

*“Threne” and “Scene”: the author’s relics of
immortality in “The Phoenix and Turtle”*

By attending to Shakespeare’s role as an early modern author, we can discover a fresh response to what has long been recognized as a reader’s paradox: “The Phoenix and Turtle.”¹ John Middleton Murray declared this philosophical lyric “the most perfect short poem in any language” (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 566), yet I. A. Richards found it “the most mysterious poem in English” (*Poetries*, 50). So mysterious, Richards thought, that “the whole poem” tries to convey “an endeavor to apprehend a mystery . . . the mystery of being” (57). William Empson called it “exquisite, baffling, and exalted” (“Narrative Poems,” 18), while John Masefield found it “strange” and “beautiful,” a form of “Spiritual ecstasy” (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 564). G. Wilson Knight believed the poem exhibited “the mystery of . . . love-death intercourse,” by which “a mystic paradox vitalizes . . . tragic joy” (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 581–82), and Richard Wilbur said it is “strange and masterly,” leaving “an impression of complete vitality” (Introduction to Wilbur and Harbage, eds. *Narrative Poems*, 20–21). More recently, Katherine Duncan-Jones has called the poem “extraordinary . . . one of the most dense literary riddles of the period” (*Ungentle*, 135, 140), while Colin Burrow has drawn attention to its “growing thunder of metaphysical speculation” (*Sonnets and Poems*, 87–88). In a 2001 statement in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Barbara Everett summarizes this view for the new century: “‘The Phoenix and Turtle’ is . . . brilliant and beautiful, but its extravagant rhetorics and unusual formality bring about a real opacity” (13). Back in 1922, Middleton Murray was thus on to something when he declared that “*The Phoenix and the Turtle* is mysterious, but it is crystal-clear” (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 565).

For a long line of distinguished commentators mesmerized by the poem, the paradox results because the poem’s perfect beauty is so exquisitely belied

¹ Cf. Burrow, ed.: this title “was first used in 1807, and has no connection with Shakespeare” (*Sonnets and Poems*, 82).

by the opaqueness of its allegorical content. We admire the pristine expression of the poetry, but we possess no certitude about what it means. As to be expected, such a paradox has intensified rather than eliminated controversy, yet today we may still marvel at how such a slender portion of the Shakespeare canon – a mere 67 lines – has generated such a massive and important history of criticism.²

The major interpretations are drawn along four lines, which variously cross and combine: politics and history; religion and philosophy; sexuality and gender; genre and literariness. By far, the political or historical interpretation has received the most press, as scholars and critics have vigorously debated the allegorical referents for the two avian principals. No fewer than eight major theses about the identities of the phoenix and turtle have been forwarded: (1) Queen Elizabeth and the earl of Essex (Grosart, ed. *Chester's Love's Martyr*; Matchett, "Phoenix and the Turtle"; Oakeshott, "Love's Martyr"; McCoy, "Love's Martyrs"; Tipton "Transformation"; Hyland, *Introduction to Shakespeare's Poems*); (2) Sir John Salisbury and his wife Ursula (C. Brown, ed., *Poems*; Buxton, "Two Dead Birds"; Honigmann, "Lost Years," 90–113; cf. Klause, "Phoenix and Turtle"); (3) Elizabeth and the English people (Axton, "Miraculous Succession"; Hume, "Love's Martyr"); (4) Elizabeth and Salisbury (T. P. Harrison, "Love's Martyr"); (5) Lucy, countess of Bedford, and her husband, the third earl of Bedford (Newdigate, ed., "Phoenix and Turtle"); (6) Elizabeth and Giordano Bruno (Eriksen, "Bruno"); (7) the martyred Jesuit poets Robert Southwell and Henry Walpole (Asquith); and (8) the martyred Catholic Ann Line and her husband Roger (Finnis and Martin, "Another turn").

Yet many critics have eschewed such historical allegory for religious or philosophical allegory, usually by emphasizing scholastic elements of Christian mysticism, especially regarding the three-in-one mystery of the Trinity in its Reformation context (Cunningham, "Essence"); or Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy (Ellrodt, "Poet," "Anatomy"), especially regarding the two-in-one mystery of eros; but also "a vision of love's aspiring immortality" emphasized by Knight in his famous commentary: "the very theme of *The Phoenix and the Turtle*" is that "In death there is no unfaithfulness"; there is, thus, "an assurance of immortality, in terms of 'death' and 'love,'" the "blending of duality in unity, of life and death in love's immortality" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 580–81).³ This last

² Even so, "The Phoenix and Turtle" remains outside the mainstream of Shakespeare criticism, even in works sympathetic to Shakespeare's poems – e.g., Bate, *Genius*; Miola, "Poems," in *Reading Shakespeare*; S. Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems*; Hyland, *Introduction to Shakespeare's Poems*.

³ Critics surveyed by Rollins in the *Variorum: Poems* often mention the Christian and Platonic dimensions (570–83).

dimension shades easily into sexual or gender dynamics, with most critics (especially recent ones) attending to Shakespeare's representation of male and female lovers – or the feminine and the masculine – within the institution of marriage, or to love as an abstraction and idea (see Roe, ed., *Poems*, 50–54; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 83–84). Finally, critics have labeled the genre of the poem variously as a philosophical poem, a funeral elegy, or a love lyric, emphasizing its mix of technical philosophical terms with language in the transcendent key, tracing its literary origins to the bird poem, including Ovid's *Amores*, 2. 6 on the death of Corinna's pet parrot (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 571), but especially Chaucer's *Parlement of Foules* (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 571), Petrarchism and Ovidianism more broadly (Ellrodt, "Anatomy"; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 49–50; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 83–84), Sidney and elegies on him (Everett, "Golden Bough"); and even drawing attention to Shakespeare's self-reflexive concern with his own art and role as a poet during the Elizabethan era (Ong, "Metaphor"; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 52–55; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 89–90).⁴

While the interpretations continue to be dizzying, a number of recent critics have luckily reached something of a consensus about what has seemed the eye of the storm – the identity of the conjoined avian principals. The phoenix and turtle, who love each other, die, leave no posterity, yet warrant civic mourning among the purified elect, appear to allegorize Queen Elizabeth and the earl of Essex, who have put the national succession in jeopardy through the unfortunate tragedy of their star-crossed conjunction.⁵ The poem was first printed in 1601, the very year when Elizabeth signed the execution warrant for Essex, who had forged a rebellion against his sovereign and failed. Since we possess no entry in the Stationers' Register for the poem, we cannot identify whether it was published before or after Essex's public beheading in March, but it does not really matter, since neither Essex nor Elizabeth needed to be dead for Shakespeare to represent their "death" in symbolic terms; he "need only have seen the situation as past redeeming" (Matchett, "Phoenix and the Turtle," 191). However persuasive rationally, this intriguing political tenor speaks little to the poem's awe-inspiring vehicle, the absolute beauty of its formal perfection, which continues to leave readers today in an exalted state of joy. Unfortunately, most readers who have emphasized the poem's formalized beauty, thinking

⁴ For a literary interpretation, see also Brooks, *Well Wrought Urn*, 14–16; Richards, *Poetries*; Knight, *Mutual Flame*. For criticism through the early 1970s, see Underwood, "Phoenix"; the inventory above is also indebted to Roe, ed. *Poems*, 41–49; and to Tipton, "Transformation," 59–60n3.

⁵ Asquith, "Phoenix," and Finnis and Martin, "Another turn," have just complicated this conclusion, but it remains to be seen how seriously. Even though Shakespeare might be processing the martyrdom of Ann Line or Southwell and Walpole, the Essex–Elizabeth fallout remains the most durable historical context.

with Ralph Waldo Emerson that it must be “a lament on the death of a poet, and of his poetrie mistress” (quoted in Richards, *Poetries*, 50), or with Richards that it must be about “the poetic endeavor” and of “poetry” itself (50), have tended to eschew politics. What “The Phoenix and Turtle” seems to require is a hermeneutic that can account for both the political and the literary at once.

