

## The Phoenix and the Turtle

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When one looks at the bewildering number of interpretations of *The Phoenix and the Turtle* cited and summarised in the Variorum Shakespeare (*The Poems* p. 566 ff.), it is clear that (until 1938 at least) the great majority have been personal or historical readings. The Phoenix was Queen Elizabeth, or Christopher Marlowe, Sir John Salisbury, or his wife or sister-in-law or daughter, Lucy Countess of Bedford, or the Fair Youth of the Sonnets, to mention only a few of the more colourful suggestions. Interpretation then implied inventing an 'occasion' for the poem, to fit one's choice of candidate.

In this essay I should like to leave such readings out of account. As a working principle I feel I cannot do better than to quote J. A. W. Bennett's statement, when he was confronted with a similar situation regarding Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*:

Even if we were to discover definite evidence of such an occasion, the discovery would illuminate this poem no more than the knowledge of any similar origin or setting . . . helps us to understand the inner force of any work of genius. Whatever one is to say about topical allusions – and it would be foolish to deny their existence out of hand – must be said after we have considered what is manifestly the writer's main intent, and the scheme of his book or poem as a whole; we are likely to find that the more sure and satisfying the imaginative work, the less important will become the topical references, or autobiographical scaffolding.<sup>1</sup>

In this sense, then, I shall not look for an occasion for *The Phoenix and the Turtle*. In another sense, the occasion of Shakespeare's poem is evident: namely, that it was printed as a descant on Robert Chester's poem *Loves Martyr*.<sup>2</sup> It is the most brilliant of a series of variations, by 'the best and chiefest of our

1. *The Parlement of Foules* (Oxford 1957), pp. 2-3.

2. London 1601. My quotations below are from the edition of A. B. Grosart (London 1878).

moderne writers', on a poem 'allegorically shadowing the truth of Love, in the constant Fate of the Phoenix and the Turtle'. An allegory is not a cryptogram; so, rather than go on a biographical or political treasurehunt, it seems better to take Chester at his word, and to search out that particular kind of truth of love which is adumbrated in the love-death of Phoenix and Turtle.

Some scholars and critics, including A. H. Fairchild in his long and illuminating essay, have denied that there is any significant connection between Shakespeare's poem and the bulky poem, or miscellany, by Chester which precedes.<sup>3</sup> Many others have denied it in practice, by ignoring Chester's work. I believe, however, that Shakespeare's poem is best understood in relation to *Loves Martyr*, however much the diamond may surpass the mass of rock from which it was cut. I shall briefly outline what seem to me the more important aspects of the original poem.

The poem is 'Rosalins Complaint, metaphorically applied to Dame Nature at a Parliament held (in the high Star-chamber) by the Gods, for the preservation and increase of Earths beauteous Phoenix.' This is developed in the manner of a traditional *Planctus Naturae*, and it is useful to bear in mind the poetic uses that had been made of this pattern. The pattern is basically a threefold one – the ascent to heaven, the winning of a supernatural favour, an 'idea' or revelation, and the return with it to the world. The earliest development of this is in the fragmentary poem of Parmenides,<sup>4</sup> though here it is not the goddess Natura but the poet himself who is the protagonist. Parmenides is taken in his dream in a chariot drawn by five maidens, who are the five senses, as far as the boundaries of night and day. There he enters the great double doors, and is received by the goddess of wisdom. Because men waver and err in the blindness of ignorance, she reveals to him the world of true being, τὸ εἶναι, as complete and perfect as a sphere. This revelation, she says, is the way of absolute truth. Then comes the return to earth, and the revelation of the world of mutability, by a way which cannot be certain but only probable. Yet vestiges of the absolute perfection of τὸ εἶναι are found in this mutable world. The mind that has received the goddess's revelation 'will not separate

3. *Englische Studien* XXXIII (1904) 337-384, especially p. 346; and most recently F. T. Prince, in his introduction to *The Poems* (Arden Shakespeare 1960). Professor Prince is more concerned to dismiss *Loves Martyr* as 'rubbish', 'grotesquely incompetent and tedious' (p. xl), than to understand it or ascertain its relation to *The Phoenix and the Turtle*.

4. *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (6th ed., Berlin 1951) I 228 ff.

being from being, either as that which is scattered everywhere utterly throughout the universe, or as that which is collected perfectly together' (fr. 4).

