

“Compassion and Benignytee”:

A Reassessment of the Relationship Between Canacee and
the Falcon in Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale”

Melissa Ridley Elmes

AMONG ITS MANY fanciful elements, Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Squire’s Tale” includes an emotionally charged dialogue between two aristocratic female figures: the human princess, Canacee, and the wounded falcon she meets in the wood.¹ Scholars have described this relationship in interspecies and gendered terms, each argument advancing our reception of the scene beyond a mere instance of medieval fancy readily associable with the romance genre to demonstrate its various critical and theoretical usefulnesses for feminist, and especially ecofeminist, interpretations of this tale. Most such studies focus on the trope of the magic ring as a means of communication between humans and animals and on reading the scene for its depiction of womanly emotions and relationships, ultimately arguing some variation of the point that Canacee and the falcon communicate mainly through supernatural means, which are supported by Canacee’s human (and inherently feminine) compassion for the bird as a wounded creature in need of assistance.

1. This article began as a presentation in the “Gender and Species: Ecofeminist Intersections” roundtable at the 52nd annual International Congress on Medieval Studies. I would like to thank Carolyn Van Dyke, who organized the session, Lesley Kordecki, who presided over it, my fellow panelists, and the attendees of the roundtable for their many insightful comments and suggestions towards developing the talk into the finished article. I also thank the anonymous reader for *Medieval Feminist Forum* for further feedback which helped me to clarify and strengthen the central argument that the Squire conflates the falcon and woman in the blanket category of “female.”

While these observations are both true and important for our understanding of this tale, I think we can press the issue of the nature of their relationship still farther, situating it even more firmly as an instance of female friendship grounded in a decidedly female point of view, despite being constructed by a male author and for a male storyteller. I argue that Canacee and the falcon enter into a strong natural bond not only, or even primarily, because Canacee's magic ring permits interspecies linguistic comprehensibility, or because of the way her "gentil herte"² causes the noblewoman to reach out to the wounded bird. Rather, the bond derives from their femaleness, which for the tale-teller transcends species in favor of a gendered sameness borne of similar experiences; in particular, female experiences with figures of the opposite sex. The affinity- and experience-driven bond which Canacee and the falcon develop in the final portion of this tale supports a reading of this scene that is grounded in the theme of female friendship. However, where it has heretofore been read along human terms, I consider this instance of female friendship from the avian perspective—that is, I bring Canacee into the falcon's world as, in fact, the Squire does. This "bird's-eye view" reassessment of their relationship relies on an intersectional approach that is indebted to the insights of many scholars who have come to this tale before me, and so I begin with a brief retrospective of their most salient points before continuing with my own.

First, no discussion of women's relationships in Chaucerian romance can proceed without acknowledging its debt to Susan Crane's 1994 *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales*. Readily discernible in each of the studies I summarize below, as well as in the present one, are her points about the relationship between romance and gender: that "romance assigns gender a high degree of motivating and explanatory force"³; that romance makes use of gender for a variety of narrative and critical functions, "implicat[ing] the dichotomy between masculine and feminine in a range of other oppositions between authority and

2. Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Squire's Tale," *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), lines 146–52 and 479. All further references to this tale will be given as line numbers parenthetically in text.

3. Susan Crane, *Gender and Romance in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 12.

submission, familiarity and exoticism, justice and mercy, public and private, with which the gender dichotomy suggestively interacts"⁴; and that gender and magic are interrelated in romance: "in association with masculine characters and concerns, magic expresses desires for achievements and completeness that are denied to masculine identity in romance [. . .] In contrast, women's magic involves men in intimacies, expresses the ambiguous pleasure and danger of these intimacies, and tends to have occulted origins."⁵

