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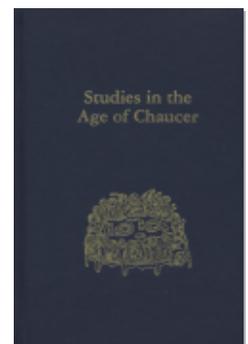
*Hunting Law and Ritual in Medieval English Literature* by  
William Perry Marvin (review)

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Loeb or other editions of the traditional Latin text of the *Consolatio*, and they now have another source of information regarding where and how Chaucer used material from Trevet and the Remigian commentary tradition.

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WILLIAM PERRY MARVIN. *Hunting Law and Ritual in Medieval English Literature*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006. Pp. ix, 198. \$75.00.

Did we really need another book on hunting in medieval literature? William Marvin makes a good case that his book is indeed needful. The originality of his contribution lies in his attention to the political and ideological dimensions of the hunt. The basic tenet of Roman law, that wild game is nobody's property and everyone is free to hunt, accorded with the practices of Germanic tribes; but, over the course of the medieval period, hunting in England gradually became a privilege of the few—of kings, who after the Conquest began privatizing vast tracts of land as “royal forests,” or of noblemen, who soon followed the trend by converting land into private hunting reserves. The tensions between these processes of “afforestation” and “imparking” and the old customs of “free capture” provide the unifying thread in the best parts of this book.

The worst part is the first chapter on *Beowulf*. Anyone maintaining that hunting is central to this poem would have to be most ingenious. And Marvin is. He argues that the building and naming of Heorot (“Hart”) are symbolic of the institution of a particular social order (hierarchically organized) and of the hunting ethos of “delayed return” hunters (who act as a corporate body). By contrast, Grendel's attack on Heorot symbolizes the backlash of the ruthless individualism associated with the older “immediate return” hunters (who hunt for instant self-gratification). The fact that *Beowulf* is not about hunting does not deter Marvin. There are, after all, plenty of other critics who talk about things that are *not* in a text. Marvin's model is David Aers, who “illustrates in the case of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* how a socio-economic factor such as the agricultural labor of the peasantry is critical to the represen-

tation of élite chivalric subjectivity” (p. 33). *Illustrates?* And, of course, some other interpretations of Heorot’s meaning are equally wild. Marvin says he is “encouraged” by the fact that his interpretation “can hardly be more speculative than what has already been said about the pagan stag cult” (p. 21). I agree that there are many tenuous interpretations about in the field, but that should not encourage anyone to produce more.

The second chapter is valuable, for there Marvin looks at texts that really do share his interests. “Bloodsport and the Symbolic Order of the Forest” is devoted to writers at the court of Henry II, in particular John of Salisbury, the great critic of the hunt, and Richard FitzNigel, a royal apologist. Marvin sees and shows clearly that the stakes in the twelfth-century hunting debate are very high. The royal forests were subject to the king’s arbitrary rule. The common law did not apply in this domain, and so Henry II’s policy of afforestation and his enthusiastic pursuit of the hunt came to be seen as indicative of his absolutist aspirations. The invention of “forest law” politicized hunting in novel ways.

The third chapter deals with the *Artes venandi* of England, and contains some thoughtful observations about the point of hunting rituals. Practical considerations may have mattered rather less in these rituals than did the competition for social distinction. Marvin is right to emphasize that English hunting manuals are as much about “correct speaking” as they are about “doing,” but I doubt that this insistence was peculiar to English hunting manuals. The same fussiness about terminology can be found in French authors: witness Henri de Ferrières, who (c. 1375) wrote that all things related to the hunt should be done and named properly, “for words well spoken proceed from understanding, especially since the manner of words has been ordered in accordance with the art of venery.” Marvin also exaggerates the “Frenchness” of the Englishman’s hunting terms. He imagines that while “the gentleman’s converse is congested with [French] hunting jargon, the yeoman can talk the talk but has things to say in English as well” (p. 104). This is not borne out by the gentlemen he cites, namely, Sir Thomas Malory and Edward of York, translator of Gaston Phoebus’s *Livre de chasse*. Malory’s “terms of venery” are predominantly Germanic ones, and while it is true that Edward of York retains many French terms, he explicitly says that he does so to acquaint readers with terms used “beyond the sea,” and *not* with the intent that his readers should use these terms in England.

The next chapter deals with Gottfried's *Tristan* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Marvin has some interesting things to say about the "curialization" of the hunt. These ceremonies offered participants symbolic and material "rights" and "fees" in a context where the actual freedom to hunt had been ceded to the monarch (or baron). "Ritualization therefore recuperated a semantic of free estate in a legal context within which a man could not freely hunt" (p. 141). The arrival of Tristan amid King Mark's primitive huntsmen is the inaugural moment of this new "civilized" order of refinement and subjection. This might seem a promising basis from which to approach *Gawain*, but Marvin tries too hard to make the hunting scenes thematically relevant to the rest of the story. He argues, for example, that the "assay" of the deer (to determine its fatness) is relevant to Gawain's attempted seduction by the lady (for she was sent to "assay" him) and to Gawain's nick in the neck (another "assay"). I am aware (as Marvin seems not to be) of many similar attempts to integrate the hunting scenes with Gawain's adventures, but think that all such readings, however "historicized," beg the fundamental *historical* question of whether "unity of action" was something that medieval writers set as much store by as their modern interpreters.

The final chapter, "Slaughter and Romance," focuses on *Sir Degrevant*, a chivalric romance about love, hunting, and raids on other men's hunting parks. Marvin truly illuminates the romance by setting it into the context of the late medieval privatization of hunting grounds by the nobility, and by reading the story alongside historical documents that similarly record the passions and troubles fueled by "imparking."

I should finally note that there is some important scholarship that Marvin does not refer to. For example, the authority on the history of *Artes venandi* is Badouin van den Abeele, *La littérature cynégitique* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996). The hunting scenes in Gottfried have been carefully studied by William Sayers, "Breaking the Deer and Breaking the Rule," *Oxford German Studies* 32 (2003): 1–52. Marvin unwittingly echoes observations about *Gawain* made by Felicity Riddy, "The Speaking Knight and Other Animals," in Martin B. Shichtman and James P. Carley, eds., *Culture and the King* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 149–62, and Dorothy Yamamoto, in *The Boundaries of the Human in Medieval English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99–131.

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