In late Antiquity we find the 'complaint of Nature' as such in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae* (III 18ff.). In the court of heaven Jove complains that man, who had held his head erect and looked heavenwards, had become little better than a beast. Natura ascends to heaven and pleads with Jove for mankind. He reveals to her Ceres' loss of Proserpina, and promises a new fertility to the world, which will make possible the regeneration of the human race. In the twelfth-century cosmological epics this becomes a regular structure. In Bernard Silvestris' *De Mundi Universitate* Natura ascends to Tugaton, the Idea of the Good, the 'suprema divinitas' of the highest heaven, to obtain there the perfect archetype of man, which she will fashion on earth. She returns down through the spheres, and forms the creature who is both divine and human, who shares in the higher as in the lower world. In Alain de Lille's *De Planctu Naturae* the goddess, complaining to the creator about the sexual transgressions of mankind, receives once again the exemplars of all human qualities from on high, while her poet sees this event in ecstasy and awakes remembering it. So too in Alain's *Anticlaudianus* the ascent of Prudentia in the chariot, whose horses are the senses, is followed by receiving in a state of ecstasy the idea of human perfection, and by bringing a copy of it down to the world. As soon as the form has been embodied and has shown itself able to withstand attack, the descent is concluded by a return to the beginning, to the renewal of fertility on earth. In each instance the nature whose sphere is this world ascends to the higher world, receives a transcendent grace or perfection there, and brings it back as an exemplar to the world. There is a way of ascent, which is often an arduous one, often demands even the complete self-surrender of ecstasy, and a way of return to the earthly, in which at least some vestige of the heavenly perfection won through the ascent is brought down.

Nature in the poem *Loves Martyr* has created a unique Phoenix, a pattern of womanly perfections. It is necessary to clarify at the outset the gender of the two birds, the protagonists of Chester's poem, because Professor Wilson Knight, in an essay otherwise rich in ideas,<sup>5</sup> has unfortunately brought this question into confusion. There is a bird in Arabia, who is female, and a bird on the island of Paphos, who is male. It is totally misleading to suggest that these birds are androgynous. What happens is simply that Chester often uses

5. *The Mutual Flame* (London 1955), especially p. 156ff.

the *names* Phoenix, Turtle, and Dove interchangeably, applying them indifferently to the feminine Arabian bird and to the masculine Paphian one. Thus near the opening Nature says of the Arabian bird

One rare rich Phoenix of exceeding beautie,  
 One none-like Lillie in the earth I placed;  
 One faire Helena, to whom men owe dutie:  
 One countrey with a milke-white Dove I graced:  
 One and none such, since the wide world was found  
 Hath ever Nature placed on the ground.

And a little later, to persuade this bird to come with her to Paphos:

There is a country Clymat fam'd of old,  
 That hath to name delightsome Paphos Ile . . .  
 Where in a vale like Ciparissus grove,  
 Thou shalt behold a second Phoenix love . . .  
 We'le take our course through the blew Azure skie,  
 And set our feete on Paphos golden sand.  
 There of that Turtle Dove we'le understand:  
 And visit him in those delightfull plaines,  
 Where Peace conioyn'd with Plenty still remains.<sup>6</sup>

There is no sexual mystery here, only a somewhat confusing use of names.

Nature tells Jove and the assembly of gods that though her Arabian bird is an Angel, whose beauty is 'devine maiestically', she will soon die and leave the earth without its exemplar of perfection, because in the Arabian climate she cannot regenerate herself. Jove assents to Nature's plea by allowing Nature to transfer her to a paradise-garden on the island of Paphos, where there is another Phoenix or Dove, who is the only squire worthy of her.

Nature visits the Arabian Phoenix and finds her wasting away, for as she has lost her power of regeneration she has no longer a reason for living. But she is taken to Paphos in Phaethon's chariot, while Nature regales her with a long account of the cities of Britain and the deeds of King Arthur. By way of relaxation, they then sing a love-ditty: Nature sings of mutable love – 'What is Love but a toy / To beguile mens senses?' – and the Phoenix answers with the praise of immutable love – 'Love is a holy, holy, holy, thing' (pp. 78–80).

As they approach the island paradise, the goddess (adopting the manner of medieval encyclopaedists) explains the plants, trees, fish, jewels, animals, and birds to be found there. At last they come upon a bird looking shabby and

6. *Loves Martyr* pp. 2, 9, 24.

crestfallen. The Phoenix asks 'But what sad-mournefull drooping soule is this?' (p. 123). It is of course the Paphian turtle, forever seeking his lost love. The Arabian bird is compassionate but, it seems, somewhat disconcerted, and asks tentatively 'Shall I welcome him?' But Nature gives her no choice, and leaves the two alone together.

The last part of the poem is the most interesting. As soon as she realises that her companion is absolutely intent on death, the Arabian Phoenix feels completely one with him (pp. 125-7):

Why I have left Arabia for thy sake . . .  
 We are all one, thy sorrow shall be mine . . .  
 Thou shalt not be no more the Turtle-Dove,  
 Thou shalt no more go weeping al alone,  
 For thou shalt be my selfe, my perfect Love.

The poetry sheds its quaintness and has moments that are direct and moving. The Turtle explains to the Phoenix the nature of pure love-unto-death, and she sees such love as the source of perfect wisdom. Thereupon they give their bodies (the phrase is used of each in turn) as a sacrifice, so that 'one name may rise': they give them not to each other, but to 'blessed Phoebus, happy, happy light'. They become one with the 'pure perfect fire'. Thus in the last resort they do give their bodies to each other ('I will embrace thy burnt bones as they lie'): in their self-surrender they find themselves in each other.

The Pelican, the bird of self-sacrifice *par excellence*, watches the love-death and comments on it as Chorus. I shall touch on this comment later.