Such a hermeneutic can be found if we view the poem as a work about the politics of authorship itself. In “The Phoenix and Turtle,” Shakespeare versifies the very predicament of the late-Elizabethan author who willingly voices dangerous political crises, like that of Elizabeth and Essex, whose emotional conjunction threatened national succession. What seems challenging today is figuring out just how the poem relates the literary to the political. Since several important recent critics agree on the political allegory (even if others dispute it endlessly), we might turn our historical scholarship back to the literary.⁶ When we do, we discover that the poem rehearses another kind of conjunction that happily predicts a more fortunate succession – one that pertains both to the material printing of the poem in Robert Chester’s *Loves Martyr, or Rosalin’s Complaint* and to the professional environment of Shakespeare’s professional career.

THE PRINTED CONTEXT: LOVE’S MARTYR

Sometime in 1601, Chester’s volume was printed by Richard Field, the Stratford-born friend of Shakespeare’s who nearly a decade earlier had printed both *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. The Chester volume has other connections with Shakespeare’s first two printed poems, because, as Burrow points out, Chester’s dedicatory poem “alludes to the semi-epic status of *Lucrece*: ‘Of bloody wars, nor of the sack of Troy, / . . . Of Lucrece’s rape, being ravished by a King, / Of none of these, of sweet conceit I sing.’” Burrow also finds a “reference to Ovidian tales of Lucretia on p. 46; and a reference which may be to Shakespeare’s first poem, ‘under this / Faire Venus from Adonis stole a kisse’, occurs on p. 18” (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 84n1). What might be striking to recognize, then, is just how *Love’s Martyr* coheres with the printing of William Shakespeare’s name between the early 1590s and the first years of the seventeenth century – including through the practice of William Jaggard in *The Passionate Pilgrim*.

⁶ On this foundation, we may then account for the sexual and the religious.

Chester’s volume is “one of the hardest books to make sense of in Elizabethan literature” (J. Kerrigan, “Poems,” 76). The difficulty is virtually advertised on the title page to the first edition:

LOVES MARTYR: | OR, / ROSALINS COMPLAINT. *Allegorically shadowing the truth of Loue,* | in the constant Fate of the Phoenix | and Turtle. | A Poeme enterlaced with much varietie and raritie; | now first translated out of the venerable Italian Torquato | Caeliano, by ROBERT CHESTER. | With the true legend of famous King Arthur . . . | To these are added some new compositions, of severall moderne Writers | whose names are subscribed to their severall workes . . . | [Ornament] | LONDON | Imprinted for E. B. | 1601.⁷

In a single volume, the reader can find a remarkable array of material: a curious miscellany of works “by” Robert Chester, ranging from a very long (and widely maligned) poem on the phoenix and turtle and a long verse discourse on King Arthur; and “some new compositions, of severall moderne Writers,” two by an anonymous poet named “Ignoto” (perhaps John Donne [D. Kay, “Shakespeare,” 230] or Sir Walter Raleigh [Oakeshott, “*Love’s Martyr*,” 40–41]), one by “William Shake-speare,” four by “John Marston,” one by “George Chapman,” and four by “Ben Johnson,” all of which are introduced by two poems collectively written by the “Vatum Chorus” (chorus of poets). To complicate the whole matter, the title page declares that *Love’s Martyr* “*Allegorically shadow[s] . . . the truth of Loue*” in its myth of the phoenix and turtle – the very spring to the torrent of allegorical interpretation in the nineteenth, twentieth, and now the twenty-first centuries, from Grosart in 1878 (who first identified Elizabeth with the phoenix and Essex with the turtle) to Alzada Tipton in 2002 (who most recently confirms this interpretation). Briefly put, *Love’s Martyr* is hard to make sense of as an Elizabethan book because it operates at two removes from the stability so many readers require: that of authorial “meaning.” The book is that strange bedfellow, a collaborative allegory, and it just happens that the world’s most famous author, “William Shake-speare,” lies deeply embedded in its printed sheets.⁸ More precisely put: *Love’s Martyr* prints the paradox at the core of the present book: “The Phoenix and Turtle” is a poem by the world’s most famous theatrical man. As it turns out, Chester’s

⁷ Quotations from *Love’s Martyr*, except from Shakespeare’s poem, come from Grosart’s edition. A second printing of *Love’s Martyr* appears in 1611, with a different title page: “The Annuall [Annals] of Great Brittain. Or a Most Excellent Monument” – printed by Mathew Lownes (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 83).

⁸ On *Love’s Martyr*, see Grosart, ed., *Chester’s Love’s Martyr*; C. Brown, ed., *Poems*; Knight, *Mutual Flame*, 179–92; Matchett, “*Phoenix and the Turtle*”; Oakeshott, “*Love’s Martyr*”; Axton, “*Miraculous Succession*.”

printed volume, like Shakespeare's printed poem, emerges directly out of a theatrical environment. James P. Bednarz recalls that Marston "became Shakespeare's commentator, collaborator, and rival in print" (*Poets' War*, 198), and he notes that Shakespeare, Marston, Chapman, and Jonson "were considered 'the best' modern playwrights" (198). Bednarz adds that it is not "accidental" that Shakespeare, Marston, and Jonson "were currently involved in the Poets' War" (198). In other words, in its original material casing, "The Phoenix and Turtle" functions as a lyric poem embroiled within a theatrical competition.

In fact, critics have long situated the poem in the context of Shakespeare's dramatic career. In 1886, Fleay believed that "the appearance of Shakespeare's name, as fellow-contributor to Chester's *Love's Martyr* with Jonson, Marston, and Chapman, marks the conclusion of the theatrical quarrel, and the reconciliation of all the principal combatants, except Dekker" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 562; see 564). More frequently, critics have compared the poem with the plays. Some, like Middleton Murray, boldly declare the poem's absolute superiority to the plays (reprinted in Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 566), while others find the poem's "philosophy" of male and female desire suggestive of that in the romantic comedies (see Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 573). Occasionally, critics have even found the poem "dramatic" in quality, especially the concluding Threnos, "perhaps originally intended for the epilogue of an allegorical masque" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 568). Such a view recurs as a convention in most modern introductions on the poem (Prince, ed., *Poems*, xlv; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 49). Yet critics have also added one feature of intriguing specificity; as Everett puts it: "In the year of *Loves Martyr*, *Hamlet* first held the stage, its author recognized as master of the public theatre, but still open to dismissal by well-born or university-trained writers. But *Hamlet* is a court tragedy. And in 'The Phoenix and Turtle' the poet is perhaps making plain that he can equal or outdo the court makers of his time in their own mode" ("Golden Bough," 14).

While acknowledging this theatrical context, Everett joins most commentators in emphasizing the poetical context. She suggests Sidney's "Eighth Song" from *Astrophil and Stella* as an origin for Shakespeare's discovery of "a music he uses nowhere else" (14).⁹ Later, Everett observes that in *Cymbeline* Shakespeare picks up the "unfinished" works of Sidney's *Arcadia* and Spenser's *Faerie Queene* – what she calls their "heroic love epic[s]" – and she notes that "The Phoenix and Turtle" has "a rhetoric and feeling

⁹ In fact, critics have long cited Sidney and his song; see Roe, ed., *Poems*, 48.

perhaps closest, in of all the poet's work, to *Cymbeline*" (15). Since she pursues only the Sidney connection, we might wish to follow up on the connection with Spenser, and then situate this connection within the theatrical competition emphasized by Bednarz in *Poets' War*. When we do, we discover one important way that "The Phoenix and Turtle" lines up with Shakespeare's other poems already examined: here Shakespeare competes not merely with fellow "playwrights" but with England's national poet, in a printed poem that processes his own standing as a poet-playwright before a national audience.¹⁰

Chester's hopes for *Love's Martyr* are signaled not merely by his attention to the Elizabeth–Essex fall-out, but by two other features. The first is well known, and is doubly advertised, first on the title page in the announcement of "some new compositions, of severall moderne Writers" and again on a second title page prefacing these compositions:

HEREAFTER | FOLLOW DIVERSE | Poeticall Essaies on the former Sub | iect; viz: the *Turtle* and *Phoenix*. | Done by the best and chiefest of our moderne writers, with their names sub- | scribed to their particular workes: | *neuer before extant*. |

In other words, Chester has managed to assemble, not just ordinary modern poets, but the "best and chiefest" then living – a judgment that literary history has largely confirmed, at least with respect to Jonson and Shakespeare.

