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Juliet’s Taming of Romeo

CAROLYN E. BROWN

Shakespeare’s Juliet has received divergent critical appraisals. Early criticism, in particular, of Romeo and Juliet largely overlooks Juliet, viewing the play as being primarily about Romeo and treating Juliet as a subsidiary, underdeveloped character. When such criticism explores Juliet, it is often influenced by her young age of fourteen, reading her as little more than a child—naive, immature, inexperienced, obedient to her parents’ wishes, and uncomplicated. E. C. Pettet, for example, characterizes Juliet as a “spontaneous, passionate child of nature, whose speech and heart are always one.” But as criticism, especially feminist in orientation, begins to recognize the depth of Shakespeare’s female characters, Juliet is receiving more concentrated, appreciative attention. And as critics look beyond her youth, they discover not a reticent virgin but a multifaceted character who transcends Romeo in maturity, complexity, insight, and rhetorical dexterity. Critical estimation of Juliet has moved from regarding her as a passive victim of “star-crossed love” to lauding her as a self-willed, courageous, intelligent young woman who initiates and controls action in her struggle to preserve her integrity and autonomy in a world that is hostile to women. Irene Dash argues that Juliet tries to retain “her sense of self as ‘essential’” and, thus, moves the audience “with admiration for a courageous person attempting to fight her destiny as a woman” and “to govern her own life.” Nancy Compton Warmbrod views Juliet as determined to see “herself as an independent person”

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and to establish “an identity apart from family and nurse.” Instead of perceiving Juliet as shallow, criticism is now more willing to admit that under the surface lyricism there is another dimension to her words and actions where her more independent, controlling, and rebellious nature is lodged.

This essay enhances the critical appreciation of Juliet’s depth and her struggle for selfhood, and focuses on her interchange with Romeo in two particular scenes—II.ii, the so-called balcony scene, and III.v, which contains the lovers’ interchange the morning after the consummation. Typically these scenes are read as the most romantic in the play, and Juliet is traditionally read as helplessly in the throes of young love. Pettet, for example, looks at II.ii as “the most serenely joyful passage of the play,” containing “lyricism and the warm, unfolding passion of [Romeo and Juliet’s] love declarations.” My reading, however, explores a less romantic mode in which Romeo and Juliet woo each other in these two scenes, and challenges the traditional view of Juliet as Romeo’s passive beloved by arguing that her language and actions contain a deeper level of meaning. This subtext is established by the falconry imagery that appears throughout the play but that reaches its prominence in the balcony scene. Through this imagery, Shakespeare establishes a reading that draws parallels between Romeo and trainable falcons (usually females) and between the way Juliet treats Romeo and the methods falconers (usually males) use to train their birds. Shakespeare reverses the gender roles, as he does in other parts of the play, and has Juliet assume behavior typically assigned to men.

During the balcony scene, she can be read as trying to train Romeo, much as falconer Petruchio trains his bird Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew. She attempts to make Romeo as obedient as a “manned” falcon. The falconry references contribute to the reading of Juliet as being interested in control since the relationship between the bird and trainer is not one of equality but one in which the trainer respects the bird’s powers but subjects them to his own will and dominates the bird. Juliet transforms her future husband from a “flighty,” impractical man of fancy who engages in long, unrealistic speeches, into a pragmatic, obedient man of few words who learns to give her the succinct answers she wants and to fulfill her commands. The subtext establishes that Juliet’s inability to control her own life compels her to resort to shrewd means of establishing autonomy and that she attempts to control her destiny by controlling the man who constitutes her destiny—Romeo. This essay examines
how Shakespeare transmutes the rigorous physical training of a falcon into Juliet’s training of Romeo through rhetoric and elucidates this subtextual reading by comparing it to the primary reading of falconry taming techniques in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

That Juliet wants to control Romeo and her life is not unusual. In the context of marriage, lovers—males and females—often try to control one another. In the context of Shakespearean drama, moreover, female characters have been recognized as strong-willed, and Shakespeare has been called an “inveterate feminist.” But what is unusual and refreshing at the same time is Juliet’s overt mode of controlling Romeo and her life. She does not use the traditional feminine wiles. She does not disguise herself as a male, as do some of Shakespeare’s heroines, in order to sanction what is traditionally male behavior. While she may offer a few obligatory excuses, she usurps the male role with aplomb and conviction. Although Juliet is one of Shakespeare’s youngest female protagonists, she in many senses is the most aggressive and self-contained in her pursuit of love and independence as she attempts to tame a wild falcon.

Falconry imagery appears throughout Shakespeare’s plays. Maurice Pope notes that hawking references appear with greater frequency, variety, and accuracy in Shakespeare’s works than in those of his contemporaries, and he conjectures that Shakespeare gained his knowledge from first-hand experience. Certainly, most Elizabethans were familiar with what has been called “the great national field sport of England,” and Shakespeare’s audience would have better appreciated the numerous falconry images in *Romeo and Juliet* and their significance than modern audiences do. The language of both Romeo and Juliet contains many references to birds and more particularly to falconry, and references are made to them in such terms. Romeo, for example, is repeatedly associated with winged Cupid. Mercutio associates Romeo with the flight of Cupid—“You are a lover, borrow Cupid’s wings / And soar with them above a common bound” (I.iv.17–8). Romeo himself identifies with the winged love god: when he is “in love” with Rosalind, Romeo explains that Cupid has so wounded him that he is temporarily immobile, “I am too sore enpierced with his shaft / To soar with his light feathers” (I.iv.19–20); later he implies that he flew with Cupid in order to find Juliet—Cupid “lent [Romeo] counsel, and [he] lent [Cupid] eyes” (II.ii.81). Juliet describes Cupid, with whom Romeo is associated, in terms of birds as well: “nimble-pinion’d doves draw Love, / And therefore hath the
wind-swift Cupid wings” (II.v.7–8). Romeo identifies with birds and their flight: “Flies may do this [touch Juliet’s lips] but I from this must fly” (III.iii.41); when he sees Juliet in the balcony scene, he immediately thinks of the way birds would react to her beauty—“[B]irds would sing and think it were not night” (II.ii.22)—and “sings” himself as if he were a cozened bird. Romeo’s language also contains more specific allusions to falconry: he, for example, thinks of Juliet “cast[ing] [her virginity] off” (II.ii.9), a technical term for throwing out a lure in falconry; he claims he is “so bound [by love] / [He] cannot bound a pitch above dull woe” (I.iv.20–1), “pitch” being a “height from which a hawk stoops to kill” its prey. He is repeatedly associated with the hooding of falcons, a device used to cover the hawk’s eyes and, thus, control the bird: Romeo refers to Cupid’s “view [being] muffled still” (I.i.168); Benvolio implicitly compares Romeo to “Cupid [being] hoodwink’d with a scarf” (I.iv.4). All of these references underscore that Shakespeare repeatedly encourages his audience to view Romeo in terms of a wild bird, specifically a falcon.