The poem is followed by a large number of conventional alphabetic and acrostic verses in which a lover addresses his beloved, under the guise of the Paphian bird courting the Arabian one. But this fiction is only kept up tenuously and intermittently; here neither chastity nor the love-death occur as themes, and these 'cantoës' are a coda related only loosely to *Loves Martyr*. The second part of the book follows with an *Invocatio* and dedication, two short poems by *Ignoto*, then Shakespeare's poem, four by Marston, one by Chapman, and four by Jonson.

Such was the 'occasion' of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*; now to say a word about its genre. This is the medieval bird-mass, here a bird-Requiem. It came into medieval and Renaissance tradition, I think, from two sides. On the one hand there are the two classical elegies. In Ovid's poem on the death of Corinna's parrot (*Amores* II 6), the birds who are *piae* become mourners at the

parrot's exequies. Pre-eminent among the mourners, united to the parrot in a unique bond of love, is the turtle-dove. In Marlowe's translation:

But most thou friendly turtle-dove, deplore.  
Full concord all your lives was you betwixt,  
And to the end your constant faith stood fixt.  
What Pylades did to Orestes prove,  
Such to the parrat was the turtle dove.

The parrot is taken up into the paradise of birds, into the company of the *volucres piae*, where those who are *obscae*, that is, birds of ill-omen, are debarred. In Statius' imitation of Ovid (*Silvae* II 4), the birds sing an anthem at the parrot's funeral-pyre, in which the parrot is symbolically identified with the phoenix:

Sent to the shades, but not ingloriously,  
his ashes laden with Assyrian balm,  
his tender feathers fragrant with the perfumes  
of Araby, Sicilian saffron, he  
will rise, unburdened by dull age, will soar  
into the scented fires, a happier Phoenix.

On the other hand, probably independent of this tradition, there is an episode in the early tenth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*,<sup>7</sup> which multiplied into dozens of later versions and translations. Brendan and his companions come to an island where an immense tree grazes the clouds, star-studded with white birds on every bough. The birds speak to Brendan and say that this is their paradise, and that they are angels – those angels namely who were neutral in the war in heaven, who therefore could neither be rewarded with the full joy of God nor yet punished in Hell. At dawn the monks arise to say matins: they sing their antiphons, and the birds chant the responses.<sup>8</sup>

The bird-liturgy is combined with a love-theme in the delightful *Messe des Oisiaus* of Jean de Condé, in which all aspects of birds' celebrating the joys of spring, of lovers' celebrating Venus, and of priests' celebrating their mass come to be symbolically related and interchangeable. First the bird-mass takes place, later it is retold allegorically, so that for instance the elevation of the rose of love then becomes explicitly the consecration of the host. The gaiety of the whole work must not lead us to suppose that this is merely making fun

7. Ed. Carl Selmer, Notre Dame 1959.

8. Ch. 11 (ed. cit. p. 22ff.)

9. *Dits et contes de Baudouin de Condé et de son fils Jean de Condé*, ed. A. Scheler (Bruxelles 1866) III lff.

of sacred things; behind the lighthearted parallels is the more serious, Boethian notion of a single love reflected in the most diverse aspects of creation.

I shall not pause at Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules*, for though it has kinship with this tradition it is not strictly a bird-mass; nor at the late Chaucerian piece *The Court of Love*,<sup>1</sup> which concludes with thirteen stanzas in which, on May morning, the birds sing the Matins and Lauds of the Virgin Mary in honour of the god of love. Only the transference of a liturgy in praise of chastity to the praises of Amor should perhaps be noted here. Contemporary with this is a poem *Devotions of the Fowls*,<sup>11</sup> which has been attributed to Lydgate, where the birds sing each an appropriate hymn. The poem is completely serious and reverent, and the birds signify souls in heaven:

Than I herd a voyce celestialle,  
Rejoysyng my spirites inwardly,  
Of dyverse soules bothe grete and smalle,  
Praisying God with swete melody . . .

In yet another piece, *The Armony of Byrdes*<sup>12</sup> (attributed to Skelton, but falsely, according to Dyce), the birds unite to sing the *Te Deum*. The central image is that from the voyage of Saint Brendan: a tree

Whereon dyd lyght  
Byrdes as thycke  
As sterres in the skye,  
Praisying our Lorde  
Without discorde,  
With goodly armony.

This poem also preserves another important tradition: that the Phoenix is a figura of the Son of God (as it had been from the first *Epistle of Clement* [ch. 25], written about 96 A.D., onwards); and the Dove is a figura of the Holy Spirit:

Than sayd the phenix,  
There is none such  
As I, but I alone;  
Nor the Father, I prove,  
Reygnyng above,  
Hath no mo sonnes but one.

10. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (ed. Skeat) VII, Chaucerian and other Pieces, 409 ff.

11. *Early English Poetry* (Percy Society, 1840) II 78 ff.

12. *Ibid.* VII 3 ff.

With tunes mylde  
 I sang that chylde  
 Venerandum verum;  
 And his name dyd reherse  
 In the ende of the verse,  
 Et unicum filium.

Than sayd the dove,  
 Scripture doth prove,  
 That from the deite  
 The Holy Spiright  
 On Christ dyd lyght  
 In lyknesse of me;

And syth the Spiright  
 From heven bright  
 Lyke unto me dyd come,  
 I wyll syng, quod she,  
 Sanctum quoque  
 Paracletum Spiritum.

