

# Flying, Hunting, Reading: Rethinking Falcon-Woman Comparisons

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THIS SIXTEENTH-CENTURY tapestry captures an equestrian lady, her sparrowhawk, and a gentleman alongside a second set of hunters in a floral frame (fig. 1). The male and female human subjects appear to signify lovers in an idyllic setting, but what has the trained hunting bird to do with them? This common image might suggest that falconry allowed men and women to cavort together in secluded woodland settings, temporarily freed from the confines of the court.<sup>1</sup> Yet at the center of the tapestry the lady tightens her grip on the sparrowhawk as its wings spread, a gesture that confines even as it creates movement. This tense grip suggests that the arduous phases of falconry training loomed behind such images, and familiarity with this training laced such lovers' portraits with anxiety about fidelity—between species as well as between lovers.

A medieval audience would approach this lady's avian companion with a mix of approval and trepidation. Sparrowhawks' hunting precision and small size made them optimal hunting partners for female falconers. But, like all birds of prey and unlike the dog and horses in the hunting scene, sparrowhawks naturally fear and avoid humans. Hawking manuals taught aspiring falconers to quell this fear in order to train birds to hunt with them. The training process was slow and

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1. See, for instance, the images of lovers hawking in the *Große Heidelberger Liederhandschrift* (Codex Manesse), Cod. Pal. germ. 848, <http://www.ub.uniheidelberg.de/ausstellungen/manesse2010/Welcome.html>, or in the month of May in Books of Hours.



Figure 1. Tapestry of “Hawking Party” showing two sets of lovers hunting in a floral setting, ca. 1500–1530, wool warp, wool wefts, South Netherlands. Use of this image is granted under the Creative Commons Corporation, courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York.

incremental, gradually increasing the amount of freedom afforded to birds in flight. The hawks began on a leash, whose length increased until the falconer released the bird completely and hoped that it would return to the fist. A fourteenth-century hawking manual in *Le Menagier de Paris* outlines this tension between control and release. Initial phases of training emphasize constant control: “Les bons espreveteurs dient un tel proverbe: *Au lier et au deslier/ Te tien saisy de l’esprevier.*”<sup>2</sup> (Good austringers [trainers of hawks] repeat this proverb: “When attaching and detaching / Keep firm possession of the hawk.”)<sup>3</sup> But the object of

2. *Le Mesnagier de Paris*, ed. Georgina E. Brereton and Janet M. Ferrier (*Le Livre de Poche*: 2010), 3.2.29. Cited in text by book, part, and line number.

3. *The Good Wife’s Guide: A Medieval Household Book*, trans. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 238.

falconry is to fly the bird at game and thus release control but (crucially, hopefully) not possession:

Il convient reclaimer en un secret lieu, petit a petit et de plus loing en plus loing, tant qu'il revienigne du loing de ses longes. Puis le couvient reclaimer a la commande ou recreance, et puis en pluseurs lieux et en especial aux champs et es pres a recreance, et puis sans recreance. (3.2.388-393)

You must practice calling it back to the gauntlet in a secluded place, gradually from farther and farther away, so much that it returns from afar, attached to its longes [short leash]. Next you must call it back to the gauntlet using the commande or the creance [longer leash], and then in different places and especially in the fields and meadows, first with the creance and then without.<sup>4</sup>

Herein lies a paradox: flying the bird is the endgame, but flying the bird means releasing control over it. Hawking manuals' focus on the play and tension between control and release informed premodern audiences' awareness of a similarly necessary tension in artistic productions. The tension in falconry is especially salient for feminist approaches to representations of gender when birds stand in for women's sexual bodies.

Like the tapestry above, textual representations of falconry often depict hawks and women together: women were falconers in their own right, but they were also symbolized by their avian partners. As a species that required constant training to keep them "loyal"—that is, to keep them from flying away and staying away—falconry birds inspired poets to map the entire enterprise of falconry training onto women's behavior in love relationships. Examining structures of power through the medieval practice of falconry, I offer two considerations about how feminist studies converges with animal studies: first, awareness of the actual practice of falconry undermines representations of patriarchal control when human handler stands for patriarch and subjugated animal

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4. Greco and Rose, 240.

stands for domesticated woman. Second, and most challenging and exciting in terms of methodology, is the possibility that a human-animal relationship represents a feminist poetics. Even though traditional comparisons between training women and training falcons appear uniformly misogynous, the uncertain control inherent to the relationship between falcon and falconer suggests an unknowability in the human power dynamics behind these comparisons. More broadly, attending to both the poetics of comparison and the actual practice of a human-animal relationship does more for critical animal studies than blur boundaries between species. Comparisons between women and falcons did animalize women, but they did so without the effect of degradation, prompting us to reconsider what human-animal comparisons mean in terms of subjugation and reading practice.<sup>5</sup>

### I. Literary Hawking and Female Sexuality

The Old French pun *faucon*, which means both “falcon” and “false cunt,” imbued literary references to falcons with a joke about the impossibility of control over female chastity. Most threatening to chastity’s knowability in these comparisons is the distance between falconer and falcon at the moment of the falcon’s stoop—its highest pitch—for what occurs in this detached space is unknown to the falconer. It is in this space that female sovereignty cannot be traced, thus rendering futile a man’s quest to ascertain his beloved’s chastity. In terms of a literary symbol, then, falconry represents all that cannot be known and controlled regarding a sexual female body. When read into medieval romances, the *faucon*, and the female genitalia it implicates, both resist legibility. In terms of a poetics, representations of *female* falconers with their own birds collapse the gendered metaphor and instead create an alternative signifying system, one that does not rely on the subjugation of one gender to another, but rather outlines the terms of autonomous female control.

