

Chapter 8

Gawain and the Generic Literary Hunt

After reading a few descriptions of hunting in a few different Middle English romances, one cannot fail to notice that they have a surprising sameness of content and style.¹ A closer look shows that these similarities are attributable to the fact that there is a specific and well-defined standard template to which *all* medieval hunting narratives adhere (a template which I will call “the generic literary hunt”), regardless of whether they are embedded in works which are “literary” or didactic, imaginative or factual, sacred or secular. At the same time, these descriptions are not characterized by the same sort of immutability as, say, the description of a standard romance *locus amoenus* (singing birds, grassy mead, bubbling brook), or that of the resident romance heroine (golden hair, grey eyes, a pleasing slenderness). There is a fair amount of room for authorial maneuvering – nothing is strictly required and although certain elements are standard, they can be dispensed with if the author so chooses – and clever authors find a surprisingly large number of ways to reconfigure and recast the traditional elements.

The anonymous alliterative poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (later 14th c., hereafter SGGK), the quintessential medieval “hunting poem,” is no exception to the above rule. Although SGGK is the only Middle English romance that uses hunting

¹ A few critics have made similar observations, but none have followed up on it. Derek Pearsall suggests that hunting scenes are conventional in Middle English alliterative poetry, but does not give any examples; see “Rhetorical ‘Descriptio’ in ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’,” Modern Language Review 50 (1955): 133. Anne Rooney makes the observation that the boar hunt is highly stylized, with “a recognisable structure repeated from one example [of medieval romance] to another” that is comprised of seven distinct stages: 1) the challenge, 2) the coming together of man and beast, 3) the breaking of the spear and death of the horse, 4) the drawing of the sword, 5) the prolonged fight, 6) the hero’s prayer, and 7) the death of the boar (Hunting in Middle English Literature (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell, 1993) 83-85). I agree with the general outline of Rooney’s analysis of this particular hunt but have identified a number of other mandatory and optional elements; see Appendix B.

scenes as a primary organizing principle, and although its author is far more talented and knowledgeable about hunting than are most of his peers, the poem's hunting scenes differ from those in contemporary works only in terms of complexity and quality, not kind.

Many critics have offered theories for the meaning behind the hunting scenes in SGGK. Most assume that the hunts parallel the concurrent events inside Gawain's bedroom, or that they are an allegory of the human condition. On the other hand, very few critics have considered these literary hunts in relation to the sport they describe, or to the many other hunts which fill the corpus of Middle English romance. In this chapter, I propose a new way of reading the hunts of SGGK, an approach that takes into account one way these scenes might have been interpreted by medieval readers who were well-versed in cynegetical theory and the conventions of hunt descriptions, even if they did not necessarily have first-hand experience on the hunting-field.

In the first half of this chapter, I will describe the salient features of the generic literary hunt as it occurs in Middle English romance. In the second half, I will demonstrate how the Gawain-poet uses this traditional form in several innovative ways: as a structural framework for the exchange-of-winnings and seduction themes, as a way of creating narrative symmetry between the poem's various subplots, and as a reading experience pleasurable on many different levels.

The generic literary hunt.

As Anne Rooney has pointed out, hunting motifs (she defines *motif* as “an integral narrative or thematic element of composition”) are common features of Middle English literature, regardless of genre: “The motifs range from the type of plot-elements familiar from the folkloric studies to sophisticated *topoi* of the kind identified by Curtius. Some are characterised by recurrent verbal formulae and similar

phrasing, some by a character-defining function, while others have comparable narrative sequences.”²

In this section, I will take Rooney’s observation one step further and propose that hunting motifs are more than simple plot-elements or Curtius-style *topoi*. I will argue that, in fact, that hunting narratives formed a body of potential or subjunctive “literature” in their own right, and that authors who used hunting descriptions in their work were engaged in the process of borrowing from, or at least alluding to, this “literature.” I will refer to hunt narratives that occur in works of literature by the general name “the generic literary hunt.” The word *generic* is appropriate in two senses, problematic in at least one. Its usual, unspecialized meaning describes what is undoubtedly the most prominent feature of these hunt narratives: that they have no fixed form, are nonspecific, widespread, and infinitely malleable. Although they can be used to serve any number of narrative or rhetorical functions, some of which will be discussed in the next section, they are also *generic* in the sense that Jonathan Culler uses the word: “A genre, one might say, is a conventional function of language, a particular relation to the world which serves as norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text.”³ The generic literary hunt, I contend, deserves to be recognized as a separate medieval genre because it is precisely the sort of “conventional function of language” that Culler describes, one which serves to orient readers in certain pre-prescribed ways toward the texts in which it is embedded. The one sense in which the word *generic* is somewhat misleading is that it seems to suggest that hunt narratives are free-standing texts, which they are not: no matter how prominent or elaborate they may be, they only occur within other texts.

We might imagine that the purest form of hunt “literature” would have been

² Rooney, Hunting in Middle English Literature 22.

³ Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics and the Study of Literature (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1975) 136.

oral and informal: a first- or second-hand recounting of a single hunt in its entirety. But no medieval work, at least none extant, is *only* a hunt narrative; the closest thing to a “pure” medieval hunt narrative is to be found in didactic or pseudo-didactic literature, the hunting manuals themselves. For the most part, this hunt “literature” is potential and unarticulated. We cannot read it, for it does not exist and may never have existed; rather, we must reconstruct the way it might have appeared in the medieval consciousness by examining the traces it has left in various works of written literature.

It is helpful to think of medieval hunt narratives as occupying a status something like that of traditional European folktales in the era before it became fashionable to record such tales in writing. Both hunting sequences and folktales are common narrative property, recognizable to everyone and theoretically usable by anyone, though only within certain generally recognized restrictions. Although they do not have firmly defined forms (or perhaps it is more precise to say that they have a very large number of possible forms), they are governed by clear-cut rules as regards plot and presentation. Both the literary hunt and the folktale are comprised of a number of narrative elements which can be linked, like train cars, in an almost infinite number of ways. The more elaborate a description or hunt scene is, the more optional elements it tends to employ; conversely, an author who is not particularly interested in describing the hunt in any detail may use the standard elements selectively, combine them, condense them, or omit them altogether. At the same time, in each case there are only a certain number of acceptable elements that can be joined together, and the storyteller is not allowed to invent train cars willy-nilly or put them together in any order that pleases him. The art of describing the hunt, like the art of telling folktales, resides in the skillful treatment of traditional elements, not in the ability to concoct new ones.

We can profitably take this comparison further and analyze the structure of the literary hunt using the methods developed by folklorists to analyze the structure of the folktale, in particular those of Vladimir Propp. In his Morphology of the Folktale,⁴ Propp reports the results of his structural analysis of Russian folktales and suggests that although there are an effectively infinite number of traditional folktales (“wondertales,” “fairy tales”) with widely varying content, they are all reducible to a single “structural type” with multiple possible variations. He calls the narrative elements “functions of characters” or “functions of dramatis personae,” because, as he points out, although the actors may be different from tale to tale, their actions are always the same. Propp identifies four cardinal rules governing the structure of folktales:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.
2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited.
3. The sequence of functions is always identical.
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.

A careful analysis of the structure of hunt narratives shows that the above rules can likewise be used to describe the pre-prescribed form and content of the generic literary hunt.⁵ All generic literary hunts are indeed of one type in regard to their structure, though writers of hunt literature have more creative leeway than do tellers of fairytales.

⁴ Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, trans. Laurence Scott, rev. Louis A. Wagner, American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series 9, Indiana University Research Center in Anthropology, Folklore, and Linguistics 10 (Austin: U of Texas P, 1990).

