

The Phoenix and the Turtle

THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE

Let the bird of loudest lay,
On the sole Arabian tree,
Herald sad and trumpet be,
To whose sound chaste wings obey.

But thou, shrieking harbinger,
Foul precurrer of the fiend,
Augur of the fever's end,
To this troop come thou not near.

From this session interdict
Every fowl of tyrant wing,
Save the eagle, feath'ed king:
Keep the obsequy so strict.

Let the priest in surplice white,
That defunctive music can,

5

10

1 bird . . . lay Opinion is divided over whether this is the phoenix or another bird, e.g. the cock or Chaucer's 'crane, the gaunt, with his trompes sound' (*The Parlement of Foules*, 344). For the phoenix, Dronke, *Orbis Litterarum* 23 (1968), 208, notes that Lactantius in *De Ave Phoenixe* commends it for its wonderful, matchless voice, though volume seems not to be one of its properties. There is no compelling reason for urging identification, since the line contents itself with the expressive alliteration dependent on periphrasis.

2 See Florio's *Italian Dictionary* (1598): 'Rasin, a tree in Arabia, whereof there is but one found, and upon it the Phenix sits'; and Shakespeare, 'Now I will believe / That there are unicorns; that in Arabia / There is one tree, the phoenix' throne, one phoenix / At this hour reigning there' (*Temp.* 3.3.21–4).

3 trumpet trumpeter (metonymically).

4 obey The use of the verb with the preposition 'to' is recorded in Spenser: 'Lo! now the heavens obey to me alone' (*FQ* 3.2.35).

4 chaste wings See 3n. The use of metonymy, synecdoche, and periphrasis frees the poem from depicting the birds merely as creatures and allows it to concentrate on those qualities or essences which they represent.

5 shrieking harbinger Often identified as the

screech-owl; but see 1n and 4 below n.

6 precurrer precursor (*OED* gives only this example of its usage; under 'precurrent' it cites John Hume's *The Jemes deliverance out of Babylon* (1628): 'The precurrent signes of the day of Iudgment').

6 fiend devil.

7 Augur Soothsayer, Prophet (in ancient Rome). The augur predicted the course of events from the flights of birds or by studying their entrails (details which may have prompted the pattern of association). The poem chooses to stress the negative character of the office.

7 fever's end The course the fever will take, for good or ill.

9 session sitting (usually of a court or parliament – perhaps echoing Chaucer's poem).

9 interdict keep away by decree.

10 tyrant wing It is not enough to gloss this merely as 'bird of prey' since 'tyrant' carries further emblematic resonance (compare 'chaste wings', 4n).

12 strict exclusive.

13 surplice white i.e. referring to the swan's down.

14 can i.e. to be skilled or versed in. 'Defunctive music' is funeral music. The swan is also the bird of Apollo, the god of music. See 15n.

240

Be the death-divining swan,
Lest the requiem lack his right. 15

And thou treble-dated crow,
That thy sable gender mak'st
With the breath thou giv'st and tak'st,
'Mongst our mourners shalt thou go. 20

Here the anthem doth commence:
Love and constancy is dead;
Phoenix and the turtle fled
In a mutual flame from hence.

So they loved, as love in twain 25
Had the essence but in one:
Two distincts, division none;
Number there in love was slain.

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance, and no space was seen 30
'Twixt this turtle and his queen:
But in them it were a wonder.

15 death-divining The swan is supposed to sing melodiously as it senses its imminent death (see *Luc.* 1611–12) and for this reason is preferred to the 'shrieking harbinger' of line 5.

16 his right Either (1) its (the requiem's) right (see Abbot §228), or (2) its (the swan's) right. (1) is more likely. Also, 'right' most probably plays on the sense of 'rite' (see *Luc.* 1838n).

17 treble-dated long-lived. The expression is formulaic: 'date' means extent or limit of (see *Luc.* 26, 935, and 1729), giving the meaning here of three times the ordinary span.

18 sable gender black offspring ('sable' is a carefully chosen poeticism); 'gender' = thing engendered.

19 Shakespeare may be voicing a popular belief: 'They (ravens) are said to conceive and to lay their eggs at the bill. The young become black on the seventh day' (from the *Hortus Sanitatis*, in Seager, *Natural History* (Rollins, p. 326)).

19 giv'st . . . tak'st The phrase suggests an exchange of lovers' vows.

21 anthem song of praise.

22 is The singular may signify the theme of resolved dualism (two hearts in one); but Abbott (§336) notes the frequency of sing. usage when two

or more nouns precede the verb.

23 fled are fled, having fled. The compact verb forms contribute to the gnomic, lapidary character of the poem.

25 as that, as a result that; 'love' is a noun.

25 in twain in two.

26 essence irreducible, or indivisible nature (see 'single nature' in 39). Critics have discussed the scholastic character of 25–48: Cunningham defines 'essence' as the intellectual soul and interprets the indivisible love of the phoenix and turtle as analogous to relationships within the Trinity (see Cunningham, pp. 266, 273–6).

27 Ridley further observes the scholastic terms: "'distinction" implies a verbal, "division" a real difference'.

28 'Number' may be 'slain' as an enemy because it poses a threat to indivisible love.

29 remote apart.

30 Distance . . . seen Distance was seen and yet not seen.

31 his queen This expression has given rise to speculation that the 'queen' is Elizabeth and the turtle Essex (see pp. 42–3).