Poems which feature the direct comparison between woman and falcon are an illustrative point of departure for understanding where literal and symbolic hawk converge. For example, this excerpt from

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5. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for this observation.

the fifteenth-century antifeminist ballad “Pluk of her bellys & let here flee”<sup>6</sup> (Pluck off her bells and let her fly) engages readers’ knowledge of falconry to compare the behavior of a deserter hawk to that of an unruly female lover:

Who carpys of byrddys of grete jentrys  
The sperhawke me semyth makys moste dysporte  
And moste acordyng for all degreys  
For small byrddys sche puttys to morte  
Y reclaymyd on, as y schall reporte  
As longe as sche wolde to me a ply  
When sche wolde no3t to my gloue resorte  
Then plukkyd y of here bellys & let here fly<sup>7</sup>

Whoever chatters about birds of great nobility, / the sparrowhawk seems to me to offer the most entertainment / and most suitability for all ranks, / for she puts to death small birds. / As I shall report, I tamed one, / as long as she would submit to me; / when she would not return to my glove, / then I plucked off her bells and let her fly.

In falconry terms, plucking off a hawk’s bells meant removing a sonorous tracking device from the bird’s feet, effectively relinquishing control over the bird. While the first two stanzas only hint at an allegorical interpretation of the poem, the third stanza explicitly aligns sparrowhawk

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6. This poem appears in a 1450 miscellany of English and Latin prose and verse (Trinity College, Cambridge, MS O.9.38), fol. 21r–22r. A scribal hand differing from that of the poem added the title, “Pluk of her bellys & let here flee,” in the upper margin of folio 21r. The poem is sometimes titled in modern editions after the first line, “Who carpys of byrddys,” but I have elected to use the title given in the manuscript.

7. “Pluk of her bellys & let here flee,” Item 19 Transcription, Trinity College, Cambridge, MS O.9.38, *Scriptorium: Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Online* (Cambridge, University of Cambridge), lines 1–8 (hereafter cited in text by line number), accessed 5 April 2013, [http://scriptorium.english.cam.ac.uk\\_manuscripts\\_itemtranscription.php\\_ms=O.9](http://scriptorium.english.cam.ac.uk_manuscripts_itemtranscription.php_ms=O.9).

with “yowre paramours” whose “hert begynnyth to wry” (19, 22).<sup>8</sup> The refrain, “pluk of here bellys and lete here fly,” though apparently meant to warn lovers of sexually deviant women, illustrates how falconry training overturns the concept of controlling women in this poem, and more broadly, in other texts that compare women to falcons.

The thirteen-stanza ballad appears to essentialize women’s nature as inherently “changabyll” and “fals” (25, 73), and ultimately beyond the speaker’s control despite any degree of training. Although many of the poem’s traditional antifeminist set pieces (among them, echoes of the *Wife of Bath’s Prologue*),<sup>9</sup> each stanza ends on a curious conceit. Falconry training would suggest a submission of bird to human, but the refrain suggests the answer to untrainability is to relinquish power back to the bird. It is here that we can see how the paradox of control in falconry allows a subtle feminism to arise from within the context of a trained bird’s apparent submission. The pairing of “ply” and “fly” in this opening stanza conveys this paradox: in falconry, the falconer must allow the bird to fly, without knowing for certain whether or not the bird has been “plied” (rendered submissive),<sup>10</sup> whether or not it has been sufficiently “reclaimed” (tamed).<sup>11</sup> *Plien* and *reclaimen* have amorous meanings, too, which the poem seems to map neatly onto a courtly love narrative. The speaker “reclaymyd” (loved)<sup>12</sup> a sparrowhawk as long as she “wolde ply” (would make her heart submissive to him).<sup>13</sup> Yet the conditionality of this statement achieved by the phrase “as long as” points to the fragility

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8. The speaker uses coy language early in the poem to hint at the explicit comparison to a lover in the third stanza. In the second stanza he feeds his hawk “byrddys of Valentyne” and yet “to another sche dyd enlyne” (12-13).

9. The speaker warns that the beloved will turn into a nag of the attire-envying kind, complaining, “Off gay atyrynge y am desolate: / Y se other wymmen go gayer than y” (45-46).

10. *Middle English Dictionary Online* (Ann Arbor: The Regents of the University of Michigan, 2001), s.v. “Plien” v.(1) 2b, accessed 30 January, 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED33737>.

11. *MEDO*, s.v. “Reclaimen” v.1b, accessed 30 January 2018, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?size=First+100&ctype=headword&q1=reclaimen&rgxp=constrained>.

12. *MEDO*, s.v. “Reclaimen” v.2a.

13. *MEDO*, s.v. “Plien” v.(1) 2a.

of control in falconry training and in amorous relationships of subjugation. Readers may have laughed at the joke that wavering women must be “plukkyd of here bellys,” cut loose, as it were. But what falconry allows in this poem is a feminist response to infidelity narratives that attempt to “plien” women through their representations of “fals” falcons: one way or another, the women represented must be permitted to “fly”—to exercise self-control, and likewise, readers of these lines, too, must be allowed freedom in interpretive choice.

Sharing folio space with “Pluk of her bellys” in the manuscript is the penitential lyric “Revertere,” which also uses the image of a hawking excursion, and whose internal glossing demonstrates concern for wandering meaning. The poem begins with a youthful speaker who “toke my hawke all fore to play” one summer’s day (3).<sup>14</sup> The hawk (alternately named “faucon” and “hawke” throughout the poem)<sup>15</sup> flies so far up while pursuing a pheasant that the bird’s scrambling handler must keep his eyes to the sky and promptly stumbles into a briar patch. The briars “bare wrytynge in every leef”: the Latin word “revertere” (15–16). The falcon’s flight in this poem catalyzes the speaker’s meditation on “revertere,” or, in “english tunge” “to turne a ye” (to turn again) and reflect on what his life has been (25–26). That hawking allows this kind of spiritual rumination is not surprising; the bird’s movement between the man’s arm on earth and the celestial sphere conjures an apt image for such contemplation. But, in addition to a figurative and spiritual “turning again,” “revertere” characterizes the flight movement pursuant to falconry, offering a visual schematic for reading habits. Martha Dana Rust locates a parallel between the description of the falcon’s recursive

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14. Martha Dana Rust, “Revertere! Penitence, Marginal Commentary, and the Recursive Path of Right Reading,” *Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* 8 (2004): 1–24. Rust gives a full transcription of the poem on pp. 19–24 of her article. The poem is cited in text by line numbers, amended for the slight variants from MS O.9.38.

