

"Who Will Break the Deer?": Lord and Huntsman in Medieval English Hunting Ritual

Hunting in medieval England was a jealously guarded expression of aristocratic¹ superiority and it was protected not only with legal penalties, which could include blinding and castration, but also with intricate terminology, rules, and rituals that reinforced its elite status and excluded the uninitiated. This ritual context of the hunt has long been recognized but little discussed in scholarship, and when it has been, scholars, such as Susan Crane, have quite reasonably asked what function the rituals fulfill when done properly. The answer they have given is, briefly, that the hunt portrays the lord in a position of dominance – over animals, over nature, and over other men. But what if we instead approach the topic from one side and ask what happens when these rituals are not performed correctly?

The association between the hunt and the nobility was so close that the "hunting lord" was a literary commonplace. Myth invariably wavers before reality, however, and it is a simple fact that not all lords enjoyed hunting or were good at it. Nonetheless, the hunt had diplomatic, political and social purposes (one can compare it to the business context of modern golf), and so, often, a lord had to hunt – and, what's more, had to appear to be good at it. So how, we can ask, was the bumbling or amateur lord accommodated, as the context of the hunt insists he must have been? For the sake of this short paper, let us focus on the ritual division of the animal carcass known variously as the "breaking," the "unlacing," and the "undoing." The breaking is particularly important both for its heavy emphasis in all accounts of hunting and for its symbolic division of food and reward. One manual states that the skin goes to the man who kills the deer or hunts him down with hounds, the "chyne" to the man who breaks him, the right shoulder to

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the parson, a quarter to poor men, and the left shoulder to the forester. The division of the deer is a microcosm of the lord's maintenance of society. The conclusion we reach from examining this rite through both imaginative and technical literature is that while imaginative literature is incredibly insistent that the lord break the deer, the hunting manuals often place the lord in the position of instructor and state that the huntsman be the one who breaks the animal. Such a situation allowed for a tacit silence about a lord's possible ineptitude, a social gloss that permitted an ideological necessity.

To begin, we have to note that hunting was a primary characteristic of the nobleman through the High and Late Middle Ages, a popularity portrayed in Marie de France and John of Salisbury and on up through Malory and Erasmus (that is, the twelfth century through the sixteenth). Scads of historical evidence support this general claim and that evidence is reinforced and strengthened in imaginative literature. Hunting was one of *the* noble pastimes in literature, on par with love and combat. As Gaston Fébus says, "Tout mon temps me suis délité par espécial en trois choses, l'une est en armes, l'autre est en amours, et l'autre si est en chasce" (I have always especially delighted in three things: one is arms, the other is love, and the last is the hunt). Edward of Norwich is a perfect example of the ideal hunting lord. Second Duke of York, grandson of Edward III, and cousin to Henry IV, he was appointed Henry's Master of Game, the head huntsman in England. He wrote a hunting manual titled after his position and dedicated it to the future Henry V. The duke followed in a long tradition of aristocratic lords passionate about the chase, a tradition that sprang up in England from the passions, and the laws, of William the Conqueror and his descendants.

Edward and lords like him are the closest we can come in real life to the image of the hunting lord portrayed in literature, which idealized the hunting lord to an extent that would have

been quite uncommon. In doing so, however, it emphasized this figure's important characteristics. Tristan, of the Tristan and Isolt legends, is the paramount hunter in medieval literature and an analysis of him provides all the necessary details. Thomas Malory, in his *Morte d'Arthur*, emphasized that Tristan, "Began good mesures of blowynge of beestes of venery and beestes of chaace and all maner of vermaynes, and all the tearmys we have yet of hawkyng and huntynge," positioning Tristan as the originator of the most conspicuously elite aspects of the hunt, the intricate horn calls and the complex and difficult terminology, the "language of the hunt." Malory idealizes Tristan as the model from which all others ought to take their example. He is not novel in this portrayal. From Marie de France's *Chevrefoil* (Honeysuckle), to Gottfried von Strassburg's classic *Tristan*, to the 13th-century romance of *Sir Tristrem*, we find this association of Tristan and hunting reiterated and reinforced.

