

Thomas Coryat Prepares:

Reviewing the Significance of travel in the Elizabethan and Jacobean England

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Introduction:

This paper addresses the issues that a traveller faced when planning to travel in the late 15th and early 16th century. The English traveller Thomas Coryat was one such traveller who undertook two major journeys, one around continental Europe in 1608 and the other in 1612 to the East Indies. ¹⁾ Private travellers such as Thomas Coryat opted to travel for certain reasons that shall be discussed as the paper progresses.

Significance of travel in Elizabethan and Jacobean England

When King James IV of Scotland ascended the English throne as James I of England, after the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, foreign policy was a crucial issue. Pauline Croft comments that;

James took pride in his role as a European peacemaker, and told his Parliament in 1604 that with the Anglo-Spanish negotiations then in progress, they enjoyed 'Outward Peace... peace' ²⁾

Thus, this peace that James I created gave an impetus to travelling across Continental Europe.

Thomas Coryat in his lifetime of forty years crossed the boundary of his country on two occasions. In 1608, Coryat took a tour around continental Europe that lasted five months and covered a distance of 1975 miles. The second travel he made abroad in 1612, this time with a big project in mind. For a middle class, Oxford dropout to undertake these two travels needed a considerable amount of determination and motivation to accomplish daunting missions like these.

Where did the motivation lie and what were the incentives for Coryat on his return to England need to be understood before we plunge into the other aspects revolving around the age and times in which he lived.

Among the diverse reasons that may have induced Coryat to embark on a journey, a decisive agent must have been his education at Oxford. According to Anthony à Wood, the compiler of the *Athenae Oxonienses*, Coryat became a commoner at Gloucester Hall from 1596 for a period of three years. While he studied here he acquired a sound humanistic education. Coryat however left without attaining a degree. After his early withdrawal from Oxford he spent a few years in Ocombe and then moved to London and was enrolled into the household of Prince Henry³⁾ for a brief time. It was during this time that Coryat acquainted himself with the other wits in attendance.

It is rather well known that Prince Henry was a curious young man with an insatiable appetite for new knowledge. As mentioned by Charles Carlton, King James I is personally said to have ordered, that the court of Prince Henry should resemble a college and not a court.⁴⁾ It was precisely at this time that Coryate may have resolved to travel. For Coryat to survive among the wits he needed something to offer to the young prince. Travelling as a means to survive and create a position among the other courtiers seemed the best bet.

Prince Henry who was extremely fond of Sir Walter Raleigh is said to have regularly visited the latter in the Tower of London to listen to new stories and discoveries which Raleigh fed him with. The Prince also interceded with King James I, his father to release Walter Raleigh from the tower but to no avail. This enthusiastic nature of Prince Henry paved the path for a common man like Coryat to participate and be a source of recreation.

Coryat among the witty circle at the Court of Prince Henry

The question regarding Coryat's entry into the court of Prince Henry is not clear. However there are certain speculations that can help one assume certain reasons that may have assisted Coryat to secure a place for himself at the Court of Prince Henry. Panegyrist Richard Martin⁵⁾ of Inner Temple wrote a letter of recommendation to Sir Henry Wotton⁶⁾ for Coryat on his journey to Venice which has been published in *Coryat's Crudities*. In this particular letter Richard Martin requests Sir Henry Wotton "to take notice" of Coryat and,

To binde up all, take into your honourable consideration, that looke what curtesie you doe to him, your Lordship shall do to a Gentleman in whose veins runs the blood of the Essexian family, to whose chief he is cosen german, but somewhat removed, to what distance I cannot

shew your Lordship. ⁷⁾

As seen above Coryat was related to the Earl of Essex. Besides his relationship to the Earl of Essex, Coryat also claimed to have been related to the Sydenhams of Brympton, the Earl of Clanricard and Frances Walsingham. All these so called distant relatives were all positioned well enough in Elizabethan and Jacobean society to avail an entry for Coryat in the courtly circle of Prince Henry.

Strachan too mentions that Coryat was well acquainted with other prominent families living around Odcombe. Some like the Philipseys of Montacute, the Pouletts of Hinton St. George and the Speaks of Ilminster. ⁸⁾ They were also members of the Odcombe Church whose rector was none other than Coryat's father, George Coryat. One can then speculate that these aristocratic families who held various powerful positions would favour Coryat by recommending him to the household of Prince Henry. Strachan reveals that Coryat on two occasions mentions Sir Edward Phelips and Sir Robert Phelips as his patrons. This is one of the prime reasons that induce Strachan to believe that it was the influence of these two persons that may have secured Coryat a position into Prince Henry's family.

