

Birds, Humans, and Taking Flight in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy

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The history plays of the Tudor period appealed to both the English elite and the commoner. Shakespeare's first tetralogy written and produced between c. 1590 and c. 1593, and printed in the first folio in 1623, reviews England's Wars of the Roses. In part, Shakespeare helped explain the reasons for the Wars to a pre-modern nation still affected from its excesses.¹ Shakespeare's first four histories, the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, depict the Lancastrian and Yorkist warriors, the battles, and the moors, meadows, fields, and forests where the Wars' several campaigns were fought. To state this in another way and as he so often demonstrates even in his later plays, Shakespeare links humans with nature since to him, human beings and nature share two branches of the same cosmic force and were; therefore, inseparable. The first tetralogy also mentions several non-human entities in addition to the landscape: the bear, the fox, the rabbit, and especially, birds.

In the three parts of *Henry VI* and in *Richard III*, Shakespeare wrote for audiences intimately aware of bird-life; they hunted, ate, and raised them. The three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*, combined, mention at least thirty-two different species, from the peaceful dove to the predatory eagle, as well as bird-like creatures, like the cockatrice, that made their way into English folklore,² with which Shakespeare's playgoers would have also been familiar. These bird references illuminate and comment on human emotions and motivations and on a humanness shared by commoners and nobility, especially with regard to politics and civil war. It is in their vital immediacy that the birds become the prevailing image for life's struggles whether on the battlefield or within the home.

Several noted scholars ranging from Caroline Spurgeon to the contributors in Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton's volume, *Ecocritical Shakespeare*,³ discuss the relationship between animal and human in the playwrights' works. Spurgeon has contributed to our knowledge of Shakespeare's imagery and highlights bird movement, song, and/or appearance in *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *Henry V*, *Macbeth*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *Romeo and Juliet*; yet, she articulates little of the first Henry trilogy and its sequel, *Richard III*. To her credit, though, Spurgeon also created tables of other flora and fauna, but again, with limited reference to birds.

Bruckner and Brayton's collection of essays advances the work examined lately on ecocriticism, environmentalism, and ecofeminism that pertains to the early modern period in general and to Shakespeare in particular. These articles speak of women and nature, pastoralisms, the earth, flowers, and even excrement. While the essays spend time on flies, frogs, dogs and cats, they pay little attention to avians, though some of the contributors cite the martlet, kite, and starling, and a few others. Thorough discussions relative to Shakespeare's birds do not appear in this volume, however, and for good reason, the editors were interested in more broad analyses of the whole of nature that Shakespeare depicts.

Other scholars do spend more time on Shakespeare's fowl, like Robert Hornback in "Blackfaced Fools, Black-Headed Birds, Fool Synonyms, and Shakespearean Allusions to Renaissance Blackface Folly."⁴ This

1. The causes for the Wars of the Roses has been contested over the years. Shakespeare offers his contemporaries one plausible reason.

2. The English and other nations inherited the legend of the cockatrice from Pliny and others.

3. See Caroline F. E. Spurgeon in *Shakespeare's Imagery and what it Tells*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), and Lynne Bruckner and Dan Brayton, eds., *Ecocritical Shakespeare. Literary and Scientific Cultures of Early Modernity*. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2011).

4. Robert Hornback, "Blackfaced Fools, Black-Headed Birds, Fool Synonyms, and Shakespearean Allusions to Renaissance Blackface Folly," *Notes & Queries*, 55, no.2 (2008): 215-219.

essay compares the blackness on the crown of some birds in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* to blackface and racism in early modern England and its influence on blackface in early American theatre. In “Macbeth's Martlets: Shakespearean Phenomenologies of Hospitality,” Julia Reinhard Lupton equates martlets with kindness, generosity, and warmth. Phenomenology functions for Lupton as “a thematic in the plays and as a framework for grasping the condition of their performance.”⁵ Lupton cites one reference to the martlet in *Macbeth*, that by Banquo in Act I, scene six. This selection “achieves its primary communicative work of conveying the social ideals of hospitality via dramatic ironies that reveal that virtue’s constitutive vulnerability to violation and neglect.”⁶ Similarly, Steve Criniti’s “*Othello*: A Hawk among Birds” and Helmut Bonheim’s “Shakespeare's 'Goose of Winchester” refer to specific fauna; unfortunately, these scholarly, too, neither concentrate on the first tetralogy nor delimit several birds that operate metaphorically in it. Although many scholars’ arguments offer substantial contributions to Shakespeare studies—Laurie Ellinghausen in “*Shame and Eternal Shame*: The Dynamics of Historical Trauma in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy”⁷ comes to mind—they attend less to the birds in the initial quartet of histories than to other elements extant in these plays, such as the connections among avifauna behavior, characteristics, mannerisms, and habits within the human population. Several themes within these plays emerge as a result of these associations: human fear, cowardice, ambition and rivalry, loyalty, familial love, and failure. When attending the tetralogy, Shakespeare’s playgoers would have easily noticed these bird traits aligned with themselves; the lower classes in particular would have especially enjoyed viewing what they shared with the nobility particularly the concept of flight. While also exemplifying actual nature, of course, Shakespeare’s birds disclose both positive and negative human characteristics that factor thematically into the first tetralogy especially where characters directly and indirectly remark on bird flight and its derivatives—fleeing, flying, and flew.