In her 2006 study *Chaucer's Agents*, Carolyn Van Dyke suggests that the narrator of this tale, the Squire, is sympathetic to his female subjects, Canacee and the falcon.⁶ Most importantly for my argument for interpreting Canacee as avian, rather than the falcon as humanlike, Van Dyke reminds us that "the setting and characters remain outwardly avian—the falcon was raised in a cliff, wooed by a tercelet, betrayed for a kite—but most points of reference are human."⁷ Regarding the falcon's own tale of betrayal in love, Van Dyke concludes that "the narrator floats somewhere between a human subject who could experience most of it and an animal that could not, stranding us between compassion and amused disbelief."⁸ Of course, the falcon's narrative is conveyed by a male human being, the Squire, whose human—and humane—approach to his subject matter implies that as tale-teller he is engaging in a flight of fancy, a suspension of disbelief, which allows him to identify and sympathize, at least in part, with the otherwise more-or-less utterly foreign (to him) female subjects of his story. This idea that he is engaging in a flight of fancy is essential to my interpretation of the scene: the Squire is telling a tale that transcends the usual romance practices of using the story to illuminate some aspect of human being (generally in masculine terms) by engaging in an original and innovative, if heretofore largely unremarked, approach. He makes an effort to characterize Canacee and the falcon's relationship as avian, rather than human, and to use that characterization in turn to

4. Crane, 12.

5. Crane, 14.

6. Carolyn Van Dyke, *Chaucer's Agents: Cause and Representation in Chaucerian Narrative* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2006), 82.

7. Van Dyke, 82.

8. Van Dyke, 85.

illuminate something about feminine, rather than masculine, experience. It is an effort which ultimately backfires, revealing more to us of the Squire's reception and understanding of female experiences than of either female figure's, and reinforcing the relationship of masculinity to romance articulated by Crane. The Squire is more comfortable with the female bird than with the female woman—so much so, that he can only tell this romance he is composing by taking a different species as his subject rather than taking on a female human's point-of-view; he characterizes Canacee as a bird in his (ultimately failed, on which, more below) effort to engage in an act of empathy with the feminine experience of masculine treachery.

In 2011, Lesley Kordecki pointed out in *Ecofeminist Subjectivities* that in writing the birds in *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer was limited by his own masculine and human subjectivity; nonetheless, he moves away from the “truths handed down in written tradition . . . to the truths gleaned from active, confrontational, and contemporary voices” and “lets the animal world into the equation.”⁹ In my 2012 essay on the *Parliament of Fowls*, I further this understanding of Chaucer's birds as being more than typical or received literary constructions by showing how Chaucer drew on both textual sources and his own observations of the interactions of birds to develop a highly realistic depiction—because gleaned not merely from literature, but also from his own experience of the natural world as birdwatcher—of the avian community in that text.¹⁰ Taken together, these arguments underscore that Chaucer as an author attempts to convey verisimilitude not only in his depiction of the human, but also of the animal, world. In returning to these ideas in association with the “Squire's Tale,” I now extend the point further: Chaucer does not only let the animal world inflect the human one through his efforts at verisimilitude; nor does he simply unify the bird and woman as feminine others to his own masculinity in the magical

9. Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 53 and 143.

10. Melissa Ridley Elmes, “Species or Specious? Authorial Choices and the ‘Parliament of Fowls,’” in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, ed. Carolyn Van Dyke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 233–48, especially the discussion of Chaucer's selection of birds for the poem, 235–40.

world of romance, as noted by Kordecki in an earlier study.¹¹ As I show below, he also seeks to bring the human into the animal world through an act of, for lack of a better term, premodern fantasy.