Juliet is delineated in similar terms, for she and women in general are described as birds: Benvolio claims that Romeo will see other women at the Capulet ball who “will make [him] think [his] swan a crow” (I.ii.89); when Romeo sees Juliet at the ball, he concurs with Benvolio’s earlier prediction, viewing his new beloved as “a snowy dove trooping with crows” (I.v.47); during the balcony scene, Romeo associates Juliet with “the airy region” (II.ii.21) and sees her as “a winged messenger of heaven” that “sails upon the bosom of the air” (II.ii.28; 32); he refers to her as his “nyas” (II.ii.167), an unfledged hawk or eyas. The Nurse calls Juliet a “ladybird” (I.iii.3) and states that Romeo “must climb a bird’s nest” to be with his beloved (II.v.75). In III.v, Juliet and Romeo’s language is filled with references to nightingales and larks and the songs of these birds.

Juliet also enlists and is described with falconry terminology. In her epithalamium, for example, she asks that Night “hood [her] unmann’d blood, bating in [her] cheeks” (III.ii.14), using three terms from falconry: she refers to the “hood” placed over a hawk’s eyes in order to calm it; to the “bating” or the fluttering of a hawk’s wings when it is being uncontrollable; and to the “manning” or the mastering of a wild hawk. She speaks of “the mask of night [being] on [her] face” (II.ii.85), an allusion not only to darkness but also possibly yet again to the hooding of a falcon. Lady Capulet speaks of her daughter being “mew’d up to her heaviness” (III.iv.11), the “mews” referring to the housing
or confining of hawks, especially at night; Capulet refers to his daughter as a “wayward girl [who] is so reclaim’d” (IV.ii.47), “reclaiming” being the falconry terminology for a hawk’s obedient return to its master after a hunt. The bird imagery equates Juliet with a trapped bird, wanting to exercise its natural freedom of flight but confined—imagery that embodies the state of women and Juliet, in particular, in a patriarchal society that “mews” them up.

Juliet, though, also refers to herself as a “falconer” and to Romeo as her “bird” (II.i.177), repeatedly speaking of him in connection with birds: when she is anticipating Romeo’s arrival in her bedroom, she proclaims Romeo “wilt lie upon the wings of night / Whiter than new snow upon a raven’s back” (III.ii.18–9); she describes her beloved as a “dove-feather’d raven” (III.ii.76). She also calls him her “tassel-gentle,” a designation for the male peregrine falcon: “O for a falconer’s voice / To lure this tassel-gentle back again” (II.i.158–9). She speaks of training Romeo to come to the “lure”—an “alluring” object that entices the falcon back to its master after a flight for quarry. She gains Romeo’s attention with “Hist! Romeo, hist!” (II.i.158), the bird’s receptivity to the falconer’s call being an important part of the sport. She speaks of having him attached to a “silken thread” (II.i.180), a designation for the trainer’s leash or “creance.” At the end of the balcony scene, she says she prefers to have Romeo “still stand” (II.i.172) in one spot, a falconry term for an obedient hawk that does not “bate” its wings. Romeo wishes he “were [Juliet’s] bird” (II.i.181), and, indeed, the bird and falconry terminology in the play contributes to a latent reading in which Romeo becomes Juliet’s well-trained pet falcon. Such imagery leads to a reading of Juliet as trying to escape her confined status as a “mewed up” bird and vicariously achieve flight or freedom through training her bird to fly for her.

The references to Juliet as falconer and Romeo as her falcon are reinforced by the actions and language of both characters. Juliet’s designation of Romeo as a “tassel-gentle” (II.i.159) is appropriate. The tassel is labeled “gentle” because of its suitability as a “noble” bird for a prince and because of its “docile and tractable disposition.”14 Like the high-spirited but pliant peregrine falcon, Romeo has a gentleness about him. He shuns the feud that consumes the other men and professes himself a wooer, not a fighter. The Nurse remarks on his mildness: “I’ll warrant him as gentle as a lamb” (II.v.44). Juliet also notes his docility after she kisses him: she claims that he “kiss[es] by th’book” (I.v.109). Although perhaps a little disappointed at
his lack of proficiency in the art of kissing in which she seems
to have some experience, Juliet seems to feel she has made a
good choice: he displays callowness, does things by the book,
and follows directions well—characteristics that make him
tractable and, thus, trainable. On a primary level, Juliet devel-
ops an affection for Romeo because she meets a soul mate. But
on a subtextual level, she is attracted to Romeo because he is
malleable and controllable. Such a mate allows her to assume
the dominant role in the relationship, finding the “weaker
vessel” in Romeo.

