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Freakish, Feathery, and Foreign: Language of Otherness in the *Squire's Tale*

LAUREL MEISTER

THOUGH SETTING a standard for English literature in the centuries to follow, *The Canterbury Tales* was anything but standard in its own time. Written in a Middle English vernacular that was only recently being used for poetry, and filtered through the minds and mouths of the wackiest of characters, Geoffrey Chaucer's storytelling explores the Other: an unfamiliar realm set apart from the norm. One of the tales whose language engages with the Other, the *Squire's Tale* features a magical ring allowing its wearer to understand any bird "And knowe his menyng openly and pleyn / and answe're hym in his langage again," a rhyme that repeats like an incantation throughout the tale.¹ Told from the perspective of a young and inexperienced Squire, the story has all the makings of a chivalric fairy-tale—including a knight and a beautiful princess—with none of the finesse. The *Squire's Tale* is sloppy and incomplete, and the Squire's most articulate characters are also his most abnormal. A foreigner's accented speech and a falcon's animal squawking become confused with the Squire's amateur storytelling in a possible attempt on the part of the narrator, the least experi-

1 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, ed. John Manly and Edith Rickert (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), IV, ll. 51–52. All quotations from the *Tales* come from Manly and Rickert's edition of the Hengwrt text.

enced of all the pilgrims, to normalize his own position as outsider through characters whose foreignness or animalness also render them outsiders. The very same outsider amateurism that makes the Squire ashamed also gives Chaucer freedom from the traditional restraints of poetic craft, gaining access to a messy, noisy language that resembles foreign and animal speech more closely than a refined style. In this way, Chaucer apparently makes room in the literary canon for amateur writing as an atypical vehicle by which to reach the Other.

The Squire makes his amateur literary ability known from the start. When responding to the Host's request to tell a tale, for instance, the Squire expresses a poetic anxiety that continues throughout his telling of it:

Nay sire quod he but I wol seye as I kan
With hertly wyl for I wol nat rebelle
Agayn youre lust a tale wol I telle
Haue me excused if I speke amys
My wyl is good and lo my tale is this. (4–8)

Several of the pilgrims apologize for their poor tale-telling,² but the Squire's invocation is unique for introducing the issue of "wyl." A variant spelling of the modern "will," in Middle English this word can refer to "Intention, purpose; a plan, project; also, the import of a discourse or the intended meaning of a text" (*MED* s.v. "wil(le)"). If "wyl" is synonymous with "intention" or "intended meaning," the Squire appears to make a distinction between language and intent here. He cites his own "good" or "hertly [i.e., hearty] wyl" in the hope that his listeners can understand even if his language is insufficient, suggesting an arena in which the wills or intentions of language can be gleaned even from a narrator who "speke[s] amys." Though humbly wrought, the Squire's work of juvenilia aspires to serve a powerful literary purpose, yielding meaning without literary craftsmanship. From the

2 See, for instance, the *Miller's Tale*, ll. 3171–3186, and the *Franklin's Tale*, ll. 716–718.

Squire's first words, then, an interest in transcending established communicative boundaries becomes apparent.

The Squire is a storyteller in training as well as a knight in training. He associates language with chivalry and possesses a keen understanding of both, even as he lacks the skills to wield either. In his *Prologue*, for instance, the Squire associates language with a sense of knightly loyalty to the Host, saying that he “wol nat rebelle” against the Host’s wishes. The rhyming of “telle” and “nat rebelle” connects the Squire’s linguistic and knightly functions, turning the tale into a sportsmanly suppression of a fight. Language, it seems, fulfills the Squire’s duty as an apprentice knight. Lindsey Jones explores the relationship between the Squire’s understanding of language and his admiration of his father, the Knight that begins Chaucer’s storytelling competition. “The *Squire’s Tale* echoes the *Knight’s Tale* in its themes, images and colors,” writes Jones, but “the Squire is less capable of handling the Knight’s rhetorical flourishes.”³ Associating the Squire’s amateur storytelling with his role as the Knight’s apprentice and son, the text not only accentuates the Squire’s inexperience but also assumes a paternal tone toward the Squire in all his amateurism. The very same youthfulness that sets the Squire apart from the other pilgrims is also what allows room for the knightly and literary potential that must be paternally nurtured and validated. The Squire’s youthful alterity apparently acquires value through comparison with his paternal role model.