15. That the bird is denoted as “faucon” genders it necessarily as a female bird. While the generic term “hawk” designates both sexes, “faucon” or falcon signifies the female of the species. *OED Online*, s.vv. “hawk, n.1.a,” “falcon, n.1.a,” accessed 10 January, 2018, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/84760?rskey=VFVWwO&result=1&isAdvanced=false>; <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67800?rskey=cYRvIY&result=1&isAdvanced=false>.

flight and the trajectory of the reader's eyes between the heavy glossing and the text of the poem. She argues that the poem's *mise-en-page* and content encourage a "switch-backing path of reading and re-reading" that is underpinned by the focus on the falcon's flight.<sup>16</sup> The poem's repetition of "revertere" in the final line of each stanza asks its readers to turn over again their understanding of the poem as well as of their own lives. While this poem focuses more on introspection than gendered control, it nevertheless aligns hawking in youth with "euery synne / dedly other uenyall" (every sin, deadly or venial, 77–78). In so doing, the poem turns the narrative action of hawking into a stock symbol common in other moralizing works that use hawking to signify sinful indulgence, especially associated with lust.<sup>17</sup> The poem thus wavers between employing hawking as a reading practice and as a symbol for sin. And so, when considered adjacent to and even sharing folio space and scribal hands with "Pluk of her bellys," "Revertere" also encourages a turning back to the sexual hawking metaphor in the previous ballad, and in anterior representations of hawking.

Such a turning back reveals that the late medieval ballad does not follow a straightforwardly antifeminist tradition of viewing women as unruly birds to be tamed. Rather, "Pluk of her bellys" develops from an earlier medieval phenomenon of falconry opening doors otherwise closed to women. In doing so, rather than depict how the language of falconry inherently polices female autonomy, the poem demonstrates the opposite: an anxiety that falconry had allowed women too much freedom of both expression and physical movement. Taking our cue from "Revertere," a literary turning back to a time when falconry had an ambivalent valence will help us understand the production of such a poem as "Pluk of her bellys," apparently steeped in misogynistic culture. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, material and literary culture produce overt and oblique examples of falconry as a model of interpretation for female readers. In what follows, I explore three forms

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16. Rust, "Revertere!," 15, 9.

17. Robin Oggins cites over a hundred instances of falconry "depicted in the context of the deadly sins" among four Bible moralisées. *The Kings and Their Hawks: Falconry in Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 130.

of this ambivalent representation of female autonomy: personal seal iconography, conduct manuals, and narrative poetry. Examining how representations of falconry manifested in the two centuries leading up to “Pluk of her bellys” will help us view it in light of a practice that afforded women the opportunity to choose how they might interpret literary references to birds, thus invalidating the comparison’s misogynistic power.

## II. Seals: Self-Representation Through Hawking

As early as the twelfth century, women, as well as men, practiced falconry.<sup>18</sup> This straightforward fact means that comparisons between women and falcons, even when penned by men, were not straightforwardly misogynous. In addition to negating misogynous comparisons between falcons and women, something more pointedly self-representational occurs when women depict *themselves* as falconers: they are in possession of their own birds, and via falconry comparisons, their own bodies. Rather than a human-animal relationship standing in for a man-woman relationship, men seem out of the picture altogether. Instead, women are sometimes represented in both positions—as human handler and as animal. For example, at the height of personal seal usage in the thirteenth century, the most common topos for women’s seals was a lady with hawk on hand (fig. 2 and fig. 3).<sup>19</sup>

Falconry’s popularity as a seal topos reflects women’s actual participation in this activity. Scholars of medieval women’s education and of falconry agree that noblewomen “[were] expected to know how . . . to breed falcons and release them during the hunt”<sup>20</sup> and that “women not only flew falcons, but they cared for them.”<sup>21</sup> Scholars base such claims on records of “queens and noblewomen employing falconers” and purchasing birds and falconry equipment, as well as records of women receiving

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18. Oggins, 118.

19. Brigitte Miriam Bedos-Rezak, “Women, Seals, and Power in Medieval France, 1150–1350,” in *Women and Power in the Middle Ages*, ed. Mary Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, 61–82 (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 64.

20. Shulamith Shahar, *The Fourth Estate: A History of Women in the Middle Ages*, trans. Chaya Galai (London: Routledge, 2003), 152.

21. Oggins, *Kings and Their Hawks*, 118.



Figure 2. Seal-matrix of Mas, wife of Antonio D'Lendenaria, showing woman front facing, standing, with hawk on arm, 13th century, bronze, Italy. Use of this image is licensed by the British Museum, © Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 3. Seal-matrix of Elizabeth, Lady of Sevorc, showing woman on horseback holding falcon and tiring, 13th century, copper alloy, France. Use of this image is licensed by the British Museum, © Trustees of the British Museum.