Shakespeare also means Romeo’s elaborate, lofty professions
of love to resemble the flight of hawks, which “hover on
extended wings high in the air.” While Shakespeare models
Romeo after the courtly serenader and lover-poet, scholars note
that Romeo speaks in the “debased literary currency” of Petrar-
chanism and his language is so extreme and hyperbolic that it
almost ruins the solemn mood by making the audience laugh.
Shakespeare also undercuts the lofty romanticism by making
Romeo’s speech resemble the soaring of a falcon, for Petrarch-
anism is associated with loftiness, flight, and ascension into a
spiritual world above a mundane existence. Scholars often speak
of Romeo’s language in terms of flying: Katherine Dalsimer and
Larry Champion allude to his “flights” of rhetoric; James Calder-
wood argues that Romeo’s Petrarchan flights “soar airily and
often vacuously.” Romeo indulges in such inflated Petrarcha-
nism that he soars figuratively in his “flights of passion.” He
“flies” with romantic allusions, which make him almost ethereal,
part of the airy realm. Upon seeing light in a window, or spying
Juliet, or hearing an “oh hum” from her lips, Romeo, with each
event, soars further from reality with lengthy, grandiloquent
comparisons of Juliet to the sun killing the jealous moon
(II.ii.29). He rhapsodizes about her eyes leaving her head to
outshine the stars in heaven (II.ii.15–20). At the beginning of
II.ii, he is merely noting Juliet’s beauty and his desire to divest
her of her chastity, but it takes him thirty lines to make this
simple observation. In terms of falconry, his “flight” is
“unchecked” or free-ranging in that his speech is erratic: Romeo
darts from one metaphor to another and gets carried away with
extravagant comparisons. Romeo is also like a falcon in that he
figuratively flies above the concerns of the feud and is oblivious
to the dangers that might ensue from his appearance at his
enemy’s house: “With love’s light wings did I o’erperch these
walls / For stony limits cannot hold love out” (II.ii.66–7). Flying
along with winged Cupid, he figuratively cannot be impeded by
earthly boundaries. As a man, Romeo can go wherever he wants, unlike Juliet, and the flight imagery becomes symbolic of this freedom.

Juliet, on the other hand, can be seen to resemble a falconer—a person consigned to the earthy element, keen-witted and aware of reality. As a woman, she is presented as having less liberty than a man and as being bound to earth—a situation reflected in her status as an “earthbound” falconer: the Chorus states, “her means much less [than Romeo’s] / To meet her new beloved anywhere” (II.ii.11–2). Her constrained status is indicated by her language: “Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud” (II.ii.160). Constrained by a patriarchal society from expressing her thoughts and controlling her own life, she does not figuratively fly in her speech as Romeo does; rather, her speech is direct, curt, and practical. While Romeo is metaphorically “in the clouds,” Juliet at the beginning of II.ii immediately gets down to business, speaking as if she were striking a bargain:

Deny thy father and refuse thy name.
Or if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love
And I’ll no longer be a Capulet.

What’s in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other word would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call’d,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title.

(lines 34–47)

Her practical language and message are in stark contrast to Romeo’s flighty Petrarchanism. On the primary level of meaning, Shakespeare suggests that Juliet, unaware of Romeo’s presence, muses to herself about her affection for Romeo, showing that the strength and purity of her love allow her to look beyond the externals of names and feuds to an appreciation of Romeo’s spiritual essence. But with Shakespeare being elusive about whether Juliet knows of Romeo’s presence, he suggests the possibility that on a subtextual level of meaning Juliet recognizes that Romeo has entered the scene. Shakespeare allows for the reading that Juliet only pretends not to see Romeo and takes advantage of the darkness so that she can be more forward and can assume a typically masculine position of power, proposing to Romeo rather than waiting for him to act. She inverts the
marriage vows and asks him to make the sacrifices required of women: he is to give up his name and leave the protection of his father’s home and take her as his new protector. While Romeo enters the scene thinking only of enjoying her physical delights, Juliet thinks in more practical terms, and she begins by almost conducting a mock wedding ceremony. She requests that he deny his heritage, forgetting his past freedoms and thinking of her as his new family—his new identity. In this reading, Juliet maneuvers Romeo into assuming a less powerful position in the relationship, a position subsidiary to her. She entices him by making her argument seductive and tantalizing, as she refers to the sweet smell of Romeo, to his “perfect” body “parts” (line 41) that constitute him more than his name, and to her offering herself to him sexually. On a subtextual level, she is trapping him, as a falconer does a wild bird. Although the phrase is suggestive, “Take all myself” (line 48) actually refers to Romeo’s subsuming his identity into Juliet’s, into doing what a bride customarily does during a wedding ceremony—give up her name and take her husband as her new self. She suggests he renounce both his first and last name, all signs of his former life.

Shakespeare has Juliet’s actions resemble those of a falconer, who early in the training must de-program the bird from its former freedoms until it thinks of the falconer as the center of its new existence. The falconer has to “mak[e] her forget her wild ways.” The bird must be “detached from her normal mode of life and [made to] renounce certain peculiarities, replacing them by other (acquired) habits and accomplishments . . . [The falconer must] teach the falcon a new manner of life,” one based on the falconer’s terms. Shakespeare has the self-proclaimed falconer Petruchio of The Taming of the Shrew take first steps similar to those of Juliet in order to “man” his falcon. Petruchio modifies Katherine’s identity, diminishing her independent stature as “Katherine” into the more diminutive status of “Kate” (II.i.185–90). Petruchio gives her a new name, a new identity that he defines for her. Petruchio clarifies that this strategy is meant to make her “conformable” (II.i.271) or pliant to his molding her into a wife who suits his needs. Just as Petruchio proclaims Katherine to be “my Kate,” Juliet declares her beloved to be “my Romeo,” as if she possesses or owns him. In his avowal of love, Romeo voices his utter devotion to Juliet and defies the outside world: “Call me but love, and I’ll be new baptis’d: / Henceforth I never will be Romeo”; “Had I [the name of Romeo] written, I would tear the word” (II.ii.50–1; 57). On a subtextual level, however, he can be seen
as figuratively flying to Juliet and taking the bait. The word “tear” seems unusual in this context. But it makes sense in reference to the falconry terminology, with Shakespeare evoking the image of Romeo as a hawk taking its prey in its talons and “tearing” small portions of flesh off with its beak before swallowing the meat. Romeo’s prey becomes his own identity, and he is willing to give up both his first and last name and to give Juliet absolute control over him: he claims to be “neither [Romeo nor a Montague], fair maid, if either thee dislike” (line 61).

