

**Contextualizing the *curée* ritual in *Master of Game*
Hunting as a performance of social order**

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INTRODUCTION

In this study I shall examine the subject of hunting rituals in late Medieval England. Hunting has long been an important prerogative of the European nobility and royalty. From its origins of protecting society from wild animals, hunting metamorphosed during the Middle Ages into a privileged sport of the upper classes, a ‘passion for kings and lords,’ and was used as a way to underscore noble preeminence in society.¹ Hunting was also a poignant gesture.² In a society in which conspicuous consumption and pageantry paralleled social status, the privileges enjoyed by a person in a position of power were effectively synonymous with that status and vice versa: neither could exist without the other. Amongst the most sought-after privileges during the Middle Ages was the right to hunt the king’s deer.³ In late-Medieval England, hunting was indeed a very royal affair. After the Conquest of 1066 the early Norman kings transformed the best woodlands of England into veritable hunting preserves for the crown in which the king alone reserved the prerogative to hunt.⁴ All who wished to hunt within the bounds of the forests, however elevated their social position, had to have the king’s blessing. Thus, to hunt the king’s game carried with it connotations of royal favor and social prestige. With this in mind, hunting in the late Medieval era should be viewed as a performance of sorts, as a symbolic flaunting of one’s social rank.⁵

In my analysis I shall attempt to examine how English hunting ritual attained ritual form, as well as to place the rituals within their proper historical and ritual context. Hunting rituals are assumed to reflect the intended concerns of the nobility, as well as to disclose their function within Medieval society in general. For the purposes of this study, I shall analyze the post-kill ceremony known as the *curée* in the early 15th-century hunting treatise *Master of Game* as a projection of

¹ Cf. Bechmann 1990, 27–36; Crane 2013, 101–119; Judkins 2013.

² Fossier (2010, 54) called the Middle Ages ‘the age of gesture.’

³ Almond 2003, 13–18; Bechmann 1990, 27–36; Griffin 2007, 36–41; Manning 1993, 60, 196–197.

⁴ Griffin 2007, 11–24; James 1982, 9–12.

⁵ Almond 2003, 28–29; Griffin 2007, 30–32; Manning 1993, 4–5, 57–60.

power and natural social hierarchy. In so doing, I aim to show the pseudo-religious undertones inherent in hunting rituals, as well as to venture an opinion as to how the *curée* ritual attained ritual meaning, and why.

Historical Background

The England of the late Medieval era (1300–1500) was still a very Medieval land. Its ultimate foundations lay upon the long established notion of the three estates: those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked. This in turn was predicated on a complex system of interrelated loyalties and duties that is often called feudalism but might be better termed privileges for loyalty. At the center of this system was the king, the ultimate fountainhead of power and voucher of legitimate authority. His liegemen (the noble class) worked to protect and uphold the prevailing social order; for their service they were rewarded with privileges, some symbolic, some mundane. The ecclesiasts, for their part, were tasked with providing society with the framework for achieving salvation and, like the nobles, were expected to work to preserve the prevailing social order; they too were linked to the king through ties of patronage. The lot of the commoners was to work the land and sustenance those who upheld the system; their reward for a life of hard work was a simple, uncomplicated path to salvation. In the era under scrutiny we see a society held in cohesion by a king ‘enthroned in the land, represented as the body politic, with warriors on his arms, the church in his heart and the peasantry tirelessly plowing at his feet,’ as one historian succinctly put it.⁶ Status and privilege were thus intrinsically linked in the Medieval world, and both played important roles in maintaining order in society.⁷ In general terms, the social order of late-Medieval England was underwritten by the notion that each estate, indeed every person, even the most humble peasant, was owed certain privileges in return for certain duties – the terms of which were effectively the mortar that bound society

⁶ Salih 2012, 86.

⁷ See, for example, Fossier 2010, 252–285. See also Peter Cross (2006) ‘An age of deference’; Richard Kaeuper (2011) ‘Social ideals and social disruption’; and Bloch *Feudal Society* passim.

together.⁸ Though the framework for such a society remained static as a matter of course, Medieval society, like any society, was marked by an elemental state of contestation in which the prevailing social hierarchy need eternally be reaffirmed, lest it diminish and be recast anew.

Existing Research

The noble hunt has long attracted the attention of historians and the existing literature on the topic has addressed many aspects of hunting and the hunt. Indeed much notable work on the subject was undertaken already in the 19th century.⁹ Perhaps for this reason many subsequent historians were loath to treat the subject as worthy of further research, and hunting consequently became somewhat of a dead subject by the early 20th century. Historians by and large have been satisfied to pluck the odd example from the sources, cite a few anecdotes about foresters or hunting practices, and then move on to more promising topics.¹⁰ Long into the 20th century the received knowledge of a bloodlusty king slaying hundreds of deer with no other agency in play save evil forester and innocent peasant (i.e. the Sheriff of Nottingham and Robin Hood) has tended to be the norm wherever hunting was mentioned.¹¹

Later in the 20th and the early 21st century, however, some historians began to call aspects of this picture into question. Chief amongst them, Richard Almond, and Roger Manning have posited a more nuanced interpretation of Medieval hunting and the material resources of the forest. Typically, these historians have portrayed hunting as less straightforward than was once assumed. The myriad types of hunting and hunters, as well as the role of the forest as a wellspring of

⁸ Fossier 2000, 117–127; Bloch 1971; Schofield 2003.

⁹ Charles Petit-Dutaillis is but one of the prominent names.

¹⁰ Almond 2003, 5–6.

¹¹ The received knowledge has been quite persistent to change. Even the eminent H.S. Bennett could write of ‘the terrors of the Forest Law hanging over the wrongdoers.’ Nor could Emma Griffin, writing in the present century, refrain from highlighting ‘harsh laws, severe penalties,’ and ‘mutilation,’ all without any qualification or mention of the equally cruel punishments meted out elsewhere in England during the era – showing that while the focus of the research may have shifted, its tone has nevertheless remained remarkably unchanged. See Bennett 1974, 53; and Griffin 2007, 18, 33.

resources – and disputes – have been well elucidated in this recent research.¹² With reference to the present thesis, historians such as Susan Crane, N.J. Sykes, Anne Rooney, William Perry Marvin, John Cummins, Ryan Judkins and Barbara Hanawalt, to name the most prominent names, have recently shed light on the symbolic/ritualistic nature of hunting as well as its role in social status creation and maintenance.

