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Blowing the Morte: The Rites of Manhood in William Rayner's *Stag Boy*

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Abstract

William Rayner's young adult novel *Stag Boy* (1972) is often discussed in surveys of children's literature as a classic title, but it has received little probing critical attention. This article argues that the novel uses its narrative of a boy's psychic association with a giant stag as an allegory for the transition from boyhood into manhood. In a detailed close reading of the novel, and following the model of the love chase of medieval romance, it is shown how the author borrows key elements from folklore (the shaming ritual of the stag hunt), myth (Herne the Hunter), and quest romances (the motif of the joust) to develop a highly symbolic tale of mental growth and triumph over limitations. This makes *Stag Boy* a key text in the literary tradition that uses the theme of animal metamorphosis as a trope for addressing the conflicts of male adolescence.

Additional Keywords

Stag Boy; William Rayner; masculinity; joust; Herne the Hunter; animal metamorphosis; quest romance; love chase; stag hunt



FOLLOWING THE MORTÉ:
THE RITES OF MANHOOD IN
WILLIAM RAYNER'S *STAG BOY*

CHRISTOPHE VAN ECKE

WILLIAM RAYNER'S YOUNG ADULT NOVEL *Stag Boy* (1972) is an elusive quarry. Although the book is held in high regard by critics and is regularly touched upon in thematic surveys of young adult fiction (e.g., Bramwell 45-47; Hogan 200-201; Kokkola 145-151; Lassén-Seger 53-54), the book appears not to have enjoyed sustained analysis. And unlike several other popular classics from the era, it is not currently in print. There are good reasons, however, for revisiting this modern classic. Drawing on a broad reservoir of pagan and Christian lore, the novel develops an allegorical tale about a young man's coming of age in which he must learn to balance physical strength with morals and kindness. In our current cultural climate, where masculinity is often framed as problematic and traditionally masculine traits in boys are increasingly devalued and disapproved of, this gives the novel particular resonance. Because it mobilizes ancient narrative tropes and archetypal imagery, *Stag Boy* addresses the question of becoming a man with the timeless flair of myth. While nearly five decades old, the novel is anything but a period piece and its message seems as relevant today as it was in 1972, when the explosion of feminism onto the cultural scene had made it inevitable that traditional concepts of masculinity would be questioned—also in the minds of teenage boys who were (and are) only just on the brink of manhood.

Stag Boy's protagonist is Jim, a boy of fifteen who returns to the farm of the Yeandle family in Exmoor where he spent most of his childhood. After his father died, Jim and his mother moved to Wolverhampton, but because Jim is suffering from increasing bouts of asthma, he is sent back to the moors for health reasons. This reunites him with Mary Rawle, the childhood friend with whom he had always been quietly in love. But Mary has fallen under the spell of Edward Blake, a doctor's son of seventeen who is both tall and athletic, and with whom Jim feels he cannot compete. One day, Jim happens upon an ancient passage-grave under a recently uprooted tree. Inside, he discovers a rusted helmet mounted with antlers. He soon finds that, when he puts it on, he is psychically transported into the mind and body of a powerful stag that is being hunted in the area. As his power over the animal grows, Jim repeatedly guides

it to Mary's house to woo her, gradually allowing her to share the secret of his alliance with the beast. He also uses the animal to engage in a stand-off with Edward, his rival in love. As the hunting season draws to a close, however, it is time for the stag to surrender to the hunting party, and Jim must withdraw from the animal in order not to be killed along with it. Because the helmet's magical hold over Jim is too strong for him to release himself, Mary has to put on the helmet and break its spell for him. This sets Jim free, but at the same time the stag is killed.

Stag Boy is remarkable for its complex layers of symbolism. By constructing the novel's narrative around a stag hunt, Rayner connects to a poetic tradition that harks back to the Middle Ages, when the hunt was often used as a model for narrative structure. Marcelle Thiébaux has investigated this phenomenon in her book, *The Stag of Love* (1974), where she argues that "in an elaborated form, the hunt offers a narrative pattern of quest and conflict, with a dénouement" (49). Narratives modelled on the hunt could take many forms, but "in its developed literary form the hunt became a Journey upon which the protagonist was swept more or less irresistibly, impelled as he was by his desire for the quarry. [...] All that he did marked stages in the hunt's progress and in his own" (56). As such, the protagonist's Journey became a transformative experience that usually ended with the capture of the quarry, although sometimes the hunter might himself become the hunted or the hunt would remain unresolved (in which case both the quarry and that which it symbolises are not obtained). Possibly the most popular mode of hunt symbolism was that which portrayed the pursuit of the beloved as analogous to the hunt: a love-chase whose cultural roots go back to classical models (103-104).

