THE WILD HUNT

Wild Hunt. It crosses our path at scarily unpredictable intervals, often through the sky and nearly always at night. It is very numinous and also doom-laden. Otherwise, no one knows quite what to make of it. ~ Diana Wynne Jones, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*

Overview of the Wild Hunt

The folk-myth of the Wild Hunt begins many centuries ago. Before our modern Christmas was invented, pagan peoples of Northern Europe celebrated the midwinter festival of Yule or Yuletide with the coming of the Winter Solstice season, a time of cold and darkness. Yule took place in the deepest, darkest days of winter (usually from mid-December into January), when it was believed that the spirits of the dead traveled between our worlds, walking freely among the living. Venturing out into the depths of a Yuletide night was considered dangerous at this dark time of the year, as one might encounter evil spirits, dark entities or worse—the Wild Hunt, a terrifying cavalcade of ghostly horsemen riding across the winter sky, their black hounds baying and horns blaring, and accompanied by the sounds of the howling wind of the stormy night. The Wild Hunt was said to pass through the forests in the coldest, stormiest time of the year. In the Northern tradition, the Wild Hunt was synonymous with the onslaught of great winter storms or the change in the seasons from summer to winter. In the Scandinavian versions, the Wild Hunt commonly signified a change in seasons or the onset of war. Some Wild Hunts are savage, amoral, and intensely powerful, embodying the irresistible force of untamed nature itself. In his function as a Lord of the Dead (e.g., the Welsh Gwyn ap Nudd and Arawn King of Annywn, and the English Herne the Hunter), the leader of the Wild Hunt is the embodiment of living wildness. Sometimes, accompanied by his consort, the fertility goddess, they represent the two sides of life and death, and therefore complete cycle of renewal.

Folklorists tell us that from Scandinavia to Germany, from (Saxon) England to Wales, from Ireland to Scotland, and to the remote Isles of Orkney, the infamous Wild Hunt raced across the stormy Northern European skies, terrorizing the people of these countries and stealing the souls of any unfortunates who might find themselves in its path, dooming them to ride with the hunt for all eternity. In some Scandinavian versions of the folk-myth, the Wild Hunt was not seen, but only heard. Typically heard was the barking of Odin's dogs, as well as the forest growing deathly silent, which warned people of their imminent arrival. In other versions, seeing the Wild Hunt was often thought to be an ill omen—warning of war, plague, famine, or the death of whoever witnessed it. It was also believed that a person's spirit could be pulled away during their sleep to join the procession, and that anyone who encountered the Wild Hunt could be abducted to the underworld. It was also believed that anyone found outdoors at the time would be swept up into the hunting party involuntarily and dropped miles from their original location. In Germany, the tale often recounts someone encountering the hunt. If they oppose or stand up to the menacing horde they are punished, but if they aid the hunters they are rewarded, customarily with money or the leg of a slain animal. Unfortunately, if they receive the latter, it is usually cursed and impossible to get rid of without the aid of a magician or priest. The tales also mention that someone standing in the middle of the road is somehow safe from the hunting procession. The hunted prey in these tales likewise varies—it might be a wild horse, a boar, or a magical maiden. One magical being often portrayed in flight from the hunt is someone called "the wood wife." The wood wife is a pretty, delicate forest spirit whose life is tied to the lives of her trees, like a dryad.

Although the phenomenon of the Wild Hunt is ubiquitous in Northern Europe (with variants in Central Europe and the Mediterranean countries, such as the

Witches' Sabbath "night flight"), the particulars of the nature of the Wild Hunt are varied, such as who the leader and riders of the hunt are and their purpose.

In northeastern Italy, during the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a related phenomenon to the Witches' "flight night." The *benandanti* (a term meaning "good walkers") were men and women members of a folk tradition in the Friuli region, who took flight to ensure the protection of their community and its crops, and in order to ensure good crops for the season to come. The *benandanti* reported leaving their bodies in the shape of mice, cats, rabbits, or butterflies. The men mostly reported flying into the clouds battling against witches to secure fertility for their community; the women more often reported attending great feasts. Although these were described by *benandanti* as spirit journeys, they nevertheless stressed the reality of such experiences, believing that they were real occurrences. According to the historian Carlo Ginzburg's (1983) interpretation of the evidence, the *benandanti* was a "fertility cult" whose members were "defenders of harvests and the fertility of fields." Ginzburg furthermore argued that the *benandanti* phenomenon was only one surviving part of a much wider European tradition of visionary experiences that had its origins in the pre-Christian period, all of which revolved around "the myth of nocturnal gatherings" presided over by a goddess figure, varyingly known as Perchta, Holda, Abundia, Satia, Herodias, Venus or Diana. The similarity of nocturnal flights and the goddess leaders of the *benandanti*, especially Holda and Perchta (or Berchta), and Diana, strongly suggests that the *benandanti* phenomenon was an Italian form of the Wild Hunt folk-myth. In fact, Ginzburg argues for just such an interpretation. Because he sees the *benandanti* to be "a fertility cult," Ginzburg draws parallels with similar visionary traditions found throughout the Alps and also from the Baltic, such as that of the widespread folklore surrounding the Wild Hunt. Ginzburg looks at the *Canon Episcopi*, a 9th-century document that denounced those women who

