

Pruning Peasants

Private War and Maintaining the Lords' Peace in Late Medieval Germany*

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Around 1450, the Swiss canon of Zurich, Felix Hemmerli (*ca.* 1388-1458/9), wrote a Latin treatise, *De nobilitate et rusticitate dialogus*, constructed as a dispute between a rustic and a noble protagonist. In chapter 32, the discussion reaches a high point as the rustic accuses nobles of engaging in endless feuds and bringing destruction upon the countryside. In response, the noble protagonist develops an elaborate argument for the social use of private wars. Like an exceedingly ramified tree, whose lush branches and twigs must be lopped off for it to remain fertile, peasants must be occasionally pruned so that they renounce their arrogance, lethal hatred and invidiousness and be brought back to the discipline of humility, servility and self-recognition. They should be stripped of their feathers, so that they cannot fly too high. As Gregory the Great said, worldly prosperity can be detrimental for certain people. Without affliction, the wicked would be all the more removed from salvation. But the peasants' rustic nature calls for an especially harsh and befitting remedy. Hence, every jubilee year, their small houses, cabins and fields should be plundered, destroyed and burnt down.¹

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¹ Felix Hemmerli, *De nobilitate et rusticitate Dialogus*, in *Clarissimi viri Juriumque doctoris Felicis Hemmerlin... varie oblectationis opuscula et tractatus*, ed. Sebastian Brant (Strassburg, n.d.; probably after 1497). On Hemmerli, see Hermann Walser, *Meister Hemmerli und seine Zeit, 1388-1458* (Zurich, 1944); Piroska Réka Máthé, "Das Verhältnis von Stadt und Land in der Sicht des Zürcher Chorherrn Felix Hemmerli und der gleichzeitigen städtischen Chronistik," in *Fribourg: Ville et Territoire: Aspects politiques, sociaux et culturels de la relation ville-campagne depuis le Bas Moyen Age*, ed. Gaston Gaudard, Carl Pfaff and Roland Ruffieux (Fribourg, 1981), 214-234; on the literary context, see Claudius Sieber-Lehmann, "Introduction," in *In Helvetios - Wider die Kuhschweizer: Fremd- und Feindbilder von den Schweizern in antieidgenössischen Texten aus der Zeit von 1386 bis 1532*, ed. Claudius Sieber-Lehmann and Thomas Wilhelmi (Bern, 1998), pp. 1-21.

This passage has been well-known since the nineteenth century. Historians, however, have tended to treat it either as an unusual expression of unrestrained hatred for peasants, or as a pronouncement by an author whose Latin abounds in elaborate metaphors and tangled circumlocutions, but cannot be taken all too seriously. I do not think this is the case. As I shall try to show, Hemmerli's argument refers obliquely to a recognizable social practice (section II) and is embedded in a widely prevalent mode of constructing late medieval society (section III). But first I would like to examine more closely the basic agrarian metaphor of pruning, which Hemmerli uses in order to represent necessary and legitimate violence against peasants (section I). The range of metaphors and images a culture places at people's disposal is not unlimited. Political metaphors, those used in order to encode relations of power and authority, form an even more restricted set of options. The examination of this metaphor may thus provide a convenient point of departure for reconstructing the ways lords' violence against peasants could be perceived in late medieval Germany.

I

Advocacy of the systematic application of violence to rustics is well-attested in medieval sources, from Bernard de Ventadorn's twelfth-century poems, through those of Neidhart of Reuenthal in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, to the didactic and political tracts of the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century. Several fifteenth-century German texts, however, evoke in this context the metaphor of pruning. The vernacular, anonymous chronicle of the Appenzell-War (1400-1404) insists repeatedly that peasants should be "pruned every year, so that one may better bend them."² In an age when peasants abandon their station and cannot "recognize themselves anymore", violence should contribute to reinstall proper, socially ascribed peasant identities.³ Note that 'self recognition' is not conceived here as an act of solitary

² Traugott Schiess, ed., "Chronik des Appenzellerskrieges (1400-1404)," *Mitteilungen zur vaterländische Geschichte St. Gallens* 35 (1919 [1913]), ll. 1496-1497; cf. ll. 1290-1293.

³ Ibid, ll. 1485-1490.

rumination, the exploration of an open-ended self, but as a social interaction in which predefined selves are violently ascribed.⁴

Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the rhymed chronicle of the Swabian War repeats the same theme:

Shut up, peasant, and bear in mind what I am saying;
I cannot withhold the truth any more:
You should be punished every year
With the sword, as a willow
Is wounded every year, naked and bare
And the next year it is all the more fruitful;
Its thicket would otherwise hinder its growth.⁵

Similar arguments which do not evoke the pruning metaphor can also be found in non-polemical contexts. In his *De regimine rusticorum* (1472), the Carthusian monk Werner Rolevinck (1425-1502) from Westphalia interrupts his conventional praise of peace to warn against its harmful social side effects: Peace is often accompanied by many vices and is therefore “very dangerous for simple people... but even for saintly people.” Rolevinck further narrows down this general warning, claiming that the dangers of peace for peasants are attested to in Deuteronomy 32. God bestowed abundance on the people of Israel, who, according to Scripture, Rolevinck insists, were a peasant folk. Jacob, the personification of the people of Israel, and, according to Rolevinck, particularly of peasants, “ate and was well fed... grew fat and unruly, grew bloated and sleek, and forsook God who made him” (Deut. 32:15). Out of this and other sound teachings, as well as daily experience, concludes that famous saying: “Peasants are best when they grieve, and worst when they rejoice.”⁶

⁴Gadi Algazi, “*Sich selbst Vergessen*’ im späten Mittelalter: Denkfiguren und soziale Konfigurationen,” in *Memoria als Kultur*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle (Göttingen, 1995), pp. 387-427.

⁵Theodor Lorentzen, ed., “Zwei Flugschriften aus der Zeit Maximilians I,” *Neue Heidelberger Jahrbücher* 17 (1913), 139-218, at p. 178, ll. 371-377. The author, who calls himself “Heinz von Bechwinden”, was identified by some scholars as the Swabian humanist Heinrich Bebel. For the historical context, see Thomas Brady, *Turning Swiss: Cities and Empire, 1450-1550* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 57-72. Note that in this part of the poem, the author specifically addresses south German peasants, and not members of the Swiss confederation.

⁶“Sed quia frequenter eam concomitatur multiplicatio vitiorum, ideo est simplici populo multum periculosa, immo et sanctis hominibus. Quod sit populo rusticano periculosa patet per illud Dt 32: *‘Constituit—scilicet populum Israel, qui ad litteram rusticanus erat—super excelsam terram, ut comederet fructus agrorum... Incrassus est dilectus et recalcitravit: incrassatus, impinguatus, dilatatus. Dereliquit Deum factorum suum et recessit a Deo salutari suo.’* [Deut. 32:13-15]. Ex his et aliis sanis doctrinis et

Rolevinck evidently draws on a common repertoire of biblical authorities and the Christian critique of luxury, but he uses them here to construct a social message, based as he says on “experience” and embodied in popular sayings. The sudden switch from the praise of peace to its condemnation and the fact that the argument is not developed in the context of an apology of nobles’ warfare also suggest that Rolevinck relies here on a well-entrenched view.

