

Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle": A Reconsideration of "Single Natures Double Name"

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Christiane Gillham follows up effectively on Alexander Grosart's note, in his 1878 edition of Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr*, concerning the homonymy of Greek *phoinix* in the words phoenix and palm tree ("sole Arabian tree") in Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle."¹ Among the most valuable findings of Gillham's study is her suggestion, an original one I believe, that the Song of Songs is a source of *P&T*. The Song is indeed a source of the image of the bride as "palm tree [*phoinix*]" (7:6-8) and of the groom as "dove" (2:14). But the fact that some interpreters see the dove as a metaphor not only for the groom but also for the bride,² leads her to remark that "the ambiguous allocation of sexes in the Song of Solomon . . . may provide a background setting off some of the seeming inconsistencies of *P&T*, [helping us] interpret . . . the neutralization of opposites between male and female" in Shakespeare's poem (132-33). However, since the fusing of two, male and female, into one—"Number there in love was slain" (*P&T* 28) is the "wonder" Shakespeare's poem celebrates, to name this metamorphosis "the neutralization of opposites" is to miss the mark. The poem's mystical union of love-partners in death results in such a greater unified whole that its excellent oneness appalls Property (peculiarity, appropriateness) and confounds Reason out of all reason (logical thought and choice); Reason, given the last word in the "Threnos," seems to fall back on rather literal commonplaces, but in the light of the whole poem, even Reason's lines, implying the opposite of what they say, celebrate a transcendent and eternal union.³ The "enclose" are actually enlarged,

¹Reference: Christiane Gillham, "Single Natures Double Name": Some Comments on *The Phoenix and Turtle*," *Connotations* 2.2 (1992): 126-36.

"no posteritie" is self-perpetuation, burial in the urn is new life germinating in the womb, and the "dead Birds" are so alive as to inspire prayer in new generations of lovers "true or faire" (*P&T* 55, 59, 67, 66). I return to the threnos below.

Gillham's contributions to our understanding of Shakespeare's poem are significant. Another example of helpful insights she provides is the etymological clarification of "cinders" (*P&T* 55)⁴ both as fertile ashes connected to the seed-dust of the palm and as "seed of fire" (cited from Chapman's Homer, 134n11), Homer's metaphor for apparently dead ashes that may spring into flame. She might have added that since Reason's threnos portrays these "cinders" lying enclosed in "this urn" to which "either true or faire" lovers are invited to "repaire . . . [and] For these dead Birds, sigh a prayer" (*P&T* 55, 65-67), the continuance of such miraculous unions depends on the potential of those very cinders to kindle "mutuall flame" (*P&T* 24). And that the lovers are to "sigh a prayer" recalls the "treble dated Crow" whose offspring depend on the "breath" it gives and takes (*P&T* 17-19).⁵ Thus the birth from death of the phoenix and the dove not only confirms their own immortality; it also assures a perpetual succession of loves like theirs inspired by their example. The phoenix is reborn through its death in its palm tree nest; therefore, the dove in sharing the essence of the phoenix is also eternal, co-supreme (*P&T* 25, 41). The two "leau no posteritie," because they are, miraculously, their own progeny.

Death is now the *Phoenix* nest,
And the *Turtles* loyal brest,
To eternitie doth rest [remain],

Leauing no posteritie,
Twas not their infirmitie,
It was married Chastitie.
(*P&T* 56-61)

"Truth and Beautie [as dead birds] buried be" (*P&T* 64), but they lie in cinders which will rekindle into new life. How else could "the bird of lowdest lay, / On the sole *Arabian* tree, / Herauld sad and trumpet be" (*P&T* 1-3) at its own funeral rites?

Another clue beyond those Gillham explores to support her argument for the Song of Songs as a source lies in the “mutuall flame” in which phoenix and turtle “fled . . . from hence” and as the shining light of love “Flaming in the *Phoenix* sight” (*P&T* 23-24, 35) by which the turtledove sees clearly the total identification of himself and his queen: “Either was the others mine” (most editors indicate either “source of wealth” or mutual possessive pronoun, but perhaps the best reading is “mien.”)⁶ Furthermore, the divine flame of love celebrated in the Song of Songs is much like the “mutuall flame” of *P&T* which, instead of destroying, miraculously fuses two “distincts” into a “concordant one,” making the two birds “Co-supremes” (27, 46, 51).

