Chapter 1

The Romance of the Hunt

For the hunter, the forest is a text, a complex series of overlapping and interlocking narratives, visible only to the initiated; therefore, success in hunting is, in a very basic sense, success of interpretation. The hunter rarely sees the animal that he is chasing until immediately before it is to be killed. Rather, he must read the signs which it has left – a hoofprint, a broken twig, a smear of mud – and use those signs to reconstruct the animal’s own narrative: how old and how big it is, where it has been and where it is going, what its intentions are. Once he has identified his quarry and is following its track, he must be able to reconstruct the narrative of the animal’s journey by reading not only the signs which are visible on the trail but also his own hounds’ behavior. He must continually keep in mind how the narrative of the hunt is developing and therefore must be able to “read” the shouts and horn music of his companions (a complex system of long and short notes and calls of varying timbres resembling Morse code) and the baying of the dogs. Even after the animal is killed, there are more narratives to be teased out, for one can deduce some things about the animal’s life only after its death.

The hunter is a reader of stories, but he is also a writer of them. He is, of course, an integral character in the narrative of any hunt and thus has a hand in “writing” it – as does every other participant, the quarry most of all. But there are certain stories which he writes all on his own. If he is in charge of finding the quarry in the early morning, he must later return to the assemblee (Middle English ged(e)ryng or metyng), or pre-hunt banquet, and tell the story of his journey through the wilderness, and of the things which he has found. During the hunt, he must
continually tell the story of his success or failures through the medium of horn blasts or shouts.

But the most important storytelling begins only after the hunt is finished and the participants have gathered around the table to go over the events of the day:

... sera moult de foiz que l’un croysera sus l’autre. Et aucune foiz touz les chienz iront après une beste, si aura debat entre eulx, quar l’un dira: “Ce est celuy que j’ay feru”, et l’autre dira: “Mes cest le mine”. ... Et au vespre après souper y sera le debat grant, et en la fin le vin en fera la paiz. (LC 71: 58-61)

[… many times, one [archer] will cross the path of another. And sometimes all the dogs will go after a single beast, so there will be debate between them [the hunters], for one will say: “That’s the one that I hit” and the other one will say: “But it’s mine.” ... And in the evening, after supper, there will be great debate, but in the end the wine will make peace.]

… þe maistir of þe game oght to speke to the officers, that alle þe hunters soupere be wele ordyned and that thei drynke none ale, for nothyng but alle wyne that nyght for þe good and grete labour that thei haue hadde for the lordes game and disporte, and for the exploite and makyng of the houndes; and also, þat þai may the more merely and gladly telle what iche of them hath done of all þe day, and which houndes haue best ronne, and boldlyast. (MG 34: 2860-2866) ¹

The narrative of the hunt itself ends when the horses have been stabled and the cooks have washed out their pots. It is only the stories about that narrative – however true or false they may be, however exaggerated or colored by bias – which endure. It is, in fact, these very “stories about stories” which are the basis of the hunting manual.

¹The after-hunt dinner at which stories of the hunt are told is a recurring motif in hunt literature, regardless of its genre. Compare, for example, this description of a hunter’s after-hunt activities: “She [the hunter] returns with blood under her fingernails, and with meat – which, later on, lusciously sauced and served with wine and the story of the hunt, is indeed the best of foods” (Mary Zeiss Stange, Woman the Hunter (Boston: Beacon, 1997) 187). The author is herself a hunter and knows whereof she speaks.
The elaborate scripting and etiquette which characterized the medieval hunt were intended both to intensify the innate narrativity of the chase and to make that narrative as predictable as possible. The most prestigious kind of hunt, and the one most extensively discussed by the manuals, is the hunt *a force* or *par force* (Middle English *slaying with strength*): that is, the pursuit of an animal by armed men on horseback, a pack of dogs, and a seemingly infinite number of subordinate huntsmen and servants. This hunt took place in five distinct stages, at least as described by contemporary cynegetical writers: the *queste* (Middle English *quest/fynding/se(r)ching and herborowing*), or the search for a warrantable beast; the *assemblee* or *gederyng*, at which the huntsmen planned their tactics; the *laisser courre* (Middle English *meving*), or the release of the dogs on the beast; the *chascier et prendre* (Middle English *ronning to and slaying with strength*), or the final stages of pursuit and the kill; and the *deffere* and *cuiriee* (Middle English *undoing and cuer/quirre/reward(e)*), or the carving of the carcass and the parceling out of various parts to men and dogs.