As a coming of age story in which the boy protagonist's psychological development towards self-confidence, including winning the heart of his beloved, is organised around the trope of the stag hunt, *Stag Boy* is clearly modelled on this tradition. In what follows, I will perform a detailed close reading of the novel to map out the intricate ways in which the symbolism of the stag hunt structures both the narrative and Jim's psychological development. First, the central antagonisms that structure what one might call the novel's overall psychic geography will be mapped out. Once this scene is set, the key tropes that are woven into the narrative fabric will be investigated. These are: first, the calling of Jim by the mysterious helmet, which sets him off on his Journey of self-discovery; second, the stag hunt as a narrative and symbolic structuring device; third, the novel's modelling of its central conflict on a tournament of jousting knights such as can be found in quest romances; fourth, Mary's role as a modern variant on the virtuous maiden of medieval romance; and finally, the analogy that is suggested in the novel between the stag and the unicorn. In the final section, all the threads will be drawn together to illuminate

the intricate symbolic unity of the novel as a form of contemporary quest romance in which the protagonist must transition from boy to man. The novel, in short, is an allegorical quest for manhood.

THE LAY OF THE LAND: MAPPING THE NOVEL'S PSYCHIC GEOGRAPHY

In its opening chapter, *Stag Boy* (henceforth *SB*) carefully lays out the archetypal structure of its narrative by establishing a number of dualisms. The central opposition is that between Jim, who is weak, and Edward, his rival in love who is strong. Jim "hated the asthma that sometimes attacked him. It made him feel ashamed not to be able to control his own body. It was as if there were another creature inside his chest [...] that could bully him when it chose, cripple him, even lay him low" (*SB* 13). Jim experiences "a choking anger at being shut up in such a poor thing of a body. [...] His spirit, if it could only get free, he felt sure would be as strong and wild as a hawk" (*SB* 18). Interestingly, the boy's physical weakness is here associated with a second opposition between spirit and body. The asthmatic body is associated with lack of control, shame, and the spirit being shut up. Of course, once Jim's spirit inhabits the mind and body of the stag, these terms are inverted: his spirit now controls an incredibly powerful body, he feels pride in his power rather than shame, and his spirit is free to roam the countryside along with the stag. If the asthma is like an alien force living in his chest, Jim himself will become such an animating force living in the stag's chest.

In counterpoint to Jim, Edward is "tall and strongly made, a good rugger player and a first-rate horseman. He was many things that Jim was not" (*SB* 15). Every time he is in Edward's company, Jim is "overborne by the sheer physical presence of the boy, by the assurance of his manner, even by the deep notes of his voice" (*SB* 16). But Edward is also a doctor's son, while Jim's parents are working-class. This introduces a further dualism along the lines of social class. Now that she is a widow, Jim's mother has to work two jobs to make ends meet. Jim is acutely aware of the sacrifices his mother makes on his behalf, while "Edward's sweaters and slacks and suits and his expensive riding-gear had cost nothing more than money, in a house where there was plenty of money" (*SB* 17). Both his physical weakness and his inferior class position are psychological injuries that Jim will overcome by assuming the powers of the beast. These dualisms are finally enveloped in a more general opposition between the ancient and the modern. The return to Exmoor signals for Jim a return to the site of his childhood. Jim feels attached to nature and to the ancient, which for him are infused with a sense of the real. This connection to the region is partly conveyed through the topographical attention to detail in Rayner's description of the novel's setting. Many of the places and landmarks mentioned in the novel (such as villages, rivers, or prehistoric sites) are real and can be traced with precision on any detailed map of the area. This infuses the novel with an acute sense of

place. In counterpoint to Jim's alliance with nature and history, Mr Rawle, a neighbouring farmer who is also Mary's father, has recently become very rich "by letting out his fields to the tents and caravans of summer tourists rather than by growing crops. He was a farmer of tourists now — tourists and battery hens" (SB 15). Mr Rawle has converted his farm to modern industrial standards of fowl breeding and has converted good barley land to camping grounds. While Edward approves of Mr Rawle's capitalist enterprise, Jim loathes it. Unsurprisingly, Mr Rawle is distant towards Jim and prefers Edward as a companion for his daughter.

Taken together, these several dualisms structure the spiritual lay of the narrative land of the novel by pitting the weak (Jim, rural life, nature, tradition) against the strong (Edward, capitalism, industry, modernity). As such, *Stag Boy* follows the basic structure of fairy tales, which often pit an initially helpless protagonist (such as Cinderella or Snow White) against a powerful nemesis (such as a wicked stepmother with magic at her fingertips). Maria Tatar has argued that fairy tales typically begin with the complete humiliation and degradation of the protagonist. By the end of the tale, however, the tables are usually turned and "the humiliation and helplessness of the hero at the start are balanced by retaliation and revenge" in a narrative structure that "possesses a classic balance and symmetry" (Tatar 182). At the beginning of *Stag Boy*, Jim feels humiliated by his weakly body. His working-class background only deepens his sense of inadequacy, adding an element of psychological humiliation to his plight. By the end of the novel, Jim's association with the stag will have made it possible for him to stand up to both Edward and Mr Rawle, to win Mary's love, and to attain self-confidence.

