STREAMS AND SWAMPS IN THE *GAWAIN* COUNTRY

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In this and other essays[1] devoted to an examination of the topographical vocabulary of Middle English alliterative poetry I have used "The *Gawain* country" as a convenient shorthand both for the countryside of the north-west midlands and northern England in which most of this poetry was composed, and for the fictional landscapes within the poems themselves. The latter range from purely imaginary settings, some of them, as in *The Wars of Alexander*, far removed from England, to tracts of west midland or northern scenery made recognizable by the mention of place-names, as in *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn* or *Piers Plowman*, or by the description of local landmarks as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[2] Such an inclusive shorthand is possible because the fictional landscapes appear to be not infrequently based on the genuine English countryside with which the poets were familiar and which, whenever it is apposite to do so, I call the "real" *Gawain* country. The principal criteria of this resemblance are the links between the topographical vocabulary employed by the alliterative poets and local toponymy, and the use made of this vocabulary in creating fictional settings based on real landscapes. Such, it has been suggested, for example, is the case with that "typical view of the West Country" in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 885ff.,[3] and even more probably with several of the episodes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[4]

Taken in conjunction with other groups of words, those denoting hills, valleys, woods, forests, and scrubland, the evidence of the "water"-words here discussed suggests strongly that the alliterative poets at times drew upon their local map, as it were, when describing landscapes and for words to describe them. The vocabulary itself is in any case of sufficient interest to deserve more attention than it has received hitherto, and the particular qualities of certain landscape descriptions in alliterative poems most frequently commented upon - their effectiveness and their "realism" - may well derive from the poets' familiarity with and response to local landscapes, and their knowledge and use of dialect words endowed with local associations.

Most of the alliterative poems tell of adventures, whether of questing knights or warring kings, or of spiritual pilgrimages as in *Piers Plowman* or *Pearl*, which take place in hilly or mountainous regions where rivers run and forests abound or where, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, large tracts of countryside are mires and marshland. Hence words denoting the open sea are less

common, and the interesting fact emerges that poets often used "inland" "water"-words like northern *borne* or the widely current *broke* or the more specific *dam* to describe the sea. All three of these words are thus used by the *Gawain*-poet. The requirements of alliteration to some extent explain such usages, but as some of the poets probably knew little of the ocean, yet knew a great deal about mountain torrents and inland rivers, it is understandable that they should have recourse to such familiar words. Langland was such a one: his "water"-words are few and commonplace and the only large expanse of water with which he evinces any familiarity at all is Noah's Flood.

ee, flum, gufere, rake

The range of words denoting streams of all kinds in alliterative poetry is considerable. There are, on the one hand, the more common words known all over England, like *broke* "brook", *reuer* "river", and *strem* "stream". Similarly, there are common words denoting an expanse of water, like *lake* or *pole* "pool, pond", or the more "technical" *dam* "a stretch of water confined by a dam", or *water* itself, the latter freely used to describe any watery feature. The Old English word *ēa* "river, stream", although common in place-names throughout the country, is rare in literature. It occurs, for example, in *The Wars of Alexander* 5464:

> þan entirs in of his erles & ouire þe ee passis,

where it appears to be used for alliteration. The word survives in several dialects including the East Cheshire dialect of Mr Colin Garner, a septuagenarian craftsman who has lived all his life, as have his forbears, at Alderley Edge, and who responded to *ee* with "a stretch of water; I've heard of it".[5]

At the other extreme are the rare words *flum*, *gufere*, and *rake*. Of these the first, *flum*, occurs five times in *The Wars of Alexander* and once, in the phrase "flom jordane", the "River Jordan", in *The Quatrefoil of Love* 173.[6] Derived from Old French *flum*, ultimately from Latin *flumen*, the Middle English word means "river, stream". Although the word does not appear as an element in place-names and is rare in alliterative poetry, it is found occasionally in other thirteenth- and fourteenth-century writings and was eventually transposed with several specialised meanings into the English of the United States and New Zealand. Whether it is connected with the south-midland dialect word *flam* "a low marshy place near a river", which the *English Dialect Dictionary* records in Oxfordshire and some neighbouring counties, must remain conjectural.

In *Patience* 310 occurs the stirring line

> Alle þe gote3 of þy guferes and groundele3 powle3,[7]

which provides the only instance of *gufere* cited by the *Middle English Dictionary*. The word is probably a variant of *golf* "a

deep cavity, abyss", which appears in the similar phrase "goteȝ of golf" in *Pearl* 608.[8] In Old French, too, *goufre* is cited as a variant of *golfe*.[9] There are a few occurrences of *golf* outside the alliterative poems, but the topographical senses of "a gulf, bay, or whirlpool" were not common. Neither form is listed in A.H. Smith's *English Place-Name Elements*.[10] There is, however, the interesting link with the northern dialectal *goave* or *goaf*, first discussed by E.V. Gordon and C.T. Onions in connection with the passage in *Pearl*,[11] which, as the *English Dialect Dictionary* records, denotes "the space left in a coal-mine after the whole of the coal has been extracted" in various parts of the north country northwards from Lancashire, as well as "a hollow or depression in the moorland or on a hillside" in west Yorkshire. The *Gawain*-poet's "goteȝ of guferes" in *Patience* and the unceasing "goteȝ of golf" in *Pearl* may well recall the deep river cavities in the Pennine limestone country, as Gordon and Onions suggest, with which the poet was very likely familiar. To this day, some of the rivers in the Peak district disappear underground for considerable stretches, to re-appear as "goteȝ of guferes", rushing currents of water, out of the depths. The river Manifold, for example, in north-eastern Staffordshire, disappears beneath Darfur Crags, to surge forth again in the grounds of Ilam Hall, some 8 km downstream. One of its tributaries, the Hamps, similarly runs underground for part of its course. It appears that we have here a local phenomenon which provided both the image and a rare topographical word for the *Gawain*-poet.