The following quick interchange (lines 52–84) between Juliet and Romeo, in which Juliet asks a series of simple technical questions, such as Romeo’s name and his means of arriving at her balcony, underscores the difference between the practical, efficient Juliet, anchored in a troubled existence, and the flighty Romeo, removed from reality. Unlike the ethereal Romeo, Juliet is acutely aware of the reality of danger—“If they do see thee, they will murder thee” (line 70)—and she tries to get Romeo to give her direct answers by asking him direct questions—“How cam’st thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?” (line 62); “By whose direction found’st thou out this place?” (line 79). But his answers are unrestrained, “wild ranging,” and unfocused:

[I found this place b]y love, that first did prompt me to enquire.
He lent me counsel, and I lent him eyes.
I am no pilot, yet wert thou as far
As that vast shore wash’d with her farthest sea,
I should adventure for such merchandise.

(lines 80-4)

Shakespeare makes us feel the power of love over Romeo in that it renders him fearless and compels him to voice his endless devotion. But by juxtaposing Romeo’s indirect speech to Juliet’s direct approach, Shakespeare on another level mocks Romeo and encourages us to see Romeo’s responses in a different light. The bird imagery throughout the play allows Romeo to be seen as a wild, untrained falcon that “breaks away,” which means to not fly a direct path to the lure, as Romeo cannot fly a direct path to Juliet by giving her a substantive answer. Although she tries repeatedly to communicate effectively with him, she cannot get a direct answer out of him, one grounded in reality. In fact, with each response, Romeo only seems to “fly” further from the concerns of this world: he claims that Juliet’s love makes him impervious to stony walls, to the “enmity” (line 73) and the swords of his enemies, and even to death.
The rest of the interchange takes a new direction, signaled by Juliet’s long speech of twenty-one lines (85–106). Throughout the remainder of the scene, Juliet behaves strangely: she repeatedly and brusquely interrupts Romeo, hardly letting the loquacious Romeo complete a sentence or spout more than a few words; and she repeatedly threatens to break off relations or she actually leaves the scene in response to the Nurse’s call. On a principal level of meaning, Shakespeare intends for us to understand that the forbidden quality of their love and the need for secrecy contribute to the lovers’ strange behavior and compel them to act in haste. But the interchange can be read in a different way, for there is a systematic method to Juliet’s behavior: she consistently promises a union with Romeo only to withdraw that promise and herself. The latent reading allows for the possibility that Juliet is playing with Romeo to some degree. Calderwood suggests that Juliet repeatedly interrupts Romeo because she “distrusts his style.”21 She may, indeed, not like his answers and teaches him to give her the answers that she wants to hear. At the end of the exchange, she wishes “for a falconer’s voice / To lure this tassel gentle back again” (lines 158–9). The word “again” suggests that Juliet has lured Romeo before the last instance near the end of the scene. Her behavior at lines 85–106 may indicate that she is beginning her “luring” tactics, that she, in other words, is teasing and taunting him. Shakespeare has her rhetorically enlist something similar to a training strategy in falconry and tame Romeo into saying and doing what she wills.

To understand how Juliet transforms Romeo’s behavior, we need to see that her rhetorical strategies can be read as similar to the falconer’s tactics of getting a bird to “fly to the lure.” The lure, consisting of a dead animal or bird that the falcon would hunt on its own, tempts or “lures” the bird back to the falconer. Once the bird flies on its own for the quarry that the falconer points out to it, the lure will entice the bird to bring the quarry back to its master and to eat the lure, not the quarry. In training the bird to the lure, the falconer swings the lure “round vertically once or twice”22 and then throws it out the full extent of the line, still holding the stick to which it is attached and also holding the creance attached to the bird. The trainer tries to get the falcon to notice the lure and fly to it: he twitches the lure by pulling on the line and dragging it a bit. Juliet, likewise, can be seen as “lur[ing]” Romeo, as she tries to get him to “fly to the lure,” that is, to speak in practical terms to her and get a commitment from him. Romeo must vow his love, for she asks him, “Dost thou love me?” (line 90)—a bold question that is
usually posed by the male, not the maiden. The lure that she throws out is the promise of herself (the promise of sexual consummation) or her body (chastity), for she comes out of the shadows at this point and acknowledges Romeo's presence. She speaks suggestively of expressing her "true-love passion" (line 104) and of being "too quickly won" (line 95), or of Romeo sexually conquering her and enjoying the spoils of copulation. Earlier Romeo, like a hungry falcon, has anticipated gorging himself on a full meal of Juliet's chastity: the moon's "vestal livery is but sick and green / And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off" (lines 8–9). He alludes to her virginity as a "livery," which, besides denoting a piece of clothing, can refer to an allowance or ration of food served out. He tells her to "cast off" her "vestal livery" or her chastity. The term "cast off" comes from falconry and means to throw out a lure (OED v. 6b), and it is at this important stage in the training that Juliet throws out her chastity to allure Romeo.

As the falconer twitches the food to attract the bird's attention, Juliet tantalizes Romeo: she repeatedly makes an initiative and invites Romeo, in turn, to make an overture and then she recoils, suggesting she may be acting too forwardly:

If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully.
Or, if thou think'st I am too quickly won,
I'll frown and be perverse and say thee nay,
So thou wilt woo; but else, not for the world.
In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond,
And therefore thou mayst think my haviour light.

(lines 94–9)

On a subtextual level, Shakespeare allows us to read Juliet as piquing Romeo's appetite for her by speaking seductively about his enjoying her fleshly delights yet denying him the chance. She tantalizes Romeo, asking him to express his feelings and to hear her express hers and yet denying him the opportunity for both. She asks him if he loves her but rebuffs him by answering for him and stating that if he should profess he might break his oath:

Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay',
And I will take thy word. Yet, if thou swear'st,
Thou mayst prove false. At lovers' perjuries,
They say, Jove laughs.

