

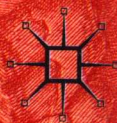
JAMES P. BEDNARZ

Shakespeare and the Truth of Love

**The Mystery of
'The Phoenix and Turtle'**

palgrave shakespeare studies

General Editors: Michael Dobson and Dymrna Callaghan



Shakespeare and the Truth of Love

The Mystery of 'The Phoenix and Turtle'

James P. Bednarz
Long Island University, USA



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For Edward Tayler, Stella Paul, and James Shapiro

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Edward Tayler led me to understand why the inclusion of 'The Phoenix and Turtle' in Helen Gardner's anthology chiefly composed of seventeenth-century verse is *not* historically misleading and how categories such as 'Elizabethan' and 'Jacobean' tend to blind analysis to significant literary changes at the turn of the century.

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James Shapiro encouraged me to view 'The Phoenix and Turtle' as a work that resists naïve biographical interpretations. I began this book when Shapiro was writing *Contested Will*, and through our conversations at the time I increasingly saw the need to rethink the poem's relation to biography and history.

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Introduction

Aside from a handful of sonnets, William Shakespeare's nondramatic poetry has seldom received the same adulation as his plays. This neglect caused Colin Burrow in his 1997 Chatterton Lecture on Poetry to complain that 'Shakespeare's poems and Sonnets have rarely been considered together as a group and are even more rarely treated as a major part of Shakespeare's works'. Since 'the poems and Sonnets tend to moulder at the back of collected editions of his work, and lurk unobtrusively in multiple editions', he urged his audience at the British Academy to put 'the poems at the front of our thinking about Shakespeare, and perhaps even at the front of collected editions of his works'. This book is part of a wider movement that responds to his challenge.¹ Its purpose is to introduce readers to the pleasure of reading 'The Phoenix and Turtle', a 'rare and irreplaceable possession' that has currently become so neglected by general readers that it might almost be called a lost masterpiece.²

Even though all of Shakespeare's nondramatic poetry has, since the eighteenth century, often been considered 'supplementary' or 'minor', some of the poems currently receive far more attention than others. The *Sonnets* is at present one of Shakespeare's bestsellers and continues to engage critics in a lively debate on its poetics and contexts. Lately *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*, which helped establish Shakespeare's reputation during his lifetime, have been particularly favoured by critics excited by their subversions of gender and sovereignty, their complex relation to each other and their place in the development of his craft.³ Still, modern criticism of these narrative poems has been regularly punctured by objections that, unlike the *Sonnets*, they are so limited by outdated generic constraints that they are inevitably as good as, but not better than, comparable work by his most talented Elizabethan compeers, such as Christopher Marlowe, Michael Drayton and Edmund Spenser.

Although they show 'great ability and moments of genius', William Empson concludes, 'we must rejoice' that Shakespeare 'went back to the theatre – recognizing perhaps that they were in some way inadequate for him'.⁴ The basis for Empson's judgement is his confidence that nothing in these poems, as brilliant as they are, can equal the best examples of poetry in the plays, where a dazzling combination of blank verse and supple prose, augmented by lyric emphases and insets, gives rise to writing of a different order, which belongs not just to English, but to world literature.

Among the remaining poems attributed to Shakespeare, there is one remarkable exception that provides profound insights into his life and art at the pinnacle of his career. None has been more enthusiastically celebrated by critics – while remaining almost entirely unknown to general readers – than his enigmatic 67-line untitled allegory of love centred on the mystical union of the phoenix and turtle. Usually referred to since the nineteenth century as either 'The Phoenix and Turtle' or 'The Phoenix and the Turtle', it is now rarely taught and probably scarcely read, even by those who consider themselves otherwise familiar with Shakespeare's plays, narrative poems and sonnets.⁵ Due to its critical neglect, novice readers, hearing this title, now probably imagine that the poem's archaic word 'turtle' (which finally expired in the nineteenth century) refers to a tortoise rather than to a turtle-dove (from the Latin '*turtur*', perhaps mimicking its song), the symbol of conjugal affection and constancy, whose bond with the beautiful and indomitable phoenix is the centrepiece of Shakespeare's verse. Those unfamiliar with the specialized criticism of the poem might likewise be surprised to discover in Chapter 1 that since the end of the nineteenth century this extraordinary elegy has regularly been regarded as one of the most highly prized works in the canon. This book was written to encourage a larger audience to consider its inestimable value; it is an invitation to appreciate a relatively unexplored side of Shakespeare's genius at its most erudite, riddling and difficult. But understanding it adequately requires us to read it both in terms of its position in the culture of patronage and through the interconnected political, literary and theological contexts to which it symbolically responds.