THE CALLING

Jim is not the agent of his destiny in the novel. He is called by a supernatural force, and once he heeds this call, he also surrenders to it. At the end of the novel, this is explicitly stated by Mrs Yeandle who, it then appears, has known for quite some time about Jim's association with the stag but has decided not to do anything to prevent the slaying of the animal, and of Jim, which she considers inevitable. "These things happen," she says. "It's not of our choosing" (SB 155). According to Mrs Yeandle, Jim has struck a bargain with the stag and this has set in motion a series of events that must be played out to the end. This view is also expressed by Sam, an old man whom Jim encounters several times and who is very knowledgeable about both hunting lore and folk traditions associated with the supernatural. Sam also seems to be aware of Jim's magical association with the stag, because he not only addresses him as "my young buck" (SB 119), but at one point when he meets the boy, he spits to his left in an ancient warding gesture. When Jim confronts him about this, the man becomes nervous and

evasive. Before the final hunt, when the stag will be killed, Sam informs Jim that "his turn must come. The stag must die." According to Sam, the animal will yield to the hunt, as is expressed in an ancient rhyme that ends: "'Tis paid and bought. / Blow ye the morte" (SB 145), where the *morte* or *mort* is the "blast on the horn to denote the end of a hunt" (Whitehead 270).

Jim's calling unfolds in three stages. While resting one day among the ferns in Yurt Castle, the remains of an old fort near the Yeandle farm, Jim notices a pair of antlers mysteriously moving around. They lead him to the passage-grave where he finds the antlered helmet. When he later wants to show Mary the site of the grave, it has disappeared, suggesting that the helmet was his alone to find: the helmet chose and called him. He was elected. This is very significant in itself. *Stag Boy* is a novel about a young man's coming of age through his association with a powerful beast. This is a ritual from which women are excluded. For example, when Mary wants to try on the helmet, she can feel how it actively resists her touch and her handling it. At the end, when she must put the helmet on to save Jim, she physically struggles to force it onto her head against its will as "resistance flowed from the pronged male crown like a sullen heat" (SB 157). Mrs Yeandle also points out that women should not interfere with this ancient mystery: "It's not for us to think we can meddle in such affairs. I tell you, it is not a thing for women. You must learn to bide still and bow your head" (SB 156). Of course, Mary will do no such thing, and in the end, it is her rejection of the traditionally passive female role that will release and save Jim, her beloved.

As soon as Jim puts the helmet on, it starts to work its transformative power and Jim's sensory experience is altered to fuse with that of the stag: his eyesight changes and his sense of smell becomes extremely acute, with natural flavours rising "to his brain like a fume" (SB 36). It is significant, however, that although "he inhabited the limbs of the stag," Jim always remains conscious of himself, and "his thoughts were still his own" (SB 71). Maria Lassén-Seger has pointed out that, in this type of fiction, there is usually a human remainder in a metamorphosed person because this establishes the continuity between the two states (in this case, Jim and Jim-as-stag) that is necessary for both the character's and the reader's understanding of the change and its meaning (26-27). The third and final stage of the calling takes place when Jim accompanies Mrs Yeandle to Porlock and finds a book called *Cults and Legends of the West* in the porch of an antiques shop. Opened at random, it displays a picture of the mythical figure of Herne the Hunter with his "mouth wide open in a silent roar. From the man's head sprung two great beams, a pair of antlers with perfect branches" (SB 64). Jim's mind is drawn into the world behind the picture and he finds himself in a cave, where he is confronted by a dancing man with antlers growing on his head. He recognises the figure because it resembles the prehistoric cave drawing

of a stag-man guarding the entrance to the cave of Trois-Frères in the Ariège region in France, which his history teacher had once shown him. The figure asks him a series of questions, beginning with "What sanctifies the holy man?" (SB 65), and ending with "What seals the great bargain?" (SB 66) Each time, the answer is "blood," and after the last question has been answered, the words "paid and bought" (SB 66) come into Jim's head, signifying that the bargain connecting Jim to the stag has been struck. Of course, these are also the words in Sam's rhyme, signalling that Jim's fate is now entwined with that of the stag.

This sequence is one of the key narrative catalysts of the novel. Rayner highlights its significance by introducing, in quick succession, two iconic figures: Herne the Hunter and the rock painting of the Sorcerer. Both open up interesting perspectives to flesh out the intertextual and symbolic fabric of the novel. The famous antlered figure from the cave of Trois-Frères was dubbed a Sorcerer because he was assumed to be involved in a ritual attempt to attract the animal's powers (Clottes and Williams 78-84). Since the mid-1960s, and following Mircea Eliade's influential book on shamanism (of which an English edition was published in 1964), a number of historians had suggested that prehistoric cave painting was produced by shamans who documented on the rockface the visions they experienced while hallucinating (89-90 and 104-105). Since one of the most widely documented trance hallucinations experienced by shamans is that of being transformed into an animal (19), this suggests that the stag-man of Trois-Frères could be the record of a shaman's hallucination of himself as being partially transformed into, and in that sense inhabiting, a stag (108). This shamanistic connection is illuminating in relation to Rayner's novel. After all, Jim's initiatory experience of being drawn into the world behind the image of Herne the Hunter is a hallucination experienced in broad daylight on the porch of an antiques shop. Furthermore, every time Jim's spirit rides with the stag, his body seems to be sleeping in a deep trance from which he cannot be woken and during which his face is "pale and shining. It had a noble look, but there was also a blankness, an absence" (SB 97).