In a pair of articles published in 2011 and 2012, Sara Deutch Schotland discusses the homosocial bonds between Canacee and the falcon. Linking the sympathetic tone of the tale to other works of his that feature women jilted by their lovers, she writes in 2011 that “Chaucer shows a deep sympathy for women betrayed by male infidelity and a profound appreciation of the value of female friendship as a defensive strategy.”¹² She continues by describing the anthropomorphic nature of the falcon as being a good thing in this case, because it permits the falcon and Canacee as women to care for and defend one another against a dangerous world. She characterizes their friendship as acceptable because they are not social equals: “assuming that female friendship is more acceptable or at least more common when there is a gap in status, the difference in species between Princess Canacee and the formel provides a suitable space for friendship to form.”¹³ She also argues that the friendship is suitable because falcons are associated with royalty, falconry is a socially approved pastime, and Canacee’s nursing care of the falcon is a “prototypical, unthreatening female role.”¹⁴ Canacee, she concludes, “is capable of friendship with a bird because she can transcend differences.”¹⁵

11. Lesley Catherine Kordecki, “Chaucer’s *Squire’s Tale*: Animal Discourse, Women, and Subjectivity,” *The Chaucer Review* 36, no. 3 (2002): 277–97, at 285–86, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25096170>.

12. Sara Deutch Schotland, “Talking Bird and Gentle Heart: Female Homosocial Bonding in Chaucer’s ‘Squire’s Tale,’” in *Friendship in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age*, ed. Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011), 525–42, at 527.

13. Schotland, “Talking Bird and Gentle Heart,” 528. As here described by Schotland, the relationship between Canacee and the falcon also strongly resembles that between the formel eagle and Dame Nature in the *Parliament of Fowls*. I have further examined the idea of the acceptability of friendship between women of differing social status in Geoffrey Chaucer’s works in my paper, “Female Friendship in Middle English Romance,” delivered in the “Female Friendship in Medieval Literature I” session at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in 2017 and currently in revision for publication.

14. Schotland, “Talking Bird and Gentle Heart,” 528.

15. Schotland, 541.

The friendship between Canacee and the falcon is here characterized as homosocial because the bird, although noble among birds, is not human; she belongs to a category of being that engages in service to and therefore is below the human princess in rank (from a human perspective) and thus, Canacee's ability to transcend their difference in species by acknowledging, understanding, empathizing with, and caring for the bird (via the ring and also, Canacee's natural feminine tendency to caregiving and empathy) permits their friendship to form.

In her 2012 essay, Schotland elaborates on her position regarding the anthropomorphism in the "Squire's Tale," noting that while critics tend to view the tale as incorporating the worst aspects of anthropomorphism—the bending of animal figures into human subjectivity, and the subjecting of those animal figures to the position of literary vessels for human emotions and excesses—in fact, the anthropomorphic falcon can be read much more positively, as demanding that the readers of this tale engage in an ethics of care. Reflecting on her "predominantly avian form but human linguistic capabilities,"¹⁶ Schotland points out that the falcon is able to reveal a commonality between animals and humans that defies all normal barriers, including those of rank, language, and species, concluding that "anthropomorphism here represents not a subordination of the animal but an affecting cry to ease suffering across borders."¹⁷ For Schotland, what is essential in the relationship between Canacee and the falcon is the homosocial bond they form, which erases all barriers and boundaries to their care and compassion for one another as members of the same sex and gender. I agree that they form that bond and that it can be read in homosocial terms, but in what remains of this essay I present an alternative interpretation that considers their bond not as homosocial as in stemming from a human and anthropomorphic perspective, but as "avian-social" stemming from a fanciful, blurred-species (or even, "bird"-species) perspective, still reliant specifically on their shared female gender.

The importance of their gender in this interaction between Canacee and the falcon cannot be overstated. To underscore its importance, in

16. Sarah Deutch Schotland, "Avian Hybridity in 'The Squire's Tale': Uses of Anthropomorphism," in Van Dyke, *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, 115–30, at 116.