The Squire reconstructs his admiration for the language of Chaucer’s Knight in his own tale, creating for himself a character that embodies all the qualities an aspiring young knight could want: especially chivalry, masculinity, and command of language. When in his *Tale* he describes a foreign knight riding in to interrupt a king’s party, ultimately to deliver the magic ring to princess Canacee, the Squire gushes,

He with a manly voys seide his message
After the forme vsed in his langage

3 Lindsey M. Jones, “Chaucer’s Anxiety of Poetic Craft: The *Squire’s Tale*,” *Style* 41 (2007): 301.

With outen vice of silable or of lettre
And for his tale sholde seme the bettre. (99–102)

The Squire is keenly aware of the fictional knight's language, which is “manly” and “With outen vice of silable or of lettre,” as if to represent the knightly authorial ideal that the Squire cannot achieve in his fear of “spek[ing] amys.” The knight's foreignness—a quality that rooted him firmly in the strange realm of the atypical Other—only enhances his command of language, with foreign dialect only making the knight's words “seme the bettre.” In this way, the knightly character of the Squire's story improves upon his model, the Knight of the pilgrim frame, replacing his father's familiarity with untranslatable, foreign Otherness. If the Squire's inexperience is responsible for rendering him, as Jones writes, “less capable of handling the Knight's rhetorical flourishes,” it is this same youthfulness that allows admiration of the Other, represented here by an exotic knight, even as standard literature (by implication) fails to experiment in foreign realms.

The Squire's poor narration compares unfavorably to the knight's “langage,” but seems adequate for establishing intent. The Squire realizes that he cannot replicate foreign speech in portraying the exotic knight who delivers Canacee's ring, saying,

Al be that I kan nat sowne his style
Ne kan nat clymben ouer so heigh a style
Yet seye I this as to commune entente
Thus mucche amounteth al that euere he mente
If it so be that I haue it in mynde. (105–109)

The Squire's pseudo-rhyming between “style” and “style” here, only made possible by a somewhat forced metaphor in the second line, illustrates the Squire's struggle to effectively wield the poetic tools that the knights use. Jones points to the Squire's overuse of such rhyme, as well as enjambment and caesura, as evidence of the Squire's poor storytelling, claiming that “The

Squire's Tale is not a tale intended to tell a story; it is instead a narrative poem designed to examine the craft of poetic composition."⁴ The Squire represents the proto-poet, ambitious yet amateurish, anxious to convey the knight's "entente" and "al that euere he meant" without the exotic "style." Just as the Squire's *Prologue* hopes to establish "wyl" in spite of "spek[ing] amys," here the Squire seeks "entente" without "style." In a tale with a foreigner so utterly alien that his language apparently stands no chance of being replicated textually, the amateur author provides a solution that seeks meaning without acknowledging issues of style. A nostalgic reflection, perhaps, of Chaucer's past self, the amateur poet allows access to the foreign Other through his unusual *lack* of stylistic attention, whereas a more polished poet may reject such Otherness in favor of a more normative style.

Like his misuse of rhyme, the Squire's tendency to cut the text short results from a failed attempt to replicate the poetic qualities that he deems masterful. This non-committal narrator interrupts Canacee's first encounter with the ring's power, for instance, with a lengthy interlude that functions as a treatise on writing:

The knotte why that euery tale is told
If it be tarried til that lust be cold
Of hem that han it after herkned yore
The sauour passeth euer lenger the moore
For fulsomnesse of his prolixitee
And by this same reson thynketh me
I sholde to the knotte condescende
And maken of hir walking soone an ende. (401–408)

Just as the Squire wishes to establish "wyl" and "entente" in spite of his amateurish use of language, this passage conveys a similar hope to distill the story down to its "knotte." For this word, the *Middle English Dictionary* offers two related definitions that appear particularly apt. "Knotte" could denote either