To return to the particular genre of the bird-Requiem, Skelton uses it with immense delight in all its liturgical detail in his *Phyllyp Sparowe*. The celebrant at the Requiem is the Phoenix, and the climax of the rite is, in its lighter mood, a splendid counterpart to Shakespeare's poem:

*Domine, exaudi orationem meam!*  
 To heven he shall, from heven he cam!  
*Do mi nus vo bis cum!*  
 Of al good praiers God send him sum!  
*Oremus.*

*Deus, cui proprium est misereri et parcere,*  
 On Phillips soule have pyte! . . .  
 To Jupyter I call,  
 Of heven emperyall,  
 That Phyllyp may fly  
 Above the starry sky,  
 To treade the prety wren,  
 That is our Ladyes hen:  
 Amen, amen, amen!<sup>13</sup>

Closest to Shakespeare, however, both in time and in poetic diction, is a poem which has often been mentioned in more recent discussions of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, Matthew Roydon's *Elegie* in *The Phoenix Nest*, published in

13. *The Poetical Works of John Skelton* (ed. Dyce) I 69.

1593, upon Sidney's death. Once again it is the birds who celebrate the Requiem, this time for a human being. This is not only to say that the whole of 'kinde' is united in mourning a poet's death (a theme that spans from Moschus' *Lament for Bion* to *Lycidas*), but that emblematically the birds can give an exemplum of love, and an insight into death and immortality, which has a purity and self-sufficiency beyond what human images of grief could convey:

The skie bred Egle roiall bird,  
 Percht there upon an oke above,  
 The Turtle by him never stird,  
 Example of immortall love.  
 The swan that sings about to dy,  
 Leaving Meander stood thereby . . .

The swan that was in presence heere,  
 Began his funerall dirge to sing . . .  
 This mortall life as death is tride,  
 And death gives life, and so he di'de.

The generall sorrow that was made,  
 Among the creatures of kinde,  
 Fired the Phoenix where she laide,  
 Hir ashes flying with the winde,  
 So as I might with reason see,  
 That such a Phoenix nere should bee.<sup>14</sup>

The stage is now set for a rehearsal, a first and provisional reading, of Shakespeare's poem. So as not to enlarge this essay unduly, I shall take for granted the glosses and the explications of birdlore that can be found in standard editions such as the Variorum and the new Arden, those explications at least that are no longer problematic. Again, I shall not elaborate the poem's paradoxes of love on the same scale as Mr. Alvarez, who in his essay<sup>15</sup> is so keenly alert to every linguistic possibility, ambiguity, or complexity in these lines. Often I feel incompetent to decide how many such reverberations of subtleties would have come within the conscious experience of either the poet or a highly sensitive contemporary reader; but also, I think that the crux of the poem is to be found neither in the birdlore nor in the metaphysical conceits, but later, in the lines which have had not nearly as much detailed attention, above all in the Threnos.

14. *The Phoenix Nest* (ed. Rollins), p. 2 [10]ff.

15. *Interpretations* (ed. J. Wain, London 1955), p. 1ff.

With regard to the opening lines, I am convinced of what is by no means universally admitted, that 'the bird of lowdest lay, on the sole Arabian tree' is a periphrasis for the Phoenix.<sup>16</sup> The traditional belief is, in Sebastian's words from *The Tempest* (III 3),

that in Arabia  
There is one Tree, the Phoenix throne, one Phoenix  
At this houre reigning there.

So unless an explicit statement were made to the contrary, it would not I think have occurred to Shakespeare's contemporaries to imagine any bird other than the Phoenix on the tree. (Just as if a poet had written

Let the god with wingèd sandals  
And the herald's staff draw near,

no-one would have doubted that Mercury, not Mars, or Apollo, or some undetermined god, was in question.)

The phrase 'of lowdest lay' may at first seem strange. The Phoenix is indeed the bird of *greatest* lay, in a tradition that goes back as far as Lactantius (*De ave Phoenice* 45 ff.):

Beginning to pour forth her holy melodies,  
she greets the new-born day with wondrous voice.  
Neither the notes of nightingales, nor songful flute  
with its Cirrhaean modes can match her song.  
Even the dying swan cannot be held her peer,  
or tuneful strings of the Cylleian lyre.

While the beauty of a bird's song has usually carried the association of loudness, the use of 'lowdest' here, rather than some word meaning greatest or most beautiful, may well suggest 'most authoritative', or perhaps 'most apt for lamentation'.

I would therefore take the opening lines to mean, let the Phoenix now act as the *angelos* of its own funeral, let it summon the other birds, the *piae volucres*.

16. In recent years R. Bates (*Shakespeare Quarterly* VI, 1955, 19 ff.) has suggested that the bird in the opening stanza is a cock; M. C. Bradbrook (*ibid.* 359-9) and F. T. Prince (*op. cit.* p. 179) argue that no particular bird need be meant; T. W. Baldwin (*On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets*, Urbana 1950, p. 368) and Wilson Knight (*op. cit.* pp. 202-3) are as convinced as I that only the Phoenix can come in question.



show that pure, unwavering love can find its perfect fulfilment in death, and that its power can extend even beyond death.

