

The lap of whiteness in *The Squire's Tale*

Wan-Chuan Kao

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, a woman wanders through the forest. Her name is Canacee, and her father is the Great Khan of Tartary. Earlier in the tale, her father gifts her a magic ring that gives the wearer the ability to understand the language of birds (obviously, what else is a magic ring supposed to do?), which she wears during her morning stroll in the garden. But her walk is interrupted—she is stunned by the bloody spectacle of a self-mutilating, shrieking female falcon in the canopy above.

Her magic ring gives her access to the bird's feelings as she empathizes with the bleeding bird : 'on this faukon looketh pitously.' Canacee's feelings mirror the falcon's: like the falcon, 'almoost she deyde,' and she weeps inconsolably. Worried that the falcon might fall and die, Canacee 'held hir lappe abroad' beneath its perch. Canacee spreads her lap wide open, like a firefighter's jumping sheet, waiting for the falcon to drop in as if it were leaping off a burning building.

But she misses the bird, and the falcon falls straight to the forest floor:

Tho shrighete this faukon yet moore pitously
Than ever she dide, and fil to ground anon,
And lith aswowne, deed and lyk a stoon,
Til Canacee hath in hire lappe hire take.

This scene of Chaucer's might not immediately signal to you how the mechanisms of race are at play. But they are, and one of the ways we can see them is by reading the scene through the lens of empathy. Empathy describes the process by which the emotional state of the other, your pain, inherently creates the subject "I", by vicarious feeling. I feel your pain, but I am not you. You, the one who is in pain, are not me, you are you. By virtue of empathizing with the bird, Canacee inherently understands herself as a being distinct from it. She is witnessing the bird's distress, not literally feeling it herself. And when Canacee places the falcon in her lap, it reciprocates Canacee's empathy. 'Pitee rennet soone in gentil herte, / Feelynge his similitude in peynes smerte' The "sameness" between them is a loop closing. Though they are different beings, in the poem's logic, their identities have merged.

There are a few things to note here. Canacee is nobility in Tartary, which was a name used for a vast, ill-defined region of Asia that was associated with the Mongol empire. Meaning, Canacee is representative of an exoticized and Orientalized culture. The falcon, on the other hand, is implied to be white and European, a strange bird "of fremde land." In the Middle Ages, the falcon symbolizes nobility. Falconry is an aristocratic pursuit and represents the hunt of *fin'amor* in artistic representations. The falcon is a sign of racialized strangeness to Canacee, who is comfortably at home in Tartary, but is in many ways a symbol that represented the culture of Chaucer's readership.

Readers at the time would have also recognized the imagery of courtly romance at play: the scene recreates the vertical separation between the Lady and her lover in medieval courtly literature. Like Guinevere looking down from her tower at her lover in Chrétien de Troyes's *Lancelot*, or Arcite looking up at Emily after his victory in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, the falcon unwittingly occupies the role of the courtly Lady and

Canacee, the traditional male lover. When Canacee places the falcon in her lap, verticality collapses and empathy is complete.

But empathy is not unequivocally a universal good. Empathy, presumably, can reach across and into the distant past to make affective connections, and it can cross boundaries like racial difference. But employing cross-racial empathy does not change the realities of racial difference. It does not mark any break with the past, the transcendence of difference, or entry into a post-racial utopia. In fact, to enter racial difference is to enter a dangerous territory—empathy can be used as a master's tool that actually produces racial difference and instills violence. Empathy may trigger one's emotive responses, but it does not activate their motor-sensory functions. True empathy is illusory, for the experience is never a complete recreation. There is no full entry into another's pain, only affective resonance. It may be more precise to say, "I feel your pain in my mind, but never in my body."

When Canacee places the falcon in her lap, she reanimates the bird. The falcon no longer shrieks and instead begins to speak to her. Though our narrator, the Squire, specifies that a falcon speaks "in hir haukes ledene," it is in human tongue and through text that she is rendered intelligible (you might remember, Canacee has a magic bird-translating ring). The falcon's story is high art, easily recognizable as the lover's complaint in courtly literature. Because the audiences of the narrative have already come to understand the nobility instilled in the falcon, they see that she and Canacee reflect each other's courtly sensibility. Symbolically, what Canacee picks up is not a bird, but language imprinted as white *gentillesse*, that is white gentility.

Art historians have noted that high and late Middle Ages witnessed the emergence of historically contingent "white identity" in representations of Europeans, whose flesh tone shifted from a pinkish-brown to pasty white. The chromatic shift can be traced to

the Crusades and increased contacts among European Christians, Muslims, and Sub-Saharan Africans. Chaucer's *The Squire's Tale*, likely composed in the 1380s, emerged out of this cultural climate.

Chaucer's falcon is the mother lode of whiteness. She signifies in no uncertain terms racialization through whiteness, here coded as courtly language. And as a figurative instrument of whiteness, the falcon is a form of racial capital. Her *gentillesse*, racialized and tied to whiteness, is designed for the logistical chain of aristocratic production, valuation, and consumption. When we read *The Squire's Tale*, it is important for us to analyze whiteness as an object of racialization, and to understand how empathy is deployed across difference in a way that serves and produces racializing narratives.