Importantly for the focus of this essay, Ryan Judkins has interpreted the pageantry of the noble hunt as a game in which various members of society, from all social classes, take part and have roles to play. He sees the noble hunt as a performance of social allegory. In his interpretation, a successfully executed hunt represented the success of the prevailing social order or an idealized (sentimental) version of feudal cooperation; conversely, failure would have represented a breach of social unity.¹³ Somewhat similarly, Susan Crane analyzes the possible social meaning and impact of the noble hunting rituals, coming to the general conclusion that they serve to impress upon the spectator the notion of noble preeminence in society. Crane sees noble dominance over the natural world as a mimesis of its dominance in the social order.¹⁴ For his part, William Perry Marvin has noted that the rituals of the courtly hunt have the underlying function of indexing the hunting party's roles in society, and, importantly for the present study, highlighted their pseudo-religious nature.¹⁵ Hewing close to the aims of this essay, John Cummins also touched on the religious symbolism of the hunt.¹⁶ The work of these researchers is novel in that it has examined the social function of the hunt, that is, the social hierarchy that these rituals communicate. They have argued, quite convincingly, that projecting social hierarchies was the underlying ideological message of the noble hunt. As such, these findings are quite insightful and illuminating. However, with reference to the purposes of this thesis, this research trend has not focused on examining the contextual underpinnings of the rituals of

¹² See, for example, Bechmann 1990, Griffin 2007, Manning 1993, Almond 2003.

¹³ Judkins 2013.

¹⁴ Crane 2013.

¹⁵ Marvin 2006.

¹⁶ See, for example, Cummins 1988; Crane 2013; and especially, Marvin 2006.

the hunt, nor have these researchers examined how these rituals functioned as rituals. Put briefly, in emphasizing function, they have tended to overlook form.

Research aims and methodology

The aim of the present study will be to analyze the rituals of the Medieval English noble hunting, to scrutinize the available sources in order to shine light on the meaning, significance and form pertaining thereto. In particular, I shall attempt to focus on the aspects of the subject which have been either glossed over by earlier historians or which have not been adequately addressed by recent research. The aim of this thesis is not to call into question any of the findings of this research trend or to assert that the noble hunt was not ritual – indeed, the noble hunt was ritual par excellence, and was clearly concerned with social hierarchies – but rather to point out that this line of argumentation rests upon a fallacy of presumption. To say that something is a ritual without explaining how, or whether for that matter, it achieved ritual form is fallacy indeed. Merely defining what a ritual is does not suffice. One primary task of this research will be to adjust the focus of research onto matters fundamental to hunting ritual, rather than simply focusing on describing the rituals per se or their social function, as has typically been the case for researchers of the field. Of similar importance will be to examine how the rituals of the courtly hunt achieved meaning and therefore how they reflect the wider cultural assumptions of Medieval English society. Individual actions are always motivated and formed within the framework of the culture which gave rise to them.¹⁷ Accordingly, the overall aim here will be to understand the noble hunt as a unique expression of the society from which it emerged, as a performance of social hierarchy. In this sense, I will make use of the notion of society (and power) as something performed as opposed to something more tangible or concrete in nature. Such performances of power are always historically contingent and rooted in prevailing social norms. As such, *Master of Game* will serve as a fundamental

¹⁷ Wood 2007, 82.

touchstone for analyzing how rituals, power and performance intertwined in the noble hunting practices of late Medieval England.¹⁸

Although many writers have noted that the noble hunt was very ritualistic, and a few have even posited that noble hunting resembled a ‘sacrament’ or was religious in nature,¹⁹ generally the interplay between religion, ritual and hunting has not been thoroughly examined, to say nothing of contextualization. Thus the central question I hope to address in this study is *How did the noble hunting rituals in Master of Game function as rituals, how did they achieve ritualistic meaning?* As a corollary to this question, I shall also examine the possible intended purposes of these rituals. To answer these questions, I shall examine *Master of Game* but also other existing literature on noble hunting during the era. These works of literature disclose much about the prerogatives of the noble hunt and offer a good perspective on the concerns of the English nobility as regards hunting and notions of social hierarchy. As a central point of analysis, I shall examine a number of similarities between noble hunting rituals and the rituals of the Catholic liturgy, as well as offer a historical contextualization of *Master of Game* to better understand its function.

Ritual, as a concept, is a problematic theoretical construct. Typically, ritual has been understood as a ceremony that marks some kind of change before a community, one that ‘invokes sacred forces, or values held sacred by the community’ and that ‘recruits all present as active participants’.²⁰ Ritual also fundamentally involves a certain recognizability; it also must be evaluatable to the spectator and involve the acquiescence of the agents.²¹ Like speech acts, rituals are always inescapably performed for an audience, real or imagined, regardless of whether the performer realizes this or not. They also entail a certain power to coerce, an interpellative potential that has the power to impress ideology on the

¹⁸ Foucault is the ultimate source of this idea. For a discussion, see Simmons 2012, 301–318. On the heritage of performativity, see also Staudenmaier 2009, 55; Wood 2007, 100–102; Loxley 2007, 121–123.

¹⁹ See, for example, Spearing 1970, Cummins 1988 and Almond 2003.

²⁰ Crane 2013, 104.

²¹ Enfield 2009, 51–57.

spectator. Embedded within a performance of ritual there is always a message of power.²² Also, for a ritual to maintain its significance it must be repeated, or disseminated. The hunting practices described in *Master of Game* will be examined with the understanding that they fulfill these criteria of ritual, that is, that they involved, wittingly or not, a certain ideological indoctrination tendency.