The third of the rare words listed earlier, *rake*, goes back to Old English *racu* "course, path". As the meaning "path" is well attested in various dialects, in place-names, and occasionally in literature, the word is usually given this sense by editors of alliterative poems. It is thus glossed for its two occurrences in *Morte Arthure* 1525, 2985,[12] and two in *The Wars of Alexander* 3383, 5070. Elsewhere in alliterative poetry the word occurs only twice within fifteen lines in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2144, 2160) where it describes the steep downward descent into the valley of the Green Chapel. When the knight reaches the bottom reference is made to "þe brymme", *the* stream, although none has been mentioned before, unless indeed we take *rake* here to mean "watercourse, stream", a sense confirmed by Old English usage where the compounds *ēa-racu* and *strēam-racu* point to such semantic development. This is further borne out by the meaning "reach, the straight stretch of a river", found in place-names (AHS II, 78), and it is perhaps worth recording that for Mr Colin Garner, my Cheshire informant, *rake* has a sufficiently similar meaning to elicit the response: "You get it on farms, same as Burgess's rake. I'd got it in my mind it froze over." It is not merely semantically possible but contextually probable that *rake* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* represents another uncommon word for "stream".

bekke, borne

The remaining words which denote "a river, stream" in alliterative poetry, can be associated even more firmly with midland and

northern dialects than the two just discussed. A notable exception is *bekke*, from Old Norse *bekkr*, which, according to A.H. Smith (I, 26), replaced Old English *brōc* "brook" and *burna* "burn" in much of the north country and the Danelaw, but which does not figure in alliterative poetry, where *borne* continues to be used. On the other hand, in the north country, as Smith also notes (I, 63) the introduction of Old Norse *brunnr* reinforced the use of Old English *burna*, so that the continuing use of *borne* in alliterative poetry, as well as in non-alliterative poems, is not surprising. The *Gawain*-poet uses the word in all four poems, to denote streams in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Pearl*, and the sea and the Flood respectively in *Patience* and *Cleanness*.[13] The word occurs several times in both *The Destruction of Troy*[14] and *The Wars of Alexander*. It is recorded, for example, from fourteenth-century Worcestershire, where Langland also knew it, in the personal name "Joh. atte Bourn",[15] and is found in such north-west midland place-names as Ashbourne in Derbyshire.

gille, gole

The northern and north-midland *gille* occurs northwards from Derbyshire and Lancashire with the sense of "a deep and narrow valley, a ravine," usually with wooded banks and a stream running at the bottom. The word connoted the presence of a stream in Old Norse and the connotation appears to have survived in Middle English, patently so when re-inforced by "stream" in the compound *gill-stremes* found in *The Wars of Alexander*, where the Ashmole manuscript reads at line 3231

Girdid out as gutars in grete gill-stremes,

a better reading than the *gylle-stormez* of the Dublin manuscript. In *The Awntyrs off Arthure* the word *gylles* is used once (418) as a convenient rhyme word in the not particularly informative phrase "greues and gylles", and it also occurs occasionally in non-alliterative works.

The word *gole*, still known in north-east Cheshire with the meaning "ditch" and found in neighbouring Derbyshire in the place-name Watergo (cp. the sixteenth-century form Watergawle), south-west of Derby, is probably of native origin, although possibly influenced in form by the Old French *goule* "throat" from which the *Middle English Dictionary* derives it. The meaning of "watercourse", more specifically "a ditch, channel, stream" is well attested in place-names and dialect in the north, in several midland counties, and in the south-west of England, and in its nonce occurrence in *Morte Arthure* 3725 the same meaning is appropriate.

gote, goter

Not far from Three Shire Heads, at the heart of the "real" *Gawain* country, where the counties of Cheshire, Staffordshire, and Derbyshire meet, are the headwaters of the river Goyt which eventually joins with the Etherow to form the river Mersey. Although some early forms of the name suggest a Celtic origin,

others point to an Old English **gota*, related to the verb *gēotan* "to pour, flow", as the origin of the river-name as well as of Middle English *gote*. This word occurs in *Cleanness* 413 and *The Wars of Alexander* 4796 with the meaning "a watercourse, a stream", as well as in the phrases "goteȝ of . . . guferes" and "goteȝ of golf" in *Patience* and *Pearl* which we noted earlier. The word is known to my Cheshire informant and is recorded in several north-country, midland, and south-western dialects by the *English Dialect Dictionary*. Although not confined to the "real" *Gawain* country of the north-west midlands, it formed part of its dialect, and indeed still does, and also figures there in such minor names as Lightgote in Derbyshire.[16] Its occurrence in several alliterative poems, particularly those of the *Gawain*-poet, may thus be regarded as reflecting regional usage.

