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Sounding the Hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*

IN AN ARTICLE ON *BEOWULF* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Marie Boroff coins the expression “systematic sound symbolism,” which she explains as “operating through chance similarities or identities on the level of sound”; this symbolism, involving “the magical incantatory powers of language,” she notes, lends “a validity to connections among words which is quite other than the kind of validity having to do with connections among meanings and aspects of subject matter.”¹ She is speaking of the poetic line, the evocative rhythms of alliterative verse. Put another way, she considers the sounds of the poems when read. I am also interested in the “systematic sound symbolism” of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. The systematic sound symbolism that primarily concerns me, however, involves the sounds we do not hear in the poem, whether read aloud or to oneself; these sounds cannot be heard in the words or rhythms of poetry. The sounds to which I refer are those that would have been familiar to the fourteenth-century audience of the poem but are less familiar, if not alien, to those who read the poem now.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider all the natural and artificial sounds of the Middle Ages, or even of this poem. My particular interest is with one type of sound, that made by the hunting horn. Unfortunately, the sound of this horn cannot be easily replicated, either in the lines of poetry or those of an aca-

¹ “Systematic Sound Symbolism in the Long Alliterative Line in *Beowulf* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *English Historical Metrics*, ed. C.B. McCully and J.J. Anderson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 120–21.

demic paper. No wonder that Bruce Smith calls listening “an intensely situated experience.”² The experience that primarily concerns him is that of early modern England, about which he says, “Listening, as opposed to looking, seems especially apt with respect to early modern England, as a collectivity of cultures that depended so extensively on face-to-face communication.”³ Such a statement is, of course, equally applicable to medieval England, though I do not want to privilege one sense over the other, for if listening depends on “face-to-face communication,” then it depends on using one’s eyes as well as one’s ears. Unlike Smith, I am less concerned with the “protocols of listening,” “the biological materiality of hearing,” or the “phenomenology of listening” comprised of “an amalgam of biological constants and cultural variables” (8). It is the sounds themselves as communication that I consider.

Smith points to church bells as “the most obvious ‘soundmarks’ in the acoustically dense soundscapes of early modern London” (53), which would certainly be true of rural as well as urban medieval England. According to one historian, church bells “had become commonplace” by the seventh century, “even in the villages of Western Europe.” This same author identifies the fourteenth century as marking “a turning point in the development of bells” because it became possible to cast tower bells weighing tons, which led to “rivalries between churches, and even cities” as to who had the biggest bell.⁴ Centuries later Edgar Allen Poe would muse on the regular tolling of “The Bells,” offering an associational response to their sound. To Poe, the bells also toll seasonal occasions, though their particular patterns of sound and what they are intended to communicate do not matter as much as the effect or association of these and other sounds. But in the Middle Ages there were specific sounds, including bells, that themselves mattered very much, whose meaning did not depend on personal as-

² *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999) 31.

³ Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* 12.

⁴ Wendell Wescott, *Bells and Their Music* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1970; rpt. [http://www.msu.edu/~carillon/batmbook/chapter 2](http://www.msu.edu/~carillon/batmbook/chapter_2), 1998). See also J.J. Raven, *The Bells of England* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1906) 71–84, who makes a similar point. Perhaps this development and the cacophony wrought by it may help explain Chaucer’s use of bells as discussed by Guillemette Bolens and Paul Beckman Taylor, “Chess, Clocks, and Counsellors in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*,” *Chaucer Review* 35.3 (2001): 281.

sociations but community rituals of a particular time, place, and society, sounds heard in different ways by different auditors, sounds almost as familiar as the ringing of the sacraments or canonical hours.

In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, there is only one reference to church bells, though these suggest a familiar ritual, if not a specific, knowable individual sound. The church bells are explicitly sounded after Gawain has partaken of Christmas dinner but before he and Bercilak have arranged the exchange of winnings. After Gawain gets up from the board of Christmas dinner, “Chaplaynez to þe chapeles chosen þe gate, / Rungen ful rychely, ryzt as þay schulden, / To þe hersum euensong of þe hyze tyde.”⁵ It is the ringing that is emphasized, not the bells themselves; the bells, implied as either subject or direct object, do not appear in this context. If one knows what the ringing of evensong sounds like, the sense of the line—its effects if not meaning—is different from what it might be to a reader who has never heard evensong bells or any church bells at all. To those in the Middle Ages, church bells were auditory messengers, bringing news of birth, marriage, and death, reminders to pray and attend mass, or, as Smith observes for early modern London, they indicated the “rhythms of the workday.”⁶ Perhaps, surprisingly, in this Christmas poem noted for its Christian themes, the church bells are explicitly rung only this once. Although we are told that the hero Gawain and his host Bercilak, as well as the Lord’s fellow hunters, attend mass (592, 1135, 1311, 1414, 1558, 1690), the poet does not refer to the bells or ringing that would have announced the celebration of mass.⁷ The only actual bells that are seen as well as heard glimmer and ring from the Green Knight’s green horse that dramatically appears at King Arthur’s New Year’s Day feast, setting in motion the events that will follow: “Syþen þrawen wyth a þwong a þwarle knot alofte, / þer mony bellez ful bryzt of brende golde rungen” (194–95). In

