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Chapter 8

Resisting Sex and Species in the *Squire's Tale*

The *Squire's Tale* is an odd duck, or, maybe, an odd falcon. Lesley Kordecki describes it semi-ironically as “an obscure narrative, an anomaly, unfinished, a lesser tale, concerned with the unimportant (a bird), and curtailed before the important (a human story of heroism and incest) can take place.”¹ And it is a weird tale, a queer tale, a horse-of-a-different-color kind of tale, which has two parts – famously disjointed in both tone and content – each clearly defined by two very different miraculous animals: a brass horse in the first, seemingly masculine, realm, and a talking falcon in the second, feminine, space.

Of course, animal bodies figure heavily in many Middle English romances, and the fourteenth-century romance *Octavian* provides a clear example of what these bodies frequently signify for human identity. Wrongly accused of adultery, the empress of Rome is driven by her husband and mother-in-law into the forest with her twin boys. The wilderness is “full thyke of wylde bestes” and a series of unfortunate events ensues, by the end of which one of the boys has been abducted by a lion, the other by an ape.² Although the boy abducted by the lion is the tale's titular hero, the bulk of the narrative's drive is given to his brother. After being rescued by a knight and captured by outlaws, the baby is sold to a Parisian merchant named Clement, who names the child Florent. However, as Jeffrey Cohen notes in his book *Medieval Identity Machines*, “Clement's repeated attempts to indoctrinate Florent into a mercantile identity fail as the boy proves incapable of assigning anything but absolute values to the animals that for his father are the negotiable commodities of the marketplace.”³

Sent with the family's oxen to pay for his apprenticeship to a butcher, Florent's trajectory is arrested by the “seemly syghte” of a squire selling a falcon,

1 Lesley Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 79.

2 *Octavian*. In *Four Middle English Romances: Sir Isumbras, Octavian, Sir Eglamour or Artois, Sir Tryamour*, edited by Harriet Hudson (*TEAMS Catalogue*, 2006, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/hudson-octavian>), line 293.

3 Jeffrey J. Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 66.

which Florent promptly trades both oxen to buy.⁴ When he discovers the trade, Clement beats Florent severely, betraying an inability to appreciate the intrinsic beauty of the hawk that shocks the boy. Florent chastises his father:

“Would ye stoned now and beholde
How feyre he can hys fedurs folde,
And how lovely they lye,
Ye wolde pray God with all your mode
That ye had solde half your gode,
Soche anodur to bye.”⁵

Soon after, Florent is sent back to town with “fowrty pownde,” but once again he is deterred from his errand by an animal body. This time, it is a horse, “stronge yn eche were,” with a coat as “whyte as any mylke” and a beautiful bridle and harness.⁶ As Cohen tells it, when asked the price, the horse’s owner

declares the value of the warhorse to be precisely “thyrtty pownde, / eche peny hole and sownde” [730–31], a statement of exaggerated firmness that betrays the expectation of a counteroffer. Whereas Clement immediately bargained down the asking price of the infant Florent from forty pounds to twenty, Florent announces that thirty pounds is too mean a sum for so noble an animal and insists upon giving the man his full forty pounds.⁷

As Cohen goes on to explain, “Forty pounds, by no coincidence, was also repeatedly declared to be the statutory threshold of English knighthood, so that Florent’s seemingly impulsive purchase actually enfolds and attenuates the economic, the social, the aristocratic, the animal, and the chivalric.”⁸ Through his aesthetic appreciation and acquisition of these courtly animals, Florent is able to narrow the gap between his adopted father’s middle-class identity and his inevitable return to a chivalric nobility defined in part by its engagement with animal life. Coming into his young life at a pivotal moment, the horse and falcon help usher Florent away from his father’s practical and mercantile identity, teaching him instead how to be a different kind of man.