Loxley, synthesizing Turner, notes that ritual contains the capacity to change or transform participants, particularly their status, in a moment of fluidity. Ritual also has a liminal quality: In functioning on the boundaries between sacred and mundane, it holds the potential to transform, and transfix, the society in which it is performed.²³ There is also within ritual a fundamentally ordering and normative-disseminating tendency. A ritual becomes meaningful and ‘real’ through interpellation of the onlooker. Through performance, the message conveyed in the ritual becomes credible; it becomes creed. In this sense, ritual can be understood as entailing a certain sense-making tendency in that ritual highlights and crystalizes certain relationships between the mundane and the spiritual. To participant and onlooker alike these relationships are presented as meaningful, natural, and divinely anointed. Thus ritual inherently involves a certain sanctifying of earthly order through supernatural approval: It projects a divinely inspired order which commands but also enforces. In similar vein, to quote Rubin (speaking of the ritual of the Corpus Christi procession), ritual, ‘in creating order, must address competition . . . , and may even instill rivalry’.²⁴ Thus any attempt at forging cohesion through ritual need always entail a navigation of the tension that exists between social order and social discord. These social tensions will be further examined below but here it suffices to say that prevailing ritual formulae strongly predetermine any possible coopting and evolution of rituals, and, therefore, the social impacts that rituals may have. In the present thesis, a critical goal will be to elucidate how contemporary ritual formulae and political agendas intertwine within the rituals of the noble hunt.

²² Loxley 2007, 123–131.

²³ Loxley 2007, 154–156.

²⁴ Rubin 1991, quoted in Döring 2005, 13.

It is clear that the noble mode of hunting was a performance, one that was fundamentally constituted by and through ritual. Accordingly, the analysis here will hinge on examining how these rituals were recognized and received by both spectator and participant alike, as well as on analyzing the ritual forms that were used to transmit underlying meaning. In itself, such a methodology necessitates considering these rituals within the particular historical juncture in which they emerged. With this in mind, the present thesis will employ a contextual reading of hunting ritual in general. In so doing, it is hoped that the rituals depicted in *Master of Game* can be better located not only within their proper ritual context but also within their proper historical context.

Sources

The primary work of this research will hinge on analysis of the English hunting treatise *Master of Game*, written by the Second Duke of York in the early 15th century. *Master of Game* offers the most detailed description of noble hunting practices in Medieval England, and it is of great significance for the present purposes. Here it is also prudent to note that *Master of Game* in particular and the hunting treatises in general are not practical guides to hunting: They offer nothing in the way of guidance about the practicalities of hunting; rather, they are essentially interested in the rituals of the hunt.²⁵ Although in fact a translation of Gaston Phébus' late-14th-century *Livre de Chasse*, *Master of Game* includes several original chapters on English hunting practices that do not occur in the source text. These chapters describe noble deer hunting practices in vivid detail and are assumed to be based on contemporary English practices.²⁶ They will be in the focus here. Like many hunting treatises, *Master of Game* was a popular text (it has survived in 27 manuscripts)²⁷ and was well read for its age. A number of additional English hunting treaties will be used to complement the analysis: *Treatyse off Huntyng*, *Boke of St Albans*, and *The Art of Hunting*. The sources

²⁵ Rooney 1987, 38–39.

²⁶ Baillie-Grohman 1909. 'Introduction'.

²⁷ Rooney 1987, 25; Rachel Hands notes the heavy signs of use in copies of *Boke of St Albans* (Hands 1975, xviii).

used here are primarily modern facsimiles of extant, original manuscripts. In most cases the original language is preserved (i.e. in Middle English), although in some cases the language or typography has been updated to reflect modern English norms. Additionally, *Livre de Chasse* will be used to complement the English manuscript of *Master of Game*. All of the treatises examined here derive from the 14th–15th century. These works generally describe noble hunting practices of the 13th–15th centuries, which thus dictates the scope of the study, though the immediate manuscript context of *Master of Game* will be the main concern of the thesis. Hunting was a popular literary motif during the era and hunting practices often play an important role in many texts of the era, offering much insight into the topic. Accordingly, the imaginative literature of the period will be examined as needed. By critically interpreting these sources, I hope to present a nuanced understanding of the function, aim and context of the rituals described in *Master of Game*.

Chapter One: Hunting by strength and the *curée* – ‘A passion for kings and lords’

The style of hunting that features prominently in *Master of Game*, hunting ‘by strength,’ was the most esteemed version of the Medieval noble hunt. Hunting by strength referred to the practice whereby a large hunting party, sometimes hundreds of people, would single out one animal, usually a male red deer, a *hart*, and chase it with relays of hounds and hunters on horseback. Groups of attendants, usually local peasants, would be stationed at intervals to ensure that the deer advanced in the desired direction. After the deer had been chased to near exhaustion, the entire hunting party (including the hounds) would approach for a view of the final kill. After dispatching the creature, a highly ritualized butchering of the carcass would take place and the hounds would be rewarded with a portion of the kill in a ritual known as the *curée*. As it represented one of the most important phases of the hunt, the rites of the *curée* are described in detail in most Medieval hunting treatises, but occur in finest detail in the Duke of York’s *Master of Game*. Here we see the blood of the deer collected and mixed with bread, and the deer’s carcass reassembled so as to resemble its natural appearance, with the commixture of blood and bread hidden within. In the apex of the post-kill ritual, the head of the deer, already severed from its body, was then raised aloft by the ranking nobleman for all to see and then placed back in its natural position; the hounds were made to bay and then the ‘package’ was opened, revealing the hound’s reward. Afterwards, the head of the deer (aloft again) was taken back to the nobleman’s manor, with the entire hunting party following in procession. The aim of the entire endeavor was to take one prized deer, in great spectacle.

It is important to note two things about hunting by strength. The first is that the post-kill rituals were clearly the most important ones. In the treatises, somewhat counterintuitively, the actual killing, or *spaying*, of the deer receives very little treatment and is dealt with rather matter-of-factly. As regards the actual

dispatching of the animal, the treatises by far dedicate more space to discussing the proper type of tool that should be used. A typical example comes from *Master of Game*, which simply relates that once the hart has been run to exhaustion and cornered, the lord should 'bid some of the hunters go spay him behind the shoulder forward to the heart'.²⁸ The actual killing was fairly unceremonious, the apex of the hunt yet to come. A second notable issue is that by and large the *curée* has been overlooked by researchers. This likely stems from the fact that researchers have seen significant meaning in the distribution of the deer and the social hierarchies and unity it reflects – undoubtedly the central purpose of the noble hunt.²⁹ As a result, the *curée* has typically received scant attention in this context.