⁵ *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. J.R.R. Tolkien and E.V. Gordon, 2nd ed., rev. Norman Davis (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) ll. 930–32. All subsequent references will be to this edition and hereafter cited by line in the text.

⁶ *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* 53.

⁷ According to Percival Price, *Bells and Man* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 107 and 110, such use would be commonplace, even for private services. As he explains, “Although in time the church bell was rung for a wide variety of purposes, its most important use remained the call to the celebration of Mass.”

the fourteenth century, bells on riding horses were considerably less common than church bells. Their rare use was for special occasions and to “scare the enemy.”⁸

Rather than the call to prayer, to work, to celebration, to eternal and temporal time both, the predominant sound of this poem is that of the hunt, from its short opening call to gather to its final long call to return home. There are more than ten references to the sound of hunting horns or bugles, and these are, in at least four instances, very specific and depend on familiarity with the rituals of hunting and its language. These references extend from line 1136 to 1923 during the course of the three hunts. It is with these secular sound rituals that I am most concerned.

While many scholars have discussed the hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, none, to my knowledge, has discussed the ritual performative and symbolic sounds of the hunting horn in the poem.⁹ In 1962, Alain Renoir first drew attention to the “pattern of sounds,” meaning something other than “intelligible human speech as such.”¹⁰ But he refers to the horns only twice, once as part of a montage, when he writes, “At the precise instant that Bercilak gallops off, we are made to hear peals of the hunting horns And immediately thereupon, we see the pack of excited hunting dogs racing through the fields, and we hear their quasi-demonic barking mingling with the repeated blasts of the horns” (14). In the second use, Renoir distinguishes the relationship between the two hunts, of Gawain being “hunted” by the wily Lady in the bedroom and the animals being hunted in the field by her Lord, and the horn is one of the symbols of the differences between the two hunts:

⁸ Price, *Bells and Man* 154, 162, and 50–53. According to Price, bells on a knight’s horse originally came from the crusades and likely were adopted from the infidel Turks. Bells on animals were more common in non-Christian areas as early as the twelfth century BC; by the sixth century in Western countries, animals used for transport or tilling would wear bells to identify ownership and location, to indicate status as well as to “clear the way.”

⁹ Anne Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993) 159–65, reviews the scholarly approaches to the hunt in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*; she does not mention Nicholas Orme or Alain Renoir’s articles cited below.

¹⁰ “An Echo to the Sense: The Patterns of Sound in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *English Miscellany* 13 (1962): 10.

Just as Bercilak is hunting in the fields, his wife is hunting in the castle; but whereas the object of the hunt is wild game, the object here is Gawain himself. Not only are the objects of the two hunts different, but so are the methods: whereas the deer in the woods may be tracked down, cornered, and felled by brute force, Gawain in the bedroom can be made to fall only through the subtlest wiles; and the sounds that accompany the two activities are designed to emphasize this difference. To symbolize its energetic and brutal nature, the poet has begun the hunt in the fields with repeated blasts of the horn. He now begins the hunt in the bedroom with a sound that dramatically contrasts with the thunder of the hunt in the fields and sets the atmosphere for the amorous chitchat which follows 'little dyn at his dor.' (15)

To the Gawain-poet and, presumably, for his audience, many of whom likely knew the sounds of the hunt and the very specific meaning of each sound,¹¹ the horn does not represent the "energetic and brutal nature" of the hunt, nor, for that matter, would the hunt itself necessarily have been perceived as "brutal"; in this regard, it is unlikely that "the sounds that accompany the two activities are designed to emphasize this difference," that of brutality and subtlety.