4 Jones, "Chaucer's Anxiety," 300.

“An intellectual knot to be untied, a theological or philosophical problem; a riddle, mystery” or “the point of a story or argument; the main point of a treaty; the conclusion of a statement, book, story, song, etc.” (*MED* s.v. “knotte”). If Chaucer intended the word “knotte” to denote the intellectual, theological, or philosophical, then the *Squire’s Tale* becomes more sermon than story, more interested in yielding meaning than presenting a narrative. Furthermore, such a treatise on language—arguing that text should quickly arrive at its “knotte” or risk losing its “sauour” [i.e., “savor”]—expresses a clear preference for brevity that justifies the story’s fragmentation and hasty ending. Chaucer’s Squire, with his naïve willingness to interrupt the story for the purpose of proving a point, acts as the ideal character for extracting the essence of things, a tool that proves useful in exploring the otherwise inaccessible and unfamiliar.

Because it precedes the falcon’s story, the Squire’s anticipation of the “knotte” identifies the falcon’s scene as the *Tale’s* main point, placing the most important discussion in the animal’s mouth, or beak, as it were. Many scholars have noted the closeness (according medieval natural philosophical texts on animals) of bird song to human speech, a relationship which makes the narrative move from human to bird more readily acceptable. Jill Mann’s interest in avian language is particularly intriguing:

[O]f all animals, birds come nearest to imitating or spontaneously reproducing human speech. On the one hand, this clever mimicry makes it possible to treat them as quasi-humans, able to use language to shape and respond to situations. On the other hand, it raises questions about the human use of language, which may be as little related to intelligent thought or sincere emotion as that of a talented parrot. Birds focus the issue of what truth there is to be found in language.⁵

5 Jill Mann, *From Aesop to Reynard: Beast Literature in Medieval Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 193.

Chaucer's falcon blends the animal and human. At once anthropomorphic and animal, speaking but also squawking, the bird warrants comparison to the human realm while remaining distinctly apart from it. Like the foreign knight, the falcon does not represent the norm but instead belongs to the Other.

The falcon is an uncanny animal outsider from her first appearance, where it is not human language but animal screeching that captures Canacee's attention when the falcon, "with a pitous voys so gan to crye / That al the wode resowned of hir cry" (412-413). Considering Canacee's magic-ring-induced ability to understand avian speech, the falcon's crying could echo a distinctly human variety of weeping. On the other hand, the evocation of the "wode" nestles the scene in the natural rather than human realm, suggesting a cry that is more animal in quality. Perhaps Canacee only listens because she is aware of the ring's power, but she understands through the common language of noise rather than the ring's agency. "The avian element in the hybridity enables Chaucer to show a fundamental commonality between living creatures," writes Sarah Schotland, continuing to note, "[C]ommunication can occur across barriers of rank, language, nationality, and even species."⁶ If the difference between humans and the natural world is language, then the commonality is noise, so that the falcon's human-animal "cry" establishes a universal language, which both the human norm and animal Other understand. In this way, the falcon's inarticulate warbling models the kind of language that the Squire seeks to undertake: both falcon and Squire noisily reject a more refined style in favor of communicating intent with the opposite faction.

The *Tale* becomes a bizarre mixture of human rhetoric, story, and birdcall, with the falcon functioning as the animal keeper of its logical "knotte." Aristotle's modes of persuasion prove useful in revealing the rhetorical work that this tale is doing. The Squire's conviction that even poor language can establish good "wyl" or "entente" speaks to the tale's logical

6 Sarah Deutch Schotland, "Avian Hybridity in *The Squire's Tale*: Uses of Anthropomorphism," in *Rethinking Chaucerian Beasts*, ed. Carolyn Van Dyke (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 116.

