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Gillian Rudd

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‘The Wilderness of Wirral’ in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

GILLIAN RUDD

This brief discussion of Sir Gawain’s journey across the Wirral seeks to open up questions of how literature ‘thinks’ landscape and how that might feed into eco-critical debates. It deals with lost geographies and invented ones, and touches on notions of the otherworld as underpinning our responses to this one. (GR)

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a text which apparently cries out for ‘green reading.’ The name by which we all know this text now ensures that Gawain shares the stage with a figure whose title positively invites ecocritical reading. What could be more appealing than a giant Green Knight? Here, it seems, is a creature who *embodies* nature, and so can be regarded as the representation of how humans think about and react to the non-human world. As such, this Green Knight acts as a representation of the human concept of Nature in a poem that abounds with descriptions of the physical world, from birds to boars and icicles to grass knolls. It is a world through which man travels, with which he battles and aspects of which he hunts, but it is also a world which fundamentally ignores man when it can. The natural year is marked by the seasons that follow their own rhythm, as the much-praised opening stanzas of Fitt II show, and while human festivals are mentioned in passing, they are irrelevant to the shift from winter to spring and back again. It thus works well to read the Green Knight as the embodiment of the natural world, whose bursting in to Camelot’s Christmas festival easily lends itself to being interpreted as the powers of nature interrupting the rituals of culture—a reading which again fixes that Knight as a personification of all aspects of the non-human world.¹ However, the Green Knight should not be the only feature of the poem to draw ecocritical attention, as Michael W. Twomey’s consideration of the poem in terms of the ‘green world’ indicates.² What follows here continues such investigations, albeit taking a slightly different stance, and is a brief discussion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and the Wirral journey with a view to opening up questions of how literature ‘thinks’ landscape and how that might feed into eco-critical debates. It deals with lost geographies, and indeed invented ones, touches on notions of the otherworld as underpinning our responses to this one, and is also, I hope,

a further example of how practical theory, to borrow Paul Strohm's phrase, may help reveal aspects of a text about which it is otherwise silent.³ It is, in short, an attempt to perturb the text *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and it does so by focusing on the landscape in which Gawain himself seems least at ease—the natural and somewhat inhospitable one of the Wirral in winter.

I. THE WILDERNESS OF WIRRAL

The Gawain of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* sets forth from Camelot (exact location unnamed) to find the green chapel where he is due to meet for the second time the Green Knight who features in the received title of the poem. The journey is described in just over two stanzas of the poem (lines 691–752) during which we are told he travels through 'þe ryalme of Logres' (691) into North Wales, leaving Anglesey on his left, crosses the ford at Holy Head and thence enters 'þe wyldrenesse of Wyrle' ten lines later at line 701.⁴ All this seems geographically precise. We may not be sure of the exact whereabouts of the Holy Head ford, but the poet and his contemporaries probably were, or at least as sure as one can be of something that might conceivably shift location in the wake of particularly high tides or heavy storms. However, once across that ford, the poem's landmarks become progressively vague, so that having taken unfamiliar paths ('gates straunge,' 709) Gawain finds himself in 'countrayes straunge' by the time he reaches the next stanza (713ff). Here we are among generic or at least unspecified hills, fells and rivers, as the poem no longer links its hero's journey to named areas of the country.

The poem may not provide such links, but several of its latter readers have, most notably R. W. Eliot, whose detailed consideration of Gawain's journey results in him offering some very specific suggestions for probable sites of the poem's action.⁵ The urge to follow the clues of the poem and literally map the text onto the landscape seems almost irresistible, leading many intrepid cultural tourists (mainly medievalists, it must be confessed) to seek to follow in Gawain's footsteps, albeit normally at more benign times of the year. One such expedition has been logged on the internet (www.ithaca.edu/faculty/twomey/travels) and while the title of this website, 'Travels with Sir Gawain,' addresses readers of the poem, the power of search engines which will pick up references to particular views and landscapes mentioned and photographed on this site will also bring in other virtual tourists, thus allowing readers of the poem and explorers of the region (or, perhaps more accurately, explorers of the poem and readers of the landscape) to encounter each other's terrain serendipitously on the world-wide web. Elliott's study is motivated by a wish to prove the *Gawain*-poet's NorthWest provenance; the motivations of other explorers are more mixed, reflecting a common desire to undertake literary pilgrimages blended, in this case, perhaps with a direct personal enjoyment