The introduction of Herne the Hunter at this stage is even more interesting. This legendary figure was first mentioned in Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597), where it is said that he used to be a keeper in Windsor forest who "Doth all the winter-time, at still midnight, / Walk round about an oak, with great raggd horns" (IV.iv). There has been extensive speculation about the nature and identity of this Herne the Hunter, including the possibility that he might be "merely a local representative of an international tribe of ghostly nightriders who participated in the Wild Hunt" (Fletcher 99; also Thiébaux 54-55), but it seems most likely that he was indeed a keeper at Windsor forest who was, on account of some misdeed, induced to hang himself from a tree, which would explain why, according to local lore, he continued to haunt it

(Petry 94-95; also Simpson and Roud 174-175). Herne subsequently became a significant part of pagan lore. He was often associated with the figure of the Green Man, who was usually depicted with foliage sprouting from his gaping mouth (see Sheridan and Ross 31-49). Both Herne the Hunter and the Green Man were significant figures of reference in pagan-themed young adult literature of the time (see Bramwell 38-83), so Rayner may simply have been drawing on a popular trope that was especially relevant to the subject of his novel.

In this respect, an important intertext for Rayner's introduction of Herne the Hunter might quite simply be the famous fourth chapter in John Masefield's young adult novel *The Box of Delights* (1935), in which Herne the Hunter appears to take Kay, a young boy, through a series of animal transformations, including a stag. Herne next reappears in the tenth chapter of Masefield's book, where he takes Kay on another journey through time and space. To make clear how Kay can continue to exist in the present while going on extended fantastical voyages (facilitated by the magical box of the novel's title), Herne explains that, "in a way, it won't be you that goes, it will only be a shadow of you; the rest will be asleep." And when Kay sets off on the journey, he "felt that he became two Kays, one asleep at [home], the other beside Herne" (Masefield 258). It is perhaps not too fanciful to suggest that this sequence in Masefield's book became the model for Jim's trance-like sleep while he is riding the stag.

THE STAG HUNT

The central conflict of *Stag Boy* is organised around the stag hunt. Stag hunting is not merely a popular upper-class blood sport: the term also refers to a traditional folk ritual that functioned as a form of public censure for a person or persons perceived to be guilty of certain moral transgressions. These transgressions were usually of a sexual nature, such as adultery. The hunt could take several forms in different regions or villages. In some cases, the men of the village would perform a mock chase through the village, chasing a man dressed up as a stag. The stag would be captured at the front door of the guilty party's dwelling, at which point a bladder filled with blood would be pierced to soil the door, leaving a visible stigma of shame. In other cases, the men would gather at night and

marched in procession to the home of the culprit. The leader then assumed a pair of ram's horns, which were mounted upon his head [...], and the men danced and howled round the house [...]. The man was then brought out, given a fair start, and hunted with howls and hunting cries. When caught he was generally thrown into the nearest pond or stream, and then allowed to return home. (Brown, "Stag Hunt" 106)

Such ritual stag hunts are part of “a family of ritual forms” (Thompson 3) that are often grouped together under the name of *charivari* or, in English, rough music, and which were almost always “a summary form of censure that made life in the village quite impossible” (Brown, “Further Note” 19). A common cause for a *charivari* or, indeed, a stag hunt, would be a mismatched marriage, for example when a widower took a much younger wife, thus removing her from the young men’s pool of eligible brides.

It is not difficult to see how such a ritual stag hunt informs the narrative structure of *Stag Boy*. Jim is a foreign interloper in the Exmoor community. While he did grow up there, he has been away, living in the city, and now finds that he does not quite fit into the community anymore. He also finds that his working-class background sets him apart, as do his ecological awareness and his opposition to both modern tourism and industrialized farming, which make him a nuisance to Mr Rawle. Furthermore, his love for Mary pits Jim against Edward, who is one of the golden boys of the local community and a member of the hunting party. While outwardly merely a teenage boy recovering from a severe case of asthma, Jim actually becomes the source of considerable unrest for certain prominent members of the community. His association with the stag can then be interpreted as a symbolic representation of his outsider position: in hunting the stag the community is also hunting Jim, who is questioning too much of what the community takes for granted, or would rather not think about (such as the ecological and animal welfare issues raised by modern farming). In this respect, it is useful to recall that, in the course of the novel, both Sam and the Yeandles become increasingly aware of Jim’s connection to the stag, leading them to approach him with suspicion bordering on superstition.

The core conflict, however, is Jim’s sexual rivalry with Edward, which again intersects with the issue of class if we consider that the hunt has traditionally been, since early modern times, an aristocratic endeavour. Since the late Middle Ages, “the shrinking forests of north-western Europe were transformed [...] into exclusive aristocratic playgrounds” (Cartmill 59; see also Malmesbury 187). A “forest” was a technical term denoting a reserved area where the game should be left alone, so that it could serve as quarry in the ritual of the hunt. This meant that the common people no longer had access to the animals living in that area as a source of food. “Peasants suspected of taking game were punished with ruthless severity; accused poachers might be blinded, castrated, staked out to die in freezing water, or sewn into the fresh skin of a stag to be chased down and killed by deerhounds” (Cartmill 61; see also Thiébaux 22, and Whitehead 12 and 263). Perhaps we could see the hunting of Jim-as-stag as a symbolic punishment for his romantic and sexual “poaching” of Mary, whom both Edward and Mr Rawle believe is the appropriate partner for Edward. In this regard, it is worth pointing out a further way in which class

difference intersects with hunt symbolism. Writing about nineteenth-century working-class resentment against the upper-class privilege of the hunt in England, Matt Cartmill observes that “aristocrats chasing a fox or a stag occasionally found their quarry protected from them by a hostile lower-class mob” (142). Jim several times behaves in a similar way: when he finds out from Sam where the next day’s hunt will take place, he uses his riding of the stag during the night to guide the animal to an area far beyond the hunting grounds, leaving the hunting party to chase the animal in vain.

