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Title: Sympathy for the Devil: the legend of Gog and Magog

Date: 2011

Originally presented to: The Fantastic Imagination, Richmond
American International University, London

Conference URL: <http://www.richmond.ac.uk/n/1250.aspx>

Example citation: Mackley, J. (2011) Sympathy for the Devil: the
legend of Gog and Magog. Paper presented to: *The Fantastic
Imagination, Richmond American International University, London, 25
November 2011.*

Sympathy for the Devil

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In the 2007 film of *Beowulf*, the dying Grendel is seen being comforted by his mother, crying in agony 'hæ hærod me, hæ mordred me'. Throughout the film, Grendel's motivation is clear: he is disturbed by the noise from the Gæts at Heorot, and moves to find a way of ending the disturbance, permanently. In the text, however, there is no such empathy for Grendel. He is described as a 'grimma gæst', a cruel spirit. In this discussion I want to consider a similar demonising of the 'other' in the form of the giants who were the indigenous inhabitants of Albion before the first civilised settlers arrived: this story is told in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia regum britannie* (History of the Kings of Britain), but their story develops and the giants are treated more sympathetically 150 years later when they are presented in the Anglo-Norman poem *Dez granz geantes*.

Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote the *Historia regum britannie* in Latin around 1135–38. He is most famous for first popularising early stories of King Arthur. One of Geoffrey's sources a Welsh monk called Nennius who was writing around 830AD. Geoffrey's writings demonstrate his rather vivid imagination: he claims that he had copied details from a manuscript, "ancient book in the British language that told in orderly fashion the deeds of all the kings of Britain", although no such book still survives and historians generally believe that it, too, was another of Geoffrey's fabrications. However, Nennius described how the first settlers of Albion were led by Brutus, the great Grandson of Æneas, one of the survivors who fled Troy. Geoffrey took up the story to establish a bloodline for England that could compete with those of other European nations: medieval regions were named after the Trojan survivors, but Brutus is the only character credited with having named an entire nation after himself. Landing in Totnes, Devon, he gave his own name to the land, *BrUtain*. However, before they could settle, Brutus and the descendants of the Trojans needed to rid the land of the indigenous population, a race of brutish and uncivilised giants.

Geoffrey's description of the journey from the siege of Troy corresponds very closely with that of Nennius, although, admittedly, Geoffrey adds more details. However,

Nennius does not include any details of what happens once the Trojans arrive in Albion; specifically, he does not include the giants. In exactly the same way that writers such as Horace Walpole looked back at the Medieval period as something that was distant and unrefined, Geoffrey was doing the same, looking back to a time before society was structured in a way that he recognised, looking at the barbarity that needed to be purified by the nation's noble founders, even if they were originally pagan.

In Geoffrey's account, the giants are given no voice. The Trojans land and begin a programme of displacing the indigenous community, forcing the giants into Cornwall. However, the giants regroup and attack the Trojans while they are celebrating a day dedicated to the gods. Twenty giants are led by a 'particularly repulsive' twelve-foot tall giant named Gogmagog; together they kill a number of Trojans. **[PPT6]**Geoffrey describes how Corineus 'experienced great pleasure' from wrestling with the giants, so, they spare Gogmagog as Brutus 'wanted to see a wrestling match between the giant and Corineus' which culminates with Corineus heaving Gogmagog onto his shoulders, running with him to the 'nearby coast' and hurling him into the sea where 'the giant fell onto a sharp reef of rocks, where he was dashed into a thousand fragments'. There is a record of the chalk cut giant being on Plymouth Hoe in 1486 and a record in the City Archive shows a receipt for a bill for cleaning and weeding the giant – the figures were destroyed when the citadel was built in the 1660s. Geoffrey writes of the battle:

Corineus, overjoyed at this, prepared himself, and throwing aside his arms, challenged him to wrestle with him. At the beginning of the encounter, Corineus and the giant, standing, front to front, held each other strongly in their arms, and panted aloud for breath, but Gogmagog presently grasping Corineus with all his might, broke three of his ribs, two on his right side and one on his left. At which Corineus, highly enraged, roused up his whole strength, and snatching him upon his shoulders, ran with him, as fast as the weight would allow him, to the next shire, and there getting upon the top of a high rock, hurled down the savage monster into the sea; where falling on the sides of craggy rocks, he was torn to pieces, and coloured the waves with his blood. The place where he fell, taking its name from the giant's fall, is called Salt Gogmagog, that is, Gogmagog's Leap, to this day.

Here, the imagery parallels the Book of Revelation where Satan is hurled into a lake of burning sulphur. Only once the old order has been destroyed can the new civilisation flourish, being either the New Troy or the New Jerusalem.