payments for training falcons.<sup>22</sup> They also look to descriptions from conduct manuals that include falconry in women's educational programs. For example, Robert de Blois's thirteenth-century *Les chastoiments des dames* reports that the ideal lady "faucon, tercieul et esprivier / sout bien porter et afaitier" (should know well how to carry and train falcon, tiercel, and sparrow hawk).<sup>23</sup> The manual's suggestion that women not only carry (*porter*) their birds, but also know how to train (*afaitier*) them is revelatory, as is the listing of three kinds of birds: a female peregrine (*faucon*), a male peregrine (*tercieul*), and a female sparrowhawk (*esprivier*). By suggesting that women educate themselves to *train* birds, and not simply to carry them, the conduct manual betrays an assumption that women could and should learn the complex theory and practice behind training. The variety of gender and species also suggests that women would have had a nuanced understanding of the different training and carriage methods for a range of birds. The implication here is an assumption that women possessed the theoretical knowledge and physical capability to participate in this active and experiential practice. While these lines may appear to simply catalogue courtly activities that build a lady's noble education, their assumptions are helpful. The conduct manual does not question women's intellectual or physical belongingness in this arena, and this admission implies that the knowledge available to male falconers was also available to female falconers. For while the training of different genders and species of hawks varied, the gender of the trainer matters little: men and women both trained hawks and this training followed the same precepts and tenets. Even in falconry manuals addressed to audiences of a specific gender (i.e., Adelard of Bath's dialogue with his nephew in *Questiones Naturales*,<sup>24</sup> or the narrator of *Le Menagier de Paris*'s address to his wife), the training methods described do not vary based on the gender of the addressee, the intended trainer.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Oggins, 118.

23. Robert de Blois, *Les chastoiments des dames*, ed. Jacob Ulrich (Geneva: Slatkine Reprints, 1978), lines 265–66. My translation.

24. Adelard of Bath, *Conversations with His Nephew: On the Same and the Different, Questions on Natural Science, and on Birds*, trans. and ed. Charles Burnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

25. Smaller species such as merlins and sparrowhawks might have been

The historical fact that women practiced falconry allowed its representation in seal iconography to register on multiple levels: these seals depict something that women actually did and they remind viewers that the falcon as a symbol for female infidelity (already established by the twelfth century)<sup>26</sup> is counteracted by the fact that the female figure is in possession of her bird. Extant examples of seals with female falconers offer two configurations: a woman standing with hawk on glove, at leisure with her bird, training it to the fist but not actively flying it (fig. 2); and a woman on horseback with hawk on glove, presumably on the hunt with her bird (fig. 3). Figure 3 especially illustrates a multitasking falconry only possible in advanced phases of training: the lady has accustomed her bird not only to her human presence and fist, but to the unsteady gait of equestrian movement, and the lady is wielding a tiring (meat used to lure the bird) in her opposite hand, suggesting that she has already trained the bird to fly without its training leash (the leather straps dangling from her clenched fist would have been flying jesses, detachable from a longer leash). In either configuration, these seals allow their users to identify with the bird as well as with the falconer. It is clear that the human woman on the seal is the most obvious proxy for the lady whose name the seal bears. But her close contact with the bird—it is always on the glove, connected to the woman's hand—suggests intersubjectivity between the two. The interconnectedness is truly a part of falconry training because of the contact between falconer and falcon. But the seal promotes a specific self-reflexivity because of literary tropes associating women with falcons: it suggests that her authority begins with and stays with the lady.

These examples of women's seals are more than coincidental cases recommended for persons of a smaller stature, male or female, but the training itself would have been the same whether the handler was a man or a woman. And of course, even if theoretically instructions for training hawks were the same regardless of the trainer's gender, in practice women certainly could have encountered and certainly do encounter bias and gendered assumptions about their preparedness for or affinity with certain species of hawks. For a modern viewpoint on the patriarchal gender bias in falconry see Helen Macdonald's memoir, *H is for Hawk* (New York City: Grove Press, 2016), 110–12.

26. See Baudouin Van den Abeele, *La fauconnerie dans les lettres françaises du xiii<sup>e</sup> au xiv<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Louvain, Belgium: Leuven University Press, 1990), 174 ff.

of individual identity crafting; they point to a pattern of self-reflection. Brigitte Bedos-Rezak writes that “ultimately, female seals carry the abstracted image of woman rather than portraying individual persons. These seals are stereotypes, semiotic conventions of a collective mentality.”<sup>27</sup> What is this “collective mentality” to which seal iconography grants access? Bedos-Rezak claims that such iconography shows us “the place which [women] occupied . . . with reference to their own psychic and emotional environment,”<sup>28</sup> but few scholars go further than hazarding that the female falconer on seals mediates “ambiguous meanings associated with birds of prey.”<sup>29</sup> We can speculate about what the image of female falconers symbolized for the women who commissioned these seals, and we might find irony in women’s choice of an image that had also been used to denigrate their sex.<sup>30</sup> But in order to fully understand the dynamic of the image and what it illustrates in a “collective mentality” we can turn to a textual mode of representation that continues the story of a woman with her bird.

### III. Conduct Manuals: Hawking and Reading Practices

Images of female falconers explicitly foreground uncertain control in falconry because the women holding the birds share the falcon’s position in their own cultural framework. In these images we have a collapse of the object being controlled and the subject controlling it. Women choosing to picture themselves holding their own birds overturn a signification system that is simultaneously used to regulate them. Like the fifteenth-century ballad discussed above, plenty of texts use falconry

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27. Bedos-Rezak, “Women, Seals, and Power,” 75.

28. Bedos-Rezak, 73.

29. Susan M. Johns, *Noblewomen, Aristocracy and Power in the Twelfth-Century Anglo-Norman Realm* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 130.