⁵ In determining the “possible elements” of the hunt narratives found in medieval literature, I have adopted Propp’s sensible method of selective inquiry: “First glance would seem to indicate that it is necessary to cover all extant material. In fact, this is not so. ... the accumulation of material can be suspended as soon as it becomes apparent that the new tales considered present no new functions” (Morphology 23).

The hunter may be Bevis, Tristram, Sir Palomydes, or a nameless poacher. He may be hunting by himself, with a dog or horse, with a companion, and/or with a whole company of men and/or women. He usually hunts deer or boar, traditionally the most “noble” quarry, but he can hunt any sort of animal possible (including a mythical or otherworldly one, or a real but improbably exotic one.⁶ He may be hunting to impress a superior or potential lover, for amusement, or for no discernible reason at all. But regardless of all of these variables, the basic narrative elements of the literary hunt are constant, although there are always local variations and exceptions. Unless it is unexpectedly truncated by other events, the hunt will have a distinct beginning, middle, and (successful or, very rarely, ambiguous) end, and each stage of the hunt will generally follow its own particular pattern. If the author alludes to time at all, the hunt will begin at daybreak and end at sunset.

A corollary to the above rule is the stipulation that there are only a limited number of possible plot elements available to the hunt storyteller. The quarry may escape for a while or turn and kill a few (generally nameless and expendable) companions, but it will never kill the main hunter and, unless it is a numinous animal whose function is to lure the hunter into the Otherworld, it will almost never escape.⁷ The hunter, for his part, will not give up or run away in fear or be distracted from his labors by an inner emotional crisis. If there are many animals, they may be killed by

⁶ For example, reindeer hunts occur in both England (*Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, ll. 115-117) and Calabria (*Ipomadon*, l. 3029). (*Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* is found in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan U, 1995); *Ipomadon*, ed. Rhiannon Purdie (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 2001).)

⁷ The main exceptions to this rule are certain types of perpetual hunts, none of which are common in Middle English romances. One such hunt is the Wild Hunt, in which an unfortunate or damned individual or soul is continually or intermittently pursued by a demonic huntsman. Another perpetual hunt is that of the Questing Beast of the *Morte Darthur*. In fact, we might consider the futile hunt for the Questing Beast to be the purest form of the romance hunt, as it is nothing more than a narrative expedient. It performs all of the narrative functions that romance hunts typically perform – it establishes characters, removes them from the stage, effects meetings and conflicts, and provides neat transitions from one episode to the next – while never pretending to any real narrative of its own. (However, the mournful yet always earnest pursuit of the Questing Beast by Sir Grummore Grummerson and Sir Palomydes does become a narrative motif in its own right.)

subsidiary hunters, but if there is only one animal, it will be killed by the main hunter, without assistance from man or dogs. The hunt may be interrupted by some other narrative exigency or perform some distinct narrative function of its own, but the plot of the hunt itself nevertheless remains quite predictable.

Finally, although there is some chronological variation possible, the basic sequence of narrative elements in the literary hunt is fixed. To some extent, this sequentiality is a logical necessity. A hunter cannot kill an animal before he has found it, and he cannot find it before he has looked for it. But the stylized chronology of the literary hunt presupposes certain conventions of narration which are not based on real-life exigencies or rules of logic. For example, the boar can never be killed outright: it must be chased for a very long time first and often attacked with weapons (which it throws off easily), killing many men and dogs as it goes, before it is killed by the hero's sword thrust. A stag shot by an underhunter will likely keep running, but a stag shot by the hero will always drop dead without further ado. Furthermore, if the hunt is used mainly as a plot device, then still other narrative conventions influence the content of the following episode. If the hunter loses his quarry in the forest, he will come across a numinous being or castle (e. g. Guingamor, Sir Gawain and the Carl of Carlisle); alternately, if the hero completes his hunt successfully but loses all of his companions in the process, something will probably happen to him while he is isolated and unprotected (e. g. Guy of Warwick, Bevis of Hampton). A hunter chasing a white beast will often end up having adventures with a magical component; this kind of hunt motif is common in Breton lays and the romances adapted from them.⁸

⁸ For example, in both Graelent and Guingamor, hunting a white animal (a doe in the first case and a boar in the second) lead the hero to the fairy land and a fairy mistress (Graelent and Guingamor: Two Breton Lays, ed. and trans. Russell Weingartner (New York: Garland, 1985)).

A white hart, followed by a white brachet and thirty couples of black hounds, invades Arthur's court in Morte Darthur (III.1), an episode that begins a series of adventures showcasing the abilities and shortcomings of his knights (The Works of Thomas Malory, ed. Eugène Vinaver and P. J. C. Field, 3rd

As helpful as the comparison between hunting narrative and folktale may be, we must recognize its limitations. The most important difference between the two genres is that the literary hunt necessarily works within much looser constraints than does the folktale. Because it is incorporated into other works and does not stand as an independent form in itself, the literary hunt is not obligated to provide a complete or wholly logical narrative; sometimes it is evocative or lyric rather than strictly narrative,⁹ and sometimes it describes events out of order.¹⁰ The authors seem confident that their readers or listeners will be able to supply the missing elements from their own imaginations and experience (whether that experience be of reading or listening to romances, or of hunting itself), and that they will be able to mentally rearrange the events into the proper sequence when required to do so. On the other hand, as Propp has shown, the sequence of elements in folktales is very rigid: the event *B*, if it is to happen at all, must happen after the event *A*.

Furthermore, there are no required narrative or stylistic elements of hunt scenes or allusions to hunts, though some elements are fairly standard while others are more clearly optional, to be included at the author's discretion. Most hunting descriptions do not include all possible elements and some contain very few. Conversely, there are certain elements which folktales *must* contain: all folktales must

ed., 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990)). For a discussion of this latter episode, see Rooney, [Hunting in Middle English Literature](#) 59-60.

⁹ Two examples of hunt descriptions in which the author merely wishes to establish a mood and not to describe the narrative of the hunt in any detail are [The Greene Knight](#), ll. 405-410 and [Sir Degrevant](#) (Lincoln MS.), ll. 505-512. The former romance is found in [Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales](#), ed. Thomas Hahn; the latter is in [Sir Degrevant](#), ed. von Karl Luick (Wien: W. Braumüller, 1917).

¹⁰ Nonchronological hunt sequences are generally a sign of an author who does not know enough about the hunt to know that he is putting narrative elements out of order. An example of such a description is found in [The Squyr of Low Degré](#), ll. 767-772 ([Middle English Verse Romances](#), ed. Donald B. Sands (New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Toronto, London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966)). I have not yet come across what seems to be a deliberately nonchronological hunt sequence, though such a thing is theoretically possible. More common are examples in which the procedures and ceremonies surrounding the hunt are not presented in the usual order, although the hunt sequence itself remains perfectly chronological (e. g. the hart hunt in [The Carle of Carlisle](#), the boar hunt in [Sir Eglamour of Artois](#)). ([Sir Eglamour of Artois](#), ed. Frances E. Richardson, E. E. T. S. 256 (London: Oxford UP, 1965).)

begin with characters in an initial situation who are confronted with some sort of difficulty, and so on. Hunting descriptions can be simple or elaborate, merely allusive or highly detailed; but all folktales *must* have an abstract and concise style; anything else is evidence of unscrupulous doctoring.¹¹

Although there are a very large number of possible variations of the generic literary hunt, we can identify certain standard features and general tendencies (see Appendix A). A fairly elaborate description of the *chasse a force* consists of four parts: the quest, the chase, the kill, and the undoing. As a general rule, the chase and the undoing are the most heavily emphasized and carefully described, both in the manuals and in the romances, though this distribution varies according to the type of hunt being described. On the other hand, the quest receives a great deal of attention in the manuals but is typically glossed over hunt narratives that occur in other genres.¹²

The text may or may not begin with a description of the night before the hunt, the dawn, or the beauty of the forest, but it generally includes a description, however brief, of the uncoupling of the hounds and the sound of the bugles. Similarly, the description generally ends with the blowing of the *prise* and the barking of the dogs. Very often, the hunter will present the kill to someone (a friend, a beloved, a peer, or a superior); and, more often than not, the day of hunting will end with a banquet. (Middle English romances never include a description of the *assembly* or pre-hunt meal, but Edward of Norwich tells us that this is a French habit, anyway (MG 33: 2540-2541).) Such is the general pattern for the *chasse a force*, regardless of which animal is being hunted; the precise pattern, as well as the narrative pacing and the amount of description devoted to each stage, depend largely on the species of the

¹¹ See Max Lüthi, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, trans. John D. Niles (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982) 19-20.