For love is strong as death;
jealousy is cruel as the grave;
the coals thereof *are* coals of fire,
which hath a most vehement flame [of Yahweh himself].
Many waters cannot quench love,
neither can the floods drown it.
(Song 8:6b-7a)⁷

Gillham cites *The Tempest* 3.3.22-24 as an example in Shakespeare of a “relationship between bird and tree” similar to that explored in her article (133n2). Although the tree which serves as the phoenix’ throne is not identified as a palm in the reference, its uniqueness is stressed as it is in “the sole *Arabian* tree” of *P&T* 2. However, in *The Tempest*, when the conspiratorial brothers and their henchmen, accompanied by Gonzalo, have been entertained by the island’s spirits with a banquet and dance, Sebastian exclaims that, having seen such “living drollery,” he will now believe

That there are unicorns, that in Arabia
There is one tree, the phoenix’ throne, one phoenix
At this hour reigning there.⁸

Thus the dramatic emphasis in the play is on the conspirators’ conviction of the spirit world’s reality, not on a semantic relationship between bird and tree; even these hardened skeptics are now ready to credit all of the fantastic tales of other travelers, since they must believe the equally

incredible sights and sounds they have witnessed. Probably written some nine or ten years after *P&T*, these lines do give evidence that the rarity, even the unique nature of both the phoenix and her tree is still an important feature of the myth in Shakespeare's mind.⁹

A few allusions in Shakespeare that relate to the regeneration of the phoenix from her ashes may add support to Gillham's argument that bird and tree are vitally connected through the ashes/seed-dust imagery. In *The Rape of Lucrece* Lucrece alludes to the phoenix' birth out of death when she convinces herself that only by killing her own dishonored body can she make her honor live again.

So of shame's ashes shall my fame be bred,
For in my death I murder shameful scorn;
My shame so dead, mine honor is new born.
(1188-90)

In the first and third of the *Henry VI* play-cycle, characters find encouragement in prophecies of revengers rising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of dead heroes. In *1 Henry VI* 4.7.92-93, Sir William Lucy predicts of the bodies of Talbot and others taken from the battlefield near Bordeaux: "from their ashes shall be rear'd / A phoenix that shall make all France afear'd"; and in *3 Henry VI* 1.4.35-36, Richard, Duke of York, declares to his killers:

My ashes, as the phoenix, may bring forth
A bird that will revenge upon you all.

Later, in *Richard III* 4.4.423-25, this foreseen "bird" (earlier insulted by Queen Margaret to his prophetic father as "that valiant crook-back prodigy, / Dicky your boy," *1 Henry VI* 1.4.75-76) says to Queen Elizabeth of her slaughtered children:

But in your daughter's womb I bury them,
Where in that nest of spicery they will breed
Selves of themselves.

Since some scholars see Shakespeare's phoenix in *P&T* as Elizabeth I and the dove as Essex,¹⁰ Cranmer's prophecy in *Henry VIII* 5.5.40-43,

46-48 of Elizabeth's phoenix-like death and rebirth as James I is interesting.

When

The bird of wonder dies, the maiden phoenix,
 Her ashes new create another heir
 As great in admiration as herself, . . .
 Who from the sacred ashes of her honor
 Shall star-like rise, as great in fame as she was,
 And so stand fix'd.

In this instance the new phoenix, as in Chester's *Love's Martyr*, is Elizabeth's male successor James I. Thus the conflation of male and female (or the transmutation of female to male) in the figure of the phoenix finds expression in courtly compliment to James in the later Shakespeare as it did not in his early contribution to Chester's publication. In *P&T*, despite the political bent of *Love's Martyr*, Shakespeare's focus was on idealized love—"married Chastitie"—not on anticipated monarchical succession.

Gillham chose as her title "Single Natures Double Name." The line's immediate context is stanza five of the anthem (stanza 10 of the poem).

Propertie was thus appalled,
 That the selfe was not the same:
 Single Natures double name,
 Neither two nor one was called.