Once recommended, Coryat needed to maintain his position within the intellectuals at court. Thomas Fuller in his *Worthies of England* reports that Prince Henry paid Coryat a pension and kept him as a servant. This too cannot be confirmed as Thomas Fuller belonged to a later generation at the household, besides Strachan confirms that no pay rolls mention Coryat receiving any kind of allowance. Several mentions have however been regarding his position as an unofficial court jester. Fuller however claims that,

Sweetmeats and Coryat made up the last course of all court entertainments. Indeed he was the courties' anvil to try their wits upon; and sometimes this anvil returned that hammers as hard knocks as it received, his bluntness repaying their abusiveness.

Thus, Coryat was able to use his humanistic education to keep all entertained. However for him to continue keeping the Prince and other members of the court interested and entertained he needed newer and substantial fodder. With this in mind he probably decided to travel to uncover and discover what he had studied. As an initial step he toured continental Europe extending over a period of over five months and covering a distance of approximately 1975 miles, almost half of which he is said to have traversed on foot.

Travelling abroad

Travelling around Europe was also made in preparation for his next trip on which he was planning to travel further east. Coryat often mentions in *the Crudities* the intense desire and intention to go on a next journey that will take him almost as far as the East Indies. As Anthony á Wood often describes, an Oxonian travelled beyond seas and returned a complete person. In a similar manner Coryat who had dropped out of school, wanted to complete his education, by actually experiencing visually and personally his learned knowledge as a student at Oxford. Besides, he probably also wanted to gain sound knowledge of his near surroundings before he ventured further into the east.

At the time Coryat was planning his travels there was ample opportunity for him to travel westward as there was much more money and opportunities for persons who wanted to discover the so-called new land. However Coryat chose the hard way, places where he had to travel with a limited budget and walk areas that were fraught with danger of life. Of the many reasons that could have prompted Coryat from rejecting the west, his education at Oxford is of prime importance.

While at Oxford, Coryat may have surely set his hands on the ancient texts of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Justin, Quintus Curtius and other similar texts that may have aroused his interest and curiosity in the antiquity. Thus in the case of Coryat contact with the ancient texts could have probably played a major role in the manner he travelled, his itinerary and the style of recording his experiences. Clare Howard mentions that during the reign of Queen Elizabeth travel was popular and that all classes hoped to cross boundaries.⁹⁾

Persons on the move included merchants, pilgrims, soldiers, missionaries, geographers, and others who out of their curiosity were willing to risk their lives in order to undertake the peregrination. Movement caused repercussions in the form of cultural exchange which further gave rise to common stereotypes of foreignness. Tropes such as we versus they, us versus them, civilized versus uncivilized, East versus West came into common usage.

Influence of other travellers

The ancient people travelled for various reasons like education, religion, health, and pleasure. A look into the travels of Herodotus who undertook such journeys shall help us not only understand why people of the time moved, but will also shed light on the time period in which such movement became rather normal. However, fifteenth and sixteenth century travel differed greatly from the notion of travel of the ancient times when people like Herodotus, Strabo, and

Pausanias travelled.

Herodotus, who is also referred to as 'The Father of History' was born in Halicarnassus (ancient Greek city site at Bodrum in Turkey). He is said to have travelled the ancient Greek empire accounting the Greco-Persian wars of the fifth and sixth B.C, geography, natural history, anthropology, commerce, technology, architecture and religion which he eventually compiled into a masterpiece called *The History*.

Herodotus travelled far and wide in an age when travel was a tedious undertaking. He travelled around Macedonia, Delphi, North Africa, Egypt, Sicily, Southern Italy, Syria, the Persian Empire, the Black Sea, and places around what is present day Turkey, Palestine and Babylon. Most of these areas Coryat visited on his second journey out of England.

It is said that, Herodotus was very accurate in his compilation of information which he collected while he moved from one place to another. Besides minutely detailing the Greco-Persian wars, he writes on topics related daily life of the people that fascinated him, the causes of things both hidden and known. As far as the compilation of history by Herodotus is concerned, J.A.S Evans rightly claims that, the historical tradition of the west started with him. Hence it would not be an exaggeration to state that, the Histories written by Herodotus is the first ever history book written. This style of compilation greatly influenced Coryat who chose to explain every minute detail of the things he had observed leading his work to run into two volumes.

At times Herodotus is attested not as the father of history but the father of lies. When he travelled the open road and was bearing witness to marvels and wonders and enquiring from the locals the new things he was encountering and the reason why they were so, he was also getting to know newer information about more distant lands and the civilizations and culture that existed there. Herodotus keenly noted every single detail of not only the people, place, culture and mannerisms of the place he was visiting but also information regarding unknown lands that lay beyond. As a result his compilation runs into pages with detailed notes, drawings and other relevant knowledge which he thinks needs to be preserved for future generations. Travelling widely he observed numerous things that caught his eye and recorded almost everything he saw and at times interviewed the local people as a result of which he managed to amass a great deal of information that was at times fantastic and factual and at other times mythical.