(lines 90–3)

Like a good trainer, Juliet keeps her "tassel-gentle" hungry for
some affection. If the training is to continue, a falcon’s sharp appetite must always have its edge: hunger in hawks “will enforce them to be more eager’ or ‘as an empty eagle, sharp by fast.”’²⁴ Petruchio of The Taming of the Shrew starves Katherine, who is “sharp and passing empty” (IV.i.177), both of literal food and sexual contact, and describes this technique: “And till she stoop she must not be full-gorg’d, / For then she never looks upon her lure” (IV.i.178–9).

The bird must be taught to be obedient, to fly directly to the lure. The falcon must learn to fly as its new master wishes, not as the falcon wishes: the bird is to “return to [its master] promptly” and “roundly, without delay.”²⁵ An expert explains the technique: upon just the sight of the lure, the falcon should “presently come in and be most obedient, which may easily be performed, by giving her reward when she doth your pleasure, and making her fast when she disobeieth.”²⁶ Consequently, if the falcon “checks”—“casual, random, or intermittent action, as distinguished from a sustained and deliberate effort”—and does not fly straight to the lure, the trainer removes the lure. The following advice explains the training procedure: “Just before the falcon reaches [the lure], jerk it towards you.” “The falcon should feel that if she flew just a little harder she would catch the lure, yet when she does so she still finds it eluding her by a fraction—so she tries harder still.”²⁸

Tantalized and “hungry” for Juliet’s chastity, Romeo flies to the lure, vowing his love: “Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow, / That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops—” (lines 107–8). But Juliet interrupts him: “O swear not by the moon, th’incon-stant moon” (line 109). In falconry terms, Juliet jerks the lure from him because Romeo does not make a direct flight to her. He “breaks away” as he did in his previous responses, launching on one of his “flights of fancy,” becoming distracted with an elevated paean to the moon. He, in other words, indulges his wild, unrestrained romantic nature. She removes the promise of herself because, as she tells him, his answer or flight has been unsatisfactory. In terms of falconry, she makes him fast when he is disobedient and lets him know that if he wants her affection, he must follow her instructions; he must please her, not himself. Like a trained hawk, he begins to see her as the new focus of his existence and becomes dependent on her, asking her for directions: “What shall I swear by?” (line 111).

Responding to his show of obedience, Juliet “throws out the lure” again, acting as if she might be receptive to him and telling him to “swear by thy gracious self” (line 113), not to
engage in lofty references to the moon but to speak directly of himself and in more practical terms—in falconry jargon, to fly straight to the lure. Romeo tries verbally to “fly” to her again, “If my heart’s dear love—” (line 115), but she is shown to be once again dissatisfied with his answer and withdraws the lure, “Well, do not swear. Although I joy in thee, / I have no joy of this contract tonight” (lines 116-7). The few words of his answer betray that he is beginning to launch on another erratic, indirect “flight,” and, consequently, she allows him to speak fewer words than in his previous attempt. In reference to falconry, she jerks away the lure faster than she did before and does not allow him to get close to it, making him fast even more for an incorrect flight pattern. She reaffirms her control: if she does not like his answer, he will get no “food.” Her withdrawal of the lure is more emphatic, more final as she threatens to leave him and, thus, to remove the lure of herself:

[This contract] is too rash, too unadvis’d, too sudden,  
Too like the lightning, which doth cease to be  
Ere one can say “It lightens.” Sweet, good night.  
This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath,  
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.  
Good night, good night.  

(lines 118–23)

With each repetition of “too,” she seems more determined to abandon the meeting or to not present the lure again, as she protests the alacrity of the wooing, although she has been the one who has rushed the wooing. But she yet again twitches the lure before Romeo, for her words can be read as continuing to tease him with a promise of a relationship. With the terms of husbandry having a sexual subtext, her language elicits images of fecundity and fruition and the promise of sexual consumption. With the allusion to a “contract” or a marriage agreement (OED 3), she makes his next flight to the lure more demanding (throws the lure farther from him) and makes it more difficult to catch in that he must not just vow his love (which he has not done yet) but also propose to her.

Romeo’s response betrays that her taunting tactics have increased his appetite, “O wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?” (line 125). He wants “satisfaction,” “satisfy” meaning to “put an end to an appetite by fully supplying it” (OED v. 6). Romeo’s pleas evoke the training of falcons through hunger and the equating of affection with food. He also asks Juliet if she would
“withdraw” (line 130) her vow to him. With the word “withdraw,” Shakespeare allows for the image of a falconer “withdrawing” or physically removing the lure from Romeo’s sight and teasing him—as Juliet has been doing. Romeo’s increased hunger makes him more receptive and more obedient, and he begins to “fly” or respond more directly, more practically to Juliet in his answers. When she asks, “What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?” he promptly responds, “Th’exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine” (lines 126-7). Instead of a flighty reference to the moon or to Cupid, Romeo makes a straight “flight to the lure,” stating the request she has led him to ask. His response is focused and short as he makes what sounds very much like a marriage proposal. Juliet does not withdraw the lure as before and make him fast. Falconry experts underscore the importance of rewarding a falcon and allowing it to take the lure after a successful flight. Juliet rewards Romeo, responding to him with luxuriant answers that ooze with erotic nuances:

My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep: the more I give to thee
The more I have, for both are infinite.