The first remarks concerning “flight” in the English language date to roughly 900 a.d. in *Martyrology Frag* (*O.E.D.*). The *O.E.D.* defines “flight” as “to take (make, wing, etc.) flight” or “to fly.” Further phrases cited in the *O.E.D.* include “the action or manner of flying or moving through the air with or *as with* wings” (bold and emphasis mine). On the one hand, the gradual shift in meaning from birds to human fear was less an obvious metaphor than it is now. On the other hand, these definitions, particularly the latter set, signify that the early moderns were becoming accustomed to employing the language of flight and flying with fleeing both literally and figuratively. References to flight appear more times in this initial quartet of histories than in all of his other plays. The early modern concept of flight, sixteenth-century English notions of avian-ism, Shakespeare’s bird imagery as it does and does not relate to English folklore, and the possible reactions of sixteenth-century audiences to Shakespeare’s birds and politics is therefore the focus of this paper. The comparing of animal nature to human is certainly not new to Shakespeare analyses; the following assertions about the manner in which Shakespeare employs references to and descriptions of birds and bird flight I believe, is, in order to stress the so-called warriors’ cowardice.

Several of Shakespeare’s characters in the *Henry VI* plays and in *Richard III*⁸ often discuss battles and their peers’ behavior during them; they talk not only of flight but also of fleeing a battle by flying from it. One

5. Julia Reinhard Lupton, “Macbeth’s Martlets: Shakespearean Phenomenologies of Hospitality,” *Criticism*, 54, no. 3 (2012): 365-376. See p. 366.

6. *Ibid.*, 373.

7. See Steve Criniti, “*Othello* Literature-Film Quarterly, 32, no. 2 (2004) 115-121; Helmut Bonheim, “Shakespeare’s ‘Goose of Winchester,’ *Philological Quarterly*, 51 (1972): 940-41; and Laurie Ellinghausen, “*Shame and Eternal Shame*: The Dynamics of Historical Trauma in Shakespeare's First Tetralogy, *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 20, no. 3 (2008): 264-282.

8. All quotations from Shakespeare’s history plays come from David Bevington, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th ed., (New York: Pearson/Longman), 2004.

bird known by early modern playgoers as being particularly cowardly was the quail. Except for defending their nests, quail, which appear stout when compared with their short legs first run from danger, then take wing if it is only for a meager distance, sometimes to hide under a bush—chickens would have simply fled and not necessarily to a safer area like their coops. Quail belong to the *Galliformes* order and the *Phasianidae* family, as do partridges, peacocks, and domesticated fowl, chickens, for instance. Unlike chickens, quail would have most likely lived in the wild. At least from the medieval period in England quail thought of most often in the way we view the chicken, a bird that flees rather than fights. Definitions of “quail” in the *O.E.D.* associate the word not merely with a bird, but with its habit of falling away, fading, withering, yielding, and losing courage. Chaucer appears to be the first in England to refer to this bird in writing and in this manner: “And thou shalt make hym couche as doth a quaille,” with “couche” meaning to shrink down, cringe, recoil, and cower.⁹ The early modern English viewed quail as wanting courage particularly when compared to other birds like the falcon, even though popular bird folklore nonetheless claimed that the seemingly fragile and non-aggressive quail endangered sailors.

Sixteenth-century English naturalist, William Turner, reports the myth that these birds “often settle[d] on the sails, and that always at night, and so [sank] ships.”¹⁰ One has to wonder how quail, believed to be birds unable to fly well and far, could actually be found at sea. What most early English commoners did not comprehend was that quail actually migrated from the most southern regions of England to the northern parts of Scotland. Be that as it may, folktales endure more often than fact because contain elements of the fantastic. Although “quail” or its cognates does not appear in any of the first four histories, Shakespeare exploits the tall tales by creating Falstaff, who, in his physicality, his habits, and his actions appears like a quail, a rather rotund character whom Prince Hal describes in the later play, *1 Henry IV*, as a “huge hill of flesh” (II.4.242). The image of a blubbery man who sported short legs in comparison to his body, presumably played by William Kempe, himself having cut a portly figure, appealed to Shakespeare’s audience members.

In *1 Henry VI*¹¹ during the funeral of Henry V, a messenger runs on stage¹² to report the ill conditions England’s soldiers were facing in battle as they bravely, yet vainly, were attempting to hold onto England’s claims in France. One of the knight generals, a noble, whom another messenger reports “would fly swift, but wanteth wings” is errant knight Sir John Falstaff who mimics the common quail. (I.1.75). Falstaff “played the coward,” but, being wingless, he could only fly on foot (*1 Henry VI*, I.1.131) and might be imagined as concealing himself beneath any convenient hiding place and “quailing” out of fear.

The playgoers would have laughed at Falstaff’s jiggling about while fleeing battle looking for a safe place to hide. Perhaps Kempe, in playing him, would have pretended a stage post was a tree large enough—or not—to “quail” behind or, Kempe might have concealed himself beneath a stage property that could signify

9. See Geoffrey Chaucer as cited in *O.E.D.*, “The Clerk’s Tale,” c. 1383, l. 1206.

10. Turner was among the first to categorize birds by copying then translating Aristotle and Pliny. He then added commentary especially when he thought one or the other incorrect. William Turner, *Turner on Birds: A Short and Succinct History of the Principal Birds Noticed by Pliny and Aristotle*, 1544, Ed. A.H. Evans. (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1903): 63.

11. Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1577_5328. Shakespeare referred to Holinshed’s 1587 edition, rather than the 1577. “After this, with great pompe he rowed vnto West|minster, & there the thirtith daie of October he was with all ceremonies accustomed, annoited, & crow|ned king, by the whole assent as well of the com|mons as of the nobilitie, Henrie the s [...]uenth crow|ned king. and called Henrie the sea|uenth of that name: which was in the yeare of the world 5452, and after the birth of our Lord 1485, in the fortie and sixt yeare of Frederike the third then emperour of Almaine, Maximilian his sonne being newlie elected king of the Romans, in the second yeare of Charles the eight then king of France, and in the fiue and twentieth of king Iames then ruling the realme of Scotland” (1587. 6. 762).