17. Schotland, "Avian Hybridity," 116.

fact, bird references in this tale are presented in masculine terms until the scene with the falcon in the woods. Earlier in the poem, when an emissary presents the king and his family with tokens of honor from the King of Arabia and India, he describes the ring thusly:

The vertu of the ryng, if ye wol it heere,
Is this: that if hire [Canacee] lust it for to were
Upon hir thombe or in hir purs it bere,
Ther is no fowel that fleeth under the hevene
That she ne shal wel understonde *his* stevene,
And knowe *his* menyng openly and pleyn,
And answeere *hym* in his langage ageyn.
(146-52; emphasis mine)

This gendering of “fowel” as specifically masculine could easily be avoided by rendering it in the plural form, so that the “his” and “hym” become rather “her(e)” and “hem.” In fact, when Canacee is in the woods, she hears the “foweles” sing before she happens upon the falcon, so there are appearances of birds linguistically presented in plural terms in this poem (398). But a male emissary, speaking to a king before his court, reinforces the masculine nature of their relationship to the world. This association of masculine “fowel” with the ring is not necessarily a generic reference to birds, and it may be important for our understanding of the Squire as the tale-teller. He is still telling the tale from the masculine point of view, in which magical items confer achievements and completeness on their possessors, and still assuming that the ring is the means by which Canacee understands what she is hearing, conferring through its magic properties interspecies comprehension and an artificial (because magic) unity with the natural world. However, as Susan Crane points out, Canacee does not actually need the ring to understand the falcon; she hears the falcon shrieking and understands what she is communicating before it is explained in words.¹⁸ Crane’s point that they

18. Crane, “For the Birds,” Biennial Chaucer Lecture, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 23–41, 32, doi:10.1353/sac.2007.0013. The passage from the “Squire’s Tale” under discussion is as follows:

Amydde a tree, for drye as whit as chalk,

share a female language of embodiment is essential to understanding this moment. The Squire interrupts himself to reintroduce the ring in the same specifically masculine terms used earlier by the king's emissary (433–36), undermining a moment in which communication depends not on magic but on an essential shared language of the pain and suffering brought about by female beings' experiences of the actions of their male counterparts.¹⁹ Bringing the ring back into the story at this point undermines the moment of female bonding by reintroducing what has, in fact, been characterized as male magic—a ring presented to a woman by a male emissary of a foreign king, in order that she might understand the language of birds—to this point, also characterized linguistically as male. However, what the Squire then does with the ring in terms of reporting what is being said reinforces the bond between Canacee and the falcon by distancing both himself and the audience from their conversation. It is here that I would like to push beyond the anthropomorphic and interspecies readings thus far presented, and examine this as a moment not of intermingling, but of commingling, with gender still at the heart of the scene.

As the scene begins, Canacee enters the wood with “fyve or sixe of hir meynee” (391)—a fact not noted by earlier critics that is significant because this group of women functions in much the same way as do the townswomen in *Troilus and Criseyde*; that is, they listen to the falcon's woes and seek to cheer her up (although it must be acknowledged that the falcon much more readily takes advantage of this commiseration than does Criseyde).²⁰ After the falcon relates her failed love affair to

As Canacee was pleying in hir walk,
 Ther sat a faucon over hire heed ful hye,
 That with a pitous voys so gan to crye
 That all the wode resounded of hire cry [. . .]
 This faire kynges doghter, Canacee [. . .]
 Hath understonde what this faucon seyde. (409–37)

19. Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 73–6.

20. In the scene to which I refer in Book Four of *Troilus and Criseyde*, a group of women visit Criseyde to commiserate with her following news that her father intends to exchange her for a prisoner of war; in response to the townswomen's efforts to draw Criseyde into conversation and take her mind off of her troubles, the narrator assures us, Criseyde remains closed-off to them, locked in her own internal conflict:

Canacee, “greet was the sorwe for the haukes harm / That Canacee and alle hir wommen made; / They nyste hou they myghte the faucon glade” (632–34). Here is a community of women acting in friendship towards one of their own—that is, towards another female, the storyteller conflating the humans and birds under the umbrella of gender. Their bond is not homosocial in the usual sense, a connection between two or more individuals of the same gender in which there is a shared sense of access to and use of power or the manipulation of that power;²¹ it is based more specifically on female friendship developed over the common, shared experience of dealing with the trauma females suffer as a result of a male’s callous behavior and negotiating their broken hearts in its wake. The squire, however, is not only male but a young man, with little experience with those of the female persuasion, and this lack of worldliness, in part, allows him to make the move of conflating the female figures in his story into a single social category, expressed in his terms. That move, in turn, has held important implications for the scholarship on their relationship. Not being intimately familiar with experiences beyond his own position as a human male, the storyteller seems content to lump human and bird, alike, into the category of “female” for the purposes of his tale, and scholars have used this as an opportunity to explore the emotional bond between Canacee and the falcon—but that bond is always considered from the human, or anthropomorphic, point of view. What if, instead, we shifted the lens from human to avian?