In other late medieval German vernacular sources, peasants who should be violently made to ‘remember who they are’ are occasionally designated “lustful” or “lush”, in German *geil*.⁷ *Geil* has a wide range of meanings, whose relevance becomes apparent in the light of the image of pruning. *Geil* designates a state of mind or the body, or more precisely the relationship between the two, characterized by uncontrolled desire; it also means exuberance (as in the French *gal*, hence *galliardus*, *goliardus*), playfulness, and insolence. But it is also an agrarian term, designating fruitfulness, fecundity, abundant vegetative growth, which might turn into its excess—immoderate growth and luxuriance.⁸ It evokes unmistakable connotations of sexual desire, referring to a clerical discourse based on the Augustinian identification of unruly desire with religious and political

experientia quotidiana exivit illud notabile proverbium, quod ‘rustica gens est optima flens, sed pessima gaudens’.” Werner Rolevinck, *De regimine rusticorum*, in *Werner Rolevincks Bauernspiegel: Untersuchung und Neuherausgabe von “De regimine rusticorum,”* ed. Egidius Holzapfel, Freiburger Theologische Studien, vol. 76 (Freiburg, 1959), p. 117. On Rolevinck, see Volker Henn, “Der Bauernspiegel des Werner Rolevinck: ‘De regimine rusticorum’ und die soziale Lage westfälischer Bauern im späten Mittelalter,” *Westfälische Zeitschrift* 128 (1978), 289-313, with further references.

⁷ The peasants in Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of Fools* are said to be ‘geil’; cited with further references in Jacob Grimm et al., *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4 (Leipzig, 1897), cols. 2581-2606, esp. cols. 2583-2589. Peasants are said to be ‘geil’ and should therefore be ‘pruned’ by nobles in the anonymous fifteenth-century Easter-play “Vom Babst, Cardinal und von Bischoffen,” in *Fastnachtsspiele aus dem 15. Jahrhundert*, ed. Adalbert von Keller, Bibliothek des literarischen Vereins, vol. 29 (Stuttgart, 1853), pp. 642-647, at p. 646. A detailed analysis of the play is undertaken in my paper “The Social Use of Private War: Some Late Medieval Views Reviewed,” *Tel Aviver Jahrbuch für deutsche Geschichte* 22 (1993), pp. 253-274, whose conclusions form the basis of some of the present argument.

⁸ Mathias Lexer, *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1872-1878), vol. 1, p. 58; “*geil* = üppig wachsend, wuchernd, tadelnd; Bäume, die zu geil treiben, quae luxuriantur. ... So geht es, als fruchtbar begonnen, eigentlich in unfruchtbar aus.” Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, col. 2588; cf. Rüdiger Brandt, *Wortgeschichts- und Wortbedeutungsstudien: Genießen, engelten, wellen, geil*. Europäische Hochschulschriften, Series I, vol. 1107 (Frankfurt am Main, 1989), pp. 113-142, esp. pp. 122-123. The adjective ‘rank’ seems a rough equivalent.

insolence.⁹ At the same time it is also firmly embedded in an agrarian world, evoking a recognizable image of lush, menacing vegetative growth, calling for incisive action.¹⁰

It would be misleading, however, to associate pruning only with restraining growth, with occasional trimming and clipping intended to give its object a definite, normalized shape. The appeal of the pruning metaphor lies precisely in its capacity to evoke an image of *productive* violence, capable of bringing about renewed growth. Medieval audiences would not fail to recognize in the images of the bleeding willow or the ramified tree an allusion to established practices of forestry, to the economy of the underwood.¹¹ Under the coppice system (from the French *couper*), trees would be regularly cut on short, varying rotations. After cutting, the “stools” or stumps produce fresh shoots—known as suckers—which grow into the next crop and the operation is then repeated.¹² While

⁹ In 1526, Martin Luther would invoke the same tradition. However, his fierce language undermines the effectiveness of the metaphor. Peasants, he says, have become unbearably *geil* during recent peaceful times; like fatted swine, they are almost itching for the butcher’s knife (“Es ist unsegligh, wie geil und kutzel die bawrn itzt worden sind durch diese friedreiche zeit etliche jar daher, es jucket sie die haut so fast wie einer saw zur schlachtung gemestet” [cited⁹ Peter Brown, “Saint Augustine,” in *Trends in Medieval Political Thought*, ed. Beryl Smalley (Oxford, 1965), pp. 1-21. A good late medieval example is provided by Geiler von Kaiserberg: “dieweil der leib geil ist, so wirt er dem geist nimmer untetänig.” (cited in Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, vol. 4, col. 2584).

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¹¹ An especially useful exposition in English is provided by Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodlands in the British Landscape*, rev. ed. (London, 1995); cf. Jost Trier, *Holz: Etymologien aus dem Niederwald* (Münster and Cologne, 1952), pp. 7-51; Hans Haus-rath, *Forstgeschichte der rechtsrheinischen Theile des ehemaligen Bistums Speyer* (Berlin, 1898), pp. 44-50; idem, *Geschichte des deutschen Waldbaus von seinen Anfängen bis 1850* (Freiburg in Breisgau, 1982), pp. 17-28; Kurt Mantel, *Forstgeschichte des 16. Jahrhunderts unter dem Einfluß der Forstordnungen und Noe Meurers* (Hamburg and Berlin, 1980), pp. 327-338, pp. 369-371 (on willows); Karl Hasel, *Forstgeschichte: Ein Grundriß für Studium und Praxis* (Hamburg and Berlin, 1985), pp. 191-193.

¹² N. D. G. James, *A History of English Forestry* (Oxford, 1981), p. 299. See the pictures in Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, plates I-VIII. Rotations varied according to local custom, economic needs and climactic fluctuations. According to Rackham (p. 64), medieval rotations were usually short, between four to eight years, while other authors

building relied on a regular supply of timber, underwood gained by regular coppicing was used for fencing and fuel. Coppicing seems to have been a widely prevalent, though frequently overlooked, mode of exploiting and shaping woodlands in medieval and early modern times.¹³

Once one realizes the dimensions and importance of the underwood economy, pruning knives,¹⁴ pollarded willows, and stools covered with springs seem to emerge everywhere in late medieval and early modern visual representations of the countryside, especially after landscape had become a subject matter in its own right. “Anthropomorphic willows” and lopped trees—“grotesque fruits of human cultivation”¹⁵—seem to abound in Wolf Huber’s drawings of 1510s (plate 1), in Albrecht Altdorfer’s influential landscapes, and in the work of their followers.¹⁶ Allowing for specifically artistic reasons for incorporating images of grotesquely shaped willows in landscapes, it still seems that dressed trees, pollards, and stools were a prominent feature of the late medieval countryside.¹⁷

cite higher figures, up to twenty years (Mantel, pp. 379-380).

¹³ Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, p. 10; James, *English Forestry*, p. 172.