The second feature is less well known. Presumably, Chester could make the high claim for this particular group of writers because he knew that England's New Poet had died two years previously. Accordingly, his main title page advertises his debt to Spenser in the alternative title to *Love's Martyr*: "*Rosalins Complaint*." By 1601, both Shakespeare and Lodge had written works featuring a heroine named Rosalind: in 1590, Lodge had published the prose fiction *Rosalynde or Euphues' Golden Legacy*, while toward the end of the 1590s Shakespeare had put Lodge's heroine on the stage in *As You Like It*. What has escaped attention is not that Spenser had first used Rosalind as a heroine in his 1579 Virgilian pastoral, *The Shepheardes Calendar*, and kept her before the reading public in such works as the 1595 *Colin Clouts Come Home Again*, but more precisely that the name "Rosalind" in English literature appears to be a Spenserian coinage, and thus came to be associated with Spenser and his national art.¹¹

¹⁰ See Oakeshott on Chester's high hopes for the volume: "Here was . . . the chance that if and when the revolution that he and others confidently expected took place *Loves Martyr* . . . would be launched on the world" ("*Love's Martyr*," 47).

¹¹ For this idea, thanks to Dustin Stegner. See Mallette, "Rosalind," 622. The genealogy of the three authors has been discussed but not with respect to Chester's volume; see, e.g., C. Kinney, "Feigning."

If, as Marie Axton suggests, “*Rosalin’s Complaint* voices a monarch’s reproach to her subjects” (“Miraculous Succession,” 118), *Love’s Martyr* shows Chester making a rather large-scale appropriation of the recently deceased national poet’s project: he employs a genre Spenser had turned into a nationally significant form (see H. Maclean, “*Complaints*”) and identifies the beloved of Colin Clout with Queen Elizabeth. Throughout his career, Spenser himself had been careful to conceal Rosalind’s real-life identity; in the gloss to the *Januarye* eclogue, E. K. says that “Rosalinde . . . is also a feigned name, which being wel ordered, wil bewray the very name of hys love and mistresse, whom by that name he coloureth,” citing as the first of several literary precedents Ovid and Corinna (118–20). As this discourse suggests, E. K. invites readers to make their own guesses, and though most readers think first of Spenser’s beloved, some identify Rosalind with the queen (Mallette, “Rosalind,” 622). Chester may be the first on record to indicate such a (royal) reading.

Love’s Martyr includes other Spenserian moments. Chester equates Rosalind and her complaint with Dame Nature: “Rosalins Complaint, metaphorically applied to Dame Nature at parliament held (in the high Star-chamber) by the Gods, for the preservation and increase of Earths beauteous Phoenix” (9). We cannot determine whether Chester had seen *The Mutabilitie Cantos* in manuscript (it was not published until 1609), but the link between Rosalind, the complaint form, Queen Elizabeth, and Dame Nature suggests such a possibility. All the more so since one part of the miscellany, as we have noted, narrates the story of Arthur (the hero of *The Faerie Queene* and the destined husband of Elizabeth/Gloriana), while another part, as Axton observes, is called “Britain monuments”: “Nature identifies the ancient founders of noble civilizations by giving an account of ‘Britain Monuments’ reminiscent of the *Faerie Queene*, Book II canto 10” (“Miraculous Succession,” 122). Axton also notes that “Nature calls [London] . . . Troynouant,” the name Spenser had used in his national epic (2. 10. 46), and she is even more precise when suggesting that “A Spenserian contrast between kinds of love is taken up in song” when “Nature laments Cupid who beguiles men’s senses, while Phoenix sings of perfect love which is pure beauty” (123) – presumably thinking of *Faerie Queene* 3. 3. 1.¹²

The Spenserian dynamic in *Love’s Martyr* suggests how at home Spenser might be in Shakespeare’s contribution to the volume. Yet in the long history of reception, England’s New Poet occupies a rather paradoxical position:

¹² Buxton cites a 1595 poem by Chester that concludes with a Spenserian inscription: “Bould and to bould” (“Two Dead Birds,” 47; see *Faerie Queene*, 3. 11. 54: “Be bold . . . / Be not too bold”).

he appears recurrently yet incidentally (e.g., Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 570), although in 1903 Brandl fancied that Shakespeare’s “feathered king,” the eagle, represented Spenser (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 570). Occasionally, critics suggest something more promising – as when Knight observes that the phoenix’s “flaming spirituality appears to cover the whole range of Spenser’s four *Hymns* in honour of Beauty and Love, Earthly and Divine” (*Mutual Flame*, 153). Even though Knight adds that “the Phoenix would scarcely be at home within Spenser’s *Epithalamion*” (153), William Matchett recalls Spenser’s representation of the phoenix in the 1569 *Theatre for Worldlings* and its 1591 version in the *Complaints* volume (“*Phoenix and the Turtle*,” 24). These comments are important, because they record a matter of literary history: during the last decade of Elizabeth’s reign, Spenser was the supreme love poet within a nationalist setting.¹³

Finally, we might recall that in the last poem printed in his lifetime, the 1596 *Prothalamion*, the New Poet had consolidated his standing as England’s poet of wedded love by championing the national heroism of Essex, who had just returned from the famed Cadiz expedition: “Great England’s glory, and the Worlds wide wonder” (146). In this swan allegory about the poet’s role in national destiny, Spenser presents Essex as the martial hero who can “free” the “country” from “forraine harmes: / And great Elisaes glorious name may ring / Through al the world . . . / Which some brave muse may sing / To ages following” (156–60). At the end of this “Spousall Verse” (title page), the martial Essex steps forward to preside over the marriage of the two Somerset swans, who have sailed down the Thames to Essex House to join with their husbands, “Against their Brydale day, which is not long” (179). It is hard to imagine that Shakespeare could not have had this memorable poem in mind five years later under very different national circumstances.¹⁴ We may even wonder whether in “The Phoenix and Turtle” and *Love’s Martyr* as a whole Shakespeare and company were not taking up Spenser’s call, presenting themselves as the brave muses singing Essex’s glory to ages following, precisely when the circumstances did change.

¹³ Editors typically gloss “obey” in line 4 with *Faerie Queene*, 3. 11. 35 (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 324; Prince ed., *Poems*, 179, mistakenly citing 3. 2. 35). Bednarz suggests Spenser’s Gardens of Adonis in *Faerie Queene*, 3. 6 as a model for Shakespeare’s Neoplatonic representation of love (*Poets’ War*, 199), while Burrow notes that Chester’s *Love’s Martyr* is “clearly indebted to Spenser and Samuel Daniel” (*Sonnets and Poems*, 84). Eriksen attributes the poem’s “compositional technique” to Spenser (“Bruno,” 211).