Another salient point about the hunting rituals described in the literature is that, however superfluous and impracticable they may seem, they actually reflect the hunting practices of the era. Archeological finds and historical records have shown that the ritual breaking and division of the carcass was in fact practiced, and may even have been fairly widespread in the period.³⁰ Likewise, we can comfortably assume that the *curée* ritual reflects real-world practices as well; and indeed its regular inclusion in imaginative literature in which hunting features would support this assumption. Additionally, although hunting by strength in its 'perfect' form was practiced essentially by the king and the high nobility, many of the practices depicted in the hunting treatises surely diffused throughout society. Such diffusion would have been aided by the fact that, during the era under inspection, king and nobleman alike would have spent much of their time in itinerary, travelling from manor to manor, often hunting whenever they stopped.³¹ In this sense, the high noble hunting practices of the treatises were surely widely viewed, and therefore socially poignant. It should also be borne in mind that all classes of society participated in the rituals of the hunt, whether as active participant or passive spectator, including peasants recruited to aid in the hunt. Thus, despite its focus on nobility, hunting by strength was in essence a

²⁸ *Master of Game* 174.

²⁹ See, for example, Judkins 2013.

³⁰ Sykes 2006, 170–175; Birrell 2005, 176–188.

³¹ Woolgar 1999, 1–9.

performance for a wider audience. The practice seems to have developed before the 13th century and certainly achieves a standardized form in the treatises by the early 14th century.³² Within the period under examination, these rituals therefore would have been well known and widely disseminated.

The curée as ritual

In one form or another, the *curée* occurs as a recognizable ritual in all of the hunting treatises and was clearly a central feature of the noble hunt. Also, as a subject of inquiry it has been typically passed over in much of the research on Medieval hunting and the hunting treatises. Whereas many researchers see ritual in other aspects of the noble hunt, the *curée* has generally been portrayed as a more or less practical way to reward the hounds.³³ Marvin, in his avoidance of ‘essentializing’ ritual, and hence whose work is closest to the approach used here, nevertheless did not find much ritual significance in the *curée*, seeing it as simply as part of the blood and slaughter that helped commit the spectacle to memory.³⁴ For him the *curée* is logical practice, and (for the hounds) served ‘to whet their hunger for the chase to its keenest edge.’³⁵ The central argument here has been that associating the hounds with the blood and flesh of the deer as reward for the hunting effort was a functional and useful aspect of the hunt.³⁶ This undoubtedly is a valid point. Nevertheless, the presence of a number of clearly ritual forms in the *curée* sequence would point to a more symbolic function. This aspect of the *curée* has chiefly been overlooked. In this chapter the *curée* sections of *Master of Game* will be examined with the aim of elucidating and understanding these forms, as well as with the aim of showing how they are essentially religious in tenor.

³² Judkins 2013, 72–74.

³³ See e.g. Almond 2003, 77–78; Marvin (2006, 118) for his part describes a somewhat ritual but primarily functional *curée*.

³⁴ Marvin 2006, 121.

³⁵ Marvin 2006, 118.

³⁶ Cummins (1988) sees this as particularly valid.

At first glance the post-kill ceremony would seem to have employed much imagery from the standard toolset of ritual. Here we see such rituals as procession, elevation, and sacred space, ritual forms all well-represented in the hunting treatises. However, there is an added depth of symbolic meaning. In particular the rituals of the noble hunt seem to widely draw on the liturgical rituals of the Catholic mass: ritual sacrifice (Crucifixion), sacred transformation (Consecration) and ritual distribution and feasting (Communion) all appear in fairly recognizable forms.³⁷ In addition to the general liminal themes of slaughter and sacrifice unmistakably evident in the noble hunt, the passages in *Master of Game* that relate the dismembering and distribution of the hart's carcass would seem to indicate that these sequences occurred in sacred space. *Master of Game* mentions explicitly that before the ceremony only the king or the hunt master could enter the *curée* area:

And they [the hunters] should take care that no man come within the curée till the King come, save the Master of Game.

Master of Game 193

This sense of sacred space is further underscored by the way that, after the kill, the hounds are kept away from the carcass, and only once the deer has been reassembled and the *curée* ready are they allowed to approach.³⁸ This would seem to mirror how in the Catholic mass the chancel, where the altar is situated and the Eucharist celebrated, is cordoned off as sacred space, and partially screened from the parishioners during the service. Intriguingly, *Master of Game* also relates how the hunters should stand in a line to obscure the hounds' view of the *curée*:

and everyman that is there . . . should stand in from of either side of the head, with rods, that no hound come about, nor on the sides, but that all stand in front.

Master of Game 193

This quite nicely parallels the cordoning of space in the altar during the Consecration. In the Medieval Catholic mass, the area of the altar where the priest

³⁷ For a detailed consideration of the late Medieval Catholic mass, see Monti 2012, 26–104.

³⁸ *Master of Game*, 177–178.

consecrates the communion host and wine was sectioned off by a screen (called a *rood screen*) to partially obscure the parishioner's view of the ritual. It 'separated the realms of the clergy and the laity.'³⁹ Only at the climax of the mass, when the priest turns the Host into the corporeal body of Christ, does the ritual become visible to the churchgoers as it is raised above the screen for the sacring.⁴⁰ The raising of the communion host, the Elevation as it was called, would also seem to have had a close parallel in the *curée* sequences as well. Several of the treatises specify that the head of the hart should be held aloft, and *Treatyse off Huntyng* explicitly notes that the hounds should see this:

And when þay haue a vew of yette lette þe houndez goo to & be rewarded

Treatyse off Huntyng 56

The sense of elevation, too, is underscored in *Master of Game*, where the Duke of York writes:

A fair thing is the curée, and a fair thing to undo him well, and for to raise the rights

Master of Game 29

Treatyse off Huntyng as well highlights this point:

þhan shall we ta blawene & take vp þe heded

Treatyse off Huntyng 50

Thus the visual aspects of the *curée* would seem to have been important concerns and clearly were taken into accord.

Also an indicator of subtle borrowing of liturgical ritual is the prominent role of blood and bread in the *curée*.⁴¹ In the Catholic liturgical rite, after the priest has consecrated the host and the wine (literally now the body and blood of Christ),

³⁹ Thiery 2011, 64.

⁴⁰ Thiery 2011, 64.

