

"Double Nature's Single Name": A Response to Christiane Gillham*

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In her otherwise interesting article on the endlessly puzzling *Phoenix and Turtle*, Christiane Gillham mistakenly quotes Shakespeare's words, "Single natures double name." The words are correct enough, but they are mistakenly applied to the "phoenix." In the original Greek, the single name—as she interestingly points out—has reference to two different beings or natures, on the one hand to the "Arabian bird" or phoenix, and on the other to the "sole Arabian tree" or palm-tree. It would therefore have been more logical on her part to have altered Shakespeare's wording (with due apology to the poet) in the manner I have ventured to use in my title.

Here indeed we find but one name for two different natures, the one animal and the other plant. But it may be questioned what light this fact, however interesting in itself, may have to shed on this most mysterious of poems, or even if the poet himself was aware of the fact. After all, we have it on Ben Jonson's word that he had even "less Greek" than Latin; and he may not have been aware of the double nature of "phoenix." He may even have identified the "phoenix' nest," as did some of his contemporaries, with the cedar rather than the palm-tree.¹ And so much of Christiane Gillham's argument, for all its intrinsic interest, falls to the ground for lack of relevance to Shakespeare's poem.

Greater relevance, however, I find in her mention of the Song of Solomon as a possible source. Not that Shakespeare with his "less Greek" would have recognized—as she seems to imagine—the bird implicit in the palm-tree of Cant. 7:7; nor would he necessarily have seen the dove

*Reference: Christiane Gillham, "'Single Natures Double Name': Some Comments on *The Phoenix and Turtle*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 126-36.

of Cant. 2:14 as male, seeing that most commentators see that dove as rather the bride than the bridegroom. But the Song is at least a love song, and not just one among many but the paragon of love songs in the Christian West—celebrating, as it came to be commonly interpreted, the love between God and Israel, Christ and the Church. Not only do both the turtle and the dove feature more than once in the Song, but we may also find a source of Shakespeare's "Either was the other's mine" in Cant. 2:16 (shortly after a mention of the "turtle" in 12 and the "dove" in 14), "My beloved is mine, and I am his." Also in Cant. 6:3 we read, "I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine," followed by another mention of "my dove" in 9; and again, in 7:10, "I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me."

Needless to say, Shakespeare makes use of this manner of speech in his Sonnets, where he says both "thou being mine" (36) and "all mine was thine" (40). Here, too, he speaks of "our undivided loves" as "one," since "In our two loves there is but one respect" (36); and in "our dear love" he looks to the ideal of the "name of single one"—though that one has to become twain by separation (39).² From this standpoint, indeed, it looks as if the young man of the Sonnets may well be the phoenix of the poem, with the poet himself as the true turtle. Only I would hesitate to attach myself to any one of the many identifications or biographical interpretations of the poem.

Rather, I would prefer to return to our mutual title in Shakespeare's original version of it, "Single natures double name"—with reference not to the phoenix and the palm-tree, which are (as I have pointed out) two natures in one name, but to the two birds united as it were in one nature of love. For it is as if this "love in twain / Had the essence but in one," so that the one is the other and the other is the one: "Either was the other's mine." So we come back to the Song of Solomon, with its traditional application to the love of Christ and the Church, as Christ is shown praying for his disciples at the Last Supper, "All mine are thine, and thine are mine" (John 17:10), and "That they all may be one; as thou, father, art in me, and I in thee . . . I in them and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (21, 23).

Here we find our minds being raised from the love of Christ and the Church to that of the Father and the Son in the divine Trinity. And such

is precisely the language Shakespeare is using in this poem: the most rarefied theological language, as developed by St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas in their explanation of how the "double name" of Father and Son are united in a "single nature," the nature of God who is Love.³ It is supremely of them that we may say, "love in twain / Had the essence but in one," and that while the two are distinct as persons there is no division of nature between them. Such an explanation may well bewilder the reason, which deals in division for discourse, but it appeals to the heart as the seat of love and, as Pascal remarks, "The heart has its reasons that the reason knows not."

Not that I would say that Shakespeare's poem is precisely about the divine Trinity; but that in speaking of an ideal love between two human beings, possibly that between himself and the young man as recorded in the Sonnets, he can't help raising his eyes—as Donne also does in "The Canonization," with similar reference to "the Phœnix riddle"—from earth to heaven, and from man to God.⁴ After all, for the Christian the source of all human love is divine, and it is not blasphemous (as a Puritan might have maintained) to compare an ideal love between human beings to the divine love of Father and Son in the Trinity. This is precisely what makes this poem so mysterious, not as a mere puzzle of identification, which may never be resolved, but as a mystery in the theological sense of the word—as when Donne goes on to say that he and his beloved "prove / Mysterious by this love."

This movement from two to three, or from the "double name" of Father and Son to the divine Trinity, I see implied in the somewhat odd transition from the introduction and anthem (with abba) to the "threnos" (with aaa). For the effect of the preceding stanzas is at once a breathing out (from a to b) and in (from b to a), as theologians say of the procession outwards from Father to Son and inwards again; and this procession may be seen as the breathing (or Spirit) of love. And the effect of the following stanzas is an emphatic repeating of three similar sounds, as it were passing from what is "so well compounded" to "Grace in all simplicity"—with a special emphasis in the penultimate stanza on "be," and thus an implication of the divine name.

It is therefore appropriate that this mysterious, and mysteriously theological, poem should end with a "prayer," just as Shakespeare

himself says his farewell to the stage at the end of *The Tempest* with an appeal for "prayer."

All I would add is that his strange, funereal poem comes significantly at the end of Shakespeare's comic period, after the first performance of *Twelfth Night*, and at the beginning of his tragic period, ushered in by the composition of *Hamlet*, with "the rest is silence."

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NOTES

¹In *The Phoenix' Nest* (1593), by M. Roydon and others, we find an "Elegy for Sir Philip Sidney" with the description: "The Phoenix left sweet Araby / And on a cedar in this coast / Built up her tomb of spicery." The anthology has been edited by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1931).

²Shakespeare is quoted from the Arden Edition of *The Poems*, ed. F. T. Prince (London: Methuen, 1960) and from *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. Stephen Booth (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977).

³The various meanings of "form" and "nature" and "essence," "name" and "person," not to mention "one" and "two" and "three," in connection with the divine nature and the trinity of persons, are explored at length by St. Augustine in his *De Trinitate*, in which he develops his "psychological interpretation," and more precisely by St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* Part I, qq. 26-43, in his discussion of the Trinity.

⁴John Donne, *The Elegies and The Songs and Sonnets*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1965) 73-75.