This privileging of warhorse and falcon as uniquely able to signify chivalric masculinity is also evident in the two parts of the *Squire’s Tale*, and this, perhaps, is unsurprising. Like *Octavian*, the *Squire’s Tale* is a romance, a genre in which, as Susan Crane notes, “a powerful animal’s devotion reflects well on the

⁴ *Octavian*, line 654.

⁵ *Octavian*, lines 694–99.

⁶ *Octavian*, lines 720, 721.

⁷ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 67.

⁸ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 67.

hero, and the hero's responding devotion also reflects well on him."⁹ But, if romance privileges the relationship between man and animal to some extent, it also sets restrictions upon that relationship. For, as Cohen notes, even as Florent's desire for the falcon and the hawk opens up spaces of possibility,

a second, circumscriptive circuit activates simultaneously, attempting what Deleuze and Guattari would call a reterritorialization, striving to articulate into socially useful form this dangerous and potentially nonhuman flux of identity. The second movement works through equivalence: a warhorse, an aristocratic boy, and a knight are all given the same absolute value (forty pounds), because it is necessary that they all in the end become the same predictable, discernable, deployable thing.¹⁰

In spite of its ability to imagine alternate possibilities, Cohen argues, chivalry is nevertheless an "apparatus of normalization." But chivalry, like all normalizing mechanisms, "always ultimately falters," and this is evident in the *Squire's Tale*.¹¹ Like Florent's desires, the *Tale's* two parts are also dominated by a warhorse and a falcon, but these animals work very differently in the *Squire's Tale* than in *Octavian*. In their uncanny abilities to elude categories, or what Chaucer might call "kynde," the *Tale's* brass steed and talking falcon resist being reduced to "deployable thing[s]." Instead, they offer opportunities for transformation, creating spaces of possibility for nonnormative sexualities and a reimagining of human relationships with other marvelous bodies. In the sensually evocative first part of the text, a mysterious rider arrives at Genghis Khan's fabulous court. The rider bears four fantastic gifts: a mechanical brass horse that can carry its rider anywhere he wishes within the space of a day; a sword that can both cut any armor and heal any wound it creates; a mirror that identifies both friend and foe; and a ring that grants its bearer the ability to speak to and understand birds. These gifts are all treated as marvels; however, the brass steed dominates the first part of the narrative. But it will not dominate the first part of this essay. Rather, in an attempt to further destabilize the disconnect between masculine horse and feminine bird, I will take these animals out of order, first turning to the falcon's half of the tale before circling back to the strange brass horse. The narrative attempts to fix both the brass horse and talking bird in place. But both creatures ultimately resist this reduction, in the process creating space for both interspecies and intrasexual relationships of care outside of the gendered human norms of chivalric romance.

⁹ Susan Crane, "For the Birds," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 29 (2007): 21–41 at 24.

¹⁰ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 67.

¹¹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 71.

“Hir Hauke Kepyng”

Mutely receiving her gifts and joining the knight for a dance, the host’s daughter, Canacee, barely registers in the *prima pars* of the *Squire’s Tale*. As the *pars secunda* begins, however, the story shifts, following Canacee as she goes early to bed to take joy with her “queynte ring”:

For swich a joye she in hir herte took
Bothe of hir queynte ryng and hire mirour,
That twenty tyme she changed hir colour;
And in hire sleep, right for impressioun
Of hire mirour, she hadde a visioun.¹² (V, ll. 368-72)

This description of Canacee in bed transitions the reader from the serious, mechanical space of the first part of the story to the dream-like, organic space of the second; the tale switches from robots to rings, from horses to falcons.