⁴¹ Bread and blood are also mentioned in *Livre de Chasse*, and also appear prominently in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (*Livre de Chasse*, 182, 220; Abrams 2000, 263).

a portion of the host is mixed with the wine, the Commixture. At the reassembly of the deer carcass, in *Master of Game*, it is specifically mentioned that bread and blood will be mixed together as the hounds' reward:

*and bread broken therein according to whether the hounds be few or many,
and all this turned and meddled together among the blood till it be well
brewed in the blood.*

Master of Game 193

The idiom *bread broken* also may have had a slight religious parallel in the Catholic liturgy, in which of course the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, the Fraction, is a central performance.

The reassembly of the carcass indeed could well be interpreted as a form of mystical reanimation (akin to the Resurrection) and in *Master of Game* the reassembled deer is referred to as the 'visage', clearly indicating its visual function and purpose.⁴² The hounds were meant to imagine the hart animated anew before they devoured it. When the lord gave word, the hounds were made to bay loudly and the hunters blew their horns (aurally perhaps akin to the ringing of the sacring bell that marks the Consecration), then came the command 'Devour' and the package was opened for the hounds to eat.⁴³ After the *curée*, several of the treatises mention the entire hunting party departing in procession with deer head held aloft on a rod or spear.⁴⁴ This too would bear close resemblance to the ritual of the Corpus Christi procession, a popular Medieval ritual in which the Host was paraded through town.

The *curée* would seem to have employed much imagery and tropes that derive from the Catholic mass. Ritual killing, sacred space, reassembly (i.e. transubstantiation), blood and bread (body and blood of Christ), elevation, procession and adoration of the Host all appear in fairly recognizable form. If the *curée* represents a general coopting of the Catholic liturgical Eucharist tradition,

⁴² *Master of Game*, 177.

⁴³ *Master of Game*, 178.

⁴⁴ *Tretyse off Huntyng*, 50.

this raises the troubling question of profaning the Church's most holy sacrament. To better understand the religious undertones of the *curée* is it is worthwhile to consider the Church's criticisms of it, and of noble hunting practices in general. Generally the Medieval Church proscribed against clerics hunting (as an unworthy activity) but was generally accepting of the notion of hunting. On the other hand, the sarcastic critique of Erasmus is quite telling:

Bareheaded, on bended knee, with a special sword for the purpose (it would be sacrilege to use any other), with ritual gestures in a ritual order he cuts the ritual number of pieces in due solemnity, while the crowd stands round in silence and admires the spectacle it has witnessed a thousand times and more as if it was some new rite.

Erasmus *Praise of Folly*⁴⁵

A modern reader might be tempted to see a certain, surely unintended irony in Erasmus' words. Indeed, at this point it would be tempting to assign to the liturgy rituals and hunting rituals a simplistic commonality that derived from their genesis in a period of history more superstitious than our own. Such a solution, however, would skirt the issue of how (or whether) these two sets of rituals functioned in tandem within their own historical and ritual context, nor would it bring us any closer to answering the question of how well the associations between hunting rituals and liturgical rituals could be discerned by the spectator. In the following section, the similarities noted above regarding hunting and liturgical ritual will be examined more closely with an aim of scrutinizing how this commonality might have appeared within its own unique context.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Marvin 2006, 134 (original translation, Betty Radice).

2 Coopting the Liturgy – ‘Do not give that which is holy to dogs’

Matthew 7:6

As alluded to in Erasmus’s words, in the Medieval era some clergy discerned a troubling similarity between hunting rituals and religious rituals. Why this was so will be examined in this chapter. The aim will be on determining the degree of associability between these two ritual sets as well as on examining how they intertwined within a particular historical and religious juncture. In this chapter the focus will be on the immediate manuscript context of *Master of Game* (turn of the 15th century) but a wider examination of the genealogy of various pertinent rituals and themes will also be ventured.

The context of the curée: Eucharist, hunting and the hart

As we have seen, there appear to be many parallels between the *curée* and the Catholic liturgy. To better understand these similarities, and to better understand how easy they were to recognize in the late Medieval period, it is important to first examine more closely the rituals of the Catholic mass, so as to understand their function, impact but also their focus in the eye of the spectator. Considering the focus of the mass, it is critical to understand that the major theological preoccupation of the late Medieval era focused on the real presence of Jesus in the Host and Chalice (the body and blood). This was not only a central tenet of Christianity but also the focal point of the mass. To better understand how this point from the perspective of the spectator, the Lay Folks Mass Books of the era are helpful. Lay Folks Mass Books (a sort of layman’s guide to the liturgy) were used by laity to understand the meaning of the mass (which of course was mostly in Latin). They instructed the reader about what to do (when to pray, what to pray about, etc.) but also decoded the meaning of the priest’s actions and words. For our purposes, they are invaluable because they represent a guide to mediating with the mass; they are effectually manuals for properly interpreting the mass and thus

disclose something of the desired reception of the liturgical rituals as regards the parishioner.⁴⁶ In similar vein, the Sarum Missal (the official priest's handbook for celebrating mass) of the period is also insightful. The missals disclose the underlying concerns and focal points of the liturgical rituals from the perspective of the clergy. Together, these sources will be used to help contextualize the mass rituals so as to better understand their associability with *curée* rituals.

Also critical for any examination of the similarities between Christianity and hunting ritual should be the fact that the 'image of the stag has been pervaded with religious symbolism since early Christian times.'⁴⁷ The theme of Christ as a hunted stag in imaginative literature was well known in the late Medieval period⁴⁸ and would seem to add credence to the interpretation that hunting and religion could have seamlessly intertwined in the noble hunting rituals.

Rituals, as has been noted, carry with them a certain interpellative potential, which was certainly true of the rituals of the noble hunt. To gaze upon these rituals is equated with being inculcated with the ideology embedded within them.⁴⁹ As we have seen, the noble hunt was clearly designed to be a public spectacle, and *Master of Game* states that the *curée* ritual should be held in a well-known, open place, presumably to ensure maximum visibility.⁵⁰ This would imply that the spectator's role was well understood and accommodated for. A similar concern can be observed in the Catholic liturgy of the era. Although the ultimate function of the mass was to ensure the salvation of the parishioners by way of the clergy's mediation with the divine on their behalf, for the churchgoer the most salient point of the mass was the Consecration. The climactic moment when the Host was elevated represented a spectacle in its own right and one could consider the parishioners' gaze as a sort of visual confirmation of creed pregnant with

⁴⁶ Although the Lay Folks Mass Books were not read by a wide section of the population during the era, they nevertheless disclose the intended focus and interpretation of the mass; they were written by the clergy for the laity. See Simmons 1879, 'Introduction' *passim*.

