

THE PHOENIX AND THE TURTLE (1601)

William Shakespeare

Shakespeare, William (1564-1616) - English dramatist and poet widely regarded as the greatest and most influential writer in all of world literature. The richness of Shakespeare's genius transcends time; his keen observation and psychological insight are, to this day, without rival. Phoenix and the Turtle (1601) Published with a group of Shakespeare's early poems, the Phoenix and the Turtle remains an enigma in both meaning and merit.

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,
 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.

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

THE END-