12. See stage directions (s.d.) 513 and 514.

a thicket in which to conceal himself until he felt it safe enough to appear again. He certainly would not have let out a “wet-my-lips” call as quails do to signify their presence because doing so would have meant being exposed.¹³ All too often a quail’s calling out too soon unfortunately enabled hunters to locate it easily, and Falstaff wanted to avoid capture whether it be by the Lancasters or the Yorks. Unhappily, for his own men, Falstaff’s cowardly fleeing (I. 1.134) meant both abandoning them and endangering the other forces that were on the same side and fighting in the same location. Here, a quail would behave more nobly than Falstaff, for if its nest was being attacked, the hen would protect its chicks. Visually and figuratively, then, the playgoers would have comprehended the similarities between a top-heavy quail and the corpulent Falstaff. They also would have recognized the sometimes irreparable political damage Falstaff and those who behave as he caused their nations.

As *I Henry VI* indicates, Falstaff’s cowardice contributed to the English defeat of the French at Rouen. This knight could not be trusted, just as some early modern English distrusted quail, both as a danger to sailors and to anyone who chose to eat it. Turner wrote, “Their flesh is liable to ills so many, namely poison and the falling sickness”¹⁴ A quail-like figure could therefore put one’s life in peril, as Falstaff did his troops, who were likewise liable to so many ills. Thus, the messenger rightly scolds the nobility for their lassitude with “Awake, awake, English nobility!” (*I Henry IV*, I.1.78). Shakespeare’s playgoer would most likely have both disapproved of any lord who flies rather than fights and considered him a coward, as well as disloyal, treacherous, and injurious to his peers, his men, and in the end, to England, a country built on the backs of the common person who deserved the nobles’ protection.

Holinshed’s *Chronicles* describe the Rouen campaign that actually took place in Pataie – or Patay. In one entry, Holinshed records a one Sir John Falstolfe¹⁵ as having “departed,” or taken flight from, the “battell . . . without anie stroke striken” (1587.6.601). While there is no telling precisely how Shakespeare’s playgoers responded to Falstaff’s flight, they certainly would have reacted both when a noble appeared on the stage as well as showing explicit disapproval of Falstaff as they normally did when they disagreed with a character’s behavior, as reflected upon by Stephen Gosson and William Fennor.¹⁶ Gosson commented in 1596 that “in Publicke Theaters, when any notable shew passeth over the stage, the people arise in their seates, & stand upright with delight and eagernesse to view it well” (2.27/C7^v). Audiences also responded either with delight—or disgust—according to Fennor in an epistle titled, “The Description of a Poet” (1616):

They screwed their scurvy jawes and look’t awry,
Like hissing snakes adjudging it to die:

.....

Clapping, or hissing, is the onely meane
That tries and searches out a well write Sceane,

.....

The stinkards oft will hisse without a cause,

13. “Discover and Enjoy Nature,” “Bird Identifier,” “Quail,” Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), accessed 26 Feb. 2016, <http://www.rspb.org.uk/search/index.aspx?q=quail>.

14. Turner, 63.

15. Andrew Gurr in “In-Jokes about Spear-Shakers,” *Notes & Queries* 58, no. 2 (2011): 237-41. The 1623 editors changed Holinshed’s original spelling, Fastolfe, in the *First Folio* text to match the company’s later reinvention of the name in *I Henry VI*.

16. William, Fennor, *Fennors Descriptions*, (London, 1616); Stephen Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions*, (London, 1596); and *The Triumph of Warre*, (London, 1598).

And for a bawdy jest will give applause. (2.123/B2^r-3^r)

Thus, it is entirely possible that Shakespeare's audiences would have booed, hissed, and raised their fists at Falstaff. In *Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event*, John Russell Brown argues that "When a person in the play was threatened in a fight, spectators might run onto the stage in order to 'save the blow.'"¹⁷ Whether they would have thrown rotten fruit or climbed on the five-foot high stage is questionable, however. What would not have been debatable is that many of these spectators would have been familiar with Falstaff's name from the stories about the Wars of the Roses that circulated through the years and would have logically correlated Falstaff with disloyalty, cowardice, and with quail.

If anything, Falstaff certainly plays the "proud Jack," as Prince Hal refers to him in *1 Henry IV* (IV. 2.11). While a common nickname for John in the early modern period as it is today, "jack" was also synonymous with "knave," an attribute fitting the Falstaff in Shakespeare's histories. Significantly, this relationship would not have been especially lost on the playwright's sixteenth-century work-a-day audience, as they would have connected Falstaff with another type of "jack," the bird known as the jackdaw, also labeled the "daw."

A member of the crow/corvid family, the daw was likewise a scavenger that would plunder other birds' nests to feed on the eggs rather than hunt on its own. When other fowl would catch the daw off guard, this bird would fly off rather than fight for its meal; we often see starlings and other smaller birds chase crows away from their own nests. Although known as intelligent birds that can be taught to sing, daws may also choose not defend their own territory. Birkhead notes that ornithologists tend to disagree with this last statement¹⁸; however, Sibley claims that perhaps daws do go on the defensive; and like other corvids, they will sound "alarms," so "the other group members hide, fly away."¹⁹ Nonetheless, this description of the daw suits Shakespeare's portrayal of Falstaff. In *1 Henry VI* Shakespeare defines Falstaff's daw-ish characteristics before Act I, scene two. At the close of I.i, Duke Winchester claims he shall not be gutless like Falstaff, a "jack-out-of-office," or, one might claim, a knavish, loutish, male bird of little account (II.175). In addition, Falstaff admits in Act III to choosing "to save" himself "by flight" when a captain asks him, "Will you fly, and leave Lord Talbot" (II.105,107)? Since the early modern English typically despised the daw, as they did other corvids, there is no reason not to believe that Falstaff, in resembling the cowardly jackdaw, would have been scorned by his fellow knights, and by Shakespeare's playgoers.