Even more common in the local toponymy of the "real" *Gawain* country is the dialectal "gutter" which denotes both "a drain, channel, narrow watercourse" and "a small stream" and is known as such to my Cheshire informant. Of Old French origin, probably via Anglo-Norman *gotere* and possibly influenced by Middle English *gote*, the word *goter* is represented in such minor names as Tinkerspit Gutter, head-water of the Cheshire river Dane, in the parish of Wildboarclough,[17] in such Staffordshire moorland names as Green Gutter Head and Lower Stoke Gutter on Goldsitch Moss, and in the simple name Gutter in Hartington Upper Quarter parish near Buxton in north-west Derbyshire. The word is used by several alliterative poets and occasionally elsewhere. In *The Siege of Jerusalem* it occurs alongside the distinctive midland word *baches* "valleys" in a couplet redolent of reminiscences of gushing streams:

> Baches woxen ablode a-boute in þe vale,
> & goutes fram gold wede as goteres þey runne.
> (*Siege Jer* 559-60)[18]

In Book V (1607) of *The Destruction of Troy*, the river Xanthus is described as running under the city "through Godardys & other grete vautes", where *godardys* is a variant of *goteres* and denotes water channels used, *inter alia*, to turn mill wheels. The form in *The Wars of Alexander* is *gutars* in 3231, and *guttars* in 4796 where it is linked with *gotis*, which we discussed above. In the latter instance the meaning is practically that of the modern English "gutter", whereas in line 3231 it means "streams" or even "torrents". Despite its appearance in such exotic narrative surroundings, the word *goter* provides yet another example of a topographical word with which several of the alliterative poets were familiar from local usage.

rasse, res(se)

Old Norse *rǽs* "a rush of water, a water-channel" survives in Middle English as well as in modern English "mill race", perhaps reinforced by French *ras*, *raz* "strong current", and is more likely to be the root of the word *rasse* in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1570 than Old French *ras* "level (ground)" which causes most editors

and translators to render the word as "bank or ledge" in the poem, a meaning more appropriate in *Cleanness* 446. The "hole" to which the boar retreats in this episode of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is not a cave in the hillside, but an opening up or widening of the water-course in which the "boerne" runs among steep banks, and in which the hunted animal scrapes desperately before succumbing to Sir Bertilak in mid-stream. The word occurs in late minor names according to A.H. Smith (II, 81), as in the Yorkshire Gipsey Race.

Cognate with Old Norse *rás* is Old English *rǣs* "race, rush, onslaught" which occurs as *res(se)* in several alliterative poems. In *Pearl* 874 the word is used to reinforce the image of rushing waters,

> Lyk flodeȝ fele laden runnen on resse,

which A.C. Cawley renders "like many rivers rushing in full spate",[19] and which evokes a picture very similar to the poet's description in the boar hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Usage in the alliterative poems suggests that the several related meanings of Old Norse *rás*, Old English *rǣs*, and Old French *ras* (which is also glossed "*fossé plein d'eau*") tended to conflate in Middle English. Thus, for example, in *The Wars of Alexander* 1996 the phrase "redis in a rese" means "reads in a hurry", but the word may well have suggested itself to the poet by the reference to "þe streme of struma" in the preceding line.

rynel, stanc

Confronted with the word "runnel" my Cheshire informant offered this response: "I know 'rundle'. That's water going under a road, same as a splash or a ford covered over." The earlier forms, without intrusive *d*, derive from the Old English pair *rynel* (masculine) and *rynele* or *rinnelle* (feminine). Later English has the several forms "runnel", "rundle", and "rindle", all meaning "a small stream, rivulet". The *English Dialect Dictionary* assigns both "runnel" and "rindle" to the midlands and north country, including Staffordshire and neighbouring counties, while D. Wilson narrows the Staffordshire usage of "rindle" even further, to the moorlands.[20]

Among the poets of the alliterative revival only the poet of *The Destruction of Troy* appears to use the word *rynel*, and he associates it, perhaps mainly for reasons of alliteration, with "red" blood. In line 5709 the word has its literal meaning of "a small stream", here used to denote the rivulets running with the blood of the wounded and slain in the battle following the landing of the Greeks in Book XIV:

> The rynels wex red of the ronke blode.

The same picture is transformed into the image of "Rinels of red blode" running down Hector's cheeks in the other occurrence of the word, in Book XVII, 7506. Both the literal and the figurative usage confirm familiarity with a word associated mainly with the north and the north midlands.

The same poet employs another "water"-word of limited literary occurrence, *stanc* "a pond, pool", from Old French *estanc*, to describe the pool into which the Greeks cast the body of Penthesilea in Book XXVIII. The reference to a pond or reservoir,

> A stanke full of stynke standyng besyde,
> (*Destr Troy* 11189)

at first sight seems to conflict with the description of it as "a clere terne" two lines earlier, but *clere* here means "calm, unruffled", perhaps even "torpid". Chaucer uses *clere* similarly to render Latin *serenus* in describing the sea in *Boece* II, metrum 3, 13. The inconsistency is rather in equating *stanke* and *terne*, both meaning "pond" or "pool" with *burne* in 11472, which denotes flowing water. But the latter reference is at some remove from the earlier ones and *burne* appears to have been chosen for alliteration at the expense of topographical consistency.