¹⁴ Finnis and Martin (“Another turn”) prepare us to see an unexplored connection between Spenser, Shakespeare, and Essex, since they link Shakespeare with the Lines through a report to Lord Burleigh in January 1593, in which Mistress Line attends Mass in the home of the earl of Worcester, father to the two brides Spenser celebrates in *Prothalamion*.

The Spenserian dynamic in “The Phoenix and Turtle,” perhaps like that of *Love’s Martyr*, pays homage to Spenser for his championing of Essex. Yet, in the New Poet’s failure to predict great Eliza’s inglorious execution of the world’s wide wonder, we might simultaneously discover grounds for an eclipse of Spenser’s national achievement. The precise strategy Shakespeare relies on turns out to be of some importance to the future of English literature.

“CO-SUPREMES”: THE HISTORICAL ACHIEVEMENT

To understand the stakes of Shakespeare’s politics of intertextual authorship in “The Phoenix and Turtle,” we might recall how a distinguished line of commentators has rendered the extraordinary historical achievement of this tender little poem. As the interest of Emerson, Masfield, Richards, Knight, Empson, Wilbur, Duncan-Jones, and Everett alone testifies, “The Phoenix and Turtle” occupies a special place in the canon of English poetry. Everett articulates this place in terms at once eloquent and resonant: “The poem is in fact neither an event (‘history’) nor an idea (‘philosophy’) but something that begins with what has to be called a music, an extremely original sound heard nowhere else in the Renaissance. Once invented, it was, however, noted, remembered and imitated by a series of English poets, the last of them probably Tennyson, and all very different from each other except perhaps in the fineness of their ear” (“Golden Bough,” 13–14). For 67 lines buried deeply in a potentially obscure volume, this is an extraordinary achievement.

Following up on Everett’s contribution, Burrow brings us even closer to the present line of inquiry:

Shakespeare’s poem is clearly pushing in the direction of an innovative and abstract poetic vocabulary . . . His poem feels as though it is coming from another world, and as though it grows from thinking, and thinking gravely, about sacrifice in love, and about where Elizabethan poetry might move next. But the difficulty of attaching his poem to particular circumstances may partly derive from the work which it is attempting to achieve: to keep the name of Shakespeare alive and to keep it associated with new forms. (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 89–90)

For Burrow, as for Everett and others like Richards and Empson, “The Phoenix and Turtle” is astonishing because in such short metric space it crafts a distinctive historic place, not simply in the evolution of Shakespeare’s “career,” nor even in “Renaissance” literature, but in the long course of what Richards calls simply “English.” In fewer than seventy verse

lines, Shakespeare manages to create a “new form” – an original “music” – that preserves “the name of Shakespeare.” “The Phoenix and Turtle” is historically priceless because it prints Shakespearean political authorship in an eternal register.

Along this line of distinction, one of the most recent statements comes from Frank Kermode: “The years 1599–1600 seem roughly the time at which Shakespeare, already the author of several masterpieces, moved up to a new level of achievement and difficulty. There was a turning point, I think, and I associate it with *Hamlet* and with the poem ‘The Phoenix and Turtle,’” and it may have something to do with Shakespeare’s move to the Globe Theatre (*Shakespeare’s Language*, ix). This is Kermode’s book-length thesis, and importantly for the present book, he locates Shakespeare’s “turning point” in both a play and a poem, written at about the same time, one for the Globe, the other for a printed miscellany. In his brief analysis of the poem (69–71), Kermode finds a new “metaphysical” use of subjective language (70): “around 1600 a new inwardness, almost independent of dramatic necessity,” emerges (71) – what he calls an “effort to represent intellection” (43; see Roe, ed., *Poems*, 52).

Recalling the historical context of Shakespeare’s career, we might come to view the supreme “intellection” of this artifact as a decidedly sixteenth-century phenomenon, a playwright’s poem, a printed lyric by the world’s most famous man of the theatre. By doing so, we discern how the printing of Shakespeare’s poem in *Love’s Martyr* speaks directly to the material predicament of his professional career, long neglected in Shakespeare studies: Shakespeare is a famed theatrical man who pens some of the most astonishing poems in “any language.” The historical context for viewing the literary dynamic in “The Phoenix and Turtle” lies in the Elizabethan authorial conjunction of printed poetry and staged theatre, together with the fact, uncannily predicted in the poem itself, that an authorized Spenserian (and Jonsonian) culture of printed poetry may be outstripped by an upstart (Shakespearean) culture of performed theatre.

THE PRINTING OF THE AUTHOR’S VOICE

Supporting evidence for this historical argument lies in the very structure of the poem itself, which commentators divide into three units, following markers within the printed text:

1. Stanzas 1–5 (lines 1–20) present an unidentified narrator who conspicuously avoids the lyric “I” but who uses the imperative voice to invoke a choir of birds assembling to lament the deaths of the phoenix and turtle.

2. Stanzas 6–13 (lines 21–52) then modulate the narrator's imperative voice into the lamenting voice of the avian choir itself, actually recording its funeral anthem.
3. Finally, stanzas 14–18 (lines 53–67) stage a theatrical "Threnos" sung by one of the personified abstractions from the anthem, "Reason" (47), who uses new emotional authority to call purified members of the public to mourn before the birds' funeral urn.

The poem's careful formal devices clearly demarcate this three-unit division: while units one and two share a four-line stanza in the unusual meter of "a seven-syllable line with four evenly-spaced accents" (Matchett, "*Phoenix and the Turtle*," 34) or what Everett terms "broken trochaics" ("*Golden Bough*," 14), rhyming *abba*, the stanzas divide at line 21 (the beginning of stanza 6) with the formal announcement: "Here the anthem doth commence." Even more clearly, unit three is set off from the preceding two units through three formal features: the inset title of "THRENOS"; the replacement of the four-line stanza with a three-line stanza; and the change of the rhyme scheme from *abba* to the tercets, *aaa*.¹⁵ Perhaps the real mystery no longer lies in the identities of the avian lovers but rather in the strange elegiac voice itself, which modulates through the poem's three units.

Let us look at the elegiac voice from each unit in turn. The enigma of "The Phoenix and Turtle" begins with its opening word, line, and stanza:

Let the bird of loudest lay,
On the sole Arabian tree,
Herald sad and trumpet be,
To whose sound chaste wings obey.
(*"The Phoenix and Turtle*," 1–4)

The first word, "Let," functions ambiguously, meaning not merely *allow* but also *suppose* (Axton, "Miraculous Succession," 126): an unidentified narrator tells an unidentified auditor to allow the bird of loudest lay to be the herald and trumpet; and (or) a narrator tells the auditor(s) to suppose that this bird performs such a role. The unnamed narrator or poet quietly orchestrates the avian congregation, functioning as its master of revels. If the narrator's command is double-voiced, the auditor is similarly doubled, being either (or both) the community of birds within the fiction and (or) the reader of the printed poem. The effect of such a compound operation

¹⁵ Matchett offers the most persuasive formulation about the enigmatic structure: "we have three approaches to the death of the Phoenix and the Turtle, that of the poet . . . that of the 'chaste wings' [line 4] . . . and that of Reason . . . The poet's dividing of the symbolic birds leads into the anthem in which Reason, said to be undone, actually asserts itself to present its own view of the event" ("*Phoenix and the Turtle*," 53; see 33–36). See also Wilbur and Harbage, eds., *Narrative Poems*, 20–21.

is not merely to open language and meaning up, but more emphatically to draw attention to language itself, to the complex way the poetic voice speaks, and even to the complexity of its reception. This is our first hint that voice, agency, authorship, and the afterlife of the poet are to be the virtual subjects of this poem.