In *The Master of Game*, a late fourteenth-century book on hunting based on Count Gaston de Foix's *Livre de Chasse* or, as it was popularly known, *Gaston Phoebus*, the author Edward of Norwich, Second Duke of York, reiterates the noble and moral virtues of hunting. He says, "Now I will prove how a good hunter may not be idle, and in dreaming may not have any evil imaginations nor afterwards any evil works And he is not idle, for he has enough to do to think about rising early and to do his office without thinking of sins or evil deeds."¹² While the historian Nicholas Orme

¹¹ Barbara Hanawalt, "Introduction," *Chaucer's England*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) xviii, remarks that "The ritual was well known among all classes of medieval England, since the clergy as well as wealthy Londoners joined nobles and gentry in hunting, and peasants had many occasions to observe their betters at a hunt."

¹² Edward of Norwich, Second Duke of York, *The Master of Game*, ed. Wm. A. and F. Baille-Groham (New York: Duffield, 1909) 6. This is the literally translated modernized edition.

considers this response from both Gaston de Foix and Edward as defensive, he nevertheless sees the Gawain-poet's work as representing this "civilized" view of hunting, as he explains: "The sport in its formal dress was organized, mannered, and pedantic, affected by conventions of courtesy By the late fourteenth century it was being emphasized as the sport of gentle people."¹³ One of the conventions of courtesy, especially as shown in this poem, concerns language, how to use it and understand it; similarly, the hunt has its own specialized language that concerns life and death, if not love. One language involves the human voice, the other a horn, and "aspiring hunters" must "learn to speak...in the many languages," of which "there are too many of these" to be named.¹⁴

Gerald Morgan, like Alain Renoir, also argues that "the symbolic value of the hunts ought not to be considered apart from the parallels that exist between them in the progressive development of the fable."¹⁵ Although he, too, mentions the hunting calls, he is more specific in his observation:

Moreover, the propriety of the hunt is observed from the beginning to the end by the accompaniment of the fitting sounds: the uncoupling of the hounds is signified by three long single notes, 'pre bare mote' (1141); while the capture of the deer and the return home are marked by a like formality. (209)

Morgan is right to note the formality, but, in this poem, the horns, that sound more regularly than church bells, have a particularity of meaning. The three notes may or may not communicate the uncoupling of the hounds. In short, their signification may not be as simple as Morgan suggests.

Musical notation found originally in illuminations of a fourteenth-century poem by Hardouin de Fontaines-Guérin provides

¹³ "Medieval Hunting: Fact and Fancy," *Chaucer's England*, ed. Barbara Hanawalt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1992) 133–53; see especially 146, 148. Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 1, 197, shares this view.

¹⁴ *The Hunting Book of Gaston Phoebus*, intro. Marcel Thomas and François Avril, commentary by Wilhelm Schlag (London: Harvey Miller, 1998) 39.

¹⁵ "The Action of the *Hunting* and Bedroom Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*," *Medium Aevum* 56.2 (1987): 212.

both the graphics and gloss of the various sounds used in a medieval hunt, but one that may appear almost simple, at least when compared with later period hunting manuals trying to describe or find verbal equivalents for the sounds.¹⁶ In the marginalia of the French poem, these sounds are represented as black and white squares, the length of the black squares representing the duration of the particular blow of the horn, the white representing the duration of the pauses between each blow. The calls include those for gathering, running the hounds, requesting help, death, drawing homeward, calling the hounds together, and calling the hunters together, among others (see, for example, plate 5). Other hunting

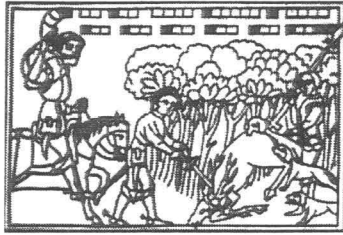


Plate 5: *Cornure de prise*, from Hardouin, *Trésor de vènerie* (Paris, 1856) 35.

journals offer a variety of different sequences for the same actions.¹⁷ In none that I know of do the three notes unambiguously designate the uncoupling of the hounds.¹⁸

¹⁶ Seigneur de Fontaine-Guérin Hardouin, *Trésor de vènerie* (Paris, 1856) is unmentioned by Rooney above; William Twiti, *The Art of Hunting, Cynegetica Angelica I, Stockholm Studies in English*, ed. Bror Danielsson (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1977) 49, represents the sound in this way: "trout trout trrororout, trout, trout trrororout, trorererorout." At least one gloss on the poem confuses this attempted transcription with the "names of calls" themselves; see *Sir Gauvain and the Green Knight in The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*, ed. J.B. Trapp et al. (New York: Oxford UP, 1973) 1: 315.