The *Gawain*-poet uses *stanc* twice in *Cleanness*, in one instance opting for the same association of the word with "stink" as in *The Destruction of Troy*, which might suggest not merely an alliterative convenience or a false etymological linking but an actual awareness of the odour emanating from stagnant pools:

> As a stynkande stanc þat stryed synne.
> (*Cleanness* 1018)

Towards the end of the description of the Flood earlier in the poem God is shown turning off the waters:

> Þen he stac vp þe stangeȝ, stoped þe welleȝ,
> (*Cleanness* 439)

which in view of the Latin *cataractae coeli* of *Genesis* viii, 2, Anderson glosses "floodgates, cataracts". These are proper renderings of the Latin word, but they have different meanings in English. In the present instance, the sense of "waterfall" is inappropriate, as the word *stangeȝ* connotes "reservoirs" which are here blocked or dammed up to stop the flow of water, a sense more in accord with the word's usual meaning of "pond, pool". The latter is confirmed by three occurrences in *The Wars of Alexander* as well as by place-names in Herefordshire, Lancashire, and north Yorkshire (AHS II, 146). In dialect the word had wider currency, and it is found in Middle English writings other than alliterative poetry. Chaucer uses it once, to describe the lake in hell into which, according to *Revelation* xxi, 8, adulterers will be cast: "Seint John seith that avowtiers shullen been in helle, in a stank brennynge of fyr and of brymston" (*The Parson's Tale* 840).[21] In Cheshire, although the corresponding verb is listed in the phrase "stanking a drain", that is damming it up, in Egerton Leigh's *Glossary*,[22] the word has not survived into the dialect of my informant from Alderley Edge.

strynde, terne

In the valley of the Cheshire-Derbyshire river Goyt, which was mentioned earlier, the place-name Strines in High Peak hundred reveals in its earlier forms Stryndes, Strindes the Middle English *strynde* used by the *Gawain*-poet in *Patience* 311:

And þy stryuande streme3 of stryndе3 so mony.

The word is of uncertain, but probably Old English, origin, and may be related to *strand*. Its meaning ranges from "a ditch, water-channel" to "stream" and in *Patience* it is best rendered "currents". Although not confined to alliterative poetry it seems largely western and northern in Middle English. The word is also recorded in some minor names in Derbyshire, and the *English Dialect Dictionary* cites examples of usage from Lincolnshire, Shropshire, and Yorkshire, thus confirming it as yet another word with strong regional colouring.

The same is true of the word *terne*, derived from Old Norse *tjǫrn* "a tarn, small lake, pool", which belongs in toponymy and dialect wholly to the north-west, and which in Middle English generally as well as in alliterative poetry is similarly restricted. The poet of *The Destruction of Troy*, as we noted earlier, equates the word with *stanke*, and so does the poet of *The Wars of Alexander* whose *staunke* is also called a *terne* (3860). *The Awntyrs off Arthure*, as the full title indicates, takes place "at the Terne Wathelyn", Tarn Wadling, a small lake south of Carlisle, drained in the nineteenth century, which is also the setting for three other surviving romances.[23] The *Gawain*-poet uses the word but once, perhaps for alliteration, in *Cleanness* 1041:

And þer ar tres by þat terne of traytoures,

thereby illustrating yet again his familiarity with a topographical term associated with the north-west of the country.

see, occiane, fome, bre

There is a small group of words used by alliterative poets which denote inland lakes or ponds, occasionally streams, but which are used on occasions to refer to the sea. Some "sea"-words in Middle English, developed straight from Old English or Old Norse, were common and familiar, like *see* "sea" itself. But a word like *occiane* "ocean" was still sufficiently uncommon and learned a word for Chaucer to restrict it to his "wise" Man of Law, apart from its being used once in his *Boece*. It is equally uncommon in alliterative poetry, where it occurs in *The Wars of Alexander* 2328, 5503, in *Morte Arthure* 31, and in *Alexander and Dindimus* 533.[24] The poet of *The Destruction of Troy* uses the word twice as an adjective in the phrase "the se occiane" (4440, 13254).

The same poet uses *fome* "foam", from Old English *fām*, several times for "sea", as does the poet of *Alexander and Dindimus* who twice alliterates it with "fish". This use of "foam", also attested in non-alliterative Middle English, is familiar from its later

appearance in the line "To Norroway o'er the faem" in the ballad *Sir Patrick Spens*.

Rather more idiosyncratic is the word *bre*, which normally denotes various liquids, such as "broth, soup, juice" and even a kind of ale, but which appears twice in *The Destruction of Troy* meaning "sea" (3697, 12516). Mr Colin Garner's response to "brew" was "slang for brook". The word, at least in its topographical sense, looks like an inland dialect word used by the poet of *The Destruction of Troy* as a synonym for "sea" for purposes of alliteration.

flode, brymme, laye

The ubiquitous word *flode* "flood" (like *water*) could describe anything from a stream to the ocean, a semantic range inherited from Old English *flōd*, and well illustrated by the various uses to which the *Gawain*-poet puts the word in his four poems. Similarly, the Old English poetic word *brim* has several uses in Middle English. Originally either "sea, flood, water" or "the edge of the sea, shore", Middle English *brymme* can denote any body of water, from a spring to the sea. The alliterative poets used it as a rule more specifically to mean either "stream", as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2172 and *The Wars of Alexander* 4080, or "bank, brink", as in *Cleanness* 365 and *Pearl* 232, 1074.