Today, we still do not know the identity of the loud-singing bird on whose behalf the initial complexity in part operates – either its species or its relation to the twinned principals of the poem's (modern) title. Until recently, commentators swung between two major arguments. First, the "bird of loudest lay" is a species other than the phoenix and turtle, with Grosart proposing the nightingale and others the crane and cock (Bates, "Phoenix and Turtle"; Prince, ed., *Poems*, 173; Roe, ed., *Poems*, 232; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 373); or the "bird of loudest lay" is "*the phoenix itself*" (Knight, *Mutual Flame*, 202–03; his emphasis) – a theory that Richards rather likes (*Poetries*, 52–53), as do many others. Knight quotes "the old English poem based on Lactantius": "singing exultant," the phoenix produces a "trancing song," "Warbling melodies wondrous sweet, / . . . More winsome far / Than any music that men may make; / And sweeter than any earthly strain" (203). Critics have also long cited *The Tempest*, which presents "Arabia" as the site of "one tree, the Phoenix' throne" (3.3.22–23). More recently, however, commentators emphasize the indecipherability of the loud bird: "The fact that the bird is not named here . . . is significant: it leaves readers uncertain whether a second Phoenix has sprung from the death of the Phoenix and the Turtle . . . in order to act as herald in its own obsequies" (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 373; see Bradbrook, "'Phoenix'"). Not merely the authorial voice and its auditor but the initial subject evades easy intelligibility. Even the bird's gender escapes grasp, being neither clearly male nor clearly female. In the play of the verse, the emphatic word "be," the verb in the syntactical construction delayed until the very end of line 3, quite literally leads to ontology, the "mystery of being" that many like Richards have found themselves brooding over; it also creates an uncanny point of touch with that play being performed at the Globe that this author was also composing: "Let . . . be" (cf. *Hamlet*, 5.2.224).¹⁶

Paradoxically, the ontologically sounding bird is of singular (even solitary) identity, power, and authority: it sings the "loudest" songs; it occupies the exalted position atop "the sole Arabian tree"; and it is the herald and trumpeter for the congregation of birds. It is, then, their leader, for it possesses the unique attracting quality of chaste sexuality: the "chaste wings" of the other birds "obey" its chaste "sound." The concept of obedience is

¹⁶ See Bloom, *Shakespeare*, on Hamlet's "let be" as the summation of the Prince's philosophy (422).

important in Shakespeare; for instance, it shows up in the final speech of *King Lear*, when (in the *Riverside* version) Edgar says, “The weight of this sad time we must obey” (5.3.324), as if the whole concept of Jacobean obedience were being re-routed, and right where “The Phoenix and Turtle” is taking us: to the heavy “weight” and “sad time” of tragedy itself. In the poem, the word “obey” certainly suggests allegiance, and (in context) communal bondage, but, as in *Lear*, obedience is being defined in terms of what Patricia Fumerton (*Cultural Aesthetics*) calls “cultural aesthetics,” as “sound” confirms. Whatever species the loud-singing bird might be, its authority lies in its song, as two other words emphasize: “lay” and “trumpet.” Above all, the bird of loudest lay is a figure of authoritative song, chaste and august, able to bond the community to faith through voice itself.

Yet we can be even more specific. The bird of loudest lay has come to “the Phoenix’s tree, at which the ceremony is presumably to take place” (Matchett, “*Phoenix and the Turtle*,” 37). In other words, the loud-singing bird has taken up residence “On the sole Arabian tree” in order to become its heir and successor. Furthermore, not merely is the bird’s trumpet the instrument of epic poetry (a point neglected in the commentary), but the sound of its chastity evokes amorous poetry, and the two together suggest the genre of “epic romance” (Burrow, *Epic Romance*, 1–10). Not surprisingly, Everett has drawn attention to “the antique sounding dialect of his first line” and characterized the “Invocation” here as being “in a Virgilian fashion” (“Golden Bough,” 14). It is not a long step to suggest that in “The Phoenix and Turtle” Shakespeare’s poetic voice summons a Spenserian authorial figure with an epicist-sounding role for the community.

That Shakespeare in this unit draws on the literary convention of the bird parliament should help us see that he strains to represent a poetic voice – someone else’s poetic voice. As recent critics would remind us, here we need to historicize. Whereas some critics may wish to identify the voice as Chaucerian, harkening back to *The Parlement of Foules*, we might recall that in the 1596 *Faerie Queene* Spenser had trumpeted his career-long appropriation of the Chaucerian epic voice, as he communicates directly to the Old Poet himself:

through infusion sweete
Of thine owne spirit, which doth in me survive,
I follow here the footing of thy feete,
That with thy meaning so I may the rather meete.
(4. 2. 34)¹⁷

¹⁷ See Cheney, “Spenser’s Completion” and “Novells,” including on Spenser’s appropriation of Chaucer as an epic poet.

Relying on an English (and rather gentle) version of the typology of intertextuality, Shakespeare may imitate Chaucer but he does so almost certainly to represent the art of Spenser.

Shakespeare’s foregrounding of the author’s voice in stanza 1 confirms what many have suspected about the remaining four stanzas of this first unit: Shakespeare draws on the avian trope to represent a community of poets. Just as critics have long struggled to identify the phoenix and turtle, so the birds in the choir. Among the charming treasures of the *Variorum: Poems*, Rollins particularly delights in lampooning Brandl, who believed the poem a lament on the death of Marlowe, with the eagle representing Spenser, the crow Nashe, the owl Harvey, and the swan Shakespeare (571). Mercifully, such days have (largely) passed us by. And yet: the return to historicism does prompt us to historicize birds other than the phoenix and turtle. The most obvious candidates would seem to be the modern writers whom Chester assembled in *Love’s Martyr*: Jonson, Chapman, Marston, and Ignoto (Eriksen, “Bruno,” 210). In a volume that brings famous authors to write poems on the deaths of the “phoenix” and “turtle,” we discover a poem that appears to fictionalize this very event. Some such design may be intended, but the fact remains: in four hundred years, no one has succeeded in identifying any of the birds with the least degree of certainty, and most have happily given up trying.¹⁸ We need try no more, beyond suggesting an intriguing, generalized Shakespearean literary history for late-Elizabethan England. For the purpose of the present argument, such a history locates leadership in the national authority of Spenser, and leaves (most of) the rest to silence.

In stanza 2, the narrator commands the “shrieking harbinger,” once more not identified but usually thought to be the screech-owl, to “come . . . not near” the “troop” of birds, because it sings cacophonously, functions devilishly as “Foul precurrer of the fiend,” and serves as a false prophet or “Augur of the fever’s end”: death itself (5–8). By banishing the shrieking harbinger while commanding the bird of loudest song to stay, the narrator establishes an ethical dialectic of good and evil song, of chastity and its violation, lucidly underwritten by Christian authority. Such a dialectic recalls that from *The Rape of Lucrece*, and thereby is evocative of the opposition of aesthetics we found there (chapter 4): between a Spenserian and a Marlovian aesthetics, with the rehearsal of death here perhaps suggesting the genre of tragedy and the procurement of the fiend possibly conjuring up *Doctor Faustus*. If so, rather than being a lament on the death of Marlowe,

¹⁸ For other identifications, see Knight; Matchett 18, 105–35; Asquith; Finnis and Martin.

“The Phoenix and Turtle” intimates a Spenserian exorcising of Marlowe’s spirit.¹⁹

In stanzas 3, 4, and 5, what we notice is a kind of double identification operating in the representations of the remaining birds, in which each species performs both a literary and a nonliterary role. Thus, in stanza 3, the narrator extends the ethical dialectic of the chaste Spenserian aesthetics to the political sphere of justice. On the one hand, Shakespeare’s representation looks to be a rather perfect model for “Elizabeth’s monarchical republic” (Collinson, “Monarchical Republic”), at once “interdict[ing]” all fowls from the “session” who are “of tyrant wing” and inviting the eagle, “feath’red king,” because it can use its high office to “Keep the obsequy . . . strict” (9–12). On the other, Spenser himself had had something to say about the virtue of justice, making it the topic of Book 5 of his national epic. At issue here, then, is not simply the politics of justice but the aesthetics of justice.

