

Single Natures—Double Name: A Reply to Peter Milward and James H. Sims*

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First of all, I would like to thank Professor Milward and Professor Sims for their most stimulating responses to my article. It is extremely gratifying not only to have both scholars' support for my thesis that the Song of Solomon is a possible source for *The Phoenix and Turtle* but also that both provide further evidence and pursue the subject in their own way. Regarding *P&T* against the background of the "Song of Solomon" Professor Milward is struck by the "Trinitarian" number symbolism of the poem while Professor Sims (more than once in the Shakespeare canon) finds corroboration for the idea that "bird and tree are vitally connected through the ashes/seed-dust imagery" (67).

Before accepting the challenge contained in both responses, I want to signal complete agreement with Professor Sims that "neutralization of opposites" is a misleading description of the perfect union of Phoenix and Turtle. I beg to disagree, however, with Sims' identification of the Phoenix with "the bird of lowdest lay" (65).¹ It seems unlikely that the Phoenix celebrates his own and the Turtle's funeral rites, after both have "fled / In a mutuall flame from hence. . . . Leaving no posteritie" (23-24, 59).²

I also find I cannot but treat Milward's scepticism concerning Shakespeare's awareness of the homonymic nature of the word *Phoenix* in a sceptical vein. Surely that *Phoenix* means the bird as well as the palm-tree was not a detail of classical learning but common knowledge. Shake-

*Reference: Peter Milward, "'Double Nature's Single Name': A Response to Christiane Gillham," *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 60-63; James H. Sims, "Shakespeare's 'The Phoenix and the Turtle': A Reconsideration of 'Single Natures Double Name,'" *Connotations* 3.1 (1993): 64-71.

speare might have got it, to name only two popular sources, from Gerard's *Herbal*³ or Holland's *Pliny*:

The bird Phoenix, which is supposed to haue taken that name of the Date tree (called in Greeke Foinix) for it was assur'd to me, that the said bird died with that tree and reuiued of itself as the said tree sprung againe.⁴

And this brings me to the main point of both responses, i.e. the meaning of "Single natures double name" and whether (according to Professor Milward) I would not have done better to use "Double natures single name" as a title. The "single name . . . has reference to two different beings or natures" (60) writes Milward, while Sims argues that "the line in its context refers not to the bird and the tree but to the two birds, the phoenix and the dove" (69). I could not be more grateful to both scholars for making me aware of what really is the understander's first concern: the immediate context defined by grammatical correlations. When I chose the line for a title I did so because it defines so clearly the relationship between "natures" and "name" (or *res* and *verba*) as a theme permeating the poem as a whole. This meaning seems valid to me still. Therefore, what remains to be done now is bridging the gap between the overall, prototypical meaning of the line and the semantically and grammatically precise one of the immediate context. So I begin (thanks to Milward and Sims) to do my homework.

First there are the textual variants "nature's" or "natures." Since the subject-predicate relationship of "name" and "was called" does not seem convincing to me (which perhaps means disagreement with Professor Sims) I would like to vote, after all, for the reading "natures." Thus, the first of the two lines now in question contains two contrasting nominal statements, "single natures"—"double name," which are put into relation and interpreted in the second: "Neither" (meaning *neither of whom*, or *neither of the two single natures*) "two nor one was called."

Secondly there are the denotations of the words. Professor Milward as well as Professor Sims seems to understand "single" as an indicator of the one-ness of the two birds (Sims 68; Milward 61) and "double" as an indicator of their two names, Phoenix and Turtle (Sims 68-69; Milward 61). But the line does not read "one nature two names." Instead Shakespeare qualifies the plural "natures" by the epithet "single," i.e.

not yet unified but separate and solitary,⁵ while in “double name” a noun in the singular is qualified by an adjective denoting duality. The singular thus refers to one name which is, however, “double.” This reading is corroborated by the semantic value of “double,” which, apart from its first denotation “consisting of two members, things, sets combined; twofold,”⁶ means “having a twofold relation or application; occurring or existing in two ways or respects; sometimes = ambiguous.”⁷ The *OED* reference to Chaucer’s *Troilus* is well suited to shed a new light on the meaning of “double” in *P&T*:

And but if Calkas lede us with ambages—
That is to seyn, with double wordes slye,
Swiche as men clepen a word with two visages—⁸