believed that they went on nocturnal processions with the goddess Diana; the Canon's author had claimed that they were deceived by the Devil, but Ginzburg argues that it reflects a genuine folk belief of the period. He connects this account with the many other European myths surrounding the Wild Hunt or Furious Horde, noting that in those of central Europe the name of Diana was supplanted by that of Holda or Perchta. And, again, he connects the Late Medieval and Early Modern accounts of the *benandanti* with surviving remnants of a pan-European, pre-Christian shamanistic belief concerning the fertility of the crops. To quote Ginzburg: "It seems possible to establish the existence of a thread linking the various pieces of evidence that have been examined thus far: the presence of groups of individuals (generally women) who during the Ember Days fell into swoons and remained unconscious for brief periods of time during which, they affirmed, their souls left their bodies to join the processions of the dead (which were almost always nocturnal) presided over at least in one case by a female divinity (Fraw Selga). We have also seen that these processions were linked to an older and even more widely diffused myth, that of the 'Wild Hunt'. It was precisely these elements that reappeared, as we shall see more clearly, in the confessions of the female Friulian *benandanti.*"

The legend of the Wild Hunt has been adapted over the years and, depending also on the geographical location, the leader of the hunt along with it; i.e., the name and backstory of that leader varies based upon the region. Thus, the numerous variations of the legend mention different leaders of the hunting party. (For example, in the Christian Middle Ages, with heathen deities becoming a thing of the past, the hero of the legend became both fictional characters such as King Arthur, Roland, and historical personages, such as the emperor Charlemagne.) According to one authority of the Wild Hint in literature, Catherine Butler (2006),

various incarnations of the hunt's leader and his huntsmen ranged from mythical to historical figures:

In other incarnations, the Wild Hunt was euphemised and associated with historical or semi-historical figures, such as the Saxon nobleman Wild Edric, King Arthur, or Sir Francis Drake, or any number of squires and priests (such as the Cornish Squire Dando) foolish enough to go hunting on the sabbath and condemned to lead a spectral hunt in consequence. Alternatively, the huntsman might be none other than Satan himself, on the lookout for lost souls to snatch away to hell or press into his hunting retinue. In this form the Wild Hunt shares some of the characteristics of the Irish and Scottish Sluagh, a malicious fairy host given to tormenting (and sometimes abducting) unwary mortals who cross its path.

In Germanic and Scandinavian countries, the leader of the Wild Hunt was Wodan or Wotan (Old English Wōden, Old Saxon Wōdan, and Old High German Wuotan), better known to us as the supreme god of Norse mythology, Odin, the god of the dead, inspiration, ecstatic trance, battle frenzy, and knowledge. Odin is known by two particular names which relate to the time of year the Wild Hunt was alleged to occur, Jólnir and Jauloherra (both translate as Yuletide because Odin's hunt was most commonly associated with midwinter, and therefore with Yule). Both of these names roughly mean "Master of Yule," the festival celebrating the change of the seasons. (The Scandinavian name for the Wild Hunt is Odensjakt, "Odin's Hunt." In Middle High German, the hunt is called Wilde Jagd, "Wild Hunt," or Wuotanes Her, "Odin's Army.") In Germany, the Wild Hunt's leader is known by various names; for instance, Holt, Holle, Berta, Berchtold, Foste, or Heme. Yet, one figure frequently appears in the majority of versions: Odin or Woden, who rides his eight-legged steed, Sleipnir, at the head of the fiendish horde. Thunder and lightning accompany his passage while the winter winds sweep away the souls of the departed. In Norse or Scandinavian mythology (the body of myths of the North Germanic peoples), the Wild Hunt consists of gods

from Asgard (roughly speaking, the fortified home to the Æsir tribe of gods, located in the sky) and dead souls, who ride through stormy sky. In Norwegian (Scandinavian) folklore, the Wild Hunt is known as Oskorei, "Terrifying Ride," and Odensjakt, "Odin's Wild Hunt," and generally called Åsgårdsreia or Aasgaardsreiden ("The Ride of Asgard"). It started on October 31st and lasted until April 30th. It is said that when Odin's Wild Hunt is heard, it means changing weather or trouble. The sound of hunting horns can be heard through forests and mountains, but the hunt itself is rarely seen.