In juxtaposition with the last line of the stanza, "Single Natures double name" is the subject of the passive verb "was called." In printing the line as it appears above, Gillham implies that she reads "Single Natures" as I do, not as a possessive but as an oxymoron (parallel with "concordant one," 46). The natures (plural) each had appropriate names (double name), but now that the two are single (the two natures unified), neither of the pair of names (double name) "phoenix" or "dove" nor even the names of the numbers "two" nor "one" is any longer appropriate; this confusion of the whole concept of selfhood and proper nouns is that which has given rise to Property's appalled state. Yet the thrust of Gillham's discussion, centering primarily not on the two birds,

but on the bird and the tree, seems to have presupposed instead a formulation like the following: "Single Natures Double Name"; i.e., the tree and the bird, since both share a single *res*, are appropriately identified by the same *verbum* (126), *phoenix*. Therefore, the line implies the now-discovered connection between the life-bringing properties of the bird's ashes and the tree's pollen, since the similarity between the two natural objects lies hidden in the fact that the name of each is the duplicate (double name) of the other.

But clearly the line in its context refers not to the bird and the tree but to the two birds, the phoenix and the dove, and what appalled Property was not what either "was called" (40) but was that the two selves so completely disappeared into one that the new entity could not, according to Property's rules of propriety, appropriately be a self or even be numbered or named. The situation is so far beyond all normal rules that even Reason is "in it selfe confounded" (41) to see the selfhood of the two birds vanish into a "Simple," an elementary element, "so well compounded" of two in contradiction of all logical reason (44).¹¹ Simples combine into a compound; compounded elements cannot create a simple. Yet, Reason cries, this impossibility seems to have happened:

how true a twaine
Seemeth this concordant one,
Loue hath Reason, Reason none,
If what parts, can so remaine.
(*P&T* 44-48)

The apparent occurrence of the impossible provokes Reason to compose a threnos, or funeral song, which on the surface grants the supernatural quality of the pair's love and union, while it laments the final state of dissolution of the "dead Birds," who, though they embodied Platonic Truth and Beauty, leave no posterity. As suggested earlier, however, by implication Reason's own words provide assurance of the lovers' posterity to rise from their cinders through the generative power of pilgrim lovers, "true or faire," as they sigh their prayers.

NOTES

¹Robert Chester, *Love's Martyr, or, Rosalins Complaint (1601). With its Supplement, Diverse Poeticall Essaies on the Turtle and Phoenix by Shakspeare, Ben Jonson, George Chapman, John Marston, etc.*, ed. with introd., notes and illus. by Alexander B. Grosart (London: Trübner for the New Shakspeare Society, 1878) 241. Greek *phoenix* comes, of course, from the Septuagint; in biblical Hebrew the palm tree is *tamar*.

My quotations from Shakespeare's "The Phoenix and the Turtle" correspond with the spelling and punctuation of the poem's original text in Chester.

²Gillham cites Franciscus Sbordone and Cyril Alexandrinus (135n32). Some modern editions of the Bible also identify the dove as the bride; e. g., *The New English Bible Oxford Study Edition*, ed. Samuel Sandmel et al. (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) and *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Bruce M. Metzger et al. (New York: Oxford UP, 1991). See also *The Jerome Bible Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 508 item 11. The "My dove" of Song 6:9 is the bride.

³I agree with Marjorie Garber, "Two Birds with One Stone: Lapidary Re-Inscription in *The Phoenix and the Turtle*," *The Upstart Crow* 5 (Fall 1984): 5-19, that there is "evidence for a speaking persona of Reason as distinct from the authorial voice" (15) and that "Reason, the pseudo-elegist of phoenix and turtle reduces the immortal phoenix to a 'dead bird,' setting the stage for the reader's own 'prayer,' which [recognizes] the immortal quality of both the birds and the poem which enshrines them" (16). This view is opposed to that of William H. Matchett, *The Phoenix and the Turtle: Shakespeare's Poem and Chester's Loues Martyr* (London and The Hague: Mouton, 1965), whose new critical reading, followed by careful study of the historical and literary context, finds "Reason triumphant [in] introducing an ultimately negative rational evaluation" (202-03). As Peter Bilton observes, "Graves on Lovers, and Shakespeare at a Lovers' Funeral," *ShS* 36 (1983): 39-42, "Matchett interprets [P&T] as ultimately a defence of reason rather than an exaltation of the transcendent" (41).

⁴In *Antony and Cleopatra* 5.2.171-73, Cleopatra rails at Seleucus, her treasurer, for contradicting her word before Caesar that she has truthfully declared all her wealth:

Prithee, go hence,

Or I shall show the cinders of my spirits

Through the ashes of my chance.

The outcry shows clearly that ashes and cinders may together suggest at once despair in dissolution and rekindled hope for life.