⁴⁷ Smets & van den Abeele 2011, 75.

⁴⁸ Rooney 1993, 102–139; Cummins 1988, 71–74.

⁴⁹ Crane 2013, 104–105.

⁵⁰ *Master of Game*, 177, 188.

interpellative potential. One went to ‘hear mass’ but far more importantly one went to see the actual body of Christ.⁵¹ As Fossier has noted, the Christian faith makes this concrete dimension of truth a requirement and a requisite ‘line of spiritual conduct.’⁵² The Christian Eucharist was at its heart a visual ritual that encapsulated the concrete link between the natural and supernatural world.⁵³ Any similarity in the *curée* would have made a vivid point.

In understanding how the mass was viewed, it is useful at this juncture to note that in the late Medieval era most parishioners only rarely received communion (typically at Easter); rather they came to mass to *view* the Consecration.⁵⁴ The Lay Folks Mass Books make clear that the intended focus of the churchgoer’s gaze during the Elevation should be on the host, and they direct the reader to meditate on its significance:

‘And so þo leuacioun þou be-halde,
for þat is he þat iudas salde’.

Lay Folks Mass Book 38

The Sarum missal, for its part, also emphasizes the visual aspect of the Eucharist and instructs the priest to elevate the host above his forehead, ‘so that it can be seen by the people’ (Sarum Missal 45). This would appear to be in parallel to the visual aspects of the ‘elevation’ of the hart’s head that we examined earlier. In this sense, the spectators of the *curée* would have been offered a similar spectacle – one that they would have been conditioned to meditate on the significance of.

In directing the viewer’s gaze to the host, and to the theological consideration of the corporeal presence of Jesus, the wording used in the Lay Folks Mass Books to describe Jesus’s deathblow are notable:

⁵¹ For a discussion, see Bokenkotter 2004, 146–147, or Monti 2012, 23–36.

⁵² Fossier 2010, 368.

⁵³ Rubin (1996), cited in Walters, Corrigan & Ricketts 2006, xvi.

⁵⁴ Thiery 2011, 66.

*A knight smat him to þhe hert, he had no mercy;
þe sone be-gane to wax myrk quen iesu gon dy.
lord out of þi syd ran a ful fayre flude
As clere as well water our rannson bi þi blode.*

Lay Folks Mass Book 86

In very similar wording, *Master of Game* describes the dispatching of the hart:

*bid some of the hunters go spay him behind the shoulder forward to the
heart*

Master of Game 174

The location of the weapon's thrust is near identical and would have elicited a quite visceral associability considering the iconography of the crucifixion of Jesus, which often depicts the deathblow in graphic detail.

Considering the Catholic liturgy's general emphasis on the body and blood of Christ, as well as his suffering in the crucifixion, a passage from *Boke of Saint Albans* is quite telling. The treatise relates that just before the hunter slits open the deer's cavity:

and then shall ye goo at chaulis: to begynne assone as ye may

Boke of Saint Albans 77

To 'go at chalice' is in reference to the old English custom that holds that before the hart is undone the huntsman must first 'drinke a good harty draught' of red wine or else the deer's flesh would subsequently putrefy.⁵⁵ In itself, this is interesting superstition, but more importantly for the present task is that Chalice is a very telling word choice: it is the same word used during the era to refer to the communion cup.⁵⁶ It is quite tempting to interpret the symbolism here as a fairly

⁵⁵ Turberville's *Booke of Hunting*, quoted in Baillie-Grohman 2010, 209.

⁵⁶ Cf. Lay Folks Mass Book 144.

direct link to the Communion rite, the partaking of which vouchsafed eternal salvation for the Christian. Here the wine in the chalice would seem to ensure the ‘salvation’ of the venison.

Also an interesting parallel between the noble hunting rituals and the Medieval Catholic liturgy can be seen in the distribution of the deer’s carcass after the kill. Here, set portions of the deer went to various parties, usually determined by custom, (typically, the church, the poor, the forester, the lord, the hunters, etc.). Treatyse off Huntyng explains this as follows:

And also whoso breketh hym shall haue þe chyne, & þe parson þe ryght shulder, & a quarter to pore men, & the parker þe lyfte shulder.

Tretyse off Huntyng 56

At a larger royal hunt, the king presides over the distribution and more complicated rules apply.⁵⁷ This aspect of the post-kill rituals, as mentioned, has elicited much interest from researchers, who have seen distinct social ordering implications in the distribution ritual.⁵⁸ As these researchers have seen the distribution as one of the keys to decoding the ultimate purpose of the noble hunt, here it is useful to investigate their arguments as well as the context of the distribution ritual. As a concept, ritual implies a moment of fluidity between the everyday and the transcendent but also a renegotiation or reaffirmation of roles.⁵⁹ In speaking of the post-kill rituals, Marvin in particular noted that a sacrifice that aims to order society can only tenuously be associated with the spiritual realm, and that sacrifice indexes man’s relations to the transcendental – something the post-kill rituals only appear to do in passing. For Marvin, the focal point of *ars verandi* is the breaking and division of the carcass, the revelatory pseudo-spiritual apex of the hunt, and hence he sees hunting rituals as indexing man’s wider relationships within society.⁶⁰ While this is clearly a valid point, for the present purposes it is notable that a parallel rite in the liturgical tradition can be discerned in the

⁵⁷ Master of Game 195–198.

⁵⁸ Cf. Cummins 1988, Judkins 2013, Crane 2013; Marvin 2006.

⁵⁹ Loxley 2007, 154–156.

⁶⁰ Marvin 2006, 134–141.

distribution of holy bread after the liturgy. Holy bread functioned as something of a substitute for receiving communion, and, importantly, its distribution was a highly socially relevant matter. Although the underlying message was that of community and unity (parishioners shared the same bread, which was provided by the community and blessed by the priest during the mass), the actual distribution was dictated by a strict social hierarchy.⁶¹ The same could be said of the post-kill distribution: through invoking unity, social hierarchies are maintained. It is also critical to note that the potency of these rituals regarding division of the hart's carcass, as with the rituals of the noble hunt in general, likely benefitted from the parallel ritual forms in the Catholic mass tradition.

