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“THERE CAME A HART IN AT THE CHAMBER DOOR”:
MEDIEVAL DEER AS PETS

Ryan R. Judkins

Though the term “pet” did not exist in the Middle Ages, the concept of the “pet” or “companion animal” has been tantalizing for animal studies across historical periods due to such an animal’s position in human space and its potential for cross-species identification.¹ Indeed, the field of critical animal studies traces its origins to Jacques Derrida’s thoughts on his own pet cat in *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Unsurprisingly, then, given both that critical origin and the pets common today, much of the interest in medieval pets has centered on dogs and cats kept indoors. One of the most recent monographs on medieval pets, for instance, specifically emphasizes the idea that “their true milieu [is] enclosed domestic space,” and it focused particularly on small companion animals kept by “women, clerics, and scholars, all of whom shared an indoor lifestyle” (Walker-Meikle 55, 1).

Historical and literary evidence illustrates, however, that people in medieval England sometimes also kept deer as pets, even indoor pets. Although these domestic deer were probably status pets and may not have occasioned the same sort of emotional attachment as a dog, they encourage modern scholars to think more broadly about medieval pets. These domestic deer, along with their half-tame compatriots kept in deer parks and their literary doppelgangers, illustrate that deer were for many medieval people an important “contact zone” (Haraway, *When Species Meet* 4) with the animal world, one that reveals an intense spatial engagement with cervid bodies and an equally dense empathy with the cervid mind. In contemplating, hunting, and keeping deer, medieval people attempted to see the world through these animals’ eyes and even on occasion imagined harmonious possibilities between the human and non-human. These models contrasted dominant ideologies based on medieval theological and philosophical distinctions between humans and animals, and deer-keeping in particular provided an exception to a broader culture of violence toward animals, one that through the control and consumption of animal bodies maintained what Karl Steel has referred to as the “structural position” of the human (43).

MEDIEVAL DEER AS PETS

Medieval deer are often thought of today in terms of their symbolism, usually in the context of secular romance or religious allegory. Gerald Morgan, for instance, treats them in just such a way in his recently reprinted article on the hunting scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.² Sometimes deer are also described as ciphers in complex deployments of elite hunting terminology, as Ad Putter and David Scott-Macnab have illustrated. Deer are, of course, also frequently regarded as living game animals or as an uncommon form of livestock kept in hunting parks, a subject on which Jean Birrell's contributions are particularly notable.³ On occasion, they have also been the objects of fascinating zooarchaeological investigations, as in Naomi Sykes's work. Medieval deer, however, are also open to critique as pets. We know from a letter circa 1280, for instance, that John of Maidstone paid a visit to Gregory de Rokesle, then mayor of London. With him, he brought some writs from court, which he left on a counter in Gregory's chamber, presumably for his review, before they were dispatched to Boston and elsewhere. This routine matter was disrupted, however, when a hart (the male red deer), which was in the house, entered the chamber and devoured the writs. The mayor was forced to write to John de Kirkby, the keeper of the chancery rolls, to ask for duplicates.⁴

On a similar note, the Court of the King's Bench heard a case in Hillary Term, 1307, regarding a more rural household in which:

Alicia que fuit uxor Williami Davy de Keythorpe attachiata fuit ad respondendum Johnne de Tylton de placito quare quendam cervum domesticum ipsius Johannis de Tylton precii quadraginta solidorum apud Keythorpe nuper viventum cum quibusdam canibus nequiter fugavit et dictum cervum cepit et crura eiusdem fregit per quod cervus ille moriebatur et alia enormia &c ad grave damnum ipsius Johannis et contra pacem &c &c.⁵

[Alice who was the wife of William Davy of Keythorpe was attached to answer John of Tilton concerning a plea whereby a certain domestic stag of that same John of Tilton of the price of forty shillings recently living at Keythorpe with certain dogs she wickedly put to flight and seized the aforesaid stag and broke its

legs on account of which that stag died and other offenses etc. to the serious damage of that John and against the peace, etc. etc.]

In addition to the forty shillings John claims the stag was worth, he requests an extraordinary ten pounds in damages. Alice, as one might expect, denies responsibility. Further details and the resolution of the case are not recorded in the roll.

These two examples provide historical evidence that around the turn of the fourteenth century, people in rural households and urban ones, in rustic sites and elite ones, were keeping deer near and inside the home. They also raise the questions of whether these deer were pets, how people regarded them, and how widespread this practice might have been.