In a number of paradoxes the birds express the mystery of two perfect lovers – that each by losing himself in the other finds himself only there; that by ecstasy, by standing outside himself in the other, each lover comes to his own fullest self-realisation; that it is in their unity that their individuality is made perfect; that by surrendering all claim to *Propertie*, to *proprietas*, by having nothing, they possess all things.

Such paradoxes are beyond the faculty of reason. I shall comment on the personified Reason more precisely later; here let me say only that Reason too, like the lovers, to come to herself and find herself again, must lose herself, in the surrender of love. She must, in her turn, participate in the lovers' funeral, as the birds of Phoenix-qualities have done, and by thus sharing, like them, in the lovers' supreme event, she shares in their love. Reason, precisely in admitting her defeat, transcends herself.

Thus she makes her *Threnos*. The perfections of the two lovers are now enclosed in their ashes. The Phoenix goes into death as into a new nest, the Dove rests for ever, and they have not perpetuated themselves on earth – not because they could not have done so, but because they were too completely chaste to wish it:

It was married Chastitie.

What is the point of this line? I cannot accept the frequent interpretation, 'they were childless because of excessive continence', which would surely be a defect, an 'infirmity'; nor yet something like 'they were chaste because theirs was a marriage of minds not bodies'. I think it is a question of singlemindedness towards an absolute fulfilment, one that can be found only in death, and of saving oneself for this without so much as a side-glance at anything less, or rather, not saving but losing one's life so as to find it in this. It is the self-overpowering aspiration which brings 'the Youth pined away with desire, and the pale Virgin shrouded in snow' towards their goal, the sun. And yet here too we must ask, is such an extreme of purity not a form of selfishness? What of the poor world, to be deprived of its most perfect ones?

Thou shouldst print more, not let that copy die.

How often we have heard this theme in the *Sonnets*, how often, and in what different tones of voice, in the *Roman de la Rose* or in *The Wife of Bath's*

*Prologue*, in Valla's *De Voluptate*, or in Leander's arguments to persuade Hero to love him.

What of the world? If its exemplar of truth (the *veritas* of Reason being here subordinate to the *fidelitas* of Love) and its exemplar of beauty have gone, there can no longer be a standard of values in these things – there is merely appearance, which is deceptive, nothing by which to test it.

But we can see that this stanza and the last one contradict each other. It seems to me that on this contradiction the whole poem turns.

Truth and Beautie buried be.

And then

To this urne let those repaire,  
That are either true or faire.

If truth and beauty are really buried, how can there still be true and fair ones to invite? Is it not precisely because Phoenix and Turtle have ascended to heaven in their mutual flame, because the attributes truth and beauty have thereby attained eternity and been united at their source, that they can for ever be participated in by the other birds, and leave their signature in the created world? Does not the poem come full circle here, the end taking us back to the beginning?<sup>19</sup> The Phoenix presides at its own funeral and summons the other birds to it. By participating in the Phoenix's love-death, in its overcoming of duality, the other birds are participating in its immortal aspect, are becoming bearers of the Phoenix's attributes. It is because these are unified, and made heavenly in perfect love, that they can be diversified on earth; because the exemplar of perfection is made eternal that the vestiges of perfection are made possible in time.

If this seems at all strange or far-fetched, consider for a moment a contemporary poem which likewise tells of a love-death, or consummation of love, under the image of the Phoenix, Donne's *The Canonization*:

19. This depends, of course, on the assumption that the bird of the opening stanza is the Phoenix. If this were not so, the basic pattern of the other stanzas would still, I think, be the same: Truth and Beauty come to rest in eternity, those who are true or fair participate in the exemplars by sharing in their funeral. But the opening stanza would then be only loosely connected with the rest of the poem – which does not correspond to my dominant impression of an intense imaginative whole.

The Phoenix riddle hath more wit  
 By us, we two being one, are it.  
 So to one neutrall thing both sexes fit,  
 Wee dye and rise the same, and prove  
 Mysterious by this love.

The world will learn to know this lover and beloved as love's saints,

And thus invoke us; You whom reverend love  
 Made one anothers hermitage;  
 You, to whom love was peace, that now is rage;  
 Who did the whole worlds soule contract, and drove  
 Into the glasses of your eyes  
 (So made such mirrors, and such spies,  
 That they did all to you epitomize,  
 Countries, Townes, Courts: Beg from above  
 A patterne of your love!

The soul is in a manner all things. The whole world's soul, *Anima Mundi*, everything which is the lover's *proprium*, is 'contracted', is drawn together and reflected in the eyes of his beloved; so that (to complete the syllogism) to him *she* is all things, soul of his soul. This conceit is as old as the Greek Anthology.<sup>20</sup> So too the Turtle in Shakespeare sees his right (his *proprium*) 'Flaming in the Phoenix sight'. But Donne does not finish with the lovers' attaining of this state. The world, he continues, will then beseech the lovers: because you have attained this, because you 'prove mysterious' – are full of the power of the *mysterium* of love – let that power redescend to earth, 'Beg from above a patterne of your love!'