of walking in landscapes that appear relatively untouched to the visitor's eye. There are some obvious parallels to be drawn with the popularity of Hardy country, Jane Austen's Bath, and Dickens' London as tourist destinations, which also offer the opportunity to stand in the actual places where fictional encounters took place. Specific houses and streets are regarded as the models for those appearing in the books, while particular towns or landscapes are assumed to have inspired descriptive passages or furnished plot devices. The same could easily be said of *Gawain* walks, with the added felicity of having to put ourselves more fully in the protagonist's shoes in that we are not entirely sure of where we are going. All we know is what we want to find—a credible crossing point for the Dee, a suitable forest, a rocky outcrop that fits the description of the chapel.

The effect is paradoxical in that the increased lack of precision regarding actual geography coincides with, or even creates, an increased familiarity in terms of imagined geography. Even now, the British Isles—and indeed Europe in general—provide enough examples of this kind of mixture of woody scrubland, boggy waste, and rocky outcrops to allow readers to build a picture of the terrain *Gawain* has entered based on personal experience. It is safe to assume that effect would be even stronger for the poem's contemporary audience. But such landscapes are also familiar from romances like *Sir Orfeo* and the Arthurian romances whose forests have been so ably explored by Corinne Saunders.⁶ Thus our literary knowledge encourages us to superimpose upon our empirical knowledge a landscape made up of rocks and fells, streams and forests, through which gallant protagonists must ride, seeking a path to they know not quite what.

Perhaps 'superimpose' is the wrong word here. It may be that the figurative and actual landscapes are blended together more fully and more frequently than we are aware.⁷ It is not only the audience of a text who mingles actual with figurative; the protagonist is equally liable to do so, especially one like *Gawain* who is all too aware of being caught up in a plot of someone else's making. A relationship is thus established, which means that what we see in the environment around us is dictated at least in part by what we associate with the types of landscape described or evoked by the text. Likewise, those associations are informed by what we actually see, and this symbiotic process is reflected in the text of the poem itself, as both the narrative voice and *Gawain* himself comment upon or seek to define the geography through which the story moves in an attempt to both understand and control the events that are due to unfold. Nor are such landscapes confined to medieval romance; they reappear frequently in English literature, whether in texts that deliberately evoke the medieval such as Robert Browning's poem 'Child Roland to the Dark Tower Came' or tourist information that seeks to attract people to specific regions. The assertion of one website has an irresistible

irony for anyone imagining themselves in Gawain's shoes: 'Well connected to the rest of the country, Wirral is the ideal location for those wanting to get away from it all.'⁸

However, such amusing irony aside, that paradox of being both easy to get to (and thus presumably also easy to leave) and yet also 'away from it all' epitomizes our responses to apparently wild places, or 'wilderness' as the poem specifically calls the Wirral (701). Although the word 'wilderness' implies remoteness and lack of human habitation, areas designated 'wildernesses' have a direct association with the spaces around them, which is based upon the assumption of a marked contrast. Like Gawain, we enter wilderness from some other environment, crossing into it from some other, more hospitable, terrain. This is the case for actual physical geography simply because one environment has to have some kind of border with another. That border might be man-made (a wall, fence, or ditch separating managed land from that left to nature) or might be a natural boundary such as a river or even a sea. Such borders ensure that the wilderness is also a place and indeed a space (that is an area which itself is deemed to have boundaries). Even if we do not know what the limits of the wilderness might be, we yet retain a notion of them being contained within, or at least bordered by, land that is tamed, used, and comprehensible. As Adam Sweeting and Thomas C. Crochunis put it: 'space-based notions of wilderness...create the wild within specific geographical confines.'⁹ Once thus created, those wildernesses are effectively contained and othered or, to put it another way, are contained by being othered, and the wilderness thus becomes a paradoxical space, a familiar unfamiliar, the quintessential known unknown. So in terms of physical landscape, a wilderness is defined as land which is not managed, although it may fall within someone's ownership. It is untamed but not devoid of life; rather, it may be teeming with plants and creatures which co-exist in a disorderly fashion, making the landscape as unpredictable as the creatures within it. One would not expect roads, and yet at the same time there is an assumption that one can find a path through wilderness—and so on. As this list shows, the description of what a wilderness is quickly becomes evocative and soon symbolic if not entirely metaphorical. The series of contrasts wildernesses provide may not all operate at once, but they are available to be invoked, consciously or not, with such ease that the assumptions that feed these contrasts go unchallenged and indeed are rendered all the more secure, presumed and presupposed, because the associations of the wilderness seem so natural. Such contrasts, in short, are part of what wilderness *is*.

