Expedient truths: aspects of narrative representation in Elizabethan voyage literature

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Abstract:
In the following dissertation, I investigate how the reports of Ralegh's Roanoke adventures, 1584–90, interpret Virginia. Other scholarly writers have considered these reports in the context of broader studies, but the reports have not been analysed together as a body of literature that presents a shared experience, nor have their impacts upon each other and on Ralegh's The Discoverie of the large, rich, and Bewtiful Empyre of Guiana (1596) been the main focus of an investigation. I argue that the initial reports projected an optimistic tone about Virginia that became increasingly suspect as alternative reports concerning Ralegh's attempt to establish a colony entered circulation. Furthermore, I believe that the reports written about Ralegh's colonial adventures in Virginia and his own report, the Discoverie, contain significant common features, and that a hitherto unanalysed intertextuality exists among them. The reports are strongly influenced by the need to present the land in its best light and the need to present the authors' actions as laudable and fully in support of the enterprise in hand. With this in mind, I identify in the reports a pervasive equivocation, especially based on the fact that in encouraging expansion they also attempt to make a virtue of failure. Thus, profound setbacks are explained without admitting excessive discouragement, and one result is a rhetoric wherein rumour, second-hand evidence, hearsay, and the suppression of inauspicious information are extensively deployed. What emerges is a highly equivocal mixture of revelation and concealment which provides a constantly shifting set of perspectives against which the voyagers' experiences can be interpreted. This complex rhetoric is simultaneously fascinating and elusive, as the explorers attempt to maintain a sometimes perilous balance between their optimistically expansionist aspirations and the containment of refractory experiences of various kinds. No extended study has been made of the rhetorical strategies developed to negotiate such contradictions, or of the intertextuality among the accounts of the voyages with which I deal. In short, these documents show how a putatively historical narrative engages with uncomfortable contingency, political aspiration, fanciful escapism and inventiveness designed to save appearances, producing a literature that is often more than the sum of its eclectic influences, and which tells us much about our perennial search through history for meaning and stability. The intertextuality of the reports is a fundamental, though unexamined (and generally unrecognised), feature of the Elizabethan experience of America. Although each writer espouses a different view of the new found land, significant common material and shared motifs combine to create a coherent, if complex, Elizabethan English interpretation of America. My analysis of the inter-relationships among the Roanoke reports and my subsequent suggestions about their development in Ralegh's Discoverie are offered here as original contributions to scholarship about Elizabethan English voyage literature.

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