Accordingly, in stanza 4 the narrator calls for the true prophet, “the death-divining swan,” to preside as “the priest in surplice white,” because he is skilled in “defunctive music” or funereal song – and besides, without this bird dressed in the habit of Elizabeth’s moderate Protestant ministers (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 74), the “requiem” would “lack his right” – both Christian truth and Christian rite. Yet the nature of the rite has raised eyebrows, because of the exquisite ecclesiastical contradiction: this swan suited in Protestant attire sings a Catholic mass for the dead, the word “requiem” being “the first word of the Introit in the Mass for the Dead, ‘Requiem aeternam donna eis, Domine’” (Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 374; see also H. N. Davies, “Phoenix and Turtle”). Among critics, John Klaus has shown how “Shakespeare follows Skelton [*Phyllyp Sparowe*] in at least alluding, if very discreetly, to parts of this [Roman] liturgy” (“Phoenix and Turtle,” 216). Klaus sees Shakespeare later in the poem moving beyond “hint” to an “explicit resort to Roman theology” in the “idealization of married celibacy,” and he gets at the recusant principle here: “Prayer for the dead . . . is a Catholic practice, which the English church . . . removed from the Book of Common Prayer in 1552 and, in the Elizabethan Homily ‘On Prayer,’ officially condemned” (217–18).²⁰ Like *Hamlet*, the poem appears to register the trauma caused by the Protestant erasure of purgatory and the Catholic prayer for the dead, and to seek recompense, not merely in

¹⁹ In finding Bruno in the poem, Eriksen cites Marlowe’s reference to the Italian scholar in *Doctor Faustus* (“Bruno,” 210).

²⁰ Klaus does not refer to the work on this topic by Neill, *Issues*. Low, “*Hamlet*,” and Greenblatt, *Purgatory*, all of whom neglect “The Phoenix and Turtle” but attend to that play being rehearsed over at the Globe.

the genre of tragedy (Neill, *Issues*), but also in the art of elegiac poetry. Shakespeare uses the word “requiem” only one other time in all his works, during the scene of Ophelia’s burial (5. 1. 237), suggesting a precise linguistic bond between the funeral poem and the stage tragedy (McCoy, “Love’s Martyrs,” 194). Not surprisingly, there is aesthetic import here: Shakespeare makes “the Swan figure the poet’s own *troth*; Apollo’s bird, unlike the shrieking harbinger, prophesies at death ‘prosperity and perfect ease’. The swan-poet *divines* death, perceives and foretells it, but his immortal song also makes death itself divine, revealing it as the cause of new life, so he is essential to the miracle” (Axton, “Miraculous Succession,” 128). While we might see Shakespeare including a cameo of himself in the Spenserian choir of birds, as Jordan long ago thought (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 568), we may alternatively find simply a professional representation that reflects a theology consistent with the one thought to be voiced by the author himself (Eriksen, “Bruno,” 210).

Finally, in stanza 5, the “treble-dated crow” is singled out to join the “mourners,” evidently because of two innate qualities: it lives nine times as long as humans do (says Pliny of Hesiod in *The History of the World*, 1. 180; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 373); and it procreates through the chaste touch of its mate’s bill (Pliny, *History*, 1. 276; Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 373). As such, the crow is a fit emblem of an eternizing sexuality. Among the choir, the crow is distinctive for its role as an erotic maker: “thy sable gender mak’st.”

Simply in terms of the narrative, then, in stanzas 1–5 the poet selects the avian participants for a funeral service, banishing two kinds of birds (the “shrieking harbinger” and the “tyrant wing”), and invites four birds to join the troop: the bird of loudest lay, who functions as herald; the eagle, who presides as judge; the swan, who serves as priest; and the crow, who marches as chief mourner. As readers often note, the discourse is at once enigmatic and precise, opaque and technical. It is also comprehensive, drawing in the nationalist domains of art (“lay”), government (“session”), religion (“requiem”), and community (“Mong’st our mourners”). As a troop, the birds are associated with artistic sound, strict law, pure religion, and chaste duty; what they share is a faith in song to combat time, death, and corruption. Altogether, Shakespeare’s parliament of fowls confronts death with a wondrous power: an ensharpened song of immortality.²¹ The

²¹ Matchett notes that “Shakespeare’s poem emphasiz[es] . . . the voices of the birds” (“*Phoenix and the Turtle*,” 190). Critics who emphasize “immortality” include Richards, *Poetries*, 54; Knight, *Mutual Flame*, 204; Wilbur and Harbage, eds. *Narrative Poems*, 20–21; Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language*, 69–71.

immortalizing function is clear in the bird of loudest lay, but also in the eagle, who keeps the “obsequy” strict; the swan, who sings its “death-divining” song before it dies; and the crow, who is “treble-dated” and makes offspring with its “breath.”

The immortalizing function makes best sense if we identify it as a Shakespearean photograph of a Spenserian-orchestrated poetics. While Spenser had no monopoly on the funeral elegy, he was the first (and most famous) Elizabethan poet to adopt the form for a nationalist role, advertised initially in the Song of Dido in *November* and subsequently fulfilled through a series of career elegies, including on Sidney (*Ruines of Time, Astrophel*), the earl of Leicester (*Virgils Gnat*), and Douglas Howard (*Daphnaida*) (Cheney, “Dido”). In “The Phoenix and Turtle,” Shakespeare appears to recognize Spenser for nationalizing the function of the elegiac form. In the poem’s first unit, we read the voice of the Shakespearean poet calling on the Spenserian bird of loudest lay to assemble the “chaste wings” of the immortalizing choir for the funeral elegy honoring the phoenix and turtle.

In unit two (stanzas 7–13, lines 25–52), Shakespeare records the anthem that the assembled birds sing, marked in the text by the unit’s opening line, which announces the commencement of the anthem. In other words, this unit records the actual contents of the avian song, opening the aesthetics up to “Adversity’s sweet milk, philosophy” (*Romeo and Juliet*, 3. 3. 55). As commentary variously reveals, Shakespeare gathers in the philosophical terminology from scholasticism, Neoplatonism, and Catholicism to introduce the phoenix and turtle as figures of quintessential love:

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.
 (“Phoenix and Turtle,” 21–27)

The complexities of Shakespeare’s paradoxes have been widely examined, so we need not pursue them in detail. Suffice it to say that the poet succeeds in representing “a wonder” (32): the absolute miracle of two “distinct” figures having the “essence but in one.” While most often attention is deflected to the “‘ecstasy’ poems” (Everett, “Golden Bough,” 14) – Sidney’s “Eighth Song,” Donne’s “The Ecstasy,” and Lord Herbert of Cherbury’s “An Ode upon a question moved, Whether Love should continue for ever?” – we

might recall that among Elizabethans, Spenser had most sustained the hermaphroditic wonder of two in one.²²

What has been less attended to than we might think is the theatrical dimension entering toward the end of the second unit. In stanza 11, the figure of “Reason” suddenly emerges as a character within the avian anthem; this figure has both a subjectivity and a voice, and he emerges with a complex art form – all controlled by the narrator’s (or is it the avian choir’s) witty self-reflexivity:

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.

(“Phoenix and Turtle,” 41–52)

This representation is “the outstanding event of the poem” (Matchett, “*Phoenix and the Turtle*,” 44). The character Reason undergoes an epiphany, moving beyond confusion to clarity when he “Saw division grow together.” So affected is Reason that he articulates what he sees, announcing his loss of reason even as he animates a new form of reason, inspired by the miraculous unity of “distinct” erotic opposites. Here Reason functions to bring a tragic “balance” to the choir of birds’ anthem of affirmation by rejecting “married chastity” or “the very idea of Platonic love” (Matchett, “*Phoenix and the Turtle*,” 196, 200). As Matchett puts it, “Shakespeare insists upon reason in a time of violent emotional commitments,” and his “discovery of the voice of Reason” is “for man the greatest triumph” (202). But Reason does not simply cry out in passion and triumph; he moves beyond autarchic to artistic expression, and he does so through a historic transposition of literary forms.

