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"Single Natures Double Name":[1] Some Comments on *The Phoenix and Turtle*

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In his comment on the "sole Arabian tree" in Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and Turtle* (*P&T*) Grosart drew attention to the homonymy of Greek φοῖνιξ: "The palm is meant. In Greek phoinix, and meaning both phoenix and palmtree."[2] This trace, which has never been followed, has given rise to the following comments.

In the Renaissance, agreement in the *verba* was still felt to be an indicator of hidden congruence in the *res*.[3] In other words, the identical or similar name suggested a parallel in the Book of Nature, i.e., in the case of *phoinix*, the integral relationship between the tree and the bird.

The following remarks are to show that this "natural" analogy was taken to be a fact by natural philosophers of the classical tradition, which means that when the one was named, the two were always addressed, this in turn bringing into focus a hitherto disregarded source for *The Phoenix and Turtle*.

In early speculations on the phoenix, this legendary bird is seen to be naturally related to the palmtree. Pliny, for instance, assumes that the phoenix obtained his name from the palm (*phoinix*). The bird is said to die and to rise again when the tree experiences its rebirth.[4] This entry in the "Book of Nature" finds an exact poetic parallel in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where the phoenix fashions his pyre "in the topmost branches of a waving palm-tree."[5] The topical connection between the bird and the tree is further pursued in the Christian tradition, where the phoenix is frequently seen to be roosting on top of the palm in delineations of paradise.[6]

According to the myth, the uniqueness of the bird phoenix consists in its cremating itself every 500 years to rise again from the ashes,[7] first in the form of a worm which will have matured to the full-grown bird

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after three days.[8] Accordingly, the ashes do not signify the death of the phoenix; they are not, as is generally maintained, merely an infertile, dead substance,[9] but on the contrary a breeding-ground of new life. To quote Henry Vaughan's translation of Claudian's *Phoenix*:

> . . . *life* which in the ashes lurks
> Hath framed the *heart*, and taught new *blood* new *works*;
> The whole *heap* stirs, and every *part* assumes
> Due vigour; . . . [10]

It is this substance of fertile ashes[11] which links the two natures, palm and bird, listed under the single name, *phoinix*. Thomas Mann in one of the most beautiful chapters of the beautiful story of *Joseph and His Brethren*, shows the young Joseph climbing date-palms in Potiphar's garden in order to transfer the pollen, also an ash-like substance, which the narrator calls "Samenstaub" (seed-dust), from a fruitless tree to a fructifying one.[12] The date-palm brings fruit only when fertilised (either naturally by the wind or artificially by the skill of the gardener) with the seed-dust or pollen of the stamen-bearing tree. The pollen hence assumes great significance in connection with the generation of fruits.

When Thomas Mann introduces the artificial fertilisation of the date-palm into his vision of Ancient Egypt as a major motif, speaking of the necessity of pollinating the "fertile specimens" with the pollen of the "infertile tree" so as to enable the maturation of fruit, he does not resort to irony and anachronism. The Egyptians are not wrongly credited with a knowledge usually accredited to Linné in the *Fundamenta et Philosophia Botanica* of 1732. It is a matter of fact that Thomas Mann's *Joseph and His Brethren* is based on meticulous study and, indeed, the artificial fertilisation of the date-palm has to be looked for just as far down in the "deep well of history" as the story of Joseph and his brethren itself.

Herodotus has it that the Assyrians stimulated palm-trees to generate fruit in much the same way as fig trees:

> . . . they tie the fruit of the palm called male by the Greeks to the date-bearing palm, that so the gall-fly might enter the dates and cause them to ripen.[13]

Herodotus here describes the so-called caprification, a technique which, with the aid of gall-flies, is specially intended to improve the fructification of figs.[14] He makes no mention, however, of the pollen, which in *Joseph and His Brethren* helps to make the female tree fruitful. So this brings us no nearer to an ancient knowledge and use of any word or thing resembling "seed-dust," and neither in the *OED* nor in Grimm's *Deutsches Wörterbuch* are there any entries dating back to the time before the systematic botanical studies of the late 17th century. "Pollen" as a technical term indicating the fertile dust of flowers or plants, is recorded in the *OED* for the first time in 1760. Linné himself used the term *fovilla*, a derivation from the Latin *favilla* meaning flying cinders, to denote the contents of the stamen said to be discovered by him. It would be tempting to connect *fovilla* with Shakespeare's "cinders" and use it to bridge the gap between the bird and tree as well as over the centuries but no earlier example can be found. Similarly, the synonymous terms "dust" or "powder" are not listed in this context before 1672.