Of course, Falstaff is not the only character representing the elite who speak of fleeing out of fear and/or cowardice in the tetralogy. In *Henry VI* part one, the Dauphin and Joan la Pucelle (Joan of Arc) fly off and provide shoddy excuses for doing so, despite their earlier boasting and bravado. Initially, Charles claims he "would ne'er have fled" the field, but his forces left him alone on the field in the middle of the English (I.2.23-24). Perhaps one should allow the prince some leeway; after all, his soldiers fled the battle, so what other recourse would he have had but to take flight, but throughout the play, Charles often behaves spinelessly. If Charles had demonstrated the bravery about which he blustered, then perhaps his men would have remained, and he would not have had reason to flee. In Act III the dying Bedford remarks most poignantly about Charles' cowardice:

17. John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare and the Theatrical Event*, (London: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2002), 11.

18. Tim Birkhead, *The Wisdom of Birds: An Illustrated History of Ornithology*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008,) 231.

19. David Allen Sibley, illus. and ed, et al., *The Sibley Guide to Bird Life & Behavior*, National Audubon Society (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), 413.

They that of late were daring with their scoffs

Are glad and fain by flight to save themselves.

(III.3.113-14)

While Pucelle was reputed to have been a shepherd's daughter, in this Henry play since she leads the French army, she is given the rights of a noble. Upon introducing herself to the Dauphin in I.2, Pucelle brazenly claims she would "ne'er fly from a man" (I.103). Her boasts are equally tenuous as are Charles'. Pucelle, however, runs from battle more than once and with Charles to boot. At one point Burgundy tells Bedford that Pucelle and Charles even fled "arm in arm," and "swiftly running, / Like to a pair of turtledoves" (II.2.28-30).

Ornithologically, doves are related to pigeons in the *columbidae* family, although pigeons are larger than doves.²⁰ The early modern English considered doves meek, peaceful, loyal, loving, and monogamous, but these species of birds seem to take flight rather capriciously, sometimes without reason. A walker may stroll among these fowl that seem to barely acknowledge the walker and leisurely move out of the way; then, suddenly, they fly off.

Shakespeare depicts Charles and Pucelle as capricious as doves, thereby reflecting a common attitude among the early English toward them and those they represent, the French. In fairness, though, Shakespeare at times treats the English with as much malice as he does the French, particularly when he reveals both the nobility's and the populace's switching their support from Lancaster to York, to whichever part of the family appeared the safest and most rewarding. In effect, the lower classes would fly and flit like starlings from one branch to another. But the public also observed on Shakespeare's stage that the aristocrats who could not garner the commoners' full support likewise fled. Queen Margaret did so when a messenger told her that

the commons of the citie would not suffer them to passe, [Uittels sent by the maior,] but staid them at Crippe|gate, notwithstanding the maior did what he could by gentle persuasions to quiet them. (Holinshed, *Chronicles* 1587.6.660)

Act IV scene viii of 2 *Henry VI* depicts Buckingham and Clifford as they confront Cade, who claims that he alone is the legitimate heir to the throne. Buckingham and Clifford convince the mob of citizens who follow Cade to abandon him; they decide either to switch sides or simply to fly away. Cade remarks in an aside: "Was ever feather so lightly blown to and fro this multitude" (II.54-55). Cade himself flees (I.64) "through the crowd, weapon in hand" (s.d. p. 591), and Clifford points out, "He hath no home, no place to fly to" (I.37). Cade is like a bird without a nest, and "knows [not] he how to live" (I.38); some auks like the murre (the Great Auk now extinct), lay eggs directly in cliff crevices.²¹ Cade's feather allusion, then, draws attention to general human nature, and Shakespeare's audience might have enjoyed witnessing their so-called betters behaving just as flightily. To elaborate on the metaphor, Cade is; therefore, unreliable and without the means to nourish his fledgling citizen followers, and typical of a mob, Cade's followers switch sides to which Cade responds in an aside: "Was ever feather so lightly blown to and fro this multitude" (II. 54-55). Consequently, Cade "is fled" (I.64) "through the crowd, weapon in hand" (s.d. p. 591).

To elucidate further on the above assertions: In similar fashion to the nobles' own supporters, Cade's rebels become disloyal to him indicating that both the upper and lower classes can adopt bird-like behavior.

20. Sibley, *Sibley Guide*, 319.

21. *Ibid.*, 312.

Shakespeare emphasizes this notion through Cade's birds of a feather analogy, one that suggests the similarities among the distinct populations of the sixteenth century—the nobility, the middling sort, and the lower classes. While a mob may at first seem to show loyalty to its leader, it will easily swap sides. Like birds on the wing, they know instinctively when to alter their flight patterns. And so did the nobility. Both Shakespeare's and history's Warwick, along with other nobles, flew in the opposite direction to join forces with their enemies. Cade's feather allusion draws attention to general human nature, and many in Shakespeare's audience would most likely have enjoyed witnessing their so-called betters behaving just as flightily.

References to bird flight, cowardice – and its association with loyalty and betrayal – appear, too, in *3 Henry VI*. At the start of this third history, Richard Plantagenet, Duke of York, has illegally assumed the throne in Parliament. Henry VI, now aged, had fled the Yorkists for a time. Both historians and Shakespeare have noted that the son of Henry V was indeed a coward as well as indecisive, unable to make exemplary decisions (example below). According to Stapleton, Henry's queen

Margaret might well be described as the presiding spirit of the first tetralogy, yet the two major articles that discuss the origin and nature of the genre do not mention the crucial figure of this controversial French queen as the binding agent of the four plays. Hers may well be the most multifaceted female role in Shakespeare, another example of the angry woman, *femina furens*, with rhetorical mastery of sententiae and tropes of exhortation and imprecation; androgynous in her words and deeds; capable of sorrow, pity, and anger at the weakness of her poor silly ass of a husband.²²

Queen Margaret's verbal abilities and her "amazing endurance despite the pervasive corruption, duplicity, and political intrigue of which she is sometimes the agent and at other times the victim"²³ enabled her to rule fifteenth-century England rather than Henry VI, who never wanted to reign and preferred fleeing rather than fighting.