For Kordecki, the falcon has a “very different” effect on the text from the brass horse; the horse is “a symbol of manipulated animality” and serves to emphasize the text’s reliance on “masculine subjectivity.”¹³ By contrast, the falcon “breaks into the set vision, draws out the heroine instead of the hero, and moves the narrative into far more exotic and dangerous sensibilities.”¹⁴ Consequently, the obscene (possibly masturbatory?) pun on Canacee’s “queynte ring” is important, establishing from the get-go the significance of both biological and cultural sex to Canacee’s connection to the falcon. That is, it’s important that Canacee’s ability to talk to the falcon be tied to both her ring and her *ring*; it matters that her tale is grounded in the genre-specific requirements for cisgendered heterosexuality, and it matters because of the way Canacee and her falcon will slyly exceed those limitations. Canacee’s relationship with the hawk, I argue, triangulates hetero- and homonormative desires, alongside species difference, toward a queer intersubjectivity that includes – indeed, depends on – animals. This alternative to bounded human selfhood, furthermore, reflects backward to expand the possibilities of both parts of the tale.

Birdlike, Canacee arises early the morning after the party in order “to pleye and walke on foote” with her magical ring (V, ll. 390–91). And it isn’t long before she’s able to try it out, as very soon she spies a peregrine falcon crying in a tree:

¹² All citations from Chaucer are taken from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

¹³ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 79.

¹⁴ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 287.

Amydde a tree, for drye as whit as chalk,
 As Canacee was pleyng in hir walk,
 Ther sat a facoun over hire heed ful hye,
 That with a pitous voys so gan to crye
 That all the wode resounded of hire cry. (V, ll. 409–13)

But this is no ordinary falcon. From the beginning, the falcon is presented in terms both avian and human. As Crane argues,

In *The Squire's Tale*, Chaucer draws on the genre of romance as a way into thinking about the cultural place of falcons. He presents the peregrine falcon of this tale as richly symbolic, but also as a living bird, raising the issue of species difference and the question of how to respond to this difference – what Chaucer would call difference of “kynde.”¹⁵

When Canacee first spies her, the falcon is performing violence upon herself that evokes the frantic movements of a bird stuck in a cage: “Ybeten hadde she hirself so pitously/ With both hire wynges til the rede blood/ Ran endelong the tree ther-as she stood” (V, ll. 414–16). As Kordecki points out, “Birds, of course, do self-mutilate in moments of distress by tearing out their feathers. The cause is often related to encaging them, but molting in the wild can also become a bloody experience. The story works common happenings of actual creatures into the fabric of romance.”¹⁶ This first description of the bird is thus unmistakably avian; but then, of course, life for people with vaginas is also, often, a “bloody experience.”

The particularly avian nature of this violence is further undercut by the distinction the narrator immediately draws between the falcon and other creatures:

And evere in oon she cryde alwey and shrighthe,
 And with hir beek she hirselven so she prighthe
 That ther nes tygre, ne noon so cruuel beest
 That dwelleth outhur in wode or in forest,
 That nolde han wept, if that he wepe koude,
 For sorwe of hire, she shrighthe alwey so loude. (V, ll. 417–22)

The falcon's cries are so hideous, the narrator suggests, that even otherwise insensible beasts would be moved by her to weep if they could. The falcon is already indicating how complicated species division will be in this tale. Although the violence that she does to herself is described in unmistakably avian (and therefore animal) terms, the falcon is simultaneously positioned as the most sensitive of creatures, sensitive enough that she is even able to engender sensitivity in other

¹⁵ Crane, “For the Birds,” 23.

¹⁶ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 95.

creatures. As Crane has noted, such sensitivity and exceptionality can be understood as directly related to the falcon's position as a courtly animal, which means it is therefore necessarily already noble. This kind of "totemic thought explains lineal and social distinctions among humans by reference to species distinctions. The evident difference between sparrows and falcons is recruited to make the difference between peasants and princes look natural."¹⁷ The falcon, by being falcon, is thus also very much a human symbol, more inherently sensitive than other creatures and able to elevate them to a more symbolic plane.