¹² Rooney, in contrast, asserts that the pursuit itself (the *laisser courre*) is the least important part of the hunt in Middle English literature (*Hunting in Middle English Literature* 6).

quarry. Deer drives and deer stalking follow still other patterns than do deer hunts on horseback. (See Appendices B-E for variations on the general pattern.)

Although there are many ways that the generic literary hunt can be incorporated into texts, most romance writers use it as a fairly unsophisticated narrative tool: a way to manipulate the scene (to remove a character from or put a character on the stage, transport him to another location, or isolate him), plot (to force a meeting or confrontation between two characters or kill someone off), atmosphere (to emphasize the lavishness of the hunting party, the isolation or menace or wonders of the forest, the violence of the final confrontation) and/or as a fairly straightforward way to demonstrate the hero's qualities (strength, courage, prowess with weapons, courtliness, inherent nobility). And, as Anne Rooney notes, the hunt is generally associated with *adventure*, in whatever form it may take.¹³ In the next section, we will examine the multifarious and oftentimes unconventional functions that the generic literary hunt assumes in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

The meaning of the hunts in SGGK has long been a bone of critical contention, primarily because it is difficult for a modern reader to know what to do with them. Consequently, critics have labored to wring meaning out of these scenes, sometimes going fairly far afield in the process. Most critics who have considered the function of the hunts in SGGK have chosen to read them symbolically or allegorically: the hunted animals are representative of the qualities, behavior, or sins of Gawain in particular or of man in general, or of traits which Gawain must avoid in order to maintain his knightliness, or they are meant to remind the reader of heraldic devices; the hunters

¹³ For a discussion of the traditional narrative functions of the hunt in secular Middle English literature, see Rooney, Chapter 3, "Hunting Heroes (and Villains)," in Hunting in Middle English Literature.

represent Lady Bertilak, the Green Man, or Gawain himself; the chase itself is symbolic of Lady Bertilak's pursuit of Gawain (the love-hunt), the Devil's hunt for man's soul, or Gawain's search for knowledge.¹⁴ However, as Anne Rooney sensibly points out, "The diversity of these symbolic readings of the hunts should alert us to their shaky foundations. If the Gawain-poet intended any single, clear symbolic meaning, he has desperately muddled the issue; it is more likely that he didn't intend any of these as the main purpose of the hunting scenes."¹⁵

A few critics have suggested in passing that the Gawain-poet's audience might find hunting an interesting topic in its own right;¹⁶ still others, noting the similarities between SGGK and the hunting manuals, have proposed that the poet might have consulted a manual while writing these scenes.¹⁷ It is true that there are clear and

¹⁴ For a summary of these arguments (pre-1993), see Rooney, Hunting in Middle English Literature 159-165.

¹⁵ "The Hunts in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, ed. Derek Brewer and Jonathan Gibson (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1997) 159.

¹⁶ Geoffrey Shepherd asserts that "[w]e can assume a general interest in hunting on the part of the audience," though he does not give any support for this statement ("The Nature of Alliterative Poetry in Late Medieval England," Poets and Prophets: Essays in Medieval Studies by G. T. Shepherd, ed. T. A. Shippey and John Pickles (Cambridge, Eng.: D. S. Brewer, 1990) 174-175). A. C. Spearing similarly assumes that the poet was a gentleman writing for gentlemen, and that both poet and audience had intimate, though not necessarily first-hand, knowledge of the sport (The Gawain-Poet (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1970) 10, 213-214).

¹⁷ Elisabeth Brewer suggests that the poet might have consulted the manuals of William Twici or Gaston Phébus' Livre de Chasse ("The Sources of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," A Companion to the Gawain-Poet 254); however, see n. 18. Emile Pons suggests something of the same: with only scanty and sometimes questionable evidence (the poet's apparent uncertainty vis-à-vis cynegetical vocabulary and occasional discrepancies in procedure between SGGK and the French manuals), he concludes that the Gawain-poet was not a hunter, that he must have derived his knowledge from "une source livresque" (Pons does not specify which), and, most damning of all, that "la vénerie n'est pas sa passion" (Sire Gauvain et le chevalier vert: Poème anglais du XIVe siècle (Paris: Aubier, 1946) 35-36). John Scattergood suggests that Gawain is tested in terms of the sins of the flesh, particularly sloth, and that "To contemporaries, particularly those who knew the sort of treatises on hunting which apparently provided much of the material for Fitt III, the contrast between sloth and hunting would have been both familiar and significant" because the manuals emphasize that a man protects himself from sloth by being a hunter ("Sir Gawain and the Green Knight and the Sins of Flesh," The Lost Tradition: Essays on Middle English Alliterative Poetry (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000) 110).

Anne Rooney, after examining in painstaking detail the correspondences and divergences between the procedures in SGGK and those in the manuals, suggests a measured (but still speculative) compromise to all of the critics' speculations: "It is unrealistic to imagine that any man of standing attached to a provincial court had never hunted, but it is possible that the poet augmented personal experience with information drawn from a hunting manual" (Hunting in Middle English Literature

compelling links between SGGK and the hunting manuals, though they are not to be found in most of the places that previous critics have looked. The mutual resemblance in terms of content and structure is not necessarily due to the fact that the Gawain-poet imitated the hunting manuals – or, for that matter, that the authors of the hunting manuals imitated poems like SGGK, though this possibility seems as least as likely as the reverse. Rather, it seems to be attributable to the ubiquitousness of the generic literary hunt, the default narrative model even for writers who claim (and no doubt believe) that their writing is objective and their works purely factual. I will not attempt to answer the question of whether or not the Gawain-poet took some or all of his knowledge from hunting manuals, though I suspect that he did not.¹⁸ Nor will I address the question of whether or not the Gawain-poet was himself a hunter: the possible answers to this question are necessarily speculative and, in my estimation, not very interesting.

It seems quite likely that the Gawain-poet did intend for the hunting scenes to carry some sort of symbolic or even allegorical weight; especially convincing are the numerous theories that associate Bertilak's hunts for animals with Lady Bertilak's love-hunt of Gawain. However, I would argue that the poet's interest in hunt

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¹⁸ The arguments that have been given to support such a claim are weak, given the available evidence: SGGK may very well have been written before Gaston's Livre de chasse, and was almost certainly written before Edward's Master of Game – and, furthermore, may have been written before *any* of the major French or English manuals. Most scholars date the poem from some time after the founding of the Order of the Garter in the 1340s. As Livre de chasse was written in 1387 and Master of Game in ca. 1406-1413, there is a chance that the author may have had access to the former work. However, Livre de chasse would have been of very limited utility as a handbook because it says nothing about English practices or terms; this same problem of limited applicability also holds for the earlier French manuals, Livres du roy Modus et de la Royne Ratio (ca. 1354-1376) and Le roman des deduis (1359-1377). The only unquestionably extant English manual at the time of the writing of SGGK is the fourteenth-century text The Art of Venery (ca. 1327), a Middle English translation of William Twici's Anglo-Norman Le art de vénerie (ca. 1323); the probability that this text would have been useful to the Gawain-poet is very low, as it is little more than a list of terms, poorly organized and largely unexplained. If the Gawain-poet were unversed in the art of venery, Twici would not have been much help. There is, of course, the attractive but unverifiable possibility that there were other Middle English hunting manuals that have not survived the centuries.

symbolism (of any sort) was only one factor in his decision to include the hunts in the first place, and perhaps not even the most important factor, at that. I suggest, instead, that the Gawain-poet includes hunting scenes in his poem at least in part because he wishes to satisfy his audience's desire for hunting narratives.