(lines 133-5)

Romeo does not get to gorge himself yet; he gorges himself only on the promise of endless bouts of sexual ecstasy—a tactic that both satisfies and tantalizes at the same time. Juliet gives him only a small amount of “food” or a vow of affection, even after all of the luring. He certainly gets no physical contact in this scene. After this brief “feeding” and getting Romeo to want more substantial food or affection, Juliet withdraws the lure by removing herself, leaving the scene momentarily and then reentering “above.” The primary reading is that Juliet is merely responding to the Nurse’s summons, that she is being careful that no one detects their meeting, and that she keeps coming back to steal just a few more precious moments with her beloved. But a subtextual reading allows for the possibility that Juliet is capitalizing on this opportunity to tease and tame Romeo. With her repeated references to leaving and with her actual exit, she can be read as playing with Romeo, keeping him always “hungry” and making him fearful that he will get no more food, that he will not see her again that night. He fears that “this is but a dream, / Too flattering sweet to be substantial” (lines 140-1). Juliet keeps him at a pitch of arousal because she has an even lengthier flight for him: she now requires more of a commit-
ment from him, for he is not only to agree to marry her but also to arrange the ceremony:

If that thy bent of love be honourable,
Thy purpose marriage, send me word tomorrow
By one that I’ll procure to come to thee,
Where and what time thou wilt perform the rite.

(lines 143-6)

Like a falconer, she gives him his first free-flying mission: he is to fly after the quarry—the arrangement of the marriage rite—and return it to her—to inform her of the time and place. If he obeys and makes a successful catch, she promises Romeo a full meal: “And all my fortunes at thy foot I’ll lay, / And follow thee my lord throughout the world” (lines 147-8). In hawking terms, she remains stationed on the ground as she gets her falcon-like mate to fly for her and capture the quarry—make arrangements for the marriage—which she as a woman cannot undertake from her position of confinement. She achieves a kind of freedom in her life, limited though it may be.

Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew tames his falcon, Katherine, in a similar but more literal and patent fashion. Like Juliet, he denies Katherine any physical relations, any signs of affection: a servant declares that Petruchio makes “a sermon of continency to her” (IV.i.170). Petruchio denies Katherine a full meal of sexual consummation of their marriage throughout the play. He also denies her the more basic sustenance of food, which in Romeo and Juliet is comparable to the “food of love” or affection. In IV.iii, both Petruchio and his servant Grumio taunt Katherine with food, much as Juliet taunts Romeo with her affection. Like Romeo, Katherine is in need of food: she pleads with Grumio to “satisfy” her by getting her “some repast, / I care not what, so it be wholesome food” (lines 15-6). Like Juliet, Grumio repeatedly tempts her with the promise of satisfaction, as he describes in delectable terms the dishes he could serve her, but he ultimately denies her any food at all. Petruchio then enters the scene and duplicates his servant’s actions. He holds the actual meat before Katherine and then withdraws it until she gives him the response he wants. Like Juliet, he feeds Katherine only when she gives him the simple, direct answers he requests—“I thank you, sir” (IV.iii.47). And, even then, he allows her to take only a few bites, keeping her in a perpetual state of hunger and, thus, amenable to his training lessons. Petruchio goes on to taunt Katherine not only with food but also with clothing and a trip to her family’s house. She must prove how well-trained she
is by answering as he wishes. Like Juliet, Petruchio tells Katherine what to say, and, like Romeo, Katherine learns to follow directions, if she wants to be satisfied.

Juliet's next move is to leave the scene again and then reenter to call Romeo back: “Hist! Romeo, hist! O for a falconer’s voice, / To lure this tassel-gentle back again” (lines 158–9). Harley Granville-Barker clarifies the conventional reading: Shakespeare enlists the “well-worn comic theme of the lovers that cannot once and for all say good-by.”31 But the falconry imagery allows for a latent reading in which Juliet calls Romeo back and postpones his departure in order to “lure” him “again,” just as she has been doing throughout the preceding part of the scene. She withdraws herself and her affection and then she reintroduces her body or the lure. She develops a special call for him, as all falconers must—“Hist!”—a word that denotes a sound used to summon a dog or other animal (OED 2). George Turberville refers to the special sound as a “whistle or the chirping of your mouth.”32 Another Renaissance practitioner of falconry, Edmund Bert advises a “keeper to giue [his hawk] his voyce out of her sight” as a way to assess the extent of the bird’s obedience.33 A highly trained hawk should not need to see the lure, but only hear its master’s call to be reclaimed. Juliet, likewise, is gauging how quickly and directly Romeo comes to merely the sound of her voice. While extravagant, Romeo’s answer is short, unlike the earlier lengthy tributes to Juliet:

It is my soul that calls upon my name,
How silver-sweet sound lovers’ tongues by night,
Like softest music to attending ears.

(lines 164–6)

He, moreover, avows that he has “attending ears,” that he is an attendant, ever waiting to serve her. He resembles a tamed hawk that “waits on” or follows the falconer wherever he goes. But because Romeo has not answered obediently enough, has not come to her call quickly enough, Juliet commands him again, “Romeo” (line 166), to which he quickly, directly, and obediently replies, “My nyas” (line 167). Shakespeare allows for Juliet to be testing her training skills, for she fabricates an excuse for calling him back and asks a superfluous question, “What o’clock tomorrow / Shall I send to thee?” (lines 167–8). She admits that she has no valid reason for reclaiming him: “I have forgot why I did call thee back” (line 170). Shakespeare permits the reading that Juliet calls Romeo back unnecessarily not just to assess
how well she has trained him but also to relish her control over him, to see him jump when she tells him to jump, to see him “still stand there” (line 172) until she tells him to go. Romeo shows that he is well-trained by responding to her question about when he will send his answer to her with a directness, alacrity, and practicality, uncharacteristic of his first long, unrestrained Petrarchan flights: “By the hour of nine” (line 168). Romeo’s answers after this point in the scene are all short, direct, seldom more than one line long. Romeo becomes as well-trained as Katherine in *The Taming of the Shrew*: they both learn to answer directly and to give their trainers the responses they want.

