"Bi contray caryez this knyght": Journeys of Colonisation in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

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The opening passage of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*[1] is frequently dismissed as irrelevant to the poem[2], or as a conventional reduction of the story of the founding of Britain that gives Arthur a place within history[3]. However, there are some notable exceptions; Theodore Silverstein argues that the opening of the poem is important to the work as a whole as it introduces "classification and rhetoric" as well as comedic elements[4], Malcolm Andrew says that it establishes a view of civilisation as alternating between "bliss and blunder"[5], Robert W. Margeson argues that it introduces recurring themes of linear and cyclical time[6], and Alfred David states that "the allusions to Troy…add a shade of meaning" to the work[7]. While these critics disagree as to the direct import of the section dealing with Aeneas and his kindred they do agree that the opening passage introduces themes which are important to the work and this is an idea that I wish to take up.

Recent scholarship by Patricia Clare notes the colonial nature of the passage describing the path of Aeneas and his descendants from the ruins of Troy to the foundation of Britain[8]. Ingham's focus is on the connection between the loss of Troy and the subsequent colonial journey, and on the absence of France, the most recent coloniser of England from this version of history. She argues that the poet is attempting to link Welsh concerns with classical history, ignoring any French influence on the story. While Ingham draws attention to the connections between the story of Aeneas and his descendants and Gawain's ride through North Wales, arguing that Gawain's is also a journey of colonisation, she does not closely investigate the nature of the

colonisation that is presented in either journey, nor does she address the differences between the two.

Although, as Ingham notes, "the opening of *Gawain* links loss to colonial conquest" through the inclusion of the lines dealing with the destruction of Troy: "Sithen the sege and the assaut watz sesed at Troye, / The borgh brittened and brent to brondez and askez" (1-2) (When the siege and the assault were ceased at Troy, the city destroyed and burnt to brands and ashes), the poem quickly moves onto a positive note. The first journey described in the work is essentially a celebration of colonial movement, as the colonising people apparently establish a number of kingdoms and gain great wealth without encountering any opposition:

> Hit watz Ennias the athel and his highe kynde
> That sithen depreced provinces, and patrounes bicome
> Welneghe of all the wele in the west iles.
> Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swythe,
> With gret bobbaunce that burghe he biges upon fyrst,
> And nevenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat;
> Tirius to Tuskan and teldes bigynnes,
> Langaberde in Lumbardie lyftes up homes,
> And fer over the French flod Felix Brutus
> On mony bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez (5-14)

(It was Aeneas the chieftain and his noble kindred who then conquered kingdoms and became lords of almost all the wealth in the western isles. Then noble Romulus goes quickly to Rome and with great pride he first builds that city and gives it his own name, as it is now called; Tirius goes to Tuscany and begins houses, Langaberde raises roofs in Lombardy, and far over the English Channel Felix Brutus establishes Britain on many wide hills). Although

this description of the path of Aeneas and his descendants is based in the chronicle tradition, as it is told, for example, by Geoffrey of Monmouth, it differs noticeably from the usual story. The story conventionally recounted in the chronicles details at considerable length the opposition faced in the various regions of Europe. For example, Geoffrey of Monmouth tells of considerable opposition in France, notably from King Goffar and the Poitevins, as well as from giants who lived in Britain. The account the *Gawain*-poet gives excludes the presence of the colonised, instead presenting each region as though it was previously uninhabited. The landscape is also mostly absent from this account; only the hillsides of Britain are mentioned and there is no hint that they are anything other than welcoming to Brutus and his people. By thus excluding the people and the land from history the *Gawain*-poet not only presents a view of colonisation that excludes any potential challenges to either the rights or the power of the coloniser, but also omits the presence of the colonised from history.

Such an idealised reading of the opening stanza of *Sir Gawain* is however, potentially misleading. Although the colonisation itself is without complication, as Silverstein notes, "nearly every figure in it is touched, one or the other, by ambiguity, seeming oddity, apparent irrelevance, or error"[9]. Silverstein points out that Aeneas is known to have betrayed Troy to the Greeks and that Brutus was a parricide[10]. The other three figures, Tirius, Romulus and Langaberde are irrelevant to the direct history of Britain and in addition to this Tirius is unidentifiable and Romulus was a fratricide. Since three of the five colonisers are in some way questionable figures, and one can not be identified with any certainty, their actions, though presented in an apparently positive manner, must also be called into question. The inclusion of the phrase "depreced provinces" is another jarring note in the apparently celebratory account as it contains the only suggestion of the use of force. Since

this is a small part of the overall account it can be easily overlooked, it does howeverreinforce the uncertainties connected to the named colonisers. These complicating features of the first stanza of *Sir Gawain* suggest that the picture the poet presents of colonisation at this point is in fact an ironic one where the irony is flagged by these details.