⁵Robert F. Fleissner, "Shakespeare's Epitaph and the Threnos," *N&Q* ns 35 (1988): 53-54, argues that Shakespeare's surname at the end of the threnos, printed "Shakespeare," forms a "metathetic variation" of the last three words, "sigh a prayer," when pronounced "Sha[gi] [S]pea[y]re" (54). The rhymes of the final stanza, then, would be *repaire/faire/prayer/spaere*. He points out that Shakespeare's epitaph has similar slant rhyme: *forbeare/heare/spare*. These perhaps coincidental similarities make intriguing Garber's suggestion that the threnos of P&T is intended as an inscription for a burial urn ("Two Birds with One Stone," n3 above).

⁶On "mine" as a variant spelling of "mien" (*OED*), see John Constable, "The Phoenix and the Turtle: 'Either Was the Other's Mine'—A New Reading," *N&Q* 36 (1989): 327. Constable cites *OED* references to, among others, J. Eliot (1593) and Sir John Suckling (1641) using "mine" to mean "air or bearing" and "appearance (of anything)." The usage is a "particularly apt forerunner of the 'Single nature's

double name" (327). "Mine" as a possessive with the sense applying equally to both lovers occurs in Song 2:16 and 6:3.

⁷Quotation taken from the King James Version, *The Holy Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments, etc.*: A Reference Edition with Concordance (New York: American Bible Society, 1967). The bracketed phrase in 8:6, "of Yahweh himself," appears in *The Old Testament of the Jerusalem Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); in *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1952) Song of Songs 8:6b reads "For love is strong as death, / Jealousy is cruel as the grave; / The flashes thereof are flashes of fire, / A very flame of the LORD." Marcia Falk, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation and Interpretation* (San Francisco: Harper, 1990), in order to reflect the suffix *-yah*, yet not include the name of God, translates "flame of the LORD" as "holy blaze" (193).

⁸Quotations from Shakespeare's works other than *P&T* correspond to the texts in David Bevington, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1980).

⁹"Phoenix" as a metaphor for rare excellence in a person, usually based on achievement, occurs several times in Shakespeare's works. See, e.g., *As You Like It* 4.3.18; *All's Well That Ends Well* 1.1.132, 168; *Antony and Cleopatra* 3.2.12; *Cymbeline* 1.5.17.

¹⁰See, e.g., Matchett, cited in note 3 above; also Anthea Hume, "Love's Martyr, 'The Phoenix and the Turtle,' and the Aftermath of the Essex Rebellion," *RES* ns 40 (1989): 48-71. In Hume's reading the phoenix is Elizabeth I and the turtledove represents the Queen's loyal subjects: "Shakespeare [in *P&T*] wrote exclusively on the subject of the relationship between the Queen and the people, so exclusively, indeed, that he seemed to have no interest in the theme of succession by the New Phoenix [as celebrated in the volume by Chester and the other poets]" (66). Shakespeare's prophecy, put in Cranmer's mouth in *Henry VIII*, of the "new phoenix," James I, is quoted above in the text. Roy T. Eriksen, "Un certo amoroso martire: Shakespeare's 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' and Giordano Bruno's *De gli eroici furori*," *Spenser Studies* 2 (1981): 193-215, argues at length, and persuasively, that "the relationship between Shakespeare's birds in 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' resembles that of the phoenix and the *furioso* in the *Eroici furori*" (194) and that the interrelationship of form and meaning in Shakespeare's poem "depends on Bruno's allegory of divine love to a very high degree" (210). His further contention that the image of the turtledove of Shakespeare's poem, consumed in the "mutual flame" of his and the phoenix' love and death, represents a "passionate reaction to . . . the death of [Bruno] at the stake in Rome" in 1600 (210), however, is not convincing. Gwyn Williams, "Shakespeare's Phoenix," *National Library of Wales Journal* 22.3 (Summer 1982): 277-81, identifies the turtledove as Sir John Salusbury and his phoenix as Dorothy Halsall, his sister-in-law, on the basis of acrostic poems in *MS Christ Church 184*.

¹¹See the discussion by Patricia Parker, "Anagogic Metaphor: Breaking Down the Wall of Partition," *Centre and Labyrinth: Essays in Honour of Northrop Frye*, ed. Eleanor Cook et al. (Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1983) 38-58. Parker relates the "mysterious joining" of *P&T* to Ephesians and to two Shakespearean comedies.