Kordecki has in the past claimed that “we do not seriously entertain

Tho wordes and tho wommanysshe thynges,
 She herde hem right as though she thennes were;
 For God it woot, hire herte on othir thyng is.
 Although the body sat among hem there,
 Hire advertence is alwey elleswhere,
 For Troilus ful faste hir soule soughte;
 Withouten word, on hym alwey she thoughte.

Geoffrey Chaucer, “Troilus and Criseyde,” *The Riverside Chaucer*, 4. 680–734, at 694–700.

21. See, for example, Amy Brown, “Female Homosociality and the Marriage Plot: Women and Marriage Negotiation in *Cligés* and *Le Chevalier au Lion*,” *Parergon* 33 no. 1 (2016), 49–68.

this story as one of birds,²² and while it would certainly be quite foolish for us to read the poem straightforwardly as being about birds, I do think it invites us to contemplate it in both avian and human terms in ways we have not yet accomplished. Here, I want to follow Kordecki's suggestion that the falcon's story provides a parody of what happens after the formel eagle of the *Parliament of Fowls* finally makes her choice,²³ but to read it not as a parody, but as an extension, of that tale—a sequel, if you will. Because the birds in *Parliament of Fowls* are a “blend of ornithology and literary convention, of observation and imagination,”²⁴ reading this falcon and her story within that same world renders her, also, such a blended figure. The slippage of birds into the *fin'amor* tradition in the *Parliament* is carried into the “Squire's Tale” and, as with the *Parliament*, it is done in the service of describing the birds' situation and condition, rather than that of the human. We read *Parliament* as an allegorical dream vision, but as I show in “Species or Specious,” it is also an observation and recording of particularly avian being in the world. If we read the “Squire's Tale” in the same vein, then we need to read here, too, for the particularly avian, as much as we are able to do so. I find that the Squire tells his tale in such a way that we are invited, and indeed, encouraged, to read Canacee in these same terms—in terms of the avian. When we read Canacee as avian, it brings us into line with the Squire, as tale-teller, and places her in alignment with the falcon, as female—an important distinction and distancing for our understanding of Chaucer's characterization of the Squire, as I show below.

It seems at the outset that this reading doesn't actually work linguistically, because when the bird speaks, it is in the language of *fin'amor*, the human language of the courtly world to which Canacee belongs. As Kordecki notes, and Schotland reiterates, in describing her situation the falcon “forgets herself and talks of ‘man’ and ‘womman’ in lines 552 and 559,”²⁵ and her “purpose is to warn Canacee of the perfidy of men, not tercelets.”²⁶ I am not sure the distinction here between male

22. Kordecki, “Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*,” 289.

23. Kordecki, “Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*,” 279.

24. Ridley Elmes, “Species or Specious?,” 244.

25. Schotland, “Avian Hybridity,” 115.

26. Kordecki, “Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*,” 288.

human and male bird transgression against the female is necessary. As noted by Crane, Canacee already understands the bird's meaning and doesn't need the translation which the ring affords. I suggest that the reason the bird is speaking in a courtly, human register is that the ring is translating her language as it is supposed to, but that Canacee doesn't need that translation because she understands the falcon; they already speak the same language. They are "kynde." They speak the language of female experience, and that language is presented in the tale both in bird and human language—but Canacee understands it first and most readily in bird language. Maybe the longer description of the falcon's experiences, rendered in courtly language, is for us, the readers who do not speak in the language of birds, who may not speak in the language of females. The ring, and the translation it provides, are for those who do not inhabit the avian world—but Canacee does, at least in this moment.