¹⁴ See, for instance, the figure of the peasant in the illustrations to Jacobus de Cessolis’ *Book of Chess*. Anežka Vidmanová, “Die mittelalterliche Gesellschaft im Lichte des Schachspiels”, *Soziale Ordnungen im Selbstverständnis des Mittelalters*, ed. Albert Zimmermann, *Miscellanea Mediaevalia*, vol. 12 (Berlin and New York, 1979), pp. 324-335, ill. 6; Jacobus de Cessolis, *The Game of Chess translated and printed by William Caxton c. 1483* (repr. London, 1976). Note that in the second chapter of Hemmerli’s *Dialogus*, pruning knives, hoes and axes figure prominently in the list of peasant tools, which the rustic protagonist contrasts with the nobleman’s weapons.

¹⁵ Christopher Wood, *Albrecht Altdorfer and the Origins of Landscape* (Chicago, 1993), p. 221.

¹⁶ Wolf Huber: *Willow Landscape* (ca. 1515), reproduced in Wood, *Altdorfer*, p. 163, ill. 114; *Willow Landscape* (1514), p. 221, ill. 160; *Mill with Footbridge* (ca. 1515), p. 164, ill. 115; *View of the Mondsee* (1510), p. 219, ill. 158; *Castle Landscapes* (1510s), p. 222, ill. 161. Albrecht Altdorfer: *Willow Landscape* (ca. 1511), p. 224, ill. 165; *Landscape with Fir and Willows* (ca. 1521-2), p. 238, ill. 175; followers: *Landscape with Mill* (1520s), p. 196, ill. 134; Niklas Stoer, *Landscape* (ca. 1530s), p. 269, ill. 195; Paulus van Vianen, *Willows on a Bank* (ca. 1600), p. 279, ill. 203.

¹⁷ This practice, blurring sharp distinctions between raw nature and human cultivation, might also have implications for our interpretation of contemporary paintings and drawings which include forest scenes. From this perspective, among Altdorfer’s works discussed by Larry Silver, “Forest Primeval: Albrecht Altdorfer and the German Wilderness Landscape,” *Simiolus* 13:1 (1983), 4-43, very few seem in fact to portray “wilderness”. Most forest scenes include pruned trees and visible traces of human cultivation. This casts doubts on the suggestion that “primeval forests”, standing for unbridled nature or the Germanic past, are uniformly represented. It also draws attention to the notable cases which do seem to deviate from this pattern, such as Altdorfer’s depiction of *Saint George and the Dragon* in the midst of the forest, surrounded by a thicket of trees.



Plate 1

Embedded in this agrarian world, the pruning metaphor thus presented the lords' violence as a crucial element in the ongoing cultivation of their subject peasants. The specific advantages it offered as a metaphor for necessary and legitimate violence can better be discerned when set against the background of an alternative option. Violence against the dominated can also be represented, for instance, as a sort of pedagogy, a component of an educational process inculcating a sense of one's place. This is quite a common metaphor for political violence, well attested in both medieval and modern texts. At least one of the texts considered here also represents lords as harsh fathers chastising their unruly peasant children for their own good.¹⁸ Pedagogical conceptions of violence, however, require a host of auxiliary assumptions and arguments, such as representing the dominated as fated to a status of permanent minority, in constant need of harsh educational measures. Also, in order to justify their recurrent use, such measures must be represented as insufficiently effective; if they were effective, they would need no repetition.

Likening violence against peasants to pruning luxuriant trees offered some notable advantages. It initiated a process of substitution: peasants and their dwellings—human beings and their most precious material possessions—are replaced by vegetable tissue, which, as Elaine Scarry remarks, “though alive, is perceived to be immune from pain; thus the inflicting of damage can be registered in language without permitting the entry of the reality of suffering into the description.”¹⁹ By redescribing the violent act in this way, the implied definition of the instrument inflicting pain also undergoes an important transformation: a weapon becomes a tool.²⁰ In this respect, the pruning metaphor joins a long list of cultural

¹⁸ Lorentzen, “Zwei Flugschriften,” p. 178, ll. 361–368.

¹⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York, 1985), p. 66.

²⁰ “The weapon and the tool seem at moments indistinguishable, for they may each reside in a single physical object (even the clenched fist of a human hand may be either a weapon or a tool), and may be quickly transformed back and forth, now into the one, now into the other. At the same time, however, a gulf of meaning, intention, connotation, and tone separates them. If one holds the two side by side in front of the mind—a hand (as weapon) and a hand (as tool), a knife (weapon) and a knife (tool), a hammer and a hammer, an ax and an ax—it is clear that what differentiates them is not the object itself but the surface on which they fall. What we call a ‘weapon’ when it acts on a sentient surface we call a ‘tool’ when it acts on a nonsentient surface.” (ibid., p. 173; cf. Scarry’s illuminating discussion, pp. 172–174, and note 14 above.)

encodings of violence, which serve to conceal concrete pain by a whole repertoire of shifts of meaning.

For a pre-modern sensibility, however, wood was perhaps not entirely dead material. Michel Pastoureau has reconstructed the place of wood as “living matter” in medieval systems of classification. In contrast to stone, wood could be represented as capable of suffering. Its ambivalent position also clung to the instruments used to shape it: The axe, says Pastoureau, an instrument used by both labourers and warriors, was indeed considered both a weapon and a tool. It was viewed as a “positive, effective, even generous” object, a tool which does not dishonour its user; an instrument which “strikes in order to produce.”²¹

Here lies the distinctive advantage of the metaphor of pruning. First, violent, obviously destructive action is represented as a *productive* activity, contributing to the maintenance of growth and fecundity—though one should not fail to ask who is to benefit from the fruits of the tree. Second, it implies that the tree itself cannot regulate its lush growth: it is “riches kept for the owners thereof to their hurt” (Eccl. 5:12). There is therefore an inherent *need* for external action, for a gardener equipped with a knife or an axe. Third, violence against peasants is represented neither as a single, non-recurring, harsh measure nor as confined to a specific, early stage of development. Pruning suggests repeated, periodical action. This is exactly what Hemmerli stresses by opting for the Jubilee to designate the right time at which peasants should be raided and plundered. The institution of Jubilee is supposed to undo the work of history by reinstating original—but, in the Bible, egalitarian—social relations: “You shall hallow the fiftieth year and proclaim liberation in the land for all its inhabitants. You shall make this year your jubilee. Every man of you shall return to his

²¹ Michel Pastoureau, “Introduction à la symbolique médiévale du bois”, in *L'arbre: histoire naturelle et symbolique de l'arbre, du bois et du fruit au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1993), pp. 25-40, at pp. 26-27, 32-33. On the cultural opposition between the axe and the saw, a deceitful instrument associated with women, as an explanation for the belated adoption of the saw, see P. H. Kilian, “Die Bedeutung der Säge in der Geschichte der Forstnützung,” in *Actes du symposium d'histoire forestière, Nancy 1979* (Nancy, 1982), vol. 1, pp. 81-96; Roland Bechmann, *Des arbres et des hommes: La forêt au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 1984), pp. 86-93. An alternative explanation for the late expansion of the saw, pointing to the state of medieval technology: Ernst Schubert, “Der Wald: wirtschaftliche Grundlage der spätmittelalterlichen Stadt,” in *Mensch und Umwelt im Mittelalter*, ed. Bernd Herrmann (Wiesbaden, 1996; originally published in 1986), pp. 257-274, at p. 260.

patrimony, every man to his family” (Lev. 25:10). Similarly, arson and robbery are to reinstate peasants in their proper places, to make them recognize who they really are by reversing a process of material accumulation and social transformation.