The various definitions of “pet” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* merge to produce a relatively satisfactory modern definition of a pet as an animal raised by hand or in the home, kept for pleasure or companionship, and singled out to be treated specially. Yet, the *OED* also points out that the first use of the noun “pet” in this sense comes from the late sixteenth century (*OED*, s.v. “pet,” n.2), and in her recent book on medieval pets, Kathleen Walker-Meikle notes that there is no medieval term for a “pet,” going on to further define pets as “animals chosen by humans simply to perform the task of being companions,” ones who are allowed into restricted spaces, kept in close proximity to their owners, fed special foods, and frequently treated with greater care than other animals or fellow humans (1). Similar criteria seem to suit most scholars. Keith Thomas, for instance, defined a pet succinctly “as an animal that was kept indoors, was not eaten and was given a name” (cited in Walker-Meikle 1), while James Serpell and Elizabeth Paul used the *OED* definition and emphasized that “in practice, the word is generally applied to animals that are kept primarily for social or emotional reasons rather than for economic purposes” (129).

The core elements of all of these definitions are proximity, emotional attachment, and elect status, with the emphasis falling on emotional attachment. Walker-Meikle, however, rejects emotional attachment as a sole criterion:

Pets are the objects of emotional attachment on the part of their owners, but emotional attachment alone is not a sufficient criterion to determine whether an animal is a pet, for in the

medieval period other animals could be the objects of such attachment. Owners could have close relationships with animals used in outdoor recreational activities, such as birds used in falconry, or with animals that were technically utilitarian, notably horses, and might lavish care and affection on them. For this reason, I have focused on animals kept indoors. (1)

Unfortunately, this argument is arbitrary. It might be better to say that Walker-Meikle focuses on pets kept indoors rather than stating that pets are only kept indoors. Even if one did restrict pethood to indoor animals, which the modern definition does not, then medieval pet culture presents some problems with that definition. For instance, while Walker-Meikle focuses on indoor pets rather than “fine horses, hunting hounds and hawks, all of which required special attention from trained carers and resided in purpose-built accommodation—stables, kennels, and mews” (55), all of these animals were permitted inside the home, either occasionally or frequently, and were the objects of special attachment. Greyhounds were often allowed or kept inside the house, being especially valued for their gentle attitudes and graceful appearances, and hawks were often displayed on perches in hall or bedchamber, or carried around on the wrist as a sign of status (Cummins, *Hound and Hawk* 24-25, 202-03; Pascua 81-82). Indeed, even horses were sometimes allowed into early medieval halls (Pascua 100). For the most apt definition of a pet, then, one must settle on the three elements of close proximity, high emotional value, and elect status. Similarly, instead of stating that “being a pet exempted the animal of any traditional utilitarian function” (Walker-Meikle 108), one might suggest instead that being a pet exempted the animal from any *purely* utilitarian function. A hunting greyhound might still be a pet.

By these three criteria, the Mayor of London's hart was probably a pet. The fact that it had the opportunity to devour royal writs left on a counter means that it was kept, at least on this occasion, inside the house and had an elect status compared to other deer. Emotional attachment is more difficult to discern. As far as John of Tilton's deer is concerned, the Latin term used for it may be a key to its status. The legal case refers to it as a “cervus domesticus,” rather than as “pecus” (livestock) or some more generic term. In classical Latin, “domesticus” means “of or relating to the house,” from “domus” (“house”), while medieval Latin provides “domesticare,” “to live in a house.” Thus, a domestic stag is apparently a

“house stag” or a “household stag,” perhaps even living or allowed inside like the Mayor’s deer.

The damages that John of Tilton requests may provide yet another clue to this stag’s status. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has suggested, quite reasonably, that medieval and modern humans burn with equal ardor for their pets (cited in Crane 178, n.10), and John’s request for damages might suggest as much: He claimed forty shillings in value and an astounding ten pounds in damages. In the mid-fourteenth century, a male sheep cost about 1.5s., a pig a bit less than 3s., a cow or a plow horse about 10s., an ox about 13.5s., and a cart horse about 18s. The annual rent on a cottage was 5s., and on a craftsman’s house 20s (Miller 457; Pascua 90). Of course, John had to claim that the deer was worth 40 shillings to get the case heard before the King’s Bench due to the “40 shilling rule,” but the damages he requests are still extreme. John also may have appealed the case from a local court, since the King’s Bench could act as an appellate body. Though his motivations are unclear, these actions perhaps suggest anger and emotional attachment. Of course, John might also have been angry at the invasion of his property or the loss of the stag’s value if he were raising it as livestock. Venison was an expensive status food, much in demand at feasts and ceremonious occasions and difficult to acquire, all of which inspired a booming black market (Birrell, “Peasant Deer Poachers” 85-86).

Regardless of John’s attachment to this particular deer, though, the concept of the domestic stag seems to have been widespread. The regulations of King’s College, Cambridge, for instance, forbid students to keep pet deer or other animals, including dogs, birds, monkeys, badgers, foxes, wolves, and bears (Walker-Meikle 73). Just as these university students seem to have been, the canons of Notre Dame were enthusiastic animal-keepers; Eudes, legate of Saint-Siège, forbade them in 1245 to keep such animals as monkeys, crows, deer, and bears (Walker-Meikle 69). Literary texts play with the idea of the domestic stag as well. In the late-fourteenth-century Middle-English romance *Generydes*, a king and a rather forward lady are interrupted in her bedchamber immediately after she places herself “all atte [his] comaundement”: “Anone vppon as she these wordis saide, / Ther com an hert in att the chaunber dore / Al embosed; the kyng was sore dismayde” (77-80). Here, a hart interrupts a nascent erotic encounter within the most intimate confines of the home.