²² Noted by Eriksen, “Bruno,” 200. On Platonic elements, see Ellrodt, “Anatomy,” who discerns Shakespeare’s original Platonism (104). Hardie, *Ovid’s Poetics*, reminds us of the Ovidian origin of Shakespeare’s two in one here (25–26).

Critics have surprisingly passed over this historic moment, as if the working dramatist's turn to theatre within a lyric poem were a natural event.²³ The combined discourse of poetry and theatre is here at its most *formalized*. While the earlier words "lay" and "anthem" jostle now with "chorus" and "tragic," the last stanza represents a formalized conjunctive relation in the emphatic rhyme of "threne" and "scene." Shakespeare's meditation on a whole series of conjunctions, or "Single nature's double name" (39) – phoenix and turtle, love and constancy, two and one, division and unity, love and reason – comes around to voicing the very conjunction organizing the author's professional career. What he says of the other conjunctions thus provides a "chorus" on his own literary predicament as an Elizabethan author trying to combine two careers in one: *mutual flame . . . two distincts, division none . . . neither two nor one was called . . . division grow together . . . simple were so well compounded*. "The Phoenix and Turtle" may not be a formal meditation on the compound of poetry and theatre, but it nonetheless functions as Shakespeare's most precise and sustained grammar for such a meditation.

The word *scene* speaks for itself as an arch-term for the place of the stage (see *Henry V*, Prologue, 3–4). By contrast, the word *threne* is unusual in English and thus requires special comment. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is a transliteration of the Greek word for "funeral lament": "A song of lamentation; a dirge, threnody," with the first recorded usage in 1432–40, the second in 1593 (by Southwell), and the third in "The Phoenix and Turtle." As Malone long ago indicated, the word also appeared in Kendall's 1577 *Flowers of Epigrammes*, nestled with other poetical forms: "Of Verses, Threnes and Epitaphes" (Rollins, ed., *Variorum: Poems*, 330). In this way, the word "threne" evokes *song* or *lyric poetry*. Yet as a Greek word for funeral song, "threne" also acquires theatrical resonance, since it refers to the threnody of the Chorus in Greek tragedy. Shakespeare identifies the third unit of his poem, called a "THRENOS," as a "threne," and thus he presents this unit *as a play*. He makes the point explicit by saying that the threne functions "As chorus to their tragic scene"; a song is a chorus to a tragedy. Yet there is an actual representation of (Greek) tragedy in line 51: "Co-supremes and stars of love." As in the Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*, with its references to "star-cross'd lovers" and "fatal loins" (5–6), here the "stars" suggest fate: the "stars of love" for "the Phoenix and the Dove"

²³ Typical is Ellrodt, "Anatomy," 107–08. More recently, see Burrow, ed., *Sonnets and Poems*, 88. The critic who most anticipates my argument is Bates, who confines his version to a final paragraph ("Phoenix," 30).

have been "fatal," locking them into a tragic universe that determines their annihilation.

The conjunction of poetry and theatre, "threne" and "scene," forms the very point of transition from unit two to unit three. The word *chorus* in line 52 is a superb Shakespearean pun, and its effect is to slow the verse down, right where it should, in the transitional line between the two units. According to the *OED*, the pertinent definition of *chorus* reads: "In English drama, imitated or adapted from the chorus of Attic tragedy . . . by Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists reduced to a single personage, who speaks the prologue, and explains or comments upon the course of events" (def. 1. c). As such, the word *chorus* in "The Phoenix and Turtle" could have at least two meanings, and the point is that they operate simultaneously: metaphorically, the song *comes before* or *comments* upon the tragedy; but literally, the song precedes or glosses the tragedy. In all cases of meaning, what we see is the absolute interpenetration of poetry with theatre.

Shakespeare presents the verse "THRENOS" precisely as a dramatic form. He thus accomplishes the rather difficult maneuver of *presenting a play within a poem*; this constitutes a photographic negative of his more familiar maneuver, of presenting a poem within a play, as in *Love's Labor's Lost*, or in Hamlet's poem to Ophelia (2. 2. 116–19). Recalling that Shakespeare probably wrote his plays for the page as well as for the stage (Erne, *Literary Dramatist*), we might say that in this lyric poem the author imprints a model of theatrical authorship itself.

Two independent sets of evidence measure the uniqueness of what Shakespeare is attempting here. The first comes by comparing his poem with the other three "ecstasy" poems, Sidney's "Eighth Song," Donne's "The Ecstasy," and Lord Herbert's "An Ode." While all four poems share a philosophy of erotic essence, and gesture to their status as poems, only Shakespeare's relies on formal theatrical discourse. Alone, "The Phoenix and Turtle" constructs a self-conscious "artefact" (Everett, "Golden Bough," 14) that uses the medium of print, with careful markers in the text, to transact a transposition from poem to play, funeral elegy to stage tragedy. The second set of evidence is closer to Shakespeare's martyred hand: none of the other modern writers in *Love's Martyr* – even those known to be fellow poet-playwrights, Jonson, Chapman, and Marston – attempt to formalize a compound generic representation expressed by their colleague.²⁴

²⁴ Occasionally, theatrical terms do infiltrate: Ignoto speaks of "the foule-maskt Ladie, Night" ("The first," 2); Marston, of "Hard favor'd Feminines so scant of faire, / That Maskes so choicely" ("To Perfection," 6–7); Jonson, of "the stale Prologue to some painted Maske" of "the Ladies of the Thespian Lake" ("Praeludium," 20, 25).

Shakespeare is often understood to be the only one of the modern writers who veers from Chester's memorial program, but we may now understand another way in which he crosses into new territory. In "The Phoenix and Turtle," he pens his clearest "signature" for his status as an early modern author of poems and plays: his professional role as national poet-playwright.

Within the fiction of the poem, the figure who performs this role is "Reason," who thus joins a whole host of characters in the Shakespeare canon as a type of poet-playwright. It is this figure who transposes the two forms; he makes his threne as a chorus to the tragic scene. Yet Reason differs from all other characterizations of the poet-playwright; as his name intimates, here we find the subjective spring for the fusion of poetry and theatre itself. The representation acquires a distinctly Ovidian form, "the flexible self" (Bate, *Ovid*, 3), when Shakespeare catches the poet-playwright Reason performing a miraculous metamorphosis, from a perplexed rationality to a super-rationality in apprehension of a mystery.

In the verse "Threnos," we see the mysterious contents of Reason's tragedy:

Beauty, Truth, and Rarity,
Grace in all simplicity,
Here enclos'd, in cinders lie.

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

("Phoenix and Turtle," 53–58)

While "Beauty, Truth, and Rarity" fix the (Platonic) absolutes, "Grace" and "eternity" Christianize them.²⁵ "To eternity doth rest" is nearly as resonant as Hamlet's "the rest is silence" (5. 2. 358): does it mean that the breast of the turtle will rest until eternity, or is it that the turtle's breast will rest eternally in death? In both cases, the message of the Gospel is not certified: in the first possibility, the turtle's destiny is stretched out only *as far as* – "to" – eternity, while in the second the turtle enacts a Christian tragedy in which the promise of resurrection goes down un-phoenix-like in flames.

