"All These False Fowls": The Rational Language of Geoffrey Chaucer's Birds and Women

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Abstract: In Geoffrey Chaucer's account of a fictional English pilgrimage, *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400), and in his dream vision *Parliament of Fowls* (ca. 1380), anthropomorphized birds illuminate the complexity of who has a voice, and, by extension, who is rational and capable of self-determination. These birds often share a connection with the female characters in their tales—either in roles that parallel one another (as in the "Manciple's Tale") or in the relationships they share with female characters (like in the "Squire's Tale")—linking the voicelessness of nature to that of women. Chaucer's uncanny birds unsettle the boundaries between humans and nature, complicating gendered assumptions of women's irrationality in Chaucer's work.

Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400) and his *Parliament of Fowls* (ca. 1380) use anthropomorphized birds to explore rationality and gender as these birds occupy complex metaphorical and literal positions within their tales. In her article on ecological ethics in Chaucer's works, Sarah Stanbury comments on how

> in its performativity, metaphor drawn from nature may … unsettl[e] the binary law that splits nature from culture, human from nonhuman. By eliding categories and creating a hybrid form, metaphor imagines a third term—and in the process throws into relief the founding terms or categories that have created it. (Stanbury 7)

Stanbury's argument specifically relates to ecocriticism, but Chaucer's birds also unsettle the binary laws of gender. A common theme in medieval writing is the presupposition

of the superiority of human rationality over nature and the superiority of male rationality over female rationality. Because this supposed superiority is based in language, this paper uses the term "logocentrism" to describe this presupposed superiority and its linguistic source. Logocentrism delineates the modes of thinking accepted by the patriarchy, which are often based in binaries that prioritize men. Through their language and anthropomorphization, Chaucer's birds transgress the boundary that separates animals from humans, thus destabilizing the medieval assumption of the irrationality of nature and women.

Chaucer's writing explores a paradox in the interplay between birds and humans that is common in medieval literature: because birds' vocalizations are so similar to humans, they are perfect for allegorical examinations of humanity; however, because birds are too similar to humans in their vocalizations, they pose a threat to how humans distinguish their rationality from animals.[1] Two potential portrayals of birds arise from this paradox: the first depicts birds as humans with feathers, stripping them of their animal qualities and allowing them to be allegorically significant, while the second portrays birds as animals incapable of intelligence, diminishing the threat they pose to human rationality. To medieval scholars and writers, rational speech was a primary means of distinguishing humans from animals. Through their human-like vocalizations, birds provide a horrifying yet fascinating breach in this method of distinguishing human rationality from the natural world. By raising the question of what distinguishes rational speech from supposedly irrational bird sounds, these vocalizations expose the tradition of "excluding nonhumans from the logocentric standpoint in order that inarticulacy could be taken as a sign of innate irrationality" (Warren 115). Due to the sounds that uncannily resemble human speech, birds exist in a confusing grey area between what is natural and what is human, allowing them to transgress boundaries and upset the status quo.

[1] See Michael J. Warren's "'Kek kek': Translating Birds in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*" for more on medieval attitudes toward bird sounds.

Chaucer's birds move beyond uncanny human-like vocalizations into rational speech across *The Canterbury Tales* and in *Parliament of Fowls*, but the issue of translating these vocalizations indicates the value of inhuman or irrational expression. The birds from *Parliament of Fowls* and the falcon from the "Squire's Tale" require magical intervention to translate their birdspeak,[2] indicating an innate human-like capacity for language that still maintains its animal quality. *Parliament of Fowls* features a dreamed parliament of birds who discuss love and relationships. The birds speak in Chaucer's Middle English—translated for the reader by the dreamscape—but partway through the poem, their speech dissolves into phonetically transcribed bird cries: "'kek kek', 'kokkow', 'quek quek' hye" (*Parlement of Foulys* 499). Michael J. Warren points out that "linguistic slippage between bird and human languages … compromises the allegory … [as these voices] are no longer recognizably human" (121). The slippage transforms the birds in *Parliament of Fowls* from allegorical figures into something less recognizable, as transcribed birdspeak "is not and cannot be a full translation, and in this sense attends, however unintentionally, to the ethics of representing otherness" (123). While the rest of their speech may be translated into Middle English by the dreamscape, these bird sounds indicate an untranslatable phrase or sentiment. Rather than a regression into incoherence, birdspeak expands the birds' potential for communication and allows them to voice sentiments that logocentric language cannot articulate. Similarly, the falcon from the "Squire's Tale" does not speak Middle English; instead, Canacee's magical ring gives her the power to understand the "haukes ledene" (478). Susan Crane explains that "ledene" is "a term for both Latin and language" (25), indicating that the falcon possesses the capacity for rational intelligence and conversation, despite her language seeming senseless to humans. Through the translation issues these linguistic slippages raise, Chaucer engages in discourses of