32 But Except.

32 were would be, would have been.

So between them love did shine,
That the turtle saw his right
Flaming in the phoenix' sight; 35
Either was the other's mine.

Property was thus appalled
That the self was not the same;
Single nature's double name
Neither two nor one was called. 40

Reason, in itself confounded,
Saw division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded:

That it cried, How true a twain 45
Seemeth this concordant one!
Love hath reason, reason none,
If what parts can so remain.

Whereupon it made this threne
To the phoenix and the dove, 50

34 **right** due, possession.

35 (1) Glowing in his vision of the phoenix, and (2) Glowing for the phoenix to see. The word 'sight' means both appearance (see *Ven.* 183n) and eyesight.

36 **mine** (1) possession (the possessive pronoun used as a noun), (2) 'rich source of wealth' (Schmidt). Despite the reluctance of some editors, the latitude of wit in the stanza makes (2) possible. John Constable further detects wordplay on 'mine' as a variant of 'mien' (appearance). See *N&Q* NS, 36 no. 3 (1989), 327.

37 **Property** Selfhood, Self-ownership. Cunningham (p. 275) adduces further scholastic terms such as *proprium* and *alienum*: 'what is proper to the one, but not to the other'.

37 **appalled** weakened, enfeebled (O. Fr. *appalir* = 'grow pale').

38 That the self was not itself (but involved another).

39 **Single nature** indivisible essence (see 26n).

39 **double name** Perhaps referring to the 'Two distincts' (27), or to the two-in-one phoenix and turtle.

41 **in itself** in essence, thoroughly.

41 **confounded** overthrown, destroyed (see *Ven.* 1048, *Luc.* 250).

42 **division . . . together** things separate become one.

43 Each in himself was nothing without the other. Paraphrase does little justice to the gnomic wittiness of the line.

44 'Simples' (see *Luc.* 530n) normally form a compound; but this compound is so well unified as to appear a simple.

45 **true a twain** Maxwell notes wordplay on 'true': (1) how *faithful* a pair they are, (2) how *truly* one seems to be two.

46 **concordant one** i.e. agreeing with itself (a further resolved paradox since concord requires the agreement of two parties).

47 Since love has taken over reason, reason is dispossessed of itself ('has none' = has no reason). This exercise in logic is one familiar in Socratic dialogues (and was taken up earnestly by contemporary Neoplatonists).

48 In defiance of reason, what 'parts' (divides) none the less continues to form a unity. Also implied is togetherness in spite of separation and distance (as in 30). The line demonstrates the fulfilment of logic through paradox – consistent with the ideal of Neoplatonic love poetry (compare Donne's 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning').

49 Apart from the need for fluency of narrative transition, there seems little significance in the fact that it is Reason who sings the threne. The unidentified imperative narrator of 1–20 modulates into the quieter anthem-speaking voice of 21–44;

Co-supremes and stars of love,
As chorus to their tragic scene.

THRENOS

Beauty, truth, and rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclosed, in cinders lie. 55

Death is now the phoenix' nest,
And the turtle's loyal breast
To eternity doth rest.

Leaving no posterity,
'Twas not their infirmity, 60
It was married chastity.

Truth may seem, but cannot be;
Beauty brag, but 'tis not she;
Truth and beauty buried be.

To this urn let those repair 65
That are either true or fair;
For these dead birds sigh a prayer.

Reason then declares its surprised admiration for the love of the pair, and it is appropriately this tone which continues to the end. However, Lewis (p. 509) and Middleton Murry both ascribe importance to 'Reason's deliberate homage to a higher power' (Murry, p. 25).

49 threne (1) threnody, lament, (2) epitaph.

51 Co-supremes Joint rulers ('supremes' is accented on the first syllable).

51 stars presiding deities. Fate is also evoked by 'stars', in keeping with astrological notions of fortune (compare *Rom.* line 7: 'star-crossed'). As supreme examples of love, they must also submit to its 'tragic' laws.

52 scene drama, performance (*OED* sv *sb* 3; *H5*, Prologue 4: 'And monarchs to behold the swelling scene').

THRENOS Threnody (see 49n).

53 truth fidelity.

55 enclosed, Prince seems right to retain Q's comma: the qualities named are enclosed in each other and only incidentally in the cinders.

56 One version of the phoenix legend is that it will renew itself from its ashes; but this does not account for the turtle. The tenor of the poem is rather that the two birds will find themselves mutually renewed in 'eternity' (58).

58 (1) finds repose in eternity, (2) endures eternally.

59 posterity, Q's comma is preferable to later emendations to a colon; the three lines of the tercet stand in equal relationship.

60 i.e. their childlessness was not the result of physical incapacity.

61 married chastity A married couple may enjoy conjugal relations without blame; but the point of these words is to deny even that. Donne's Neoplatonism (see 48n) is again relevant:

But we by a love, so much refin'd,

That our selves know not what it is,

Inter-assured of the mind,

Care lesse, eyes, lips, and hands to misse.

(*'A Valediction'*, 17–20)

62 seem . . . be i.e. only a semblance of truth remains.

63 Whoever boasts she is beauty is an impostor. This and the line above strike a further Platonic note by arguing that what is now perceived on earth as truth or beauty merely reflects the ideal.

66 either . . . or Expressed as alternatives, perhaps because the two qualities can no longer be combined in a single person.