I

'The Phoenix and Turtle' is unarguably one of the most important short poems written between the death of Sir Philip Sidney in 1586 and the lyrics of John Donne at the beginning of the succeeding century.

A landmark in literary history, it is a work that reconceives what a short poem might be in 1601. It represents the rise of a new sensibility that would transform the manner in which some of the best seventeenth-century lyrics were written. A crucial document in the history of literary form through its affinities to the works of Ovid, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Skelton, Edmund Spenser, Sir Philip Sidney, Matthew Roydon and John Donne, 'The Phoenix and Turtle' is a transitional piece that symbolically links ancient, medieval, Elizabethan and metaphysical modes of expression and thought. Fusing Sidney's golden age smoothness with the kind of dense scholastic argumentation we encounter in Donne, the poem constitutes a remarkably rich experiment in a rapidly changing lyric style. Profound but not pretentious, heart-felt and yet remote, elaborate yet simple, clear but baffling, serious although playful, it is as difficult as anything Shakespeare wrote, an ecological mystery that leaves its best readers guessing whether the Phoenix, the symbol of everything valuable in life, is now endangered or extinct. It marks the point at which Shakespeare's allegory becomes so complex that it might justifiably be termed a metaphysical conceit. With 'The Phoenix and Turtle' we confront a work for which the critical antinomies of symbolism and allegory collide, merging concrete avian imagery with moral and psychological abstractions.⁶ Here the Phoenix and Reason occupy the same visionary terrain. But even though it constitutes for discerning readers one of Shakespeare's most brilliant works and its fictional premise is deceptively simple, there is little agreement about what it means. Yet a kind of understanding is possible if we first accede to the impossibility of its being rationally understood and learn to read it with wonder. Deliberate yet hypnotic, the work is called into being by the voice of the poet who summons the enigmatic 'bird of lowdest lay', with the strongest singing voice, perched on the Phoenix's tree, to serve as herald for a ceremony commemorating the mysterious union of the female Phoenix and male Turtle-dove, who have 'fled' the world 'in a mutuall flame'. The poet then bans the ominous owl and most predators before inviting three other birds – the swan, eagle and crow – to sing an anthem celebrating the departed couple's exemplary love, before Reason's 'Threnos' mourns their loss and solicits prayer for their well-being in death:

Let the bird of lowdest lay,
On the sole *Arabian* tree,
Herauld sad and trumpet be:
To whose sound chaste wings obay.

But thou shriking harbinger,
Foule precurrer of the fiend,
Augour of the fevers end,
To this troupe come thou not neere. 5

From this Session interdict
Every foule of tyrant wing,
Save the Eagle feath' red King,
Keepe the obsequie so strict. 10

Let the Priest in Surples white,
That defunctive Musicke can,
Be the death-devining Swan,
Lest the *Requiem* lacke 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 Antheme doth commence,
Love and Constancie is dead,
Phoenix and the *Turtle* fled,
In a mutuall flame from hence.

So they loved as love in twaine,
Had the essence but in one,
Two distincts, Division none,
Number there in love was slaine. 25

Hearts remote, yet not asunder;
Distance and no space was seene,
Twixt this *Turtle* and his Queene;
But in them it were a wonder. 30

So betweene them Love did shine,
That the *Turtle* saw his right,
Flaming in the *Phoenix* sight;
Either was the others mine. 35

Propertie was thus appalled,
That the selfe was not the same:

Single Natures double name,
Neither two nor one was called. 40

Reason in it selfe confounded,
Saw Division grow together,
To themselves yet either neither,
Simple were so well compounded.

That it cried, how true a twaine, 45
Seemeth this concordant one,
Love hath Reason, Reason none,
If what parts, can so remaine.

Whereupon it made this *Threne*,
To the *Phoenix* and the *Dove*, 50
Co-supremes and starres of Love,
As *Chorus* to their Tragique Scene.

Threnos.

Beautie, Truth, and Raritie,
Grace in all simplicitie,
Here enclosde, in cinders lie. 55

Death is now the *Phoenix* nest,
And the *Turtles* loyall brest,
To eternitie doth rest.

Leaving no posteritie,
Twas not their infirmitie, 60
It was married Chastitie.

Truth may seeme, but cannot be,
Beautie bragge, but tis not she,
Truth and Beautie buried be.

