

“The Figure of a Dance”:  
Christopher Fry’s  
A Phoenix Too Frequent

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CHRISTOPHER Fry’s first two published plays both deal directly with religious subjects. *The Boy with a Cart* is a commissioned “festival play” which recounts in an episodic manner the simple story of the boy Cuthman who leaves his native village after his father’s death on a divinely inspired journey in quest of a place to build a church. Fry’s second play, *The Firstborn* (1946), draws on Exodus for its plot material, and using the strategies of antithesis and counterpoint which are to characterize all Fry’s later work, creates tension between the tragedy of the death of Rameses, the Pharaoh Seti’s firstborn, and the triumph of Moses, who achieves the release of the Hebrews and a new self. The death and resurrection archetype which underlies the play’s structure dominates *A Phoenix Too Frequent* (1949) — and, indeed, reappears in all Fry’s subsequent plays. However, the perspective undergoes an important shift as Fry moves from the distinctly tragic treatment in *The Firstborn* to the comic mode in *Phoenix*. The character in *Phoenix*, as in the four seasonal comedies — *The Lady’s Not for Burning* (1949), *Venus Observed* (1950), *The Dark is Light Enough* (1954), and *A Yard of Sun* (1970) — are engaged in the fundamental activities of self-preservation or self-assertion. As Susanne Langer points out, these activities are part of the biological “processes that produce the life rhythm;”<sup>1</sup> comedy celebrates life in its triumph over the vicissitudes of fortune and over death in its patterns of triumphant victim, fertility and rebirth — all

of which are present in *Phoenix*. Fry also moves away from the direct concern with religious materials. *The Firstborn* is a religious drama whose final statement is essentially humanistic:

We must each find our separate meaning  
In the persuasion of our days  
Until we meet in the meaning of the world.<sup>2</sup>

*Phoenix* reverses this process: it is a secular drama whose final statement is essentially religious. This statement results from a highly integrated structure that fuses the ancient tale with pagan myths and a Christian sub-structure — all subsumed within a vital, entertaining piece of dramatic craftsmanship.

In a chapter entitled "Myth and the Literary Scruple," Francis Fergusson turns to Malinowski for a rough classification of myths into three categories: Legends, which are stories of the past deemed to be based on historical fact; Folk or Fairy Tales, told for entertainment without reference to truth; and Religious Myths which represent "basic elements in the creed, the morals and the social structure of a people."<sup>3</sup> *Phoenix* embraces all three levels. The historical legend, as Fry states, "was got from Jeremy Taylor who had it from Petronius."<sup>4</sup> The story of the Ephesian woman no doubt does have some historical basis of fact, but the legend has more of the qualities of a fable of ingenuity than any suggestion of mythic properties on the grander scale. In the hands of Jeremy Taylor, the legend becomes material for a moral exemplum on the fickle nature of a woman's passion. The soldier "escaped the present danger, to possess a love which might change as violently as her grief had done:"<sup>5</sup> Fry draws a somewhat different conclusion from the same tale. At the level of Fairy Tale, the title indicates the traditional pattern Fry wishes to evoke of the fabulous bird, the symbol of love, which is consumed in flames only to emerge from its ashes with renewed youth to live out a further cycle. Also in the Fairy Tale tradition, Dynamene is a Sleeping Beauty awakened by her Prince. On the level of Religious

Myth, *Phoenix* is a comic analogue for the Christian pattern of atonement and resurrection.

Briefly, the plot of *Phoenix* recounts how Dynamene, mourning the death of her husband Virilius, retreats with her maid, Doto, to his underground tomb, resolved to fast and die. Her vigil is interrupted by the appearance of Tegeus, a soldier set to guard the bodies of six hanged men. Inevitably, the forces of life prevail, and they fall in love. The disappearance of one of the hanged men threatens dire punishment for Tegeus for neglect of duty. The problem is solved by the replacement of the missing body by that of Virilius, and the lovers emerge triumphant over death and misfortune.

The action of the play takes place at and shortly before dawn on the third day in the tomb, the time of Christ's rising. The removed body is taken from a holly tree, symbolic of the cross, and there is also a "eucharistic intertwining of feast and sacrifice,"<sup>6</sup> the taking of wine and bread with a background of death. Finally, Doto drinks to "The Master. Both the masters" (p. 43), dead and living simultaneously. Working on the clue "section six, paragraph/Three in the Regulations" (p. 40), Stanley M. Wiersma relates *Phoenix* to Romans 6, which is usually divided into three paragraphs, 1-11, 12-22 and 23.<sup>2</sup> He sees Fry's themes related to Paul's, and finds significant Christian patterns in the focus on naming and renaming:

Just as baptism is a symbol of death and resurrection, just as the resurrection of baptism confers a new identity to the object of it, and just as Christian dogma and practice associate baptism with naming, so the three characters of Fry's play undergo burial and resurrection, so each gains a new identity, and so each either has his name exchanged for another or has a change in the name's meaning.<sup>8</sup>

The obvious example is Tegeus, whose name suggests "tedious." This name reflects his disenchantment with a corrupt world, but, as with the ironically named Virilius, is the opposite of his nature. The root of his name is the Latin *tego*, to cover. When he tells Dynamene his name, she remarks "That's very thin for you/It hardly covers

your bones" (p. 20). She refuses, however, to tell Tegeus her name, and condemns the human preoccupation with naming:

The genius of dumb things, that they are nameless.  
Have I found the seat of the weevil in human brains?  
Our names. They make us broody . . . (p. 20)

However, she does rename him Chromis, the Greek for colour, and with his change in name comes a change in personality from relative reserve to self-assertion. Changes in character and the relationship of such changes to names and the process of rebirth will be considered later. Wiersma identifies Paul's themes as the problem of doing evil and omitting good and that of "the law of the members warring against the law of the mind; there is a moral ambivalence, but also a psychological one."<sup>9</sup> He sees each of Fry's characters conscious of a moral or psychological ambivalence, or both, and notes the relevance of the adjacent Romans 5 and 7, the former concerned with sin, death and grace, and the latter opening with a specific statement on marriage:

Do you know, brethren . . . that the law is binding on a person only during his life. Thus a married woman is bound by law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies she is discharged from the law concerning her husband . . . if her husband dies she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.