An interesting development is that of Old English *lagu* "water" which generally referred to the sea in Old English poetry. Its Middle English descendant *laye* has the more restricted meaning "lake, pond". Yet in the alliterative *Morte Arthure*, where Arthur with his ships "lengede one laye" (3721), the word again means "sea". According to A.H. Smith (II, 12), the element appears in the Devon place-name Slapton Ley, a large lake, and in East Anglia, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word was recorded in the nineteenth century with the meaning of "a very large pond". Closer to the "real" *Gawain* country of the north-west midlands is the still current sense of "a stretch of water, not running" in the East Cheshire dialect of Mr Colin Garner.

abyme, hourle, loghe

The latter responded unhesitatingly with "Yes; deep water" to the word *abyme* "abyss, depths (of sea or earth)", which is not common in the sense "sea" in alliterative poetry. In the description of the Flood in *Cleanness* 363, it may have been suggested by the Latin use of *abyssus* in the Vulgate (*Genesis* vii, 11), as Anderson surmises in his edition. That the word could specifically mean "sea" to the poet is clear from *Patience* 318, where it is preceded by the phrase "I am wrapped in water" in the previous line and followed by the line

> Þe pure poplande hourle playes on my heued,
> (*Pat* 319)

which uses another rare "water"-word, *hourle*. Jonah is crying to

God from the depths of the sea, and the whole passage rings with evocative "sea"-words.

The word *hourle* probably derives from the verb *hurlen* "to rush" which was commonly associated with surging water. The above line from *Patience* is repeated almost *verbatim* in the Ashmole manuscript of *The Wars of Alexander* 1154,

> Þe pure populande hurle passis it vmby,

where *hurle* denotes the surge of the sea. In the Dublin manuscript of *The Wars of Alexander* another verbal derivative of similar meaning, *perle*, expresses the same idea of a rush or surge of water.

Finally, it is worth noting that the *Gawain*-poet's *loghe* appears to have been yet another inland "water"-word, which here provides a useful alliterative synonym for "sea" both in *Patience* 230 and in its three occurrences in *Cleanness*. Of Celtic origin, the northern Old English *luh*, meaning "loch, lake, pond", is found in its Middle English form in this sense in *The Wars of Alexander* 3899 and *The Awntyrs off Arthure* 83, and in some non-alliterative works. Although in place-names this element occurs mainly in the north, it is found as far south as Lincolnshire and may be present in the Derbyshire place-name Loughborne.[25]

flosche, plasche

The topographical affinity of a stretch of water, like a pond or lake, with marshland, that is a tract of land more or less permanently waterlogged, is well illustrated by the Middle English word *flosche*. In place-names, *flosche* (also *flasche*) can mean "a pool" as well as "a swamp", testimony perhaps to the difficulty of differentiating between the two in a rainy climate before the days of adequate drainage. The more northerly form *flask* reveals the Scandinavian origin of the word, from Old Danish *flask*, "a swamp, a pool", while the Old French *flache* "small pool, puddle" may have helped to develop the forms in *s(c)h*, which range from the north country to the midlands.

In alliterative poetry two of the poets use *flosche* to demarcate one side of a narrow passage or restricted terrain, as swamps were obviously considered treacherous, if not impassable. Thus the *Gawain*-poet's

> Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge,
> (*Gaw* 1430)

where the passage is between a swamp and a forbidding crag, whereas in *Morte Arthure* the other side is a stretch of water proper, "a flode":

> Be-twyx a plasche and a flode, appone a flate lawnde.
> (*Morte Arth* 2798)

Alliteration confirms that the word here must originally have been

flasche, although another topographical word *plasche* also exists. The latter, which is paralleled in Middle Dutch *plasch*, is probably onomatopoeic in origin. It means "a marshy pool" and occurs in place-names and some personal names of the south and the west midlands.[26] I have found no examples of *plasche* in alliterative poetry, apart from the doubtful occurrence in *Morte Arthure*. The *Promptorium Parvulorum* equates the two words: "Plasch, or flasch qwere rayne water stondyth . . ."[27]

In both *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Morte Arthure* the meaning "swamp, marsh" is appropriate for *flosche*, whereas in *The Wars of Alexander* 2049 the word denotes "pools of blood" in which the horses are wading to their fetlocks:

> Þat foles ferd in þe flosches to þe fetelakis.