Locating a stag outside the home, but still closely associating it with domestic life, one medieval homily relates a story about a tame stag in

England that was accustomed to eat bread and drink beer. One day, the stag becomes drunk and while walking along falls into a pit and breaks his leg. Ever after, he refuses to drink alcohol (British Library, MS Burney 361, f.156, catalogued in Herbert 646). Despite the didactic anthropomorphization of the stag here, the homily still suggests that the tame deer was a familiar sight.

Illustrating that tame deer were proverbial, as well as homiletic, the didactic and chauvinistic father in "How The Wise Man Taught His Son" declares that taming a wife is like taming a deer: "And thou schalt not thi wijf displese, / Neither calle hir bi no vilouns name; /... / But softe and faire a man may tame / Bothe herte and hynde, bucke and do" (97-98, 103-04). Finally, many will, of course, be familiar with Richard II's emblem of the chained white hart, perhaps the quintessential late-medieval image of the tame deer. Patently, the tame deer was a well-worn concept and most likely a familiar sight in late medieval England.

These examples illustrate two of the three criteria for pethood: proximity to humans and elect status compared to similar animals. The third criterion, emotional attachment, is more difficult to prove, but given some of these examples, such as John's demand for hefty damages, it seems quite plausible that some medieval people may have been particularly attached to their pet deer. Even if they were not emotionally attached to the animal itself, however, they may have been to the status it represented for them. It is no coincidence that the deer above are gendered male, with their impressive antlers, larger size, and nobler image. Edward of Norwich, second Duke of York and Henry V's head huntsman, the Master of Game, declared in his hunting manual, which he had adapted from Gaston Febus, the Count of Foix's 1389 *Livre de Chasse*, that the hart was "þe fairest huntyng þat any man may hunte afir" (*Master of Game* 159). Red deer were the most elite of noble prey from the afforestation of perhaps a third of England by William I just after the Conquest until their near destruction by hungry (and perhaps angry) commoners during the English Civil War (Griffin 3). Deer and hunting scenes were common on aristocratic seals and in heraldry, both images of idealized identity, as well as in courtly art more broadly (e.g., Crouch 305). Under the crown of antlers on the head of this king of the forest, English noblemen imagined themselves. The lower classes, for their parts, must have seen deer as a marker of status and privilege more generally.

Thus, both John of Tilton and Gregory de Rokesle might have kept their deer as expressions of their self-images or as statements of their social aspirations. If they were status pets, as is likely, these deer would fit in neatly with a major trend in medieval (as in modern) pet-keeping: “Pets formed a part of their owners' identity and were almost always connected to status. Having a pet often demonstrated their owners' desire to emphasize their elevated position in society and show off their material assets” (Walker-Meikle 109). Taken all together, these examples provide undeniable evidence that deer were sometimes kept as pets and allowed inside the home.

These historical examples establish a richly suggestive contact zone between humans and deer, and they raise the question of what connections people might make with deer that would encourage them to bring them into the home. Moreover, they lead us to ask how keeping deer as pets, as opposed to dogs or cats, may have established particular human-animal relationships arising from “what Donna Haraway (2007) winningly called 'contact zones' between human and non-human life forms and the environments, technologies, prostheses, and practices in which they are embedded as beings both acting and acted upon” (Wolfe, “The Animal Turn” 3). Unfortunately, however, while the preceding examples illustrate that deer were indeed kept as pets in the home, they also reveal very little about that state of affairs beyond general suggestions that keeping deer was associated with status and social display, that a pet-owner might fight over a deer's death in court, that a deer might be seen as an example for human morality, and that deer might pry into one's intimate affairs.

To approach these more intriguing questions, one must range further afield than bureaucratic documents or brief literary references allow. I have two particular examples in mind to investigate the potential relationships between humans and deer. The first comes from a courtly romance, the second from the history and literature of deer parks. These examples suggest that keeping deer as pets encouraged a close engagement with the cervid mind, creating opportunities for humans to reappraise themselves and their attitudes toward deer and animals more broadly.

