John Lyly and Lincolnshire

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To those who are familiar with the court drama of the reign of Elizabeth I, the name of John Lyly is well known. Lyly, an ambitious member of the middle class, sought to rise at court through his writings, first through prose fiction (the elegant and artificial Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit—novel, handbook of upper-class etiquette, sometimes moral sermon—and its sequel), then through drama: plays written to be performed before Elizabeth and her court by supposedly amateur but virtually professional acting companies composed of the choirboys attached to St. Paul's Cathedral and to the Chapel Royal. Eight of Lyly's plays are extant today. They are largely artificial, ceremonial creations, with gods and goddesses included among the characters and participating in mortal affairs; and they contain many classical motifs, references, and allusions, and sometimes contemporary political or court allegory. Some have classical settings: the court of the legendary King Midas (Midas), Athens at the time of Alexander the Great (Campaspe). Endimion has a typical romance setting; the locale of Love's Metamorphoses is pastoral. Two plays, however, have explicitly English settings. Mother Bombie is located in Kent, and Gallathea, in Lincolnshire.

Apart from its setting, Gallathea is anything but realistically English. Its plot concerns two beautiful virgins, Gallathea and Phylilda, who are disguised as boys by their fathers, Tityrus and Melebeus, because the custom of their country is that once every five years the most beautiful virgin in the land must be sacrificed to a sea monster sent by Neptune. The two disguised girls meet, and fall in love; each believing the other to be a real boy; and a happy dénouement is eventually accomplished only by Venus undertaking to change one of the girls into a boy, so that a marriage can take place. A minor plot strand involves a quarrel between Venus and Diana over Cupid.

Two questions arise concerning Lyly's use of Lincolnshire in Gallathea: how extensive is it, and what is the reason for it? Certainly Lyly is explicit about the locale of his play; in the first few lines of the first scene, Tityrus tells his daughter, Gallathea:

"The sun doth beat upon the plain fields, wherefore let us sit down, Gallathea, under this fair oak, by whose broad leaves being defended from the warm beams we may enjoy the fresh air which softly breathes from Humber floods".

(I.1.1-4)

The first scene is thus situated on the banks of the Humber; and in I.iv, in the same general
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location (which remains the same throughout the play), a Mariner tells four rascally boys, "You are now in Lincolnshire" (I.12). Does Lincolnshire figure, otherwise, in Lyly's drama?

First, as has long been recognized, Lyly uses Lincolnshire geography not merely superficially, in his dialogue, but as a part of his plot. The main action of Gallathea is based on the classical motif of virgin sacrifice to a sea monster, and most resembles the motif as it is found in the legend of Hesione, daughter of Laomedon of Troy. The tale exists in several forms, but common to all are an angry sea god, a sea monster sent by the god to attack the land, and the exposure of the beautiful Hesione to the monster. In Gallathea, the monster is named the Agar, "against whose coming the waters roar, the fowls fly away, and the cattle in the field for terror shun the banks" (Li.49-50). Clearly Lyly is thinking of the Humber bore, or eage (of which word "Agar" is an obsolete form), rushing up the river with the incoming tide. Lyly is thus definitely using Lincolnshire geography as a plot base. And he accounts for the virgin sacrifice by having Tityrus tell Gallathea in Li.103 that when Neptune once became angry with the people of the region, the god sent a dreadful flood to cover the land; and to appease Neptune, and persuade him to remove the flood, the people promised to sacrifice to him (via his monster), once every five years, the most beautiful virgin among them. Lincolnshire, of course, has always been one of the regions of England most menaced by both sea and river floods; and in past centuries the rivers of Lincolnshire and the sea frequently used to flood much of the land. In Lyly's own day, flooding in Lincolnshire was particularly bad, as the dunes and marshes of the sea coast, which formerly had provided some natural protection against the sea, were disappearing, and the building of new sea banks could not be accomplished quickly enough adequately to replace them. In 1571, only some twelve to thirteen years before the composition of Gallathea, the region had undergone an especially disastrous flood, recorded by Holinshed and other contemporary chroniclers and doubtless vividly remembered in the area for many years.

Clearly, therefore, Lyly makes considerable use in his play of the physical characteristics of Lincolnshire; and doubtless one reason he chose Lincolnshire as a setting was because its geography lent itself with ease to his classical plot, giving the obviously fictional tale some degree of verisimilitude. It has also been suggested that Lyly became especially interested in and knowledgeable about Lincolnshire circa 1583-84 (when he wrote Gallathea) because of his marriage on November 22, 1583, to Beatrice Browne of Mexborough in southern Yorkshire.

Lyly does not, however, use in Gallathea only the geography of Lincolnshire. He also refers to Lincolnshire history—and this has not hitherto been noticed by readers of the play. Lyly gives us the historical material in the first scene of his drama, in Tityrus' first long speech.