But Henry alone should not have been chastised for taking flight. Other nobles wanted to follow suit but did not; it probably helped that in I.1. Norfolk threatened that anyone in his army "that flies shall die" (I.1.30). For Norfolk, there would be no bird-like behavior.

Warwick, too, alludes to flight in his boastful, falconry metaphor:

Neither the King, nor he that loves him best,
The proudest he that holds up Lancaster,
Dares stir a wing if Warwick shake his bells
(I.1.46-47).

Falconers traditionally dressed their hawks in bells that would attach a bewit, or leather straps threaded to small bells, around their bird's legs. The bells' tinkling even from large distances would allow the falconer to determine the location of the hawk as well as whether the falcon managed to catch its prey. Warwick, then, equates himself with hawks whose own bells would signal both his troops and his quarry—the Lancastrians—of his location. Should his enemy dare expose themselves from their hiding places, Warwick would surely hunt them down.

22. M. L. Stapleton, "I of Old Contemptes Complayne': Margaret of Anjou and English Seneca," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 43, no. ½ (2006) 100-133, p. 105.

23. Naomi C. Liebler and Lisa Scancellia Shea, "Shakespeare's Queen Margaret: Unruly or Unruled?" *Henry VI: Critical Essays*, Ed. Thomas A. Pendleton, (New York: Routledge, 2001), 79-96, p. 79.

Exeter, Northumberland, and Clifford, as well, desire to “pluck [York] down” (I.59), a clear pun on and a reminder about the picking of roses in *I Henry VI*; the phrase, however, also refers to plucking feathers to prevent a bird from taking flight. Although Henry cautions his men “the city favors” the Yorkists, Exeter reminds Henry, “But when the Duke is slain, [the citizens will] quickly fly” (II.67, 69).²⁴ Knowing Henry VI’s propensity for fleeing in times of crisis rather than surrender or fight, Richard (Duke of Gloucester and after Richard III) orders “drums and trumpets” be sounded, so “the King will fly” (I.1.117) and surrender the throne to York. Surprisingly, however, Henry does not fly; rather, he and York strike a bargain. Henry will rule until his death, after which York will inherit the crown. Despite this negotiation, the fighting between the two houses continued, and Henry still loses his crown; for him, York is “like an empty [hungry] eagle” that is “winged with desire” and will tear, or “Tire on the flesh of me and of my son” (*III Henry VI* I.2.268).

At the start of *III Henry VI*, I.4, York enters, describing the Battle at Wakefield won by Queen Margaret. According to York, when his followers sensed they will lose the battle, they “turn back and fly” (I.4). In fact, York compares the soldiers’ attempts to the swan that “With bootless labor swim[s] against the tide” (II.9-20) York and his “swans” must either eventually surrender to the tide or drown. Also, York spits rancorously then sings a hollow song as he weeps (s.d., p. 609). It could be said that York was less of a man and more of a coward, unlike swans and other *antidae* (the goose family) that do attack, hiss, snap, and bite when threatened. Eventually though, York resorts merely to words to dissuade Clifford from killing him. York’s pleas fail, soon dying by Clifford’s and Queen Margaret’s hands; York could not “fly their fury” (II.23).

Before York’s death Clifford insults him by referring to the nature of different birds:

So cowards fight when they can fly no further;
So doves do peck the falcon’s piercing talons;
(I.4.40-41)

York then threatens Clifford and the Lancastrians with vengeance: “[A]s the Phoenix, may bring forth / a bird” that will rise and enact “revenge upon you all” (II.35-36). York’s prophecy accesses folklore about the phoenix, represented later by Edward IV of the House of York and then by his infamous brother Richard III. With the recent discovery of Richard III’s remains in Leicester where once Greyfriars stood near Bosworth Field and where Richard was slain in 1485,²⁴ York’s prophecy in *3 Henry VI* now seems today less myth than reality. Yet as Shakespeare depicts him in this play, York’s behavior simulates a spoiled child’s, on the one hand; on the other, it offers a clear message to the Tudor court: watch like a hawk because ambitious men are dangerous men.

Ambition is a familiar theme in most of Shakespeare’s works; in particular, the tragedies. Katherine Knowles equates ambition with hunger and appetite in her reading of *Macbeth*.²⁵ And obviously, ambition also appears in the history plays; ambition causes nobles within a family to war against each other, elevates the underserving and the deserving, unites individuals once disassociated—and divorces others, and, importantly, ambition, Shakespeare seems to suggest, initiated the Wars of the Roses when Henry Bolingbroke usurped Richard II’s throne and York’s claim as rightful heir. The Wars continued, it seems,

24. A number of websites discuss the finding of Richard III’s remains under a parking lot where Greyfriars once stood. See https://www.history.org.uk/resources/general_news_1599.html, and www.richardIII.net, for instance.

25. Katherine Knowles, “Appetite and Ambition: The Influence of Hunger in *Macbeth*.” *Early English Studies*, 2 (2009): N.p., Pdf, accessed 4 June 2013, <https://www.uta.edu/english/ees/pdf/knowles2.pdf>.

because of the ambitions of other men as well, Warwick's, for instance. Ambition peppers this first tetralogy and clearly links with birds and flight.

While the first three history plays highlight external battles and physical fighting, *Richard III* focuses more on the duke's psychological, Machiavellian machinations. As well, Shakespeare relies less on bird imagery in this play than with those preceding it, but the usage of bird imagery, metaphor, and flight is very telling nonetheless. The following three scenes are not alone in depicting characters who anxiously flee capture. Stanley tells Richard that "the Marquess Dorset, . . . has fled / To Richmond" in Act IV, scene 2 (II.48-49). And earlier, Hastings learned through Lord Stanley's messenger that after having dreamt of Richard's murdering them, Stanley advises and prophecies that Hastings and he "fly the boar before the boar pursues," the boar of course referring to Richard whose supporters wore a pin replicating this animal (III.2.28-29).²⁶ Hastings, though, refuses to flee. To the early moderns dreams and prophecy may have merged with superstition and the supernatural, but Shakespeare connects these with a type of desperation individuals feel that the playwright connects to birds' fleeing for safety.