A similar image is created in the description of the massacre in *The Siege of Jerusalem* which, as we noted earlier, makes use of several interesting "water"-words. Here the reference is also to horses wading, this time knee-deep, but *flasches* may be more literally puddles or small pools of water into which runs the blood of men and beasts:

> Þe blode fomed hem fro in þe flasches aboute,
> Þat kne-depe in þe dale dascheden stedes.
> (*Siege Jer* 571-2)

The *Gawain*-poet's use of a topographical word almost entirely restricted in Middle English literature to these few occurrences is of particular interest in a passage in which several other rare words are employed to describe the terrain of the boar hunt. I have suggested elsewhere[28] that these words may have found their way into *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from an actual landscape in the southern Pennines where they occur close together in local place-names. Here it suffices to note that one of these words is represented in the name Flash, a village in the north-east corner of Staffordshire, in a marshy moorland setting with appropriate echoes of medieval boar hunts.

ker(re), misy

The *Gawain*-poet uses two other words in this poem to denote swamps which occur nowhere else in alliterative poetry and rarely elsewhere. These are *ker(re)* and *misy*. The first, of Scandinavian origin as in Old Icelandic *kjarr* "brushwood", is common in place-names of the Danelaw (AHS II, 4). The word is still familiar to my Cheshire informant, and it occurs quite frequently in place-names and minor names in north-east Cheshire, North Staffordshire, and north-west Derbyshire, the heartland of the "real" *Gawain* country. There is, for example, the "sow's marsh", Sowcar, in Rainow parish in Macclesfield hundred in Cheshire, or Broad Carr in High Peak hundred, Derbyshire, recorded as "le Soweker" in 1379 and "Brodeker" in 1285 respectively. The *Gawain*-poet's "in a ker syde" (1421) and "at þe kerre syde" (1431) occur close together in the description of the boar hunt and clearly envisage the hunters skirting the

marshland. It is worth noting that this is the same passage in which the word *flosche* occurs (1430).

The word *misy* occurs only once in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

> Þurȝ mony misy and myre, mon al hym one,
> (*Gaw* 749)

as Sir Gawain rides on his way to keep his tryst. *The Middle English Dictionary* cites no other example, and the word is not listed as a place-name element by A.H. Smith. Probably related to Old English *mēos* "moss" and *mos* "a moss, marsh", *misy* is recorded as *mizzy* in Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* with the meaning "a bog, quagmire", and is cited as a north country and a Lancashire dialect word by the *English Dialect Dictonary*. Egerton Leigh lists the variant "mizzick", meaning "bog", in his Cheshire *Glossary*, but the word is not known to my informant from Alderley Edge. The nearest place-name forms to *misy* are those incorporating Old English *mēos*, like Meese in Staffordshire and Shropshire, and the names of two midland rivers: the Mease, which rises in Leicestershire and joins the Trent near Alrewas in Staffordshire, and the Meese, which flows from western Staffordshire into Shropshire.[29] The *Gawain*-poet's *misy* is certainly an uncommon word with strong regional colouring.

myre, mosse, marasse

The word *myre* which the poet links with *misy* is, on the other hand, quite common. Used by the poet also in *Patience* 279 and *Cleanness* 1114, the word occurs in other alliterative poems and elsewhere in Middle English literature. Derived from Old Norse *mýrr* "a mire, bog", the word occurs in place-names mainly in areas of Scandinavian settlement. In Great Longstone parish in the High Peak hundred of Derbyshire, for instance, the minor name The Mires is recorded as "le myre" in a mid-fourteenth-century personal name.

Old Norse *mýrr*, Old English *mēos*, and Old English *mos* are etymologically related. From *mos* derives Middle English *mosse* which can mean "bog, swamp", as well as "moss". Both senses are found in place-names, mainly of the north country and the north-west midlands (AHS II, 43), where it is a common element in the moorlands of the southern Pennines. The word is linked contextually with "misy and myre" in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, occurring a few lines earlier:

> With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere.
> (*Gaw* 745)

It means "moss" here, but carries connotations of marshy ground, as mosses thrive in moist soil. This connection is exploited even more closely in *Morte Arthure* where the word is twice used in the alliterative phrase "the mosse and the marrasse" (2014) and "thorowe marasse and mosse" (2505), where connotations of marshy terrain are further conveyed by *marasse* "morass, swamp", from Old French *mareis*, found elsewhere in Middle English and in several other alliterative

poems, including *Piers Plowman*, but not used by the *Gawain*-poet. Langland uses *mosse* in the description of St Paul the hermit invisible in his concealment "for mosse and for leues" (*Piers Plowman* B XV, 287) where the botanical sense is patent, and the same connotations of concealment are present in line 93 of *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* where a compound "hair-moss" is used:

> With hethe and with horemosse hilde it about.[30]

With its connotations of concealment, of mosses growing in moist ground as well as in the cracks of stones and rocks, as in *Mum and the Sothsegger* 1643-5, and of bogs and marshland generally, *mosse* is one of the more versatile "swamp"-words found in alliterative poetry.

mor

In the north of England and, as A.H. Smith notes (II, 42), especially along the Pennines, the word *mor* (Old English *mōr*, Old Norse *mór*) generally denotes "a high tract of barren uncultivated ground", whereas in more low-lying parts as well as in other regions of England it may refer to "marshland". In the alliterative poems, *mor* is frequently made to alliterate with *mountez* as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 2080, *Cleanness* 385, *The Destruction of Troy* 7350, 7808, and *The Siege of Jerusalem* 726, while the poet of *William of Palerne* uses both *mor* and *mire* in the same formulaic manner, presumably giving to both the common meaning "marshland", unless indeed the distinction is purely scribal:

> ouer mures & muntaynes & many faire pleynes,
> (*Wm Pal* 2619)