Again, both in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Anthonie and Cleopatra* the consummation of love in death has a wider significance than for the lovers themselves. In *Romeo and Juliet*, admittedly, the concern is primarily with the lovers, and with the insight of each of them at the moment of dying, conveyed in the very word they use ('Thus with a kisse I die' – 'there rust and let me die'), that their death is the completion of their love. But this is not the end of the play. There is an effect, even if it seems to come about *per accidens* rather than to follow from the nature of the love-death. This two-in-one death manifests to the society in which the lovers had lived the destructiveness of its discord, and thereby allows that society to win a vestige of the lovers' perfect

20. *Anth. Pal.* V 155:

Within my heart is the sweet-tongued Heliodora,  
 whom Eros himself has formed as the soul of my soul.

concord. While they themselves are 'Poore sacrifices of our enmity', the statues at least, placed beside each other, Juliet's given by Montague and Romeo's by Capulet, will provide a 'patterne of love' for the time to come. The lovers are an exemplar to the city. The oneness and peace which they found supremely in death the city will find, in a lesser way, in its life.

In *Anthonie and Cleopatra* this pattern is not just established *per accidens*, but springs, for Cleopatra at the end of the play, from her very conception of love. In her lines 'I dreamt there was an Emperor Anthony', the perfection which is Anthony, the 'Arabian Bird' (III 2), 'contracted' into Cleopatra's love, is to be Nature's exemplar, a perfection more real, and by that very fact more perfect, than any that can be imagined:

But if there be, nor ever were one such  
It's past the size of dreaming: Nature wants stuffe  
To vie strange formes with fancie, yet t' imagine  
An Anthony were Natures peece, 'gainst Fancie,  
Condemning shadowes quite.

Compare the Pelican's contemplation, in *Loves Martyr*, of the love-death of the Phoenix and the Turtle:

O if the rarest creatures of the earth,  
Because but one at once did ere take breath  
Within the world, should with a second he,  
A perfect forme of love and amitie  
Burne both together, what should there arise,  
And be presented to our mortall eyes,  
Out of the fire, but a more perfect creature?

What the two passages have in common is a structure of thought dependent on the Boethian and medieval Aristotelian notion that existence is a perfection. The purest, most extreme application of this was Saint Anselm's argument for the existence of God: both those who affirm and those who deny that there is a God agree that the concept 'God' means the most perfect being. But the most perfect must exist, otherwise we could always imagine a more perfect: that same perfect one, with the added perfection – existence.

But by definition perfection cannot both be perfect, that is, immutable, and survive in a world of mutability. That is why (returning to the opening of *Loves Martyr* and to the *Planctus Naturae* pattern), Natura must always ascend to receive the archetype, and why she must always descend again to in some measure actualise it. The tragedy of the world's being deprived of perfect truth

and beauty, and the joyous possibility of being able, even in its imperfection, to share in truth and beauty, are two aspects of the same belief.

Now I should like at least to begin a second rehearsal of Shakespeare's poem, to bring into play certain 'properties' I have neglected until now, and to suggest certain new possibilities of detail. If my argument so far has been valid, the main intent of the poem would be, roughly speaking, as follows. The Phoenix asks the *piae volucres* to come to watch the funeral-rite, in which she and the Turtle-dove die in a mutual flame. As they watch this 'Tragique Scene', the birds sing the anthem, lamenting the loss of the perfectly united ones, the exemplars of constancy and love, truth and beauty. Insofar as they participate in the rite they win the sacramental grace it can bestow; to the extent that they comprehend the transcendence of truth and beauty they begin to have truth and beauty themselves – Phoenix and Turtle are in some measure reborn in them.

It has several times been pointed out that some of the language of paradox in which the love of the Phoenix and the Turtle is expounded recalls language used theologically of the Trinity. Such expressions as

So they loved as love in twaine,  
Had the essence but in one,  
Two distincts, Division none,

have their counterparts in the *Praefatio* of the Trinity in the Roman liturgy: 'sine differentia discretionis . . . in personis proprietatis et in essentia unitas'. Again, the paradoxes of unity and separateness,

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;  
Distance and no space was seene,

can be paralleled in many hymns to the Trinity, as for instance in the Victorine sequence 'Trinitatem simplicem' –

posse, scire, velle paria,  
In personis tribus et distantia.<sup>21</sup>

It must be remembered that the transference of such language to human love was itself traditional. So too was the figural identification of Phoenix with Christ and of Dove with Holy Spirit, as I mentioned in connection with *The Armony of Birds*. But let us now leave aside the bird-masses, and leave aside also the emblem-books in which such figurae can likewise be found, and turn to what is perhaps more relevant here: to Marston's and Chapman's Phoenix

21. *The Liturgical Poetry of Adam of St. Victor* (ed. D. S. Wrangham, London 1881) I 128.



(Psyche) of the Plotinian one. Anima Mundi, united to Ratio, is also the full perfection and actualisation of the human *anima*. So Donne's lovers in *The Canonization* had in their fulfilment contracted the whole world's soul into themselves, become one with the Anima Mundi, and thereby united in the Phoenix.