Gawain's journey through North Wales can also be read as a journey of colonisation. It is linked to the first journey mapped out in the poem by the inclusion of place names along the route[11]:

> Til that he neghed ful neghe into the Northe Walez.
> Alle the isles of Anglesay on lyft half he haldez,
> And farez over the fordez by the forlondez,
> Over at the Holy Hede, til he hade eft bonk
> In the wyldrenesse of Wyrale (697-701)

(Until he came very near to North Wales. He keeps the isles of Anglesey on his left side, and passes over the fords at the promontories, over at the Holy Head until he had regained the bank in the wilderness of Wirral). Ingham argues that various textual and historical features show that this is a journey of colonisation, pointing out the use of English place names for Welsh sites, noting the similarity between Gawain's route and that of Henry II's invasion in 1135, and arguing that the wilderness is constantly presented as an Other to the Self of the knight[12]. The figure of the individual knight as a representative of a centralised power that is attempting to assert control over a distance landscape also suggests that Gawain is on a journey of colonisation, albeit a different kind of colonisation from that practiced by Aeneas and his kin.

The journey in the fist stanza is clearly colonial, wealth is gathered and kingdoms are established, however, the colonisation practiced by Gawain is of a more subtle kind. Gawain has no interest in building houses or creating a kingdom, instead his journey becomes a kind of extended combat where he struggles with the landscape and its inhabitants for mastery. The Green Knight challenges the power of Camelot and Gawain's journey is made in an attempt to answer that challenge and thus reassert the control that has been called into question. Gawain is a symbom of civilisation as he travels through the uncivilised landscape, thus his is a form of cultural colonialisation rather than one of direct military conquest such as that practiced by Aeneas and his kin. For this reason, as well as those discussed by Ingham, Gawain's travels can be read as a journey of colonisation, despite the fact that it has different focus to the one mapped out in the first stanza of the poem.

Gawain's journey is a much more difficult one than that of Aeneas and his kindred. During this journey the inhabitants of the landscape and the landscape itself are an integral part of the narrative. The way they are presented demonstrates a variety of challenges to Gawain's ability to exert control as a representative of the power of Camelot. The poet first comments on the human inhabitants of the Wirral: "wonde ther bot lyte / That auther God other gome wyth goud hert lovied (701-2) (Only a few lived there that either God or a good-hearted person loved), thus showing that they are uncivilised and therefore the proper objects of colonisation. Although the human inhabitants pose no direct challenge to Gawain, they do not assist him on his quest to find the Green Knight: "And al nykked hym wyth nay, that never in her lyve/ Thay seye never no segge that was of suche hwez/ of grene" (706-8) (And everyone answered him with 'no', that they never in their lives saw any man who was green coloured). That they are so unhelpful creates a sense of alienation and isolation

that is reinforced by Gawain's later encounters with other inhabitants of the land as well as the landscape itself.

The non-human denizens of the region are a much greater challenge, as Gawain is forced to fight with many of them:

> Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and with wolves als,
> Sumwhyle wyth wodwos that woned in the knarrez,
> Bothe wyth bullez and berez, and borez otherquyle,
> And etaynez that hym anelede of the heghe felle (720-3)

(Sometimes he fights with dragons, and with wolves as well, sometimes he fights trolls who lived among the crags, with both bulls and bears, and other times with boars, and giants who pursued him across the high fells), so many, in fact, that the poet says it would be difficult to recount one tenth of his encounters (719). The presence of these inhabitants, both human and non-human, marks an important difference between this journey and that of Aeneas and his descendants, as it includes in the story the presence of the colonised. While they are not presented in a positive light and do not have presence in their own right, existing only in opposition to Gawain, their very inclusion creates a very different vision of the colonising process to that presented in the opening stanza of the poem. The inclusion of the landscape creates similar differences between the first and second journeys in *Sir Gawain*. As noted above, there is only one mention of the landscape in the first journey, but in the second the landscape is an important part of the narrative and its presence, like that of its inhabitants, poses significant challenges to Gawain. Not only is the landscape described in a threatening manner, but the poet also specifically states that the weather troubles Gawain more than the fighting:

For werre wrathed hym not so much that wynter nas wors,

When the colde cler water fro the cloudez schadde,

And fres er hit falle myght to the fale erthe.

