoch der Natur*, Konrad von Megenberg (1309–74), who relied on Pliny's account and coined the German term “Rabenmutter” (“uncaring mother”). Rollenhagen's radical distrust towards ancient authorities, however, is not restricted to Pliny and his medieval reception but includes the entire canon of classical learning. At the time of the publication of the *Four Indian Voyages*, Gabriel Rollenhagen was enrolled as a law student in Leipzig, and his outlined method of examining evidence and evaluating his sources sometimes echoes his legal training:

We should not ask Aristotle, Pliny or Albertus Magnus about these matters but only trust our own eyes. Where things speak for themselves, there

28 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 276. With regards to the brooding raven, Rollenhagen is surprisingly well-informed on the history of Pliny's reception. As he correctly notes at the bottom of this page, the author of the German *De natura rerum*, Konrad von Megenberg, relied on Pliny's account and coined the German term “Rabenmutter” (“uncaring mother”).

is no need for words, as the legal scholars say. Speaking and disputing against obvious experience is not wisdom but wilful foolishness.²⁹

Applying the Ciceronian dictum “Ubi rerum testimonia adsunt non opus est verbis” (“Where things speak for themselves, there is no need for words”) on the examination of classical authorities, he formulates a position that requires experiential confirmation of every claim to knowledge. While ancient sources cannot be dismissed *per se*, their claims require additional confirmation, be it through immediate observation, obvious experience (“öffentliche erfahrung”) or other credible sources.

Inverting Cosmography

Rollenhagen’s rigorously critical stance in matters of establishing truth and his stress on “obvious experience”, however, raises the question of how to evaluate information that is only available from second-hand observational accounts. Many of the topics discussed in the forty lies concern phenomena from non-European regions which could not directly be confirmed by Rollenhagen or his German readers. In order to correct erroneous “Indian” accounts, he complemented them with information from newly published travel literature, especially Dutch titles. In the preface to Christoph von Dorstadt, he mentions the rich library of his patron and in particular the collection of travel literature, “not only all the printed maritime voyages of our time [...] but also the marvels from all over the world that have eagerly been collected by the Doctor Paludanus”.³⁰ In a German context, “all the printed maritime voyages of our time” can only refer to Johan Theodore de Bry’s and Levinus Hulsius’s collections of voyages, but Bernardus Paludanus and Jan Huygen van Linschoten are mentioned by name throughout the book and Rollenhagen regarded them as more trustworthy sources on Asian natural history than most other available accounts.³¹ A year after of the *Four Indian Voyages* was published, Rollenhagen moved to Leiden to continue his studies but as his use of sources shows, he was already familiar with the Dutch landscape of learning in 1603, perhaps through Dorstadt.

Paludanus and Van Linschoten are treated with less skepticism than other authors but even here Rollenhagen always stays at a critical distance and never quotes them with explicit approval. Discussing the winter destination of

29 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 276.

30 Ibid., preface, fol. A4v.

31 Rollenhagen probably also knew Linschoten’s work from the De Bry collection, as the series contained the only known publications of the *Itinerario* that appeared within the German territories. For an exhaustive study on De Bry’s Voyages, see Michiel van Groesen, *The Representations of the Overseas World in the De Bry Collection of Voyages (1590–1634)* (Leiden: Brill, 2008). On the inclusion of Linschoten’s texts, see 118–20; 229–31; 257–58. See also Stephanie Leitch’s chapter on De Bry and Hulsius in this volume.

European storks, he writes that it is “Linschoten’s opinion that they migrate to Java”, but still does not cite Van Linschoten’s observation as an established fact.³² The scrutinous reading of his sources is guided by Rollenhagen’s critical understanding of “experience” (“erfahrung”). As he states, “erfahrung” is the last instance on which to rely but in his analysis it is also identified as inescapably subjective and dependent on specific contexts as well as on concrete mental and physical circumstances. Discussing the anatomy of elephants and the idea that they lacked knee and hip joints, Rollenhagen stated it was the “experience” of contemporary Spanish and Dutch travellers that these animals indeed had mobile legs just like horses or cattle.³³ This approach allows him to contextualize experience and observation and to offer alternative explanations for otherwise inexplicable phenomena. Discussing the question of why traditional misunderstandings about nature were sometimes confirmed by later first-hand eyewitness accounts, he seeks to formulate an explanation through a critical and contextual reading of such reports. Accounts of basilisks, for example, did not necessarily have to refer to the mythical creatures as described in the classical tradition. Such testimonies could also be the result of an observer’s already existing expectations and the specific individual circumstances at the moment of observation. Discussing eyewitness accounts of an actual basilisk, he writes:

It is very well possible that some lost seafarer came to India or Africa and saw a Calcutta rooster that blew up its neck and hung down its grotesque red nose and then crowed like a rooster. The stranger was obviously astonished and concluded that this was a basilisk and after his return he may have recounted his vision as a marvel to others.³⁴

In this way, Rollenhagen deconstructs a whole range of enigmatic and suspicious reports, and subjects them to an almost dialogical analysis in which observations are embedded into the circumstances in which they were recorded and transmitted. His critical readings of eyewitness reports take into account the possibility that some observations have an authentic core. However, they can be distorted by several factors: in the case of the basilisk account, the perception of the stranded seafarer becomes blurred by his immediate astonishment and the first impression of the “Calcutta rooster”. Second, his perception was based on a frame of reference in which basilisks existed but not yet turkeys (“Calcutta roosters”). Third, accounts from far-away places could be distorted by the unreliability of memory as well as the

32 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 283: “Denn wir wissen / dass auff Laurentii die Störch jehrlich ire jungen aus dem Nest führen / und für Jacobi mit inen davon fliegen / zu der großen Insel Java, wie Johan Huigen meint.”

33 Ibid., 223.

34 Ibid., 210–11. Hereafter, Rollenhagen also suggests a second explanation for accounts of basilisks and mentions interferences between basilisks and poisonous vipers (“aspis”) in several classical sources as well as in the Septuaginta. See Ibid., 211.

long and cumbersome journey home. Finally, European audiences expected to hear marvels (“wunderwerck”) from returning travellers.³⁵ In the light of this critical examination, direct observation is identified as inevitably shaped by a number of communicative, individual, and cultural contexts and preconditions.

Rollenhagen’s attempts to situate observation in individual subjectivity and its dissemination in social interaction bear striking resemblance to Bacon’s (later) *Novum Organum* and its critical analysis of “idols” to which human perception falls prey.³⁶ Not only individual prejudices and the circumstances in which observations are made are taken into account but also their communication between individuals. In comparison to Thomas Browne’s *Pseudodoxia*, which adheres to Bacon’s approach and aims to bring it into practice, Rollenhagen goes even further: where Browne typically concludes his arguments with a criticism of sources, Rollenhagen speculates on their origin and the ways in which testimonies were informed by affects, emotions, and the failing memory of observers, such as the sailors who claimed to have seen basilisks or dog-headed humans.³⁷

The list of enigmatic creatures that are deconstructed in this way is largely derived from Sebastian Münster; for every marvellous creature in the *Cosmographia*, Rollenhagen offers a more credible alternative. Even though he never mentions Münster by name, he follows the order of the *Cosmographia*: his discussion of elephants, winged dragons, and harpies corresponds to the fifth book of the 1544 and 1545 editions, while the discussion of the basilisk, the poisonous snakes, and the monstrous human races is based on the sixth book.³⁸ Consistently, Rollenhagen suggests the least spectacular explanation for each phenomenon in Münster: Pliny’s monstrous races or cynocephali are identified as “dog-faced apes” or baboons, and dragons as poisonous snakes or lizards. Touching the question of whether such reptiles attack elephants, as described in Münster, he admits that he cannot disprove such claims but is self-confident enough to rule out the existence of winged dragons, as their imagination is most likely the result of medieval depictions of Saint George that are printed into the memory and imagination of Christian travellers.³⁹ On some occasions, Rollenhagen offers etymological explanations of marvellous accounts and phenomena: he clearly doubts the existence of phoenixes and harpies, and hypothesizes that the belief in these legendary birds could be the result of the misreading of seafaring accounts. “Phoenix” could originally have referred to “Phoenicians”, and since Phoenician seafarers were notorious

35 On the expectations to hear marvellous accounts from travellers, see Julia Schleck, *Telling True Tales of Islamic Lands: Forms of Mediation in English Travel Writing, 1575–1630* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2011), 20–22.

36 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (London: John Bill, 1620), 40ff.

37 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 210–11.