Thus, to return to the poem, the Wirral and Wales are inevitably places of lawlessness and danger and, being wildernesses, are inhabited by godless men; the two concepts mutually reinforce each other and thus allow the 'normality' and civilization of the surrounding (and so contrasting) country

to be taken for granted. The ease with which this process is internalized is reflected in the evocative lines that announce Gawain's arrival on the Wirral: 'In þe wyldrenesse of Wyrale; wonde þere bot lyte / Þat aþuer God oþer gome with goud hert louied' (701–02). By adding the detail that there are few to be found there who love either God or other men with a good heart, the poet is merely confirming what we all know about wildernesses: they are inhabited by wild and lawless men with no respect for either God or good people. At the same time, and by implication in this line, the wilderness-dwellers are not loved by God or good men either. The binary opposition mutually confirms both the status of wilderness and non-wilderness. It is almost as if at the moment Gawain reaches the bank and enters the Wirral he must be reminded, or possibly remind himself, of the correct attitude a worthy knight should take to all he finds in this kind of terrain. Thus when Gawain enquires after the whereabouts of the Green Knight, the people he asks are given the ambiguous term 'frekes' (703), a word which even at this stage seems to carry some suggestion of our current 'freak,' even though its primary connotations are of knight, warrior, or simply man.¹⁰ What is unclear is who deploys this term: is it evocative description on the part of the poem, or labeling that reflects Gawain's view of those he encounters?

So the Wirral is deftly characterized as both wilderness and lawless place in a way that allows those two terms to enhance each other. It is a characterization that has its appeal for readers of the poem and its annotators and has been given some historical substance by Henry Savage's note of 1931, which provided evidence of the Wirral being regarded as 'a forest notorious in the poet's time as a refuge for malefactors' to use John Burrow's phrase in his note to this line.¹¹ As Savage pointed out, Ranulph le Meschin, fourth earl of Chester (who died c.1129) established the Wirral as a forest.¹² As a royal forest, it gave protection to the outlaws who lived there, creating a kind of inverted realm in which the law-abiding of the world outside become the obvious targets of the forest-dwellers. In this context Gawain's dual position as both conventionally law-abiding citizen and as representative of Camelot, embodying all the codes allegedly upheld and enforced by the King, makes him doubly vulnerable. However in 1376, the Wirral was disafforested, thus removing legal protection from the outlaws but not, of course, removing the outlaws from the forest. Assuming a 1370s composition date, Gawain thus enters an area which has so recently changed status as to be uncertain. In theory, his position as representative of the legal, royal norm (Arthur's court) should now give him some security, as the outlaws have now been brought within the norms of society outside the forest. But Gawain would be unwise to rely on this as the previous status—which made him the outsider and the outlaws in effect the rightful inhabitants of the forest—would still retain a grip. One might add that outlaws who have been newly re-criminalized

could have little to lose in attacking a lone traveller, where before there might have been some point in not making their situation worse. Furthermore, as the King's representative, Gawain now embodies the very laws that have just removed protection from the outlaws in the forest. Whichever way one looks as it, the situation does not look good for Gawain. Moreover, while we, the audience, may be aware of this change in the Wirral's forest status and are free to speculate about its effects, is Gawain aware of it? Gawain himself comes from a time before 1376, although as a figure of romance he is also always already riding through the actual landscape of the time of the poem's composition. So the question becomes one of readership, a question in which Gawain himself is also a reader of the landscape. Is the landscape he is reading the same as that being read by the poem's audience? In other words, is the poem assuming an audience that does know about the disafforestation of the Wirral, but a protagonist that doesn't? From this a further question arises: are we in the real Wirral at any point at all or only ever in the Wirral of romance imagination?