This nebulous place of the falcon between the human and animal realms is further emphasized by the narrator's description of her:

For ther nas nevere yet no man on lyve,
If that I koude a faucon wel discryve,
That herde of swich another of fairnesses,
As wel of plumage as of gentillesse
Of shap, of al that might yrekened be. (V, ll. 423–27)

This use of the trope of *occupatio* – "If that I *koude* a faucon wel discryve" – echoes the Squire's first description of Canacee, "for to telle yow al hir beautee,/ It lyth nat in my tongue,/ n'yn my konnyng" (V, ll. 34–36). Indeed, the falcon merits a longer description than Canacee, which is also in keeping with the more eloquent, less hesitant articulation of the second part of the tale. In thus framing both Canacee and the falcon in similarly hyperbolic terms, the *Tale* situates them both within their genre. However, this fixation within genre is not necessarily only a limiting thing, for, as Crane explains, "Closer to romance's sensibilities than official science and theology were pervasive lay convictions about animals' similarities to humans."¹⁸

The falcon's slippage between human and bird only intensifies as the narrative goes on, to the point that some critics have even suggested that the bird must actually be a transformed human princess, the "true" story of whom is lost in the aborted third part.¹⁹ While I want to resist the impulse to make the falcon's story overtly human,²⁰ I agree that she is by no means entirely avian. We see this even before the bird's first speech, which we are told she speaks

¹⁷ Crane, "For the Birds," 28.

¹⁸ Crane, "For the Birds," 25.

¹⁹ Crane, "For the Birds," 26.

²⁰ Susan Crane's dismissal of this point is, I think, particularly eloquent, and deserves to be quoted in full: "This view is neither sustainable nor refutable, given the tale's irresolution; but whether the formel is or is not *also* a human hardly makes her 'kynde' less problematic. Indeed, it redoubles the species question, by taking her to be not only different from Canacee as bird from woman, but divided within herself as woman from bird. Most evidently, she's not

in her “haukes ledene” (V, l. 478). That word *ledene* is important for, as the *Middle English Dictionary* notes, it means not only language and birdsong but also the undifferentiated cry of an animal.²¹ In the tale that follows, the falcon vacillates between describing herself and her tercelet lover in terms both avian and human. She describes her childhood in deeply romantic terms: she is “fostred in a roche of marbul gray,” and does not know adversity until she meets the tercelet that becomes her lover (V, ll. 500, 503). She describes herself as a “womman” (V, l. 559) and relates a conversation with the tercelet that is deeply human, not only in its adherence to romance narrative but also in her multiple allusions to figures of speech and classical sources. Lest the reader could forget that she is a bird, however, this is immediately undercut by her pointed acknowledgement that once her conversation with the tercelet is over, “forth he fleeth” (V, l. 605).

It is worth pausing for a moment on the tercelet here. For he, too, is described in romantic and often anthropomorphizing terms by the falcon. Not only does she use markedly human terms to articulate his body – he falls “on his knees with so devout humblesse,” she takes “hym by the hond” (V, ll. 544, 596), – but she also attributes literariness to him:

Whan it cam hym to purpos for to reste,
I trowe he hadde thilke text in mynde,
That “alle thyng, repeiryng to his kynde,
Gladeth hymself;” thus seyn men, as I gesse. (V, ll. 606–9)

In her vividly descriptive reading of this passage, Kordecki describes how “the tercelet’s ‘text’ conjures a convoluted image of a speechless creature who perches with a little bird-size volume at his side.”²² That “speechless” is crucial; unlike the female falcon, and in spite of the human qualities attributed to him, the tercelet’s birdiness is preserved by his lack of speech. This avian quality of the tercelet, as well as the humanistic qualities of the falcon, is perhaps most evident in her poetic injunction of the cage:

Men loveth of proper kynde newefangelnesse,
As briddes doon that men in cages fede.

simply human within, and animal without, since her heart belongs to a tercel, a male falcon, along with her feathers. The question of animal difference could only be dismissed by declaring every bird in the tale to be no more and no less than human” (“For the Birds,” 26).

²¹ “Ledene,” *Middle English Dictionary*. The Regents of The University of Michigan, 2001. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary/MED24958>.

²² Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 97.