38 Ibid., 222–25; 209–11; Münster, *Cosmographia*, dccl–dcclii, dcclxxxiii, dccxiii.

39 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 211, 223.

for their ship raids in the ancient Mediterranean, phoenixes might have stood for pirates or personifications of any kind of danger at sea.⁴⁰ Seeking to offer a rationalistic re-interpretation of classical sources, he suggests that already in Virgil references to mythical creatures were in fact poetic devices to signify real or abstract dangers that were only later understood as real creatures by medieval readers:

[i]n Virgil, pirates are depicted in the manner of big birds called harpies, with faces like virgins, bellies like ovens that are invulnerable, and hands like bear claws that can destroy, ruin, and take away everything with them. In the *Hortus sanitatis*, however, these harpies are falsely described and referred to as real, natural birds.⁴¹

Ascribing the physical existence of harpies to the *Ortus Sanitatis*, a fifteenth-century natural encyclopaedia, offers Rollenhagen the opportunity to explain a number of marvellous accounts as based on a misreading of literary sources: not only phoenixes and harpies but also the mythical bird Roc are reduced to poetic personifications that were later misunderstood by superstitious medieval interpreters.⁴² The reason that even trained scholars committed such intellectual *faux pas* was due to a blurred understanding of the relationship between poetical speech and historical truth:

It is petty and childish foolishness to mistake such poetry for true histories. It is a miracle that one had not also believed Virgil's *Fama* or Ovid's *Invidia* to be actual strange wondrous women and included them into a postil.⁴³

Assuming ancient creatures to be physical animals would be the same as mistaking allegorical figures and poetical personifications for real human beings. Despite Rollenhagen's obvious polemical stance, these analyses indeed invoke a form of stylistic criticism that pays close attention to the interferences between figural and non-figural speech. Such rationalistic re-readings of ancient myths and classical literature are surprisingly similar to what Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks have called the eighteenth-century "anti-marvelous".⁴⁴ Several of the points made by Rollenhagen return in the critical philological approach of the Jesuit Antoine Banier (1673–1741), who tried to de-mythologize classical sources and sought to reconstruct their historical and poetic origins by consistently distinguishing between allegorical and factual speech. Banier, who discusses the same accounts of phoenixes and harpies

40 Ibid., 272, 225.

41 Ibid., 225.

42 Ibid. On harpies, see *Ortus Sanitatis*. (Mainz: Meydenbach, 1491), fol. Yiiiir.

43 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603).

44 Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park. *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 329.

and also identifies them as pirates, never refers to Rollenhagen but his analysis bears striking similarities to the approach of the *Four Indian Voyages*.⁴⁵

Another source of knowledge and reliable information discussed in Rollenhagen's book is physical evidence – and even here he urges his readers to be cautious. Material proof can be confirmed by “erfahrung” but it should not be uncritically trusted and it requires careful examination since objects could also have been mistaken for something else or even been wilfully manipulated. According to Rollenhagen, the widespread belief in harpies and griffins was partly due to the circulation of giant bird feet that were collected in cabinets of curiosities. Without further arguments, he identifies these objects as ostrich feet and “griffin claws” as “Indian buffalo horns” that were sold by fraudulent jugglers.⁴⁶ As obvious as the evidence of material objects might appear, even here, manipulation or misidentification could not always be ruled out. A possible strategy to verify or refute sensational accounts of the behaviour or appearance of exotic animals, Rollenhagen suggests, would be the observation of live specimens in princely menageries: more and more German princes kept lions, tigers, and other exotic animals, and even bred them in captivity; this trend could also be useful for the study of natural history. Discussing the assumption that lionesses gave birth to dead pups, he refutes such claims on the basis that such occurrences would have certainly been noted in captivity.⁴⁷

Throughout the *Four Indian Voyages* but particularly in the second part, Rollenhagen is pervasively present as the author of his book, and his self-fashioning as a highly sceptical and independent reader and examiner also involves showcasing his polemical and satirical skills. At times he is so convinced of his own critical stance that he does not even bother to present any kind of argument or evidence to make his case. Discussing the idea that tigers can cure their bronchial diseases by eating aniseed, he just dismisses this claim by asking his fellow Magdeburgers if they have ever seen a tiger in their herbal gardens. To prove his intellectual imperturbation and his insusceptibility to exaggerated claims, he cannot help adding that tigers are in fact a form of “wild sighthounds who like to catch rabbits” rather than the miraculous creatures many Europeans imagined.⁴⁸ On the notion that storks throw every tenth chick out their nest as a form of tax to the owner of the house where they nest, he only remarks that this is the reason that they are so scarce in Thuringia, where no tenth penny is collected.⁴⁹ The medieval account of pelicans feeding their chicks with their own blood, originating

45 Antoine Banier, *La mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire*, 3 vols (Paris: Briasson, 1738–1740) III, 214; 228; Antoine Banier, “Dissertation Sur Les Furies”, in *Memoires De Litterature Tirez Des Registres De L'Academie Royale Des Inscriptions Et Belles-Lettres. Depuis l'année M.DCC.XVIII. jusques & compris l'anne'e M.DCC.XXV* (Amsterdam: François Changuion, 1731), 51–76.