If we leave out the assembly (a sort of hiatus that is ritually inserted into the otherwise boisterous activity of the hunt), the four remaining stages of the hunt correspond closely with the four stages of drama: opening and exposition, rising action, climax, and falling action. Furthermore, if we examine any one subdivision of the overall narrative, we find that it, too, contains the same four dramatic elements. For example, the fourth and final stage of the sequence outlined above, the *deffere* or *undoing*, has an opening (the blowing of the *prise* (Middle English *price or deth*), the horn notes which announce that the quarry is dead), rising action (the carving and flaying of the carcass), a climax (the *curee*, a rather violent but exquisitely

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² Compare Hemingway’s observation that a bullfight is a tragedy in three acts (*Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner, 1999) 81-82).
orchestrated scene in which the dogs are at first encouraged to eat off of the flayed skin, and then to fight for the guts of the slaughtered animal), and a denouement (the second blowing of the prise). Even the lesser forms of hunting – stalking, shooting, snaring, and trapping, collectively known as petites chasses – are complex narratives of the same general pattern; some of them span many days and a large geographical area, and all of them are as uncertain and unpredictable as the chasce a force. For any hunt, of course, the genre of the narrative is impossible to predict in advance. Hopefully, it will be a comedy, but sometimes it is a tragedy; and, on occasion, it has even turned out to be a history.³

Although the metaphor is admittedly anachronistic, the comparison of the four stages of the medieval hunt with the four stages of drama is particularly relevant because the hunt is, above all else, a theatrical performance staged for the pleasure of its own actors. The most extravagant hunts employed a cast of thousands, or at least hundreds, and used entire forests as their backdrops.⁴ Before a vallet or grome could

³ It is no exaggeration to say that hunting accidents have had a significant impact on the course of history. Several members of William the Conqueror’s family (including his heir, William Rufus) died during the hunt. King Fulk of the Franks broke his neck while hunting in Syria. Gaston Phébus himself died of what was apparently an aneurysm brought on by the exertion of a bear chase. King Edmund narrowly missed being killed while stag hunting and founded the Abbey of Glastonbury in gratitude. On a less verifiable but by no means less important note, Geoffrey of Monmouth claims that Brutus, eponymous founder of Britain, was forced into exile from Italy after accidentally killing his father during a stag hunt (Geoffrey of Monmouth, The History of the Kings of Britain, trans. Lewis Thorpe (New York: Penguin, 1966) 55).

