THE NOBLEST OF SPORTS: FALCONRY IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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"Ah, what great pleasure God our Lord conferred on man when He gave him the sport of dogs and birds... and when He willed that beasts and birds should be obedient to him!"

In such words did good King Modus in the fourteenth century voice the spirit of his age in praise of falconry, "the noblest of sports."

All the mediaeval world hunted. Like the art of warfare, hunting was part of the education of every knight, who took as much pride in the falcon on his fist as in the sword at his side. Knights took their favorite birds to war with them and entrusted them to their squires only at the moment of battle. Even bishops were known to carry their falcons to church and to relinquish them only when approaching the altar. A Bishop of Ely so valued his stolen falcon that he excommunicated the thief. In a famous fourteenth-century book, Le Ménagier de Paris (The Goodman of Paris), the unknown author advised his young wife to carry her hawk with her wherever people gathered, "at church or in other assemblies."

Falconry was ardently pursued with costly trains of dogs and horses by the upper classes, but it was by no means confined to them. The Boke of Saint Albans, printed in 1486, lists the kinds of falcons and hawks appropriate to each rank of mediaeval society, ranging all the way from the lordly eagle for the emperor to the lowly "muskyte" for a holy-water clerk. In this book the noble gerfalcon is assigned to a king. Philip the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, ransomed his son, the Count of Nevers, by a gift to the Sultan Bayazid of twelve white falcons—probably the Greenland or Iceland gerfalcon, rare and most highly prized. This kingly ransom was well chosen, since the sultan's passion for falconry was such that he kept no less than seven thousand hawks.

Although falconry, which has been called the oldest sport known to man, was practiced in western Europe before the Crusades, it received new impetus from knights returning from the Near East, where it had been known at least as early as the first millennium before Christ. The Emperor Frederick II, who employed Muhammadan trainers, was one of the greatest mediaeval falconers of Europe. Even while he was besieging Faenza in 1240 he found time to correct a translation of an Arabic work on hawking. His own book on hawking, De arte venandi cum avibus, was a principal source of many later books.

Great patience and skill were required to train falcons and hawks. When first captured, the bird—usually female, for females, larger than the males, make the best hunters—was left alone in a quiet place in complete darkness and kept awake. Lack of food made her gradually welcome the falconer, who brought her choice bits of raw meat and who began to carry her perched on his fist. He carried her for longer and longer periods, to accustom her to other people and to dogs and horses. Finally he took her to a secluded spot and taught her to return to his fist. In the case of a falcon it was necessary to use a lure, a pair of bird's wings to which was tied a tempting bit of food. The hunter swung it above his head by a cord and cried to his bird as he did so, "cherishing her with his voice, which was a great encouragement to her," according to Sir Richard Blome, a seventeenth-century writer who followed the mediaeval traditions. Gradually the falcon learned to fly to the lure from greater distances, until finally the falconer released a live bird in place of the lure.

When fully trained, the falcon soared into the blue, sometimes even out of sight, circling above her prey and then diving upon it like a thunderbolt. The shock of the impact stunned
or killed the bird, which fell to earth. The falconer then reclaimed his falcon by the use of the lure before she had time to gorge on her quarry, which was usually retrieved by the dog. Care had to be taken lest she satiate herself, or she might never again have returned to her master. After each flight, however, she was rewarded by some choice part of the victim.

In the ancient and royal speech of falconry each claw, and even each feather, had its particular name. For instance, a hawk was “dis-
A lady with a falcon. Flemish tapestry, school of Arras, 1420-1435. Height 8 feet 6 inches. Given by Mr. and Mrs. Frederic B. Pratt
closed,” not hatched; she “rejoiced” when she sharpened her beak and shook her feathers after catching game; she was a “brancher” when she had learned to fly from branch to branch. An “eyas” was a young hawk taken from the nest, while a “haggard” was an adult hawk who had learned to hunt (or to “prey”) before she was captured.

Since what is in men’s minds is eventually portrayed in word and picture, it was not long before the noble sport of falconry was emblazoned in manuscript illumination, carving, fresco, and tapestry. Two rare hawking tapestries, a generous gift to the Museum from Mr. and Mrs. Frederic B. Pratt, offer a happy excuse to call attention to the subject of hawking in the mediaeval tapestries in the Museum. Most of these tapestries, together with groups of ivories, manuscripts, and other material illustrating the sport as it was practiced in the Middle Ages, are now being shown at The Cloisters. This exhibition of “The Noble Sport of Falconry” opened to the public May 17 and will continue throughout the summer.