In Wales, the Wild Hunt is referred to as Cwn Annwn, which meant "Hounds of Faeryland/Hell." Its leader is Gwynn ap Nudd, Lord of the Dead. Like Odin, he was the god of battles and the dead. In this version, the Lord of the Dead is followed by a pack of white hounds with blood-red ears. In Gwynn ap Nudd's hunt, he rounds up unbaptized souls and carries them to the underworld. In England, the same white hounds with red ears appear in legends. They were called the Gabriel hounds and said to portend doom if you saw them. Then there is the horned Herne the Hunter (or Herlathing), who is alleged to be the Wild Hunt's leader in Southern England (and possibly connected to the mythical king Herla). He is described as a tall, glowing figure wearing deerskin clothing and a flowing cloak. He is crowned by the skull and antlers of a stag, and he rides a fire-breathing horse. Like Gwynn ap Nudd, he rounds up the souls of the damned to deliver them to Hell. In Northern France, Mesnée d'Hellequin, the Goddess of Death, was said to lead the ghostly procession. In Germany, the leader of the Wild Hunt is sometimes associated with a devil or dragon and rides a horse, accompanied by numerous hounds. In one 16th-century German variant of the legend, Hans von Hackelnberg was said to lead the Wild Hunt. The tale recounts him slaying a boar, accidently piercing his foot on the boar's tusk and poisoning himself. The wound was fatal and, upon his death, von Hackelnberg declared he didn't want to go to

heaven, but instead continue with his treasured avocation—hunting. He was then forced to do this for an eternity in the night sky, or, as recounted in alternate versions, condemned to lead the Wild Hunt. Sources cite his name as possibly being a corruption of an epithet of Odin's name.

These are not the only leaders of the Wild Hunt that can be identified by tracing the antiquity of the tradition of ghostly nocturnal hunts. As Ronald Hutton, author of "The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination" (2019), has discovered, "the motif of the ghostly hunter, doomed because of his misdeeds to carry on his sport or be the object of it, night after night, is both worldwide and ancient, being known not only across Europe but among the Iroquois and Malays and in the Vedic Hymns." (To this list could be added the Wild West variant of the Wild Hunt motif, which is embodied in the 1948 song, "Ghost Riders in the Sky: A Cowboy Legend." It's author, Stan Jones, stated that he had been told the story when he was 12 years old by an old Native American who resided in an Arizona border town. According to Jones, the Native Americans, possibly Apache, who lived within Cochise County, believed that when souls vacate their physical bodies, they reside as spirits in the sky, resembling ghost riders. As a boy, Stan and his friend were looking at the clouds and he shared what the old Native American had told him. Looking in amazement, the cloudy shapes they saw were identified as the "ghost riders." Years later, this experience would be transposed into song lyrics.)

In many accounts of the Wild Hunt, the riders of the supernatural hunt were said to be the damned or the apparitions of dead men and women, known to invade villages to freely take food, money, and souls at their leisure. In other accounts, the supernatural hunters are recounted as either the dead, elves, or in some instances, such as in Celtic lands, they could be the Fae (faeries). Wild Hunt tales often mention a conglomerate of both the Fae and other creatures of the Celtic

Otherworld, along with doomed humans making up the group, In Scotland, for instance, the Wild Hunt is closely linked to the faery world. In some sources, evil fae (fey), were said to be cast from the Sluagh or Unseelie Court, the noble faery court. They flew in from the west in order to capture dying souls. (This allegedly resulted in the people of Scotland, even up until the 20th century, closing windows and doors on the west side of their houses when they had a sick person inside.) Similarly, the Orkney Island variant of the Wild Hunt tells speaks of faeries or ghosts coming out at night and galloping on white horses, or bulwands, driving a stolen cow before them. The Orkney Islands were said to be home to trows, or trolls. These creatures supposedly hated the sunlight and tried to catch and eat mortals, unless the humans were lucky enough to escape by crossing over a stream. According to Viking lore, the Wild Hunt is made up of the "Asgardr-Riders," the immortal souls of dead ancestors who ride through the stormy nights of winter. In other variants of the legend, it is recounted that there were human participants in the Wild Hunt; namely, the practitioners of black magic who were able to join the wild huntsmen in spirit, while their bodies remained safely at home.