The legend has several notable characteristics, but I only want to focus on two here: first, Tristan represents the idealized young aristocrat, superlative in almost every conceivable fashion – outstanding even in his failure to follow his oath to his liege lord when he falls in love with Isolde, King Mark's wife (this is, of course, one of the classic love triangles of medieval courtly love, comparable to Lancelot, Guinevere, and Arthur. In helplessly loving Isolde, Tristan personifies the courtly lover.) As that ideal young aristocrat, he is also the idealized representation of a national aristocracy. Gottfried's *Tristan*, for instance, explicitly opposes two countries, as well as two people, when Tristan corrects the Cornish huntsmen's manner of cutting up the deer. Gottfried describes Tristan's homeland as *Parmenie*, "a domain in or near Brittany":

Now when the hart had been killed, the one who was Huntsman-in-Chief laid it out on the grass on all fours like a boar.

‘How now, master, what is that meant to be?’ interposed Tristan, bred as he was to courtly ways. ‘Stop, in God’s name! What are you at? Whoever saw a hart broken up in this fashion?’

The huntsman fell back a pace or two. He looked at him and said: ‘What do you want me to do with it, boy? When we flay a hart we know of no better way in these parts than to split it clean down from the head and then into four, so that none of the quarters is much bigger than another. That is the custom of this country. Are you versed in the art, boy?’

‘Yes, master,” he replied. ‘The usage is different in the land where I was reared.’

This exchange between Tristan and the huntsman here opposes not just individual practices, but national ones. Tristan’s education of the hunters, which follows this exchange, proves both his aristocratic superiority over common huntsmen and his Brittanian superiority over the Cornish. Since Tristan is the embodiment of a national aristocracy as well as the ideal hunter, we can see his consummate hunting ability as a primary facet of the aristocrat and a matter of national as well as individual concern. The example points out the important ideological place of hunting as an instance and ritual of aristocratic and national superiority.

The second characteristic of the Tristan legends that I wish to emphasize, which is also shown in this episode from *Tristan*, is that Tristan *gets his hands dirty*. He personally shows the Cornish his superior fashion of breaking the deer and, in doing so, takes personal responsibility for performing his own aristocratic identity to his audience, in this case also performing his national identity to foreigners. This episode where Tristan shows the Cornish how to cut up a hart is repeated in *Sir Tristrem* and we find a parallel moment in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, with Sir Bertilak and the boar he hunts down, when the two face off in a *mano-a-mano* contest between lord and prey that emphasizes Bertilak’s daring and might. For them, the hunt is

a personal experience, a one-on-one domination of nature and an individual assertion of their physical vigor and human and aristocratic supremacy.

For the sake of argument and brevity, let us take these two examples as representative of medieval English hunting literature as whole. In this literature, then, the hunting lord personally breaks or kills the prey, personally bloodies his hands and displays his superior knowledge and skill to his dependents, and personally upholds his dominion over animals, nature, and the lower classes. When we turn to hunting manuals, which give us our best idea of how the hunt was actually performed, however, we find this image of the personally active lord almost entirely absent. In the earliest manual we have, *La Chace du Cerf*, a French work from the mid-13th century, the lord instructs his huntsman in how to break up the deer. In Gaston Fébus's *Livre de Chasse*, a work from the late 14th century that was the most used hunting manual in Europe for centuries, Gaston refers to the "veneur," or huntsman, who breaks the deer and preserves the tasty bits on the fourchiee (a forked stick) for the "seigneur," or lord. Edward of Norwich in *Master of Game* provides a brilliantly clear statement of who breaks the deer:

If þe lorde woll haue þat dere vndone, he þat he byddeth, as byforn is seide, should vndone hym þe moste wodmanly and clenly þat he can. And ne wondreth ȝou noght þat I say wodmanly, for it is a point þat longeth to a wodman[es] craft; and þough it be wele fittyng to ane hunter for to kunne done it (to know how to do it), neuerþelatter it longeth more to wodmancraft þan to hunters.

Particularly interesting in Edward's account is that he tells his audience not to be amazed that he says that a woodsman should cut up the deer, rather than a "hunter" (unlike the French use of "veneur" for a professional huntsman, Edward reserves the term "hunter" for the aristocrat, using "woodsman" for the professionals). Edward thus presumes his audience expects him to say the

lord should do it and is curbing that expectation. This presumption likely comes from the audience's familiarity with the image of the personally engaged hunting lord portrayed in imaginative literature, but it is also likely that Edward is resolving the tension between imaginative literature and reality by asserting that the task of the breaking is naturally the huntsman's rather than naturally the lord's and only taken over by the huntsman at his command or instruction, as we see in the other manuals.