Chaucer defines what he calls “ambages,” i.e. ambiguities,⁹ as “double wordes” and paraphrases his definition again in explaining a double word as “a word with two visages.” Accordingly, “double” is used by Chaucer as a synonym of “ambiguous.” If this holds true for “word” it also holds true for “name” (both meaning *nomen*), so that “double name” in *P&T* does not indicate “two names”—which would moreover contradict the syntactic logic—but one ambiguous name, or, in Chaucer’s words—a name “with two visages.” Thus “double name” does not point to two names (Phoenix and Turtle) for one and the same thing (Phoenix and Turtle united in married chastity), as both Milward and Sims seem to imply when they read it as a “pair of names” (Sims 68) or “the two birds” (Milward 61), but to one ambiguous name for two things.¹⁰

It now appears that the meaning in the immediate context is in harmony with the overall meaning of the line “Single natures double name.” The ambiguity of the name *Phoenix*, signifying both bird and palm-tree, points to the manifold and multi-levelled language of the poem, *Phoenix* being itself a most telling example of a “double name.”¹¹

We are agreed, then, that the lines “Single natures double name / Neither two nor one was called” refer to the two birds. Each of their single natures bears one ambiguous name and this is why neither of them was called either “one” or “two.” The ambiguity of the *verba* denotes the ambiguity of the *res*. And this is where the ambiguous allocation of sexes in the Song of Solomon and what I now would like

to call *coincidentia oppositorum*¹² of male and female in *P&T* comes in. Although in the poem the Phoenix is the bride and the Turtle the bridegroom, seen against the background of the Song of Solomon¹³ the poem speaks of the unity of the sexes. Apart from the Phoenix and the Turtle's final union this is manifested in the nature of each single bird, since both are at the same time male and female.¹⁴ Both these words are implied by way of paranomasia in the word "flame," which is granted a central position in the poem. In the "flame" in which Phoenix and Turtle are fled "from hence," both *male* and *female* are mysteriously united.¹⁵

Thus the natural ambiguity indicated by verbal ambiguity at last assumes a mystical meaning. Phoenix and Turtle figure in their singleness as well as in union as a paradigm of "married chastity,"¹⁶ Shakespeare's ideal of love.

In the *Threnos* the verbal and natural or rather sexual double-oneness is transposed (as Milward has convincingly shown) into a triple-oneness:

Beauty, Truth, and Raritie
Grace in all simplicitie,
Here enclosde, in cinders lie. (53-55)

"Grace" is the one name in which the Platonic triad¹⁷ of line 53 is contained "in all simplicitie" and therefore also in all singularity, as "single" and "simple" are etymologically related.¹⁸ This, again, shows that the concept of ambiguity permeates or even rules the thematical and verbal structure of the poem. Trying to understand the mysteries of the poem one is left with a mystery: the double-oneness of Phoenix and Turtle is finally transformed into a triple-oneness, but not as one might be inclined to suppose in the way of a love-poem like Shakespeare's eighth Sonnet. This union is not one "Resembling sire, and child and happy mother, / Who all in one, one pleasing note do sing." Being a kind of "married Chastitie" which leaves "no Posteritie,"¹⁹ it reminds the reader of the Holy Trinity, with its three individual ("single") natures comprised in one name. There, too, the one name has three different meanings, each of which at the same time implies the other two, all being coexistent.

NOTES

¹G. Wilson Knight was the first to identify the "bird of lowdest lay" with the Phoenix, but he himself admits that "it weakens the point and pathos" in this case. See *The Mutual Flame* (London: Methuen, 1955) 202-04, esp. 204.

²Cf. F. T. Prince, ed., Shakespeare, *The Poems* (1960; London: Methuen, 1985) 179n1.

³John Gerard, *The Herbal or General History of Plants*, rpt. of 1633 ed. (New York: Dover, 1975) 1517-18, "Of the Date tree," esp. 1518: "The Names: The tree is called in Greeke, Foinix: in Latin, Palma: in English, Date tree."

⁴Holland's Pliny XII.iv.387, quoted in the *OED*, entry "phoenix² Bot.," where more information about the nominal identity of bird and tree may be found: "Various speculations connecting the date-tree with the mythical bird, Phoenix, were current from the time of Pliny." The *OED* also refers to the Latin *Carmen de Phoenice*. One of the references is Trevisa, *De proprietatibus rerum*, tr. 1398.

⁵*OED*, "single" a. 1.1.; 3. In this meaning also in Shakespeare, see *Timon of Athens* 5.1.107, *Sonnets* 3.14; 8.14; 9.2; 39.6.

⁶*OED*, "double" a. 1.a.

⁷*OED*, "double" a. 2. The word "Doublers" in Puttenham's *The Arte of English Poesie* 201-02, ed. G. D. Willcock and A. Walker (Cambridge: CUP, 1936, rpt. 1970) stands for the repetition of one and the same word.

⁸Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* V.897-899, *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., ed. Larry D. Benson (1987; Oxford: OUP, 1992) 572.

⁹*OED*, "ambage."