Lover and beloved are completely one in the unity of the divine Ratio, where Reason is made perfect by Love. Why is this? Because in 'Deepe Contemplations wonder' Ratio likewise loses herself, in the union of love with 'that boundlesse Ens, That amplest thought transcendeth', with the transcendent *One*, which the Christian neoplatonists identified with God the Father. What Chapman's lover says of his beloved is grounded in the idea that Reason too transcends herself in Love.

In what way could such complexities as these be relevant to Shakespeare's poem? What would be gained poetically for interpretation by seeing Reason in *The Phoenix and the Turtle* as yet another personification of the Ratio or Nous of the neoplatonists, with its kinships that extend to Solomon's Sapientia and Parmenides' nameless goddess, to Boethius' Philosophia and Bernard Silvestris' Noys? Why should we think that Shakespeare's conceit of Reason transcending herself in Love has any metaphysical import, and is more than merely a striking metaphor for love's irrationality?

In his *Brief Apology for Poetry*, written in 1591, Sir John Harington claimed that

The ancient Poets have indeed wrapped as it were in their writings divers and sundry meanings, which they call the senses or mysteries thereof . . . Manie times also under the selfesame words they comprehend some true understanding of naturall Philosophie, or sometimes of politike government, and now and then of divinitie: and these same sences that comprehend so excellent knowledge we call the Allegorie, which Plutarch defineth to be when one thing is told, and by that another is understood. Now let any man iudge if it be a matter of meane art or wit to containe in one historicall narration, either true or fained, so many, so diverse, and so deepe conceits.<sup>22</sup>

As an illustration, Harington takes the fable of Perseus, who is son of Jupiter, who slays the Gorgon, and thereupon ascends into heaven. This is not merely a moral allegory of the man who, being heaven-born, is able to vanquish sin and rise to heavenly virtue. According to Harington it also signifies 'the mind of man being gotten by God', overcoming its earthboundness and mounting to the contemplation of heavenly things. It signifies the Intelligence, 'daughter

22. *Elizabethan Critical Essays* (ed. G. Smith, London 1904) II 201 ff.

of Jupiter', transcending the sublunary world whose motion she causes; and finally 'the angelicall nature . . . overcoming all bodily substance' and rising to heaven. In other words, for the poet it signifies a process, the drama of self-transcendence, wherever it occurs – whether in moral conscience or contemplative intellect, in planetary Intelligence or theological Angel. It is not a question of pluralised 'layers of meaning' (which would be hopelessly clumsy and unpoetic), but of possibilities unified in a single poetic insight.

It seems to me that a number of important lines in *The Phoenix and the Turtle* suggest 'divers and sundry meanings' in just this way – not that they demand a kabbalistic 'reading on several levels', but that they have a vivacity and compelling power which does not seem to be exhausted by their most immediate or most obvious intention.<sup>23</sup>

The paradoxes of the anthem fall into two parts. The first are the abstract statements, which find their climax and summing-up in 'Either was the others mine'. The basic meaning of 'mine' here is 'an abundant source of supply'<sup>24</sup>: the lover finds a world in the eyes of his beloved. It is the paradox that was stated already by Meleager (*Anth. Pal.* XII 60):

When I gaze upon Theron, I see all things; but if I should behold all things save him,  
I should see nothing.

At the same time, in Shakespeare's two preceding lines it is the Turtle's right, his *proprium*, all that pertains to him as an individual, that he finds reflected in the Phoenix's eyes. Because of this, it seems inevitable that the word 'mine' must also suggest the possessive pronoun – in the beloved the lover finds his world, and finds himself.

It is this that appals Propertie. 'One can't call one's soul one's own any longer!' she seems to say. The second group of paradoxes introduces a row of philosophical personifications. They are not given a full poetic life of their own, only so much as the swift progress of the argument can take.

With the lines

23. Heinrich Straumann, in the essay referred to above (n.18), which is the finest contribution that I know to the understanding of Shakespeare's poem, rightly emphasized the complementary kinds of meaning that the poem can carry. But while I agree completely with his interpretation of 'truth' and 'beauty' in the poem, and with his sketch of the significance of these concepts elsewhere in Shakespeare's work, I would also wish to say, as he does not, that in an important sense this ideal conjunction *does* have 'Bestand' and 'Fruchtbarkeit' (p. 35).

24. V. *NED*, s. v. *mine* 1c, citing this example.

Single Natures double name,  
Neither two nor one was called

it may seem as if the first of these figures, *Proprietas* or individuality, is simply protesting against the nature of the two lovers, which has both distinctness and unity, and that this stanza is therefore only a repetition in other terms of the earlier 'So they loved as love in twaine, Had the essence but in one . . .' But in the meantime the meaning of 'Nature' has widened. The lover finds in his beloved not only his own essence or nature, but 'the whole worlds soule', or, to recall Shakespeare's own expression, 'great creating Nature'. The lovers who are all-in-all to each other 'create their own world'. Thus they exemplify the unity of Nature's two names, *naturans* and *naturata*, perfecting and perfected.