These manuals reiterate Edward's delegation of the task to the huntsman, though without his specific emphasis on the huntsman as the *proper* person to break the deer, and they treat the situation less directly in general. The late 14th-century *Tretyse off Huntyng* says that whoever breaks the deer shall have the meat from its neck, for instance. Since the entire deer belonged to the lord, the fact that this part is specifically allotted to the breaker implies that the lord was not doing the deed. Similarly, the *Book of St. Alban's*, a late 15th-century English manual mostly comprised of lists of terminology, states that one should, "At th' assay cut hym that lordys may see." The assay was the test to see how much "grease," or fat, was on the deer, and the line implies that the lords were watching the huntsmen work. *La Chace du Cerf* has a "seigneur" (a lord) instruct a huntsman in how to conduct the hunt and break the deer. Drawing broad strokes, then, what we find is a technical literature – which we presume shows us relatively realistically how hunts were conducted – that belies the myth of the hunting lord who is personally responsible for breaking the deer, and which perhaps attempts to rewrite the responsibility in order to resolve the disjunction between imaginative and technical literature in *Master of Game*.

So, then, what do we make of this disjunction? Susan Crane in arguing that the hunt is a mimesis of the aristocrat's "myth of itself" quoted a study on hunting rituals by Johnathan Z. Smith that "concludes ritual mimesis is not meant to compel events; instead it is 'a means of

performing the way things ought to be in conscious tensions to the way things are.’’ Intriguingly, Smith’s conclusion applies more to literature than it does to fact in this case. It is the imaginative hunting literature that performs “the way things ought to be,” which is “in conscious tension to the way things are.” The actual rite described in the manuals conflicts with the ideal ritual portrayed in literature. The actual situation is exceptionally problematic, then, because it would seem that the breaking’s every instance would belie the aristocracy’s “myth of itself.”

The hunting manuals, however, create a polite but powerful fiction that attempts to resolve this difficulty. In *La Chace du Cerf*, in Willim Twiti’s *Art of Hunting*, and in Gaston Fébus’s *Livre de Chasse*, we find the huntsman portrayed as the pupil of the lord, who instructs him in how to cut up the deer. This situation could actually be the case, of course, but it is far more likely that professional huntsmen instructed their own apprentices, who eventually replaced them. The French royal huntsmen had an elaborate series of ranks, for instance, and a hunter rose through them as those above him retired or died. This fiction of the instructive lord, however, would have been an easy one to maintain. The huntsmen could cut up the deer under the lord’s “supervision” or with his previous “instruction.” Such a fiction would have required the tacit agreement and silence of all parties, but it does accomodate any lord no matter his (or her) experience in the hunt by making the huntsmen into his supervised proxies. Recognizing the difficulty still inherent in this resolution, however, *Master of Game* seems to have tried to resolve the difficulty by specifically validating the huntsman as the proper breaker, rather than just a proxy for the lord. The effect of that redefinition, if it is the case, is difficult to judge. It seems to me, at the moment, to have been a single effort, and it would have fought against a powerful image of the personally responsible lord.

So, then, we have returned to our original questions of “What if the ritual goes wrong?” and “How is the bumbling lord accommodated?” The polite fiction and tacit silence found in the manuals create a situation in which it is practically impossible for the ritual to go wrong or the lord to mess up. Indeed, *Master of Game* attempts to take the ritual away from the lord entirely, presumably to preserve it, though with doubtful success. Inversely, that fact boldly frames just how important the breaking must have been as an expression of the lord’s ability and as a symbol of the lord’s maintenance of society, with its division of the parts of the animal to the best huntsman, the breaker, clergy, the poor, and the forester. It was a rite so important that it was almost never performed by those who were theoretically responsible for it, and the hunting manuals instead created a rhetoric of instruction to whitewash that fact. One of the major things this situation points out is that the superiority of the aristocracy was often more a superiority in theory and name than in reality, a justification for power that arose from the fact of power.

Thank you for listening.