For though thy nyght and day take of hem hede,
 And strawe hir cage faire and soft as silk,
 And yeve hem sugre, hony, breed and milk,
 Yet right anon as that his dore is uppe
 He with his feet wol spurn adoun his cuppe,
 And to the wode he wole and wormes etc. (V, ll. 610–17)

By unselfconsciously comparing her tercelet lover to a bird, it is almost as though the falcon forgets that she, herself, is a bird. Indeed, as Susan Crane has noted, this exemplum is the pinnacle of the falcon's species disorientations: "she is the example for other creatures as the whipped dog is an example of taming lions; her lover is a tiger but one with knees to fall on in fake humility; he is a snake hidden under flowers who longs to eat worms like a captured songbird."²³ These "queasily shifting descriptions" continue the work of category dissolution that began with the brass steed in the *Tale's* first part.²⁴ By the end of her long speech the falcon's unique "kynde" seems nearly impossible to determine. And this, of course, is in some ways the point: the falcon's vacillation between human and bird is part of the joke, perhaps even more so than Chaucer – and certainly more so than the Squire – intends. Canacee and the falcon, human woman and womanly bird, are both the same and other in the text's romantic frame, and this is important for how we read the queer space of the mews.

Once the falcon has finished her tale, Canacee bears her safely home "in hir lappe,/ and softly in plastres gan hire wrappe,/ Ther as she with hire beek hadde hurt hirselve" (V, ll. 635–37). Over the course of a full day, Canacee gathers herbs to heal the falcon and busily prepares a home for her within her own room:

Fro day to nyght
 She dooth hire bisynesse and al hire myght,
 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 al withoute, the mewe is peynted grene,
 In which were peynted alle thise false fowles,
 As ben these tidyves, tercelettes, and owles;
 Right for despit were peynted hem bisyde,
 Pyes, on hem for to crie and chyde. (V, ll. 641–50)

²³ Crane, "For the Birds," 33.

²⁴ Crane, "For the Birds," 33.

Critics differ on how they understand this strange domestic space. Many scholars see the falcon's home as a reductive form of pet-keeping; as Kordecki notes, "the velvet cage is still a cage, positioned a mere twenty lines after the caged bird gloss, a reminder that the falcon loses."²⁵ Crane imagines a different future for the falcon and Canacee, and much of this difference is based on Crane's careful reading of the difference between Canacee's "mews" and the cage of the exemplum:

The cage had a "dore" (V.615), but this structure called a mews may not have one, if it resembles a conventional mews with many openings or open sides to imitate the breezy nesting conditions of hawks in the wild. This unclarity around whether Canacee's "mewe" has a door evokes Derrida's conundrum that hospitality requires and repudiates a door. . . . Calling Canacee's little structure a "mews" elides the uncomfortable question of the door, as if to imagine that the falcon can be taken in without reservation.²⁶

For Crane, the space that Canacee creates in her bedchamber is not a cage but an open mews, "a wonderfully complex attempt at hosting without taking hostage."²⁷

In her bedroom, Canacee creates a categorically and sexually nonnormative, purely feminine space, nonreproductive (although not necessarily asexual). Midas Dekker argues that in spite of the taboos against recognizing them as such, our relationships with animals – and especially pets – have a strong erotic component.²⁸ The groundwork for this is laid at the very beginning of the falcon's tale, and not only with those puns on Canacee's ring.

As Kordecki points out, "the falcon does not tell her tale until she is comforted in the lap of Canacee, a sexualized iconography akin to the union of the virgin and the unicorn."²⁹ Just as importantly, by cradling the falcon in "hir lappe," Canacee makes that lap unavailable for other users, cultivating intimacy between a conspecific in sympathy and desire, if not, technically, in biological species. In this way, Canacee and the hawk emphasize sameness over difference, a distant echo of the opening up of the self advocated by a spate of queer critics. Kuzner offers a particularly useful distillation of these proposals:

In place of the self's structural hardening would be its accession to susceptibility, and in place of the language that constitutes subject positions – that does the work, for good or

²⁵ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 97.