appeal, or *logos*. Schotland imagines a logical moral for the tale, saying, “In this tale, the medium is the message: the tale is all about the importance of communication and the necessity for sympathy.”⁷ If the Squire presents a sermon in the place of a tale, as several of the pilgrims do,⁸ then the tale’s lesson or “entente” could very well advocate the “importance of communication,” especially that which transcends boundaries. Such shared language establishes a sense of *pathos* throughout the tale, as Canacee understands the “necessity for sympathy” in her pity for the falcon once she

Hath vnderstonden what this faukon seyde
And wel neigh for the routhe almoost she deyde
And to the tree she goth ful hastily
And on this faukon looketh piteously. (437–440)

Canacee’s almost dying “for routhe” (or sympathy) occurs before the falcon has uttered a single word, and if the Squire’s amateur babbling is enough to establish “entente”/*logos*, then the falcon’s crying is enough to make Canacee “looketh piteously” and engender *pathos*. Where the language of the story creates *logos* and *pathos*, though, it fails to yield *ethos*. The clueless youth, anonymous foreigner, and talking bird all lack authority, but this very absence of the standard authority required to tell a tale is also what unites the tellers in mutual freakishness and makes room for universal intent unimpeded by stylistic idiosyncrasies. In illustrating how a tale without any real authorial skill can access “entente” and “pittee,” Chaucer imagines an amateur language capable of mediating between normality and Otherness, creating a useful space for unskilled writing within the Chaucerian canon.

The falcon is interested in obscuring the text’s *ethos*, calling for a replacement of textual authority with action. After the hawk shrieks even more pitifully,

7 Schotland, “Avian Hybridity,” 118.

8 See, for example, the *Pardoner’s Tale* and the *Parson’s Tale*.

Right in hir haukes ledene thus she sayde
That pitee rennet soone in gentil herte
Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte
Is preued al day as men may it see
As well by werk as by auctoritee. (478–482)

The falcon's language here is perhaps purposefully more complex than the surrounding *Tale*, emphasizing the animal falcon's strangely human control of language. Importantly, though, the falcon speaks in a "haukes ledene" so that the bird's animalness is preserved even in language and Canacee assumes the animal's role as foreign eavesdropper. In the words of Lesley Korodecki, "the falcon not only partially represents the human, but also helps articulate the nebulous boundary between animal and human with language constructing the bridge."⁹ Though Canacee's understanding of the falcon's "ledene" creates such a bridge between them, the falcon calls on that which can be interpreted without the use of the ring as a primary means of communication. The universal "language" of physical pain, rather than the understanding of speech caused by the ring's power, is enough to inspire pity. And if Chaucer's concepts of "entente" and "pitee" act as criteria for judging the tale's logos and ethos, then physical "peyne" and "werke" appear to replace "auctoritee" in producing a rhetorical effect. The falcon's emphasis on "werk" alongside "auctoritee," as well as on "peynes" alongside "pitee," removes the language barrier in favor of the physical action and pain that both animals and humans can understand. In a manner consistent with the universal language of intent that the *Squire's Tale* advocates, the falcon's focus on action in a tale lacking textual authority seeks universal modes of communication.

Chaucer taps into new subject-matter with his many motley characters and their strange, fragmented, and bodily languages. If the loss of textual authority proves problematic for such a skilled poet, one whose status rests on the seriousness of literature, then the young Squire gives Chaucer

9 Lesley Catherine Korodecki, *Ecofeminist Subjectivities: Chaucer's Talking Birds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 91.

access to a poetic arena free from the constraints of style and thus appropriate for exploring characters whose language could never be reproduced stylistically. The Squire is interested in outsiders because he is also one, and he conveys the intent of the foreign and animal Other with raw language that is effective in its refusal to replicate the style of foreign or avian speech. United in mutual freakishness, the Squire, knight and falcon are all products of the kind of quirky experimentation and innovation that the *Canterbury Tales* represent. Though he may “speke amys,” the unskilled Squire in all his novelty warrants acceptance into a literary tradition much greater than himself.

Laurel Meister is a senior majoring in English and minoring in German and Music, and she prepared this essay as part of Professor Andrew Kraebel's seminar on Chaucer (English 4401, Fall 2015).