[2] In this essay, "birdspeak" is defined as a hypothetical, rational language for birds. In contrast, "birdsong" or "bird sounds" are not translatable despite their language-like qualities.

rationality centred around birds' potential for intelligent speech and sets up a more complex, hidden world hinted at by their birdspeak.

As Chaucer's birds complicate the idea that speech is limited to the domain of men, their complex connection to female characters unsettles the logocentric conception of language, which prioritizes patriarchal forms of expression. Like birds, women pose a threat to the androcentric way of communicating with and knowing the world. In her book on women's speech during the medieval period, Mary Catherine Bodden suggests that medieval thinkers were well aware of the creative capacity that belongs to language; language is power through its capacity to reshape the world (8–9). Women's speech was policed and governed through laws and literary tropes, which Bodden argues was an attempt to "control every conceivable aspect of women's speech by deconstructing and fantasizing its powers, interrelationships, and mobility" (29). To escape this patriarchal governance, women's voices instead occupy the hybrid space created by the metaphor-making birds.

While still testing the boundaries of rationality, the connection between birds and women in Chaucer's Tales belittles women by comparing them to animals. The comparison of a cuckolding woman to a bird within a golden cage appears throughout *The Canterbury Tales* and condemns female infidelity as irrational, animal-like behaviour. Despite the masculine pronouns, the Manciple's point that, "Although his cage of gold be never so gay, / Yet hath this brid, by twenty thousand foold, / Levere in a forest that is rude and coold" (168–170) refers to wives and their infidelity. In the "Miller's Tale," the Miller describes the carpenter's wife, Alisoun, as "wild and young" (3225), and the carpenter "heeld hire narwe in cage" (3224) for fear of her cheating on him. Like he does with the nameless wife from the "Manciple's Tale," whom Phoebus is jealous over and "wolde have kept hire fayn [confined]" (144), Chaucer frequently compares Alisoun to a caged wild bird, connecting her to metaphorical rather than physical birds. Absolon, one of Alisoun's would-be suitors, refers to her as a bird,

saying, “sweete bryd, thyn oore” (“Miller’s Tale” 3726) and “my faire bryd, my sweete cynamome” (3699). When used by Absolon, the reference assigns wildness to Alisoun and assumes her irrationality, thus demeaning her. This motif oversimplifies these women's reasons for cheating, claiming that their infidelity stems from animal-like, irrational desires. While birds and women have the ability to speak in the world of the *Tales*, male narrators and speakers often silence them prematurely.

Chaucer creates intricate associative relationships between birds and female characters in the *Tales*, thus exploring a new space for women to occupy that simultaneously degrades the women and, at times, acknowledges the unrecognized and distinct type of rationality that lies beyond male-centric logocentrism. During Chaucer’s time, animals were frequently used as status markers to support the hierarchal status quo; as Crane explains, “The evident difference between sparrows and falcons is recruited to make the difference between peasants and princes look natural” (28). Crane continues to explain that “Canacee’s Mongol birth doubles her exotic femininity; her intimacy with a falcon redoubles it; and yet their encounter is coded in a familiar courtly idiom of pledges and deceptions” (31). While Canacee’s association with the falcon allows Chaucer to give voice to a female “other,” their shared narrative is still enmeshed with larger patriarchal narratives about birds and gender. Just as Canacee’s association with the falcon theoretically elevates her status, her magical ability to understand its speech simultaneously elevates the falcon from mere animal; however, her ability also bars it from rationality as only Canacee can understand its speech. Crane points out that, “By keeping the falcon's beak and feathers in view, Chaucer aligns species difference with cultural difference” (30). Despite taking place within a familiar setting of courtly, patriarchal norms and repressing the potential of this new “hybrid” space, the falcon’s “refusal of species dichotomy” (32) mirrors the larger rejection of arbitrary human categorization in the “Squire’s Tale."