Note that the alternatives posed by that last question are not precisely equal. If we take the second possibility as the only one, then the precision of description, the use of actual landmarks, and names of places are mere frills that become questionable irrelevancies. If the poem's setting is only one of romance text, then all we need to know about the landscape comes from literary and mythic associations. True, such associations will have links to our responses to actual landscapes, but not to specific ones. However, if the poet has deliberately situated Gawain's trek in real country, then not only are we free to bring all our knowledge of that area to bear on the text, but we are also actively expected so to do. And while we do that, we should also become aware of the extent to which those mythic, romance landscapes mold what we see in the physical world around us. Arguably, we see the Wirral only because we have the images of romance forests and symbolic wildernesses to tell us what we are looking at. This process has recently been acknowledged in a different context by John Howe and Michael Wolfe, whose comments highlight how far latter-day (mis)representations of medieval landscapes inform current land-management policies, particularly conservation practices:

[The] vision of a primordial landscape actually reveals more about the fantasies of United States conservationists than about medieval Europe. It embodies peculiar American ideas about untouched virgin wilderness, the forest primeval, and 'old growth' forest, which even in this hemisphere make little sense unless we are prepared to deny all humanity and agency to the aboriginal inhabitants who had been interacting with the environment quite successfully long before Europeans arrived on the scene.¹³

The Wirral is thus finely balanced between actual geographical place and archetypal forest of romance text: a place of personal trial, unexpected ambush,

marauders, honest and dishonest men outlawed, hermits, and wild animals. Significantly, the animals appear in both actual and conceptual forests, as in each case part of the purpose of forest was to provide an environment for hunt beasts, whether those beasts were themselves purely actual or primarily symbolic (one thinks here of the Questing Beast Pellinore pursues through Malory's *Morte Darthur*). As for the men who live in this place: we have seen already seen that they are both godless and by implication not of good heart (since they are unloved by God and those of good heart) but we must not forget that they are also given the more respectful term 'freke,' which offers them the identity of warrior or knight as well as man. As Gawain asks these 'frekes' if they know the whereabouts of the Chapel he seeks, he clearly recognizes some kind of fellowship with these otherwise anonymous individuals. Depending on how we now read this landscape and those who inhabit and travel through it, the grounds for that fellowship may be as much recognition of their common grounding in literary text as actual shared humanity.

2. LOGRES—ARTHURIAN BRITAIN AND WALES

That blend of actual and mythical is also evident in the use of 'Logres' in the poem. The term is used twice at lines 691 and 1055, first by the narrator, second by Gawain. The name itself was a familiar term for the Britain of Arthur, and had the Welsh equivalent 'Lloegy,' noted but not further elaborated upon by annotators of the poem. Tolkien, Gordon, and Davies comment that Geoffrey of Monmouth (II.i) says the area was named after Lochrine, eldest son of Brutus, which is relevant in a poem that makes a point of mentioning Brutus in its first and last stanzas, but they do not discuss the use of Logres further.¹⁴ The effect of that note is symptomatic of how Wales figures in this poem generally. That is, Wales operates as a borderland, a familiar place through which Gawain passes in order to arrive at his as-yet-undiscovered destination. Logres is both definitely not Wales and yet associated with it. Perhaps one cannot name one without thinking of the other, thus blurring the certainty of which is myth, which real. Although it is hard to be sure how 'real' Arthur's Britain was to a fourteenth-century audience, it is likely that, then as now, the country (and thus by implication, Camelot) was acknowledged as geographically real, even if the actual identity of King Arthur and his court were less certain. Similarly, by noting the Welsh term for Arthur's Britain, and then moving swiftly on to Geoffrey, the editors strengthen the mythic sense of the poem and consciously or otherwise remind their readers that this story takes place in romance territory. Wales itself is taken for granted—or rather, it is over-written with the same ease with which Gawain rides through it. The place-names indicate a mapped, knowable land, even if it is somewhat elusive: 'alle þe iles of Anglesay' (698) remind us of the indeterminate nature

of the coastline where it can be hard to tell exactly what is main land and what part of the isthmus or an outcrop liable to become a mini-island at high tide. Yet, however difficult to pin down, North Wales is still *terra firma*, a solid place which is able to name the mythical but also, in the terms of this poem, utterly sure land of Arthur's court. This is Anglesey, you have come from Logres: the stanza places both on a par, leaving the Wirral named as the wilderness, with its connotations of unmappability.