This answer may at first glance seem simplistic, especially since the Gawain-poet is uniquely innovative in his treatment and uses of the hunt. However, it is important to note that he is only innovative within certain limits. He does not alter the structure or content of the generic literary hunt in any way, except to elaborate upon them as far as possible. That he should use a standard pre-existing form is not surprising: it would be far more surprising if he did not. What is noteworthy is that he uses this formula not merely as a decorative embellishment or a minor narrative offshoot, but as one of the structuring principles of his work. Furthermore, and more surprising still, he is able to recognize and make use of the narrative possibilities which are already inherent in the generic literary hunt but which other authors do not fully develop.

The Gawain-poet uses hunting scenes as so many romance writers do: to initiate adventures, set a mood, instigate character interactions, insert plot twists, and demonstrate the skill and courtliness of the hunter(s) in question. The hunts of SGGK are "adventures" which allow other adventures to take place, and which sometimes facilitate the occurrence of those adventures. Thus the hunt removes Bertilak from the scene, "frees" his wife to seduce Gawain, frees Gawain from social obligations so that he is available to be seduced, and provides a foil of noise and violence against which the subtle and civilized (though no less dangerous) bedroom games take place. To more ambiguous effect, the hunts establish Bertilak's near-superhuman physical abilities and impressive knowledge of courtly procedure.

The hunt sequences also serve to enhance the poem's atmosphere of uneasy

foreboding. In SGGK, the chase functions as a temporal marker, a reminder to the reader of just how little time Gawain has left on earth. Directly after the Green Knight's "game" at Arthur's court, time moves swiftly ("And vche sesoun serlepes sued after oþer" ["and each season in turn followed after the other"] (501)¹⁹), the differences between one day and the next so negligible that they do not warrant mention. During Gawain's quest to find the Green Castle, from All Saints' Day to Christmas Day, the previously blurry montage of seasons and landscapes begins to resolve itself into particulars of time and geography and weather, though still the narrator speaks in generalities rather than specifics. He tells of Gawain's lonely nights (693) in "contrayez straunge" ["strange regions"] (713), with rain and sleet forever falling from the sky and monsters rushing down from the hills, but he does not describe any one night or any specific country. As the deadline approaches, time slows down more and more. During the final days, every moment, from daybreak to bedtime, both inside and outside of the castle, is accounted for. The painstaking detail of the hunts is the narrative equivalent of watching the final grains of sand run through an hourglass.

The Gawain-poet uses hunt scenes in many of the same ways as do his contemporaries, but unlike them, he recognizes that they do not have to be mere stylistic touches that serve only to add a bit of color, or associative triggers, or narrative vehicles whose primary function is to propel the main character toward more interesting events. In SGGK, the hunting scenes are integral components of the whole, more so even than most critics have realized. In fact, it seems quite likely that the Gawain-poet may have conceived of incorporating elaborate hunt sequences into

¹⁹ Citations from the text of SGGK will be taken from The Complete Works of the Pearl Poet, trans. Casey Finch (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1993). Translations will be taken from Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, ed. and trans. W. R. J. Barron (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester UP, 1974).

SGGK in the first place at least in part because of the narrative exigencies created by the tripartite temptation game.

The temptation theme, in which a hero renowned for his chastity is tempted by an irresistible maiden (but usually manages to come out all right), is quite common in medieval romance,²⁰ and several of the Middle English Gawain romances duly incorporate this theme.²¹ However, the repeated, multifaceted testing of SGGK, in which Gawain's courtesy, sexual continence, and fidelity are simultaneously put to the test on three consecutive days, has no precedent or analogue in any other extant Middle English romance. By adhering to a consistent narrative template, yet making each day's test slightly different from – and incrementally more perilous than – the last, the Gawain-poet achieves effects which are unavailable to his peers. These effects are possible, in large part, because of his ingenious use of the generic literary hunt.

First of all, the hunt provides the ideal setting for Bertilak's chastity test. In order to preserve the mystery of his own identity until the end, Bertilak cannot be implicated in his wife's behavior, and therefore he cannot orchestrate the tests openly

²⁰ See, for example, Chapter 7, "The Temptation Theme," in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: Sources and Analogues*, ed. Elisabeth Brewer (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 1992).

²¹ This is either particularly ironic or particularly appropriate, depending on how one looks at it, given that Gawain's reputation is for lechery, not chastity. See Larry Benson, *Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1965) 95.

In The Carle of Carlisle, the Carle demands that Gawain get into bed naked with his wife and kiss her three times, without going further; in Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, he puts Gawain to the same test but does not specify the number of kisses which must be given. In both of these romances, the chastity test is only one of several tests of Gawain's character, and in neither case does the Carle have any interest in testing the sexual continence of his knightly guest more than once. Somewhat surprisingly, the author of The Greene Knight (a romance generally considered to be a condensation or poor transcript of SGGK) does not take advantage of the three-day hunting-and-temptation sequence established by his predecessor, presumably because he does not see the point of it. In this version of the story, Gawain and the Greene Knight (who, we are told from the outset, is Sir Bredbeddle in disguise) make a bargain to exchange winnings on only one day; on that day, the lady tempts him only once, kissing him three times as the Greene Knight hunts various animals outside. All three poems are found in Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales, ed. Thomas Hahn. For a comparison of SGGK and The Greene Knight, see Gillian Rogers, "The Grene Knight," A Companion to the Gawain-Poet, ed. Brewer and Gibson.

as he does in other romances. He must come up with a plausible excuse to remove himself from the scene all day, every day. His decision to pursue game in the forest each day is a natural choice, at least from a narrative perspective: any reader of romances knows that when a husband or lover leaves to go hunting, some sort of mischief (usually, but not necessarily, sexual in nature) will happen while he is gone.²²

Conveniently, the generic literary hunt also provides the perfect structure within which a multi-stage temptation game can take place. Its configuration is at once immutable (once a hunter leaves for the day, he must be gone as long as the light lasts) and entirely open-ended (anything can happen while he is gone, a fact to which Lady Bertilak slyly alludes more than once). To put it another way, the adventures of any given day are unrestricted in content, but precisely limited in duration. In its most fully articulated form, the generic literary hunt lasts a full twenty-four hours, from the time the hunter goes to bed on the night before the hunt to the time he goes to bed after the post-hunt banquet. The chase itself begins at first light and it will never be completed – that is, the hunters will never get their quarry or turn back – until the moment the sun goes down. The Gawain-poet does not alter these conventions in any way: Bertilak's hunts of the deer, the boar, and the fox last precisely from cockcrow to sunset, and each one is followed by descriptions of the ensuing banquet, the after-banquet drinking, and the guests retiring to bed. However, because the generic literary hunt is by nature a malleable form, the Gawain-poet is able to expand and contract the hunting scenes to achieve a very precise balance between the events outside and the events inside.²³

²² For a discussion of the theme of seduction or adultery during a hunter's absence, see Rooney, Hunting in Middle English Literature 69-75.