> ouer mires & muntaynes & oþer wicked weiȝes.
> (*Wm Pal* 3507)[31]

In the phrase "by the more side" in *The Parlement of the Thre Ages* 495, the reference could be to the marshes then abundant in the vicinity of Glastonbury to which the passage refers. Löfvenberg (p.133ff.) cites *inter alia* the Somerset personal name "Edith de la Morland" from the thirteenth century, and similar surnames and place-names can be found in many other parts of England.

sloh, wose, warþe

Two words which among alliterative poets only Langland uses are *sloh*, Old English *slōh* "a slough, a mire" (*Piers Plowman* C XIII, 179),[32] which is found in place-names and minor names from Derbyshire southwards, as in the Derbyshire field-name "le Sloughes" from 1389; and *wose*, Old English *wāse* "mud" (*Piers Plowman* C XIII, 229), which occurs in place-names from Warwickshire southwards, and developed into modern English "ooze". The thirteenth-century Oxfordshire surname "Ric. de la Wose" contains this element.[33]

The word *warþe*, from Old English *waroð* "shore", used in alliterative poetry apparently only by the *Gawain*-poet in *Patience*

339 and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 715, could be taken to mean "marshland" in the latter instance:

> At vche warþe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed,
> (*Gaw* 715)

where a contrast with *water*, that is "stream", is presumably intended, so that the usual glosses "ford" or "river bank" lack conviction.[34] In *Patience* 339, on the other hand, the meaning "shore", attested in toponymy, is appropriate. As the meaning "marshy ground near a stream" appears to attach to some of the place-names containing this element (AHS II, 246), the *Gawain*-poet may well be using the word in the above line in this sense. He is, after all, enumerating the obstacles facing Sir Gawain as he rides through a wintry countryside which contains not only streams but the "mony misy and myre" already considered. In several inland dialects, the word *warth* denotes "a flat meadow, especially one close to a stream", with obvious swampy connotations, in the west midlands and West Yorkshire. In the north-west of Derbyshire the word occurs in a few late minor and field-names, like Warth Cottage in Chinley, Buxworth and Brownside parish, High Peak hundred. It is yet another example of a topographical term connoting marshy terrain used by the *Gawain*-poet that possesses some regional colouring.

*mershe, fen, bog, *wæsse*

Three other words merit brief notice. The word *mershe* "marsh" itself, from Old English *mersc*, has no specific regional associations. Similarly, *fen*, from Old English *fen(n)*, "a fen, a marsh, marshland", is known in many parts of the country and is found in literature and place-names accordingly. The word occurs in the late Scottish alliterative poem *Rauf Coilȝear* 444,[35] and is used in *The Wars of Alexander* 4358 in the specific sense of "clay" or "mud", itself attested elsewhere in Middle English. My Cheshire informant, interestingly enough, does not know the word.

But he does of course know the word *bog*, cognate with Irish *bogach* "marsh", which is rare in Middle English. The *Middle English Dictionary* cites no literary occurrences of *bog*, and I have found the word only in the Scottish alliterative poem *Golagrus and Gawain* 31.[36] A few medieval instances of the word occur in minor names and surnames from Somerset, Worcestershire, and the north country. The word has, however, gained wide currency in more recent times.

It is perhaps worth remembering that one topographical term, most frequently found in the west midlands does not appear to have been used by any alliterative poet. The element **wæsse*, not separately recorded in Old English, is sufficiently attested in West Midland place-names with the meaning "a wet place, a swamp, a marsh" to be regarded as a Middle English "swamp"-word in its own right. The Staffordshire names Alrewas and Hopwas, the Derbyshire Alderwasley, and the Shropshire Buildwas all contain this word, but I can find no evidence of its use in the dialects of these counties.

The foregoing discussion of "stream"-words and "swamp"-words has sought to provide further evidence of the connection between the more distinctive of such words in Middle English alliterative poetry and the appearance of the same words as elements in the place-names of what I have called the "real" *Gawain* country. The exact provenance of most of the alliterative poems will probably never be known for certain, but the works of the *Gawain*-poet at least have been authoritatively assigned on dialectal and graphemic grounds to the region of the southern Pennines, where the counties of Staffordshire, Cheshire, and Derbyshire meet, and where more northerly and more southerly linguistic features overlap.

Such words as *gufere* and *strynde*, and *kerre* and *misy*, and probably *warþe*, can confidently be ascribed to this region. Others, like *goter*, *rynel*, and *terne*, have somewhat wider regional associations. Of no less interest are several of the words used for "sea" in alliterative poetry, pointing, as in the case of *laye* or *loghe* and perhaps *bre*, to the poets' familiarity rather with mountain streams and pools than with the sea itself. The use of *borne* and *brok* in this way is characteristic of this tendency.