There is, nevertheless, one synonymous term in the English language which in its linguistic evolution somehow reflects the phenomenon of the fertile dust or powder of plants or flowers as does the German word "Blütenstaub," namely "flour," "originally the 'flower' or finest quality of meal (lat. *flos farinae*); a fine soft powder."[15] The modern word "flour," moreover, still appears in the written form "flower" in Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), so that the two meanings "flour" and "flower" were represented by the word "flower" right down into the 18th century; in fact there was no difference between the two words.

This is corroborated by the alchemistic definition of "flower" in the *OED*: "the pulverulent form of any substance."[16] Thus, the meanings of both words overlap as do the words themselves. Moreover, there is a possible association of the fertile dust of plants or flowers described by the German word "Blütenstaub."

The semantic development of "flower" and "flour" has a parallel in what happened to "pollen." This did not, originally, mean "Blütenstaub" but "fine flour or meal." Therefore, it is not unlikely that, inversely, "flower" may have meant "pollen" in the modern sense long before Linné. Sidney and Golding in *A Woorke concerning the trewnesse of the*

Christian Religion (the translation of Du Plessis Mornay's theological tract) provide an example:

> We shall see the Earth replenished with Herbes, Trees, and Fruites . . . Whence is all this? . . . Each thing serveth other, and all serve one alone. Whence may this bonde come? If things bee everlastingly, and of themselves; how have they thus put themselves in subjection? . . . So that if they have had their beginning of themselves; did they bring foorth them selves *in seed, in flower, or in kernell? In Egge* or in full life?[17]

As part of the triad "in seed, in flower, or in kernell," "flower" seems to be charged with the meaning of "pollen." Du Plessis Mornay obviously is concerned with "beginnings," more precisely with the beginnings of life in its smallest form, for both "seed" and "kernell" refer to the smallest fertile substance in nature.[18] Therefore "flower" here suggests the proverbially small particles of flour or meal which, in this close context, seems to share the procreative capacity of "seed" and "kernell."

Now, the two facts that the pollen of the date-palm played a role in horticulture at a very early date and that the phenomenon of fertile dust was long known before Linné's scientific discovery are corroborated by a very early text, well-known throughout the Middle Ages and in the Modern Period, Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*. Thomas Mann's "quaint tale" of fertilising the palm with seed-dust most likely has its origin here:

> . . . sine maribus non gignere feminas sponte edito nemore confirmant, circaque singulos plures nutare in eum pronas blandioribus comis; illum erectis hispidum adflatu visuque ipso et *pulvere* etiam reliquas maritare; . . . adeoque est veneris intellectus ut coitus etiam excogitatus sit ab homine e maribus flore ac languine, interim vero tantum *pulvere* insperso feminis.[19]

But, again, there is an earlier authority for Pliny to rely on. Theophrastus attributes to an ash-like substance a similar function as does Pliny to pollen in his description of the fertilisation of the date-palm. In *De causis plantarum* Theophrastus clearly points to the natural affinity of the date-palm and the phoenix suggested by the nominal identity:

> What occurs in the date-palm (φοινίκων), while not the same as caprification, nevertheless bears a certain resemblance to it, which is why the procedure is called ὀλυνθάζειν. For the flower (ἄνθος) and dust (κονιορτός) and down

> (χνοῦς) from the male date-palm, when sprinkled on the fruit, effect by their heat (θερμότητι) and the rest of their power a certain dryness and ventilation, and by this means the fruit remains on the tree.[20]

Apart from the identity of the "proper" names of bird and palm, Theophrastus avails himself of quite a number of terms descriptive of both. The terms κονιορτός, dust or flying ashes—composed of κόνις, ash, and ὄρνυμι, whirl up—,[21] and θερμότης, heat,[22] serve to describe the development of the fruit of the date-palm. The same expressions can also be found in the phoenix-legend where the ashes are not infertile either but, on the contrary, are responsible for the development of the fruit. The fruit of the date-palm, which is, in turn, also called φοῖνιξ,[23] rises, so to speak, from its dust-bed of fertile ashes in exactly the same way as the bird phoenix does. This is to show that, long before Pliny pointed out the sexual correlations in the fertility of the palm (phoinix), the tree and the bird had been seen to be related by their common reliance on either the substance or the motif of the fertile ashes.