If the falcon can be read as a woman, then the woman can be read as a bird, in a slippage of sign and signifier made possible by the tale's form as fantastic romance and, as Kordecki points out, "surrealistic dream vision."²⁷ In such a reading, Canacee enters the wood, where birds live, with an attendant flock. She joins her *kynde* there as she meets and interacts with the falcon who is shrieking, beating her wings against her breast, and bleeding in the same fashion as does the pelican, or sometimes the dove, in medieval bird lore, behavior Canacee recognizes as love-lorn anguish, a "strategy of expression that is based not in speech but in the close association between femininity and the body."²⁸ This physical display of suffering, accompanied by the falcon's wordless, yet meaningful, cries, attracts Canacee's attention, as it would any bird of prey such as the falcon Canacee becomes in this fanciful reading, and also alerts her to a need to soothe her fellow creature—suggestive, in the idiom of raptors which are typically solitary unless mating or raising a family, of a parent figure caring for its young, rather than of two equals. This is the point at which the Squire's figuring of Canacee as a falcon conflates with his understanding of how women interact with one another, causing a moment of cognitive dissonance where the reader

27. Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 78.

28. Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 73.

cannot be sure which reading is most viable. We see the vision of the women as birds in the woods ripple slightly, distort, Canacee in particular becoming both avian and human, parent and friend. The Squire, as tale-teller, inserts his own view of the world into the moment. As Canacee and the falcon settle into an intimate discussion of the falcon's plight there is no need to consider whether they are social equals; they are both female, and for the Squire that is ample reason why they should be friends and care for one another. While the falcon's description of her plight stems from known literary sources²⁹ and is presented in a courtly human idiom, we might also consider Chaucer's—and perhaps, the Squire's—observations of falcons in distress.³⁰ What of her behaviors and description of events can be attributed to those of actual birds of prey, both in their captive and wild states?³¹

29. See Crane, *Gender and Romance*, 66–73 for a discussion of the tale's indebtedness to Jean de Meun's *Romance of the Rose* and Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. Kordecki also notes an indebtedness to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*; see "Chaucer's *Squire's Tale*," 278.

30. Between 1389 and 1391, Chaucer held the position of clerk of the king's works, which included responsibility for the king's mews at Charing Cross. If he had not had the opportunity to observe in any real detail the behaviors of such birds of prey in his earlier service to Elizabeth de Burgh, Countess of Ulster, Prince Lionel, or Edward III, his responsibility for the mews may have offered him that chance, providing some of the rich detail we see in his description of birds' behavior throughout his *oeuvre*, particularly in the *Parliament of Fowls* regarding the behaviors of barnyard birds, and here in the description of these noble birds. I am indebted to Marion Turner for reminding me of Chaucer's responsibilities as clerk of the king's works, documentation of which is located in the Royal Patent Rolls, pat. 13 R II., p. 1, m. 30; the full Latin text of this mention is located in the Appendix to William Godwin's *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer, the earliest English poet* (London, 1804); and discussion of Chaucer's work in this position is found in chapter two of David R. Carlson, *Chaucer's Jobs* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

31. Although beyond the scope of the current study, here is a subject that has not yet received enough scholarly attention, and identifying points in the falcon's speech where she engages more with the imagery of bird experience than of human might prove helpful in further efforts to "bird" Canacee rather than anthropomorphize the falcon, deepening the avian idiom. We might, for instance, consider the work of animal behaviorists and biologists, such as A. M. Seed, N. S. Clayton, and N. J. Emery, "Post-Conflict Third Party Resolution in Rooks (*Corvus frugilegus*)," *Current Biology* 17 (2007), 152–58, as a useful starting point for thinking about how animals