²³ On the first and third days, the number of lines describing the hunt is approximately equal to that describing the seduction. The first day, the generic literary hunt occupies 147 lines (ll. 1126-1178 (53 lines) and ll. 1319-1411 (93 lines)) and Gawain's temptation occupies 139 lines (ll. 1179-1318); the third day, the generic literary hunt again occupies 147 lines (ll. 1688-1730 (43 lines) and ll. 1894-1997) (103 lines)) and Gawain's temptation occupies 162 lines (ll. 1731-1893). The pattern is different on the

Furthermore, the predictably repeated beginning and ending of the generic literary hunt provide ready-made narrative “hooks” by which the individual episodes can be linked to each other. The agreements made at each night’s post-dinner festivities naturally provide the springboard for the next day’s events, the tension of which is neatly resolved before the following night’s feast. There is even an exchange-of-winnings component built right into the generic literary hunt: it is customary for the hunter to present the day’s kill to an honored person (a guest, peer, superior, or potential lover, employer, or patron) and to receive some sort of compensation for his labors.

The generic literary is a form which is comprised of a number of discrete narrative segments, with the most obvious narrative juncture occurring between the hunt proper (the chase of the animal) and the undoing of the quarry (the ceremonies involving the carcass).²⁴ Each of the hunts of SGGK is likewise broken up into two distinct parts, and the poem shifts to the indoor temptation scene during this natural narrative “halftime.” Thus each day’s hunt becomes, in some sense, both a product and a microcosm of the situation as a whole: the hunt actuates and encloses the seduction, in the same way that Bertilak’s (and, ultimately, Morgan’s) machinations both generate and contain all of Gawain’s adventures.

But the Gawain-poet does more than use the basic structure of the generic literary hunt as a clever way to string the three temptation scenes together or to create a pleasing narrative symmetry; he is also, perhaps primarily, interested in extracting new and unprecedented sorts of pleasures out of what is a perfectly standard and

second day, for reasons I am not yet able to explain: the amount of space devoted to the hunt is exactly *twice* that devoted to the seduction: the generic literary hunt occupies 184 lines (ll. 1412-1468 (57 lines) and ll. 1561-1687 (127 lines)) and Gawain’s temptation occupies 92 lines (ll. 1469-1560).

²⁴ The significance of this major disjunction in the hunt narrative is underscored by the arrangement of the chapters in Livre de chasse: in that text, the sections describing the undoing of the hart and the boar are separate from, and occupy a comparable amount of space to, the sections describing the chases of those animals.

ubiquitous form. In his hands, the generic literary hunt provides a pleasurable reading experience on many different levels, entirely aside from any further plot developments that it facilitates or provokes: the pleasure of watching experts at work; the pleasure of learning about an exclusive sport (if one is ignorant of hunting practices) or the pleasure of recognizing what one already knows (if one is not ignorant); the pleasure of feeling like a member of an exclusive group regardless of one's lineage or socioeconomic status; and, not least, the simple pleasure of watching a fast chase or an uncertain fight, an enjoyment enhanced by the Gawain-poet's use of mimesis. Depending on the reader's personal relationship to hunting, he or she might use these scenes in one or more ways: as raw material for personalized fantasies, a reminder of past experiences, or a script for future venetorial performances. In other words, the hunt scenes in SGGK provide for their readers all of the same sorts of pleasures that hunting manuals provide for *their* readers.

Bertilak and his men do everything "by the book" – metaphorically speaking, of course, since the hunting manuals were probably not written yet (see n. 18). Part of the attraction of these sections is attributable to the satisfaction that one gets when watching an expert do anything well: the feats of the world-class pianist, the Olympic athlete, or the exemplary medieval hunter are awe-inspiring even if one does not know anything about, or does not even particularly care for, Mozart, the shot put, or the boar hunt *a force*. Nevertheless, there was an excellent chance that any reader of medieval romances, regardless of his or her own level of experience on the hunting-field, would have not only a keen interest in the sport but also enough experience with conventional hunt descriptions to be able to recognize that Bertilak hunts not merely like an expert, but like a romance hero – the way, in other words, that Gawain himself should be hunting but is not.

The unapologetically technical nature of the hunting sections of SGGK gives

the reader the pleasure of feeling like an “insider,” a member of an elite group of people who are familiar enough with the pastimes of royalty and aristocracy (read: who are themselves noble by birth or privilege, or at least by temperament) that they do not need anything explained to them. Yet at the same time, the Gawain-poet has no interest in speaking to a truly exclusive readership – something he could do quite easily, if he were to overload his descriptions with jargon – merely in creating the illusion of one. If we know how a deer is properly undone, then we can appreciate the fact that Bertilak and his men do it perfectly and that the poet describes the procedure using all the right terms; but if we have no idea how such a thing should be done or talked about, we can still derive pleasure from watching experts at work, and surreptitiously gather useful information at the same time.

There is no doubt that the Gawain-poet includes a good deal of hunting terminology which can be confusing for the nonspecialist reader. By itself, this is not surprising: it is very common practice for romance authors to go out of their way to include technical hunting terms in their works.²⁵ However, SGGK demonstrates a much more extensive knowledge of hunting on the author’s part and assumes a much more extensive knowledge on the reader’s part than do the vast majority of texts which employ hunting scenes, and certainly more than any of the other Middle English romances.²⁶ Although the hunting scenes in SGGK are full of exotic terms,

²⁵ Even and especially if they do not understand the meanings of cynegetical terms. Some authors seem to feel that the inclusion of such vocabulary legitimizes their work and adds a patina of glamour to what is sometimes not the most competent of writing. An example is The Squyr of Low Degré, in which the King of Hungary describes the lavish hunt which he will hold for his daughter (ll. 767-772). In this passage, there are enough technical terms to please even the most enthusiastic reader, but due to the fact that the writer does not understand how to use the terminology, the action is disjointed, the chronology is illogical, and the passage, on the whole, makes very little sense.

²⁶ The hunting procedures in SGGK do not always exactly follow those outlined in the manuals, though such discrepancies can easily be explained as products of regional variation. For a comparison of the hunts of SGGK with those in the manuals, see Rooney, Hunting in Middle English Literature 166-181. The Gawain-poet even seems to have a larger (or perhaps merely a different) knowledge base than do other acknowledged experts of the sport: he uses technical words like “titleres” (l. 1726) which are not found in any of the extant manuals. The Middle English Compendium defines a *titlere* as “[a] hound kept at a hunting station until the quarry approaches”; however, its only example of the usage of this

their usage is perfectly correct, their inclusion never gratuitous, and the poet's decision to use them generally seems to be dictated by the exigencies of alliteration rather than overeagerness or self-aggrandizement; there are many more procedures that he could have described, and many more technical words that he could have used, but he does not. For the most part, these terms do not pose insoluble problems for even the most uninformed reader, as the narratives are quite comprehensible without them. The exceptions to this rule, of course, are the sections that describe the *undoing* or *breaking* (dismembering) of the deer and the boar and the subsequent *curees* (the ritual feeding of the dogs on the meat). In these places, the poet is not parsimonious in his usage of hunt terminology, partly perhaps in order to show off his knowledge of the vocabulary and partly to give the reader the pleasure of reading it, but mostly because the undoing cannot be properly described without it, and there is no point in describing it improperly.

The reader may very well question why the Gawain-poet need describe such things at all, and at such painstaking length; these sections are surely the least pleasurable and most incomprehensible parts of the entire poem from a modern audience's point of view. Critics have offered various answers to this question: some see the "excessive" description as a rhetorical device;²⁷ others have drawn parallels between the bloody undoing of the animals (and especially the beheading of the boar) and Gawain's upcoming meeting with the Green Knight.²⁸ Although it seems quite likely that the poet intends to draw a loose parallel between Gawain and the slaughtered beasts, I argue that his primary motivation for including the undoing

word is the above line from SGGK, suggesting that it might have been a term unique to the Gawain-poet's particular corner of the West Midlands. (Middle English Compendium [computer file], 1998, U of Michigan, 22 December 2004 <<http://ezproxy.library.cornell.edu:2317/m/med/>>.)