¹⁷ See John Cummins, *The Hound and the Hawk* (London: Weidenfelt and Nicolson, 1988) 162–69, for an excellent comparative presentation of the various medieval calls from different representative sources.

¹⁸ For example, Hardouin, *Trésor de vènerie*, shows three notes calling the hunters (17), four gathering them, and eight calling the dogs (39) but without reference to uncoupling them; in Twiti, *The Art of Hunting* 53, the signal to couple or uncouple the hounds when hunting a Roebuck requires the hunter say the words "So how3e," not call with a horn; Edward of Norwich, *The Master of Game* 190, and

From the first specific reference that Morgan remarks, “Blwe bygly in buglez þre bare mote” (1141), the poet demonstrates his familiarity with the auditory performance rituals of the hunt. Two short notes and one long note call the hunters together in more than one hunting manual (Twici and Hardouin); it is the only call with three notes (see plate 6). Bercilak takes his horn and goes off

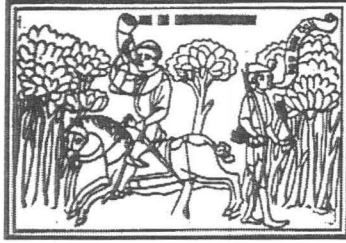


Plate 6: *Cornure d'appel de gens*, from Hardouin, *Trésor de vènerie* (Paris, 1856) 41.

to join the field after he eats and attends mass: “Ete a sop hastyly, when he hade herde masse, / With bugle to bent-felde he buskez bylyue” (1135–36). The church bells themselves are not remarked; either they are taken for granted or give place to the horns. The “cacheres” “cowpled” (1139; not ‘uncoupled’) their hounds and call those kennelled, but whether it is they who blow the first three notes is not clear; the action or sound begins the line without a defined subject of the action. Modern translators assume the subject to be the hunters,¹⁹ though whether Bercilak’s horn sounds

The Hunting Book of Gaston Phoebus 39, identify three long notes corresponding to the simultaneous action of “slipping” or “unleashing” the hounds and “unharbouring” or dislodging the hart. I suspect this last unleashing is what Morgan has in mind, though, as the editor of *Gaston Phoebus* makes clear before identifying this call, “both notes and words differ in different works.”

¹⁹ For example, William Vantuono, *The Pearl Poems: An Omnibus Edition* (New York: Garland, 1984) vol 2, line 1141, adds the pronoun “They” in brackets; in most other translations the pronoun is omitted, the hunters as subject implied. See, for example, the following: “The helpers” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet*, trans. Casey Finch (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 261; “the Master and men” in E. Talbot Donaldson’s translation of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, ed. M.H. Abrams et al. (New York: Norton, 1979) 1: 270; and “cunning hunters” in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature* 1:315.

among them is also not made clear; in any case, Bercilak's call would not likely be distinguishable from the rest. From the modern punctuation and the direct object, "hem," it appears that the hunters are only calling the dogs once they have been unkennelled; for the dogs are already gathered in one place.²⁰ It would seem the horns rouse the dogs to barking (1139–42). The horn, then, provides a language that enables the bugler to communicate with his (in this and most cases, male) fellow hunters as well as with the dogs.

This language, like the language of Courtly Love, derives from the French.²¹ Those at Bercilak's court are apparently expected to know both languages. Gawain is himself identified with French courtesy, specifically that related to "luf-talkyng." He is first welcomed into Bercilak's house as one who

In menyng of manerez mere
 Þis burne now schal vus bryng,
 I hope þat may hym here
 Schal lerne of luf-talkyng. (924–27)

"Luf-talkyng" is one language in the poem; "hunt-talkyng" is another. The language of the hunt is first heard as "þre bare mote." The noun "mote" derives from the French term 'mots,' meaning 'notes,' but more commonly, in other contexts, 'words.' The three opening notes are also, literally, three exposed words. These notes, here represented by words, stand for a ritual courtly language that the gentle noble is expected to know, just as he is expected to know the language of love. Orme argues a parallel development between the formality of the hunt and the developing formality of the indoor activities of the nobility, indicated by "the conventions

²⁰ Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 167, also remarks that "the line does not refer to the uncoupling"; she says the hunting manuals "do not mention the 'þre bare mote' at the uncoupling"; but, as I argue, there is a text that shows "þre bare mote" sounded to a different purpose, namely to call the hunters together.