It is a matter of fact that these sources were well known in the English Renaissance. *Batman vppon Bartholome* may serve as an example. He maintains that the palm shares the name of the bird because of a natural "likenesse."[24] Conversely, referring to Pliny, Batman mentions an Arabian palm which, because of its regenerative affinity, gave its name to the bird:

> In the South Countrie is a manner Palme, that is alone in that kinde, none other springeth nor commeth thereof: but when this Palme is so olde, that it fayleth all for age: then oft it quickneth and springeth again of it selfe. Therefore men suppose, that *Phoenix*, that is a bird of *Arabia*, hath the name of this Palme in *Arabia*. For he dieth and quickneth, and liueth oft, as the foresayd Palme doth, ...[25]

This is another example (pointing to Shakespeare's "sole Arabian tree") which shows that verbal identity was regarded as an indicator of a natural relationship, and, moreover, that phoenix, bird and palm, was an outstanding example in this theoretical field. Its suggestiveness is borne out by Tertullian's interpretation of Psalm 92:12, which in the *Septuagint* (93:13) reads as follows:

δίκαιος ὡς φοῖνιξ ἀνθήσει, ...

Tertullian, however, does not read "iustus ut palma florebit" like the *Vulgate* but "Et florebis enim uelut phoenix,"[26] whereby he explicitly refers not to the tree but to the bird,[27] with its rich aura of christological symbolism.

Again, a converse example is provided by Sir Thomas Browne's rejection of common errors concerning the phoenix:

> Concerning its generation, that without all conjunction, it begets and reseminates it selfe, hereby we introduce a vegetable production in animalls, and unto sensible natures, transferre the propriety of plants.[28]

When it comes to the natural rather than verbal affinity, especially with a view to Shakespeare's *P&T*, the motif of the fertile ashes proves to be most rewarding. Therefore, the "cinders" in the Threnos, far from being an obstacle, help elucidate the meaning.

> Beautie, Truth, and Raritie,
> Grace in all simplicitie,
> here enclosde, in cinders lie.

In other words, the cinders left after the Phoenix and Turtle have risen from the pyre in their "mutual flame" contain the complete ideal substance of both. In prefering "cinders" to *ashes*, Shakespeare possibly harkened back to Theophrastus's description of the development of palm-fruits. There, the focus was on κονιορτός, a word which, as already mentioned above, is composed of κόνις and ὄρνυμι. *Cinders*, in Shakespeare's age, was taken to be derived from Latin *cinis*, which explains the spelling with an initial "c."[29] Latin *cinis*, however, is derived from the Greek κόνις[30] so that the (pseudo-)etymological series κόνις, *cinis*, *cinders* represents a phonetical as well as semantic connection between Theophrastus's κονιορτός and Shakespeare's "cinders." This is another link between the "bird of loudest lay" and the "sole Arabian tree" in Shakespeare's poem.

When it comes to Shakespeare's allocation of the sexes in his poem, that is to say, his making the Phoenix take over the role of bride and

the Turtle that of groom, yet another and even more venerable source than the *De causis plantarum* comes into view. This is the Song of Solomon, where the phoenix, meaning "palm-tree," figures as bride and the turtle as groom. The groom compares his bride to a palmtree (φοῖνιξ in the *Septuagint*):

> How fair and how pleasant art thou, O love, for delights!
> This thy stature is like to the palm tree (φοῖνιξ), and thy breasts, to clusters of grapes.
> I said, I will go up to the palm tree, and will take hold of its boughs;
> (Cant. 7:6-8)

This is far from being the only parallel between *P&T* and the Song of Solomon. There is an equally striking, if hidden, example in Cant. 2:14:

> O my dove, who art in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely.

This verse is, however, somewhat ambiguous. It is syntactically uncertain whether the bride in the preceding verses is meant to be repeating the words of the groom or whether she is actually addressing him in direct speech. Accordingly, two ways of mystical exegesis have been offered. On the one hand the dove may be identified with the bride and becomes then either a symbol of the church or of the individual soul.[31]

There is, however, another interpretation according to which the bridegroom is the dove meaning Christ. This interpretation is referred to in the chapter on the turtle-dove in the *Physiologus*:

> This bird may be compared to our Lord Jesus Christ, for he is our chattering spiritual turtle-dove, the truly sweet and melodious bird, that in preaching the gospel has made resound what is below the heavens. Therefore, the bride herself, that is the church of all people, says to the turtle: "Let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice, for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is comely." (Cant. 2:14)[32]

The ambiguous allocation of sexes in the Song of Solomon (the phoenix is meant to be the bride only,[33] but the turtle may mean both, bride and groom) may provide a background setting off some of the seeming

inconsistencies of *P&T*. It could, for example, help interpret what tends to be the neutralization of opposites between male and female:

> So they lov'd as love in twaine,
> Had the essence but in one,
> Two distincts, Division none,
> Number there in love was slaine.
>
> Hearts remote, yet not asunder,
> Distance and no space was seene,
> Twixt this *Turtle* and his *Queene;*
> But in them it were a wonder. (*P&T* 25-32)

The homonymy of φοῖνιξ in Greek, therefore, not only extends the meaning of the name "Phoenix" in Shakespeare's poem. It also brings into play, as a possible source, the Song of Solomon. This, again, is an instance of classical sources being indicators of typological lore.