²⁷ E. g. Robert Levine, "Aspects of Grotesque Realism in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," The Chaucer Review 17 (1982): 65-75.

²⁸ E. g. Avril Henry, "Temptation and Hunt in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Medium Aevum 45 (1976): 190.

scenes is far more straightforward.

The truth of the matter is that dismembering a dead animal does create a bit of a mess and cannot be done without applying a good deal of force, and that custom dictates that the boar's head be cut off before the rest of the carcass is attended to. In fact, a closer reading of these passages reveals that the breakings are not violent or hasty at all – such would be the mark of an inferior huntsman or a barbarian – merely swift and practiced, with no motion wasted. The descriptions are long and detailed because breaking is indeed a long and detailed process when done properly.²⁹ In any case, their length and detail are comparable to the meticulous recounting of Gawain's arming or of the turning of the year, or of any one of the number of long descriptive passages that fill the text; the difference is that most modern readers find them far less interesting. Yet a glance at any medieval hunting manual will show that the breaking was considered at least as important as, and perhaps even more important than, any other part of the hunt; the seemingly interminable and “excessive” descriptions of breaking in SGGK seem to be a product, at least to some extent, of the likelihood that the Gawain-poet knows what he is about more than do most of his peers. The modern reader's distaste for or ambivalence towards the skilled undoing of animal carcasses is merely proof that he or she is too far culturally and historically removed from the fourteenth century to accept the status of “insider” that the Gawain-poet tries to offer.

The hunting sequences of SGGK offer the reader many pleasures, but the greatest and most obvious sort of pleasure they provide is that which comes from any spectator sport: the simple enjoyment of watching a fast chase, an uncertain fight, or a battle of wits. It may seem like a strangely obvious statement to note that the hunts of

²⁹ Nor are all of these sections equally long. The breaking of the deer takes the most time to narrate; the breaking of the boar is quicker, and the treatment of the fox's carcass is very perfunctory, all of which precisely reflects the relative amounts of time spent in dealing with the carcasses according to contemporary practice.

SGGK are exciting to read (and certainly most critics have found this fact too obvious to warrant mention),³⁰ until one gets a feeling for the generic literary hunt as it appears in romances and realizes that most instances of it are, in fact, not exciting at all. The main exception to the general trend toward a rather careless stylization is the boar hunt. Probably because they were particularly dangerous hunts ending with mortal hand-to-hand combats between man and beast which were reminiscent of single combats between knights,³¹ and probably also because they were originally derived from and modeled on the exploits of the heroes of Classical epic,³² romance writers are interested in the mechanics and ramifications of boar hunts and generally try to make exciting romance episodes out of them. Nevertheless, the boar hunt is a standard trope in Middle English romance that is used primarily to show the strength and prowess of the hero, and only secondarily to provide an enjoyable narrative.³³

Part of the reason why hunting narratives in most romances are so lackluster is because they rarely veer from the formulaic and nonspecific. The events of one day tend to be exactly like those of the next day, and the hunt of one species is rarely any different from the hunt of any other species.³⁴ In other words, most romances do not

³⁰ A few have, although generally only in passing and without attempting to find significance in this fact. See Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 185 and “The Hunts in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*” 158, both citing Spearing, *The Gawain-poet* 212-214; W. R. J. Barron, *Trawthe and Treason: The Sin of Gawain Reconsidered* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester UP, 1980) 3.

³¹ Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 73.

³² See Marcelle Thiébaux, “The Mouth of the Boar as a Symbol in Medieval Literature,” *Romance Philology* 22 (1969): 281-299, esp. 289; J. D. Burnley, “The Hunting Scenes in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*,” *The Yearbook of English Studies* 3 (1973): 6-9.

³³ An interesting permutation of the traditional confrontation between the hero and a menacing boar is found in *The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnelle*. In this romance, Gawain is forced to marry a loathly lady who is so ugly and foul-mannered that she resembles a “sowe” (l. 597) or a boar (ll. 548-556). In *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Hahn.

³⁴ Romance authors who feel the need to include a nonspecific hunting scene generally fall back on the hunt of the red deer (stag, hart, or hind), usually the hunt *a force* but occasionally deer drives or deer stalkings as well; the hunts of fallow deer (buck or doe) and roe deer (roebuck or roe) are far less common. Very few romances include the hunts of any other species. An exception, albeit a questionable one, is *William of Palerne*: in this romance, a “bear hunt” (in fact the hunt of William and Melior, who are disguised as bears) turns into a “wolf hunt” when a friendly werewolf draws the hunt party away from the fleeing couple. (*The Romance of William of Palerne, otherwise known as the romance of “William and the Werwolf,”* ed. W. W. Skeat, E. E. T. S. extra series 1 (London: N.

attempt to be mimetic of the experience of hunting or of watching a hunt first-hand, nor did their readers expect that they would be. The Gawain-poet is one of the few romance authors who recognizes the value in (and probably one of the very few who is capable of) differentiating between the unique amusements and dangers that each kind of hunt, and each species of hunted animal, provides for its practitioners. In SGGK, each day's sport showcases a different set of talents in both wild animals and their

Trübner, 1867).)

Some romances refer to the hunts of more than one species, but generally these various hunts receive only passing mention, and little attempt is made to differentiate between their individual characteristics. For example, Arthur and his men hunt fallow deer, red deer, and reindeer in one case (Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, ll. 103-126), and buck (male fallow deer), boar, hart (male red deer), and hare in another (The Avowing of Arthur, ll. 25-27); the Greene Knight hunts hinds (female red deer), does (female fallow deer), boars, foxes, "and other ravine" (The Greene Knight, ll. 405-409); Sir Degrevant hunts buck (male fallow deer), boar, red deer of both sexes, and hares (Sir Degrevant, ll. 41-44); Troilus hunts boar, bear, and lion (Troilus and Criseyde, III.1780). The authors of such romances are clearly not interested in the hunts themselves: listing various game animals is usually a relatively hamfisted way of imbuing a narrative with a sense of richness and variety, or of padding out a line, or both. The attraction of the "hare"/"bare" [boar] rhyme is apparently irresistible to many authors, even though the hunt of the hare is more characteristic of burlesque than romance. (The Avowing of King Arthur, ed. Roger Dahood (New York and London: Garland, 1984); Geoffrey Chaucer, The Riverside Chaucer, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd ed (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).)

(For two versions of the mock-lament of a hunted hare, see "The Mourning of the Hare" (Cambridge University Library Ff.5.48), Ancient Metrical Tales, ed. Charles Henry Hartshorne (London: William Pickering, 1829) 165-168; "The Hunted Hare" (Cardiff, National Library of Wales, MS Porkington 10), Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries, ed. Rossell Hope Robbins (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952) 107-110. For a seventeenth-century treatment of the same theme but with a tone that is decidedly sympathetic rather than mocking, see Margaret Lucas Cavendish, "The Hunting of the Hare," Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing, ed. Bridget Keegan and James C. McKusick (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2001) 164-166.

Even when a romance describes the hunts of several different animal species in detail, the hunts are usually fairly interchangeable: after all, if a character is destined to have a forest-related adventure or needs to be removed from a scene so that something else can happen, it does not much matter whether he goes out for hart or buck or boar. For example, Arthur first hunts a fearsome boar, then later sends Baldwin out hunting for deer so that he can set up a situation to test Baldwin's propensity for jealousy (The Avowing of Arthur, ll. 1-272, 781-876). At one point, Bevis must fight a monster boar (Bevis of Hamptoun, ll. 739-902); at another, he comes back from hart-hunting (ll. 2395-2396) to find that Josian has been abducted by lions (Bevis of Hampton, Four Romances of England: King Horn, Havelok the Dane, Bevis of Hampton, Athelston, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan U, 1999)).