II

Pruning is thus a powerful metaphor, reverberating in agrarian existence, presenting violence not only as legitimate but as necessary, periodic, and productive social action. I do not claim that it was an eminently prevalent metaphor in the later middle ages, though future research might uncover further instances of its use. I wish to argue that it is a revealing one, enabling us to explore the kind of social practice it served to encode as well as the schemes of perception with which it was associated.

The metaphor presents a prevalent pattern of nobles’ violence as a noble social mission. The lords’ private wars—and to a significant extent public wars as well—consisted mainly of organized robbery, arson, and plunder of the population of the countryside.²² German nobles resisted successfully most attempts to curb effectively their right to wage wars; after the middle of the thirteenth century, their right was not seriously contested until 1495. It was not a mere remnant of a more primitive age, but a prevalent, codified practice, which had little to do with the early medieval blood feud. In the fifteenth century, feuds seem to have increased. Every properly conducted feud enabled the warring parties to open a series of well-rehearsed moves, beginning with a formal declaration, then openly raiding neighbouring villages, plundering livestock and any movable

²² Here I can only summarize briefly a more complex argument I have developed elsewhere: Gadi Algazi, *Herrengewalt und Gewalt der Herren im späten Mittelalter: Herrschaft, Gegenseitigkeit und Sprachgebrauch* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1996), pp. 128–224 and “*Sie würden hinten nach so gaik*: Vom sozialen Gebrauch der Fehde im späten Mittelalter,” in *Physische Gewalt: Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, ed. Alf Lüdtke and Thomas Lindenberger (Frankfurt am Main, 1995), pp. 39–77, at pp. 39–46. The use of the term “private” can of course be misleading, but the analytical distinction remains essential; see now Peter von Moos, “Das Öffentliche und das Private im Mittelalter: Für einen kontrollierten Anachronismus,” in *Das Öffentliche und Private in der Vormoderne*, ed. Gert Melville and Peter von Moos (Cologne, 1998), pp. 3–83.

property, burning down villages, and raping peasant women. The parties did not take unnecessary risks; in most of the cases I have examined, the warriors never encountered each other on the battlefield. They focused on exhausting their rivals' economic and human resources by raiding their peasants and waited for the counterattack to take place, until the conflict was resolved, sometimes with a compromise restoring their honour.

This pattern should not be seen merely as a by-product of medieval techniques of warfare, a side-effect of an imperfect control of the troops or of inefficient logistics encouraging looting. An explicit system of ritualized rules of aristocratic warfare, and more importantly, an implied code of honour were involved in the systematic assault on the peasantry and the wide-range immunity accorded to the warring parties, at once rivals and accomplices. Restricting hostilities mainly to unprotected villagers made sense *socially*.

Feuding marked off the privileged group, officially participating in legitimate warfare, from those excluded from the game of honour. By marking out those excluded from participating in the game for honour as proper *objects* of its proceedings, it also painfully reinscribed on them their social identity. But private warfare not only served to distinguish lords, as members of a comprehensive social category, from peasants. It also attached individual dependent peasant communities to their particular lords. By participating in private wars against each other, lords were engaged in the uncoordinated production of the need for protection.²³

This might have been a systematic unintended consequence of lord's feuds, the "latent function" of lords' armed disputes in reproducing the social structure.²⁴ Such a view of the feud was hardly accessible to contemporaries. It presupposes combining a construction of the nobility as a comprehensive social category with an internal perspective focussed on the web of relations between local lords and particular rural

²³ Algazi, *Herrengewalt*, pp. 149-167. In the ensuing discussion, R. I. More and Stephen D. White suggested that the model outlined here may also be applied to the central Middle Ages; see Stephen D. White, "Feuding and Peace-Making in the Touraine around the Year 1100," *Traditio* 42 (1986), 195-263.

²⁴ Robert K. Merton, "Manifest and Latent Functions," in *Social Theory and Social Structure*, rev. ed. (Glencoe, 1957), pp. 19-84. I believe that the feudal "invisible hand" argument sketched here can meet the theoretical requirements formulated by Jon Elster in *Ulysses among the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 28-35.

communities.²⁵ Closer to the agents' common perceptions, however, lay the contribution of private warfare to reinstating the social order. Whatever other functions private wars might have in later medieval German society, they also enabled lords to fulfill Hemmerli's injunction to prune peasants effectively, more precisely, to trim reciprocally each others' subjects. One could count on the feud to hit peasants with its irregular regularity. To subdue the peasantry, lords needed not conspire with each other nor subject themselves to some central organization. It was enough for them to pursue their particular interests and defend their honour more or less according to the rules of private warfare.²⁶

The use of the pruning metaphor reveals more than an ingrained hatred for peasants or an exceedingly sharp reaction to particular local circumstances, such as the conflicts of the Swiss confederation in the first half of the fifteenth century or the widely diffused fear of peasant revolts towards its end. Unorganized violence against peasants was perceived by nobles as a contribution to reproducing the ordering of society, to 'peace' in its Augustinian sense.²⁷ The metaphor and the practices associated with it capture a significant aspect of the lords' social vision in the later Middle Ages. The connotations of the term 'vision' are still too intellectual for my purposes: we are dealing here not with an explicit, elaborated social theory, like those usually dealt with in studies of medieval political

²⁵ Algazi, *Herrengewalt*, pp. 135-146, 168-196.

²⁶ A close phenomenological analysis of late medieval warfare can establish significant differences between the treatment rival lords accorded to each other as recognized opponents, and the way they handled subject peasants—both their rivals' and their own. Also, although feuds were also carried on by urban communities, the fact that different social agents were evoking the same legal figure, that of the 'feud,' while carrying out armed conflicts, should not divert attention from significant differences in the modalities of the practice itself. Schematically speaking, 'feuds' conducted by German cities were not embedded in a common aristocratic code of honour nor principally guided by interest in short-term spoliation, the restoration of 'honour,' or regional political maneuvers. They tended to look more like campaigns aimed at creating permanently pacified zones and guaranteeing the preconditions for long-term economic activity. See for example Elsbet Orth, *Die Fehden der Reichsstadt Frankfurt am Main im Spätmittelalter: Fehderecht und Fehdepraxis im 14. und 15. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurter Historischer Abhandlungen, vol. 6 (Wiesbaden, 1973), pp. 7, 72-77, 105; Klaus Graff, "Feindbild und Vorbild: Bemerkungen zur städtischen Wahrnehmung des Adels," *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte des Oberrheins* 141 (1993), 121-154, esp. 126-127.

²⁷ Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, 1998), book XIX, ch. 13, p. 938.

thought, but with a condensed expression of a “structure of feeling.” The metaphor I have described did serve to justify violence against the rural population, and occasionally against merchants; but one does not have to assume a cynical, distanced use of these metaphors as *post factum* legitimations; they interlocked perfectly with the lords’ image of self and others and the way they *felt* the social order.