Language and the etymology of the curée

As we have seen, many of the visual aspect of the *curée* rituals have similar counterparts in the Catholic mass. It is also notable that there appear to have been many other associable items in the hunt. For example, it has widely been noted that Medieval hunting in England has a distinct terminology – one that initiates had to learn if they wanted to achieve ‘perfection of this art’, as the Duke of York phrases it. The terminology of the English hunt owed much to the French language, and one could even go so far as to say the French was almost a sacred language of the hunt similarly to how Latin was the sacred language of Christianity. Much of the terminology seen in *Master of Game*, and in any of the hunting treatises for that matter, derives from French. During the immediate manuscript context of the later treatises like *Master of Game* (mid-14th–15th century) French would have been the language of prestige in England, but also a language uncommonly spoken; the fourteenth century ‘sees a definitive triumph of English. French was now rapidly

⁶¹ See Rubin 1996, 73–74 for substitution. For hierarchal division of holy bread, see Thiery 2011, 70–71. Interestingly, in unity there was often disunity: disputes over division of holy bread were common (Thiery 2011, 69–71, 117–118). A parallel phenomenon is seen in *Master of Game* in which quarrels over divvying up the game are mentioned (Master of Game 196).

ceasing to be the mother-tongue even of the nobility.⁶² To the common spectator the terms of the hunt would have been as incomprehensible as the Latin of the mass. Indeed, the hunting treatises' focus on explaining these terms, decoding the messages as it were, quite nicely parallels the Lay Folks Mass Books' glossing of the Latin terms and prayers of the liturgy, a theme that will be addressed further on in the thesis.

For the present purposes, perhaps the most unique linguistic association between the hunting rituals and liturgical rituals stems from the term *curée* itself. As a term, *curée* has an interesting heritage. The first instance of the term in hunting literature appears in Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan and Isolde*, a German rendering of an earlier Anglo-Norman tale now lost. As a character, Tristan was considered the father of the hunt in England, and the mythical creator of its terminology.⁶³ In *Tristan* we see the first detailed description of the *curée*, using the terminology *excoriate*.⁶⁴ The term 'excoriate' is interesting for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is interesting because it would seem to have been the root for the many variants of the term, which of course led to *curée* in French and *excoriaten* in Middle English.⁶⁵ However, far more interesting is that the term *excoriate* (and hence *curée*) shares many similarities with the word *scourge*. Both terms are derived of the same Latin root and, interesting, through metathesis Middle English *exoriaten* would have been pronounced quite closely to *scourge*; in ME the terms were cognate doublets and may likely have been near homophonic.⁶⁶ Additionally, during the period *scourge* itself was a term that was clearly biblical in allusion: by the 14th century at latest it had attained the authoritative status as the word used to describe Jesus's scourging at the pillar, replacing the earlier *swingan* favored by Anglo-Saxon writers like Ælfric.⁶⁷ This would indicate that even at an early stage of its development, the *curée* may have had religious undertones. At

⁶² Barber 2000, 141, also see 140–144.

⁶³ Rooney 1993, 9, 14.

⁶⁴ Cf. Almond 2003.

⁶⁵ Marvin, citing Kolb, accepts the Anglo-Norman heritage of *excoriate/curée* (Marvin 2006, 137).

⁶⁶ Cf. OED 'excoriate' and 'scourge'.

⁶⁷ Cf. Ælfric's Homily for Shrove Sunday.

very least it is clear that the scourging at the pillar, an idiom which appears in Wycliffe's Bible c. 1390,⁶⁸ and the *curée* share a common heritage, as well as that during the post-Norman period the terms would have been easily associable.

Here, again, the Lay Folks Mass Books of the era offer helpful insight into the context of the trope and its meaning. During the elevation, the parishioner is instructed to meditate on the suffering Jesus endured, and on the promise of redemption:

*And sithen was scourged & don on rode,
and for mankind þere shad his blode
and dyed & ros & went to heuen,
and 3it shal come to deme vs euen*

Lay Folks Mass Book 38

The suffering of Jesus for the sins of man was a very common theme in (vernacular) sermons and surely the scourging would have been well known to the ordinary Christian. At very least, in the manuscript context of *Tristan and Isolde* (late 12th/early 13th century) the allusion between Christ and the hart would likely have been clear, and given Tristan's position as the father of the English hunt, we can postulate that term and allusion alike would have remained a lucid aspect of English hunting well after the immediate context of writing. And regarding Jesus' suffering, there is one critical liturgical element so far unaddressed in our examination of the hunting rituals: the crucifix. It should not pass unremarked that during the late Medieval era a common synonym for the crucifix, along with *rood*, was of course *tre*. This point is aptly preserved in the common tag-phrase oath of the Robin Hood ballads: *by him that dyed on a tre*.

⁶⁸ See OED 'scourge.'

Associability, historical context and illative repercussions of the hunting rituals

At this point it would appear reasonable to assert that at least a degree of associability existed between the liturgical rituals and the rituals of the noble hunt. But if so, then would this imply that the *curée* represent a ‘eucharist’ for the hounds – which surely would have drawn more criticism from the church that we see in the historical record? Though a somewhat fanciful notion, it should be remembered that in the Medieval era the break between man and beast was not quite so very wide as might be imagined. Animals were not uncommonly tried in court or even hanged, and dogs in particular were commonly brought to church by their masters.⁶⁹ Additionally, dogs are often placed adjacent to man in the Bestiaries of the era; and were commonly even worshiped as saints, as the popular legends of St Christopher and St Guinefort attest.⁷⁰ Although the boundaries between man and beast could even be described as fluid, the teachings of the church are quite clear on the point: only man had a soul and only man could attain eternal salvation. Christianity prohibited animals in its rituals, and in this sense the ultimate aim of the *curée* could not have been a religion rite for benefit of the hounds, which would have been tantamount to sacrilege. However, in the late Medieval era animals could play a critical role as *mediators* of the cosmic order in that they reflected God’s creation and therefore represented a message about religion and man’s place within it.⁷¹ The many saints legends in which animals function as intermediaries between the natural and supernatural world attest to this point, too.⁷² With this in mind, the presence of the hounds in the *curée* may have been fairly unremarkable.