THE WORLD THROUGH CERVID EYES IN *WILLIAM OF PALERNE*

The first example comes from the romance *William of Palerne*, in which William and his beloved Melior disguise themselves as deer and flee their hunters, eventually ending up in a deer park. In the process, they take on the habits of the deer they seem to be. Assisted by Alphonse, a prince transformed into a wolf, William and Melior first wrap themselves in white bearskins and then in red deerskins as disguises as they flee. The transformations are physically ambiguous. The reader is never entirely sure whether the couple has been magically transformed into these animals or whether the two are simply disguised as them. When William and Melior put on the skins of red deer, for instance:

William hent hastili þe hert, and Meliors þe hinde,
And as smartli as þei coupe, þe skinnes of turned.
Eiþer gamliche gan greþe oþer gailiche þerinne,
þat þe skinnes sat saddeli sowed to hem boþe,
as hit hade ben on þe beste þat hit growed. (2589-93)

The poet playfully manipulates the language of this scene to enhance the ambiguity of the transformation. When the two “eiþer gamliche gan greþe oþer,” the line suggests two meanings, that on the one hand the couple “playfully made each other ready” and on the other that they “dressed each other like game” (*Middle English Dictionary*, “greithen” [v.], 1a. “to make ready,” 1b. “to prepare [food],” 1c. “skin and cut up [game]”). Similarly, the skins fit “saddeli” (*MED*, “sadli” [adv.], 1a. “fully, completely”), another ambiguous term, especially in light of the following line, “sewed to them both / as it had been on the beast that grew it.” Dressed in these deer hides, William and Melior are at once hunters who have dressed themselves in the skins of their flayed prey and humans who have become animals by inhabiting animal bodies.

The scene suggests at first that by hunting animals, one becomes in part animal. As such, it seems to reflect the attitudes of classical and medieval philosophers such as Cicero, Seneca, and John of Salisbury, who castigated hunting and butchery as dehumanizing experiences, arguing that violence toward animals made its perpetrators more bestial themselves (Uhlig 89). The poet of *William of Palerne*, however, rejects

this characterization and offers a counterpoint to this long-standing indictment. William and Melior do not become bestial and inhuman in the sense these philosophers meant, giving in to base appetites, but instead become more gentle and more placid, taking on the positive habits and character of the animals they inhabit. As bears, for instance, the poet has them sleep in caves and dens (1792, 2232, 2723), and as deer, they not only rest in a “reset,” a hidden place where deer might linger (*MED*: “recet”), but they also actually walk up to the castle at Palermo and hide themselves among the other deer in the deer park that surrounds the palace (2801, 2845). Most significantly, once he has donned the deerskin, William takes on the nature of the deer, which was known for its timidity: “In the final stages of a hunt, or in its time of rut, it could kill a man, yet it was thought to be so timid that it bore in its heart a bone (so-called, but really a mass of gristle) which alone prevented it from dying of fear” (Cummins, *Hound* 32). Similarly, the nobility's primary image of the deer must have been its bounding flight away from them, which was also one of the standard depictions of the hart in manuscript images. Perhaps with particular sympathy, the Gawain-poet describes the flight of panic-stricken deer in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and illustrates this typical portrayal: “At þe fyrst quethe of þe quest quaked þe wylde. / Der drof in þe dale, doted for drede ... What! þay brayen and bleden, bi bonkkez þay deȝen” (1150-51, 1163) [At the first sound of the baying of hounds on the scent the wild animals trembled. Deer driven into the valley, crazed with fear ... Oh! They scream and they bleed, and by the banks they die].

This penchant to flight is embodied in William and Melior's behavior as hart and hind, and particularly in the episode in which Melior is struck by one of the ship's crew as they are fleeing from the ship on which they have stowed away:

But whan þe boie of þe barge þe bestes ofseie,
 he was neiȝ wod of his witt, witow, for fere,
 and bepouȝt him þere þe bestes for to quelle.
 And happili to þe hinde he hit þanne forrest,
 and set hire a sad strok so sore in þe necke,
 þat sche top over tail tombled over þe hacches.
 But þe hert ful hastili hent hire up in armes,
 and bare hire forþ over bord on a brod planke,
 and nas bold wiþ þe boie no debate make,

but fayn was away to fle, for fere of mo gestes,
fer away fro þe see, or he stynt wold. (2771-81)

Apparently completely convinced that he sees two deer on the ship, the sailor hits the hind, Melior, in the neck and knocks her “top over tail.” William, as the hart, then grabs her and runs off the ship. The text, which only refers in this scene to William and Melior as “the hart” and “the hind,” emphasizes that William “was not bold with the fellow, would not fight, but wanted to run away, for fear of more blows, far away from the sea before he would stop.”