Ner slayn wyth the slete he sleped in his yrnes

Mo nyghtez then innoghe in naked rokkez,

Ther as claterande fro the crest the cold borne rennez,

And henged heghe over his hede in hard iisse-ikkles.

Thus in peryl and payne and plytes ful harde

Bi contray caryez this knyght (726-734)

(Because fighting did not trouble him so much that winter was not worse. When the cold clear water was shed from the clouds and froze before it could fall to the faded earth. Almost dead from the sleet he slept in his armour more often than not among the bare rocks, there as the cold stream crashes down from the hill-crest and hard icicles hung high over his head. Thus in peril and pain and difficulties the knight rides across the country). Despite these challenges, Gawain is not overcome and this journey ends with his arrival at Hautdesert.

The castle appears in the midst of the forest literally in answer to Gawain's prayers and seems to offer both a refuge from the threatening landscape and a symbol of successful colonisation[13]. The way Hautdesert is presented suggests that it is a fortification against the threats posed by the wilderness:

The bryge watz breme upbrayde,

The gatez were stoken faste,

The wallez were wel arayed

Hit dut no wyndez blaste (781-4)

(The drawbridge was firmly drawn up, the gates were shut tightly, and the walls were well constructed and did not fear the blast of any storm). The castle appears as an immediate response to Gawain's prayers: "Nade he sayned hymself, segge, bot thrye, / Er he watz war in the wod of a wone in a mote" (763-4) (The man had hardly crossed himself three times before he was aware of a moated castle in the wood), and provides refuge at a critical point in the journey when Gawain's individual power is at its breaking point. The refuge provided by Hautdesert suggests that Gawain's encounter with the wilderness has been a successful one, as the power of civilisation is such that it can appear when most needed.

So, although both colonial journeys at least appear to conclude with a positive outcome for the coloniser, neither is in fact a whole-hearted endorsement for colonisation. Although the process appears to be celebrated during the narration of the journey of Aeneas and his kindred, the ambiguities surrounding the colonisers are such that the correctness of their actions is called into question. The second journey, that of Gawain through North Wales, is more clearly anti-colonial than the first as the hazards and challenges of colonisation are explored through the presentation of hostile inhabitants and a harsh environment. The connection created by this generally negative attitude to colonisation indicates that the opening stanza of *Sir Gawain* is relevant to the work as it provides an introduction to the theme of colonisation that is developed more clearly later in the poem.

Notes

[1] Henceforth *Sir Gawain*. All quotations are from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Ed. James Winny. Ontario: Broadview Press, 1992. Rpt 2001. All translations are my own.
[2] See, for example, Burrow, J. A. *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland, and the 'Gawain' Poet*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971. 96.
[3] See for example Barron, W.R.J. "Arthurian Romance: Traces of an English Tradition." *English Studies* 61.1 (1980): 2-23. esp. 17-23 and Burrow, J.A. *A Reading of* Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. London; Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965. Rpt 1977. esp. 172-3
[4] Silverstein, Theodore. "*Sir Gawain*, Dear Brtus, and Britain's Fortunate Founding: A Study in Comedy and Convention.' *Modern Philology* 62. 3 (1965): 189-206. Quote at 192.
[5] Andrew, Malcolm. "The Fall of Troy in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Troilus and Criseyde*." *The European Tragedy of Troilus*. Ed. Piero Boitani. Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1989. 75-93. Quote at 79.
[6] Margeson, Robert W. "Structure and Meaning in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *Papers on Language and Literature* 13 (1977): 16-24.
[7] David, Alfred. "Gawain and Aeneas." *English Studies* 49 (1968): 402-9. Quote at 407.
[8] Ingham, Patricia Clare. " 'In Contrayez Straunge': Colonial Relations, British Identity, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*." *New Medieval Literatures* 4 (2001): 61-93. See also Ingham, Patricia Clare. *Sovreign Fantasies: Arthurian Romance and the Making of Britain*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001. esp. 107-136.
[9] Silverstein, 192.
[10] Silverstein, 192-7.
[11] Such detailed information about the route of a journey is unusual in medieval romance. I know of only two other occurences in *Athelstan* and *Yder*. These differ from the account in *Sir Gawain* as in *Yder* the route is a set of directions rather than a description of an actual journey and in *Athelston* urban settings and place names dominate. Also, more significantly there is no sense of hostility inherent in the geography of either passage, nor is there any sense of exploration or uncertainty on the part of the traveller.
[12] Ingham, 73-6.
[13] Although Hautdesert proves to contain other more difficult challenges to Gawain at this point in the work there is no hint of these threats and so I am reading the castle as it is first presented to the reader and to Gawain.