⁴ Chapter 36 of Master of Game, “Of þe ordynaunce and of the manere of huntyng whan þe kyng wole hunte in forest or in park for the hert with bowes and greyhounds and stablee,” describes just such an elaborate hunt-performance. Besides the royal family (king, queen, “my lorde þe prince”) and their guests or perhaps attendants (ladies, gentlewomen), Edward identifies no fewer than nineteen offices or capacities which are directly involved in the hunt. The regional officials – the sheriff of the shire, the master forester or parker (depending on whether the hunt takes place in a forest or a park), and subordinate foresters or parkers – are in charge of readying the hunting grounds. In charge of the hunt itself are the master of game and his lieutenant, the sergeant of hart hounds. The “yoman for þe kynges bow” is in charge of making the king’s “stondyng,” presumably some sort of hunting platform. Feutrers build temporary shelters in the forest for the royal family. It is not clear what duties the “yomen at hors” would have had, since Edward does not indicate that horsemen were needed for this hunt, but they were evidently an important part of the proceedings. In addition, Edward mentions nine distinct types of huntsmen: the master of the eireres (“harriers,” a type of dog), the deputies of the eireres, eireres (dog handlers), berners of the harthounds, the lymere (who handled the lymer, or scent hound), feutrers (who lead the greyhounds), tesours (who set the hounds to “tease” the deer forth), the
participate in the hunt, he had to learn his part and demonstrate that he knew it by heart. Every aspect of the hunt was scripted in advance, down to the positioning of guests at the pre-hunt banquet and the words which a huntsman had to say when he was alone in the forest with his limier (Middle English lymer), or tracking dog. A rigid and complex system of classification and vocabulary ensured that each player was perfectly understood by the others—and, undoubtedly an even more important consideration, that no impostors could infiltrate the set. Aesthetic pleasure was all, and it was therefore a greater tragedy when the finely-formed dog was killed, and a greater glory when the hunter finished off his quarry in a manner that highlighted his own bravery, in much the same way that a bullfighter’s honor is commensurate with the bodily danger to which he dares to expose himself. Some of the petites chasces were as theatrical as any chasce a force; some of them were even more so, because they required elaborate props. Hunters manipulated the stage, partitioning the vastness of the forest into a series of small, manageable spaces by means of elaborate hedges, walls, nets, or traps. The hunters even became part of the backdrop themselves, disguising themselves behind (or as) oxen, horses, or foliage. Ironically, most petites chasces were considered vile and ignoble precisely because they relied too much on artifice.

“gromes chacechiens of the herthoundes,” and the bowmen. He also makes reference to “hunters,” “resceyuers,” and the “stable(e)” which may be either generic or alternate names for some or all of the offices described above; on the other hand, they may be other specialized positions again entirely.

After the hunt, cart drivers bring the carcasses to the place where they will be butchered. The quire itself is performed by the sewers of the king’s hall. Once the dogs are fed, a tithe is sent to “procurators of þe church þat owne to haue it” Some of the remainder is divided among the company and some is sent to “gentillmen of the contre.” The sergeant of the larder takes the king’s share to the kitchen, to be cooked for supper by other servants, and served by still others.

The above reckoning likely only takes into account a fraction of the people who would have been involved or affected by the bowhunt. It leaves out those who were peripherally involved with the technical aspects of the hunt (kennel boys, stable boys, bowmakers, ropemakers, and so on); women and guests who attended some of the ceremonies and may have watched the hunt but did not participate themselves; not to mention all of those peasants whose livelihoods would have been affected (or ruined) by the hunt riding through, and the aspiring aristocrats who would have watched or heard the hunt with ill-disguised envy.
Of course, it is impossible to know how closely, in practice, the medieval hunt adhered to the template described by its medieval codifiers. Each hunt was necessarily a unique variant on this Ur-narrative, for although nature can be anticipated and oftentimes manipulated, she can never be commanded. Sometimes, undoubtedly, no animals could be found; sometimes the quarry got away; sometimes men or dogs were killed. Despite all attempts at advance preparation, part of almost any performance would have to be ad-libbed. Yet very little of this inherent uncertainty is admitted by the manuals. According to the cynegetical writers, the hunter always behaves the way that he should, the quarry is always taken successfully, there are rarely any casualties, and everyone gets venison for supper. On the rare occasions when Gaston or Edward describe a possible deviation from the set pattern (usually caused by erratic behavior on the part of an animal or a chance meteorological event), they always offer a remedy which, they assure us, will always work: though the path to success may change slightly, the result is always the same. When they do speak of failure, they do so only in the past (e.g. LC 54: 15-16) or subjunctive (e.g. LC 17: 16-17) tense, never the present or future tense.

In the same way that the medieval hunt stylized chaos and death, the medieval hunting manual stylizes man’s interactions with nature. It frames a world in which nature is, on the whole, benevolent to man; chance is a force that provides opportunity, but rarely hindrance, to the hunter. This stylization is all the more convincing because it poses as mimesis: this is the way the world really is. The hunting manual ignores all of the stories that went wrong for one reason or another; instead, it presents the reader with a reassuring series of neat-edged narratives that follow expected literary patterns and that always end happily ever after.