²¹ See, for example, D.H. Madden, *A Chapter of Medieval History* (London: John Murray, 1924) 209; Wm. A. and F. Baillie-Grohman, eds., *The Master of Game* (New York: Duffield, 1909) xiii; and W.R. Halliday, "Introduction," *A Short Treatise of Hunting* by Sir Thomas Cockaine (London: Oxford UP, 1932) vi.

of courtly love, table etiquette, and polite speaking, which provided the material for a large number of courtesy books from the twelfth century onward.”²² Rooney would seem to agree: “On the whole, the representation of hunting in Middle English literature concentrates not on the most obvious element of the chase, pursuit, but on the courtliness of the activity. This is what marks it as a noble sport, rather than the simple and ignominious pursuit of animals for food or fur, and so it is on this distinguishing courtliness that Middle English authors concentrate.”²³ Gawain is expected to be master of the language used indoors, which, like the language of the hunt, follows a pattern.

Courtly language, like the language of the hunt, requires a protocol and a particular order that set up certain expectations. So far as the Lady of the castle is concerned, Gawain violates these expectations. As she is about to depart after her first intrusion into Gawain’s bedroom, she says:

And as ho stod, ho stonyed hym wyth ful stor wordez:
 ‘Now he þat spedez vche spech þis disport zelde yow!
 Bot þat ze be Gawan, hit gotz in mynde.’

.....

‘So god as Gawayn gaynly is halden,
 And cortaysye is closed so clene in hymseluen,
 Couth not lytly haf lenged so long with a lady,
 Bot he had craued a cosse, bi his courtaysye,
 Bi sum towch of summe tryfle at sum talez ende.’

(1291–93, 1297–1301)

She is explaining to Gawain the process of courtly “luf-talkyng” and offering him a lesson: first you do this (talk), then you do that (end the talk with “sum towch of summe tryfle”), all of which concludes with the request and bestowal of a kiss.

Expectations may also be violated during the first hunt of the deer, or at least the language of the hunt may not exactly represent the action, its actual progression. The hunt, as Rooney explains, “was accompanied by patterned horn signals and hunting

²² “Medieval Hunting: Fact and Fancy” 141.

²³ *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 194.

cries which formed instructions and progress reports which would carry through the forest,"²⁴ or identified "in which point you are in your sport," as an earlier editor writes translating Twiti.²⁵ The horn blows these "instructions" and "progress reports" at different times for different animals, even when the calls mark the same basic action—namely, capture and death for the animal. Therefore, the capture of a hart, buck, doe, hind, boar, and fox may all be signalled with the same pattern of the horn's blasts (the note itself is always the same), but the "moment" of capture or death being defined differently for each animal means the indicative call does not come at the same point in every hunt; in short, the auditory ritual order or placement of a call changes with the animal hunted.

Moreover, in this first hunt of the deer, two signals seem to follow very quickly upon one other: that of the "prys"—literally "taken," typically understood to mean death after capture—and that of the return home. The close proximity of the calls may be a result of the hunters blowing the death or "prys" after the deer are disemboweled, the meat divided and the dogs rewarded, rather than right at the moment of death or, as recommended, immediately after the quarry, also known as *curée* (1319–64): "Baldely þay blw prys, bayed þayr rachchez, / Syþen fonge þay her flesche, folden to home, / Strakande ful stoutly mony stif motez" (1362–64). The timing of the call of the "prys" signaling the capture of the deer more closely resembles what might be expected for that of the hart, or most noble animal of the hunt, than for does and hinds.²⁶ While Rooney also notices the inconsistent pattern of calling, she views it as one shared by the two hunting manuals she cites, and therefore "excuses the Gawain-poet's inversion."²⁷ She doesn't, however, remark that there are two signals, the "prys" and the drawing "to home" accompanied by "many very strong loud notes." *The Master of Game* also distinguishes between these two calls, the death and the departure, or "drawing homewards":

²⁴ *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 4.

²⁵ Baillie-Grohman, Appendix, *The Master of Game* 231–32.

²⁶ Twiti, *The Art of Hunting* 49–55; Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game* 197.

²⁷ *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 171.