In the case of a very few romances, there is some narrative or thematic connection between two or more hunts, but even these exceptional romances do not pay particular attention to the differences between the hunts. Eglamour must hunt both a hart and a boar in order to win Christabelle's hand (Sir Eglamour of Artois, ll. 233-342, 349-529); Ipomadon pretends to hunt for three days (he hunts "herttys" in Ipomadon and simply "deer" in The Lyfe of Ipomydon) in order to throw off suspicion while he is attending a tournament in disguise. ([Hue de Rotelande], The Lyfe of Ipomydon, ed. Tadahiro Ikegami (Tokyo: Seijo U, 1983).

human hunters, and provides the reader with a correspondingly different sort of pleasure that is always accurately mimetic of the experience of the hunt, either from a spectator's or a huntsman's point of view.

Deer are vigilant and swift, and harts (male red deer) in particular are “li3t bestes and strong and merueyleslich of gret cunningg” [“swift and strong beasts, and marvelously cunningg”] (MG 3:420-421). The deer drive, in which beaters drive deer toward dogs and archers, was a spectator-oriented hunt designed to showcase the speed of the deer and hounds, as well as the skill of the bowmen. When performed properly, the deer drive provided a grand tableau of fleeing and dying animals, an exciting mélange of sounds and sights. The deer-drive stanza in SGGK accordingly provides the reader with the same sorts of aesthetic pleasures that the deer drive would have provided for its viewers.

þer my3t mon se, as þay slypte, slentyng of arwes;
 At vche wende vnder wande wapped a flone,
 Pat bigly bote on þe broun with ful brode hedez.
 What! þay brayen and bleden, bi bonkkez þay de3en,
 And ay rachches in a res radly hem fol3es,
 Hunterez wyth hy3e horne hasted hem after
 Wyth such a crakkande kry as klyffes haden brusten.
 What wylde so atwaped wy3es þat schotten
 Watz al toraced and rent at þe resayt,
 Bi þay were tened at þe hy3e and taysed to þe wattrez,
 Þe ledez were so lerned at þe lo3e trysteres;
 And þe grehoundez so grete þat geten hem bylyue
 And hem tofylched as fast as frekez my3t loke
 Per ry3t. (ll. 1160-1173)

[There might one see, as they glanced past, the slanting flight of arrows; at each turning in the wood a shaft shot out, their broad heads biting deeply into the brown hides. Ah! They roar and bleed, dying on the hillsides, hounds forever following them in a headlong rush, huntsmen with loud horns hastening after them with a resounding cry as if the rocks were splitting. Any beasts that escaped the bowmen were all pulled down and slaughtered at the receiving stations, having

been hounded from the high ground and driven down to the streams; the men at the lower stations were so skilled, and the greyhounds so large, that they seized them instantly and pulled them down on the spot, in the twinkling of an eye.]

The poet deliberately describes the action not from the perspective of the hunters, but the way that a spectator (the generic “mon” of line 1160 and the “frekez” of line 1172) of the hunt might experience it, as a shifting montage of sensory details. The narrative eye moves back and forth quickly and desultorily, in precise imitation of a human eye attempting to take in all of the variety of a complex and constantly changing scene. In such confusion, there can be no particularity, and consequently the reader experiences all events in the plural. Skillfully chosen alliteration provides added layers of sound and motion to what is an already noisy and chaotic scene, accentuating such phenomena as the hissing sound of the arrows as they move through the air (“se,” “slypte,” “slentyng”), the surging of the maddened dogs (“rachches,” “res,” “radly”), the deafening reverberation of the hunting horn (“crakkande kry,” “klyffes”). Because the eye, when following a moving figure, is unable to accurately register peripheral details, the hunt takes place in front of a blurred and unparticularized backdrop of hills and dales, holts and heaths, banks and streams, each element in uncertain physical relationship to the rest. The enjoyment that the reader obtains from reading about Bertilak’s deer drive is thus mimetic of the enjoyment that the observer of a real-life deer drive was intended to feel: the pleasure of sensory overload, of feeling overwhelmed from every side.

The boar is a different sort of quarry altogether. It is not particularly swift or clever, but it is “a proude best, and a fers, and a perelous” [“a proud, fierce, and perilous beast”] (MG 6:772-773). Consequently, the excitement of the boar hunt *a force* lies in the continual threat of violence and the many opportunities for committing (or, to a lesser extent, watching) acts of exemplary bravery. Romance

authors generally demonstrate the danger of their boars through rather flat-footed overstatement: the animal may kill more than a hundred hounds (Guy of Warwick, 14th-c. version, l. 6725), or the hunter may find the dried husks of unfortunate men littered throughout the forest (Bevis of Hampton, ll. 778-780; Sir Eglamour of Artois, ll. 367-369), or he may battle with it for three and a half days (Sir Eglamour of Artois, l. 399).

In contrast, the Gawain-poet creates a sense of danger and anticipation through mimesis rather than hyperbole, and the description of the boar hunt is imitative of the confusion that must have been characteristic of these kinds of hunts. There is no particularity to the scene: men and dogs act as a group rather than as individuals (“al in a semblé sweyed togeder” [“they rushed together all in a pack”] (1428)), sounds are confused (“þe rocherez rungen about” [“the rocky hillsides round about echoed”] (1427)), and things happen so quickly that there is no way for the reader to distinguish between one event and the next. This confusion, like that of the day before, mirrors the lack of particularity in perception that is symptomatic of the human eye trying to watch too many things at once or the human ear trying to hear too many things at once.

However, the rhythm of the boar hunt is perceptibly different from that of the previous day in certain key ways. In place of the multifarious, impersonal, and continuously shifting nature of the deer drive – multiple hunters shooting multiple arrows into multiple deer – the chase of the boar is highly particularized (there is only one boar), episodic (the boar alternates between fleeing and turning at bay), and often localized. The animal is not driven toward the hunters by lackeys, to be shot at leisure; it must be found in the midst of the wilderness and then chased through rough terrain, which it will use to its own advantage if it can. The landscape, in other words, is not merely a backdrop for the action: it *is* part of the action, and the poem pays

attention to it accordingly. Thus, for example, the boar turns at bay for the first time in a minutely described corner of the forest,

... Bitwene a flosche in þat fryth and a foo cragge.
 In a knot bi a clyffe at the kerre syde,
 Peras þe rogh rocher vnrydely watz fallen,
 Pay ferden to þe fynding, and frekez hem after.
 Pay vmbekesten þe knarre and þe knot boþe, ...
 Penne þay beten on þe buskez and bede hym vpryse (ll. 1430-1434, 1437)

[... between a pool in the wood and a forbidding crag. In a thicket beside a cliff, at the edge of a marsh, where the rugged hillside had tumbled down in rough confusion, they proceeded to the find, and the men followed them. The hunters cast about both the crag and the thicket, Then they beat the bushes, and called on him to rouse out ...]

The landscape is full of particulars – the *flosche*, *fryth*, *cragge*, *knot*, *clyffe*, *ker*, *rogh rocher*, *knarre*, and *buskez*, some of which are probably synonyms for others – and yet it is impossible to combine these features to form a coherent picture. We cannot visualize the scene in the same way that we can see Arthur’s hall or Castle Bertilak because we are seeing through the eyes of huntsmen who are too terrified and preoccupied to get much more than a general sense of where they are and to take note of the hazards of their surroundings: fallen rocks, bushes hiding terribly dangerous quarry.

It is not until the boar turns at bay for the final time that the noisy and chaotic scene becomes suddenly focused and still, precisely imitating the sharpening and focusing of the senses, as well as the oddly slowed-down perception of time, which so often accompany particularly dangerous or critical situations.