²⁶ Crane, "For the Birds," 39.

²⁷ Crane, "For the Birds," 38.

²⁸ See Midas Dekker, *Dearest Pet: On Bestiality*, trans. Paul Vincent (New York: Verso, 1994).

²⁹ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 87.

ill, of interpellation – would be language that disorients and decontextualizes us, speech that is our undoing. We would, similarly, no longer seek to protect or cordon off our bodies from others.³⁰

In the human, animal, multilingual, feminine space of the mews, important elements of structural hardening and difference – species difference, heterosexuality – have melted away, replaced by an open-ended attempt at intimacy, care, and coming together.

Significantly, this openness persists in spite of the Squire's attempt to move on, to leave the queer for the sake of the chivalric romance. For although the Squire promises a heteronormative (or, at least, mostly heteronormative – heteronormatish), “properly” romantic conclusion to his tale, he is interrupted by the Franklin before he can tell it. This allows the feminine space created by Canacee and the falcon to linger on. The Franklin's interruption serves to shut down the possibility of incest, but leaves open a different kind of nonnormative sexuality. And through this interruption, the Squire's transitional line proves unintentionally prophetic: “Thus lete I Canacee hir hawk keypyng” (V, l. 651). In spite of the Squire's desire to move on to “aventures and . . . batailles” (V, l. 659), Canacee and her hawk are, ultimately, left alone in their mews, the last vivid image of the text.

“Bitwixe us two”

Here, I'll also leave the mews in order to return to the brass horse. Keeping Canacee in mind, it becomes more evident that the first part of the *Squire's Tale* displays the same kind of boundary-erasing triangulation of sex, species, and gender as the second. Just as Canacee and the falcon bond over a third party (the tercelet) in a pleasurable mash-up of species and desire, the brass horse draws the knight and Cambyuskan into a surprisingly intimate, even erotic, exchange of masculine knowledge.

The first thing the reader is told about the mysterious knight regards his proximity to the horse: “In at the halle dore al sodeynly/ Ther cam a knyght upon a steede of bras” (V, ll. 80–82). This should not be surprising; as Cohen notes, “Because of its corporeal adaptability and consequent long history of having been bred for a proliferation of specialized functions, all the people of

³⁰ James Kuzner, “Unbuilding the City: *Coriolanus* and the Birth of Republican Rome,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.2 (2007): 174–99 at 184. Kuzner is particularly referencing Agamben, Bersani, Butler, and Nancy.

medieval Europe, regardless of social class, had a close relationship to the horse. Yet the animal functioned as an especially revered body for knights.”³¹ The brass horse merits the longest initial description of any of the gifts. Indeed, according to Scott Lightsey’s count, it dominates the entirety of the *Tale*’s first part, ultimately taking up over a third of those 346 lines.³²

Part of this fascination, surely, comes from the horse’s ability to symbolize man’s dominion over the animal: “The horse, a symbol of manipulated animality, in its silent servility remains a standard detail in masculine magic and masculine subjectivity.”³³ Karl Steel similarly argues that “love for horses, like that for any animal, finally gives way to human self-love.”³⁴

It is certainly possible to read this subjugation in the “Squire’s Tale,” especially considering the tale’s subtle, but significant, martial context, which is evident in the way the Squire begins: “At Sarray, in the land of Tartarye,/ There dwelte a king that werreyed Russye,/ Thurgh which ther dyde many a doughty man” (V, ll. 9–11). There are other signs of war, too; the horse is part of a martial arsenal, other pieces of which include the mirror, the sword, and the mysterious knight himself. This, along with the particular attention to the loss of “many a doughty man,” suggests an under-recognized attention in the tale to the costs of war. The brass horse is intended to reduce those costs:

This steede of bras, that esily and weel
 Kan in the space of o day natureel –
 This is to seyn, in foure and twenty houres –
 Wher-so yow lyst, in droghte or elles shoures,
 Beren youre body into every place
 To which youre herte wilneth for to pace,
 Withouten wem of yow, thurgh foul or fair,
 Or, if yow lyst to fleen as hye in the air
 As dooth an egle whan hym list to soore,
 This same steede shal bere yow evere moore,
 Withouten harm, til ye be ther yow leste,
 Though that ye slepen on his bak or reste,
 And turne ayeyn with writhyng of a pyn. (V, ll. 115–27)

³¹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 46.