Although the works of the *Gawain*-poet provide an artistic focus for this and related topographical studies, other alliterative poems are not without effective landscape descriptions and interesting words to express them. *The Wars of Alexander* and *Morte Arthure*, for example, both contribute several noteworthy "water"-words and there are at least two unusual "swamp"-words, *sloh* and *wose*, in *Piers Plowman*. But Langland's landscapes are spiritual regions rather than representative of real English scenery, although some of the words he uses are firmly rooted in the west midland countryside with which he was familiar.[37] Other poets have their feet more firmly on the ground, and where a local word is used in what strikes the reader as somehow a life-like setting to a particular episode, he or she may well be justified in suspecting that the poet's picture owes some of its ingredients, scenic as well as lexical, to a familiar landscape. Nowhere is this feeling stronger than in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, for none of the alliterative poets has more successfully imparted to his descriptions impressions of authentic scenes such as we can still visit, for example, in the Goyt valley or along the moors of the Peak District.[38]

NOTES

1 "Hills and Valleys in the *Gawain* Country", *Leeds Studies in English* 10 (1978) pp.19-41; "Woods and Forests in the *Gawain* Country", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 80 (1979) pp.48-64.

2 *The Wars of Alexander*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, ES 47 (London, 1886); *The Awntyrs off Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*, ed. R. Hanna III (Manchester, 1974); *Piers Plowman. The B Version*, ed. G. Kane and E.T. Donaldson (London, 1975); *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed. revised by N. Davis (Oxford, 1967).

3 See *Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. M. Day and R. Steele, EETS, OS 199 (London, 1936) p.xviiff, 121.

4 Cp. my "Staffordshire and Cheshire Landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*", *North Staffordshire Journal of Field Studies* 17 (1977) pp.20-49.

5 I am grateful to Mr Alan Garner, himself an authority on East Cheshire dialect, for recording these responses which provide interesting, albeit inevitably limited, corroborative evidence for some of the words discussed.

6 *The Quatrefoil of Love*, ed. Sir I. Gollancz and M.M. Weale, EETS, OS 195 (London, 1935).

7 *Patience*, ed. J.J. Anderson (Manchester, 1969).

8 *Pearl*, ed. E.V. Gordon (Oxford, 1953).

9 R. Grandsaignes d'Hauterive, *Dictionnaire d'Ancien Français* (Paris, 1947) s.v. *goufre*.

10 English Place-Name Society, 25-6, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1956; repr. 1970), hereinafter abbreviated in the text as AHS I or II.

11 See *Medium Ævum* 2 (1933) p.176, and the note to lines 607-8 in Gordon's edition of *Pearl*.

12 *Morte Arthure*, ed. J. Finlayson (London, 1967). Passages not included in Finlayson's shortened version are quoted from the edition by E. Brock, EETS, OS 8 (London, 1865).

13 *Cleanness*, ed. J.J. Anderson (Manchester, 1977).

14 *The "Gest Hystoriale" of the Destruction of Troy*, ed. G.A. Panton and D. Donaldson, EETS, OS 39 and 56 (London, 1869 and 1874).

15 See M.T. Löfvenberg, *Studies on Middle English Local Surnames* (Lund, 1942) pp.20ff. Cp. also K. Cameron, *English Place-Names* (London, 1961) p.162ff.

16 Cp. K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, EPNS 27-9, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1959) p.730.

17 Cp. J. McN. Dodgson, *The Place-Names of Cheshire*, EPNS, 44-7, 4 vols. (Cambridge, 1970-72) I, p.162.

18 *The Siege of Jerusalem*, ed. E. Kölbing and M. Day, EETS, OS 188 (London, 1932).

19 *Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. A.C. Cawley and J.J. Anderson, Everyman's Library (London, 1976).

20 *Staffordshire Dialect Words. A Historical Survey* (Buxton and Stafford, 1974) p.53.

21 *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F.N. Robinson (2nd ed., Cambridge, (Mass.) 1957).

22 Egerton Leigh, *A Glossary of Words used in the Dialect of Cheshire* (London and Chester, 1877; repr. 1973) s.v. *stank*.

23 See *ed.cit.*, p.32ff.

24 *Alexander and Dindimus*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, ES 31 (London, 1878).

25 See Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, op.cit., p.741.

26 E.g. Plaish in Shropshire, Plash in Somerset, Melplash in Dorset. Löfvenberg (p.152) cites the thirteenth-century personal name Hugh de Laplache from Somerset.

27 *The Promptorium Parvulorum*, ed. A.L. Mayhew, EETS, ES 102 (London, 1908) p.350.

28 'Staffordshire and Cheshire Landscapes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*'. See note 4.

29 See E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Oxford, 1960) s.vv. Mease, Meese; and cp. W.H. Duignan, *Notes on Staffordshire Place Names* (London, 1902) p.101.

30 *The Parlement of The Thre Ages*, ed. M.Y. Offord, EETS, OS 246 (London, 1959).

31 *William of Palerne*, ed. W.W. Skeat, EETS, ES 1 (London, 1867).

32 Ed. W.W. Skeat (London, 1886; repr. 1954).

33 G. Kristensson, *Studies on Middle English Topographical Terms* (Lund, 1970) p.46.

34 Cp. the several editions of the poem, and P. Haworth, "'Warthe' in 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'," *Notes and Queries* N.S. 14 (1967) pp.171-2.

35 *Scottish Alliterative Poems*, ed. F.J. Amours, STS, OS 27, 38 (Edinburgh, 1897).

36 *Scottish Alliterative Poems, ed.cit.*

37 See my "The Langland Country" in *Piers Plowman. Critical Approaches*, ed. S.S. Hussey (London, 1969) pp.226-44.

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