As commentators observe, the next two stanzas – when the phoenix and turtle fail to leave behind a "posterity" because of "married chastity" (59–61) – leave Reason standing on the threshold of the void, only to look down and see what death is doing: "Truth and Beauty buried be" (63). Reason perceives "death as annihilation" (R. Watson, *The Rest is Silence*),

²⁵ Cf. Matchett, "Phoenix and the Turtle," 50. The *OED* reveals that "eternize" has Christian origins, citing the 1610 translation of Augustine's *City of God* (def. 1).

represented by the phoenix's once eternal "nest," now occupied by the dramatic figure of Death. Is this the promised end?

The final stanza suggests not:

To this urn let those repair
That are either true or fair;
For these dead birds sigh a prayer.
("The Phoenix and Turtle," 65–67)

The poem does not end with the phoenix and turtle as simply "dead birds"; an audience, "those" who are "either true or fair," are invited to "repair" to the couple's "urn" to "sigh a prayer." There is loss ("dead"), and weariness ("sigh"), as well as the sad diminishment of Platonic forms ("either" truth *or* beauty is "buried"). Yet a community of mourners gathers around the well-wrought urn containing the avian ashes to deliver an affirmative response, as the pun on the emphatically placed word "repair" suggests – a word that means *move hither* but also *mend*. In the words of Everett, "the turtle's breast rests to eternity with an absoluteness that makes dying the most active experience of a life-time, a wordless reversal of that calming with which the poem begins" ("Golden Bough," 15). Knight and Richards agree: what Shakespeare immortalizes is not the Christian soul ascending to Spenser's New Jerusalem but the body's eternizing performance of death as annihilation. This versified performance becomes the most concentrated miracle and the poem's greatest achievement. Thus the final word is not "sigh" but "prayer," the anguished groan sounding the very utterance of faith. Neither two nor one was called.

RELICS AND THE URN

In "The Phoenix and Turtle," the elegiac voice modulates through the three units in a way that is at once strange and admirable:

1. from the singular lyric voice of the poet-narrator, who speaks outside the fiction to call the fiction to life (and death);
2. to the collaborative voice of the avian choir within the fiction, which values the philosophical mystery of the birds' (Neoplatonic) conjunction and mourns the passing of their "mutual flame";
3. to the loving voice of Reason, a character within the anthem who presents the "Threnos" as a Greek tragedy because the turtle and dove have chosen "married chastity" over offspring.

Yet, just as the authorial voice modulates from singular lyric author to collaborative choir to the choral voice of tragedy, so does the author's

form modulate: from a lyric poem by a single author, to an inset funeral anthem sung by a collaborative troop, to a single chorus voiced within a tragic play.²⁶ In terms of the preceding analysis, Shakespeare's positioning of the Spenserian art and its heritage in the first two units is particularly noteworthy: the Ovidian poet-playwright pays his debt to the Virgilian New Poet but records the historic transition from an age of Spenser to a new age of (Shakespearean) theatre. If there is a phoenix who arises from the ashes in this poem, it is Shakespearean tragic art itself.

Shakespeare imprints the deaths of "this Turtle and his queen" (31) not by identifying his authorial voice but by *displacing* it. Yet this displacement does not evade responsibility for authorship but formally draws attention to it, *arguably erecting one the most self-conscious representations of authorship extant*. Significant to the current conversation in Shakespeare studies, the author's representation is not strictly about his plays – their "text and performance" – but rather about the relation those plays have to his poems, their staging and their printing. In a way that appears to be unique in the literary tradition, "The Phoenix and Turtle" represents the material marking of the boundary between lyric and tragedy, the lyric anthem supremely printing the tragic voice of the stage.²⁷

Although "The Phoenix and Turtle" appears to voice the turmoil of a nationally significant political crisis, it manages to leave a priceless record of the historical moment within which the author's professional voice speaks. The voice the poem identifies is not just that of the lyric poet writing the poem but more precisely a lyric voice modulating into the deep cognitive reach of tragedy. Within the tragic "Threnos," the poet-playwright creates what Richard C. McCoy calls "relics" ("Love's Martyrs," 203). Following up on the work of Walter Pater (among others), McCoy seeks to rectify an omission in Shakespeare studies during the past twenty years or so: the downplaying of the affections (203–04). He acknowledges that "There is finally no 'sure and certain hope of the resurrection' for love's martyrs in Shakespeare," but finds that "The Phoenix and Turtle," like the Sonnets, does produce "poetic renderings" that "remain sacred objects of a sort,

²⁶ Krier finds a three-step movement in Chaucer's *Parlement*, with each step figuring a "different literary region": (1) the "Latin philosophical realm"; (2) "late-medieval, vernacular, courtly love poetry"; and (3) lyric song (112–13). In *Love's Labor's Lost*, Shakespeare represents especially the move from comedy to lyric: "Shakespeare contemplates his place as dramatist in poetic genre history: he opens a space which the catalogues demarcate as specifically literary" (Krier, *Birth Passages*, 143; her emphasis).

²⁷ Cf. Kastan, *Book*: "Shakespeare has become virtually the iconic name for authorship itself, but he wrote in circumstances in which his individual achievement was inevitably dispersed into – if not compromised by – the collaborations necessary for both play and book production" (16). Kastan does not say that what gets into print is a single voice, however collaboratively produced; it is this printed voice that we witness in "The Phoenix and Turtle."

not sacraments but relics" (203). Such relics are powerful not because they save the reader's soul but because they have the "capacity . . . to stimulate emotion," and such an affective subjectivity has the miraculous power to create what Pater called a "quickened sense of life" (quoted in McCoy, "Love's Martyrs," 204). These relics – the ashes of the phoenix's "nest," the "cinders" of the two dead birds, and especially their funeral "urn" – are not, then, sacraments of Christian redemption typologically promising a spiritual afterlife so much as pagan relics grounding "eternity" in the affective authority of human inwardness. For many readers today, this inwardness is the very signature of Shakespearean authorship. Shakespeare's poems and plays are his last relics of immortality.

In the end, "The Phoenix and Turtle" appears to leave readers with a mind-bending marvel, perhaps worthy of the author's affectively suited figure of Reason: the playwright's tragic performance is movingly immortalized by the print of the elegiac poet's voice.

Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Note on texts</i>	xiv
Proem Shakespeare's "Plaies and Poems"	1
PART ONE THE IMPRINT OF SHAKESPEAREAN AUTHORSHIP	
<i>Prelude: Shakespeare, Cervantes, Petrarch</i>	13
1 The sixteenth-century poet-playwright	17
2 Francis Meres, the Ovidian poet-playwright, and Shakespeare criticism	49
PART TWO 1593–1594: THE PRINT AUTHOR PRESENTS HIMSELF	
<i>Play scene: "Two Gentlemen" to "Richard III"</i>	75
3 Authorship and acting: plotting <i>Venus and Adonis</i> along the Virgilian path	81
4 Publishing the show: <i>The Rape of Lucrece</i> as Lucanian counter-epic of empire	108
PART THREE 1599–1601: THE AUTHOR BROUGHT INTO PRINT	
<i>Play scene: "Love's Labor's Lost" to "Troilus and Cressida"</i>	143
5 "Tales . . . coined": "W. Shakespeare" in Jaggard's <i>The Passionate Pilgrim</i>	151
6 "Threne" and "Scene": the author's relics of immortality in "The Phoenix and Turtle"	173

PART FOUR 1609: IMPRINTING THE QUESTION OF
AUTHORSHIP

<i>Play scene: "Measure for Measure" to "Coriolanus"</i>	199
7 "O, let my books be . . . dumb presagers": poetry and theatre in the Sonnets	207
8 "Deep-brain'd sonnets" and "tragic shows": Shakespeare's late Ovidian art in <i>A Lover's Complaint</i>	239
Epilogue: Ariel and Autolycus: Shakespeare's counter-laureate authorship	267
<i>Works cited</i>	284
<i>Index</i>	309