After Buckingham's ghost visits Richard III in the play's penultimate scene, Richard awakens startled and anxious. He admits to being a murderer who should "then fly" (V.2.186), and foreshadowing Milton's Satan, who cannot escape from himself because he is hell, and hell is therefore all around him, Richard questions, "What, [fly] from myself" (I.186)? Ratcliff soon interrupts Richard's soliloquy to inform him the time to return to battle has come: "The early village cock / Hath twice done salutation to the morn" (II.209-10).

The rooster's crowing signified for early moderns the start of the day; however, it also indicated either a ghost was nearby²⁷ or lovers were unceremoniously separated, as revealed by an English folk song called, "The Grey Cock".²⁸ When the cock crows in *Hamlet*, it both signals the morning and warns Hamlet's father's ghost to vanish. When the cock crows in *Richard III*, however, it somehow prevents the king from taking flight before dawn. The rooster may also have forecast Richard III's death: In "The Grey Cock" the young man leaves his lover after the rooster heralded dawn—he did return to her as promised, but as a corpse. In his attempt to return to his throne, Richard also dies.

Early modern Englanders referred to the rooster sometimes as a cockerel. Interestingly, cockerels could be hermaphroditic and therefore could lay eggs. Birkhead traced the history of egg-bearing cocks and found that in 1474 a cockerel was "burned at the stake in front of an immense crowd in Basel" for bearing eggs.²⁹ When cut open, the bird's "executioner found three more eggs, confirming that the bird was indeed an inauspicious creature whose fate was fully justified."³⁰ To those who raised chickens in early modern England, hermaphroditic roosters would have been familiar to them, but understanding the scientific anomalies within nature were not. The inexplicable became part of folklore that lasted well beyond sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England.³¹ Also according to Birkhead, hermaphroditic cockerels were thought to have bred cockatrices, dragon-like creatures with the head of a rooster that, if stared at, would

26. Archaeologist Dr. Glenn Foard said after finding Richard III's boar pin, this king's symbol, "led them to pinpoint the battlefield and where the king fell. "This is almost certainly from a knight in Richard's retinue, who rode with him to his death on that last charge," accessed 1 March 2016, http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2010/02/19/article-1252208-085F92D3000005DC-756_634x497.jpg.

27. See Jacqueline Simpson and Steve Roud, *Dictionary of English Folklore*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 74.

28. Roud #179; Child #248; Ballad Index c248. Child edited part viii, but George Lyman Kittredge is also attributed on the front cover for the series, accessed 20 Dec. 2015, <https://mainlynorfolk.info/lloyd/songs/thegreycock.html>.

29. Birkhead, *Wisdom*, 274.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*

turn one into stone.³² Both Conrad Gessner and Ulisse Androvandi, two sixteenth-century naturalists, describe the cockatrice in this manner in their seminal ornithological studies.³³

No reason exists to disbelieve, then, that some members of Shakespeare's audience would have likened Richard III to the cockatrice myth, especially when the Duchess of York, Richard's mother, bemoans the fact that she gave birth to such a monster:

O ill-dispersing wind of misery!
O my accursed womb, the bed of death!
A cockatrice hast thou hatch'd to the world,
Whose unavoided eye is murderous. (IV.1.52-55)

Nearly anyone whom the ruthless Richard III espied, died.

Richard, then, is a cock full of ambition: he struts his ground, shows his feathers, proclaims his presence, possesses eyes that petrify, and, so to speak, lifts his spurs to fight.³⁴ It might be suggested that Richard describes himself comparably in his opening soliloquy, and in approximately 1513 Sir Thomas More describes Richard as

not letting to kisse whome he thought to kill: despitious and cruell, not for euill
will alway, but offer for ambition, and either for the suertie or in|crease of his
estate. (Qtd. in Holinshed, 1587.6.712)

Although he reigned a mere two years, Richard III's historical climb to the throne and Shakespeare's literary rendition of it was like a cock-fight, a sport in which some of Shakespeare's spectators would have both participated in and/or witnessed, thereby further enabling them to accept his characters and actions on the stage. And, as with a cockatrice that killed without remorse, Richard III murdered without a second thought those whom he contended would prevent him being crowned and remaining king. For the cockatrice, beast, man, woman, or child would suffice; for Richard, only the deaths of his brothers, innocent children, or other individuals who threatened or challenged him would satisfy his lust for power.

Shakespeare's truth about the hunger for power through bird flight metaphor and imagery occurs several times in Act II, scene one of *3 Henry VI* when he again alludes to falconry, the first *3H6* reference appearing in I.4.41 shortly after news of York's death reach his sons Edward and Richard, who then bicker over who shall become the next Duke of York. During their argument, younger brother Richard challenges Edward by referring to a bird of prey native to England and revered by the English people, the eagle. Richard states, "Nay, if thou be that princely eagle's bird, / Show thy descent by gazing 'gainst the sun" (II.1.91-92). According to common English folklore, the eagle could gaze into the sun without blinking; if any of its young could not do the same, the eagle would reject it.³⁵ While Richard merely suggests Edward fly toward the sun, Richard's dare would have reminded some in Shakespeare's audience of the legend as told in Holinshed and retold to all classes of English:

32. Ibid.

33. Conrad Gessner, *Historia Animalium*, 5 vols., Vol. 3, (Zurich, 1551-1587); Ulisse Androvandi, *Ornithology: The History of Birds* (my trans.), (Bologna, 1599-1603).

