

# A Discourse of Domination: Shakespeare's Use of Falconry Language

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In Elizabethan times, members of the upper class who chose to hunt with falcons used falconers to “break” the birds, subjecting them to a series of tribulations, tests, and constant attention until they submitted completely to their masters’ discipline. Generally, falconers were men who tamed the wild natures of the female falcons, who were preferred over male falcons for their greater size and more aggressive dispositions (Benson 186). The falconer-falcon relationship appears as a motif in literature when a man tries to “break” the will of a woman in order to reinforce the patriarchal gender roles expected of her as a wife. William Shakespeare uses this metaphor to explore the injustices women faced during his lifetime as well as to experiment with, stretch, and even reverse prescribed gender roles in his writings. In two of his plays, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Othello*, couples’ power struggles involve the use of domineering language derived from the sport of falconry.

Dating back to the fourth century B.C.E, Aristotle claims in his *Historia Animalium* that “in all animals in which there is a distinction of the sexes nature has given a similar disposition to the males and to the females. This is most conspicuous in man, and the larger animals, and in viviparous quadrupeds; for the disposition of the female is softer, and more tameable and submissive” (278). Although there is not a direct correlation between Aristotle’s philosophy and a popular sport of the Elizabethan era, in falconry the trainable hawks are female and the trainers are male (Benson 188). Some aristocratic women enjoyed hawking, including Queen Elizabeth; however, they hired men to train their “haggard,” or wild, falcons for them (189). Taking a wild creature and breaking its will to make it conform to a restricted existence is a time-consuming, difficult task, and so many manuals were written to instruct men on how to become effective dominators. In those manuals the language of falconry was created. All trainers were advised to “man” their hawks, meaning to make the hawks tame by forcing the raptors to become accustomed to their presence (189). As Sean Benson suggests, “The very ‘manning,’ which as a technical term applies only to hawking practice, is a revealing indication of the rigid gender structure of the sport” (189). Many of the falconry manuals strongly suggest a similarity between selecting a bird, forming an attachment with her, and training her to hunt as one wishes to

choosing a maiden, courting her, and marrying her, and the manuals use the language of human courtship to emphasize the implied connection (191). According to Benson, the guides “employ this discourse to imply that a female hawk both shares the misogynistic stereotypes of women—fickle, self-willed, recalcitrant—and needs constant training and attention by her male trainer” (191).

Shakespeare’s use of falconry language—even for dramatic effect—would not have been as effective were it not for the patriarchal ideals and laws that had normalized the oppression of women, labeling them as weaker vessels who needed men



**A Falconer.** In George Turberville, *The Booke of Faulconrie or Hawking*, 1575.

to complete them. Aristotle had stipulated long before the seventeenth century that women were “more compassionate,” “more jealous and querulous,” and “more subject to depression,” thus equating emotion with weakness and implying that women were, by nature, less capable of independence than men (278). Patriarchal ideology restricted women to lives as subordinates who could not own property, be recognized as legal citizens, enjoy the benefits of an education, or support themselves through employment; if they did work, their job was domestic in nature and their husbands were entitled to their wages (McDonald 256).

By the seventeenth century in England, institutionalized patriarchy had been prevalent for so long that it is difficult to determine exactly how it began, but religion, and in particular Christianity, played a major role in maintaining male domination over women, associating masculinity with godliness and femininity with uncleanness and sin. *An Homily of the State of Matrimony*, written in 1593, was read to English men and women during their Anglican wedding ceremonies, and its message legitimizes feminine oppression, even necessitates it as the means by which a woman may build a relationship with God (“From *An Homily*” 287). Each bride was told that she must

“obey thy husband, take regard of his requests, and give heed unto him to perceive what he requireth of thee, and so shalt thou honor God, and live peacefully in thy house” (“From *An Homily*” 287). Although many women did not rebel against the status quo, not all succumbed willingly to their prescribed gender roles. One seventeenth century woman, Aemilia Lanyer, appropriates patriarchal religious ideology in a poem that accepts responsibility for Eve’s role in the fall of man, but argues that,

since the Church mandates the supremacy, strength, and reliability of men, Adam's error was greater than the so-called weak-willed Eve's. She writes,

[S]urely *Adam* cannot be excused;  
Her fault, though great, yet he was most to blame;  
What weakness she offered, [Adam's] strength might have refused,  
Being Lord of all, the greater was his shame. (Lanyer 281)

Lanyer reveals the faults in the male-biased doctrine of the church and concludes,

[L]et us have our liberty again,  
And challenge [attribute] to yourselves no sov'reignty:  
... Your fault being greater, why should you disdain  
Our being your equals, free from tyranny?  
If one weak woman simply did offend,  
This sin of yours hath no excuse, nor end. (283)