30. For instance, John of Salisbury belittles hawking prowess, attributing women’s success in falconry to their inferior gender in his twelfth-century *Policraticus*: “The inferior sex excels in the hunting of birds. For this you might be inclined to blame nature did you not know that inferior creatures are always more prone to rapine.” *Frivolities of courtiers and footprints of philosophers: being a translation of the first, second, and third books and selections from the seventh and eighth books of the Policraticus*, trans. Joseph B. Pike (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938), 17.

to do the opposite, that is, place the male in the position of falconer and the female in the position of falcon. Guillaume de Machaut's mid-fourteenth-century allegorical falconry treatise *Le dit de l'alerion* is the most heavy-handed example as the lover/falconer cycles through four distinct species of birds until he selects the most trainable raptor.<sup>31</sup> This patriarchal structure seems to dominate modern assumptions about how the metaphor generally operates. And even when a falcon-as-woman is depicted as a cunning character, the falconers are gendered male, and the *faucon* ("false cunt") refers to the female bird and synecdochically to the female counterpart of the human love relationship. The most self-conscious example of this wordplay arises in the twelfth-century fabliau, *Guillaume au Faucon*.<sup>32</sup> In this tale, a lady resists her lord's squire's advances until he nearly dies of a hunger strike, at which point she requests that her lord grant the squire her lord's "faucon," the object he craves, in order to save his life. The lord acquiesces and grants the squire his falcon, and through the squire's own interpretation of the pun, he also helps himself to the "false cunt" of the lady. But mapping the sigillographic image of female falconer onto thirteenth- and fourteenth-century texts allows another interpretation to emerge. This application of seal iconography to text means understanding woman with a falcon on the fist as symbolizing her controlling how her body is interpreted. Turning to texts specifically directed at women offers a different portrayal of falconry than what we see in allegories and fabliaux. At stake in the manual *Le Menagier de Paris* as with other conduct manuals is who has control over a female body in both representation and in practice. If we read references to falcons as references to anxiety over adulterous or possibly illegible female bodies, then references to female falconers suggest a kind of regained control over those bodies by the women themselves—if not through practice, then at least through how those bodies are represented and interpreted.

*Le Menagier de Paris* is a manual on household life addressed to a

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31. Guillaume de Machaut, *La dit de l'alerion* in *Oeuvres de Guillaume de Machaut*, ed. Ernest Hoepffner, vol. 2 (Paris: Société des Anciens Textes Français, 1906).

32. *Guillaume au Faucon*, in *Cuckolds, Clerics, & Countrymen*, ed. Raymond Eichmann and trans. John DuVal, 75–93 (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982).

fifteen-year-old bride and narrated in the voice of her husband, and the book uses various methods to indoctrinate female readers and young wives, or to demonstrate to male readers the supposed tractability of young women.<sup>33</sup> Much of the *Menagier* contains medieval exempla of wifely obedience and feminine virtues within the frame of a conduct manual resulting in an apparently thinly veiled antifeminist collection. Readers will recognize the stories of Griselda, Susanna, and Lucretia, to name a few. The manual's subtle indoctrination is most effective in places that appear to slacken control by reframing its own purpose in generically confusing moments. The manual uses such confusion to internalize patriarchal control in its reader. For example, after describing the lengths to which women should go in order to protect chastity (death), the narrator backtracks: "Ces choses, chiere suer, souffissent assez a vous baillier pour cest article, et vous sont baillies plus pour raconte que pour dottrine" (1.4.383–85). (These things, dear, are enough to impart to you for this article, and they are given to you more for the tale than for the teaching.)<sup>34</sup> This is a place that does not look like control, but it is. Because the tales are pleasurable they might not appear an attempt at controlling, but they in fact use their own entertainment value as a way to impart their moral conduct code to the reader.

The *Menagier's* ten-folio hawking treatise, by contrast, looks like control, but is not. Critics tend to read the symbolism of a falconer enticing a wild animal to return to the fist as a metaphor for the message of the book: a husband must tame, rein in, and domesticate, a "fresh and

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33. Much of the work contains overtones of a mercantile readership, with allusions to account-taking, tallying, ledgers, and investments. As such, the book represents an emerging middle-class, a break away from an aristocracy-specific falconry training, and thus an indication of the wider accessibility to the practice for men and women. Oggins draws from "sumptuary laws and other class-defining legislation" as well as literary references for evidence that falconry and knowledge about falconry was increasingly available to varied social classes in the late Middle Ages. He makes the point that as a rising merchant class began to encroach on the nobility's "monopoly" of falconry, proper usage of falconry terminology became a kind of class indicator, and a new market for falconry manuals clarifying that terminology arose. Oggins, *Kings and Their Falcons*, 114–15.

34. Greco and Rose, *Good Wife's Guide*, 93.

frisky young wife.”<sup>35</sup> Yet, this reading doesn’t account for the fact that the falconer described in the manual *is* the wife. So, while the ideology of the *Menagier* is one of male management, a management that is both overt and interiorized, this particular hawking treatise offers readers, and especially female readers, an alternative way to interpret the *Menagier’s* indoctrination.<sup>36</sup> The treatise’s presence in this manual of wifely domestication allows female readers to apply falconry’s paradox of control and release to the management of their own bodies. Roberta Krueger argues that the *Menagier’s* excessive orderliness clashes with moments of textual disorder, and I contend that the hawking treatise likewise contributes to the way that “this text opens a discursive space for the reader’s reflection.”<sup>37</sup> The treatise thus allows female readers to take at face value the text’s suggestion that the tales are more for pleasure than for instruction; to recognize the pleasurable storytelling as a means of indoctrinating antifeminist messages; and to reject the indoctrination and thereby proclaim interiority a space beyond the control of male managers.

Hawking was perhaps one of the few rigorous outdoor activities available to aristocratic and mercantile-class medieval women, and the treatise’s opening lines suggest that a woman’s choice to engage in it might also extend to agency over choosing other, more private, diversions, such as reading and sex.<sup>38</sup> The husband-narrator begins the treatise with a declaration that foregrounds pleasure in the pursuit of falconry: “Je met cy apres ce que je say d’espreveterie, afin que en la saison vous vous y esbatiez se vostre plaisir y est” (3.2.3–4). (I place hereafter what I know about being an astringer [a trainer of hawks, i.e., sparrowhawk or goshawk] and the art of hawking, so that in the hunting season you can divert yourself with this pursuit if you so choose.)<sup>39</sup> The narrator declares his purpose in including this hawking treatise in *Le Menagier*:

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35. Greco and Rose, “Introductory Note to Article 3.2,” *Good Wife’s Guide* 231.