Then should the Lord and Master of the Game, and all the hunters stand around all about the reward, and blow the death. And when there is nought left then should the Lord if he wishes, or else the Master of the Game stroke in this wise, that is to say blow four notes and styt not half an Ave Maria and then blow other four notes a little longer than the first four notes ... and when one of the aforesaid hath thus blown then should the grooms couple up the hounds and draw homewards fair and soft. And all the rest of the hunters should stroke in this wise: "Trut, trut, tro-ro-row," and four notes of one length not too long and not too short. And otherwise should no hunter stroke from thenceforth till they go to bed.²⁸

The sounds cannot easily be transcribed, despite the authority with which Edward of Norwich gives his instructions. Hearing the horn or knowing what it sounds like provides an altogether different effect than a silent transcription or even an onomatopoeic one—just as reading about someone being prompted in courtly riposte and seduction has a rather different effect than hearing a practiced 'lady's man' smoothly garner a kiss. Like the Master of Game, the initiated medieval audience would know the difference, which means also knowing there are two separate and different calls signifying two different actions, death and departure, as well as different calls announcing different sexes and kinds of deer—does, barren hinds, hart, and buck. In this poem, the game excludes the male deer in the "fermysoun tyme" or "closed" season of winter (1156–59), though the timing of the call, if not the specific call itself, might suggest otherwise.

While the Lady's husband Bercilak participates in the hunt, the Lady hunts Gawain, concerned with, it would seem, the same processes of the hunt that the horns will announce in succeeding stanzas. Toward the end of their courtly colloquy, the Lady thinks about Gawain's future meeting with death, after which she speaks immediately of leaving his room:

²⁸ This passage is original with Edward of Norwich, *Master of Game* 178–79.

Þa; I were burde bry;test', þe burde in mynde hade.
 Þe lasse luf in his lode for lur þat he so;rt
 boute hone,
 Þe dunte þat schulde hym deue,
 And nede; hit most be done.
 Þe lady þenn spek of leue,
 He granted hir ful sone. (1283–89)

She doesn't speak aloud of Gawain's impending blow "þat schulde hym deue," and only through indirect discourse do we know she speaks of her own departure or "leue" and then takes it. The explicit courtly exchange, however, concerns kisses. In her husband's hunt, the call of the "prys" and death comes after the action itself; the Lady's thoughts on death anticipate it, but her voice acknowledges only her departure. These two courtly languages seem to be connected here, and the connection reinforces the parallel aspects of two exclusive languages, if not reinforcing the parallels between the two hunts themselves.

The second hunt begins similarly to the first, drawing attention to the inseparable connection, "hunte and horne," the alliterative phrase that associates an instrument of sound with a general action, without explicit reference to the type of hunt or its articulated stages. This time there is no explicit call gathering the men as there was the first time. Here the explicit call that follows is directed to the hounds; it is known as the "recheat" or "rechase": "Haden hornez to mouþe, heterly rechated" (1446). The boar has been spotted, so the hounds must be brought back together to follow the one scent, rather than any others (see plate 7). The

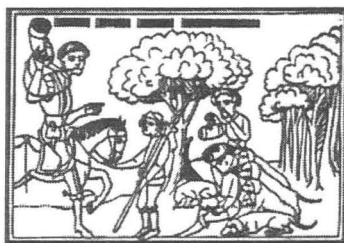


Plate 7: *Cornure d'ensemble*, from Hardouin, *Trésor de vènerie* (Paris, 1865) 17.

second "recheat" is blown by the lord alone as he follows the boar:

Bot þe lorde on a lyzt horce launces hym after,
 As burne bolde vpon bent his bugle he blowez,
 He rechated, and rode þurȝ ronez ful þyk,
 Suande þis wylde swyn til þe sunne schafted. (1464–67)

What Edward of Norwich says about the recheat with regard to the hart applies, in this case, to the boar:

the mote should never be blown before the rechasing, unless a man seeth that which he hunted for.... And as often as any man see him or meet him, he should go to the fues and blow a mote and re Chase and then holloa to the hounds to come forth withal, and this done, speed him fast in the manner that I have said to meet with him again.²⁹

The Lord, therefore, blows the recheat because he spots the prey first.

It is less clear who sees the prey and leads the chase in the bedroom hunt. The Lady implies that she is the potential prey that Gawain may take by force. She reviews the conventions of courtly love, of which he is supposed to be the renowned exemplar, “So cortayse, so knyȝtyly—as ȝe ar knowen oute” (1511). This exchange may be as deceptively directive and revealing as the hunters’ horns: Gawain may be what she hunts with verbal skill, but she identifies the female, not male, as the ostensible object of courtly love. According to the Lady, Gawain forgets the sequence of verbal conquest taught to him the day before:

‘Þou hatz forȝeten ȝederly þat ȝisterday I taȝtte
 Bi alder-truest token of talk þat I cowþe.’
 ‘What is þat?’ quoth þe wyghe, ‘Iwysse I wot neuer;
 If hit be sothe þat ȝe breue, þe blame is myn awen.’