To recap to our careful itinerary: Gawain rides from Logres into North Wales (specified in line 697) leaves Anglesey on his left and fords the river (Dee, not so specified) into the Wirral at or around Holy Head (probably Holy Well, very clearly not our current Holyhead). Holy Well itself offers a link with legends of a different kind in its connection with St. Winifred, famed for having her head cut off and surviving. Gordon pooh-poohs this association as 'fanciful,' but other readers, such as Colledge and Marler, rather like it,¹⁵ and the association seems entirely in keeping with the spirit of a poem that blends history, myth, and contemporary landscape so seamlessly. Wales, Anglesey, the rivers—these are evidently utterly real. So is the Wirral, but once we get to this ambiguous area we never quite leave it. Scholars have mapped Gawain's route and indeed the precise geography of the poem, sending him up through Cumbria, possibly via Inglewood forest or keeping him more firmly in the Wirral, North West Midlands area.¹⁶ Readers are again faced with the question: is the poem evoking virtual travel or travel in virtual Wirral? The poem itself then deserts us. After detailing Anglesey and its islands, the river and the coming to bank on/in the Wirral (which leads some critics to suggest a boat crossing rather than ford) we are left with 'gates straunge / In mony a bonk unbene' (709–10) which then become the 'contrayez straunge' of the following stanza (713), at which point we are left to fend for ourselves.

3. IN CONTRAYEZ STRAUNGE

Where are these strange lands? Given romances such as *Sir Orfeo* it would not have been impossible for the poet to have moved Gawain out of our world and into the parallel world of 'faerie' that exists in romance. Perhaps the text hints at this. In these lands there are no specific geographical names, merely generic cliffs, fells, naked rocks, and water—in rivers, water-falls, hanging as icicles, falling as sleet or hail—all inhospitable; moreover, the inhabitants are no longer the 'frekes' of the Wirral (men like Gawain, however unruly or godless). Instead we have an uneasy gathering of foes, foul and fell (717–18), consisting of dangerous beasts from snakes—which might also be dragons ('worm' covers both)—to wolves, bulls, bears, and boars (all, of course, also hunt animals), to wodwos—wildmen who might be men living wild (in effect the outlaws of the previous stanza now rendered more unknowable) or might be a different species from the 'frekes' who are at least certainly human, even

if potentially hostile brigands—and finally the more clearly other-wordly ‘etaynes’ (giants). In short everything in these lands is ‘straunge’—beyond certain knowledge of mankind, especially a man who is a knight of Arthur’s court. This is the most ‘other’ landscape Gawain encounters and may represent that version of Nature which Simon Hailwood argues is necessary as the other for humans to be sure of themselves as a species.¹⁷ It is possible that Gawain himself needs this land to be strange; he needs the adventure in an Other world to secure his own identity as a questing knight of Arthur’s court. As before, we are uncertain how much of what we read reflects Gawain’s view and how much is the allegedly neutral description of the poem.

As Gawain progresses through this landscape he leaves behind all animal life, finding himself alone in the sleet and at a point where even his horse is not acknowledged. His reaction is to turn to the more familiar version of the nonhuman/supernatural, viz. religion, and pray to Mary for assistance. This again implies an absolute divide, at least in Gawain’s mind, between untouched landscape and human life, of which religion is a crucial, perhaps even defining, element. The poem hints at several points in these passages that it is faith that both divides Gawain from the utter Otherness that surrounds him and saves him from it:

Nad he bene doghty and drye and Dryghtyn had served,
Douteles he had bene ded and dreped ful oft (724–25).