This is how Geoffrey presents the story. On the surface it perpetuates the stereotype that giants are stupid and clumsy, and that once the Trojans' descendants arrived, they were able to embark on a programme of authorised ethnic cleansing and establishing their own status quo upon the land. However, there are several subtexts regarding the giants: Geoffrey refers to several authorities, to further enhance the reputation of the giants; no longer were they represented as simply annoying, clumsy and stupid; instead, in this version of the story, the fact that the giants interrupt the Trojans' worship, *and* the authority of the Biblical references establish the giants as impious rather than simply annoying...

The name of Gog and Magog appears in the Bible: in the first of these references, Magog is the name of the second son of Japheth, son of Noah (Genesis 10), while the names Gog *and* Magog appear together in the Book of Ezekiel (38), where Gog comes from a geographic region named Magog; here Gog represents a symbol of evil and the powers hostile to God. Likewise, in the Book of Revelation, Satan Rallies Gog and Magog for a final battle with Christ (Revelation 20:7-10). As Gog and Magog are associated with the end times of Revelation, so they appear in the *Greek Romance of Alexander* where, according to legend, Alexander the Great discovered the armies of Gog and Magog in the Caucasus mountains, and forged gates to keep the uncivilised races of the north away from the civilised races of the south. These Gates will open at the end of time and Gog and Magog will fulfil the prophecy to destroy the world. As far as Geoffrey was concerned, his inclusion of the giants is of Apocalyptic importance. Indeed, the giants are often associated with *time*. They are represented as quarterjacks on the Hindley clock in York Minster, and also on the clock in the Royal Arcade in Melbourne. The name Gogmagog, as Geoffrey uses it, is most likely an amalgam of two Biblical names, which, when compounded, suggests an even more terrible adversary than the intertextual encumbrance that comes with just one name: Corineus fights an adversary on a Biblical scale.

The question then arises as to where the giants came from in the first place and how Britain was originally called *Albion*. A further legend was developed, composed in Anglo-Norman around 1300, which explained events from *before* the arrival of the descendants of Troy. This version of the legend tells of how the king of Syria had 30 daughters who are exiled after their collective plan to murder their husbands is exposed by the youngest daughter. Their exile is to be set adrift in a rudderless boat

(a device that features in Celtic and Anglo-Norman hagiography). They arrive at a fertile land, and the eldest daughter, Albina names the land “Albion” after herself:

Albine est mon proper noun, Donc serra appellé Albioun (ll.347–8)

[Albina is my Christian name, Therefore [this island] will be called Albion]

However, having established herself as the overlord, and satisfying their hunger catching animals and birds, the women become sexually frustrated and are visited by devils called *incubi* – male sexual demons, believed to impregnate women while they slept

Ceo aperceurent li malfee / Qe sunt apellez Incubi (ll.406–7)

[Then those evil demons appeared Who are called Incubi]

The women give birth to giants who engage in both maternal and sororal incest. Nothing is said of what happens to the women, although clearly they represented the descent into the chaos of the Pagan other which ultimately needed to be suppressed. Instead, the narrative progresses to the violence of the giants’ society. This description of mothers being impregnated by their children – still a cultural taboo – was not just to underscore the immorality of the indigenous population that needed to be cleansed. The union between humans and demons that produces giants as their offspring has resonances from the apocryphal Old Testament legend of the Nephilim, or Watcher Angels. The Apocryphal legends incorporated the less wholesome ideas of mythology that bubbled beneath the surface of Biblical texts.

There are a couple of vague references to the Nephilim in the Old Testament. The Book of Genesis includes a short passage:

The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:4)

They are also mentioned in the apocryphal First Book of Enoch. Chapters 6-11 describe how angels – called Watcher Angels – coveted the women of the earth and came down to impregnate them. Their offspring were giants, the Grigori. Between them, the Nephilim and the Grigori taught mankind forbidden sciences – metallurgy, astrology and witchcraft – and practised sexual perversions. Because of this secret knowledge, God sent the Great Deluge to erase all traces of the Nephilim and their

teachings. [The legend is also mentioned in *Beowulf*: the sword used to decapitate Grendel is the work of the giants, referred to as 'giganta geweorc' (l. 1562).]

The first inhabitants of Albion accumulate a list comprising a multitude of transgressions that pervert the natural order, including the murder (or planned murder) of their husbands, mating with demonic entities and then acts of incest. This continues for eight centuries, although there are no *human* inhabitants left by this time and nothing is said of the death of Albina and her sisters. In the light of the parallels with the myth of the Watcher Angels, Brutus's violent conquest of Albion and the slaughter of its inhabitants become more palatable. The 'ethnic cleansing' serves the same purpose as the Great Deluge: to wipe those who commit obscene acts from the Earth.