Sources & Historical Developments of the Wild Hunt

There is no single source or form of the Wild Hunt folk-myth or legend, but rather a series of overlapping ones. All, however, represent it as a supernatural hunt, usually seen or heard in winter (especially during storms), and led by a huntsman often, but not always, wearing horns or antlers. It may run by land (or just above the ground) or through the night sky, the sounds of the howling wind, hunting horns, thundering horse hooves, and baying hounds signaling its approach. The folk-myth is known to be extremely various and widespread, involving a complex overlay of pagan Germanic, Celtic, and Saxon sources overlayed with Christian beliefs and combined with national myth and local legend. For example,

this Christian overlay is evidenced in 12th-century Britain, where clerics reportedly witnessed the Wild Hunt. They claimed there were 20 to 30 hunters in the party and the hunt continued for nine weeks. The earlier reports available of the Wild Hunt generally represented the participants as diabolical, whereas, in later medieval retellings, the hunters became faeries instead.

Examining the different instances of the Wild Hunt, we can see not only the variety of its proximate sources but also its potential to be evoked in different forms and for different regional purposes. Thus, the Wild Hunt can claim such a diversity of mythological heritage as to almost be without a singular definition. Butler (2006) gives us an account of the local diversity of the folk-myth and its main characters:

In northern England these are the Gabriel or Gabble Ratchets; in Wales, the Cwn Annwn; in the Southwest, the Wish or Yeff or Yell Hounds, or Dando and his Dogs; in Shropshire, Wild Edric's Hunt; while near Windsor in Berkshire, the Hunt is associated with Herne the Hunter. Clearly, legends of the Wild Hunt are widespread although, as the variety of regional names suggests, it is often conceived of as a local phenomenon.

This linking of the spectral hunter with a pack of dogs (Cwn Annwn, the spectral red eared, white colored dogs of the Wild Hunt in Welsh mythology) ties the continental European myth in with local British stories of roving ghostly dogs, who are often portents of misfortune or death. According to Ronald Hutton (2019), an authority on British folklore,

These spectral packs were known in Devon and Somerset as Whisht (Melancholy), Yell (Yelling), or Yeth (Heath) Hounds, in the North of England and the North Midlands as Gabriel Hounds or Gabriel Ratchets (also meaning

dogs), in Worcestershire as the Seven Whistlers, in Sussex as Wish or Witch Hounds, on the Welsh Border as Hell Hounds, and in West Wales as the cwn annwn (otherworld or hell hounds).

One aspect of the Wild Hunt that maintains across localized usages is the tension between menacing and helpful. On one hand the Wild Hunt is frightening, but in its role as a psychopomp (a guide of souls to the place of the dead) it is helpful. Thus, the Wild Hunt can appear as both evil or good, malevolent or beneficial (with an ambiguous in between). A primary example of its beneficial aspect is leader of the Wild Hunt, Arawn of Annwyn or Gwyn ap Nudd, King of the Underworld in Welsh myth, who functioned as a psychopomp. According to Susan Greenwood (2009):

In Celtic folklore, Gwyn ap Nudd is a wild huntsman who rides a demon horse and hunts in waste places at night with a pack of white-bodied and red-eared "dogs of hell". Cheering on his hellhounds in a fearful chase, he hunts souls. A British god of battle, the otherworld, and the dead, Gwyn ap Nudd is a psychopomp who conducts the slain into Hades and then rules over them. He knows when and where all the great warriors fell, for he gathered their souls upon the fields of battle, and now rules over them in Hades, or some "misty mountain top". Later semi-Christianised stories place Gwyn ap Nudd over a brood of devils in the Celtic otherworld of Annwyn. In Arthurian romances he was the king of the underworld and had a duty to control imprisoned devils and prevent them from destroying human beings.

Other sources for the legend of the Wild Hunt can be found from the Anglo-Saxons to the Northern Laplanders. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicles (1127 CE), one of the oldest sources of Anglo-Saxon history, which first mentions the Wild Hunt. It described the huntsmen as "loathsome, huge, black beings, riding on black horses and goats, followed by terrible wide-eyed hounds." (The Anglo-Saxons

were descended from the same Germanic tribes as the Norse and broadly shared the same body of religious lore.) Johannes Scheffer, an authority on Swedish archaeology, in his 1673 book Lapponia, recounts stories by the Laplanders or Sami people of the Wild Hunt. (The Laplander stories suggest a Sami shamanic element in the Wild Hunt. Cf. Ginzburg's *benandanti* theory above. Odin should be recalled here, because he is described in Norse mythology as frequently riding throughout the Nine Worlds on his eight-legged steed, Sleipnir, on quests of a shamanic nature, another theme that connects him to the Wild Hunt.)