The narratives of the huntsmen, as they are described by the manuals, are no less stylized than those of the hunts themselves; in fact, they closely follow the
narrative conventions of the chivalric romance. The narrative movement of a romance tends to be parabolic: the hero begins in the company of his peers, leaves them in order to embark on a quest or series of quests, and returns to their society (or to a more worthy company) once he has proved himself. These adventures generally take place in an environment that is the antithesis of the court which the hero has just left: it is often a forest or "wasteland," an environment symbolic of chaos, solitude, and danger. Sometimes the hero must simply cross the wasteland in order to get to his next adventure; often, he will find benevolent or malevolent figures within the wasteland itself.

In the manuals, the narrative of the hunt is structured like that of a chivalric romance; or, perhaps more accurately, of two consecutive romances, the existence of the second dependent on the successful completion of the first. The first "romance" is that of the huntsman: the hunter leaves the civilized world of his lord’s house and enters the forest in order to find signs that indicate the presence of suitable quarry; once he has done so, he returns to the lord’s company. The second "romance," that of the lord and his aristocratic hunt party, begins where the huntsman’s romance leaves off. The party begins at the assembly, pursues the selected animal through the woods, and returns with its carcass to the house in order to participate in the post-hunt banquet.

**The first “romance”: the romance of the huntsman.**

The basic unit of the huntsman’s endeavor, like the basic unit of the chivalric romance, is the quest. In the romance, the quest is a solitary journey undertaken by a knight, often in response to a mysterious summons, sometimes for a specific purpose and sometimes not. Very frequently, the knight will be hunting an animal when he stumbles on his quest; less frequently, he will find it while following an enchanted or
merely friendly animal, perhaps a white stag or a white hind or even, as in The Book of the Duchess, a “whelp.” Oftentimes, the knight is inexperienced and may even be boorish when he begins his quest, but by the end of his adventures he has learned what (and what not) to do and is a model of good behavior and martial prowess.

In the terminology of the hunt, aler en queste (Middle English goo in quest or serchinge; nearly synonymous Old French terms are querir and destourner) means “to go out into the forest for the purpose of finding suitable quarry for the day’s hunt.” The day before the hunt, the maistre veneour (ME master of game) assigns each huntsman to a part of the forest where he is certain to meet no one. The following morning, the huntsman must use all of his skills (and must enlist the help of a friendly animal, his limier) in order to find the signs of a grant cerf [“great stag”] or a grant sangler [“great boar”]. This cynegetical quest is, like the romance quest, a rite of passage. When a boy turns fourteen, he graduates from a paje to a vallet (or, in the English system, from a page to a grome) and learns how to identify and follow animals in the forest, and how to describe those animals to other huntsmen. When he is judged competent, he becomes a full-fledged member of the hunt party and is ever after allowed to “go in quest” on his own.5

When both the huntsman and the knight errant go on a quest, they do so in the hope of finding aventures. The adventure may be good or bad, and it very often leads to danger; but in any case it is almost always an opportunity for a man to prove his worth. Many things happen by chance in the woods, no matter what kind of an adventurer one may happen to be. One knight may meet another par aventure (or par cheance), thereby drawing together two previously independent narrative threads in a

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5 Edward also describes an alternative procedure in which the forester or parker, a huntsman, and a lymner (scent dog handler) go out in the woods on a “joint quest” (MG 26). It is not clear whether such a cooperative venture was necessarily either more common or more desirable than a solitary quest. Edward does, however, seem to suggest that solitary questing is good training for a young grome (MG 26: 2402-2404).
romance. In the same way, the narrative of the hunter may intersect with the narrative of any one of an infinite number of forest animals because of a chance meeting unlooked-for by either (e.g. LC 58: 3-4; 75: 2-3). Or a knight may come across a challenge, physical or perhaps psychological, *par aventure*; likewise, *par aventure* the hunter may lose the trail, or his dogs may fail him, or the weather may turn foul, or he may have to spend the night in the woods. No forest traveler can predict his journey in advance, whether he is in the forest of romance or the king’s hunting preserves. In one respect, however, a hunter is unlike a romance hero: he cannot be certain of pursuing every adventure with success. Gaston, in particular, mentions that he has seen many good men killed by boars who put themselves in danger of dying or being mauled (“se mettre en aventure de mourir ou d’estre mehaignié ou afolé” (LC 54: 14)).