The words are heroic, casting an epic glow over the scene which elevates Gawain from lost and lonely traveller caught up in a game he scarcely comprehends to doughty Knight Errant (deserving of capitals) who maintains his faith in the face of these unnamed and, it is implied, unnameable opponents. But there is an alternative reading which casts this landscape—the one we later learn is presided over by Bertilak—as the real land. It may not have a recognizable regional name, such as North Wales and Wirral, or even a familiar legendary one, such as Camelot or Logres, but it does have real geography, or so those detailed descriptions of crags and their animal inhabitants in lines 718–23 indicate. Regarded in this light, Gawain becomes the ambassador from the mythical Other world of Arthur. In that case Gawain is rendered mystery as well as mystified; as the representative of the land of Romance, he becomes the marvel, and indeed this is suggested by his reception at Haut Desert. Lines 724–5 hint at this, offering a point of connection between Gawain as one kind of marvel or Other and God as another: a connection between planes of supernatural. For current readers familiar with Corinne Saunders’ *Medieval Forest of Romance* and Pogue Harrison’s *Forests*, it can be no surprise that this merging of actual and mythical landscape occurs in a forest.

4. INTO A FOREST (741)

Inevitably, then, in a forest is where we find the next castle, but before we get there, it is worth pausing a while to work out exactly where we are, insofar as such a thing is possible in a set of stanzas that seems intent on confusing us. For a whole stanza (lines 713–739) we have been in ‘contrayez straunge’ and we are reminded of that subtly by the use of ‘bi contray’ in line 734. As we enter the next stanza we unequivocally enter a forest, but it is unclear whether or not in so doing we have left behind the strange country that defined the previous stanza. That lack of clarity is reflected in the phrase that describes this forest as, specifically, ‘ful depe that ferly was wylde’ (741). ‘Ferly,’ with its connotations of the wondrous, allows the sense of otherworldliness to continue, but the landscape previously described as ‘wylde’ was the Wirral, which, as I have suggested, is simultaneously untracked waste and known area. In addition, deep and wild as this place may be, it is nevertheless explicitly a forest and so, as the term implies, within human jurisdiction. The landscape is wild, with tangled ancient trees, which perhaps imply a neglected forest, but interestingly it is devoid of the beasts, men, and things in between that Gawain encountered on the Wirral and the strange lands he entered after that. Is this then another borderland? If so we might expect some indication of crossing from one place to another, and we might find just such an indication in two places.

The first is in the simple form of the poem: we have entered a new stanza and with it a new environment. In addition, there is a suggestion of one landscape merging into another as Gawain rides alongside a hill or mountain, the kind of geographical site often used as a boundary marker. Moreover, as Gawain rides along his mood has changed from the misery of being beleaguered by the weather to the jaunty merry riding of this new morning. Finally, there is a more subtle hint of crossing from one world to another in the mention of hawthorn which is tangled in with the hazel of the undergrowth (744). Hawthorn is a common shrub which springs up almost anywhere but has some pertinent associations for this poem. Its foliage is one of the models for the foliate Green Man faces, and it is the bush most frequently used as a boundary marker in Anglo-Saxon charters.¹⁸ We may add to this historical record, the assertion that the hawthorn marked the place where one might cross over into the Celtic otherworld and thus arrive at a set of associations that enrich this apparently simple line of realistic description.¹⁹ At this point, it is worth noting that if we feel we have already entered such a world with Gawain either when we rode onto the Wirral, or when we entered those ‘contrayez straunge,’ then at this point we must be passing *from* that Otherworld back into a human one. The layers of ambiguity increase as Gawain is once again

placed as either a knightly representative of a human, but exceptional, court or as knight of Romance now arriving at a human castle, directly paralleling the Green Knight's entry into Arthur's court at the start of the poem.