In the “Manciple’s Tale,” the namelessness of the wife

reinforces her position as Phoebus's inferior and possession. In Jamie C. Fumo's article on the Ovidian origins of the "Manciple's Tale," she discusses the implicit connection between the crow and the wife through their names in Ovid's *Coronis*: the wife's name is Coronis, a name that relates to *cornix*, the crow.[3] While Chaucer maintains their implicit connection, he reinterprets the wife as nameless, stripping her of her personal identity by referring to her exclusively as Phoebus's wife in lines such as, "Phebus wyf had sent for hir lemman [lover]" (238). Her connection to the crow instead emerges from the syntactical parallels in how the two are introduced as Phoebus's belongings: the manciple says, "Now hadde this Phebus in his hous a crowe" (130) and then, nine lines later, repeats, "Now hadde this Phebus in his house a wyf" (139). By un-naming the wife and equating her with the crow, Chaucer removes her from the logocentric sphere, which categorizes and identifies the world through naming; she can only be discussed in the tale through her relationships with Phoebus and the crow.

Unlike the crow, Phoebus's wife physically resembles a human but does not share the same capacity for language that he does. Because "inarticulacy could be taken as a sign of innate irrationality" (Warren 115) during Chaucer's time, Phoebus's wife falls into the same confusing area that the uncanny birds do. She is not only nameless but silent as well, disregarding the importance of her speech in the original *Coronis* (Fumo 361). In the original, when the raven betrays Coronis and incites Phoebus to murder her, she lives long enough to deliver a moving speech that redeems her and causes Phoebus to shift the blame to the raven. As a voiceless character, Chaucer's version of the wife has no opportunity to verbally defend herself, and Phoebus only regrets killing her once he sees her corpse, limiting her ability to communicate to expression through the body. In contrast, the crow's role in the tale centres on his speech. When Phoebus silences the crow at the end of the "Manciple's Tale," the "wife's silence … permeates the added motif

3 See page 360 of Fumo's article for more about the conflation of the crow and Coronis through linguistic slippage.

of the crow's silencing (a punishment that Chaucer uniquely adds to the change of color), and the problem of her voicelessness manifests in the transgression of the crow's voice" (361). The "Manciple's Tale" reinstates Phoebus as the only character capable of rational speech, but uneasily so; the crow's noticeably absent voice at the end of the tale comes to represent the wife's just as the patriarchy silences them both.

As a male character, the crow is given privileges and access to speech, forcing the reader to reconsider his placement in the tale and ranking him higher than a human woman. The wife does not share that access because her gender takes precedence over her humanity. The crow's physical attributes only become important near the end of the tale, when Phoebus "pull[s] his white fetheres everychon, / And ma[kes] hym blak, and refte[s] hym al his song, / And eek his speche" ("Manciple's Tale" 304–6). When Phoebus strips the crow of his white feathers and his voice, he strips him of his place within the hybrid space that Stanbury imagines. As John Halbrooks notes, Phoebus's attack on the crow "deprive[s] [him] of human abilities; beasts become mere beasts once more, and humans either remain human or die" (6). While the representation of avian speech is purely fictional, the *Tales* open a narrative space where imagination and metaphor take priority over the rigid structures of discourse imposed by the patriarchy. The "Manciple's Tale" ends the sequence of fiction in *The Canterbury Tales*[4]: "Once the crow has been deprived of speech, active avian participation in human culture once again becomes unimaginable, just as tale-telling, or fiction, is curtailed and vanquished" (7). In the prosaic "Parson's Tale," the magic of the metaphor vanishes and strict logocentric laws descend once more.

Throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's birds take on many forms and levels of naturalism, but they all destabilize the logocentric boundaries and binaries of human rationality by imagining a third term of being. Although the final

4 The placement of the "Manciple's Tale" is not definite due to the volume of manuscripts that contradict one another, but placing it last is most common.

silencing of the crow reinforces the binary between humans and nature—and, by extension, men and women—Chaucer creates narrative space for these binaries to become less clear. While some of his birds maintain normative, patriarchal standards, like the flighty caged bird that is compared to an unfaithful wife, others, like the female falcon, complicate those norms. Chaucer's birds act as metaphor and analogy for human characteristics, reflecting the human characters and narrators back on themselves. However, the birds' metaphorical nature also gives them the opportunity to alter their position in the larger social hierarchy, even if only briefly, and creates a hybrid space in which women's voices may exist.

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