Although the term "Wild Hunt" wasn't coined until the 19th century by German mythologist and linguist Jacob Grimm (of Brothers Grimm fame), the English writer Ben Jonson wrote of a dark faery cavalcade and hunting procession way back in 1610 in his play *The Alchemist*. And while Jonson didn't invent this idea, it is one of the earliest works of popular entertainment working with the trope. Actually, the earliest instance of the legend is from Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* which is believed to have been written around 1597. This written account of the Wild Hunt is the earliest in the sense that it is an account of the English Herne the Hunter as the ghost of a former Windsor Forest keeper who haunts a particular oak tree at midtown in the wintertime. Herne is said to have horns, shake chains and cause cattle to produce blood instead of milk. (Although the antlered god Herne seems to have originated in medieval English folklore, he is actually a much older figure linked to the paleolithic "Horned God" of the Celts, Cernunnos. Thus, Herne can be related to the Greek Pan, the god of the wild woodlands.)

In the 1790s, the fashion for the Wild Hunt swept British literary society. It was certainly established in Britain by 1807, when Wordsworth published his Romantic poem, "Miscellaneous Sonnet 29," which contained the lines: "For

overhead are sweeping Gabriel's Hounds / Doomed with their impious Lord, the flying Hart / To chase for ever, on aerial grounds!" Apparently, this popularity was due to the impact of the poetic tales of the German writer Gottfried August Bürger, which were translated into English at that time. They were much read by the British poets and novelists of Wordsworth's Romantic generation. Bürger's "Der Wilde Jäger" (The Wild Huntsman), a classic story of a sinful huntsman doomed to be hunted forever by Satan by night, was especially popular. It was translated again by the novelist Sir Walter Scott in 1798. There is also some indication that the motif grew in popularity in the course of the 19th century. So much so that no account of Dartmoor folklore was complete without a reference to a spectral hunt from the 1860s onwards.

Moving forward to the end of the 19th century, American author Hélène Adeline Guerber wrote of Odin and his steed, Sleipnir, in her 1895 works, *Myths of the Northern Lands*. She tells her readers of the souls of the dead being carried off on the stormy winds of the hunt. In the early 20th century, historical novelist and poet Robert Graves combined three figures (Gwyn ap Nudd, Arawn King of Annywn, Herne the Hunter) identifying them as aspects of the same character. Dimitra Femi (2017), an authority on Celtic myth in fantasy literature, observes about Graves:

Not only that, he also added a few others for good measure: the classical god Hermes, the Egyptian god Anubis, the archangel Gabriel from the Christian tradition, as well as King Arthur, and Bran from the Second Branch of the Mabinogi. Graves interpreted Bran as a god of the underworld based on his idiosyncratic reading of a fragment of text in the Myvyrian Archaiology, the same fragment that inspired Lloyd Alexander's The Book of Three. By the time Graves was finished with him, Herne/Gwyn/Arthur/Bran was a highly complex persona, taking on myriad attributes supposedly originating from Britain's ancient, pagan

religion, but all of which should be viewed as an amalgam of wonderful fabrication.

This blending together of various myths to create the image of the leader of the Wild Hunt shares a similar lineage and mythological impulse as the development of the archaic Horned God figure of Celtic mythology—thus, also manifesting in Herne the Hunter.

Again, the term "Wild Hunt" wasn't coined until the 19th century by German mythologist and linguist Jakob Grimm. He popularized the concept in 1835 through his voluminous work, *Teutonic Mythology* (Deutsche Mythologie). In his version of the tale, he mixed folklore with textual evidence from the Medieval up to the Early Modern period. He believed the folk-myth to have pre-Christian roots and its leader to allegedly be based on the legends of Odin, on the darker side of his character. Significantly, going against the standard male-dominated versions of the tale, Grimm also speculated that the leader of the Wild Hunt may once have been a female figure, perhaps a heathen (Germanic) goddess named Berchta or Holda. He thought the female may also have been Odin's wife, Berchta, who was sometimes portrayed as accompanying Odin on the Wild Hunt. Thus, at the very least, he believed that Odin is considered to be the Master of the Wild Hunt and Berchta its mistress. (In *Teutonic Mythology*, there is also the goddess Holda, who is spoken of as "host to the Wild Hunt." In this account, she is the consort of Woden, supreme god of the Germanic tribes occupying central Europe in ancient times. In Scandinavia, where he is known as Odin, he is married to Frigga. However, in Germany, it is Holda who wears this crown. The pair ride together as they lead the Wild Hunt.) Grimm postulated the story of the Wild Hunt inevitably changed from pre-Christian to more modern times. Again, for Grimm, the folk-