What is certain is that it is here, in this forest, that Gawain finally finds evidence of human habitation, as signalled by 'won' (764), a dwelling (soon further defined as a castle) surrounded by ditches, rows of trees that have clearly been deliberately planted, and a park. Significantly, all this is placed in a wood (wode, 764). We are out of the ambiguous lands of the Wirral and the strange country—or so it appears. In fact this forest, with its courtly dwelling, managed wood and hunting park, could be situated within the Wirral, as Corinne Saunders implies when she places Bertilak's castle in the Wirral.²⁰ This notion is rich for interpretation as it remains for readers to decide how real this castle with its battlements like paper cut-outs actually is. Perchance its very verisimilitude hints at its magical qualities, and it is certainly here that Gawain finally meets his challenge. It is here that Gawain returns to his real world, but by now we may be aware that there is no finally real landscape in the poem at all. There is a natural geography that defies human definition and control, and in one way that is the real landscape, but even that, as I hope this discussion of Gawain's journey has made clear, is made up at least in part by our human reactions and imaginings.

5. CONCLUSION

This discussion has traced the shifts from definite to indefinite landscapes within *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, exploring how far the increasingly fantastical elements of landscape within the poem may be read as a trajectory of increasing unreality from the implied known of Arthur's court to the explicitly unknown realms of the land beyond the Wirral. At the same time, the poem reveals that associations of wilderness not only haunt but actively enhance our appreciation of and connection to the landscapes in which we find ourselves, and it does so in ways that shed light on our current discussions about how humans imagine and inhabit the environment. The poem uses the associations of land designated forest (and so refuge for outlaws) alongside the more magical forests of romance tradition to create a contrast between a landscape we are happy to project onto and populate with wild animals, wild men, and semi-mythical beasts—one that is both more thoroughly real and more utterly strange. This latter place is an environment of bare rocks, harsh weather, and little life beyond the birds—a winter landscape that seems unyielding to romance. By making this dreary place the ultimate reality, the poem pushes the Wirral and Wales towards being the kind of blend of fact and fiction that Logres and Camelot are. This may reflect the desire to subdue the Welsh or the awareness of Wales as a place of possible rebellion and oppression, arguably more present in the mind of one writing in the

North West Midlands than London, but I think it also shows how much we humans automatically superimpose our myths onto the landscape as a way of both connecting to and ensuring our division from it.

Part of the enduring and often re-discovered power of this poem is precisely the way it reflects so fully our conflicting attitudes towards the non-human world. We need that world, not just as actual landscape to refresh the spirit or provide sustenance but also, it seems, as a touchstone for our sense of identity and indeed our ethics. For the original audience of the poem, such ethics and identity were doubtless represented in Gawain himself, with all his trials and desires. Now it seems Gawain gains a new resonance, as we seek to re-describe and understand in different terms our relation to the physical world around us. With the help of ecocriticism, we may also discover that it is not the protagonist, nor any other figure within the poem, nor even the text itself that is 'subject to' ecocriticism; rather, the poem acts as a kind of provocative eco-critic of us as readers, with the end result of leading us to critique and understand more fully our responses to both textual and actual worlds. As John Granrose asserts:

In addition to scientific information and sophistication, however, we also need 'reminders' that are much less sophisticated than the theories and arguments required for the formal study of environmental ethics. We need metaphors, image, song and other cultural reminders of our environmental situation.²¹

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the stanzas of Gawain's sojourn in the Wirral and its surrounding area in particular are surely such 'cultural reminders.'

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Gillian Rudd has been interested in eco-criticism since 1998 and spoke at the first ASLE-UK conference in Swansea. She has published various green pieces, including her book *Greenery: Ecocritical Readings of Late Medieval English Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2007) and articles and chapters on mice (*The Yearbook of English Studies* 36:1, 2006), clouds (*Essays and Studies 2008: Literature and Science*) and most recently on various aspects of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* read from a 'green' perspective. She is the author of the sections on Ecocriticism and Medieval Literature for the *Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature* (2010) and *Oxford Handbook to Ecocriticism* (forthcoming) and is contemplating a book offering a green reading of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* alongside some other Middle English Gawain romances such as *Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle*.