Til þe kny3t com hymself, kachande his blonk,
 Sy3 hym byde at þe bay, his burnez bysyde.
 He ly3tes luflych adoun, leuez his corsour,

Braydez out a bry3t brond and bigly forth strydez,
 Foundez fast þur3 þe forth þer þe felle bydez.
 Þe wylde watz war of þe wy3e with weppen in honde,
 Hef hy3ly þe here; so hetterly he fnast
 Pat fele ferede for þe freke, lest felle hym þe worre.
 Þe swyn settez hym out on þe segge euen,
 Pat þe burne and þe bor were boþe vpon hepez
 In þe wy3test of þe water. Þe worre hade þat oþer,
 For þe mon merkkez hym wel, as þay mette fyrst,
 Set sadly þe scharp in þe slot euen,
 Hit hym vp to þe hult, þat þe hert schyndered
 And he 3arrande hym 3elde and 3edoun þe water
 Ful tyt.
 A hundreth houndez hym hent,
 Pat bremely con hym bite;
 Burnez him bro3t to bent
 And doggez to dethe endite. (ll. 1581-1600)

[... until the knight himself came up, urging on his mount, and saw him standing at bay, his followers surrounding him. Dismounting agilely, and letting his horse go, he drew a bright sword and strode forward powerfully, rapidly hastening over the ford to where the fierce beast stood at bay. The animal caught sight of the man with sword in hand, his bristles stood erect, and he snorted so fiercely that many were afraid for the knight, lest he should get the worst of the fight. The boar rushed straight at the knight, so that man and beast fell in a heap in the swiftest part of the stream; the latter had the worst of it, for the man, aiming directly at him, at their first encounter, firmly planted the sharp blade right in his throat, drove it up to the hilt, so that it cleft the heart, and, snarling, he gave in, and was quickly swept downstream. A hundred hounds seized him, biting him fiercely, the men dragged him to the bank, and the dogs finished him off.]

The tone and tempo of this final stanza switch back and forth between deliberate and frenzied so as to always maximize the sense of danger. The first five lines move with almost agonizing slowness: every action is foregrounded, isolated, and brightly illuminated, all the more riveting because the scene is uncannily silent. The earlier rapid and relatively unparticularized action of the boar hunt is replaced by a deliberate unfolding of events, each line describing only one or two individual movements:

Bertilak rides up, takes in the scene, dismounts, pulls out his sword, and wades through the stream toward the animal, which has apparently been perfectly silent and motionless while waiting for his approach. The line-by-line breakdown of events slows down the action dramatically and forces us to follow it with the same attention and heightened anticipation as do the huntsmen themselves. Then, for a moment, the pace becomes frenetic (“Þe swyn settez hym out on þe segge euen,/ Þat þe burne and þe bor were boþe vpon hepez/ In þe wy3test of þe water”) and sounds once again become audible (the splashing water, the snorting boar) in order to underline the physical danger and uncertainty of the situation. Bertilak is fated to win the contest, however, and time slows down once again and the noise ceases at the moment of the kill so that we can savor his consummate technique without distraction: he aims, places the point of the sword in the hollow of the boar’s throat, pushes in the blade, and cleanly pierces its heart so that it falls dead into the water; no romance hero ever did better, and some have done worse. With the danger gone, the pace abruptly quickens for the last time and the previously nearly static scene explodes into visual and aural confusion. After the almost overwhelming buildup of tension, the sudden noise and violence are a relief.

The fox hunt, unlike the deer drive, ranges over too wide of an area for its chase to qualify as an exciting spectator sport; and, unlike the boar, the fox is too small and weak for the kill to hold much excitement for its participants.³⁵ The hunter matches his wits – rather than his quickness or his strength – against the fox, which is

³⁵ The fox hunt *a force* of SGGK is singular in the corpus of Middle English romance and nearly so in the corpus of Middle English literature as a whole; a rare exception is the generalized account of a fox hunt that appears in *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ll. 813-830 (quoted in Rooney, *Hunting in Middle English Literature* 180). Medieval literature contains a few accounts of, or references to, digging or smoking foxes out of their earths, but it must be emphasized that these were methods of vermin control, not sports. For a theory on the link between the practice of digging out foxes and SGGK, see Marcelle Thiébaux, “Sir Gawain, the Fox Hunt and Henry of Lancaster,” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 71 (1970): 469-479. Generally, fox hunts, like hare hunts, are informal and slapstick affairs: see, for example, the stories of Reynard the Fox or *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, ll. 3375-4591.

an animal “so gynnous and so sotil þat neþer men ne houndes may putte no remedy þerto, ne may nat kepe hem of her fals turnes” [“so cunning and so subtle that neither men nor hounds may provide relief from them or prevent them from committing false deeds”] (MG 8:1095-1097). The excitement in this hunt lies in its rapid-fire pace and delightful confusion, its frequent near misses and temporary disappointments, the same pleasures that SGGK duly transmits to the reader.

The reader observes the fox hunt not solely from the perspective of a spectator (as with the deer drive) or that of a pursuing huntsman (as with the boar hunt) but from that of an omniscient observer who is able to observe the hunters, the snarling pack, and the fleeing fox in turn; these rapid shifts of perspective echo the sudden twists and turns of the hunt itself. In the first stanza alone, our view switches from the hunters uncoupling the hounds and blowing their horns (ll. 1697-1698) to the hounds on the fox’s trail (ll. 1699-1703), the fox scampering ahead (l. 1704), the baying pack (ll. 1704-1706), the clever dodging of the fox (ll. 1707-1712), its confrontation with three greyhounds (ll. 1713-1714), and its retreat (ll. 1715-1718). In the previous two hunts, the quarry was invisible to the reader for as long as it was invisible to the spectators and hunters themselves, but this time we can watch the fox, which “trantes and tornayeez” [“dodged and doubled back”] (l. 1707), as well as the “wyles” (l. 1700) of the following hounds. Despite our privileged point of view, however, everything moves so quickly and is so confused that the chase appears as little more than a series of momentary and half-glimpsed scenes, with only the occasional particular: a baying hound (l. 1701), a hedge by a little ditch (l. 1709), a dog seizing the fox as it recoils from Bertilak’s sword (l. 1903).

All of the hunts are noisy, but the fox hunt is the noisiest and most relentless of them all. The pack of dogs is described twice as a *rael* (ll. 1703, 1899), a word that suggests both physical and aural pandemonium. The dogs do not merely bark; they

snarl (l. 1702), call to each other (1701), “greet” (“3ayned,” l. 1725) and insult (“wre3ande,” l. 1706) the fox. The men do not merely blow their horns, as they have done on the previous days: they yell, threaten the fox, call him a thief (l. 1725). After the fox is killed, the baying, shouting, and horn music is deafening. During the course of the boar hunt, the sound was enough “þat the rocherez rungen aboute” [“that the rocky hillsides round about echoed”] (l. 1427); the noise of the deer drive was even louder, as the hunters blow their horns “[w]yth such a crakkande kry as klyffes haden brusten” [“with a resounding cry as if the rocks were splitting”] (l. 1166). But during the fox hunt, the combined din of the men and dogs seems to be enough not merely to shatter, but even to topple, the surrounding mountains, “[a]s alle þe clamberande clyffes hade clatered on hepes” [“as though all the clustering crags had come clattering down in heaps”] (l. 1722); the alliteration of the line adds its own clatter. The din adds not only to the general confusion but also to the pervasive feeling of joyousness: it is, the Gawain-poet says, “list vpon lif to lyþen þe houndez” [“good indeed to hear the hounds”] (l. 1719), “þe myriest mute þat euer mon herde” [“the merriest cry that ever was heard”] (1915).

In earlier chapters, I demonstrated the ways in which the hunting manual transposes ordinary gestures and scenes into romance space and thereby allows its readers to imagine themselves as romance heroes and heroines. In some ways, the mimesis of *SGGK* does precisely the opposite work: it transports the reader directly into the space of the romance, allowing him or her to experience all of the pleasure of the hunt without any of its dangers or disappointments.