myth was pagan in origin. It originally began as a hunt led by a god and goddess visiting the land during a holy holiday, bringing blessings, and accepting offerings from people. (Cf. again Ginzburg's theory of the *benandanti* night flight being led a goddess, such as Holda or Berchta, and connected to a fertility cult. As already stated here, one of the foremost leaders of the Wild Hunt was Lord of the Dead, such as the Welsh Gwyn ap Nudd or Arawn, who was accompanied by his consort, the fertility goddess in various guises.) They could be heard by the people in the howling winds, but later became known as a pack of ghouls with malicious intent.

In the body of lore surrounding the Wild Hunt, there number of themes that connect it powerfully with the dead and the underworld. For one thing, there's the ghostly character of the hunters or warriors themselves. Dogs and horses, animals that were closely associated with death, were almost invariably present. In some accounts of the Wild Hunt, the riders can hardly, if at all, be distinguished from land spirits (often associated with the fertility of the land), who were themselves often conflated with the dead, as if the two were thought of as being in some sense one and the same.

Finally, for the ancient Germanic peoples (as for the Celts, who are culturally related to them), the worlds of the living and the dead were especially permeable during midwinter, which goes a long way toward explaining why this troop of apparitions haunted the land during that particular part of the year. (In Celtic lore, the veil separating the living from the dead—and from the Otherworld of the Fae—is at its thinnest at the dark half of the year, which begins at the end of October with the festival of Samhain. During this festival, the dead ancestors are honored. In Celtic lore, too, we find the legend of the Wild Hunt at this time of year.) In the words of Claude Lecouteux, a French philologist and medievalist who specializes

in Germanic studies: “[T]he Wild Hunt fell into the vast complex of ancestor worship, the cult of the dead, who are the go-betweens between men and the gods.”

The eminent folklorist Ronald Hutton (2019) has argued that the concept of the Wild Hunt that we think of today owes its spark of life to the imagination of Jakob Grimm. He relates how Grimm drew his construction of the Wild Hunt from records of contemporary folklore, mostly German, which he combined with medieval and ancient texts. According to Hutton’s analysis, Grimm’s central idea was that all of this disparate evidence could be traced back to one single primordial pagan belief, shared across northern Europe, of a night ride of the herotic (i.e., heroic and erotic) dead led by a god whom he identified as the Germanic Wotan, Anglo-Saxon Woden, or Norse Odin, who sometimes was accompanied by his consort, the goddess of fertility in her many guises. Hutton has suggested that Grimm assembled his portrait of the Wild Hunt from three different, and originally unrelated, popular traditions, which appeared in the early to high Middle Ages:

The first of these was a belief in the night-time rides by a group of spirits, usually female and often led by a superhuman female, commonly known as Diana, Herodias, Holle or Holda, Bertha, or Percht, but also by many local names and often just as “the Lady”. These roamed the world, frequently visited the homes of favoured humans, and frequently included other favoured living people in their company. The second was a concept of a nocturnal procession of penitential human dead, or of demons impersonating them. The individuals represented in it were often those who had met violent, premature, or sinful ends, and the group was commonly spoken of as having a male leader called Herlechin, Herelwin, or Hellequin, although he almost never actually appeared with them. The third was a tradition of individual spectral huntsman, riding at night with a ghostly pack of hounds. The hunter concerned could be variously the Devil, pursuing sinners or their souls; a former huntsman, doomed to wander the dark hours to pay for sins during life; or a wildman who pursued otherworldly prey, and sometimes took the livestock of humans as well. It was the individual spectral hunter who was known

in some stories as “The Wild Huntsman”, and Grimm appropriated and modified this term for his much larger composite image.

According to Hutton, Grimm’s construct of the Wild Hunt and his hypothetical account of its origins had a marked impact upon British scholars, but it was both selective and delayed. It really became apparent in the mid-19th century, and—naturally enough—mainly to authors who were interested in German and Scandinavian folklore, and in general theories of popular belief. One odd fact that Hutton points out is that authors of local folklore collections, during the Golden Age of Folklore (1870-1930), made no reference to the term “Wild Hunt,” despite the pervasiveness of the concept today. At that time, it was granted merely a passing mention. It was only in the latter part of the 20th century that the idea caught fire. Thus, from 1965-1985 there was a surge in collections of local lore and also pop novels, discussing the Wild Hunt as an accepted as proven concept based on early British pagan gods. The concept was perceived to be so entrenched that referring to spectral huntsmen or horsemen as “the Wild Hunt” required no further explanation. To quote Hutton again:

The appearance of the Wild Hunt as a major theme in British novels was both sudden and a tightly bounded one, spanning most of the 1960s and 1970s and so matching, in a manner which can hardly be coincidental, the period of its apogee among folklorists. Equally noteworthy is that it was a phenomenon confined to fiction designed for children and young adults, which is not surprising as that was the genre in which fantasy drawing on older mythology, folklore, and imaginative literature was most pronounced. […] By 1975, the Hunt had become familiar enough in the genre to have a walk-on (or ride-on) part, in a novel by Diana Wynne-Jones for the same kind of readership, as if it was becoming familiar enough to need inclusion without an accompanying necessity to make it pivotal. Indeed, its form was one which was now becoming canonical: the dogs (again white with red ears); the antlered leader who emanates a huge power and is

associated with the inherent magic of the land; and his linkage with a medieval mythology, in this case that of Arawyn, whose dogs these hounds represented.

In further contributing to the development Wild Hunt concept, Hutton notes that in 2001 leading British experts in folklore, Hilda Ellis Davidson and Patricia Lysaght, both provided helpful definitions for the Wild Hunt. Davidson defined the Wild Hunt as "one of the many names for a company of dark riders who pass through the sky at night, or else along lonely roads." She added that its leaders could be supernatural or legendary figures, or historical personalities, and that it was usually regarded as sinister and menacing. Lysaght, defined the hunt as "a group of ghostly hunters (horsemen) riding through the sky at night." Thus, according to Hutton, what was especially significant about the developing employment of the concept of the Wild Hunt, by the end of the 20th century, was the major role which it has come to play in the popular imagination. In particular, it had achieved a prominent place in British works of fiction, and especially among those designed for children and young adults. He then cites Catherine Butler (2006), who has made the pioneering study of this development. Butler aptly described it as "paradigmatic of the way in which mythological and folk material has been utilised within British children's fantasy." Much of the Wild Hunt's fascination in the modern period lies in its flexibility as a literary device. As Butler (2006) notes, it is

both familiar and alien, human and animal, natural and acculturated, as intimate and as savagely irrational as our own unconscious desires. Cooper writes of the mask of Herne: "It was a thing made to call out deep responses from the mind"—and so it does. It is hybrid, too, in being a composite formed over many years within a variety of different cultures and contexts of belief, so that, although the Wild Hunt in its various forms is a widespread phenomenon known throughout much of northwest Europe, its individual manifestations are normally tied to particular localities. Eric Fitch has written of Herne that he "could only have

occurred in Britain, where the specific mix of ancient cultures have provided a background for the appearance of a figure of this type."

The idea here as expressed by these literary folklorists is that modern pop novels, especially young people's fantasy novels, have updated the age-old folk-myth of the Wild Hunt. Of course, continued cultural relevance through fluidity is the hallmark of good pop novels.

The Wild Hunt in Popular Novels

In Cassandra Clare's fantasy-romance *Mortal Instruments* (2014) and *Dark Artifices* (2018) series, the Wild Hunt is led by Gwyn ap Nudd, who is based on the Welsh mythology and legend. The character of Mark Blackthorn (first featured in the Mortal Instruments series, the City of Heavenly Fire, the sixth and final), the older half-brother of Julian, Livia, Tiberius, Drusilla and Octavian, is half-fey (faerie). After being given to The Wild Hunt in City of Heavenly Fire, Mark is returned to his family as a bargaining chip for Emma and the Blackthorns to solve murders involving the fey. Kieran (featured in *Tales From the Shadowhunter Academy,* a series of connected novellas, 2016) is the Prince of the Unseelie Court and a member of the Wild Hunt.

Some of the popular novels that feature the Wild Hunt are the following:

The Moon of Gomrath, Alan Garner, 1963
The Wild Hunt of Hagworthy, Penelope Lively, 1971
The Dark is Rising, Susan Cooper, 1973
The Way of Wyrd, Brian Bates, 1983