To substantiate these claims, I shall first offer a brief analysis of two sources corroborating the impression that we are dealing not with an empty justification, but with a view intimately related to deeper layers of social identity. I shall then draw on Max Weber’s conceptual tool-kit in order to situate both the pruning metaphor and the practice of private war in the context of the late medieval ‘social order’—a basic mode of perceiving and experiencing social relations, embodied in lifestyles and patterns of consumption, in notions of honour and identity, and maintained by an associated repertoire of practices, one of which was the private war.

III

Werner Rolevinck, the Carthusian monk from Cologne cited above, addressed his *De laude antiquae Saxoniae* (1474) to the nobles of Westphalia, his homeland. Rolevinck appealed to them to abandon the practice of private war, for which they were famous, and to form a union (*foedus*), similar to those which emerged in southern Germany in the face of the social decline of the minor nobility. Rolevinck presented the proposed union as a legitimate alternative to private war, a means to stop intolerable social mobility. Serfs rise in society, he wrote, leaving nobles behind; a single rustic is readily accorded as much credit as ten nobles and invests it as he pleases, whereas nobles’ rights are ridiculed.²⁸ The functional equivalence Rolevinck establishes between private wars and the

²⁸ “Ecce, carissimi, ut cernitis, stirps nostra, ab olim spectabilis, quotidie imminuitur. Hereditates nostras alieni possident. Servi succrescunt et nos cum armis nostris ad ima declinamus. Iam facilius burista unus, quam decem ex nobis, mutuo accipit aut locat quae vult, et nostra legalitas pergit in derisum et opprobrium.” Werner Rolevinck, *De laude veteris Saxoniae nunc Westphaliae dictae*, ed. and trans. Ludwig Troß (Cologne, 1865), bk. 3, chap. 11, 224. Here, as elsewhere, I am not concerned of course with the extent to which Rolevinck’s depiction of social mobility was accurate, nor do I have the means to establish how those Rolevinck defines as “serfs” would actually define themselves; for the purpose of the present discussion, it is enough that these constructions were available and considered effective enough for Rolevinck to use.

suggested league of the nobility shows that he assumed that feuds were serving a similar, legitimate need.

This becomes clearer when Rolevinck seeks to persuade his hearers to abandon private war: Pious hearts should beseech God “to put an end to such excesses [feuds], to bestow on rustics and merchants the grace of humility, so that, tempted by prosperity, they would not become presumptuous” and to inspire nobles to give up pillage and feuds and to fight the Saracens instead.²⁹ Rolevinck thus combines the appeal to noblemen to refrain from feuding with an admonition to merchants and rustics to overcome their “arrogance” and “presumption,” which are supposed to provoke the nobles’ violence. He assumes that his audience perceives private war as a proper response to the peasants’ and merchants’ intolerable presumption and prosperity. The terminology is clerical but the vision underlying it might well be called feudal: “presumption” is embodied in a lifestyle perceived as incompatible with prescribed social condition. It thus points towards an unexpected context for perceiving private warfare. It is represented as a violent mode of asserting private claims *and* of enforcing generally binding social norms—an ascribed lifestyle and appropriate patterns of consumption, conceived as a material embodiment of the appropriate social order.

A similar context is also discernible in the anonymous rhymed chronicle cited earlier. The chronicle passes immediately from the injunction to prune peasants, who are likened to willows, to a description of a peasant transgressing sumptuary norms and dressing himself like a knight. A knight, says the chronicle, should look like a peacock, yet nowadays peasants abandon their smock (*Kittel*), wear “proud clothes,” and dress themselves with borrowed plumes. They should be treated like the raven who coveted the peacocks’ feathers: The raven followed them and dressed himself in their plumes and walked about among them, “proud and beautiful in his own eyes.” When the peacocks perceived this, they plucked his feathers with their beaks and stripped him until he was

²⁹ “Hic pia corda evigilent et misericordem dominum suppliciter exorent, ut tantis extremitatibus finem imponat tribuatque rusticis et mercatoribus gratiam humilitatis, ut prosperis illecti petulantes non fiant, ruteris quoque paraclitum tribuant, quo huius mundi non dico prospera, sed extrema adversa contemnant et ad conflictum contra Sarracenos procedant.” Ibid., p. 214.

left bare and naked. This should be done to peasants; their false, proud feathers should be plucked, so that they may not walk around proudly any more and so that they should recognize their lords.³⁰

Just as “humility” and “presumption” in Rolevinck’s text do not designate an ‘internal’ state of mind but rather ‘external’ social behaviour, so too the anonymous author speaks here of “proud clothes,” describing their removal as a forced act of ‘self recognition.’ Material objects are perceived as embedded in a binding sociocultural code which assigns them objective meaning, independent of the intentions of their possessors. Their use is subject to social regulation, to binding norms of consumption, enforced either regularly—for instance through sumptuary laws—or in a less organized but nonetheless regular manner, by occasional violent expropriation. Since material objects are supposed to define the prescribed social identity of their bearers, appropriating them can in fact be perceived as false pretension, an illegitimate conversion of the ascribed self. Expropriating them from unbecoming owners is hence an act of reform, of remodeling peasants according to their proper form.

I do not suggest that private wars served this function only. They should rather be conceived as multi-layered practices with multiple social uses and unexpected hidden edges. When analyzed as a compartmentalized phenomenon bearing exclusively on relationships within the elite, their undeclared addressees and structural consequences are lost from view. If, on the other hand, feuds are reduced to their economic dimension and conceived solely as an irregular complementary mode of seigniorial appropriation, the specific way of perceiving material possessions and constructing the social order in which they were embedded is effaced. People could well make cynical uses of the cultural model of pruning in pursuing their self-interest. But their sense of self could itself be irrevocably bound up with such notions. The precise blend of self-interest in violent expropriation and the sense of fulfilling a justified role at work in each particular case cannot be gauged. My point is rather that aristocratic self-interest itself was partly conceived in terms of a specific economy of honour. Hence, reducing the feud either to its economic or political ‘motives’ or to its ulterior symbolic ‘meaning’ would be futile.

These seemingly incompatible, one-sided accounts of the feud were already prefigured in late medieval discussions, although in that context

³⁰ Lorentzen, “Zwei Flugschriften”, pp. 178-179.

they did not function as scholarly interpretations, but as interested representations embedded in social strategies. Playing different dimensions of social action against each other was an important resource for late medieval actors, engaged in conflicts over the social management of meaning, over the effective construction of practices such as private wars or gift giving. Thus, constructions of noble warfare in terms of honour and obligation could be contested by rival groups interested in disenchanting this practice and unmasking its worldly motives. Instead of reducing multi-layered practices *a priori* to their presumed true meaning, one should rather analyze such strategies of imposing definite representations on polysemic social practices.

In the present context, I shall not deal with late medieval attempts to disenchant the feud and to unmask it, for instance, as a practice governed by ordinary economic considerations. Instead, I would like to clarify further the nobler view of noble warfare. It now seems embedded in a native practical sociology: a comprehensive ‘structure of feeling’ based on conventionalized perceptions of self and others and a binding code assigning objective meaning to material objects and modes of life, itself enforced by means of a repertoire of codified actions. It is a social universe—imagined and occasionally enforced—in which economic activity is embedded in binding images of social identity. It implies a model of late medieval society in which social groups are defined by ascribed lifestyles. I wish to situate the metaphors and practices I have described within a conception of a society of orders which draws on some of Max Weber’s suggestions while introducing some necessary modifications.