The falcon is hurt; Canacee will tend to it: female/female, parent/child, friend/friend, *kynde* assisting and attending *kynde*, these two beings unified by language, gender, and experience in an avian setting in the woods. And finally, then, there is the question of the mew which Canacee builds for the falcon in the castle, removed from the woods:

Canacee hom bereth hire. . . .
.
And by hire beddes heed she made a mewe
And covered it with veluettes blewe,
In signe of trouthe that is in wommen sene.
And all withoute, the mewe is peynted grene,
In which were peynted alle thise false fowles,
As ben thise tidyves, tercelettes, and owles;
Right for despit were peynted hem bisyde,
Pyes, on hem for to crie and chyde.
(635-50)

Most critics read the mew as a cage and this moment as the human woman turning the falcon into something of a pet; Schotland engagingly reads it as an instance of ekphrasis in which Canacee communicates with the bird through art, in the form of the images of birds she draws on the sides of the mew.³² To these various readings I would like to add one more, again stemming from an avian perspective: that Canacee has “feathered a nest” in which to house the injured bird and then staffed that nest with a guard to keep away enemies, reinforcing her gendered figuration as both female falcon and human woman as she shows avian activity, human hospitality and protection, and female friendship,³³

interact as animals, rather than in human terms.
32. Schotland, “Talking Bird and Gentle Heart,” 535-37.

33. I do not suggest that it is avian to build a nest for ill birds (it decidedly is not), but rather that the act of building a nest is inherently avian in nature. In this reading, Canacee’s mew as nest-building is both human response to create a space for recuperating animals and avian behavior to create a space to raise a family, reinforcing the gendered conflation of humans and birds as caregivers for the sick and the family, alike, in this tale and, consequently, reinforcing the Squire’s characterization as a young man with limited understanding of the female experience he seeks to relate.

and thus again thwarting our expectations that this tale is coming from a necessarily human perspective by conflating Canacee and the falcon through their many female aspects. We can claim with certainty only that the perspective of these two beings is female, and that the tale is being told by a young man who, on the surface, seems to be attempting to empathize with their plight as they negotiate their treatment at the hands of their male counterparts.

The relationship between the female characters and their male narrator brings me to my final point, which is how this reading of Canacee as a bird reveals something to us of the Squire's preoccupations. Although the Squire appears sympathetic to women on the whole, particularly when they appear as a community of women caring for one another in the wake of masculine abuse, he reveals himself to be decidedly uncomfortable with women on an individual level. Read through this avian lens, his tale takes on a rather sinister undertone of misogyny: he is more comfortable with Canacee as a bird, than with Canacee as a human woman. Characterizing them both as birds, and then translating the avian language, which they speak and that excludes him through the medium of the ring into human courtly idiom, renders these female figures easier for him to contend with—perhaps because as a Squire, he typically would spend far more time in the company of falcons than of human women. Consequently, in his tale as in his everyday life, his interpretation of what is being “said” by bird (or woman) is his understanding of a given situation, rather than their own. Yet, despite his filtering of this tale through his own, masculine subjectivity and his effort to understand them through the idiom of *fin'amor* in which he composes them, these female figures are still ultimately incomprehensible to the Squire, as evidenced by his abrupt and unsatisfying end to the scene—incomprehensible as well to his male listeners, as evidenced by the Franklin's kindly interruption and redirection of the tale into his own, where no effort is made to understand what is beyond a man's ability to understand, at least when it comes to females.

Ultimately, of course, there is no single interpretation of this tale that can satisfactorily resolve its many inconsistencies and idiosyncracies, but the reading which I have set forth in this article does, I think, bear consideration: that the Squire conflates the categories of human woman

and female bird under the umbrella of “female,” and that Canacee and the falcon in turn exhibit female friendship in both human and avian terms, calling on the reader to read these females backward and forward, slipping between the species in fanciful fashion. Van Dyke posits that in this outwardly avian setting couched in human terms, the falcon floats somewhere between human and animal; so, I would add, does Canacee, inviting the reader to do the same.

Lindenwood University