³² Scott Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels in Medieval Culture and Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 75.

³³ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 79.

³⁴ Karl Steel, *How To Make A Human: Animals and Violence in the Middle Ages* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2011), 224.

The horse's supernatural abilities make it the perfect body of war. Unlike a horse of flesh and blood, the brass horse is tireless and seemingly invincible – a shield made animal. It is a perfect object. Like Canacee and her falcon, then, the horse initially reads as a prop, particularly crafted to fit a romantic story. But, also like the falcon and Canacee, the magically transportive horse is *too* well crafted: en route to the tale's intended end, it swerves, evading the Squire's narrative control. Indeed, it takes the narrative itself with it.

This sense of narrative instability is first evident in this same passage. Cohen argues that “the horse's intimacy to the human involves more than the utilitarian functions of labor and transportation,” and that is especially true of *this* horse.³⁵ The brass horse offers almost unthinkable pleasures to its rider, pleasures in excess of its role as a weapon and military tool. The steed not only has the ability to translate its rider from one terrestrial space to another, but it can literally take its rider to an entirely different plane. The rider's desire combines with the horse's ability to precipitate new becomings, in this case, a becoming-eagle. In this ability to engender marvelous transformations, the horse-as-steed reconfigures and decomposes the understood limits of the human body.

Perhaps because of this excess, the horse exerts a gravitational pull on the story, frequently disrupting the narrative. For instance, once the knight has described all his gifts, the Squire attempts to turn his narrative energy back to the party. Canacee is given her ring, the sword and the mirror are “born anon into the heighe tour,” and the horse is ridden to the courtyard where he stands, “stille as any stoon” (V, ll. 176, 171). But the Squire's attempts to return to the party are fruitless, as the reader's attention is drawn back immediately to the horse in the courtyard, around which a crowd quickly develops:

Greet was the prees that swarmeth to and fro
 To gauren on this hors that stondest so
 For it so heigh was, and so brood and long,
 So wel proporcioned for to been strong,
 Right as it were a stede of Lumbardye;
 Therwith so horsly, and so quyk of ye,
 As it a gentle Poilleys courser were.
 For certes, fro his tayl unto his ere
 Nature ne art ne koude hym nat amende
 In no degree, as al the people wende. (V, ll. 189–98)

The repetition of the word “so” aurally signifies the “broken record” affect of this passage, as the horse's beauty has transfixed the Squire just as firmly as it

35 Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 46.

transfixes the courtiers.³⁶ This is also evident in an important pronoun shift within the passage: the horse begins as an “it” and ends as a “he.” The pleasure and wonder of the horse have made it that much more alive. Like the bird, its, or rather *his*, status is constantly shifting.

Critics have argued that the knight’s description of the mechanisms controlling this mechanical animal undercut its magic somewhat. For example, Lightsey argues that the “late fourteenth century presents a fascinating cultural tipping point when marvels manufactured by men . . . were explicitly used for political and ideological purposes, participating in the establishment of a courtly culture whose politics of display was enhanced by manmade marvels.”³⁷ These marvels (the greatest of which were “the elaborate clockworks and animated creatures or *automata*, mechanical imitations of life”) were, according to Lightsey, creatures for the court, “employed for the purpose of enhancing political capital or religious awe.”³⁸

This use of marvels as political tools could be seen as normalizing; indeed, Kordecki explicitly contrasts the feminine, magical space of the tale’s second part with the “patriarchal indication of progress” that she reads as the result of the first part.³⁹ Similarly, Lightsey suggests that the mechanical quality of the brass horse makes it less marvelous, for “once the cause is understood, the marvel ceases to be marvelous in the traditional sense.”⁴⁰ I disagree.