The two Pratt tapestries must have formed part of the same series. (The same cartoon, in one case reversed, was used as a model for the ladies in both tapestries, the figures being nearly identical below the necklines.) The tapestries probably once belonged to a larger set made to decorate the chamber of some grand seigneur. Perhaps the seigneur and his lady are the two figures seated in a flowery mead—the champ vermeil or champ vert herbu so often spoken of in the inventories of the day—in the first tapestry.

The lady wears a tasseled falconer’s glove to protect her skin from the sharp talons of the merlin perched on her right fist. In the
words of Sir Richard Blome, the gentle merlin "is fit for ladies" by reason of her "smallness and fine shape" yet is "very bold and eager at her game." The merlin is held in the traditional way by jesses, two strips of soft leather, one end attached to each leg, the other end held in the falconer's hand. A bell is also attached to each leg. According to the Boke of Saint Albans, bells should be equal in weight and not be "one sound," but "a semi-tone under another" and "sonore of ringing." Birds should be carried so gently, according to King Modus, that whether one is afoot or on horseback the bells will not sound. The purpose of the bell is to locate the bird after she has flown at her game and is out of sight.

The gentleman in the tapestry holds a rod in his hand and seems to be dipping it in the pool of water. Perhaps he is stirring the water, which is recommended by King Modus when a newly captured bird will not at first bathe herself. The sound of water being stirred was tempting to the bird, and a bath invigorated her and made her a better hunter. Rods were used also to smooth and stroke her feathers.

The lady in the second tapestry carries a bird which might be identified as a sparrow hawk. It appears to be of the same family as the one carried by the noble lady in the Unicorn tapestries in the Cluny Museum. One of the Stuart kings delighted in these agile hunters—this in spite of the lowly position given to them in the Boke of Saint Albans.

Ladies in general preferred the gentler sport of falconry to rougher forms of hunting, to judge from the opinion of a French poet of the fourteenth century, Gaces de la Bugne, who wrote that "a great lady who would conserve her reputation will not spur her horse through wood, brush, and hedge and will not
go with pleasure to kill stags, wolves, or boars. . . . Such sport belongs to men.”

As King Modus wrote, hawking “is a pastime which everyone can enjoy with ladies and maidens,” and we know, from other contemporary representations of hawking, that opportunities for making love were not neglected. In the Jugement de chiens et d’oisiaus, also by King Modus, the jollity of these mixed hunting parties is hinted at:

Et quant plusieurs vont en gibiers
Jennes dames et chevaliers,
Et chascun a son esprèvier,
Et vont ensemble en gibier,
L’un faut, l’autre prent, l’autre vole,
Et l’un de l’autre se rigole.

In one of the tapestries of country life in the George Blumenthal collection now on exhibition in the Museum, a lady and a gentleman are mounted together on a horse, the man holding his hound on a leash (ill. p. 256). Another lady rides alone in front, facing her falconer, who presents the duck that the falcon (on the lady’s fist) has apparently just caught.

The Goodman recommends that the horse used for hawking be “low and easy to mount and dismount . . . , peaceable to ride without frisking or wheeling or pulling on the bridle or kicking and that he stand very quiet and still.” Dogs too must be well trained, not too restive, and accustomed to being held on a leash. They must not be allowed to go too far ahead lest they flush the game before the hawk is near enough to take it.

There is another Blumenthal tapestry of country life, one of a set of four, that also shows scenes of falconry. In one a hunter is shooting a bird with a bougon, a large-headed arrow. The Goodman says this is permissible when the bird flies into a bush and will not come out for fear of the hawk. In the second tapestry of this set, a falcon is attacking a heron, which tries to protect itself with its upturned beak.

Heron hunting was considered particularly good sport because of the strength and power of herons in flight. Cranes and other waterfowl, as well as partridge and pheasant, were also considered excellent game for the falcon. A beautiful millefleurs tapestry, lent to the Museum by Mrs. David K. E. Bruce (ill. p. 257), shows a falconer offering a lady a blue heron which her peregrine falcon has just brought down. Attached to the falconer’s belt is the lure used to retrieve the bird.