Romeo’s short, precise responses that are lodged in reality and concerns with time and practicalities contrast sharply to his lengthy, luxuriant, wandering speeches earlier in the scene, especially to his first speech in which he needed twenty-five meandering lines to state Juliet’s beauty. Kiernan Ryan attributes the “radical transformation” of Romeo’s language into a “more simple, direct, personal and resolute” style to his “love for Juliet.”34 But the change can be read in a different way if the emphasis is placed on the falconry imagery. The submerged reading suggests that the change results from less romantic influences—from Juliet’s consummate falconry strategies. To see how much progress Juliet has made, we need only contrast Romeo’s present crisp responses with his earlier inability to answer concretely and tersely Juliet’s practical questions about his name, his means of crossing the orchard walls, and his method of finding the location of her abode. In contrast to the man who fell into a quandary over whether to approach Juliet or not, over whether to answer her pleas or not, this new Romeo shows a decisiveness and certainty in his responses. He states that he will “stand here” (line 171) until Juliet remembers why she called him back. And Juliet agrees that he will “still stand there” (line 172). He will “stand still” or remain securely stationed near her, not moving until she “call[s] [him] back” (line 170). Well-trained hawks also remain motionless, not “bating” or flapping their wings but waiting their master’s next command. Petruchio describes ill-trained birds as those “that bate and beat and will not be obedient” (IV.i.183). Forgetting his wild state, Romeo declares that Juliet is his new resting spot: “And I’ll still stay to have thee still forget [why she called him back], / Forgetting any other home but this” (lines 174–5).

Much of the time, the falconer keeps his hawk hooded, for only when it is in darkness will it sit still. Gerald Lascelles states
that “what the bridle is to the horse, the hood is to the falcon; it is the only means by which she is controlled; without it, so nervous and excitable is her temperament that she would, even if trained and fairly tamed, dash herself from the perch at every strange sound or sight.” Romeo is represented in terms that evoke the picture of a hooded falcon: Juliet describes him as “bescreen’d in night” (line 52), and Romeo speaks of being enclosed in “night’s cloak” (line 75). These descriptions of Romeo suggest that, in order to tame Romeo, Juliet metaphorically has hooded Romeo or kept him in the dark as to her tactics. She has kept him blind to her tricks, for he is easier to tame if he cannot see what she is doing to him or how she is divesting him of his freedom. Certainly, if one concentrates on the latent falconry imagery, Juliet has controlled Romeo: he entered the scene wanting merely physical contact; she leads him into expressing love, proposing marriage, and promising to arrange the ceremony in precisely the way she designates. Juliet “cherishes” Romeo in that he provides her with a means to control her life, yet she must “kill” (line 183) his freedom to achieve freedom herself.

Juliet’s tactics are once again similar to those that the experienced falconer Petruchio uses with his haggard. Petruchio’s training is directed to making his falcon “come and know her keeper’s call” (IV.i.180–1). Near the end of The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio, too, tests the effectiveness of his training regimen by assessing the alacrity of Katherine’s response to his call (V.ii.66–9). Petruchio wins the bet with the other husbands because, unlike the other wives, Katherine comes obediently and quickly. Just as Juliet gets Romeo to accomplish missions for her, such as “fetching” her the quarry of the marriage ceremony preparations, Petruchio makes his falcon retrieve the quarry by bringing the disobedient wives before Petruchio and their husbands: “Go fetch them hither”; “Away I say, and bring them hither straight” (V.ii.104;106). When Katherine fulfills his commands, she is rewarded with affection—a kiss and the prospect of sexual consummation—just as Romeo is promised the reward of Juliet’s chastity. Romeo proves to be well-trained in that he fulfills Juliet’s mission of arranging for the marriage. Like the falconer who provides sustenance for himself without having exerted much of his own energy, Juliet has tried to “sustain” her mental well-being by determining her own future and arranging the marriage she wants, not the one her parents want for her, and she has never left her house.

In their next meeting, III.v, Juliet and Romeo have spent a
night together, consummating the relationship, and are reluctantly contemplating Romeo’s parting. Like the balcony scene, this meeting can be read in at least two divergent ways. Shakespeare is writing the scene in the form of the European folk tradition of the aubade. Jill Colaco explains that the tradition of the aubade is “rich in love lyrics which celebrate and lament the sweet sorrow of parting.” And, indeed, Shakespeare has written one of the most heartfelt scenes, in which the lovers savor their last moments together, reluctant to part and fearful of never seeing each other again. But on another level, there are signs of a “battle of wills,” for there is a latent combative tone to the exchange. Gayle Whittier, for example, notes the subtext: the lovers “do not co-create the aubade harmoniously as they did the sonnet [of their first meeting]: they argue its terms.” Juliet can be read as trying to reestablish her control, which seems to be waning.

From Juliet’s and Romeo’s first words in III.v we can tell that Romeo’s behavior has changed:

*Juliet.* Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day.
It was the nightingale and not the lark
That pierc’d the fearful hollow of thine ear.
Nightly she sings on yond pomegranate tree.
Believe me, love, it was the nightingale.
*Romeo.* It was the lark, the herald of the morn,
No nightingale. Look, love, what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east.
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.
I must be gone and live, or stay and die.

(lines 1–11)

While Romeo is obviously in more danger and, thus, is forced to be more realistic, his answer displays a growing sense of self-reliance and a determination to be on his way. No longer does Romeo seem to be as “bewitched” or under Juliet’s spell. In falconry terms, he can be read as chafing against being hooded and “put in the dark.” Several experts explain that keeping a bird hooded when it is finished hunting is important: the hood “is designed to blindfold the bird or, to use the original meaning of the word, to hoodwink, or fool, it into thinking that day is night. In complete darkness most animals will not move around, but will sit still . . . It gives the falconer some degree of control over his bird, and allows him to choose whom and what
she may meet [italics mine].”\(^{38}\) Shakespeare may be alluding to this falconry technique of hooding the bird, for he presents Juliet as trying to exert control over Romeo by convincing him that “day is night”—“Yond light is not daylight, I know it, I” (line 12)—and defining reality for him.\(^{39}\) The combative tone of the interchange becomes more pronounced, with Juliet sounding much as she did when she silenced the disruptive Nurse, who kept interrupting Juliet’s conversation with her mother: “And stint thou too, I pray thee, Nurse, say I” (I.iii.58).\(^{40}\) The reiteration of “I” and its placement at the end of the clause underscore that Juliet is asserting her will, that she is suggesting it will be her way or not at all. The scene can be read as a struggle over who will control Romeo.