Herodotus begins his book by telling the readers the reasons he has undertaken this particular journey and why he is interested in recording the events that were responsible for the present day circumstances. In the same manner Coryat in the *Crudities* begins by dedicating an epistle to Prince Henry and the readers where he states the reasons for his travel. Thus, one can see that the works of Herodotus did influence travellers of a much later age.

Coryat does mention Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Justin and Quintus Curtius in the epistle

to the reader in *the Crudities*. This he does in retaliation to the claims of certain members who hoped to tax him for including certain information in his book that he heard from another and did not experience himself. Here he clarifies,

...that I am not the first that hath grounded much of his matter upon the speeches of other men; For I have observed that Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus Justin, Quintus Curtius, and diverse other ancient historians, as well amongst the Greeks as Latines, have done the like, as they may easily observe that peruse their works. But I am sure I doe very seldom depend upon the report of others, and when I trust to the tradition of them, they are men of such learning from whom I derive those matters, that I thinke a man neede not doubt to allege them for authentike authours.

Herodotus influenced Coryat indirectly through his education; however a more direct force was that of the Elizabethan travellers who returned to England after their long journeys to write their experiences. Clare Howard mentions certain travellers like, Edward Dyer who was commissioned by Queen Elizabeth to the Low Countries around 1584 and to Denmark in 1589, Gilbert Talbot, the Earl of Hertford, Sir Christopher Hatton and Sir Philip Sydney who had returned to England. Howard further states that printers were eager to print their experiences for younger men who could refer to them.

Coryat besides reading the accounts of the English travellers may also have set his hands on certain translated works of travellers of other countries. Without a doubt he must have laid his hands on the English version of Linschoten. Linschoten who mainly wrote about trade also kept diaries with cultural and religious details about the people when he was in Goa. Another influential work must have been that of Marco Polo as Coryat wanted to visit China which he mentions in his speech to Mughal King Jehangir.

Clare Howard asserts that during the Elizabethan era translations of German travel accounts were very popular. Germans according to her just like the English were energetic travellers and diligently followed the renaissance ideal that travel was not just a crucial part of education but that it was also a duty towards the homeland. Here another traveller worth noting is Thomas Palmer who dedicated his travels just like Coryat to Prince Henry. Palmer clearly suggests that travelling upraises not only oneself but also the country.¹⁰⁾ Thus, in times when there were mixed responses towards travel, Coryat opted for it to make a mark in the witty circle to which he belonged.

Jyotsna Singh reveals in the introduction to *Travel Knowledge*, that most travel accounts written for the readers back home had a common motive of providing knowledge that was often

grounded on pleasure.¹¹⁾ This combination of knowledge and pleasure was unique to this age and numerous people without leaving their country could enjoy armchair travelling.

Conclusion

Coryat chose to base himself at the court of Prince Henry with his travels as a medium to support him. However both Prince Henry and Coryat never lived to see the day when the latter would officially participate among the witty circles at the household. The tragic death of Prince Henry from typhoid and the unfortunate death of Coryat from dysentery left us with historical and literary losses that we can never fathom. Had Prince Henry lived England would have etched a different history, and had Coryat survived his East Indian voyage we would have a literary saga of no match for the witty as well as the commoner.

Notes

- 1) For a fairly detailed account of his combined travels see, Michael Strachan, *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- 2) For details see, Pauline Croft. *King James* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003) 82
- 3) Prince Henry here refers to Henry Frederick Stuart, Prince of Wales (19 February 1594 - 6 November 1612) the elder son of James I of England and Queen Anne of Denmark.
- 4) Charles Carlton. *Charles I The Personal Monarch* (London: Routledge, 1995).
- 5) Here, Richard Martin refers to the Recorder of London. Educated at Oxford University, Martin pursued a career in Law at the Middle Temple, see Michelle O' Callaghan, *The English Wits* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 6) Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639) was diplomat to Venice during the reign of James I of England, see ed. Sidney Lee Vol. LXIII *Dictionary of National Biography* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1900) 51-57
- 7) For the full letter, see Thomas Coryat, *Coryat's Crudities* vol. 1 (Glasgow: James MacLehose and Sons, 1905) 377-379
- 8) For a detailed account of Thomas Coryat and his acquaintances, see Michael Strachan, *The Life and Adventures of Thomas Coryate* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962)5
- 9) For an account of the reasons of travel during the Elizabethan era see, Clare Howard, *English Travellers of the Renaissance* (Edinburgh: Turnbull and Spears, 1914).
- 10) See Thomas Palmer, *An Essay of the Meanes how to make our Travailes, into forraine Countries, the more profitable and honourable* (New York: De Capo Press, 1972).
- 11) For this account refer to Ivo Kamps, Jyotsna Singh, eds. *Travel Knowledge European 'Discoveries' in the Early Modern Period* (New York: Pargrave, 2001).

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