²⁹ This passage is original with Edward, *Master of Game* 168; unfortunately, he does not specifically discuss hunting boar, though he translates Gaston on the “Wild Boar and his nature,” which includes the observation that “A boar heareth wonderfully well and clearly ... So and therefore he puts his head out of the wood before he puts out his body, then he abideth there and harkeneth and looketh about and taketh the wind on every side” (50–51).

'ȝet I kende yow of kyssyng,' quop þe clere þenne,
 Quere-so countenaunce is couþe quikly to clayme;
 Þat bicumes vche a knyȝt þat cortaysy vses.' (1485–91)

But as Gawain explains, the situation determines the language—though, as with the hunts for deer and boar, the Lady's lecture on courtesy relies on conventional 'mots' used not quite typically: blame (1488), kissing (1489, 1501), bliss (1519), worship (1521), dalliance (1529), shame (1530), faith (1495), tales of arms (1541), adventure (1515), truth (1545), love (1513, 1516, 1524, 1540). The order may vary, but the words change little, whether he or she is the prey. Traditionally, their function would be for the knight to elicit a response from a lady; in this case, the Lady tries to provoke an action in the knight, ostensibly only a kiss, the action of which could restore the order of knight as hunter and lady as prey. Gawain takes control of the courtly exchange by not acceding to the Lady's representation of the proper way to hunt love; he parries that he might be refused and his notion of courtesy does not allow the chivalric courtier to take what he has been denied (1493–1501). In short, he rejects her construction of the chivalric protocols (1499).

At the time Bercilak rides for the boar, Gawain rises and attends mass, again announced without reference to any bells (1558–62), as will also be the case when Bercilak attends mass before hunting each of the animals (1135, 1414, 1690). This second hunt, like the second courtly exchange between Gawain and the Lady, reveals how the protocols of action and, therefore, order of correspondent language change, even while the basic words and the processes they represent remain constant: what is the right call for one situation and one type of prey changes, or its placement alters, with another situation and different prey. While the "prys" is not blown for the deer until after it has been gutted, the "prys" in the second hunt marks the boar's death after the hounds corner and slay him but before he has been gutted:

A hundreth houndez hym hent,
 Þat bremely con hym bite,
 Burnez him broȝt to bent,
 And doggez to dethe endite.

There watz blawyng of prys in mony breme horne,
 Heȝe halowing on hiȝe wyth haþelez þat myȝt. (1597–1602)

The language stays the same, “blawyng of prys,” but its object and, therefore, context, changes. The sound itself marks capture and death, not any particular animal; only the specific circumstances and the status of the kill blown as death—that is, the death after the dogs attack the boar’s body, or the death after the hunters slaughter the deer and cast to the dogs their share—reveal the identity of the hunted animal.

The last hunt, that of the fox, has more general references to horns than either of the other two earlier hunts. The particular call may be assumed by the context. In the first reference to the horn on this hunt,

Hunteres vnhardeled bi a holt syde,
 Rocheres rounge bi rys for rurde of her hornes;
 Summe fel in þe fute þer þe fox bade. (1697–99)

This call may represent the hounds running. Its specific usage and meaning are not made clear to us here, though the hunters would have taken both for granted. The hunters presumably know what they are doing and announcing whatever it is, while we cannot distinguish any one call and nothing identifiably specific is indicated, only that the rocks ring with the sound of their horns. Although specificity is lacking, the sounds are loud, apparently heard, and understood, silent as they may now seem. Similarly, we don’t know the “wordes gode” exchanged between Gawain and the Lady (1766), even while we, like Gawain, understand as dangerous the explicit requests of the Lady that follow the good words: the request for a commitment, a token, the offer of gifts (1768–1865).