In a very famous section of *Economy and Society*, Weber sketches a typology of social groupings: orders (*Stände*), classes, and parties.³¹ For present purposes, it is not the typology that matters, but the principles of its construction. Weber defines an ‘order’ or an ‘estate’ (misleadingly translated into English as ‘status-group’) as a community based on a distinctive mode of life (*Lebensführung*) and on intensive and exclusive social intercourse among its members (*Konnobium*). These elements constitute the ‘honour’ ascribed to the group. ‘Honour’ is not used here in the sense of one’s acquired prestige or reputation, nor in the sense of

³¹ Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th edition, ed. Johannes Winckelmann (Tübingen, 1985), pp. 531-540; English translation: *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley, 1978), pp. 926-939. The translation has been modified.

conformity to generally cherished values. ‘Honour’ is used here as a code for a system of binding models of behaviour and identity, ascribed to members of an estate by virtue of belonging to it.

Weber has often been misunderstood by critics who insisted that medieval society should not be conceptualized as a society of orders but as a class society, or more loosely, as one consisting of groups competing for power. But these are not mutually exclusive modes of analysis. For Weber, unlike many historians, a ‘society of orders’ is strictly speaking one possible mode of perceiving social reality and constructing it, not a way of designating its true ‘essence’. Viewing society as a ‘social order’ and constructing it according to the division of ‘honour’ yields distinguishable ‘orders’. ‘Orders’ or ‘estates’ thus function as constructs, whose theoretical status and uses are markedly different from that of ‘classes’. In Weber’s analysis, the concept of ‘estate’ is not introduced for application when analyzing society in terms of ‘social structure’ (or ‘social formation’), but as a mode of conceptualizing the ‘social order’, a concept Weber defines as the way ‘honour’—in this special sense—is “distributed” among groups within society.³² Hence, there is no need for an ‘order’, defined by the ‘honour’ ascribed to its members—their mode of life and patterns of social intercourse—to correspond neatly to any ‘classes’, constructed by a different method of social analysis.

This perspective allows us to perceive the nobles’ irregular violence as a social mechanism which imposes the proper distribution of ‘honour’ in society, that is, reproduces the social order in Weber’s sense. The struggles of individual nobles *against* each other in defense of their *particular* honour can thus be understood as fulfilling a *collective* function in readjusting the distribution of ‘honour’ within the social order: By engaging in warfare, nobles were not only distinguishing themselves by conspicuously realizing their privilege to employ violence, but also relieving peasants and burghers of their spurious material extensions, bringing them back to themselves—“a discipline of self-recognition”, as Hemmerli said—and enforcing an ascribed social identity.

³² “Die Art, wie soziale ‘Ehre’ in einer Gemeinschaft sich zwischen typischen Gruppen der daran Beteiligten verteilt, wollen wir die ‘soziale Ordnung’ nennen.” (ibid., p. 531) The English translation causes confusion by rendering ‘social order’ (*soziale Ordnung*) in Weber’s definition of the concept as ‘status order,’ only to revert to the term ‘social order’ in the next sentence (ibid., p. 927). Weber’s ‘estate honour’ (*ständische Ehre*) is rendered as ‘status honour.’

Within a Weberian comprehensive concept of 'honour' as a code for a bundle of prescribed lifestyles and distinctive patterns of intercourse, private warfare is but one such exclusive pattern of social intercourse among honourable agents, which owes its conspicuous role in their self-image to its capacity to regulate at the same time the societal distribution of 'honour' as embodied in material possessions. The ritualized game of honour between nobles serves to enforce on peasants the dominant definition of their proper 'negative honour', that is, the material possessions and social behaviour befitting their identity. Nobles were thus reinscribing the boundaries of social estates, reconstituting the social order, by participating in a violent game of honour. A feudal, partly visible hand turned the internal conflicts of lords into instruments of maintaining the lords' peace.

Here we move beyond Weber's concept, which does not explicitly refer to conflicts over the proper distribution of 'honour' among social groups, nor, more importantly, to conflicts over its effective *definition*. In other contexts, Weber points out that within the same society, definitions of honour may vary significantly according to agents' social perspective, their social position, and cultural traditions.³³ In the key passages cited above, however, perhaps for the sake of simplicity, he prefers to deal with 'honour' as if it were a uniformly valid coinage unequivocally distributed among different members of a 'society of orders'. The economic metaphors—the references to the 'distribution' and 'allocation' of 'honour'—suggest that honour is a uniformly ascribed and accepted property, not a potentially disputed construction. Weber's analysis of the institutionalized distribution of honour should therefore be complemented with insights drawn from Bourdieu's analysis of the *game* of honour as a practice in which the struggle among recognized participants reconstitutes their common social identity and serves to re-inscribe effective social boundaries.³⁴

Such a model of a society of orders does not represent it as a static and certainly not as a harmonious social whole. It is conceptualized as a society in which struggles over consumption and ascribed social identity—honour—were a central medium of social conflict. The common image of

³³ In the very same section, he sketches different social constructions of 'honour' (ibid., p. 536; English translation: pp. 934-5).

³⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Sentiment of Honour in Kabyle Society," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of a Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (London, 1965), pp. 191-242.

a society of orders, associated with traditionalism, stability, shared world-views, and inherent harmony is based on taking such contested representations of society at face value. Where conflict and mobility are introduced into the picture, they are seen as disruptive elements within a traditional, pre-existing 'social order'. I suggest that, for certain purposes, it is indeed useful to construct late medieval society, at least in Germany, as a society of orders; but not in order to indicate that it simply *was* one, certainly not that it was so by itself, by force of tradition, or thanks to some general consensus, but in order to call attention to the disputed process of its continuous (re)construction, to repertoires of practices and modes of life intimately linked with such a vision of society and tending to impose it.

The rough model sketched here needs further elaboration. A thorough analysis of this self-reproducing game would also require pointing out the preconditions of its own transformation. This task cannot be undertaken here. I shall therefore confine myself to pointing to some lines of inquiry. The vision of society outlined above did not reign uncontested. In the fifteenth century, it was challenged in Germany by attempts to disenchant the 'economy of honour', to subject it to a profanating economic gaze. Not only the distribution of honour but also its *definition* were at stake, and with it the mode of constructing society underlying it. A history of the social management of meaning in late medieval societies has not yet been written.

Such struggles over the management of meaning interlocked with ambiguities inherent to the system reproducing the social order through the lords' uncoordinated struggles. Within this system, the central power, kings and princes, assumed an ambiguous position. Nobles insisted on their right to wage private wars, yet expected the central power to arbitrate in their conflicts and to set limits to their destructive game, without abolishing it. The late medieval German *Landfrieden*, territorial peace pacts, are not concerned with putting an end to private wars, but with regulating them in order to maintain some measure of stability. In terms of our agricultural metaphors, they signalled a move from a spoliatory wood-economy (*Raubwirtschaft*), which seriously endangers long-term reproduction, to more regular pruning. On the other hand, some burghers, peasants and clergymen could reinterpret such measures in a more radical way, expecting the central power to suppress the game itself, to put an end to private wars and establish peace in a quite different sense.