William's flight is highly unusual. Though he has control enough over his human body to deny the physicality of the stag and to snatch Melior up into his arms, he apparently cannot fight as either a human or an animal while transformed. When they finally do stop, William complains that if only he had weapons, he would pay the fellow back: “‘Pat I hade here þat to werre falles, / þe boye þat þe barge ȝemes abeye schold sore; / For þe dint he þe dalt his deþ were marked!’” (2789-91). His own words here underscore the unusual nature of his lack of response, saying that if he had those things that pertain to war, the sailor would be dead. William's comment ties his action to his transformation. As the animal, the only recourse William thinks he has is flight. Had the transformation been less thorough, one would expect William, a rather puissant knight, to simply toss off the deerskin (which in that case would also not have been a convincing enough disguise to nearly drive the sailor “wod of his witt”) and fight the man barehanded. Instead, he runs away. The text's use of “boie” for the sailor may be particularly significant here. While “boie” typically refers to a commoner or a churl, it can also refer to a male pre-adolescent, as it is used today (*MED*, “boie” 1, 2, 4). If the term does suggest a youth, then William's flight is even more unusual in that he will not even fight a child left to watch the ship. Also significantly, William does not try to fight with the hart's weapons, its antlers, which suggests either that for William (and the poet) the hart is particularly constructed as a non-violent animal that prefers to flee or that the transformation is an incomplete or uneasy one.

One can compare William's cowardice here to an instance when he does, actually, have those weapons, and in that instance, the greatest misdeed is “feyntyce,” cowardice. William is exhorting his cadre of knights to battle and cries out:

“Lo, oure folk ginneþ to falle for defaute of help;
 lettes nouȝt for ȝoure lives ȝour lord forto socoure.
 Hasteli wiþ god hert nouȝ hizet ȝou to þe dede,
 and ho-so faileþ for feyntye, wild fur him forbrenne!”
 (1185-88)

“Feyntyce,” however, is precisely what William portrays as a hart. Thus, William's behavior as a hart is distinctly different from his behavior as a human knight. The suggestion seems to be that William has taken on the character of the timid deer along with its skin.

In this romance, William and Melior identify with the subject position of the deer as a creature of the forest and as a hunted animal. When these humans step into animal skins, however, they do not become less human and more bestial in the sense of stepping into a lower place on a human-animal hierarchy, with the attendant drop in morality and intellect. Instead, they take on a different personality, the one associated with the animal. These transformations are defined by their *empathy*, by William's ability to understand and share the feelings of the deer through wearing its skin and walking with its four-legged gait (“fersly on here foure fet, as fel for swiche bestes” (1766). These transformations are thus a fantasy of stepping into the cervid world and thinking its thoughts. For instance, when William and Melior finally reach their destination and rest in the royal deer park below William's mother's window, they see another deer coming toward them. William comments that it is not afraid of them as it otherwise would be because ““it weneþ þat we ben riȝt swiche as itselfe, / for we be so sotiliche besewed in þise hides,”” though ““wist it wisli whiche bestes we were, / it wold fle our felaschip for fere ful sone”” (3116-19). He implies that he and Melior have become an accepted part of the animal world and that they can take particular advantage of their role as unnoticed observers. The approaching hind is really the queen in her own deerskin disguise, of course, and William's inability to discern the queen's human nature in turn suggests that animals are people on the inside, even if one does not know it. This romance's close attention to how animals are feeling and its fantasy of participating in the animal community suggest on the parts of its author and audience a close engagement with the cervid mind, one based in empathy.

When one considers what the ethical ramifications of keeping deer as pets in medieval England may have been, this romance offers up a potential answer. Contact with deer, whether through hunting,

petkeeping, or parking, promoted a close engagement with the cervid mind that particularly resulted in empathy for deer. In this romance, William, Melior, and the queen don metaphorical deerskins and imagine what the forest and the park, what the animal community, looked like through cervid eyes.

DEER PARKS AS MULTI-SPECIES COMMUNITIES

This empathetic attitude toward deer may have found both origin and broader expression in the historical hunting park and its literary depictions, which provide my second example of the reappraisals possible within these human-cervid contact zones. In the first example, humans empathized with the subject position of the hunted deer; in this second one, they imagine a harmonious version of human-and-animal relations. Recent scholarship has illustrated a close connection between late-medieval deer parks and gardens, especially as the site for residences, and outlined the wide range of leisure and management activities that took place in these carefully maintained areas.⁶ Though ostensibly a livestock larder and hunting preserve, the deer park was often, at least in part, a carefully landscaped garden in which aristocrats could view and perhaps even handle tame deer, which were fed there through the winter on hay and green boughs (Birrell, "Deer and Deer Farming" 117-18). Romance descriptions may have especially influenced park design (Milesen 83).

Chaucer's depiction of Nature's garden in the *Parliament of Fowls*, for instance, is most likely a hunting park. The Dreamer follows Scipio, his guide, as "this forseyde Affrican me hente anon / And forth with hym unto a gate broughte, / Ryght of a *park* walled with grene ston" (120-23, emphasis added). The Dreamer walks through the park up to an interior garden:

A gardyn saw I ful of blosmy bowes
 Upon a river, in a grene mede,
 There as swetnesse everemore inow is,
 With floures white, blewe, yelwe, and rede ...
 On every bow the bryddes herde I synge,
 With voys of aungel in ere armonye;
 Some besyde hem here bryddes forth to brynge;

The litel conyes to here pley gonne hye;
 And ferther al aboute I gan aspye
 The dredful ro, the buk, the hert and hynde,
 Squyreys, and bestes smale of gentil kynde. (183-96)

Nature's residence here is a garden within a park full of all three kinds of medieval deer, a scenario that Chaucer's audience would almost certainly have understood as a deer park. Many deer parks were exceptionally large, covering thousands of acres (Clarendon covered 4,292), and these larger parks often hosted a "Little Park" inside that was particularly cultivated. The royal parks of Clarendon, Windsor, Woodstock, Gillingham, and Eltham, for example, all boasted such arrangements (Richardson 34), and Chaucer likely drew on them, and perhaps on his own experience as clerk of the king's works, in his description of Nature's garden.