NOTES

- 1 The Green Knight has been the subject of much critical discussion, not all focusing on him as an embodiment of the natural world. A good overview of how far he might be that and thus conflated with the Green Man may be found

- in Piotr Sadowski, *The Knight on His Quest: Symbolic Patterns of Transition in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'* (Newark and London: University of Delaware Press and Associated university Presses, 1996) pp. 78–108. Jeffrey J. Cohen reads the Green Knight in the tradition of the monster in *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), and thus gives him a contrasting but still strong connection with Nature as opposed to human cultural world; see especially pp. 144–48. I have considered the figure of the Green Knight in more detail in 'The Green Knight's Balancing Act' in *In Strange Countries: New Essays on Middle English Literature*, ed. Anke Bernau and David Matthews (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010) pp. 25–45.
- 2 See Michel W. Twomey, 'Sir Gawain and the "Green World"' in *Arthurian Literature*, which is based on the paper Twomey gave at the International Arthurian Society Congress 2011. This current essay is likewise based on my own paper given in the same session and has benefited both from hearing the original and being allowed to read the full paper in pre-publication draft.
 - 3 Strohm concisely and coherently argues that texts are 'inherently silent,' 'evasive,' and 'silent about their own suppressions and omissions' in the Introduction to *Theory and the Pre-Modern Text* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) pp. xii–xiii.
 - 4 All quotations from the poem are taken from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2d edition edited by Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967). References are by line number and given parenthetically in text.
 - 5 R.W.V. Elliott, *The Gawain Country: Essays on the Topography of Middle English Alliterative Poetry*, (Leeds: School of English, 1984).
 - 6 Corinne Saunders, *The Forests of Medieval Romance: Avernus, Broceliande, Arden* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001).
 - 7 Although this argument focuses on the physical geography that is such a feature of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there are parallels to be made with the discussion of what 'nature' means more generally delineated by, amongst others, Neil Evernden in his book *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).
 - 8 This was the banner heading of www.VisitWirral.com in July 2011.
 - 9 Adam Sweeting and Thomas C. Crochunis, 'Performing the Wild: Rethinking Wilderness and Theater Spaces' in *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. K. Armbruster and K. Wallace (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2001), p.325 [325–40].
 - 10 I argue the case for the freakish undertones of 'freke' in Rudd, 'The Green Knight's Balancing Act' pp. 34–5.
 - 11 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. John Burrow (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 100.
 - 12 Henry Savage, 'A Note on *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 700–2,' *Modern Language Notes* 46.7 (Nov. 1931): 455–57.

- 13 John Howe and Michael Wolfe, *Inventing Medieval Landscapes: Sense of Place in Western Europe* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002) p. 2.
- 14 See Tolkien, Gordon, Davis, *Sir Gawain*, p. 98 n691.
- 15 Edmund Colledge and J.C. Marler “‘Céphalologie’: A Recurring Theme in Classical and Mediaeval Lore,’ *Traditio* 37 (1981): 422–23.
- 16 In his edition of the poem, *Syr Gawayne* (London: Bannatyne Club, 1839), Falkner Madden suggested Inglewood forest as a likely site of this forest, while R.W.V. Elliott (*The Gawain Country*) advocated a Wirral and North West Midlands identity. Twomey offers interesting and informative commentary on the discussions surrounding Gawain’s route in the Commentary section of his ‘Travels’ website.
- 17 Simon Hailwood, ‘The Value of Nature’s Otherness,’ *Environmental Values* 9 (2000): 535–72.
- 18 See Richard Maybey, *Flora Britannica: The Definitive New Guide to Wild Flowers, Plants and Trees* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), p. 206.
- 19 The identity of Hawthorn as a gateway shrub into the Celtic Otherworld is rapidly gaining currency, due to the power of Wikipedia which cites John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, as its source. Campbell’s rather passing reference is endorsed by Raghnaid MacilleDuibh, ‘The Flowers of Death,’ *West Highland Free Press* 20 April 2001, as cited in *The Gaelic Otherworld: John Gregorson Campbell’s Superstitions of the Highland and Island of Scotland and Witchcraft and Second Sight in the Highlands and Islands*, ed. Ronald Black (Edinburgh: Berlinn Ltd., 2005, 2008), p. 345 n257.
- 20 Saunders, *Forests* pp. 149–51.
- 21 John Granrose, ‘Why study Environmental Ethics?’ in David Keller, *Environmental Ethics: The Big Questions* (Malden, MA and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p.32 [25–52].