36. See Greco and Rose, 27.

37. Roberta Krueger, “Identity Begins at Home: Female Conduct and the Failure of Counsel in *Le Menagier de Paris*,” *Essays in Medieval Studies* 22 (2005): 21–39.

38. See Richard Almond, *Medieval Hunting* (Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2003), 159.

39. Greco and Rose, *Good Wife’s Guide*, 233.

to provide his young wife with information about training birds so that she may divert herself with hawking. His choice of the verb “esbatre” predictably categorizes hawking as a noble pastime—not an activity designed for pragmatic purposes. This is an activity for the lady’s *plaisir* (“desire, will, pleasure”) alone.<sup>40</sup> But this introduction to the treatise suggests that hawking is more than a diversion: *esbatre*’s meaning ranges from “amuse, divert oneself”<sup>41</sup> to “to have sexual intercourse with.”<sup>42</sup> Both *esbatre* and *plaisir* evoke a kind of purposeful erotic pleasure, and the direct address to the lady alone suggests a private pleasure between herself and her pursuit, whether hawking, or reading about hawking. Another meaning of “esbatre” suggestively aligns the lady both with the austringer and the bird; the verb may also mean “beat, set in motion (as of wings),”<sup>43</sup> suggesting that the lady might find a kind of intersubjective pleasure in training the bird and watching it fly; that as it flies, she might also feel as though she too is set in motion on figurative wings.

By suggesting female readers substitute their own bodies for that of the austringer and for the hawk, the *Menagier* makes a risky move. Though the frame of the hawking treatise within the wider household manual may attempt to tame sexual activity, ultimately placing women under control of men, this section of the manual elides female austringer with female hawk, thus closing the circuit of control and release within a female reader. At one point, the manual overtly signals the exclusivity of the relationship between austringer and bird: “cellui ne le devoit laisser tenir ne paistre a autre fos a lui” (3.2.510–11). (“A hawk’s master should not allow anyone beside himself to hold or fed the bird.”)<sup>44</sup> We might read this warning as an expression of anxiety about wives veering from their masters, or husbands. Yet though the pronoun *lui* (himself)

40. *Old French Dictionary*, ed. Alan Hindley, Frederick W. Langley, and Brian J. Levy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2000), s.v. “Plaisir” s.m.

41. *Old French Dictionary*, s.v. “Esbatre” v.r.

42. *The Anglo-Norman Dictionary Online*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. William Rothwell (London: Modern Humanities Research Association; Anglo-Norman Text Society. 2006), s.v. “Esbatre” 1 v.n., accessed 30 January 2018, [http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/esbatre\[1\]](http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/esbatre[1]).

43. *Old French Dictionary*, s.v. “Esbatre” v.t.

44. Greco and Rose, *Good Wife’s Guide*, 242.

appears to signify a male subject, it merely refers to a masculine noun “maistre” (3.2.509). Since I have been arguing for attention to the female gender of the austringer, the “master,” in this hawking treatise, this moment rather suggests that a woman place control over her sexual body in no one else but herself. The manual’s very proposal that a body, like a hawk, can be in and out of control allows women to use reading about hawking as a simulation of the kind of freedom afforded by actually practicing falconry.

One strange simulation takes an intimate turn during early phases of training, positioning the austringer and hawk as literal bedfellows. This moment opens up the possibility for women to extend control over their bodies from the bedroom to the lectern and vice versa. The text instructs that “de nuyt soi mis l’esprevier entre deux draps au lit couchié avec une personne pour garder chaleur naturelle” (3.2.09–10). (“At night, the young bird should be put between two sheets in bed with someone to retain its natural warmth.”)<sup>45</sup> If the hawk represents male genitalia, then this moment in the *Menagier* would promote the patriarchal ideology of the entire work, but the text makes it a point to indicate distinctly different terms for male and female birds: “De l’esprevier le mouchet est le masle . . . et d’autres comme la’austour, le faucon, etc., l’en dit le masle *tercelet*” (3.2.906–8). (“The male sparrowhawk is the musket. . . . and of others such as the goshawk, falcon, etc., the male is called the *tercelet*.”)<sup>46</sup> In this case, if “l’espervier entre deux draps” (the bird between two sheets) represents a gendered body part, it is a distinctly female bird, and therefore enables a moment of autonomous control. The connection between reading and autonomy in the conduct manual seems paradoxical. But, Glenn Burger’s study of conduct manuals argues that a genre designed to impose rules for behavior might actually have supplied women with a more positive way to view their position: “For while a pervasive medieval antifeminist tradition views the female body as naturally wayward and sensual . . . late medieval conduct texts for women outline models of feminine virtue that show the good wife

45. Greco and Rose, 236.

46. Greco and Rose, 249–50.

as an identity with positive effects in the world.”<sup>47</sup> Even if the hawking manual suggests a world at first limited to a lady and her hawk, that relationship contributes to the way in which “conduct texts for women reconfigure how female embodiment is understood in the period.”<sup>48</sup>

If the hawk-in-bed moment is suggestive of a woman gaining control over her own body, this control might be considered limited to the bedroom, which is not a novel interpretation. However, these early phases of training directly influence the bird’s physical development in strength and plumage. The text hereafter instructs the reader how to read the hawk’s feathers and formation as signs of its prowess and loyalty, using the exterior to render something legible about the interior. If reading a hawk’s body can tell the austringer about its internal attributes, but the austringer also has the power to control how the hawk’s body develops, this kind of legibility-access suggests women might control how their bodies are interpreted.