Unfortunately, one woman's protest did not change the guidelines of English society, but her writings prove that there were women who did not accept patriarchal ideology. Women who questioned societal norms or behaved in a deviant manner were viewed as a threat by some men in their community—a spark to attract other sparks of discontent and shed light on injustices against women if not contained or extinguished.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shakespeare recognized the dramatic potential of creating a rebellious female character—namely, Kate—and of appropriating the dominating discourse of falconry to create a memorable production of a battle between the sexes. In the play's prologue, Shakespeare introduces the sport of falconry to his audience; the lord enthralls Christopher Sly with assurances of his involvement in elitist, masculine activities: "Dost thou love hawking? Thou hast hawks will soar / Above the morning lark" (*Shrew* 2.43–44). Sly is told the play he is about to watch is "pleasing stuff... a kind of history," which implies that the content of the play is directed towards male enjoyment as a tale of a conquering hero or a visual reenactment of how male domination is maintained (2.135–7). However, because *The Taming of the Shrew* is a play within a play, Shakespeare is free to create and explore the tensions between a very strong-willed woman, Kate, and an equally determined man, Petruchio, without fear of societal backlash. The audience accepts the exaggerated male and female dynamics they observe because they are safely ensconced in Sly's delusional world. Kate is dissatisfied with the options presented to her as a young woman and, instead of acting in a subdued, "lady-like" manner, she has verbally lashed out publicly and acquired a nasty reputation as a "shrew." Petruchio cares nothing about her reputation, looks, or personal desires; he wants to marry her for her dowry to ensure the economic stability of his estate. Towards the end of their first verbal exchange, Petruchio makes his intentions clear to Kate, stating,

For I am he am born to tame you, Kate,  
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate  
Comfortable as other household Kates. (2.1.273–5)

Shakespeare allows Petruchio to use the language and brutish tactics of a hawk to break Kate's will and domesticate her, dehumanizing her in the process. Once married, Petruchio keeps her at his side—manning her continuously. At the end of Act IV Scene I, Petruchio uses falconry language to expound on his plans to “break” Kate:

My falcon now is sharp and passing empty,  
And till she stoop, she must not be full-gorged,  
For then she never looks upon her lure.  
Another way I have to man my haggard,  
To make her come, and know her keeper's call,  
That is, to watch her, as we watch these kites  
That bate and beat and will not be obedient?  
She ate no meat today, nor none shall eat;  
Last night she slept not, nor tonight she shall not. (4.1.178-86)

He fully intends to deny her food and sleep until she is too weak to resist his will. Petruchio also forces her to accept day as night at his whim, which occurs in falconry when a trainer hoods his hawk and controls the bird's sensory perceptions (Benson 190). However, the “be it sun, or moon” exercise Kate endures is sometimes, according to the manner in which the lines are voiced by the actors, portrayed in such a way that it is Petruchio who looks unreasonable and ridiculous. Thus, ironically, Shakespeare's language seems to incorporate an underlying sense of sympathy for the plight of womankind within his “history story” of masculine domination of women (*Shrew* 4.5.13). Shakespeare empowers Kate, like a falcon released on its first hunt, to choose her path at the play's end. She can choose to come at Petruchio's request or refuse him, which balances the distribution of power in the relationship a bit and allows the audience to be lulled into believing that Petruchio and Kate could find happiness together eventually. Shakespeare's creation of a play within a play, his exploration of exaggerated gender roles, and his masterful appropriation of the dominating language of falconry make a heightened impression on the audience, shedding light on the injustices of the patriarchy for those willing to perceive it.

Shakespeare also used hawking tropes in *Othello*, *the Moor of Venice*, although not in as obvious manner as in *The Taming of the Shrew*. The rather sinister hawking reference is uttered by Othello:

If I do prove her haggard,  
Though that her jesses were my dear heartstrings,  
I'd whistle her off, and let her down the wind  
To prey at fortune. (*Othello* 3.3.276-79)

The term “haggard” means a wild, unreliable female hawk, which falconry manuals suggest freeing if its wayward behavior becomes too difficult to bear (Benson 203). According to Benson, “hawks often fly with their owner's rank inscribed on their ‘jesses,’ the leather strips attached to the hawks' legs” (203). A man's reputation could be tarnished among his peers by the behavior of his falcon; hence, no one wanted a

haggard. In Othello's situation, Desdemona's supposed infidelity would damage his reputation socially, but with the use of the word "heartstrings," he also recognizes the more life-sustaining love that binds him to her and the pain he will feel once he releases her from their marriage. Shakespeare may also have appropriated the falconry analogy to give his audience a false sense of relief that Othello refers to Desdemona in a manner similar to that of a disappointed hawker with his haggard. The culturally accepted rules of falconry "forbid the killing of one's bird," so Othello's statement that he would "let her down the wind" offers the possibility of Desdemona surviving the tragedy (Benson 204). Othello's murderous act against his innocent wife is truly horrific; however, understanding the falconry discourse makes it all the more shocking. Shakespeare's usage of the analogy, along with the extra layer of scandal caused by Othello's invocation and then disregard of proper hawking sportsmanship, enhances the opportunity for the audience to experience emotional catharsis.

Shakespeare analogizes masterfully from hawking, in which a male trainer is determined to break the will of a female falcon, to human courtship, with his male characters determined to assert dominance, and in this way disturbingly portrays the patriarchal dehumanization of women. The fact that Shakespeare addresses such controversial subjects as rebellious women, interracial marriages, and Jews suggests that he wanted to make significant observations about society. Appropriating the dominating discourse of falconry allows him to experiment with gender role guidelines, assumptions, and exaggerations from within a culturally accepted framework—with its own set of understood restrictions, like not ever killing a haggard hawk—to create moments of satirical observation, feminine complexity, or compacted tragedy, depending on the situation.

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