Thus, the central power could serve as a point of intersection for colliding social visions and expectations. Precisely because of its relative weakness and structural position, and not simply by virtue of a long tradition of political and philosophical thought, the state could function as a common surface for projection, with which incongruous expectations could be associated. This could have been a source of weakness for the central power, but perhaps also a symbolic resource, which under different circumstances could be invoked to unfold a dynamic pointing beyond the game which sustained it. Accounts of pre-modern state formation could perhaps be enriched by considering this possible aspect of the construction of the state as a collective representation.

IV

In conclusion, I would like to turn again to the metaphor of pruning as a condensation of a native political sociology of an agrarian society. According to the political model it implied, the lords were not only engaged in cultivating themselves, their distinctive culture, by means provided by peasants engaged in agriculture. The lords were also engaged in a sort of agriculture, that is, in cultivating the cultivators by sporadically and violently pruning them. If subject peasants made lords, lords were also significantly involved in the making of proper peasants. Against a prevalent current assumption, one should perhaps emphasize that social subjects were not constituted by discourse alone, but also by culturally encoded violence and material dispossession. Excluding such practices from accounts of power and the making of subjects, both pre-modern and modern ones, would yield impoverished accounts. To round out the preceding discussion, the emerging medieval model of power encoded in the pruning metaphor should be compared more explicitly and systematically with some of its modern counterparts.

Ernst Gellner has suggested that pre-industrial societies ('agro-literate polities') could usefully be regarded as 'wild cultures', in contrast to modern 'garden cultures'. In 'wild cultures', the ruling elite contents itself with supervising growth it cannot master or plan. Its members may stroll around, impress their subjects, occasionally trim them, and, of course, collect the fruit on time. Any further-reaching intervention on their part is doomed to failure. Zygmunt Bauman has pointed out that in such

cultures, the ruling elite is only marginally involved in actively forming and informing social subjects, that is, in the specifically modern project of designing cultures and inculcating them. Ruling groups are rather reduced to the role of ‘gamekeepers’. The passage to modernity is marked by their replacement by ‘gardeners’, not content with occasional pruning and weeding but actively maintaining complex social systems and designing comprehensive cultures.³⁵

I have some difficulties with both Gellner’s and Bauman’s suggestive accounts, but they do seem to point to a central dimension of the relationship between elites and subject populations in pre-modern agrarian societies. Pruning seems in fact to be a metaphor exceptionally suited to articulate the structural role of violence in agrarian society by representing social action by the ruling elite as a kind of pre-modern mode of cultivating subjects—a violent, irregular, and inherently limited one. The lush tree could well stand for peasant economy as viewed by lords—fertile, unruly, only partly permeable, and yet indispensable.

The pruning metaphor neither located peasants in the lord’s garden, subject to intensive cultivation, nor relegated them as ‘wild men’ to raw ‘nature’. It situated them quite precisely in between, or on the outer margins of the intensively cultivated domain, in a mediating zone excluded by facile oppositions of ‘nature’ to ‘culture’.³⁶ In contrast, early modern political theory and landscape designs would eventually formulate a vision of the political territory as an enclosed, carefully cultivated garden,³⁷ and in reaction to its own unfolding, also construct neatly circumscribed and

³⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 50-52; Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-Modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 51-68. Gellner’s neat contrast between pre-modern and modern politics is underpinned by an equally questionable opposition between nature and culture, translated into the opposition between ‘wild’ (pre-modern) and ‘cultivated’ (modern) cultures.

³⁶ Studies focussing on the cultural opposition between wilderness and civilization tend to map this opposition uncritically on the rural landscape. Compare in contrast Simon Schama’s apt remarks in *Landscape and Memory* (London, 1995), pp. 142-143, and esp. p. 588, n. 18.

³⁷ Martin Warnke, *Political Landscape: The Art History of Nature* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), pp. 78-82; Chandra Mukerji, “Territorial Gardens: The Control of Land in Seventeenth-Century French Formal Gardens,” in *The Culture of the Market: Historical Essays*, ed. Thomas L. Haskell and Richard F. Teichgraber III (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 66-101.

artificially maintained ‘wilderness’.³⁸ Both lie beyond the conception of power encoded in the medieval pruning metaphor. Yet the metaphor would survive the ‘agro-literate polity’ in which it took shape and undergo significant transformations.

The same image of pruning also seems to have given the Renaissance its name. *Renasci*, as Jost Trier and Gerhart Ladner have argued, does not simply mean revival or rebirth, but more specifically, the renewed growth of a tree after having been pruned. The image had already been used by Livius to describe how ancient Rome, after the invasions of the Gauls, “sprang up, as it were from old roots, with a more luxuriant and fruitful growth.” Plinius and Columella both remarked that some trees grow with renewed strength after having been pruned. Trier and Ladner describe how the image was taken up again by the early Humanists; only later, for example in Vasari’s writings, did ‘renaissance’ gradually lose its agricultural connotations, and other elements, notably the theme of rebirth and the succession of darkness and light, became prominent.³⁹ They ignore, however, the medieval and aristocratic chapter in the political history of the pruning metaphor. Without considering this phase, the shifts of meaning involved in its early modern use, especially by Humanists offering their services as cultivators of culture—in its strict and exclusive definition—to late medieval and early modern rulers, remain unnoticed.

Whereas Humanists and Roman authors seem to have concentrated on the outcome of the process—the resulting renewed growth, *renasci*—the late medieval use examined here focused on the recurring violent act of pruning itself. Also, by applying the pruning metaphor to texts and laws, its violent undertones and concrete agrarian associations could almost wither away. One late example of this culturalist inflection of the metaphor would be provided by Bacon’s discussion in the *Advancement of Learning* of how laws are to be “pruned and

³⁸ Warnke, *Political Landscape*, pp. 81-82; Siegmund Gerndt, *Idealisierte Natur: Die literarische Kontroverse um den Landschaftsgarten des 18. und frühen 19. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Stuttgart, 1981), pp. 36-37. Derek Pearsall and Elisabeth Salter have pointed out that medieval gardens, unlike ancient ones, do not merge into the surrounding landscape, but remain strictly bounded, a *hortus conclusus*. *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World* (Toronto, 1973), p. 54; see pp. 26-27, 51-53, 56-118.

³⁹ Jost Trier, “Zur Vorgeschichte des Renaissance-Begriffes,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 33 (1951), 45-63; Gerhart B. Ladner, “Vegetation Symbolism and the Concept of the Renaissance,” in *De Artibus Opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Milard Meiss (New York, 1961), pp. 303-322.

reformed from time to time.”⁴⁰ The agrarian metaphor is still present in Cesare Ripa’s influential *Iconologia*, in which the figure of ‘reform’ is represented as an elderly man in simple clothes, holding in one hand a book and in the other, a pruning knife (plate 2).⁴¹

The Humanist cultural project was not confined to reforming texts; texts were but one medium used in remodelling persons.⁴² Late medieval authors advocating occasional violence against peasants betray a deep-seated anxiety about the effectiveness of measures expected to instill discipline in contumacious peasant subjects, who might ‘forget themselves’, that is, forget their ascribed social identity. In a different social setting, Humanist authors and educators also had reasons to suspect that their efforts to transform subjects by implanting texts in them would not bear the desired fruit. In order to “stabilize the tension between... fertility and control”⁴³ inherent in their project, they used—beside the safer image of inscribing texts on receptive and passive surfaces—the more appropriate and ambivalent metaphors of feeding, pruning and trimming.⁴⁴

Such doubts seem inseparable from any project of remodeling human subjects. Yet there are telling differences between this Humanist notion of ‘pruning’ and the one with which we have been concerned, in terms of the scope and intensity of domination imagined, the image of the dominated, and the role assigned to pruning.