This scene is mirrored in the sun/moon scene (IV.v) of The Taming of the Shrew, a parallel that clarifies Juliet’s submerged taming strategies. Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew, like Romeo, tries to assert her selfhood and integrity and objects to being treated like a “puppet” (IV.iii.103) whose actions, while ostensibly her own, are controlled by another. But Shakespeare has Petruchio exercise his control over his falcon nonetheless. Petruchio again behaves much as does Juliet: he argues with Katherine that the sun is the moon. Petruchio declares, “I say it is the moon that shines so bright,” to which Katherine responds, “I know it is the sun that shines so bright” (lines 4–5). The tone is similarly argumentative, as Petruchio demands that he impose his own reality on Katherine, that she see things his way or not at all: “It shall be moon, or star, or what I list, / Or e’er I journey to your father’s house” (lines 7–8). Juliet grants Romeo his freedom, and Petruchio allows Katherine to continue her journey to her father’s house, only after their spouses agree that it is the moon, agree that it is whatever their trainers say it is. Both Romeo and Katherine must parrot their masters’ words and attitudes: to Petruchio’s statement, “I say it is the moon,” Katherine concurs, “I know it is the moon” (IV.v.15–6). Like Petruchio, Juliet must have the last word and never be “cross’d.” She admits to the truth only after she imposes her will on Romeo. Shakespeare makes Juliet realize, though, that she is losing control with Romeo’s banishment, that Romeo is “divided” from her and no longer thinks of himself as a part of her but as an autonomous entity: “Some say the lark makes sweet division. / This doth not so, for she divideth us” (lines 29–30).

The last words of the play reinforce the inequitable relationship between Juliet and Romeo: “For never was a story of
more woe / Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.” There has been a transference of power in the play, of Juliet attempting to “turn the world upside down” and assume the role of dominance in the relationship and in her life. In a listing of a husband and wife, the husband’s name usually occurs first, symbolically representative of his role as patriarch. In this case, Juliet has usurped this role, and Romeo becomes “her[s],” an extension of her and a possession, similar to the situation of a woman in marriage. With her loss of control over Romeo and with his death, Juliet’s story is, indeed, “woe[ful],” and her only option seems to be death. When Juliet earlier contemplated death, she said “If all else fail, myself have power to die” (III.v.242). Since her only chance to control her life passes with the death of “her Romeo,” Juliet’s suicide may be her last act of defiance, her last act of controlling her own destiny by exercising the power to take her own life. Shakespeare suggests that for Juliet—and perhaps for all intelligent, strong-willed women—a physical death is preferable to a spiritual death in a world that denies women power over their own lives.

NOTES

6James Edmund Harting clarifies that falconers chose female birds to train because they were considered “superior” to males: females are “stronger in flight” and larger, the male being about a “third” smaller and, thus, the significance of the word “tercel” or “tassel” (The Birds of Shakespeare or the Ornithology of Shakespeare Critically Examined, Explained, and Illustrated [Chicago: Argonaut, 1965], pp. 54, 52). Consequently, falconers usually refer to the birds by using feminine pronouns, as will be evident throughout quotations in this essay. Although women could be falconers and there were famous ones such as Mary Queen of Scots, falconry was largely a male sport.


All textual citations will be from the New Arden edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. Brian Gibbons (New York: Methuen, 1980).

Brian Gibbons clarifies the meaning of the hawking terminology (p. 107).

Gibbons notes the “subsidiary quibbles on the hood used to cover a hawk’s eyes” in the terminology “hoodwink’d with a scarf” (p. 106).

Gibbons claims “the imagery of birds is associated with” Juliet (p. 156).


Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, p. 28.


I borrow the term “earthbound” in reference to Juliet from Calderwood, p. 90.

Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, pp. 227, 152.


Calderwood, p. 90.

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127–33, 127, thoroughly describes the stage in falconry training called “flying to the lure.”

23The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), sb. 1. All further citations will be noted in the text as from the OED.

24As Shakespeare notes elsewhere (Henry VI and Venus and Adonis, respectively); quoted in Madden, The Diary, p. 199.

25Emperor Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, p. 152; Turbervile, p. 129.

26Markham, p. 89.

27Madden, The Diary, p. 376.


29Jill Colaco notes that Juliet’s refusing Romeo sexual relations is unusual, for the Night Visit, after which the scene is modeled, typically “ends with the woman relenting and inviting her lover to enter” (“The Window Scenes in Romeo and Juliet and Folk Songs of the Night Visit,” SP 83, 2 [Spring 1986]: 138–57, 140).

30Colaco claims that Juliet “turns courtship into trothplight” and explains that “it is rare for the woman in folk songs to tie her lover to any conditions before admitting him” (p. 143).


32Turbervile, p. 143.

33Bert, p. 54.


36Colaco, p. 153


38Glasier, p. 90.

39T. J. B. Spencer clarifies that “the old material [of the aubade] is embedded in [Romeo and Juliet’s interchange], but it is all transmuted” (EOS: An Enquiry into the Theme of Lovers’ Meetings and Partings at Dawn in Poetry, ed. Arthur T. Hatto [London and Paris: Mouton, 1965], p. 522). In order to have Juliet keep Romeo “in the dark” and perform the falconer’s role, Shakespeare inverts the roles of the lady and her lover. It is typically the lady who addresses the dawn and informs the man of the rising of the sun while the lover is associated with the night. See R. E. Kaske, “The Aube in Chaucer’s Troilus,” in Chaucer Criticism: “Troilus and Criseyde” and the Minor Poems, 2 vols., ed. Richard J. Schoeck and Jerome Taylor (Notre Dame and London: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1961), 2:167–79, esp. 169, 172.

40There is often a combative tone to the aubade, but the lovers typically do not carry on an argument with each other so much as they rail against and chide the dawn or the herald of the dawn—the swallow, cock, or lark. Shakespeare makes a slight modification and develops the argument between the lovers.