This integration of garden and deer park was standard and follows the pattern for garden parks laid out by Piero de Crescenzi in "On the Gardens of Kings and Other Illustrious and Rich Lords" (c.1304-09). Piero states:

In the north part a grove of diverse trees should be planted [in] which wild creatures ... may ... hide. [In] the south ... let a handsome palace be built, to which the king or queen may resort ... to ... refresh themselves by these joys and solaces.... [H]ares, stags, roebucks, rabbits and the like harmless beasts may be put among the bushes.... Rows of trees close to the palace ... should run [towards] ... the grove ... so that one can see easily ... the animals.... In this fashion the palace would be made pleasant. (Calkins, "Piero de' Crescenzi and the Medieval Garden" 173, cited in Richardson 27)

The emphasis in this type of design is on putting a royal or seigneurial residence within a natural utopia, implicitly creating a harmonious balance between humans and nature, perhaps the most famous example of which was the Garden Park at Hesdin, which was also a deer park (Farmer 648-55). Sometimes, as at Windsor, the Little Park was the site for the residence; at others, the residence looked onto the Little Park and was meant to be approached from that direction (Richardson 34-35).

The arrangement of the residence and park evokes a fantasy of participation within the animal community similar to that in *William of Palerne*. Just as William and Melior hid within a deer park and participated imaginatively in an animal community, here the “handsome palace” within the park provides its residents with a domicile within the natural community, and one from which they can venture out into an idealized landscape. In contrast to William and Melior’s “transformations,” however, the landscaping of these parks suggests human superiority at the same time as it expresses a desire to be part of an animal community. The palace or lodge rises above and looks out upon the landscape, its walls and its position separating human inhabitants from animal ones. Nonetheless, many of these “palaces” were quite small, sometimes only a hall and a single chamber, like the ones at Odiham and King’s Langley (Richardson 35). Rather than a particular attention toward dominating and overpowering the landscape, then, many of these lodges suggest instead the bare minimum accommodations a king might need should he wish to take part in this fantasy of becoming part of the natural community.

The cultivated hunting park was an expression of idealized nature for the aristocracy. The description of Nature’s park, for instance, emphasizes its physical beauty, especially its brilliantly colored flowers and grass and flowing water, its abundance of animals, and its natural harmony of birdsong. One can compare Chaucer’s description of Nature’s garden, where there:

Were trees clad with leves that ay shal laste,
 Eech in his kinde, of colour fressh and greene
 As emeraude, that joye was to seene

 On every bow the bryddes herde I synge
 With voys of aungel in here armonye

 Of instruments of strenges in acord
 Herde I so pleye a ravyshyng swetnesse. (*Parliament* 173-75,
 190-91, 197-98)

to the Pearl poet’s dreamscape paradise, in which:

Holtewodez bryȝt aboute hem bydez

 As bornyst syluer þe lef on slydez,

 Wyth schymeryng schene ful schrylle þay schynde.

 Fowlez þer flowen in fryth in fere,

 Bot sytole-stryng and gyternere
 Her reken myrþe moȝt not retrete. (*Pearl* 75, 77, 80, 89,
 91-92)

Both of these accounts focus on the jeweled or silver leaves and the sound of birds or instruments that pervades the spaces. Though Chaucer's depiction draws on the tradition of the Goddess Natura for its details (Economou 125-50) and the Pearl-poet's instead on Edenic imagery, the fact that these portraits share significant details may suggest the ways that literary and real accounts of natural beauty overlapped and reinforced one another. Significantly, even away from such elevated accounts with strong literary traditions, one finds a strong aestheticization of hunting landscapes. In his *Master of Game*, Edward described the beauty of a morning hunt, one which might have taken place in a deer park:

Now schal y preue how hunters lyueth in þis world most
 ioyfullich of any oþer men. For whan þe hunter ariseth in þe
 mornynge he seeth þe swete and faire morwe and þe cler wedar
 and briȝt, and hereth þe song of þe smale foules, þe which
 singeth swetelich with grete melody and ful of loue, euerich in
 his langage in þe beste wise þat he may aftir þat he lereth of his
 owne kynde, and whanne the sunne is arise he schal se þe fressh
 dewe vpon þe smale twigges and grasse, and þe sunne, which,
 by his vertue, schal make hem shyne; and þat is gret lyking and
 ioye to þe hunters herte. (*Master of Game* 143-44)

The emphasis in all of these accounts is on the deep, sensual engagement of the human with the natural world, delighted by its hues, entranced by its sounds, pierced to the heart by its beauty.