34. To prepare for the gruesome sport, cock-fighting, roosters' feet would be dressed with either spurs or sometimes knives to shred its opponent and kill it.

35. For early references that the early modern English adapted see Pliny, St. Augustine, St. Anthony of Padua, William Caxton, and also *The Prayer Book Dictionary* by Harford, Stevenson, and Tyrer, 1912.

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At which time the sunne (as some write) appeared to the earle of March like thrée sunnes, and suddenlie ioined altogether in one. Upon which sight he tooke such courage, that he fiercelie setting on his enimies, put them to flight: and for this cause men imagined, that he gaue the sunne in his full brightnesse for his badge or cognisance. Of his enimies were left dead on the ground thrée thousand and eight hundred. (1587. 6. 660)

Shakespeare later refers to this same analogue when in *Richard III* the Duke of Gloucester refers to his brother Edward as “this son of York” (I.1.2), a singular entity that, like the eagle, does not fly in a flock. Warwick informs Edward and Richard that upon hearing of York’s death, he “mustered [his] soldiers, gathered flocks of friends” to fight at St. Albans, a battle Warwick actually lost in 1461 (*3 Henry VI*, II.1.112).

Shakespeare’s continuing to relate birds to human ambition and the subsequent lust for power continues when Warwick refutes Richard’s accusation that he is a coward: “’Twas odds, belike, when valiant Warwick fled” (I.148). Warwick claims otherwise, bragging he will “pluck the diadem from faint Henry’s head” and describes Clifford and Northumberland as “proud birds,” who with many “of their feather,” have “wrought the easy-melting King like wax” (II.169-72). Warwick also professes he will “never once again turn back and fly” (I.185); he will remain like an eagle or a falcon, a determined bird of prey.

References to falcons appear in *2 Henry VI* when Queen Margaret enthusiastically describes her day of hawking, and although she speaks of falconry, the entire scene functions as a conceit on the Wars of the Rose, and of Pucelle’s role in it. In Act II the queen refers to a bird she generally enjoyed flying that she called “Old Joan,” but on that particular day the bird refused to fly, so Queen Margaret operated another (II.1.3-4). While “Old Joan” was considered a term of endearment to refer to a favorite bird by both the commoners and the elite, what is striking is the allusion to Pucelle, whom Shakespeare has England burn at the stake in *1 Henry VI*. In effect, this term not only reminds playgoers of Pucelle’s having hunted the English and then flying back to her handler, Charles, but also recalls for the audience Pucelle’s eventually becoming the prey. Furthermore, “Old Joan” forecasts the deaths of those who fled battle, yet were eventually captured and killed. Shakespeare, too, reinforces Queen Margaret’s abilities as both a winning hunter and a strong woman who ruled England much more forcefully than her own husband, King Henry VI. Her strength and fearlessness, as Shakespeare and even Holinshed depict her, undoubtedly promoted Elizabeth I’s own talents as ruler.

After conversing about her successful hunt, Queen Margaret participates in Gloucester’s discussion, which soon turns to charges the Cardinal lays against Gloucester. King Henry commends Gloucester for his falcon’s “pitch” that “she flew” (*2 Henry VI*, II.1.5-6). Gloucester’s falcon, most probably a peregrine because these large female hawks were strictly limited for use by the men of the upper classes. Henry’s astonishment about the greatness of Gloucester’s bird rings especially true because “birds are fain of climbing high” (*3 Henry VI*, II.1.5-6, 8). This metaphor, then, suggests that birds do not vie for the position of height unless they must, a behavior dissimilar to humans’.

Suffolk continues the falconry metaphor by appearing to praise Gloucester but insinuates the latter desires the crown:

My Lord Protector’s hawks do tower so well so
well;
They know their master loves to be aloft
And bears his thoughts above his falcon’s pitch.
(II.10-12)

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Gloucester responds in what appears to be banter:

My lord, 'tis but a base ignoble mind
That mounts no higher than a bird can soar. (II.43-44)

The Cardinal feels his own suspicions confirmed: "He would be above the clouds" (I.15). Gloucester, though, asks the Cardinal, "Were it not good Your Grace could fly to heaven" (I.17)? This retort simultaneously appeals to Henry very much and diverts attention away from him.

Unfortunately, Gloucester still died a horrible death, also accounted for by both Holinshed and Shakespeare. Regarding Margaret's lust for power when she attempts to remove Gloucester, Holinshed reports,

in casting how to keepe hir husband in honor, and hir selfe in authoritie, in making awaie of this noble man, brought that to passe, which she had most cause to haue feared, which was the deposing of hir husband, & the decaie of the house of Lancaster, which of likelihood had not chanced if this duke [Gloucester] had liued: for then durst not the duke of Yorke haue attempted to set foorth his title to the crowne, as he afterwards did, to the great trouble of the realme, and destruction of king Henrie, and of manie other noble men beside. (1587. 6. 627)

Shakespeare's playgoers might have recollected stories about the true and honest Gloucester who wanted nothing more than to protect the realm.³⁶ And, Shakespeare's masterful artistry condensed time within a conceit that began with a simple conversation about birds' hunting their prey with the kinds of high flying wings that enabled them to soar into the heavens to complete the job for which they were trained.³⁷

In the midst of his portraying the ambition, the power plays, the violence, and the misery that align with war, Shakespeare, though briefly, depicts reminders about, and moments of, familial love. In *3 Henry VI* Clifford chides Henry for not protecting the prince's legacy to the crown even though Henry feels beaten. Clifford stresses that

doves will peck in safeguard of their brood.
...
Yet, in protection of their tender ones,
Who hath not seen them, even with those wings
Which sometime they have used with fearful flight,
Make war with him that climbed unto their nest,
Offering their own lives in their young's defense? (II.2.18, 29-32)

Through Clifford, Shakespeare reminds his playgoers of the quail but, more importantly here, he contrasts the bond between very docile birds and their young with Henry's attitude toward his own young son, Edward of Prince of Wales, whom, to Shakespeare, Henry abandoned, thereby leaving the prince disinherited and vulnerable to assassination by Henry's enemies. Historically, however, Prince Edward fled to France with his mother Marguerite, and then returned to England with both his mother Marguerite

36. According to Holinshed, Gloucester was a "noble duke: he was an vpright and politike gouernour, bending all his inde[u]ours to the aduancement of the common-wealth, verie louing to the poore commons, and so beloued of them againe; learned, wise, full of courtesie, void of pride and ambition (a vertue rare in personages of such high estate) but where it is most commendable" (1587. Vol. 6. 627).