THE JOUST

Before the final stag hunt, which will end with the stag’s death, there are three powerful sequences of confrontation in which Jim, while inhabiting the stag, challenges his opponents. Each of these invites scrutiny because they deepen the complexity of the symbolism of the hunt. The novel’s central confrontation is the stand-off between Jim-as-stag and Edward that takes place at night, when Edward is driving Mary home after a dance. Edward has to stop the car because the road is blocked by the stag, which stands in the dark, “staring straight back at them” with “yellow fire in his eyes. [...] The headlights sculpted the muscles of his body. He looked monumental, kingly” (*SB* 114). Both Edward and Mary immediately know that this is the elusive stag that the hunting party has been chasing for weeks. Because Jim has shared the secret of his alliance with the stag with Mary, she obviously knows that it is Jim, and not just the stag in its mere animal state, who is there to force a confrontation with Edward. Edward is so angry that he initially feels “tempted to run the Bristol straight into the stag, [...] but he couldn’t put up such a cowardly performance with Mary sitting beside him, watching. No sportsman should contemplate hurting a stag anywhere except on the hunting field” (*SB* 115).

Throughout the novel, it is repeatedly pointed out that it is one of the sacred laws of the hunt that deliberately maiming or killing a stag outside the ritual of the hunt is a cruelty that invites moral censure. Jim also knows that “the lives of stags were saved for the ceremonies of the hunt” (*SB* 73) and uses this knowledge to taunt Edward, who is forced to leave the safety of his car to try and drive away the animal. But the stag “stood his ground for a moment, regarding Edward with mild interest,” before it seems to move out of the way. As Edward returns to the car, however, the stag several times lunges at him. Edward starts to run, but the stag “followed and cornered him against the bank” (*SB* 115). As Edward yells in desperate fear, the stag completes the humiliation. First, it rips the seat out of Edward’s trousers, then it uses its antlers to gently untie the young man’s silk cravat. Having performed this dainty feat, it walks “in a leisurely and stately manner to the car. It dipped its head and the cravat

floated down on to the windscreen just in front of Mary. Then, with a sudden bound, the stag leapt away into the shadows" (SB 116).

This confrontation is structured entirely as a parody of two knights jousting over a lady. In medieval courtly literature, the tournament was "the highpoint of each romance," and it was here that knights "attracted the attention and ultimately the love of their ladies, [and] displayed the knightly virtues of courage, courtliness and *largesse*" (Barber and Barker 139). Like a medieval tournament, which often involved elaborate pageantry and even role-playing inspired by Arthurian romance (32-47; also Barker 66-67 and 84-95), the mock jousting in the novel has a highly theatrical quality, which is stressed by the fact that the scene of the battle is "lit as brightly as a stage" (SB 116) by the car's headlights and that Mary is watching the battle from the car as if she were a medieval aristocratic lady watching from the stalls as two knights joust for her love. The stag's behavior, which exaggerates the courtly gestures of a knight (his stately manner, his bowing for the lady), is an ironic performance of courtliness. Jim knows that Mary knows that it is he, not simply the stag, who is humiliating Edward, and he relishes his performance. The untying of the cravat is especially significant. In a medieval tournament a knight would often sport a favor from the lady in whose honour he was jousting, usually a sleeve or a veil (Barker 106-107). Here, Edward assumes he has Mary's favor, which the cravat would symbolise. The stag (but in reality, Jim) disabuses him of this assumption by humiliatingly removing Mary's favor.

In a sense, Jim had already challenged Edward to the duel in an event earlier in the novel. One day, when Jim is riding the stag while it is being hunted, he decides to test the extent of his control over the animal by forcing it, against its instincts, to stop, turn, and charge the hunting party. The riders are startled and "there was a *mêlée* as he burst through, shouldering, charging, rearing. Horses broke in all directions" (SB 102). But "*mêlée*" is a technical term from the medieval tournament, denoting a mock battle between two groups of knights. The joust between two knights was developed because it was almost impossible to identify individual knights in the literal mess of the *mêlée*, which made it difficult to gain individual glory in such a battle (Barber and Barker 32-34). Rayner's choice of words here already foreshadows the joust that is to come and makes clear that Jim's charging the stag into the hunting party is in effect a mock *mêlée*. The stag then singles out Edward from the hunting party and humiliatingly chases him across the field, "roaring with silent laughter at the game" (SB 103), where the word "game" again introduces ambiguity: it can denote both a pleasurable activity pursued for its own sake (Jim is playing with Edward like a child plays with a toy or, more tellingly, a cat with a mouse), or an animal that is the prey of the hunt (Jim is hunting Edward, who, with his crisp upper-class suits and cravat could literally be called fair game).