However, by the time the mythology had developed to be adapted in the Anglo-Norman version, Corineus spares Gogmagog after the wrestling match so that the latter can recount the story of his origins: despite his demonic origins, Gogmagog is not an uncivilised brute, but one who has the ability to communicate. He tells 'la merveille del estoire' [*The marvel of the story*] (l. 546) so that future generations will remember it. This means that Corineus can lead the giant into London (ll. 521ff; in another version of the story, Corineus wades into the sea and smites the giant's head). Henry of Huntingdon, a thirteenth century chronicler, says that it is the knowledge of history that 'distinguishes rational creatures from brutes, for brutes, whether men or beasts do not know ... about their origins, their races, and the events and happenings in their native land' (4). However, speech carries presence and therefore Gogmagog becomes a rationalised adversary, rather than a marginalised brute.

Later eighteenth-century legends describe how, having been spared by Corineus, Gogmagog is led to the city founded by Brutus called *Troy-Nouvant* or 'New Troy', now called London. Thomas Boreman describes in his 1741 *Gigantick History of the Two Famous Giants* how

two brave giants ... richly valued their honour, and exerted their strength and force in defence of their liberty and country; so the city of London, by placing these their representatives in their Guildhall, emblematically declare, that they will, like mighty giants, defend the honour of their country, and liberties of this their city.

A principal influence on the later legend was the inclusion of two giants in fifteenth century London pageants: the earliest record of this was male and female giants to greet Henry V on his return from the Battle of Agincourt in 1415: later they were representations of Samson and Hercules. In a procession to celebrate the marriage of Queen Mary and Phillip of Spain, the figures are named *Corineus Britannus* and *Gogmagog Albionus*. Although they have had a chequered history, statues of the giants now stand in the Guildhall in London. These statues have replaced those that were destroyed in the Great Fire, and also those that fell victim to poor storage conditions. Originally, like those giants that appear in the pageants, these characters were called Gogmagog and Corineus. Gogmagog's body decorated as if with woad, a blue dye associated with the Picts; his weapon, a morning star, and his long hair, are both associated with the ancient Britons. Corineus is younger and more muscular than his counterpart. He wears Roman armour, carrying a halberd, and a shield adorned with a spread-eagle, which suggests, to some, the character's Teutonic origin. However, by the eighteenth century, the former effigy is called Gog, and his companion is called Magog, and rather than being considered as the brutish indigenous population, they are now considered as Guardians of the city.

They appear in a story by Charles Dickens called 'Master Humphrey's Clock' where the statues animate after midnight and, although they are initially perceived as terrifying, they are content to settle with a cask of wine and recount stories to each other until dawn.

'Our compact," said Magog after a pause, 'is, if I understand it, that, instead of watching here in silence through the dreary nights, we entertain each other with stories of our past experience; with tales of the past, the present, and the future; with legends of London and her sturdy citizens from the old simple times. That every night at Midnight, when St. Paul's bell tolls out one, and we may move and speak, we thus discourse, nor leave such themes till the first gray gleam of day shall strike us dumb. Is that our bargain, brother?'

'Yes,' said the Giant Gog, 'that is the league between us who guard this ancient city, by day in spirit, and by night in body also; and never on ancient holidays have its conduits run wine more merrily that we will pour forth our legendary lore. We are old chroniclers from this time hence.'

Horace Walpole and Geoffrey of Monmouth sought to write about a time that they considered as existing outside the civilised order of their own society, something that was medieval and barbaric, something that was filled with superstition and fear, and so in Dickens's story, Magog refers to the 'the old simple times'. The eighteenth century effigies were destroyed in the Blitz, but were quickly replaced: the giants were inaugurated, along with a new clock, on 8 June 1953. Despite their monstrous countenance, they have evolved from the brutish 'other'. They have become familiar and acceptable and they have infiltrated the heart of London: they are in positions of power; as they say in 'Master Humphrey's clock', they 'guard this ancient city'.

So, in conclusion, by giving Gogmagog a voice in the Anglo-Norman poem *Dez grants geantes*, the poet used a device to explain the back story of how they came to be in Albion in the first place, about their mothers and demonic fathers, as well as the catalogue of transgressions which meant that the Trojans were justified in their purification of the land and almost total genocide of the indigenous population. However, by giving Gogmagog a voice, he was elevated from the traditional representation of giants as uncivilised brutes and was instead able to articulate his story. Thus the Anglo-Norman poem was able to generate sympathy for the villain: he was a victim of circumstance. It is similar to the medieval apologists who attempt to illicit some sympathy for Judas Iscariot. We see similar attempts to illicit sympathy in characters that are initially presented as terrifying in gothic novels. Frankenstein is the innocent that is trapped in a monstrous body, unaware of the damage he can do. Novels such as *Frankenstein* and *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* and more recent films such as *The Fly* show what happens when man experiments with science and pushes the boundaries too far. More recently there has been a trend of seeing things from the "monsters'" point of view: Anne Rice's *Interview With a Vampire* explains the loneliness of Louis, and, finding a vampire coven, describes a highly sophisticated civilisation. However, no matter how demonic the giants were originally depicted, attitudes towards them changed and as the legend developed, the giant became two giants, who rather than aggressors, became guardians of the city.

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