Although the knight explains the horse’s “governance,” explaining how to make it work is a different thing from explaining how it works. The latter knowledge remains a secret, as the knight’s frequent deferrals make clear:

Sire, ther is namoore to seyne,
 But, whan you list to ryden anywhere,
 Ye mooten trille a pyn, stant in his ere,
 Which I shall yow telle bitwixt us two . . .
 Or, if yow liste bidde hym thennes goon,
 Trille this pyn, and he wol vanysshe anoon . . .
 And come agayn, be it by day or nyght,
 Whan that yow list to clepen hym ageyn
 In swich a gyse as I shal to yow seyn
 Bitwixe yow and me, and that ful soone. (V, ll. 314–17, 327–33)

³⁶ I am grateful to Jonathan Hsy for drawing my attention to this aural repetition.

³⁷ Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels*, 10.

³⁸ Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels*, 10.

³⁹ Kordecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities*, 79.

⁴⁰ Lightsey, *Manmade Marvels*, 80.

The effect of this secrecy is to make the horse more mysterious, not less. Although the knight explains that the horse is made to work through a complex system of pins in its ear, the reader is excluded from a full understanding – or even a clear representation – of this mechanism. Moreover, the knight’s explanation of the usage of the horse seems insufficient: “This hors anoon bigan to trippe and daunce,/ Whan that this knyght leyde hand upon his reyne” (V, ll. 312–13). If the knight’s simple action of laying a hand upon the horse’s rein (as opposed to twirling a complicated series of pins) can cause him to “trippe and daunce,” it would seem that the brass steed retains at least some of its secrets. The closest we get to a full vision of the working of this marvelous creature is at the very end of the *prima pars*, when the Squire notes only that “The hors vanysshed, I noot in what manere/ Out of hir sighte; ye gete namoore of me” (V, ll. 342–43). Even after the knight’s long description of the workings of the horse, the Squire – and, by extension, the reader – can only express wonder at the manmade marvel. This is significant, as the knight’s reticence to share the workings of the horse with the general assembly clears the ground for the queer potential of horse, knight, and king.

In “Chevalerie,” Cohen writes extensively about the knight–horse relationship and the “possible bodies” that are engendered through it. This relationship was an intimate one by necessity, “for it is not as if the horse is a passive vehicle and the knight its all-controlling driver.”⁴¹ Rather, all horses are objects of desire and privileged knowledge, complex creatures requiring intimate and embodied understanding and technique passed between men.

This sense of animal-mediated intimacy is especially emphasized in the *Squire’s Tale*, as the knight frequently promises to let the king in on the brass horse’s secrets at another time, presumably when they can be alone. Unlike in the second half of the tale, however, we never get to see the fulfillment of this promised intimate exchange of secrets. The king and knight never build their stable, as it were. On the other hand, their conversation points to the very real intimacies of coming to know and learning to manage flesh-and-blood horses, intimacies of which Chaucer and his readers would have been well aware. In this way, the queerly interspecies, homoerotic possibilities of the text radiate outward beyond its magical and romantic bounds.

A question posed by Cohen has helped to animate this project. He asks: “Why should the queer stop at the boundaries of the human? Why can’t it, in the Middle Ages, include the horses, hawks, greyhounds that are integral to

⁴¹ Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 49.

knightly and aristocratic identity?”⁴² In this essay, I have argued that not only *should* medieval queerness engage with nonhuman species, but also that it is, in many ways, *dependent* on nonhuman animals. In their ability to engender different relationalities than those foregrounded by chivalric romance, the brass steed and the talking falcon reconfigure the human, opening up spaces of possibility for homoerotic and heterospecies relationships of care. In their uncanny abilities to resist compartmentalization, the tale’s nonhuman creatures facilitate nonnormative sexualities and a reimagining of human relationships with other marvelous bodies.

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⁴² Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, 71.