The intervention early modern intellectuals envisaged seems to have been far more thorough than the one embedded in the late medieval notion of pruning lush peasant populations, which consisted mainly in an occasional violent intervention in a relatively autonomous and only partly

⁴⁰ Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, G. W. Kitchin ed. (London, 1973), bk. 2, ch. 23, par. 49, p. 207.

⁴¹ Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia* (Rome, 1603; repr. Hildesheim, 1970), p. 89. Ripa’s text insists that *riforma* should be represented by an elderly woman, but this discrepancy cannot be properly discussed here.

⁴² On the project and its limits see Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities: Education and the Liberal Arts in Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Europe* (London, 1986), esp. pp. 122-200.

⁴³ Mary Thomas Crane, *Framing Authority: Sayings, Self, and Society in Sixteenth-Century England* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), p. 54.

⁴⁴ Crane provides a useful survey of the images evoked to convey this process—“imagined scenes of education” encapsulated in images of inscribing and feeding, pruning, trimming, and gardening (see esp. *Framing Authority*, pp. 68-71). She argues that in the English context, precisely because the Humanist project was confronted with a dominant aristocratic ethos, the violence involved in the process of inculcating proper identities was openly acknowledged (pp. 55-56). Cf. Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities*, pp. 122-160.



Plate 2

controlled form of productivity. The same difference is discernible in the correlative image of the dominated: in the Humanists' discourse, subjects were likened to well-tended gardens.⁴⁵ The image of thorough control embodied in likening political territories or human subjects to enclosed gardens finds no parallel in the medieval sources examined thus far.⁴⁶ Medieval pruning located peasants in a specific form of agriculture, halfway between the cultivated fields and the deep woods. In this respect, the medieval pruning metaphor seems to embody a more modest model of power.

On the other hand, it seems that in Humanist discourse pruning was not conceived as stimulating growth; weeding and pruning were conceived as negative, restrictive measures accompanying the process of nurturing and applied to superfluities only.⁴⁷ Whereas this early modern model of power carefully distinguishes benevolent nurture from violent correction—a distinction underlying modern conceptions of cultivation—in the medieval metaphor they are completely fused. This fusion, however, remained confined to the world projected by the metaphor and the agricultural practices on which it relied. Pruning was not seriously expected to be considered beneficial by its objects. The image of rank growth, suggesting a coincidence of interests between peasant cultivator and cultivating lord, may conceal the plain fact that peasant prosperity represented no danger for peasants themselves, as luscious growth may seem to do for the fruit-bearing tree. The pruning metaphor in no way served to elicit peasant consent to the lords' violent interventions. Its role was rather to reinstall a visible 'social order' and instill a sense of one's

⁴⁵ Rebecca W. Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching: Early Modern Humanism in Theory and Practice* (Ithaca, NY and London, 1996), p. 84; cf. Klaus Schaller, "Die Gartenmetapher bei Comenius," *Paedagogica Historica* 28:2 (1992), 199-216.

⁴⁶ Christopher Wood contrasts Altdorfer's image of the countryside with its representation in Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government* or in Flemish miniatures as an orderly space, a cultivated and protected realm (Wood, *Altdorfer*, p. 165). Altdorfer often evoked an unruly and inscrutable countryside, neither the embodiment of intact 'nature' nor an enclosed, thoroughly organized 'garden' (see especially the underwood located between the forest and the castle in *Allegory* [1531], reproduced as ill. 192, p. 268 and note 17 above).

⁴⁷ Crane does not see pruning as part of cultivation, but as a negative measure, likened to weeding: Crane, *Framing Authority*, p. 57; a similar view in Bushnell, *A Culture of Teaching*, p. 84; Keith Thomas, *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500-1800* (London, 1984), p. 220. This also seems to be the image underlying Shakespeare's depiction of the "garden of England" in *Richard II*, act II, scene 4.

place. Here Humanist models of power were pointing perhaps in a different direction: they seem to have been designed to elicit a certain kind of consent by claiming to play a beneficial role. They relied on a pedagogic conception of power, conceived as a hierarchy between the ‘wise’ and the ‘fools’, not between the pruning lords and their trees. They envisaged a mode of domination combining claims for legitimation based on subjects’ consent with a productive role in shaping such subjects.

Different inflections of the pruning metaphor and the oscillation between images of violent pruning and culturalist gardening may thus indicate obliquely fundamental shifts in the models of power propagated in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is important, however, not to confuse such images and their concomitant claims for legitimation with practices of domination. Also, the contrast should not be perceived as a neat epochal passage from a ‘medieval’ model to its ‘modern’ counterpart, but rather as a changing configuration of different discourses associated with the changing composition of dominant groups. Culturalist models of benevolent, cultivating power were not completely unknown in the Middle Ages. Such an image of power may be glimpsed in a fifteenth-century treatise invoking the authority of the church fathers in order to reconstruct political authority. Pruning is evoked in a passage of Nicholas of Cusa’s *Catholic Concordance* (1433/4), in which, relying on Marsilius of Padua’s *Defender of Peace*, he cites St. Ambrose in support of the notion that the ignorant obey the wise. Here we leave the underwood behind and enter the vineyard, an intensively cultivated area:

But almighty God has assigned a certain natural servitude to the ignorant and stupid so that they readily trust the wise to help them to preserve themselves, as appears in the eighth letter of Ambrose after the quotation from Calanus’ letter to Alexander, “The unwise man is like a farm (*agri cultura*); the man who lacks sense is like a vine.” “The pruned vine brings forth fruit; cut back, it flourishes; neglected, it grows wild.”⁴⁸

Here pruning vines appears to be the very embodiment of productive, beneficial violence, indeed of lordship itself—harsh yet readily accepted.

⁴⁸ Cusanus, *De Concordantia catholica libri tres*, in *Opera omnia*, ed. Gerhard Kallen, vol. 14 (Hamburg, 1964), bk. 3, par. 271; I cite here from Sigmund’s translation: Nicholas of Cusa, *The Catholic Concordance*, ed. and trans. Paul E. Sigmund (Cambridge, 1991), p. 206.

However, its application entails reconceiving power differentials in 'cultural' terms as hierarchies of knowledge. Some subjects, it implies, although foolish, would at least "by natural instinct" be inclined to subject themselves to regular pruning by their wise masters. Medieval lords had less in mind. Having traced one thread in the history of the lords' native practical sociology, one still needs to reconstruct its changing relations with the social theories elaborated by medieval 'wise men' propagating in their own peculiar way the turning of swords into pruning-knives.

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