This cultivated beauty emphasizes a balance of elements and their aesthetic effect on the individual, and the balance in these descriptions extends to a harmony within the park community more broadly. As the Dreamer walks through the garden park, he becomes a part of this harmonious natural environment, at peace with the deer and hares he might otherwise be hunting. The harmony and beauty of the environment promise to heal the Dreamer's heart, as gardens in medieval literature so often heal both bodily wound and love sickness (e.g. Machaut's dreamer in the *Remede de Fortune*, who visits Hesdin for that reason). Under the influence of Natura, the garden is a site of natural balance, human and animals in peaceful accord within a sculpted landscape, aesthetically pleasing in sight and sound. As a result, the literary garden park, and presumably the real-life ones that it reflected and influenced, presents a space in which people and deer interact freely and peacefully, one that specifically encourages the human (or at least elite humans) to take imaginative part in a harmonious community of people and animals.

Moreover, this image of harmonious human-animal relations was reinforced by the operations of elite medieval society. Both as hunting preserves and as landscaped pleasure gardens, deer parks were locations for entertaining dignitaries and hosting social events, and so the image of the peaceful coexistence of the different types of animals and humans found in these hunting parks must have been carefully crafted to evoke status and prestige. Significantly, the principles of competition within the medieval status hierarchy would have encouraged more and more elaborate depictions of natural paradises, just as Edward II, upon viewing Robert II of Artois's Garden at Hesdin in 1313, returned to England and expanded his park at Windsor, built a lodge with a moat in his park at Guildford, and expanded and embellished the park and castle at Claredon (Richardson 36-37). As a result, a courtly society deeply shaped by hunting culture could at times present itself as part of a harmonious human-and-animal community and be encouraged in doing so by its own culture of social display and conspicuous consumption.

THE LACK OF ANXIETY OVER DEER

These points have broader ramifications. In his recent book, Karl Steel argues persuasively that "the human" is a structural position rather than some essential quality and that the medieval human founded its

claims to physical, moral, and spiritual uniqueness on the domination of “the animal,” particularly on violence toward the animal body (Steel 43 and *passim*). In a perfectly circular (but powerful) logic, “humans attempt to claim their position as human, with all this implies about human uniqueness, by dominating life that through legitimized domination becomes relegated to being animal” (Steel 186). Much ancient, patristic, and philosophical rhetoric promoted an artificial, categorical divide between humans and animals,⁷ and this structural divide produced a deep anxiety that soothed itself through a systemic violence against animals, issues that Steel saw evidenced particularly in concerns over animal flesh.

In contrast, this vision of empathetic and communal relations between animals and humans questions whether the structural position of the human is maintained by violence upon animals. How can humans empathize with deer and imagine themselves as part of a multi-species community if wracked by anxiety over their status? The answer lies, I think, in medieval courtly attitudes toward deer. As I have argued previously, the courtly *par-force* hunt, the most elite form of medieval hunting, presented an idealized microcosm of feudal relations between humans more than it did a narrative of human dominion over animals (Judkins, “Game of the Courtly Hunt”). It is not that the hart is not dominated in the courtly hunt, since it is certainly chased down, killed, and ceremonially divided, but that domination over the animal is not the point of the hunt, which is instead focused on the human community. The hart is not elided and ignored in the *par-force* hunt, either—not merely an unrecognized and insignificant casualty. Instead, the *par-force* hunt constructed the hart as a worthy and wily opponent, as a creature that must be understood; the better the hart performed, the more enjoyable the hunt and the more significant its social meaning. The *par-force* hunt shows a deep attention to and respect for the cervid mind, just as the hart was often a site of comparison and reflection for humans: in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*, for instance, the hart’s behavior is a superior corrective to the Black Knight’s (Judkins, “Animal Agency”).

In other words, in courtly deer hunting, there is little evidence for an anxiety over dominion that needs to be soothed by violence. There is no threat that the deer will rise up and supplant the human, and no anxious attention to preventing such. The deer, unlike the pig (Steel 179–220), does not present an outright challenge to human control; it is not a predator, and it would rather run away. Perhaps as a result, the deer is an

animal that court culture, in particular, attempted to understand, and even with which it empathized. Thus, deer could at times be an exception to a broader attitude of violence toward animals, at least if that violence is based on an anxiety over human status. That exception, along with the high status of the deer, helps to clarify why deer were sometimes kept as medieval pets.