Propertie, the individuality of created things, is surpassed, but also fulfilled, in the unity of 'great creating Nature'. This unity, according to the Christian platonists, is eternally contained in the divine Mind or Reason. And in the entire neoplatonic tradition, from Plotinus onwards, the divine Mind eternally loses itself in ecstasy in the contemplation of the One. Reason negates herself in love.

But this is to anticipate. Reason, the next stanza states, saw that Division was being overcome; nevertheless to themselves the lovers seemed neither 'self' nor 'other', for while souls are simple, theirs had become indissoluble. Is it possible to catch an echo of alchemy in the words 'simple' and 'compounded'? It is at least worth drawing attention to one of the popular late medieval alchemical poems, Ripley's *De lapide philosophico seu de Phenice*, which was still printed in the seventeenth century: there the compounding of the simple *lapis* with *materia* is presented under the image of the union of the god (the Phoenix) with the *virgo mundi*, who is likened to a dove.<sup>25</sup>

Reason marvels at the lovers' indissoluble unity, and it is this which prompts her own self-surrender. If what parts can so remain – if what breaks apart elsewhere can here to such an extent remain inseparable – then Reason must admit her defeat and yield to Love. But the line

If what parts, can so remaine

25. George Ripley, *Opera Omnia Chemica*, Kassel 1649, p. 421 ff. Six fifteenth- and sixteenth-century English MSS of the complete poem have been recorded; a seventh MS is fragmentary. (V. Hans Walther, *Alphabetisches Verzeichnis* 5413, and D. W. Singer, *Alchemical Manuscripts* 811.)

may have a deeper significance, one that points forward to the great contradiction in the Threnos, which to me is the focal point of the poem. Reason transcends herself if the love that is *parting* from the world can still be kindled, can still *remain*, in those who watch and participate. Thus the divine faculty of Reason, at the very moment of *ascending* into divine Love, *descends* into the world, to act as Chorus, to participate in the love-death of two birds.

What is the tragedy? That the divine cannot become permanently incarnate? That lovers on earth bear only a fragmentary trace of perfect love? That among creatures even the uniquely perfect must die? – These are simply aspects of one idea.

Death, however, is a nest for the Phoenix,<sup>26</sup> a resting into eternity for the Turtle. It is precisely in the corrupting nature of the flame into which they die that they find incorruptibility. Thus their death is paralleled by Reason's dying into love. A neoplatonist might think of a further parallel: Anima Mundi is resolved into Ratio, and both are resolved into the 'boundlesse Ens'. A theologian could see a parallel in the Trinity, with Son and Spirit, Phoenix and Dove, dying eternally into the Father. In mentioning these possibilities I am not, I hope, laying undue emphasis on the esoteric and exotic. My point is simply that Phoenix and Turtle are complex *figurae* in the best medieval and Renaissance fashion, so that to limit their meaning rigidly would be arbitrary. Their love-death figures a process which can show itself in any sphere of existence, because a single poetic apprehension can bind together 'ciò che per l'universo si squaderna'. At the same time the poet's dominant concern is with 'the truth of love'.

Just as it is by transcending the world that Plotinus's divine principles are the source of perfection in the world, so the two birds, precisely by departing from the world, become its *angeloi*; the lovers, by living towards the fulfilment of their love in death, provide a 'patterne of love' for the world they leave behind. So too, in the Chartrain poets, Natura's quest for a pattern of perfection in heaven succeeds in bringing fertility to the earth. So too in Chaucer's *Parlement* Scipio's way of askêsis brings forth the love-dream of Venus and ends in Natura's fullness and *comune profite*. So too, in Ficino's and Pico's mythology of the Graces, Castitas and Voluptas are completed by Pulchritudo – the end of the ascent is not in the rapture, but in the fructifying return to the world.

26. Cf. Lactantius, *op. cit.* 77: 'Construit inde sibi seu nidum, sive sepulchrum'.

The Phoenix and the Turtle's ascent into perfect union, and their return in the scattered vestiges of perfection, can thus be seen in perspective to one of the permanent structures in European poetry and thought. But let me indicate also what seems to me distinctive about it. I think that in Shakespeare's poem, with particular sensitiveness, this structure is reflected in and furthered by the very way in which the poem is conceived and executed. I cannot agree with the most recent critic, Robert Ellrodt, that 'the tone is throughout funereal'.<sup>27</sup> I find the tone exhilarating – and at the same time serene. The exhilaration, one might say, belongs to the drama in which the birds participate, the serenity to the unmoved exemplars that make the moving participation possible. To use Coleridge's terms, the poem has more than usual emotion – and at the same time more than usual order. There is something rarefied about it, yet it remains in touch with human qualities, with the meaning of 'true' and 'fair' in the world; while it tells of birds and of the perfection of love, it tells something relevant to imperfect human love. The language of its lines is crisp and gnomic, each line having a certain lapidary separateness, yet behind the lines we sense the creating mind impelling them together into lyricism. The structure of thought is related with a marvellous intimacy to the poetic texture. Geometric *eidōs* and passionate actuality, meditation and drama, oracle and dithyramb, seem to be bound effortlessly together.

27. *Shakespeare Survey* 15, Cambridge 1962, p. 99. (The present essay was completed in 1963.)