Also a salient point, alluded to above, is that for the most part the Church was generally approving of hunting.⁷³ If there were clear association between hunting rituals and liturgical rituals, we would expect a more vocal criticism from

⁶⁹ Fossier 2010, 197–198; Scott 1975, 197.

⁷⁰ Crane 2013, 68; Resl 2007, 22.

⁷¹ For a discussion of man and beasts’ place in Christian philosophy, see Sophie Page 2013, 30–47.

⁷² Crane 2013, 11–41.

⁷³ Except of course when it came to the clergy’s hunting, which was routinely proscribed against. See, Smets & van den Abeele 2011, 73–75; Cummins 1988, 10; Orme 1997, 134–135.

the clergy. On the other hand, it may very well be that the church refrained from criticizing the practices from a very simple reason: Many high church officials were born into the high nobility and were often great hunters themselves. Even many of the popes of the period are known to have been avid hunters.⁷⁴ In this sense there may have been a fundamental unwillingness to see the association for what it was, or perhaps an unwillingness to confront the inertia of custom. Also a salient fact was that, in the era under examination, a bishop was still primarily a nobleman, a paradox which remained unresolved for much of the Medieval era. Another interpretation might be that the social ordering functions of hunting were viewed as generally beneficial to society, and thus not to be challenged.

The latter interpretation is perhaps the most tempting when considering the manuscript context of *Master of Game* in particular and the hunting treatises in general. *Master of Game* was written between 1406 and 1413, and therefore directly after the tumultuous second half of the 14th century. This era experienced the ravages of the Black Death and the Peasants' Rebellion of 1381, as well as the social reordering that followed. The Game Law of 1389, which severely hindered peasants' right to hunt,⁷⁵ surely was a factor and it should not pass without notice that in the Rebellion of 1381 one of the rebels' main demands was the freedom to hunt.⁷⁶ The late 14th century was clearly a time of social change, a fact which was clearly felt during the era, as Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* nicely evidences. Times of distinct social turbulence would seem to call for a reiteration of recognized social hierarchies.⁷⁷ In this sense, we might read *Master of Game* as a handbook for performing a noble ordering of society that coopted religious rituals to put a divine stamp of approval on the prevailing social hierarchy.

Master of Game, similarly to the mass books and missals but also bestiaries of the era, are evidence of their times in that they teach the reader about a 'proper' way of doing or interpreting things. Here we see the same granular attention to details, and order, and interpretation. And we also see the same goal of learning

⁷⁴ Cummins 1988, 10; Smets and van den Abeele 2007, 73–74.

⁷⁵ Griffin 2007, 61–62.

⁷⁶ Oman 1969, 95.

⁷⁷ Moilanen 2015 *passim*.

and understanding the nature of things in the social or religious world. Here it is useful to recall, as mentioned above that the hunting treatises are not at all practical guides to hunting.⁷⁸ They offer up very little practical knowledge about hunting and reflect rather the symbolic preoccupations of the courtly hunt. Elucidating the finer points of the hunt seems to have been the wider goal, thus fulfilling one of the central tenets of ritual: dissemination and repetition. This would seem to underscore the underlying ideological function of the rituals, and highlight its interpellative fundamentals, echoing Bourdieu's famous observation that taste is precarious because it has to be inculcated.⁷⁹

It is an interesting point that in using such rituals so prominently, the nobility actually invited their cooption: the same hunting rituals could easily be adapted for socially disruptive purposes or to mock authorities. The historical record abounds with instances of the rituals being used to mock effect.⁸⁰ Poaching in particular was an issue pregnant with social hierarchy undertones, of which the Robin Hood ballads are just one lively example of a tradition of sylvan antiauthoritarianism. It should not be overlooked that in attempting to forge social cohesion and order the rituals also invited contestation. In using ritual forms coopted from the liturgy to underscore its social preeminence, the nobility also invited their being mocked as such.

⁷⁸ Rooney 1987, 38–39.

⁷⁹ Bourdieu 1984, 71.

⁸⁰ See Hanawalt 1988 *passim*.

Conclusion

In the Medieval hunting practices we have examined in *Master of Game* religion, ritual, and social hierarchy are all interlinked through performance. As a practice, the *curée* should be read within this context, and its ritual underpinnings should not be ignored. The contemporary contexts of the noble hunting practices in *Master of Game* (society and ritual) help disclose the likely intentions and nuances of performance of noble hunting. The concerns of the nobility in early late 15th century England – projecting noble preeminence and maintaining social cohesion at a time when the social fabric bursting at its seams – can clearly be discerned in the hunting treatises. *Master of Game* represents one point in evolution of hunting ritual with respect to its function as a sense-making performance in society. As a practice, *Master of Game* encapsulates ritual but also acts as its mediator as well; it is self-disseminating, self-replicating through its pedagogic nature. Through repetition of the rituals of the hunt, the ideological message that the treatise espouses would have gained authoritative status and hence creed status. Contextualizing the hunting practices offers much in terms of disclosing their social functions as such, but also in terms of understanding how they gained meaning in the particular historical juncture in which they emerged. Such a reading also discloses that one of the political modes and methods noble hunting employed in stamping its ascendancy over society was the appropriation of ritual formulae from the Catholic liturgy. That these modes and methods needed to be both performative as well as religious in nature discloses something of the style of political messaging of the era. Based on the etymology of the *curée* term, it would seem that such a style had been popular with respect to hunting rituals for at least two centuries prior to *Master of Game*. In this sense, we might read *Master of Game* as the high-water mark of liturgical themes appropriation into hunting rituals. Here we see the rituals of the Eucharist with their closest counterparts in the post-kill rituals: The Elevation, Consecration, Transubstantiation, and Procession, along with other parallel foci, appear in their most discernible form in *Master of Game*. That these rituals may have had a common heritage, whether in antiquity or elsewhere, in no wise diminishes the fact that in the late Medieval period the two ritual sets were

close enough to share meaning. They gained meaning by being associable. It is even possible that the rituals of the noble hunt evolved in tandem with the tenets of Christianity. Bringing the rituals of the hunt into closer coordination with those of the liturgy indeed would have helped achieve the underlying ideological message of the hunt: to give noble preeminence over society a divine stamp of approval.

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