37. Hunters' capturing and possessing birds of prey sometimes treated them very cruelly by imprisoning them, so to speak, and by sometimes sewing their eyelids shut until they took to their training. Human cognition of and sensitivity toward animal rights was barely in its infancy during this time in history.

and his wife Anne Neville; Henry VI died in the Tower in 1471; his son Prince Edward at age 18, at the Battle of Tewksbury in the same year. Edward IV died in 1483, leaving his 12-year-old Edward as king. As is known, Richard, as Gloucester, imprisoned both Edward and Edward's brother Richard in the tower and ordered their deaths. In faith, Clifford's scolding Henry VI above, aligns with the historical Henry's disinheriting his son in the Act of Accord (1460).

In one sense, Shakespeare admonishes those who appeared not to value their children, which might have hit a tender cord with his playgoers. Some parents physically abused their youngsters, used them to commit petty crimes, abandoned them, and even murdered them.³⁸ Yet Shakespeare also nods to the brave, principled folk, even the simplest and weakest among them, who would defend their fledglings rather than flee their responsibilities as parents. Shakespeare, therefore, honors the frail among the early modern English who would have comprehended and appreciated his noticing their own bravery and tenacity, particularly against oppression. Shakespeare's spectators might have also called to mind the number of men, ordinary men, whom the nobles conscripted into service, and who would have been happier to lead everyday lives with the "women and children of so high courage" that they left behind (*3 Henry VI*, V.iv.50-51).

But Shakespeare does not criticize the entire nobility; rather, he underscores members of the elite who deserve commendation. During a battle in *1 Henry VI*, Talbot and his son John argue about whom should leave the field, John, because his father had already lived his life, or Talbot, for whom his son is willing to sacrifice his own life in order that his father might continue to live. Neither took flight. They agreed to fight together; and if they died, they agreed that, together, "soul with soul from France to heaven fly" (IV. 5.25-26, 44, 55). Neither a "jack" nor a Falstaff or even a Henry VI, John remarks that those who would leave have "basely fled" and that "he who flies so will ne'er return again" (II.17.19).

In *Pierce Pennilesse*, Thomas Nashe remarks,

How would it have joyed brave *Talbot* (the terror of the French) to thinke that after he had lyne two hundred yeares in his Tombe, hee should triumphe againe on the Stage, and have his bones newe embalmed with the teares of ten thousand spectators at leats, (at severall times) who, in the Tragedian that represents his person, imagine they behold him fresh bleeding! (F3^r-3^v)³⁹

In effect, both Talbots resemble Gloucester, all honorable men who gave their lives for their beliefs—supporting the English crown and saving England's claims in France. Honor and courage, Shakespeare asserts, are attributes worth emulating, and if one needs additional courage, merely look to those who might resemble brave and caring birds. He also implies that had more noble men and women been of the Talbot ilk, the Wars of the Roses might not at all have occurred, therefore suggesting one possible reason for the start of the Wars. Through the Talbots' actions and attitudes toward each other, Shakespeare instructs his audience on familial love, and that which results from it, respect and loyalty.

38. Henry Machyn, *Diary of a Resident of London. The Diary of Henry Machyn Citizen and Merchant-Taylor of London, From A.D. 1550 to A.D. 1563*, Ed. John Gough Nichols, Camden Society 42. (London, 1848): 119, 298; Tim Reinke-Williams, *Women, Work and Sociability in Early Modern London*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 32; Lloyd DeMause, "The History of Child Abuse," Speech 25 Sept. 1997. Qtd. in *The Journal of Psychohistory* 25.3 (1998): N.p., accessed 29 Dec. 2015, <http://psychohistory.com/articles/the-history-of-child-abuse/>; Arthur F. Kinney, Afterword. "(Re)presenting the Early Modern Rogue," *Rogues and Early Modern English Culture*, Eds. Craig Dionne and Steve Mentz, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 361-381, p. 366; James I, *An Act to prevent the destroying and murthering of Bastard Children*. (London, 1624).

39. Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Pennilesse*, (London, 1592).

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In the citation above when Clifford scolds Henry for poor parenting, Shakespeare also recalls Falstaff's flight and in doing so signifies the elite's greed, jealousy, lust, murderous deeds, contentiousness, vengefulness, and spinelessness. Not only does the aristocracy function for the lower classes as flawed human beings but also as archetypes of sibling rivalry. In the three parts of *Henry VI* and in *Richard III*, the elite appear as tragic figures through whom the poorer English citizens who attended these histories might have experienced a catharsis and, therefore, a deliverance from the emotional and psychological damage of, if not explanation for, the Wars of the Roses that nearly destroyed England. And whether Shakespeare collaborated on any of these first histories; whether he accurately followed Edward Hall's and Holinshed's *Chronicles*, or even whether he initially set out to answer why the Wars of the Roses occurred at all fails in comparison to his reliance on common knowledge about birds and his facile ability to partner their flight and behavior with humans. For Shakespeare, neither human kind nor non-human can afford the luxury of an impassive indifference to the meaning of survival and what it materializes as a result. A parallel between soldiery and birds is a fateful inevitability of their respective situation, and as the birds go, so do those engaged in combat.

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