At the time the Pratt tapestries were woven mediaeval costume had nearly reached the height of its fantastic splendor. The lord and his lady are each clad in a rich, flowing robe called a houppelande; the former wears one in light blue, the latter one in rose. The sky obligingly fits into the color scheme by being red above the blue houppelande and blue above the red houppelande, and between the figures and sky is the deep green of the forest. The houppelandes have large fur-lined sleeves which a contemporary poetess, Christine de Pisan, describes as “manches à bombardes qui vont jusques aux pieds” (called “bombardes” after the wide-mouthed artillery piece of the day). The man’s rich costume marks him as a gentleman of rank who follows the fashions of the French court, much as they are portrayed in the miniatures of the Très Riches Heures of the Duke of Berry. Bells hanging from his belt make one suspect that he was also something of a dandy.

The coiffures of the ladies, particularly of the lady in the second tapestry, have already begun to sprout those horns which

. . . neither stags nor unicorns
Could boast if they should dare to plight
Themselves with her in deadly fight.1

The head roll of the lady in the first tapestry has been cut into a series of points, probably tipped by pearls or jewels. Such a headdress must have bobbed and sparkled with every movement of the head, like the crown of a Chinese princess. Somewhat similar headdresses appear in the hunting tapestries, which include scenes of hawking, at Hardwick Hall, one of the estates of the Duke of Devonshire.

The jeweled tower of magnificence worn by the lady in the second tapestry is even more imposing (the crown, as well as certain other areas in the tapestry, are restorations). One is reminded of the French queen Isabel of Ba-

1 From the Romance of the Rose, translated by F. S. Ellis.
varia, who ordered that the door lintels of the royal château of Vincennes be raised so that she and the ladies of her court could pass beneath without having to bend their proud heads. The costumes suggest that the tapestries were made between 1420 and 1435, that is, between the illuminations of the _Très Riches Heures_ of the Duke of Berry, who died in 1416, and the hunting tapestries belonging to the Duke of Devonshire, which were woven about 1440 and 1445.

The style of the tapestries, as well as the costumes, confirms this dating. The large-scale figures, placed in the foreground, still dominate the tapestry design as they do in the Apocalypse series at Angers and in the King Arthur tapestry hanging in this Museum, both of the fourteenth century. However, the bold, flat silhouettes of the figures of this earlier style have been softened in the Pratt tapestries by a landscape background, which replaces the more purely ornamental and architectural background of the earlier style. The landscape slants upward behind the figures at an angle somewhat alarming to our "scientific eyes," but there is an interest in a horizon line, which few if any fourteenth-century tapestries had, a desire to place the figures in a more natural setting. Tapestry designs were originally two-dimensional, but their grandeur and unified simplicity were gradually lost by the introduction of true perspective, which reduced tapestries in the sixteenth century to imitations of painting. The flowering plants in our tapestries are still sparsely placed; their merging and overlapping in a richer luxuriance came later in the fifteenth century.

It is more difficult to determine where the Pratt tapestries were woven than when they were woven. By the 1420's the effects of the Hundred Years' War had made such economic inroads on Paris that fine tapestry-weaving had almost come to an end there. The workshops of Arras, at their peak in the first half of the fifteenth century, continued and developed the traditions of the earlier Parisian workshops. The same shades of dark blue and blue-green, for instance, common in fourteenth-century Parisian work, are also found in the Pratt tapestries and in other Arras work. The knobby tree trunks and stylized leaves also appear in other tapestries attributed to Arras, including a set belonging to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, illustrating a romance, and in another tapestry illustrating the saga of Jourdain de Blaye in the Museo Civico in Padua. In view of their date and style it is more likely that the Pratt tapestries were made in Arras than in Paris.

Although the Goodman of Paris called mediaeval falconers "traitors and thieves to each other" because of their intense rivalry for the best young hawks, they must also have possessed much of the gentleness and patience of an Isaak Walton in the care and training of their birds. "If you wish to be considered a good hawker," admonishes the Goodman of Paris, "think first of your hawk and of your dogs, and then of yourself."

Throughout the Middle Ages the falconer held an honorable position in every knightly household that could afford to keep one. In North Wales in the tenth century, for instance, the royal falconer was the fourth ranking officer of the king's court, taking precedence over the court judge, who was fifth, and over the chief huntsman, who was only tenth. The great period of falconry ended with the introduction of firearms in the seventeenth century, an easier and quicker if less sporting way of taking game. The sport, however, still has its followers, even in this country.