Of course, adventures are not limited to physical tests for either the hunter or the knight: Gaston mentions in passing, and with unmistakable nostalgia, the “cheances d’amours” that Fate threw in his path when he was a younger man (LC Prologue: 4).

From the manuals’ point of view, every huntsman, no matter what his birth or status, is a “romance hero” by virtue of his profession. By way of proving the moral and psychological superiority of hunters, the Prologue of *Livre de chasse* (MG 1) contains two brief narratives of a typical day of an Everyhunter. The first narrative begins with the hunter falling asleep on the night before the hunt, then waking up the next morning; the second begins with the hunter awakening on the morning of the hunt. Both narratives contain the same elements: the hunter’s waking; questing for the hart; the assembly; the *laissier courre*; the ride after the dogs while blowing [the horn] and hueing (calling); the *requerir* and *redrescier*; the taking of the quarry; the *deffere* and *curee*; the hunter’s after-hunt activities. We watch the hunter wake up, go through the motions of the hunt, fall asleep, and wake up again; the film runs to the end and
rewinds and runs again, and nothing seems to change from one day to the next except for the accompanying didactic commentary.

However, on the second run-through, the quality of the film is slightly different: the colors are richer, the frame wider. Each time, the hunter wakes up at dawn and immediately begins his work, but the second dawn has a much different tenor than the first:

Et a matin, a l’aube du jour, il faut qu’il soit levé et qu’il aille en se queste bien et diligentement ... (LC Prologue: 25)
And erlich in þe dawyng of þe day he most be uppe for to go into his queste, Þat in English called is serching ... (MG 155-157)

... quant le veneur se lieve au matin, il voit la tres doulce et belle matinee et le temps cler et seri [calm] et le chant de ces oyselez, qui chantent doucement, melodieusement et amoureusement, chacun en son langage, du mieulz qu’il peut, selon ce que nature li aprent. Et, quant le solleill sera levé, il verra celle doulce rousee sur les raincelez et herbetes, et le soleill par sa vertu les fera reluire; c’est grant plaisance et joye au cuer du veneur. (LC Prologue: 35-36)

... for whan þe hunter ariseth in þe mornyng he seeth þe swete and faire morwe and þe cler wedar and bri3t, and hereth þe song of þe smale foules, þe which singeth swetelich with grete melody and ful of loue, euerich in his langage in þe beste wise þat he may aftir þat he lereth of his own kynde, and whanne þe sunne is arise he schal se þe fresh dewe vpon þe smale twigges and grasse, and þe sunne, which, by his vertue, schal make hem shyne; and þat is gret likyng and ioye to þe hunters herte. (MG 1: 190-196)

The second time around, the hunter pauses to look around him before beginning on his daily rounds, and the beauty of the forest suddenly comes into clear focus. Natural beauty, especially of an idealized sort, is not something with which Gaston and Edward are ordinarily concerned. They are pragmatists, concerned with describing things as they are, not as they should be. Furthermore, they are, as a rule, only concerned with the natural landscape as it directly relates to their subject: it is a hiding
place for game, or an obstacle to hunters and their dogs, but it is rarely a point of interest in itself. However, this is no earthly landscape: it is unmistakably a locus amoenus, a literary “pleasant place” which is found very often (though not exclusively) within the forest of romance.\(^6\)

In the first chapter of each hunting manual, there are no days different from any other days; it is always spring, and the same hunter is always chasing the same stag. Everything runs like clockwork in this Everyhunt: no one is hurt, no dogs are lost, and the hunter receives joy in regular increments. Day follows night follows day, and the hunter does what he must do at each time: “la nuyt il se couchera en son lit” (LC Prologue: 23); “a matin, a l’aube du jour, il faut qu’il soit levé” [“in the morning, at the dawn of the day, it is necessary that he get up”] (LC Prologue: 25); “il a assez a fere ... de dormir et de reposer, pour ce qu’il est las” [“he has enough to do … to sleep and rest, for he is tired”] (LC Prologue: 30); “quant le veneur se lieve au matin” [“when the hunter awakes in the morning”] (LC Prologue: 35); “s’en ira ... dormir bien