#### IV. Re-writing Narrative: Falcon with Woman

Until this point, I have been arguing for falconry’s influence on women’s reading practice. We have seen how the symbolic hierarchy between falconer and falcon weakens especially when both participants are gendered female in seal iconography and the instructional language of the conduct manual. In this final section, I turn to the relationship between falconer and falcon in narrative verse to propose that from that weakening patriarchal structure emerges a feminist poetics. Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale* concludes with an interaction between the princess Canacee and a lovelorn peregrine falcon. In the structure of the tale, the falcon-princess episode concludes with an allusion to an incestuous relationship awaiting the princess.<sup>49</sup> But the relationship most developed is that between a swooning ill falcon and her human handler, Princess Canacee:

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47. Glenn D. Burger, *Conduct Becoming: Good Wives and Husbands in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 2.

48. Burger, 2.

49. See Elizabeth Scala, “Remembering Canacee, Forgetting Incest: Reading the ‘Squire’s Tale,’” in *Absent Narratives, Manuscript Textuality, and Literary Structure in Late Medieval England* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 71–98.

But Canacee hom bereth hire in hir lappe,  
And softly in plastres gan hire wrappe,  
Ther as she with hire beek hadde hurt hirselve.  
Now kan nat Canacee but herbes delve  
Out of the ground, and make salves newe  
Of herbes precieuse and fyne of hewe,  
To heelen with this hauk. Fro day to nyght  
She dooth hir bisynesse and al hire myght.  
And by hire beddes heed she made a mew.<sup>50</sup>

But Canacee bears her [the peregrine] home in her lap, and softly began to wrap her in bandages where she had hurt herself with her beak. Now Canacee can do nothing but dig herbs out of the ground and make new salves of herbs, precious and fine of hue, with which to heal this hawk. From day to night she does her diligence and all her might and by her bed's head she made a mews.<sup>51</sup>

While a magic ring that allows Canacee to understand birds' language and to heal ailments with herbs might cast a fantastical patina on this section of the tale, Canacee's actions are not different than those of actual falconers. Canacee receives the falcon in her lap, interprets its suffering, heals it with herbs, and constructs a mews for it. All of these interactions were conventional steps in phases of falconry training and constitute the initial relationship between falcon and falconer. Interpreting Canacee as a female falconer dreaming beside her falcon's mews allows readers to linger in the relationship between falcon and falconer, which this final scene depicts as one of female autonomy: both the bird and the trainer are emphatically female, avoiding the control of potential future male lovers.

The interpretive tradition established by seal matrices and conduct

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50. Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Squire's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987), V.635–43 (hereafter cited in text by line number).

51. In order to highlight the sequence of Canacee's actions, I have offered a modern English translation of the passage.

manuals focalizes the shared gender of these two characters. Of course, their shared gender does not negate unequal power between the species in the actual practice of falconry. The ethical problem of the human-bird relationship is what Donna Haraway locates in “issues of unequal skill and unequal power and unequal everything” in animal training.<sup>52</sup> Yet, when falcons’ and women’s bodies are textualized and represented in a genre invested in female chastity, their elision is significant. The circumstances in *The Squire’s Tale* prescribe a reciprocal choosing based on gender and storytelling: the falcon seeks protection *from* another animal of the same species and chooses Canacee as her confidante while Canacee seeks a discussion with a bird and chooses the falcon as her conversation partner.

In the wake of Susan Crane’s lecture “For the Birds” at the 2010 New Chaucer Society Congress, Chaucerian scholars have re-examined the relationship between Canacee and the peregrine in *The Squire’s Tale*.<sup>53</sup> Lesley Kordecki’s 2011 *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer’s Talking Birds*, Sarah Deutch Schotland, and Sara Gutmann in Carolyn Van Dyke’s 2012 *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, and Melissa Ridley Elmes in this essay collection discuss the importance of the anthropomorphic relationship based on empathy between the female characters in this Chaucerian tale.<sup>54</sup> Stepping back, I’d like to consider how the interspecies dynamic in Chaucer’s work emerges from a tradition of representing women and their birds. The thirteenth-century seals described previously offer a visual representation of the falcon/falconer relationship and conduct manuals demonstrate its place in women’s education. *The Squire’s Tale* offers one example of how reading these different artistic forms together produces

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52. Joseph Schneider, *Donna Haraway: Live Theory* (New York: Continuum 2005), 152.

53. Susan Crane, “Biennial Chaucer Lecture: For the Birds,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 23–41, doi:10.1353/sac.2007.0013.

54. See especially “The *Squire’s Tale*: Romancing Animal Magic,” in Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer’s Talking Birds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 77–102; Sara Deutch Schotland, “Avian Hybridity in “The Squire’s Tale”: Uses of Anthropomorphism,” in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, ed. Carolyn Van Dyke, 115–30 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Sara Gutmann, “Chaucer’s Chicks: Feminism and Falconry in ‘The Knight’s Tale,’ ‘The Squire’s Tale,’ and ‘The Parliament of Fowls,’” in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, 69–83.

a feminist poetics. When E. Jane Burns asks us to consider “how female voices, fashioned by a male author to represent misogynous fantasies of female corporeality, can also be heard to rewrite the tales in which they appear,” she writes of an archive consisting of human characters.<sup>55</sup> But this poetics of reading, when coupled with an overt symbol for female anatomy in the *faucon*, brings the stakes of both feminist and critical animal studies together.

