

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: the culture of the hunt and Shakespeare

In the British Museum, a magnificent Assyrian frieze depicts a royal lion hunt. The climactic moment of the hunt features the king Ashurbanipal killing a wounded lion. The roaring beast, an arrow lodged in its forehead, lunges at the king, who extends his left arm to ward off the attack, and with his right arm plunges a sword through its chest. The faces of king and lion are level with each other, only a foot apart, and they stare directly into each other's eyes. The rigid and almost hieratic pose of the combatants suggests primal conflict: this is the most powerful of the beasts against the most powerful of men. Despite the closeness of the two in magnificence and stature, however, the power of Ashurbanipal is triumphant. He stands erect, utterly unmoved by the assault. His face betrays no emotion, unless it be the slight suggestion of a smile. His extended arms, massive yet calm in their strength, literally stop the lion dead. The frieze, like the hunt it depicts, serves to define and glorify the power of the king.

An Assyrian frieze from the seventh century BC may seem a peculiar starting point for an exploration of the Elizabethan and Jacobean culture of the hunt. Yet its central image, which evokes with such elemental force the dominance of the king over nature, foreshadows one of the most powerful Jacobean representations of the hunt, that of *Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales and Sir John Harington*. In this painting (fig. 1), the stern young prince, with a huntsman, horse, and greyhound just behind him, sheathes his sword after executing a symbolic *coup de grâce* to a fallen deer, its antlers held by the young Lord Harington, who rests on one knee.¹ At the time of the painting, Prince Henry was nine years old.

Despite the two thousand years that separate them, the Assyrian and Jacobean images have much in common: both use the hunt to celebrate royal power and, more specifically, royal power over wild nature. In the painting of Prince Henry, the elemental conflict depicted in the Assyrian frieze has been elaborated and invested with distinctively Jacobean

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)



- ¹ Robert Peake, “Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales and Sir John Harington” (1603).
The nine-year-old prince sheathes his sword after symbolically decapitating a
dead deer.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)*The culture of the hunt and Shakespeare*

3

significance. The beast hunted is no longer the lion but the deer, the noblest of animals routinely pursued as game in a land unhappily deprived of lions, wolves, or, for the most part, boar. The supreme hunter is not the king himself but the prince, whose youth makes the action seem a rite of initiation. The solitary conflict between ruler and animal is replaced by the image of the ruler surrounded by helpful and obedient human and animal companions: friend, huntsman, horse, and dog. The climactic action, moreover, is no longer a stab through the chest but a ceremonial assault upon an animal already dead. Despite these differences, the essential import of the two images remains very much the same: the painting, like the frieze, demonstrates and celebrates royal power. In the portrait of Prince Henry, that power extends to humans, both aristocratic and common, to domesticated animals, to wildlife, to the forested landscape in the background, and, one might add, to the viewer, whose gaze is returned head-on by the stern eyes of the young warrior-prince. In Peake's painting, one might say, the viewer plays the role of the lion in the Assyrian frieze, stopped dead not by the out-thrust arm but by the penetrating gaze of the prince.

From the Middle Ages to the end of the seventeenth century in England, hunting was one of the most significant royal activities and manifestations of royal power. "To read the history of kings," observed the democrat Tom Paine in the eighteenth century, "a man would be almost inclined to suppose that government consisted of stag hunting."² During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, every English monarch except Edward VI and Queen Mary hunted throughout his or her reign, either regularly or obsessively. As a young king, Henry VIII hunted so often and so hard that one member of the court complained to Wolsey that he spared "no pains to convert the sport of hunting into a martyrdom."³ Queen Elizabeth was still hunting at the age of sixty-seven, as is shown by a letter from Rowland Whyte to Sir Robert Sidney on 12 September 1600. Whyte, writing from the palace at Oatlands, informs Sidney that "her majesty is well and excellently disposed to hunting, for every second day she is on horseback and continues the sport long."⁴ James I so immersed himself in hunting when king of England that his recreation occasioned serious religious, political, and popular protest. Hunting was also an important recreation for Charles I, who was introduced to the sport by his father at the age of four.⁵ Charles II remained true to his father and grandfather in his devotion to the sport, continuing to hunt at least until three years before his death at the age of fifty-five.⁶ Among the tasks facing Charles during the Restoration was the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

re-establishment of the royal parks, forests, and herds, many of which had been damaged or destroyed as symbols of royal and aristocratic privilege during the Civil Wars.⁷

Throughout the reigns of the Tudors and Stuarts, then, hunting was an important part of the life of the court, and of the aristocratic households connected with it. It existed in a variety of modes and served a variety of purposes. It provided a regular source of exercise and recreation. It served as entertainment for foreign visitors. It amused the monarch on progress, both as a diversion en route and as a subject for pageantry provided by the owners of estates. It served social purposes as simple as informal recreation (if any action involving a monarch can be called informal), or as complex as court ceremonial. Images of the hunt surrounded the monarchy and nobility of the period, appearing in their plate, their tapestries, their paintings, their statuary, their poems, and their masques. Stirling Castle, the birthplace of James I, still features a statue of the goddess Diana on its exterior wall and a clear view from its interior down to what in James's time was a hunting park below. Queen Elizabeth's palace of Nonsuch included a grove of Diana with a fountain depicting Actaeon turned into a stag.⁸

