

James P. Bednarz. *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love: The Mystery of "The Phoenix and Turtle."*

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That James Bednarz has written a whole book on a very short poem is a measure of the puzzling status of the poem in the canon of Shakespeare's work, and the contradictory, inconclusive body of comment that has accumulated upon it. *Shakespeare and the Truth of Love* is a detailed investigation of the whole phenomenon, the text and the approaches to it, including an interesting history of the poem's reception, in six chapters with an introduction and epilogue.

In one sense, there is no mystery at all about "The Phoenix and the Turtle." As James Bednarz puts it in a phrase that concludes his first chapter, it is a poem about "a fully realized self-sacrificial love," and although the phrase itself touches upon mystery, a reading that attempts some understanding of its full ramifications will probably be on target. On the other hand, the poem has proved very resistant to interpretation as historical allegory, and if one attempts to explain it in a historical context, then everything about it is mysterious. The collection, *Love's Martyr*, of which it is a part, is a mystery. Everyone knows that Chester compiled it for his

patron Sir John Salusbury, but no one really knows quite why; and even if one can figure out a general purpose for the collection, no one knows why Shakespeare contributed this particular poem to it, since even though Chester supplied a myth of his own concerning the phoenix and the turtle, Shakespeare's poem does not fit Chester's pattern, and it has no apparent bearing whatever on Sir John's life and situation.

James Bednarz, therefore, is on solid ground when he spends a good deal of his time — his whole second chapter, "Eliminating Essex" — disposing of attempts to read specific historical references into the poem, although he cannot always avoid creating his own kind of history, as when he writes that Shakespeare "was intrigued by the possibility of adapting the psychological dynamic of Trinitarian paradox to questions of human desire" (109). How could one possibly know that? His own preferred approach is to treat the poem stylistically as an anticipation or parallel to Donne's metaphysical style, using — as Donne does — theological and patristic material figuratively to express the possible mysteries of secular love, and, while this approach is not original, it has the virtue of keeping the poem safely noncontroversial.

One of the more important acknowledged mysteries of the poem is the significance of its religious references. Bednarz is understandably dismissive of recent attempts by Claire Asquith, Patrick Martin, and John Finnis to relate the poem to specific events in contemporary English Catholic history; but his disposal of the more general argument for a Catholic background to the poem requires some special pleading on his part. *Requiem*, for instance, was not a word in the Protestant vocabulary in Shakespeare's time. The Church of England's burial of the dead has not a hint in it of the well-known verse in the Catholic liturgy, *Requiem aeternam dona ei, Domine*. The phrase that Bednarz quotes (152) from the Book of Common Prayer as an example of a prayer for the dead as requested in the poem's last line is, as any Protestant could tell him, most emphatically a prayer for the living. The poem's "married chastity," too, sounds far more like the effect of a Catholic vow of celibacy than anything to be found in the third book of *The Faerie Queene*. In that context, Bednarz's own phrase, "fully realized self-sacrificial love" (48), carries a more than merely figurative implication, and even if one cannot accept Martin's and Finnis's identification of Saint Anne Line and her husband as the phoenix and the turtle, the suggestion that that is the kind of sacrifice implied is by no means a foolish one.

James Bednarz has, nonetheless, written a thoroughly researched, continually interesting, useful study of a decidedly cryptic poem. It is probably not his fault that the reader who completes it will still not know the identity of the phoenix and the turtle, or what it was they had done to be the recipients of such a nobly conceived memorial.

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