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’red king:
Keep the obsequy so strict.

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

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 Foulis, 344). For the phoenix, Dronke, Orbis Litterarum 23 (1968), 208, notes that Lactantius in De Ave Phoenice 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 hevens obey to me alone’ (FQ 3.2.35).

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 Jewes deliverance out of Babylon (1628): ‘The precurrent signes of the day of Judgment’).

7 fiend devil.

8 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.

9 fever’s end The course the fever will take, for good or ill.

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).

11 strict exclusive.

12 surplice white i.e. referring to the swan’s down.

13 can i.e. to be skilled or versed in. ‘Defunctive music’ is funereal music. The swan is also the bird of Apollo, the god of music. See 15n.
Be the death-divining swan,  
Lest the requiem lack his right.

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.

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  
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  
’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)).


[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.

[24] as that, as a result that; ‘love’ is a noun.


[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).


[33] were would be, would have been.
So between them love did shine,
That the turtle saw his right
Flaming in the phoenix’ sight;
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.

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
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,
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.

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

Leaving no posterity,
’Twas not their infirmity,
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
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 impor-
tance to ‘Reason’s deliberate homage to a higher
power’ (Murry, p. 25).

49 thren (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 etern-
ally.
59 posterity, q’s comma is preferable to later
emendations to a colon; the three lines of the ter-
cet 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, per-
haps because the two qualities can no longer be
combined in a single person.