Although the pictorial tradition of the hunt is rather thin in Tudor and Stuart England, a number of images confirm the importance of the sport as an emblem of monarchical power. Queen Elizabeth was apparently never painted as a huntress, despite her association with Diana, goddess of the hunt, but she appears prominently in three woodcuts in George Gascoigne's 1575 edition of *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (two are reproduced as figs. 2 and 3). In the Jacobean court the hunt took on dynastic significance, providing memorable images of many members of the royal family. A 1603 painting of the Princess Elizabeth by Robert Peake shows a hunting scene in the background (fig. 4). Peake's hunting portrait of Prince Henry, previously mentioned, was produced in two versions. A 1617 painting by Paul van Somer features Anne of Denmark in royal hunting attire, standing beside her horse and holding her dogs by a leash (fig. 5). Although James himself seems not to have been painted as a huntsman, his image in the role was kept alive in the 1611 edition of the most important hunting manual in the period, George Gascoigne's *The Noble Arte of Venerie*; in that edition two of the three images of Queen Elizabeth and her ladies-in-waiting that had appeared in the 1575 edition were cut out and replaced with images of James and his pages (one is reproduced as fig. 6).⁹

The continuing popularity of the hunt among the monarchs of



2 Queen Elizabeth at a hunt assembly. From [George Gascoigne], *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575).

England cannot be explained merely as personal inclination or even as family tradition. The easy substitution of James for Elizabeth in the images of *The Arte of Venerie* highlights the fact that the monarch's role was more important than any personal views he or she might have towards hunting. Because of its legal status, the hunt was deeply intertwined in conceptions of the royal prerogative itself. The very definition

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)



3 Queen Elizabeth taking the assay. From [George Gascoigne], *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1575).

of a forest provided by John Manwood in his *Treatise of the Lawes of the Forest* (1615) suggests the convergence of real and symbolic power in the role of the monarch as hunter: “A forest is a certaine Territorie of woody grounds and fruitful pastures, priviledged for wilde beasts and foules of Forest, Chase and Warren, to rest and abide in, in the safe protection of the King, for his princely delight and pleasure . . .”¹⁰ The law

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The culture of the hunt and Shakespeare

7



- 4 Robert Peake, “Elizabeth of Bohemia” (1603). Hunting (right background) is juxtaposed with intimate conversation (left background).



5 Paul van Somer, “Anne of Denmark” (1617).

of the forests, which originated with the Norman kings and was separate from the common law, gave the monarch sole authority over every forest in the kingdom and all of the so-called beasts of forest, chase, and warren within them. According to this definition, forests were essentially wildlife preserves for the royal hunt. The right to hunt in a forest could

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)



6 James I taking the assay. From [George Gascoigne], *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting* (1611).

only be conferred by the monarch, and even the right to hunt in the boundaries of the forest, the so-called *purlieu*, was restricted to those of superior wealth and rank. Even the establishment of a private game park required a warrant from the monarch.¹¹

Hunting was restricted not only by the forest law but by the innumerable game laws that were enacted throughout the period. Whereas the forest law privileged the monarch over all others, even his greatest peers,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-80070-9 - Shakespeare and the Hunt: A Cultural and Social Study

Edward Berry

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the game laws aligned the monarch with the privileged elite whose property and interests they were designed to protect. The game laws, as Roger B. Manning notes, “made crimes of hunting without a sufficient estate, hunting at night or in disguise, breaking into a park, or being in possession of hunting weapons, nets, or hunting dogs.”¹² Under James I, in particular, who vigorously asserted his royal prerogative in relation to the hunt, these laws became highly controversial. Throughout the entire period hunting served as a considerable source of social tension, involving in various ways the complex and sometimes conflicting hierarchies of wealth, rank, and ownership of land. Since all hunting was ultimately within the warrant of the monarch, the monarchy was necessarily at the symbolic and legal center of such social conflict.¹³ Not until the Game Act of 1671 did the squirearchy begin to dominate the sport as it did throughout the eighteenth century, giving rise to Blackstone’s quip that “the forest laws established only one mighty hunter throughout the land, [but] the game laws have raised a little Nimrod in every manor.”¹⁴

The social tensions within the culture of the hunt are apparent even in works that one might expect to represent a stable and coherent point of view. Gascoigne’s *The Noble Arte of Venerie* is for the most part a straightforward translation of a French hunting manual, giving directions on the care of dogs, the blowing of horns, and the methods used to hunt fifteen different animals. The dominant tone of the work is celebratory. The 1575 edition features three original woodcuts of Elizabeth as a huntress and a preface, also original with Gascoigne, that justifies hunting in highly conventional terms. In his emphasis upon the nobility of hunting, however, Gascoigne situates himself in a way that reveals the ambiguity of his own relationship to the sport. At the end of a prefatory poem that celebrates hunting, his praise of the nobility of the sport is fraught with ironic tension. Hunting, he concludes, is

A sport for Noble peeres, a sport for gentle bloods,
The paine I leave for servants such, as beate the bushie woods,
To make their masters sport. Then let the Lords rejoyce,
Let gentlemen beholde the glee, and take thereof the choyce.
For my part (being one) I must needes say my minde,
That Hunting was ordeyned first, for Men of Noble kinde.
And unto them therefore, I recommend the same,
As exercise that best becommes, their worthy noble name.¹⁵

Gascoigne reveals in this passage the ironies within his own social position. As a gentleman, he is at one remove from both the servants, who