46 Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 272.

47 Ibid., 260.

48 Ibid., 256.

49 Ibid., 259.

from the late-ancient *Physiologus*-tradition, is mentioned without any effort to refute it and only adds that no one has ever seen it: the claim and its allegorical Christian connotation are regarded as too farfetched to be taken seriously in any way.⁵⁰ Likewise, the account of a pastor from Berlin who claimed to have found the winter location of storks by attaching little notes to their feet until he received a reply from India is dismissed without further discussion. As obvious as this might seem, accounts of storks that carried messages were not categorically excluded from the realm of possibilities in the world of early seventeenth-century learning. A 1630 treatise on the migration routes of European birds by the poet and naturalist Johann Georg Schwalbach contained an account of a Carthusian monk in Strasbourg who found a message from an Indian tailor at the foot of the stork that nested on the roof of his monastery.⁵¹ Even though Schwalbach was sceptical about this account, he could not rule out the possibility that the note had in fact been carried to Europe from South Asia, and similar stories kept appearing in natural historical literature throughout the seventeenth century.⁵²

Epistemologies of Misinformation

Rollenhagen's radical critique of sensational accounts of the natural world is not so much concerned with nature itself – it is the problem of credibility and transmission of information over time and space that is at the heart of his *Four Indian Voyages*-project. On various occasions, he invokes the notion of the “innate nature of all creatures”, but this concept is not further developed and only serves as an implicit regulative guideline through his reading and the examination of the sources.⁵³ The nature of creation itself cannot fully be comprehended but the sum of confirmed observations makes anomalies very unlikely, which is often reason enough for Rollenhagen to dismiss them as fables or misunderstandings. Accounts that do not fit into the context of established facts about nature are either written off immediately or require a closer examination of their communicative and perceptual origins. In that regard, the *Four Indian Voyages*' critical examination of lies and errors is primarily concerned with the communicative and epistemological conditions and the transmission of information over temporal and spatial distance.

50 Ibid., 264.

51 Johann Georg Schwalbach, *Dissertatio Physica De Ciconijs, Gruibus & Hirundinibus: quo exeunte Aestate abvolent, & ubi hyement* (Speyer: Baumeister, 1630), 19.

52 See e.g. Johannes Praetorius, *Storchs u. Schwalben Winter-Quartier / Das ist / Eine ungemeine Vergnügung der curiosen Gemüther / durch einen vollständigen Physikalischen Discurs, von obgedachten Sommer-Boten / wie auch andern unstetlebenden Vögeln und Thieren* (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1676), 43–46. Praetorius was also familiar with Rollenhagen and quotes his skepticism towards the migration routes of storks on page 46.

53 See e.g. Rollenhagen, *Vier Bücher* (1603), 207; 242; 250; 276; 290.

Instead of theorizing nature, Rollenhagen theorizes the value and use of information in a world in which conflicting sets of knowledge could no longer be harmonized and the richness of accounts from distant regions transformed the European imagination of the globe.

In 1603, the title *Vier Bücher wunderbarlicher biß daher unerhörter und unglaublicher Indianischer Reysen* could hardly be misunderstood as an indirect reference to the travel literature that was marketed in Germany at that time.⁵⁴ Even though the book contains hardly any authentic travel writing or uses it only to identify misunderstandings and manipulations, the title is also part of the satirical project of the *Voyages*. Marketing the fabulous accounts of pseudo-Alexander or Saint Brendan with references to travel writing urged readers and consumers to call into question what they read and what they accepted as truth. The transition of German geographical writing and book culture that took place around 1600 was also a transition of form, and marked a development from the systematic arrangements of cosmographical knowledge towards collections of subjective and personal eyewitness reports. The rise of travel reports and their mediatization on the book market also illustrates a move towards a continuous fragmentation of knowledge. The amount of facts and observations became too diverse and too multiform to fit into a coherent system of cosmographical order. To be sure, this transformational process took decades, and cosmographical modes of knowledge dissemination were only gradually replaced by newer travel editions. Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* was reprinted until the late 1620s and it continued to remain a staple ingredient of German private libraries and book collections.⁵⁵ However, it could no longer convince readers who were familiar with new accounts that claimed to be direct testimonies of travels to the places described by Münster. The amount of facts and the incompatibility of available accounts did not allow for the representational mode of the cosmographical bird's eye view, and Rollenhagen's implicit diatribe against Münster did not result in an alternative comprehensive system in which the available multitude of natural and geographical facts could be adequately represented. However, the specific topoi and points of debate in the *Four Indian Voyages* are still derived from the genres it deconstructs and ridicules. In its systematic refutation of ancient and sixteenth-century sources, the cosmographical genre lives on *ex negativo*: the lack of a new and more appropriate system finally resulted in an inversion of the cosmographical mode itself.