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NOTES

[1]William Shakespeare, "The Phoenix and the Turtle" l. 39, *The Poems, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Philadelphia: J. S. Lippincott, 1938) 323-31.

[2]Robert Chester, *Love's Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint (1601). With its Supplement, "Diverse Poeticall Essaies" on the Turtle and Phoenix by Shakspere, Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, etc.*, ed. with introd., notes and illus. by Alexander B. Grosart, The New Shakspere Society, Ser.VIII No.2 (London: Trübner for the New Shakspere Society, 1878) 241. A similar relationship between bird and tree may be found in *The Tempest* 3.3.22-24 (ed. F. Kermode, The Arden Shakespeare [1954; London: Methuen; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1985]): ". . . that in Arabia / There is one tree, the phoenix' throne; one phoenix / At this hour reigning there."

[3]See for the relationship between *res* and *verba*, for instance, Friedrich Ohly, "Vom geistigen Sinn des Wortes im Mittelalter," *Schriften zur mittelalterlichen Bedeutungsforschung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1977) 1-31.

[4]Pliny, *Historia Naturalis*, ed. H. Rockham, vol. 4 (1950; rpt. London: Heinemann, 1961) XIII.ix.42. Cf. also Philemon Holland's *Pliny* (*Pliny's History of the World, commonly called the Natural historie* [1601]) XIII.iv, I.387. See also *OED* phoenix 2.

Bot., and Christoph Gerhardt, "Der Phoenix auf dem dürren Baum," *Natura loquax: Naturkunde und allegorische Naturdeutung vom Mittelalter bis zur frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Wolfgang Harms and Heimo Reinitzer (Frankfurt: Lang, 1981) 73-108, esp. 77-79.

[5]". . . illicet in ramis tremulaeque cacumine palmae" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, with an English transl. by Frank Justus Miller, vol. 2, The Loeb Classical Library [London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1960] xv.396 [pp. 392, 393]).

[6]See J. Poeschke, "Paradies," *Lexikon für christliche Ikonographie*—later referred to as *LCI*—vol. 3 (Freiburg: Herder, 1971) 375-82. For some more examples cf. Edward Payson Evans, *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture* (London: Heinemann, 1896) 127.

[7]See, for example, Isidor Hispalensis Episcopi, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1911) XII.7.22: ". . . de cineribus suis resurgit." See also Shakespeare, *Henry VI Part 3* 1.4.35 (ed. A. S. Cairncross, The Arden Shakespeare [London: Methuen; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1964]): "My ashes, as the Phoenix, may bring forth a bird . . . ."

[8]For known versions of the Phoenix-myth see, for instance, the chapter "Of the Phoenix" in *Batman vppon Bartholome his Booke* (1582; rpt. Hildesheim: Olms, 1976), XII.14, 183.

[9]See *Batman vppon Bartholome his Booke* X.10, 156v: "And ashes hath its default & imperfection, that though he be euery daye moysted and wet, and sprong with raine, yet he is always barren."

[10]"The Phoenix out of Claudian," Henry Vaughan, *The Poetical Works*, ed. A. Rudrum (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983) 364.83-86. See also J. Sylvester, "Of the admirable and onely Phoenix" I.626: "to burn her sacred bones to seedful cinders" ("The Fifth Day of the First Week," *Du Bartas his Divine Weekes, The Complete Works of Joshuah Sylvester in 2 vols.*, ed. Alexander B. Grosart, vol. 1 [New York: AMS Press, 1967] 66).

[11]The fact that "ashes" as a substance could well suggest the idea of fertility is corroborrated by a well-known text of classical antiquity. In the Odyssey (V.490) the phrase "σπέρμα πυρὸς" is used as a metaphor for "ashes." Chapman translates this as "seed of fire" (V.662). Cf. *The Odyssey & The Lesser Homerica*, vol. 2 of *Chapman's Homer: The Iliad, The Odyssey, and The Lesser Homerica*, ed. Allardyce Nicoll (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957) 104.