The conversation between the Lady and Gawain would seem to involve much the same kind of prototypical courtly repartee as before; the additional demands, though remarked as dangerous (1768), are, nevertheless, also conventional, a familiar pattern that gives way to a different stage of expectations. The calls blown during the fox hunt also sound the same, too: as with the boar, a ‘recheat’ sounds during the fox hunt, “Ay rechatande aryzt til þay þe renk sezen” (1911); but here the hunters blow the recheat *until* they see the Lord, rather than (as with the earlier hunt) *when* the Lord saw the boar. This blowing of the recheat is different from the first two blows in the hunt of the boar, the first that gathered the hounds and the other to call the hounds, because the Lord had

spotted the prey. Here the recheat is blown after the dogs already have the prey and the Lord snatches the fox from them (1906–07). The Master of Game is no help here: he does not talk about hunting foxes. Thomas Cockaine, whose Elizabethan hunting treatise quotes “Sir Tristrams measures of blowing,” offers four different calls for hunting the fox, including the recheat under the rubric, “To blow the death of the Foxe in Field or Couert,” which he explains as follows:

Three notes, with three windes, the rechate upon the same with three windes. The first winde, one long and three short. The second, one short and one long. The third, one long and five short.³⁰

Unfortunately, we can't know whether this was the same sound blown two hundred years earlier, or what that hunting call actually sounded like or specifically signified then. In the fourteenth-century poem, however, the recheat sounds once the fox is dead and the other hunters reach their Lord, Bercilak: “Alle þat euer ber bugle blowed at ones, / And alle þise oþer halowed þat hade no hornes” (1913–14). The event is marked by a cacophony of horns that when combined may actually confuse meanings as one sequence of sounds bleeds into another, perhaps suggesting every possible call yet no one call clearly. The Lady's importunate request for a token and insistent offers of gifts resemble the cacophonous climax of sound that confuses communication, making it difficult to know what is really going on. Gawain clearly doesn't understand what the words mean for him, or he doesn't care to discern the convolutions of the courtly conversation at that vulnerable moment.

The hunting calls embedded in the poem are difficult for us to distinguish and comprehend; they speak a language we, unfortunately, cannot hear, even with the benefit of recordings—our context and environment both being so dramatically altered from the past. They have ritual signification, ritual meaning, in the sense that each call is “a highly structured and dramatic form of social

³⁰ *A Short Treatise of Hunting* n.p. These are the last two pages of the unpaginated text.

communication.”³¹ Because we have only words, or Boroff’s “systematic sound symbolism” of the poetry, it is difficult to recognize, never mind hear this ‘other’ courtly language and what it reveals. As James Howe explained in examining the ritual of modern fox hunting:

as we study societies with historical records as well as with an ethnographic present, we must be prepared to specify the temporal dimensions of the symbols we study and to demonstrate rather than assume their enduring nature. We should further be prepared to face the possibility that some symbolic forms may be best understood in terms of past conditions rather than present ones. Symbolic systems can in fact run down or be dismembered, and a set of symbols as we find them now be a faded remnant of a system that was once more complex, rich and structured.³²

While we may not hear either the horns or associate meaning with the many references to them, certain medieval court audiences would have. But understanding would be limited to select groups, which was partly the intention, if not point, of this courtly language. As more than one critic has said about the language of the hunt: it was a “means of exclusion.”³³

According to the Green Knight, revealing himself as the host Bercilak, Morgan intended to test Arthur’s court, its pride of place, its claim to deserve a singular reputation; in short, she would show that the court is not superior or better, that it is not an ‘exclusive’ club:

³¹ Cited from James Howe, “Fox Hunting as Ritual,” *American Ethnologist* 8.2 (1981): 282, a definition on “ritual” he provides from Edmund Leach that may also be found, expanded, in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (1972) 13: 520–26.

³² “Fox Hunting as Ritual” 281.

³³ See Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 15, who says, “Language then becomes not an instrument of communication but of exclusion, acting as a code and a barrier.... In the medieval hunt, the initiated are united by their special language, the uninitiated excluded by it”; Orme, “Medieval Hunting” 141, also points out the “freemasonry” of the sport whose language “linked the aristocracy together and distinguished them from lesser people.”

Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wyne halle
 For to assay þe surquidré, 3if hit soth were
 Ðat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table. (2456–58)

Morgan's success or failure is not the issue here. Morgan does not speak, the Green Knight does. Gawain's disguised host of the hunts, ultimately, controlled the game at court and in the field. The play between the two is language, the one spoken in the field providing wordless instruction that Gawain was excluded from hearing but not from knowing: the tattoo of community, the rattle of death marking kind, and that final trumpet calling everyone home.³⁴

³⁴ Acknowledgment is made to Joyce Salisbury and her husband for providing a tape of 'hunting music.' Professor Joyce Salisbury made the tape available to participants of the 1996 National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Summer Institute, "A View From Noah's Ark," directed by Irvn M. Resnick and Kenneth F. Kitchell, at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. I would also like to thank Penn State Berks-Lehigh Valley College Development Office for an undesignated gift fund award that supported the writing of this paper.