His triumph in the joust sets Jim free to pursue two further confrontations. Feeling invincible, he first decides to mock the hunters by taking a stroll down the Porlock high street while the hunting party is chasing him (or so they think) over the moors. As he proceeds down the street, traffic comes to a stand-still and people cower in fear. In another theatrical gesture, the stag decides to “impose the majesty of his presence on this warren” and “bowed his head gravely, first to the front and then to either side, saluting like royalty. He could not be killed. He was reserved for the hunt, and that was miles away” (*SB* 121). A second confrontation is born from anger when he tries to visit Mary at night and finds that Mr Rawle has set a snare for him. The stag gets entangled in the trap, but Jim manages to get the beast to free itself. Furious at this humiliation, he roars with “a hollow booming” that is “the declaration of a very ancient and lordly wrath” (*SB* 134). In his fury, Jim forces the stag to break into the battery to free the hens that are cooped up there. He next ravages the camping site, causing panic all round. Throughout this rampage, Jim feels nothing but contempt for Mr Rawle, “a mean spirit” who “cared more for profit than for the stag or the ritual that should attend his death” and who “would smugly lay waste the earth and debase its creatures” (*SB* 134) by reducing them to battery hens in industrial units.

The biblical language that Rayner uses here is not incidental. In Christian allegory, the stag is often represented as a symbol of Christ (Williamson 108-110). Within this context, the stag’s (but actually Jim’s) breaking open the doors of the chicken battery can be seen as a reference to Christ’s Harrowing of Hell. On his first visit to the battery, Jim had found that “the sense of enclosure was stifling [...]. The shed was full of cells. It was a giant penitentiary for fowls [...]. There were thousands of blank spirits here, thousands of dim guttering flames of life” (*SB* 48) in need of release from their entrapment in what seems like one of the rings in Dante’s inferno. Such a reading is in line with the novel’s dualisms between modern urban life, which is bureaucratic and soul-destroying, and the rural world of natural rhythms and ancient mysteries. Following upon the mock joust, I suggest that the ravaging of the chicken battery is indeed a pastiche of the Harrowing of Hell, with the fowl as metaphors for modern man, trapped in the chicken coop of modern city life with its endless high-rises of cramped apartments and impersonal offices. Such a connection is suggested by Jim himself, for while he is laying waste the camping ground and sees the campers scurry in panic, he is reminded of Wolverhampton, “the endless mazes of streets, the houses like cages, that world of hutches and batteries and stunted lives” (*SB* 136-7).

THE MAIDEN

The sequence of the mock joust also helps to flesh out Mary's psychology, which is very precisely pencilled in by Rayner. As the maiden over whom the two knights are fighting, Mary displays several behaviours that are quite typical of courtly ladies. To begin with, she has the capriciousness or fickleness of a lady who feels her knight must make a distinct effort to win her heart. As pointed out before, the novel begins with Jim's humiliation. Jim reaches the nadir of his self-esteem when Edward challenges him to cross a river by leaping from boulder to boulder. Jim misses the last leap and ends up in the water. Mary feels an impulse to tell Jim not to engage in such a silly contest, but she checks herself: "unless Jim entered the contest, how could he ever win?" (SB 51) Clearly, the boy must accomplish some feat to become a man and win her heart. Interestingly, this contest takes place after Jim has already been joined with the stag, and it is this humiliation before Mary that kindles his rage. Standing in the cold water, Jim "stared at them, his brown eyes wide and empty. He looked strange. His face had the nervous fine-drawn emptiness of a wild animal. [...] In a way, it was hostile behaviour" (SB 53). The mock joust in the road is a repeat performance of this humiliating contest, but with a different outcome.

Mary is also associated with elements of virginity, albeit with a modern twist. Mary is a virgin, for when Edward kisses her, it is explained that "she had been looking forward to a young man kissing her passionately for quite a while, and expected to find it interesting" (SB 77), but in the end, Edward's kisses are rather underwhelming. There is a deeply ironic and detached tone to the narrator's description of Mary's responses, which adds a feminist touch to Mary's character (see also Kokkola 145-151). "She found she was flattered to hear that Edward was crazy about her, though not so much as she would have thought likely. The situation intrigued her, Edward much less so" (SB 77). When Edward's kisses become more insistent, she allows him to grab one of her breasts because "she didn't want to appear unsophisticated" (SB 77), but then breaks off the encounter because she cannot stop thinking about Jim and what it would be like if he were the one kissing her. As she hovers between the tantalizing Edward and her childhood friend Jim, Mary is setting up the confrontation between the men. But she is fickle: although her mind and heart are already set on Jim, she is not willing to surrender either until he proves worthy in a joust.