[12]Thomas Mann, *Joseph und seine Brüder, Das erzählerische Werk in 12 Bänden*, vol. 7 (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1975) 661: "Die Dattelpalme ist ein zweihäusiger Baum, und die Bestäubung ihrer fruchtbaren Exemplare mit dem Samenstaube derjenigen, die keine Blüten mit Griffel und Narbe, sondern nur solche mit Staubgefäßen tragen, ist des Windes Sache. Doch hat diesem der Mensch von jeher das Geschäft auch wohl abgenommen und künstliche Befruchtung ausgeübt, nämlich so, daß er eigenhändig die abgeschnittenen Blütenstände eines unfruchtbaren Baumes mit denen fruchtbarer in Berührung brachte und sie besamte."

[13]Herodotus I.193, trans. A. D. Godley, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1963) 245.

[14]See the entry "Feige," *Der Kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike in 5 Bänden*, vol. 2 (1975; München: dtv, 1979) 528.

[15]*OED* flour 1.a.; 2.

[16]*OED* flour 2.c.

[17]Du Plessis Mornay, *A Woorke concerning the trewnesse of the Christian Religion, The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, ed. A. Feuillerat, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1923) 269 (italics mine).

[18]See, for instance, *Batman vppon Bartholome* XVII.145.321; William Perkins, "A Graine of Mustard-Seed," *Works* (London, 1635) I: 637-44; Nicolaus Cusanus, *De beryllo* chap. 26.

[19]Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* XIII.vii.34-36 (italics mine).

[20]Theophrastus, *De causis plantarum* II.9.15, trans. B. Einarson and G. K. K. Link, vol. 1, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann; Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1967) 279-80 (italics mine).

[21]See Liddle/Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1901) 977.

[22]See Liddle/Scott, "θερμότης."

[23]See "Phoinix (8)," *Der Kleine Pauly* 4: 801.

[24]*Batman vppon Bartholome* XVII.116, 308v.

[25]*Batman vppon Bartholome* XVII.116, 309r.

[26]Tertullian, *De resurrectione mortuorum* 13.1-4, esp. 13.3, *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina*, vol. 2 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1954) 936. Cf. Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* III.12, ed. R. Robbins, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1981) 202, 205, who attributes this misunderstanding not only to Tertullian but also to Epiphanius. See also E. P. Evans, *Animal Symbolism* 127.

[27]This is made evident by the context; but see also *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* III.12, 205.

[28]*Pseudodoxia* III.xii, 206.

[29]See *OED* cinder *sb. Forms*.

[30]See Alois Walde, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd rev. ed. by J. B. Hofmann, vol. 1 (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1938) *s.v. cinis*, 217-18. Cf. Isidor, *Etymologiarum* XVII.2.

[31]See J. Poeschke, "Taube," *LCI*, vol. 4 (Freiburg: Herder, 1972) 242-44. See also Friedrich Ohly, *Hohelied-Studien: Grundzüge einer Geschichte der Hoheliedauslegung des Abendlandes bis um 1200* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1958); Paul Simon, "Sponsa Cantici: Die Deutung der Braut des Hohenliedes in der vornizänischen griechischen Theologie und in der lateinischen Theologie des dritten und vierten Jahrhunderts," 2 vols., diss., U of Bonn, 1951.

[32]*Physiologus*, ed. Franciscus Sbordone (Rome, 1936, rpt. Hildesheim: Olms 1976) 94, transl. from the Greek by Thomas Graumann; cf. also the editor's note on p. 93. Cyrill Alexandrinus, for instance, also interprets the turtle of Cant. 2:14 as Christ; see *De adoratione in spiritu et veritate* XV.532.

[33]In the chapter on orchids in Gerard's *Herbal* the interesting combination of the word "palma" with "Christ" is found. Palma Christi or Satyrion royall is an orchid growing in England, but it is said to have its origin in Arabia, like the palm-tree. The word "palma" here is, of course, the Latin *palma*, meaning both hand and palm-tree. Again, the phoenix/palm comes into view, whose fruits are called dates, derived from Greek δάκτυλος, meaning "finger," so that a rich field of associations is opened up, nourishing the idea that the Palma Christi would as well suggest "the sole Arabian tree," the palm-tree, and, in a more hidden sense, the bird phoenix, which in Christian allegory is usually seen as a symbol of Christ. The genitive link "Palma

Christi" therefore mirrors the somewhat ambiguous allocation of sexes in the Song of Solomon and the intended neutralisation of sexes in "The Phoenix and Turtle." See John Gerard's *Herbal* (*The Herbal or General History of Plants*, rpt. of 1633 ed. [New York: Dover, 1975]) 220-21, where the male and female Palma Christi stand close together, resembling each other very much, so that again the differences between the sexes are neutralized.