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\(^6\) Though it is not directly relevant to the current discussion, it is interesting to note that the hunter’s awakening into such a “pleasant place” is also strongly reminiscent of the beginning of a dream vision. Here, everything is very pleasant but just a little brighter and louder and faster than it should be, and even the dew is uncannily luminous. We may recall Gaston’s statement that he began writing Livre de chasse on the first of May (LC Prologue: 12). This is probably no more than a declaration of fact, yet the date is suggestive: the dreamer in a dream vision typically falls asleep under the influence of balmy May weather, or else his dream begins with a Maytime scene. Whether by chance or design, it is in May that Gaston “dreams” the story of a nameless, archetypal Everyhunter who “wakes up” into a vernal world.

This opening locus amoenus prepares us for a full-blown dream vision, perhaps erotic and perhaps didactic. We expect the dreamer (here, the nameless, archetypal hunter) to go on a magical quest led by a supernatural guide, to meet an authority figure, and (hopefully) to come to understand more than he did when he began. Yet nearly all of our expectations are disappointed, as the vision never quite materializes. Instead of seeking knowledge, the hunter uses his knowledge to seek game; he is lead through an idealized landscape by the droit [the quarry], but the quest is hardly a magical one: the animal is only running for its life and, in the end, it is killed and its body cut up. The protagonist never encounters an authority figure because the “authority” in this sequence would seem to be the hunter himself – or, perhaps, the narrator who brings him alive. In fact, the only remarkable aspect of this hunt is that it proceeds so smoothly. When the hunter falls asleep at the end of his day, well-fed and a little drunk, Gaston “wakes up” from his own story and immediately returns to his old didactic self: “Donc di je que veneurs s’en vont en paradis quant il meurent, et vivent en cest monde plus joyeusement que nulle autre gent” [Thus I say that hunters go to Paradise when they die and they live in this world more joyously than any other people] (LC Prologue: 47).
et sainement la nuit” [“he will go to sleep, and sleep well and healthily all night”] (LC Prologue: 46); “si au vespre il soupent bien, au moins auront il a matin corrigié leur nature” [“if in the evening they dine well, at least they will have corrected their nature in the morning”] (LC Prologue: 49). Time goes around and around, but it never goes forward. If there is a sense of progression at all, it is a progression not of chronology, but of intensity: the narrative becomes ever more concrete and the narrative field of view ever wider, deeper, and more vivid. With each successive re-telling of the same story, the huntsman enters more and more profoundly into the world of romance.

The second romance: the romance of the hunt party. The “romance” of the huntsman undoubtedly demanded great skill from its “hero”: if he did not complete his quest successfully, the entire hunt would come to a standstill. But for aristocratic writers like Gaston or Edward, the second “romance,” that of the hunt party – that is, the one in which they participated – was of far more importance.

While the huntsmen were on their quests, the assembly was prepared in a forest clearing which was selected for its resemblance to the locus amoenus:

Et doit estre le lieu ou l’assemblee sera en un biau pré bien vert ou il ait biaux arbres tout au tour, l’un loing de l’autre, et une fontaine clere ou ruisssel delez. Et s’apelle assemblee, pour ce que toutes les genz de la chasce et chienz s’i assemblent, quar ceulx qui vont en queste doivent touz revenir au certain lieu que je di. Aussi font ceulx qui partent de l’ostel. Et touz les officiers de l’ostel doivent la porter chascun ce que il li faut selon son office bien et plantureusement, et doivent estendre touailles et nappes par tout sus l’erbe vert et mettre viandes diverses et grant foyson dessus selon le pouoir de seigneur de la chasce. Et l’un doit mengier assis et l’autre sus piez, l’autre acoudé. L’autre doit boyre, l’autre doit rire, jangler et bourder et jouer, et, brief, touz esbatemenz et leesces. (LC 38: 6-10)