To see how falconry uniquely weaves these threads together, it is helpful to consider the common aims of representation and falconry training—that is, the role that representation and interpretation play in the actual practice of falconry and in the manuals that describe the practice. Manuals such as *Le Menagier de Paris* propose that successful falconers must discover exterior details about their birds in order to interpret them. They use this early interpretation to later anticipate and react to birds’ behavior on the fist and in the sky. *The Squire’s Tale* introduces the swooning falcon to readers in two hermeneutic modes: first, the Squire, our male narrator, interprets her species from her “plumage” and her “shap” (426–27). In other words, he reads her body, finds it legible, and declares her a “faucon peregryn . . . of fremde land” (428–29). He seems to have control over the bird’s representation. But our female protagonist, Canacee, introduces a second kind of hermeneutic to interpret the bird’s body. She uses an empathy derived from listening to the falcon’s story. She interprets the creature through its sorrowing, harmed “gentil herte” (452), and the result is a compassionate elision of their two bodies, first from so much “routhe” that “almoost [Canacee] deyde” and second from bearing the falcon’s body in Canacee’s own lap (441).

The Squire was quick to categorize the bird as a “faucon”—by context, a female peregrine, but also, thanks to the diffusion of the pun *faucon*, a “false cunt.”<sup>56</sup> However, upon interacting with Canacee, this bird slips

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55. E. Jane Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 7 and 16.

56. The pun was readily available to a medieval audience. Susan L. Smith mentions a fourteenth-century French ivory mirror valve depicting falcon-as-genitalia from the British Museum, as well as the fabliau *Guillaume au Faucon* to demonstrate the popularity of the trope. “The Gothic Mirror and the Female Gaze,” in *Saints, Sinners and Sisters: Gender and Northern Art in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*,

into the wider category of “hawk,”<sup>57</sup> and her language is described as “haukes ledene” (446, 449, 478), a label that aligns her more with the *espervier* of the hawking manual than the *faucon* of the *fabliau*. And indeed, we learn of the *male* peregrine’s falsity, a trait which completely revises the trope of the disloyal and wildly sexual female to be tamed. After listening to the peregrine’s tale of betrayal, “greet was the sorwe for the haukes harm / That Canacee and all hir women made” (632–33). Canacee proceeds “to heelen with this hawk” and make the bird’s recovery “hire bisynesse.” Within the narrative, she performs the duty of a skilled falconer and empath—she cures her bird’s physical and emotional wounds. But on a metanarrative level, Chaucer’s choice of pairing Canacee and the female hawk repairs the “harm” to both species caused by the misogynistic literary symbol.<sup>58</sup>

Canacee’s construction of an enclosure for the bird “by hire beddes heed” furthers this dual-layered reparation (643). The reader might recall the *Menagier’s* suggestion to slip a hawk between bedsheets in order to keep it warm. That this mews structure for her bird also depicts on its walls the story of the peregrine’s suffering, the story that bound the peregrine and Canacee in empathetic “wommanly benignytee,” seems to remove both Canacee and her bird from the sphere of male management and even from a heteronormative plot. The phase of falconry training that allows Canacee and the hawk to spend time together in the mews replaces the objective of that training—the hunt. If Canacee bonds with the peregrine for no obvious or traditional purpose, such as hunting, she engages with the bird for another motive less perceptible. In this space Canacee bonds with the peregrine not to assert her dominance

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ed. Jane L. Carroll and Alison G. Stewart, 73–93 (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 81.

57. Even today among practicing falconers the term “hawk” may refer broadly to all three types of falconry birds: longwings (falcons), and two types of “hawks”: shortwings (buteos), and broadwings (accipiters). While “hawk” might designate all three categories and either sex, “falcon” refers only to a female peregrine. Frederick W. Holderman, *California Hawking Club Apprentice Study Guide* (Spring Valley: The California Hawking Club, 2014), 2 and 10.

58. I thank one of the reviewers for pointing out the reparation to the hawk’s reputation as a symbol.

over the animal, but instead to recraft the stand-in of falcon for woman as falcon *with* woman.

The *Menagier* ends its advice to young wives with the suggestion that the reader “I’en le mue bien sur le poing” (3.2.1048-9; “can molt [the hawk] while holding it on the fist”).<sup>59</sup> And the male narrator of the *Squire’s Tale* leaves Canacee there, in that perpetual state of molting on the fist, in the bed. He seems to have lost control over his initial interpretation of the bird’s body, adopting Canacee’s mode of interpretation and labeling of the falcon as a hawk: “Thus let I Canacee hir hauk keypyng” (651) the Squire trails off. The ensuing few lines seem in and out of the narrator’s control, bringing the hawk and her lover, the tercelet, together again, ushering in a battle for Canacee’s body that might end in incest. But the last line, “and there I lefte I wol ayeyn bigynne,” reflects the same kind of reading practice espoused in “Revertere”’s turning again: it brings us right back to Canacee keeping her hawk, closing the circuit of control and release within the female falconer.

Finally, back to our ballad. The relative freedom for women, both in the practice of falconry and in its usage as a symbol, undermines falconry’s utility as a control mechanism. The Squire’s self-conscious bumbling as a narrator even makes explicit the fallibility of using falconry as a symbol of clear dominance. The ballad attempts to pair failed falconry training with a litany of antifeminist arguments, aligning hawks’ wandering nature with women’s behavior. But what falconry had actually provided for both men and women was a clearer understanding of dedication to a practice, submission to a training, and cooperation with another species. In this light, allegorical texts such as *Le dit de l’alerion* and romances like the *Squire’s Tale* seem to parody the usage of falconry as a control mechanism rather than use it to effectively communicate a hierarchical relationship. But even when the birds are not present, I believe it is possible to use this relationship between woman and bird to reconfigure relationships of gendered control in literary texts. In consideration of the quotidian proximity to these birds, to the countless hours spent in their company, and of the inevitable impact such proximity must have

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59. Greco and Rose, *Good Wife’s Guide*, 252.

had on people's understanding of their world, feminist approaches to medieval texts might consider the hermeneutics of control in falconry even in the absence of the birds. When uncertain power dynamics in animal-human relationships influence gender hierarchies across species, we might then echo and tweak the question about animal studies' utility for feminist readings that Carolynn Van Dyke poses in introducing this special issue: "Does it have to be explicitly about animals?"

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