54 See Wolfgang Neuber, *Fremde Welt im europäischen Horizont. Zur Topik der deutschen Amerika-Reiseberichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 1991), 279; 363.

55 The last known edition of the *Cosmographia* dates from 1628. See Matthew McLean, *The Cosmographia of Sebastian Münster: Describing the World in the Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 175. On Münster in German library catalogues, see Christine R. Johnson, *The German Discovery of the World: Renaissance Encounters with the Strange and Marvelous* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 218.

In his refutation of errors, Rollenhagen always deems the newest and most recent sources the most reliable – older accounts are more likely to be corrupted by time or by distortions that were due to second- or third-hand transmission. Originality, then, enhanced credibility in the eyes of Rollenhagen. However, the preference for the newest and latest travel reports does not so much indicate a form of epistemological optimism in which scholarly progress inevitably leads to objective truth. Paradoxically, it is the very subjectivity of modern first-hand travel narratives that makes them more useful as sources of geography and natural history: even if the recounted observations contain errors or misconstructions, they can be attributed to specific individuals which allows for a thorough analysis of the circumstances under which they occurred. Even if direct observation could never be taken at face value in itself, it is the formal openness and unstructured rawness of travel accounts that make them more valuable sources of information than the systematically ordered cosmographies in which individual traits were no longer recognizable.

Despite his overly complacent self-fashioning as a young but highly independent scholar, Rollenhagen does indeed demonstrate a number of critical techniques that are remarkable for someone of his age and milieu. As a twenty-year-old student in Leipzig, he did not exactly belong to the intellectual avantgarde of his time, at least not in 1603, and he does not formulate a clear-cut epistemological theory or method that could be compared to Francis Bacon's *Organum*. It is therefore unlikely that his methods of critical examination were an individual idiosyncrasy, and his case might serve as an illustration of the registers of source criticism and critical reading that were available in the wider realm of learning in early seventeenth-century Europe.⁵⁶ Some of these approaches were more systematically applied in the Age of Enlightenment but as his case shows, they already circulated in the world of education and learning in earlier periods, and at lower levels. Antoine Banier's de-mythologizing reading of the classics and his stylistic criticism that carefully distinguished between allegorical personification and non-figurative speech is not as far from the methodological approach of the *Four Indian Voyages* as the differences in time and social milieu might suggest. Paradoxically, however, Rollenhagen's radical source criticism had little in common with the wider intellectual outlook of such Enlightenment projects – it was the very confessionism of his age and the anti-Catholic suspicions of his social surroundings that shaped the critical framework of Rollenhagen's project. A substantial part of Rollenhagen's rejection of traditional learning

56 Much of the critical skill demonstrated by Rollenhagen go far beyond what Shapin describes in his seminal *A Social History of Truth*. Contrary to Shapin's examples, Rollenhagen dismisses most of the mentioned marvels and wonders categorically and only discussed their possibility if the specific case was supported by strong or even extraordinary evidence. See Steven Shapin, *Social History of Truth. Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 200–02.

and scholarship was his conviction that “tradition” inherently stood for “Catholic tradition”, and it is this anti-Catholic prejudice that allowed him to equate Protestantism with a new quest for truth and fact, and consequently also for observational and experiential forms of knowledge production.

Both as a reader and as a writer, Rollenhagen provides crucial insights into a changing media world and the implications of this change on notions of credibility. His case does not only show how specific types of sources and media genres could be understood around 1600 but it also allows us to set more systematic investigations into the nature of truth and credibility in context. In the didactic method of the *Four Indian Voyages*, the quest for credibility is rhetorically directly attached to its opposite, and it is the very incredibility of the medieval and classical accounts that constitutes the satirical entertainment that is at the heart of this project. If we apply Rollenhagen’s approach to the travel genre in the early seventeenth century, in which sensation and marvel were simultaneously repeated and discredited, this might explain the coexistence of claims to credibility and exotic depictions of the marvellous and incredible. The sensational otherness of the distant world did not just disappear, but it was no longer part of a systematic form of knowledge dissemination. In the form of first-hand accounts, it could be questioned and examined – and it was in this form where it could coexist with claims to truth, knowledge, and established fact.

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