An important element that draws Mary to Edward is his social station, which connects to the motif of class distinctions. Being with Edward means that Mary is introduced into the better circles of the local community. There is a certain glamor to his lifestyle which she very much enjoys, although she knows it is merely a superficial veneer. When Edward takes her to a local society party, she experiences the event as "the world as it should be" and feels that "it was nice to be able to gauge your success, and even your pleasure, from the looks in

the eyes of other people" (SB 113). After the party, however, the stag ruthlessly shatters Mary's dream of upper-middle-class respectability when it stops Edward's car (his steel steed) in its tracks for the joust. From her seat in the car, Mary's "eyes were fixed on the stag. She saw him looking sternly down over the bonnet of the car, his head ringed by an aureole of light, and the world was transformed for her. He had broken in on her petty dream and destroyed it at once by his burning presence" (SB 114-115). From this point on, her allegiance is entirely to Jim. The twin metaphors of fire (burning presence) and light (the saint-like aureole) highlight the epiphany-like quality of the experience.

Mary marks the change in her allegiance by returning Edward's cravat to the unfortunate young man with the words: "Here. This is yours" (SB 117). In this way, she delivers the final blow of humiliation. It has been argued that "many romances reveal the burden of masculinity [and] the shame of dishonour" because

the ideal of the perfect knight which dictates that the best knight wins, necessitates that many men be losers, defeated in battle and shunned by the most beautiful lady. Ladies may wait as passive objects while knights fight to take possession of them, yet the knights who fail to win their sexual prize [...] wear an unmistakable badge of *honte*, shame. (Krueger 143)

This badge of shame is bestowed upon Edward when Mary concludes the joust by returning his cravat, which represents her favor. This action also implies an inversion of gender roles: where at the end of a joust a knight would normally return the favor to his lady, here Mary returns it to her would-be knight after Jim-as-stag, her real champion, has made her a present of it. The words "This is yours" therefore feminise Edward, for favors typically belong to ladies, not men. Through this humiliating gesture, Mary finally also reduces the cravat to what it already was in the first place: a pompous item of upper-class haberdashery that is a poor substitute for the sleeves, veils, and ribbons of romance.

THE STAG AND THE UNICORN

Jim does not merely joust to win Mary's hand; he also woos her. Shortly after he has begun inhabiting the stag, Jim promises Mary that he will bring the stag to her at midnight. She refuses to believe he can do this, but nevertheless waits up for him. When the stag does arrive, it picks a rose from her father's garden and leaves it on the ground under her window in a gesture that is similar to a knight kneeling and presenting a rose (or some other token) to his lady who is watching the joust from the stalls. The experience baffles Mary: "She was a young woman, schooled to live in the real world, and here was a creature as magical as a unicorn, that had come to stir her blood with its strangeness" (SB 88). The

following night, the stag returns, and Mary goes downstairs and leaves the house to meet it. Soon, an intimacy develops between the girl and the stag: there are caresses and embraces between the beast and the young woman, and eventually the stag comes to pick her up for nightly rides through the countryside that have a distinct erotic charge. Thus, Mary gradually enters "the kingdom of the stag" (SB 93).

Of course, the reference to the unicorn in this passage is not incidental. Within the context of medieval lore, "a unicorn could only be captured by a virgin, who had to entice the beast into her lap. This pacified him, so that he could be easily killed or captured" (Williamson 59). Because of her virgin state, this maiden was often "interpreted as the Virgin Mary" (175). The unicorn was identified with Christ, who was sacrificed and killed, but who was also resurrected. This means that the unicorn was symbolically associated with both death and resurrection, and John Williamson has argued that this theme runs deep through the iconography of the unicorn in late-medieval art. The theme of death and resurrection also provides the link between the unicorn and the stag, whose deciduous antlers grow anew every year (Fletcher 43 and 118). Mary's association of the stag with the unicorn is therefore quite natural, for both animals are quintessential quarry of allegorical hunting scenes with symbolic associations of death, regeneration, and, of course, love.

This dialectic of death and resurrection is central to the end of the novel, when Jim tries to escape the power of the stag. The more he rides the stag, the more Jim feels he is losing control over it. While he can ride the stag at will (without the need to put the helmet on), he also finds it increasingly difficult to resist the animal when it decides to summon him against his will. As the stag enters the rut, its wild animal nature overwhelms Jim to such an extent that he almost rapes Mary. When, in the course of the final hunt, Jim has guided the stag back to the Yeandle farm in a desperate attempt to bring himself home and break loose from the animal's magical hold over him, Mary realises she must take action before the hunt arrives and kills the stag. She rushes out of the house to get the helmet and put it on. This brings her face to face with the antlered dancer who had initially enchanted Jim. He now asks Mary the same series of questions about bargains and sacrifices, except that Mary struggles against the helmet's bloodlust and answers "love" where Jim had answered "blood". This breaks the spell, and the helmet disintegrates on the floor. When Mary returns to the farm, Jim has been set free, but the stag is dead. "Outside in the yard, the hunters followed the ancient rites of dismemberment" (SB 160). As in the folk ritual of the stag hunt, the symbolic beast's blood has been spilt on the doorstep of the sexual intruder, who has been set free by the love of his lady. This release is also, symbolically, Jim's resurrection as a full man.

