The Taming of Romeo in Shakespeare’s ROMEO AND JULIET

Scene 2.2, known as the balcony scene, illuminates Juliet’s depth of personality and accentuates her struggle for selfhood. In this scene Juliet is conventionally perceived as happily and helplessly yielding to the tumults of juvenile love.1 Contrary to all conventional assumptions that see Juliet as Romeo’s passive beloved, I believe Juliet demonstrates her independence and masculine mind-set through her words and deeds. Shakespeare makes this clearly evident through falconry imagery that reaches its zenith in this scene where he traces parallels, on the one hand, between Romeo and domesticated falcons (generally females) and, on the other hand, between the way Juliet handles Romeo and the techniques falconers (generally males) employ to train their falcons.2 Here, the playwright inverts the gender roles, making Juliet engage in behavior normally exclusive to men.

Throughout the balcony scene, Juliet endeavors to train and discipline Romeo and turn him into a “manned” falcon the way Petruchio, the falconer in The Taming of the Shrew, trains and disciplines Katherine, his figurative bird. As the relationship between the falcon and her trainer is based on the domination and the subjugation of the falcon’s powers to the trainer’s will, Juliet shows strong tendency for power as she continually speaks of herself as a “falconer” and of Romeo as her “bird”:

JULIET. [to Romeo after midnight] . . . I would have thee gone, And yet no farther than a wanton’s bird, That lets it hop a little from her hand, Like a poor prisoner in his twisted gyves, And with a silk thread plucks it back again, So loving jealous of his liberty. (2.2.176–81)
She describes her lover as a “tassel-gentle” to be “lured”: “O for a falconer’s voice / To lure this tassel-gentle back again!” (2.2.158–59). She attracts his attention with “Hist! Romeo, hist!” (2.2.158), the way a falconer calls his bird. She fancies tying him to a “silken thread” (2.2.180), the way a falconer keeps his bird on a leash. She desires to see Romeo “still stand” (2.2.172) in the same spot, like a docile bird that does not “bate” its wings. Romeo, too, wishes he were Juliet’s “bird” (2.2.182).

It is common practice for the falconer to keep his falcon hooded, as the bird stands still only in darkness. Romeo is depicted as a hooded falcon: Juliet portrays him as “bescreen’d in night” (2.2.52), and Romeo admits being enclosed in “night’s cloak” (2.2.75). Romeo’s hooded image implies that, for Juliet to tame him, she has to keep him in the dark with regard to her tricks and tactics. For, like a falcon, he is easier to domesticate if he cannot spot what she is contriving for him or how she is depriving him of his independence.

Through the implicit falconry metaphor, Juliet demonstrates her skill at mastering Romeo, for Romeo has arrived at the scene yearning merely for bodily liaison; Juliet, instead, has piloted him, in McCown’s words, into “expressing love, proposing marriage, and promising to arrange the ceremony just the way she details” (155).

Juliet becomes a falconer who is firmly grounded in reality. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare is aware that, as a woman, Juliet is to be presented as having less autonomy than a man. Having Juliet assume the role of the earthbound falconer reflects Shakespeare’s awareness of female immobility. Juliet’s language indicates the extent of her confined status: “Bondage is hoarse and may not speak aloud” (2.2.160). Curbed by a patriarchy that censors and restrains female vocality, Juliet does not take wing in her words as Romeo does; rather, her words are straight, terse, unswerving, and realistic. While Romeo is figuratively soaring in the skies at the beginning of 2.2, Juliet gets down to business right away, talking as if she were closing a deal:

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. (2.2.34–36)

The subsequent rapid exchange (2.2.52–84) between Juliet and Romeo accentuates the disparity between the two lovers. Unlike her flamboyant lover, Juliet is intensely conscious of the reality of danger: “If they do see thee, they will murther thee” (2.2.70). She endeavors to make her flighty lover offer her straight answers by asking him direct and sober questions: “How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?” (2.2.62); “By whose direction foundst thou out this place?” (2.2.79). But, like a bird untamed yet, his responses are wild and indistinct. With unrestrained romantic vocality, he tells her that he finds her place:
By 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 washed with her farthest sea,
I should adventure for such merchandise. (2.2.80–84)

Yet Juliet’s repeated interruption of Romeo’s passionate answers is indicative of her dislike of his undisciplined manner. She takes it on herself to train him to provide her with the answers that she desires to hear. Her conduct, as illustrated in lines 85–106, suggests she has already started her “luring” tactics by taunting and teasing him. By the end of the scene, Juliet succeeds in converting Romeo from a “flighty” and wordy person into a realistic, compliant person of few words. She not only does well in taming him to respond in a sober and laconic way but she also succeeds in making him abide by her orders.

The text implies that Juliet’s incapacity to control her life presses her to resort to insightful ways of attaining freedom through simulating maleness. Her desire to control her destiny drives her to manipulate and tame the man who constitutes her life by turning him into her female pet. Through this Juliet hopes to flee from her confined status and achieve freedom via training her bird to fly for her. Juliet, therefore, “cherishes” Romeo because he gives her the means to empower herself at the expense of his liberty: “I should kill thee with much cherishing” (2.2.184).

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NOTES

1. Critics often see Juliet as innocent and childish. Pettet, for example, describes Juliet as a “spontaneous, passionate child of nature, whose speech and heart are always one” (116).
2. See Harting, 52 and 54.
3. See Lascelles, 19.

WORKS CITED