Fionavar Tapestry Trilogy, Guy Gavriel, 1984-86

The Wild Hunt, Jane Yolen, 1995

Tamsin, Peter S. Beagle, 1999

Mistrals Kiss, Laurell K. Hamilton, 2006

Wicked Lovely, Melissa Marr, 2007

The Mortal Instruments, Cassandra Clare, 2007-2014

October Daye: An Artificial Night, Seanan McGuire, 2010

The Ghost Riders of Ordebec, Fred Vargas, 2011

The Brotherhood of the Wheel, R.S. Belcher, 2016

Dark Artifices, Cassandra Clare, 2016-2018

The Witcher & The Wild Hunt

Continued cultural relevance through fluidity is also the hallmark of good pop television. The Wild Hunt features in *The Witcher* series of fantasy novels by Andrzej Sapkowski (*The Sword of Destiny*), and the spin-off role-playing video game *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt,* which is based on the books. Called the "Wraiths of Mörhogg" by the islanders of Skellige, and known to their own as the Red Riders, the Wild Hunt is a convoy of spectral riders that gallop across the sky and are regarded as an omen signaling approaching times of war (something *The Witcher* show incorporates). Like their counterparts, the Wild Hunt are known for kidnapping unsuspecting souls to join the ranks of their ghastly cavalcade. People from Skellige claim the Wraiths of Mörhogg raid their shores aboard a ship called the Naglfar, a longship made from the nails and toe-nails of dead men, which lead to their practice of cutting the nails of the dead to deprive the wraiths of building materials. In the TV series, the normal citizens in the world of *The Witcher* view the Wild Hunt as supernatural omens, or as harbingers of oncoming doom. Their first mention in the TV series came just before Nilfgaard invaded Cintra, from a

king who claimed to have seen the Wraiths. At the outset of Season 2, sightings of these terrifying riders have fittingly sparked murmurings among humans of an apocalypse coming to their world. However, in finale of Season 2, Princess Ciri learns to her horror in that the Wild Hunt are actual beings, and they're on the hunt for her in order to steal her magical Elder Blood. This fated child of Elder blood is a direct descendant of Lara Dorren, an elf, and is supposedly destined to save the elves from extinction. These elves of the Wild Hunt, known as Aen Elle elves, are from another dimension. They frequently kidnap humans to take back to the Aen Elle's world to be used as slaves. However, it seems that the moral nature of these attacking elves is not purely evil, but more ambiguous. According to the executive producer of *The Witcher:* "Like all characters in Sapkowski's novels, we're going to get a little bit deeper into them so they're not just the evil, skeletal bad guys."

The Wild Hunt is also featured in the role-playing video game series *The Elder Scrolls,* which conceived of the Wild Hunt as a ritual performed by wood elves for war and vengeance during times of desperation. For this Wild Hunt, the elves transform themselves into a horde of horrific creatures who kill everything in their path. This version shows the Wild Hunt as a totally negative phenomenon, harkening back to the medieval versions where the Devil and his minions made up the Wild Hunt.

The Wild Hunt in Popular Song

Continued cultural relevance through fluidity is the hallmark of good pop songs, just as it is for the hook of good pop novels.

The Wild Hunt has become the subject of contemporary popular song, especially in the genre of Celtic, Gothic Metal, and Black Metal music. Some of the more familiar songs are:

"Wild Hunt" by Heather Alexander
"The Wild Hunt" by Chronilus
"Wild Hunt" by Chalice and Blade
"Wild Hunt" by The Whiskey Bards
"The Wild Hunt" by The Tallest Man On Earth
"The Wild Hunt" by Steve Von Till
"The Wild Hunt (Autumn)" by Marie Bruce
"The Wild Hunt" by Egil S Ødegård
"Wild Hunt" by Inkubus Sukkubus
"The Wild Hunt" by Watain
"The Wild Hunt" by Therion
"The Wild Hunt" by Dea Marica
"The Wild Hunt" - Something Grim This Way Comes" by Sol Invictus

The Wild Hunt in Neopaganism

In the modern neopagan tradition, practitioners incorporate the concept of the Wild Hunt in their rituals. (This practice is due to the prominence of the Norse god Odin in the Germanic varieties of neopaganism.) In the late 1990s, anthropologist Susan Greenwood witnessed such a ritual. She reported the neopagans used the folk-myth in order to lose themselves, as well as confront and restore harmony with the wild, dark side of nature. According to the *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism*, the Wild Hunt embraces the participation with souls, the dead, and animals, as well as the ritualized circle of life and death.

The bulk of the information presented here is not from my own research, but taken from sources such as books, articles, and online writings. The books and articles I've cited here are the following:

Carlo Ginzburg, *Witchcraft & Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth & Seventeenth Centuries* (1983)

Butler, Catherine, *Four British Fantasists: Place and Culture in Children's Fantasies* (2006)

Femi, Dimitra, *Celtic Myth in Contemporary Children's Fantasy* (2017)

Greenwood, Susan, "The Wild Hunt: A Mythological Language of Magic" in *Handbook of Contemporary Paganism* (2009)

Hutton, Ronald, "The Wild Hunt in the Modern British Imagination," *Folklore*, 130:2 (2019)