"In times past, where thou seest a heap of small pebble, stood a stately temple of white marble, which was dedicated to the god of the sea (and in right, being so near the sea), Hither came all such as either ventured by long travel to see countries or by great traffic to use merchandise, offering sacrifice by fire to get safety by water, yielding thanks for perils past and making prayers for good success to come; but Fortune, constant in nothing but inconsistancy, did change her copy as the people their custom, for the land being oppressed by Danes, who instead of sacrifice committed sacrifice, instead of religion, rebellion, and made a prey of that in which they should have made their prayers, tearing down the temple even with the earth, being almost equal with the skies, enragd so the god who binds the winds in the hollows of the earth that he caused the seas to break their bounds, sith men had broke their vows, and to swell as far above their reach as men had swerved beyond their reason. Then might you see ships sail where sheep fed, anchors cast where ploughs go, fishermen throw their nets where husbandmen sow their corn, and fishes throw their scales where fowls do breed their quills. Then might you gather froth where now is dew, rotten weeds for sweet roses, and take view of monstrous mermaids instead of passing fair maids." (I.i.12-34)
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Lily is making use in this speech of several pieces of Lincolnshire history, all of them concerning the Danish invasions of Anglo-Saxon England. First, Tytius talks of Danish oppression; and the Danes raided England often, from 790 to 1069, and frequently attacked by war of or in the region of the Humber, which provided for Danish ships a navigable route into the interior. Battles also took place in England between the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants and the Danes who came to settle there. Second, Tytius speaks as though the Danes were among the inhabitants of his country; and the Danes did settle especially in Lincolnshire. Third, Tytius accuses the Danes of destroying a temple; and the Danes in their raids especially attacked, for their considerable wealth, English churches and monasteries, and destroyed many. Fourth, Tytius describes the result of the Danish destruction as a great flood; and the Danish invasions and settlements did cause heavy flooding in Lincolnshire, because the native inhabitants were forced to turn to fighting and thus neglected to maintain the dikes and canals previously built by the Romans as a defense against floods. Both sea and rivers flooded the land. Tytius' speech is thus historically sound. The Danes invaded Lincolnshire; the Danes oppressed the land and destroyed "temples"; very heavy flooding occurred. Lily has used early Lincolnshire history as a basis for his plot. Moreover, he has, through these references to a historical period closely parallel, in its heavy flooding, to his own time, drawn together five to eight centuries of Lincolnshire history.

Thus, in *Gallathea*, Lily uses Lincolnshire more extensively than has generally been recognized. And, through his use of it, he at once motivates his plot, makes it more plausible, and gives a broad historical base to his play. He further adds almost mythic significance to his drama by having Tytius describe the flood (see above, lines 13-15 of the quotation) in some of the same phrases that Ovid uses in the *Metamorphoses*, i, to describe the great flood which is the classical version of Noah's Flood. The flood situation in Lincolnshire apparently commonly recalled to Elizabethan the original Flood; in *Lamentable Necesses out of Lincolnshire* (London, 1614), for example, the sea flood of 1614 is described as "a second deluge" (D2).

We are still left, however, with the question: why does Lily weave actual Lincolnshire geography and history into classical legend? Why does he place so definitely in England an improbable, fantastic plot based on virgin sacrifice, disguise, the mutual love of two girls, and sex-change, and containing characters such as Cupid, Diana, and Venus? For geographical and historical plausibility alone seems a thin explanation, as does "local interest", whether Lily's or his audience's. Lily did not ordinarily, in his dramas, concern himself with plausibility of setting; and *Gallathea* itself could not be called, even in setting, a "realistic" play. I suggest that the basic reason is thematic. Through his improbable plot, Lily is attempting to deal with the very real human emotion of love, and the complex psychological states which cause it and are in turn caused by it. The characters Venus and Diana represent two very real desires of mankind: the physical desire for love, and the spiritual desire for chastity. The fantastical nature of the plot and especially of the dénouement are Lily's ways of suggesting that love is not easy to understand, that it leads men into impossible situations, especially when they do not use their minds to control their bodies' desires, and that perhaps only in fiction, or through arbitrary chance, will any human being ever achieve happiness in human love. To make his thematic points, and to universalize his theme, Lily uses classical legend, superficially unreal characters, and symbolic characters such as Venus and Cupid; to make his audience aware of the realities of the emotions with which he is dealing, he not only includes an episodic subplot concerned with Elizabethan lowlife (contemporary alchemy, astronomy, sea-faring, and trickery of various kinds), but also sets his play firmly in a definite English geographical and historical context—which also has the advantage of giving plausible background and motivation to his work. The real and the unreal thus mingle in his setting as in his characters and plot; the setting of *Gallathea* becomes simultaneously actual England, past and present, and a fictional, fantastic land of gods, monsters, oracles, and fairies, which is

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real in quite a different way from Elizabethan Lincolnshire; real in its universal applicability to human actions and emotions. Only through the juxtaposition of Lincolnshire and classical fairyland could Lyly entirely achieve, in setting, the perfect balance of the contemporary and real and the timeless and symbolic which is not only present in every aspect of Galathea but is in fact the play's theme and raison d'être.

"RAFE. Would I were out of these woods, for I shall have but wooden luck; here's nothing but the screaming of owls, croaking of frogs, hissing of adders, barking of foxes, walking of hags. But what be these? Enter Fairies dancing and playing, and so, excurt".

(II.iii.2-5.1)

Notes

1 All references to the text of Galathea are to my own edition (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1969).
7 J. R. Brown and M. Cottier, "A Note on the Date of Lyly's Galathea," Modern Language Review, LI (1956), 221. They also suggest, but without evidence, that the play was first written for local performance in Lincolnshire.