And þe place where þe gederyng shall be maked shuld be in a faire mede, wele grene, where faire trees wexen all aboute, þe one fer fro þat oþir; and a clere well or som rennyng brook besydes. And it is cleped ‘gederyng’ bycause þat all men and houndes for þe huntyng gederen
hem þidder, for þei þat gone in þe quest shuld alle com ageyn in a certane place þat I haue spoke of, and also þe þat parten fro hom. And all þe officers þat parten fro home shuld bryng þiddir all þat hem nedeth, euerychone in his offyce, wele and plenteously, and shuld lay þe towailes and bordclothes all about vpon þe grene gras, and sette diuers metes apon grete plente, aftir þe lordes power. And som shuld ete syttyng, and som stondyng, som lenyng vpon here elbowes. Som shuld drink, and som laugh; som jangle, som borde, som pley; and shortly, do all manere disports and gladnes. (MG 33: 2550-63)

The chapter heading reads, “Si devise comment l’asemlee se doit fere en esté et en yver” (“How þe assemble þat men clepeth gedryng schuld be maked bothe wynter and somer after the gise of by3ond þe see”), but the text contains no suggestions for how to host wintertime assemblies. No matter what the season outside, it would seem that the hunt always takes place in the perpetual summer of romance. It is not clear whether the organizers of the hunt would actually attempt to find or manufacture such a site for the assembly – it seems not inconceivable that the master of game might have a suitable meadow cleared at a convenient distance from the kitchen – or whether the above descriptions merely reflect the powerful influence that romance conventions had on the minds of the writers. Probably both processes were at work.

The banquet could undoubtedly have been held much more comfortably inside the house, but it was the symbolic, and not the practical, value of the ceremony which was important. The “faire mede” fenced in by regularly spaced trees was a hortus conclusus, an earthly paradise, yet one without erotic overtones: the men will be hunting animals, not ladies. The spot was a “garden” of sorts that was (ostensibly) created by nature and, like the original Garden, conveniently shaped for man’s purposes and pleasure. This evidence of nature’s subservience to man was a good portent for the upcoming hunt. The proximity of the forest enhanced the sense of incipient danger and adventure while subjecting the hunt party to nothing more than

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7 Brief instructions for a winter assemblee are to be found in LC 42, “Si devise comment on doit aler leisser corre pour le sangler” [“Here is related how one must chase the boar”]. The corresponding information is not found in Master of Game.
slight inconvenience. Outside the assembly was danger and chaos; inside were all of the amenities of civilized life: luxury, abundance, courtliness.

For the duration of the hunt, the site of the assembly even acted as a temporary “court”: it is here that the lord’s liberality (and excellent silverware) is displayed; it is here that the lord demonstrates his knowledge of the hunt and his power to command subordinates; if there are to be any ladies present at the hunt, they will be here as well. The lord’s influence spreads out in ever-widening rings, represented by the outward radiation of huntsmen on quests. The assembly was, among other things, a symbol of the lord’s social and economic superiority and of his domination over the land and the animals that only he and his favored guests had the right to hunt.

Later, other parts of the forest were transformed into “rooms” of the lord’s “house.” “Bowser” and “loges,” private chambers painstakingly recreated in the forest from woodland materials, sheltered the women from the weather and the intrusive public eye. The final desfaire or undoing of the slain quarry was a large-scale imitation of the ritual of carving at table, with canine instead of human guests and the curee of served on a bloody hide (for the stag) or a litter of straw (for the roe deer) instead of a tablecloth. The hunt was a kind of eversion, an extrusion of the innermost life of the aristocracy into the wilderness.

It is worth noting that the king’s forests were considered an extension of the king’s most private chambers, as in this description from a twelfth-century English treatise on the Exchequer:

In forestis etiam penetralia regum sunt et eorum maxime deliciæ. Ad has enim uenandi causa, curis quandoque depositis, accedunt ut modica quiete recreentur. Illic, seriis simul et innatis curiae tumultibus omissis, in naturalis libertatis gratiam paulisper respirant, unde fit ut delinquentes in eam soli regie subiaceant animaduersioni.