Nonetheless, the deer park may still seem to present a troubling dichotomy as both hunting preserve and cross-species community space. One might argue, for instance, that the Little Parks were mere oases of tranquility within deserts scoured by violent hunters, and that they were no more than a feeble deflection or a self-deceptive apology for the broader state of affairs. The solution to this apparent problem, however, is similar to the last. Medieval hunting culture and its practices asked hunters to understand and empathize with the animals they hunted at the same time, while also providing a site for the elite appreciation of natural beauty. The dichotomous nature of the deer park is a natural result of that situation, as well as of broader issues of social display and competition. Consequently, there was no real opposition between hunting and conservation in the deer park, especially since, practically speaking, good conservation also maintained good prey populations. Any remaining protest, I think, is a result of powerful binaries between protected and unprotected, pet and prey, and domestic and wild, ones that are not subtle enough to express the particular situation of the medieval garden park.

This lack of anxiety over deer calls into question the theophilosophical distinctions between people and animals, though these are themselves paradoxical, as Susan Crane illustrates with the example of the standard statement that “man is a rational animal” (1). Both animal and more than animal, the human is never really divorced from animal status at the same time as humanity is distinguished from animality. The preceding examples provide a secular perspective on human-and-animal distinctions through human-cervid contact, one that reflects a similar entanglement of human-and-animal distinctions to that in medieval philosophy. *William of Palerne* and medieval deer parks present evidence that medieval people sometimes empathized deeply with animals, even imaginatively stepping into animal skins and taking on their personalities, and sometimes positioned themselves as part of a harmonious multi-species community. These texts do not so much suggest a desire to define the differences between people and animals as they do a curiosity to understand the similarities.

CONCLUSION

I began this essay by considering two historical examples of domestic deer and arguing that they should be understood as pets. In order to explore the ramifications of the close contact between human and cervid minds implied by keeping deer as pets, I then turned to examinations of human-animal empathy in *William of Palerne* and of imagined human-animal paradises in depictions of seigneurial deer parks before expanding outward to consider the effects of these relationships on human-animal distinctions. Deer are a particularly useful site for this sort of inquiry because they contrast the animals typically regarded as pets, especially dogs and cats. They also contrast other particularly privileged medieval animals. Unlike dogs and horses and hawks, deer were hunted and killed as part of elite culture, and also unlike these others, deer cannot be thought of as trained instruments of human will and thus dismissed as adjuncts to anthropocentrism. The position of the deer as a highly prized and carefully cultivated prey animal that was also sometimes kept as a pet in the home makes it perhaps uniquely suited to such investigations about human-and-animal distinctions.

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Notes

¹ See for example Kathleen Walker-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*; Donna Harraway, *Companion Species*; Cary Wolfe, *Zoontologies*; Dorothy Yamamoto, *Boundaries of the Human*; Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters*; Carolyn Van Dyke, ed., *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*; and Karl Steel, *How To Make A Human*. For loci for modern critical debate on animals, see especially the *Postmedieval: A Journal of Critical Animal Studies* 2.1 (2011) and *PMLA* 124.2 (2009) issues on “The Animal Turn.”

² See Gerald Morgan, “Hunting and Bedroom Scenes,” as well as Elizabeth Williams, “Hunting the Deer”; John Cummins, *Hound and Hawk* 68-83; and Marcele Thiébaux, *Stag of Love*.

³ See Jean Birrell, “Procuring, Preparing, and Serving Venison,” “Peasant Deer Poachers,” and “Deer and Deer Farming.” For more information, see also Robin Oggins, “Game in the Medieval English Diet”; Emma Griffin, *Blood Sport*; William Perry Marvin, *Hunting Law and Ritual*; Cummins, *Hound and Hawk*; and Thiébaux, “The Mediaeval Chase.”

⁴ Sayles, cvi, n.5, provides this summary of Gregory's letter, which is now catalogued as The National Archives, Special Collections 1, volume 60, item 98. The collection was previously known as “Ancient Correspondence” and catalogued in *List of the Ancient Correspondence of the Chancery and Exchequer Preserved in the Public Record Office* (rpt. New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1968), which lists this letter on p. 897.

⁵ My sincere thanks to Richard Firth Green for his help with the transcription and translation of this document, which is catalogued as KB27, n.187, m.46 in the U.K. National Archives. An electronic version is available at the digital archive assembled by Robert C. Palmer, Elspeth K. Palmer, and Susanne Jenks, “The Anglo-American Legal Tradition,” available at <http://aalt.law.uh.edu/aalt.html>. This document is accessible there as KB 27, n.187, image 0928.

⁶ See, for example, Amanda Richardson, “A Landscape Approach”; Sharon Farmer, “Aristocratic Power”; Aleksander Pluskowski, “Medieval Park Ecosystems”; S.A. Miles, *Parks* (esp. 82-98); Cummins, “Veneurs.”

⁷ See Elizabeth Cohen, “Animals in Medieval Perceptions” 60-65; Serpell and Paul 132; and Steel 1-3; though note Crane’s cautions that these distinctions were hazy (1-2) and that “medieval works abound in other ways of thinking” (169).

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