To this urne let those repaire, 65
That are either true or faire,
For these dead Birds, sigh a prayer.⁷

Since literary meaning is enabled by the formal properties of its articulation, scrutiny of this poem's structure is necessary for any competent

investigation of its message. The structure of 'The Phoenix and Turtle' can best be understood as the expression of an anamorphic art that invites opposing conceptualizations of its main theme: the nature of ideal love. Although some readers treat it as two poems (one untitled and the other named 'Threnos'), others read it as a single poem that in Burrow's words is 'not only about the dissolution of separate identities into a single whole', but 'enacts it'.⁸ If we tentatively consider it one poem, however, we have then to decide whether to divide it rhetorically into three or two parts, a choice that significantly biases interpretation. Most critics define it as a single tripartite verse consisting of: the injunction (stanzas 1–5), anthem (stanzas 6–13) and 'Threnos' (stanzas 14–18). Hence, in the injunction, the 'bird of lowdest lay' is requested to call the eagle, swan and crow to a 'Session' of remembrance in which an 'Antheme' is sung commemorating a miraculous love whose union-in-division kills Number and upsets Property and Reason. Reason's 'Threnos' or 'dirge' for these 'dead birds' accordingly serves as a kind of dramatic '*Chorus* to their Tragique Scene' (line 52), supplying a definitive interpretation of what the Phoenix and Turtle signify and what we should make of their absence. This formulation seems to imbue Reason's voice with Shakespeare's authority. Yet the poem can alternatively be read as bipartite, divided into five and 13 stanzas, split into: the injunction (stanzas 1–5) and anthem (stanzas 6–18), the latter consisting of (a) praise of the Phoenix and Turtle, (b) an account of Number's death, Property's dismay and Reason's confusion and (c) Reason's 'Threnos'. Dividing it in this manner, we are less likely to equate Reason's opinion with the poet's and are made to be more aware of its diminished authority in relation to both the voices that frame it and the experience of 'wonder' it cannot understand. The less Reason is seen as the authoritative speaker of the poem's choric epilogue, the more it assumes the place of a 'confounded' actor in Shakespeare's poetic drama who is incapable of fully realizing love's mystery.

In another baroque symmetry, the poem's rhetorical division into five and 13 stanzas is reversed in its metrical division into 13 'envelope' quatrains (rhyming *abba*) followed by five tercets of mono-rhyme (*aaa*) that bring its metrics to a dead stop. Divided yet whole, its 67 lines are unified through their incantatory rhythm, the product of a largely uniform use of seven-syllable lines with four evenly spaced accents, two of which regularly fall on their first and last syllables, such as: 'Trúth may seém, but cánnót bé'. This kind of poetic metre is referred to technically as 'heptasyllabic trochaic', 'trochaic tetrameter with catalexis' or 'truncated trochaic tetrameter'. Only the last line of the 13th stanza,

which introduces the 'Threnos', assumes a more natural iambic rhythm. There is, however, one major metrical irregularity which breaks through the poem's archaic formality in an expression of personal drama. Seven of its lines have extra unstressed final syllables, being 'octosyllabic' with 'feminine endings' (29, 32, 41, 42, 43, 44 and 52). Shakespeare, as George T. Wright notes, uses such endings 'freely' for 'effect' in his sonnets and poems.⁹ The effect here is emphatic. Of the poem's 18 stanzas, only the 11th (lines 41–4), recording the moment when Reason was 'confounded' by Love, consists entirely of these irregular lines, as the anthem registers this trauma in the metrical disruption of its song.

II

Anyone interested in what 'The Phoenix and Turtle' means, however, needs to combine knowledge of its formal and thematic properties with as close a reading of the specific cultural context on which it draws. Because even though such historical contextualization cannot adequately explain Shakespeare's masterpiece, it is critically necessary to guide and check the plausibility of interpretation. Part of my analysis consequently involves an evaluation of the factors that led to its original publication in a collection of 14 poems called the *Diverse Poetical Essays*, appended to Robert Chester's *Love's Martyr*, ostensibly printed to commemorate the knighthood granted Sir John Salusbury in June 1601 by Queen Elizabeth.¹⁰ It was probably to mark this occasion that Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston became what can be called 'the *Poetical Essays* group' when they were jointly commissioned as four celebrity poets to contribute to *Love's Martyr*. The identity of one other contributor – 'Ignoto' – is still unknown, but the four who are named – Shakespeare, Marston, Chapman and Jonson – were among London's most highly reputed professional writers. Their work on this project produced a fascinating case of joint composition in which one can discover complex signs of coactivity, collaboration and rivalry.

With *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night* behind him, Shakespeare in June 1601 was famous as the principal playwright of the Lord Chamberlain's Men and also as a highly esteemed nondramatic poet, the author of *Venus and Adonis* and *Lucrece*. Marston, having scandalized London with his vitriolic *Scourge of Villanie*, which was banned and burned in 1599, was a successful playwright for the Children of Paul's at their Cathedral theatre, for whom he penned satiric comedies and tragedies in competition with Shakespeare at the Globe and Jonson at Blackfriars. He had