[It is in the forests too that ‘King’s chambers’ are, and their chief delights. For they come there, laying aside their cares now and then, to hunt, as a rest and recreation. It is there that they can put from them the anxious turmoil native to a court, and take a little breath in the free air of nature. And that is why forest offenders are punished only at the King’s pleasure.]


Edward also refers to the hunting stands (or perhaps the temporary shelters built of green boughs) for the royal couple as “chaumbres” (MG 36: 3027-3031).
If these elaborate *tableaux vivants* were to be successful, of course, everyone had to stay in character. There is something rather unnerving about the obsessive scripting, (down to the precise placement of the extras), and something rather intimidating about the demand that each person be joyous in a different way during the assembly. The performance must have required so much concentration from its actors that one might very well wonder whether they were able to enjoy the success of their own spectacle.

Like supplicants or challengers come to King Arthur’s table at Pentecost, the hunters approach the assembly and announce their findings: in essence, they invite the aristocratic members of the hunt party to go on a quest of their own, to follow a mysterious animal through the depths of the forest. The lord or master of the chase confers with the rest of the party as to which is the finest animal, and which one is in the best location: after all, the adventure must not be so difficult that it is exhausts the riders, and the rewards (that is, the size and majesty of the quarry, and therefore the prestige of the hunters) must justify their trouble. This “conference” is also part of the performance, as there is really nothing left to be decided at this point. The manuals instruct the huntsmen to choose their animals carefully:

... s’il met le pié darriere loing de celui devant, c’est bon signe, ou, s’il marche plus large darriere que devant, encore est ce bon signe, quar, quant un cerf s’outremarche, c’est signe qu’il soit cerf errant, legier et bien fuyant et megre, quar, s’il avoit gras costés et flans, il ne se pourroit outremarcher ne surmarcher, et par le contraire si feroit. (LC 35: 10-12)

[... if it puts its hind foot far from its forefoot, this is a good sign; or, if it walks larger behind than before (that is, stretches its hind limbs while walking), again this is a good sign; for when a hart *s’outremarche* [puts its hind feet in front of the tracks made by its forefeet], this is a sign that it is a wandering, light, fleet, and thin hart; for, if it had fat sides and flanks, it wouldn’t be able to *outremarche* or *surmarche* [put its
hind feet on top of the tracks made by its forefeet], but would do the contrary.]

The huntsmen have each selected a fat, slow animal which is guaranteed to give the maximum pleasure in both the chasing and the eating; the lord and his friends need only to choose among these hand-picked specimens.

Once they have eaten, the members of the party mount their horses and set off on a wild chase through frith and fell. When the exhausted animal turns to meet the hounds, it is the lord’s (or his chosen guest’s) privilege to kill it in the most honorable manner possible, which generally meant exposing oneself to a moderate amount of danger, but never too much.

As exciting and spectacular as such a hunt must have been, it was, as we have seen, almost entirely staged. By the time they came to the assembly, the huntsmen would have already identified the number, location, and strength of the animals. During the assembly, the lord or master of the hunt commands that groups of beaters and relays of fresh hounds and men on horseback be placed at strategic points along the beast’s projected route. It was the huntsmen’s duty to make sure that the pack was on the trail of the chosen quarry; the aristocratic hunt party needed only to follow the hounds. A boat was kept at the ready if there was any chance that the animal might be taken in water (LC 45: 230-35). It took enormous skill and experience, not to mention stamina, to keep one’s quarry in sight, but it was the skill of the professional huntsman, not that of his higher-ups. The writers extol certain animals (the stag, the roe deer, the hare) for providing more deduiz (“delights”) than others, because their flight patterns are longer or more unpredictable; yet there would be very little delight in any of these hunts if they were not overseen by a knowledgeable master of game. After such intensive scripting, there were only a few variables left: which way the quarry chose to run, how it behaved when it was cornered, which one of the hunt party
dealt the death blow. One could have all the glory of Tristram with almost none of the trouble.