THE QUEST: THE PURSUIT OF KNOWLEDGE AND MANHOOD

Maria Lassén-Seger has pointed out that animal metamorphosis is a popular literary tool for “negotiating masculinity” in young adult fiction (53-59). As a structuring metaphor, it “underscores the turmoil characteristic of puberty and adolescence” (Hogan 195). I have argued that, in *Stag Boy*, Jim’s psychical association with the stag is combined with the traditional tropes of the hunt and the joust to allow the young man to work through a number of tensions (nature versus culture, tradition versus modernity) and to rise above and outgrow his own limitations. In his brief discussion of the novel, Walter Hogan suggests that, in the end, Jim “has not resolved the restlessness and dissatisfaction that drove him to metamorphose” (200) and that his association with the stag has been “empowering only in the short run” (201). It seems to me, however, that Jim’s riding of the stag has been deeply transformative. Not only has he gained self-confidence, he has also won the love of Mary and made the transition into manhood. Jim’s Journey has brought him increased self-knowledge and has offered him opportunities for spiritual and moral development.

In this sense, it is helpful to return again to Thiébaux’s discussion of the hunt motif in medieval literature. Thiébaux distinguishes “four principal types of experience traditionally expressed in the form of a hunt in literature: The sacred chase, the mortal chase, the instructive chase, and the amatory chase” (58). The sacred chase culminates in an encounter with a divinity, effecting a conversion experience. The mortal chase “uses the hunt as a conductor from life to death. The instructive chase initiates the hero” because it leads to self-knowledge. Finally, the amatory chase leads the hero “to the experience of passionate love” (58). Any individual work may draw on any of these four types or combine several of them, but there is no standard model that can be uniformly applied to all texts, and individual authors have adapted the types to their own purposes in various ways. In retrospect, it is possible to see elements of each of these four types in *Stag Boy*, bound together in a tightly conceived narrative fabric that creates a powerful allegory of a boy’s transition into manhood.

Mary’s perception of the halo around the stag’s head at the beginning of the joust, for example, recalls the conversion experience in the well-known legend of St. Eustace, who was chasing a stag until it suddenly leapt up a rocky ledge, turned to face the hunter, and announced that it was Jesus Christ. Depictions of this scene usually show the stag with a crucifix between its antlers (60-66). By playing the role of the fickle maiden, teasing and testing Jim, Mary has combined the roles of quarry (pursued by Jim) and hunter (she hunts by leading him on). For her, the chase does culminate in what might be considered a conversion experience at the mock joust: she surrenders her worldly ambition to be a social success and definitively chooses Jim over Edward. The metaphors of light and fire (the stag’s aureole and burning presence), and the fact that Mary

is named after the Virgin, support a reading of this cluster of motifs as a form of sacred chase. The mortal chase, on the other hand, is very much part of Jim's experience, although it is not Jim who dies, but the stag. However, the stag's death is also symbolic: it not only releases Jim, it announces the end of his Journey towards self-knowledge. The stag's death metaphorically represents the death of Jim's adolescence and the birth of the man who is now partnered with the beloved whose hand he has won in the joust. As such, the mortal chase is immediately folded into the instructive chase (Jim gains self-knowledge and self-confidence) and the amatory chase (Jim wins his love).

Peter Bramwell has suggested that the novel's conclusion, in which the stag is sacrificed while Mary's love releases Jim, articulates a severe duality between a Christian theology, "feminised by Mary taking on Christ's role of loving self-sacrifice," while the helmet and its antlered dancer's vows of blood represent a pagan theology that is "brutally masculine and built on blood" (47). While this analysis holds up to a point, I would suggest that the dualism it proposes is too strict and overlooks significant subtleties of plot and characterisation. Through his association with the stag, Jim is also Christ-like, and he is deeply motivated by an ecological awareness that is closely associated with both paganism and Christianity (in a conflation of both traditions, it is his association with the stag's pagan power that allows Jim to raid the chicken battery in a rehearsal of Christ's Harrowing of Hell). I would therefore suggest that the mysterious pagan force of the helmet and the stag carry deeper resonances: they are the novel's emblems for the quest that is at the heart of the narrative, which is the pursuit of a masculine identity. Jim's quest is to grow from a sickly boy into a man, and this is as much a question of winning a contest as it is a matter of developing a set of moral values or winning a lady.

ENVOI: THE STAG AT BAY

Stag Boy is an allegorical tale about a quest for masculinity in which a boy surrenders his soul in a Faustian pact with a pagan force beyond his control, and from which he must be liberated by the pure love of a virgin. This basic narrative triggers a wealth of ancient tropes and motifs that have been carefully woven into the narrative by the author. While written in a generally realistic style (though extremely evocative in the sections where Jim rides the stag), *Stag Boy* is riddled with metaphor. Like much allegorical literature, it can be enjoyed on many levels. For the innocent reader, it may simply be an exciting adventure. But the informed reader can peel away the several layers of symbolism that associate motifs from folk traditions, pagan mythology, and quest romances. In the final reckoning, however, the novel is an emblem of masculinity redeemed. Much as Mary is aroused by her intimate rides on the back of the powerful stag, it is ultimately Jim's kindness that wins her heart. Escaping from the stag at last,

Jim has learned that to win Mary's heart, he must marry virile masculinity (the power of the stag) with love and kindness. This, the novel suggests, will make the full man, just like it used to make the full knight. As the sacrificial animal of the hunt, personifying Christ (who, in Christian mythology, is love), the magnificent stag at bay, roaring one last time before it is put down, is a sublime emblem for this ideal of masculinity.

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