¹⁰Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* VII.9.2. See also Cicero, *De oratore* II.lxi.250 and *Ad Herennium* IV.67.

¹¹"Turtle," also, should be seen in this light, as it is not only a symbol of "truth" but its very name is (by way of paronomasia) signalling truth. This is corroborated by the topical relationship of "true" or "truth" with "turtle"; see, for example, Lydgate, *Balade Commend. Our Lady* 78: "O trusty turtle, trewest of all trewe" (quoted in the *OED* under the entry "turtle" sb.¹ 2.); Spenser, *Faerie Queene* III.xi.2.8-9: "And of faire Britomart ensample take, / That was as trew in love, as Turtle to her make"; VI.viii.33.6: "Yet never Turtle truer to his make." The palm referring of course not only to the palm-tree but also to the hand, is often seen in its relationship to truth, especially in emblem books. The palm of the hand either indicates truth or perversion of truth in Shakespeare. See Inge Leimberg, "'Give me thy hand': Some Notes on the Phrase in Shakespeare's Comedies and Tragedies," *Shakespeare: Text, Language, Criticism. Essays in Honour of Marvin Spevack*, ed. Bernhard Fabian and Kurt Tetzeli von Rosador (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1987) 118-46. Thus the two "single natures" *turtle* and *palm* both connote *truth*, which in turn proves a "double name."

¹²I here take up the term Nicolas of Cusa coined for the mysterious and transrational unity of God. See especially his *De docta ignorantia* I.4 and *De visione Dei* X-XI; cf. also G. von Bredow, "Coincidentia oppositorum," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. J. Ritter, vol. 1 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971) 1022-23.

¹³Another background is provided by Plato. See his myth of the circular and androgynous human beings in the speech of Aristophanes, *Symposium* 189a-193d.

¹⁴The Phoenix is often described as a hermaphrodite; see, for example, Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (revised ed., Oxford: OUP, 1980) 213n. See also below n16. "Turtle-dove" as a term of endearment is used in classical antiquity for both men and women alike; see Steier, "Taube," *Paulys Realenzyklopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, 2nd series, vol. 4 (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1932) 2479-2500, esp. 2495-96. This also holds true for Shakespeare. In *P&T* the turtle-dove is male, in *Hamlet* (5.1.286) it is female.

¹⁵This is corroborated by the fact that "mutuall" also refers to sexual intercourse (see *OED*, "mutual" 3.) and is used by Shakespeare in this sense in *Measure for Measure* 1.2.143: "our most mutual entertainment."

¹⁶Again the Bible provides an explanation for "neither two nor one": "A man . . . shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh" (Mt 19:5; Gen 2:24). In the emblem-book tradition one finds this well-known biblical phrase symbolized by the hermaphrodite, who is not only regarded as a type of ideal marriage but also of "married chastity." Barptolemaeus Anulus' *Picta Poesis* (1565), for example, shows the *pictura* of a hermaphrodite on a tree with birds, of which two are also present in *P&T*, the crow and the turtle. Interestingly the "double-oneness" of the hermaphrodite is characterized by having "two visages": "Corpore sit duplicis formae Hermaphroditus in vno / Vnaque sit facies foeminae, et vna viri." Sexuality, moreover, has been transcended and replaced by virtue: "Et notam sexus non sinat esse notam / Nemppe maritalis, nodusque vxorius: ambo / Dum coeunt: tecto membra pudore ligant"; quoted in A. Henkel and A. Schöne, *Emblemata: Handbuch zur Sinnbildkunst des XVI. und XVII. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967) 1631. Sims writes "compounded elements cannot create a simple" (69). But this holds true only for the physical or cosmological theory of compounds and elements, not for the metaphysics of ideal unity in "married chastity."

¹⁷For the association of Plato with the three Graces in Renaissance philosophy see Wind 36-52, esp. 39n13.

¹⁸See "single" and "simple" in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, ed. C. T. Onions (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966). Cf. A. Walde and J. B. Hofmann, *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2, 5th ed. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1972) 540, 544, *singulus* and *simplex*. See also Spenser, *Colin Clout* 727: "Single Truth and simple honesty."

¹⁹There is an interesting parallel in the metamorphosis of Coronis in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Coronis, a nymph loved by Phoebus Apollo, commits adultery and is therefore killed by Phoebus. Since she is pregnant of Phoebus, her unborn child is to die with her: "duo nunc moriemur in una" (II.609). But Apollo decides to rescue the child even from the flames of the funeral pyre. Accordingly, the child is flame-born like the Phoenix: "non tulit in cineres labi sua Phoebus eosdem / semina, sed natum flammis uteroque parentis / eripuit . . ." (II.628-630).