Romans 7:1-3 (Revised Standard Version)

Wiersma's contentions, although stretched concerning the moral and psychological ambivalence in each character, certainly illuminate some of the specifically Christian patterns of the play. Nelvin Vos outlines the general pattern of atonement and redemption:

for Fry, the operation of grace is not in some ethereal realm, but *in* the finite itself. It is through the flesh that all is mediated. The usual action in his plays therefore is a portrayal of sacrificial love of one individual who atones for the other, or, in literary terms, one who provides the comic redemption for the other.<sup>10</sup>

The Christian pattern inevitably has parallels in other mythologies. Tegeus, for example, comes to resemble "a

persona which simultaneously fulfills the archetypes of Adam, Prometheus and Christ. Allusions to apples and dust, fire and chains, and Tegeus' fear of crucifixion appear often enough to link Tegeus with these mythic characters."<sup>11</sup> The effect of these mythic associations is to suggest that beneath the surface comic action lies a pattern of meaning which has a timeless significance. The Christian cycle is not isolated, but is a recurring phoenix-like pattern with modern relevance.

It is not, however, sufficient for a playwright to rely on mythic patterns or references in themselves to carry the weight of a universal truth to his audience. Francis Fergusson observes that "one of the most striking properties of myths is that they generate new forms (like the differing children of one parent) in the imaginations of those who try to grasp them."<sup>12</sup> The myth nourishes the writer's imagination, and in turn "fecundates" — to use Fergusson's term — that of the audience or reader. The writer's first problem is the presentation of his time factor when it is not set entirely in the present. The action may take place at an indeterminate time or place in the past, and thereby suggest a perennial significance — the method of the Fairy Tale. Alternatively, past events and present action may be juxtaposed and interrelated — the method adopted in Eliot's *The Rock*, Charles Williams' *Judgement at Chelmsford* and Fry's *A Sleep of Prisoners*. A third method is to make the time and place specific, but to endow the action with a cyclical pattern and to avoid mere historical romance by making the past as relevant as possible to the present — the method of *Murder in the Cathedral* up to the epilogue, Williams' *Thomas Cranmer of Canterbury*, *The Firstborn* to a certain extent, and *Phoenix*.

The most obvious means of making a past event alive to a contemporary or future audience is to provide well-motivated, vital characters whose actions transcend the limitations of their social milieu. A great deal of the success of *Phoenix* lies in Fry's creation of such charact-

ers, whose internal changes and external relationships capture the imagination of the audience. The play opens with a recognizable stock comic character, the bawdy female servant, introducing serious themes of love, life, and death in a comic manner despite the portentous surroundings of "*an underground tomb . . . and a line of trees on which hang the bodies of several men*" (p. 1). Doto's name, as well as suggesting her "doting" nature, has the connotation of the foolish dodo and, as Wiersma suggests, of the Latin for a dowry.<sup>13</sup> She is a widow's dowry from Virilius to Dynamene, and becomes a bride's dowry to the new master. Her earthy humour is completely independent of time and place, and ensures her a sympathetic reception. Doto's humour is a foil for Dynamene's intellectual sentiments and she functions as the structural antithesis of her mistress. Dynamene is also an attractive, credible character. Her romantic nature has obviously been thwarted by the prosaic Virilius. Her attempts to praise his virtues all reveal his limitations:

Where is the punctual eye  
And where is the cautious voice which made  
Balance-sheets sound like Homer and Homer sound  
Like balance-sheets? (p. 5)

She seizes the opportunity of his death to cast herself in the romantic role of a Juliet choosing death rather than life without her Romeo. The tone and unconscious manner in which she undercuts her early statements create the impression that she is playing a role in which her true emotions are not really engaged. This impression is endorsed by her delight in intellectual sparring with Tegeus, and her transfer of love to him is an inevitable exploitation of her situation. Tegeus is a romantic of more intense nature. Like his successor Thomas in *The Lady*, he is deeply moved by the sight of beauty in distress, and he immediately idealizes the woman who can sacrifice all for love. He had become disillusioned with the world, which he had "begun to see as mildew, verdigris, / Rust, woodrot

. . . " (p. 12). Despite his ability to idealize, Tegeus has a practical side which provokes him to interrupt Dynamene's "perfection of purpose" (p. 24) in the interest of his growing love for her, and he prevails on her to give up her attempt to die by rationalizing: "I,/If I had been your husband, would never dream/Of expecting you" (p. 31). Dynamene and Tegeus both possess a vitality which expresses itself in their speech, and a desire for deep emotional experience which has been frustrated, so that they must express it by romanticizing their actions and situations. The movement of the play is satisfying because it shows them passing from this stage through a developing awareness of each other to a "love for each other . . . Infused with life, and life infused with . . . love" (p. 31).

In a pamphlet on Charles Williams, Fry's friend and mentor, J. Heath-Stubbs says that Williams held that all

personal relationships involved sacrifice — a free giving to others of part of the personality — and exchange. The idea of exchange finds its supreme embodiment in Christ's giving of Himself as a sacrifice for Man's sin. But it is the type of all other relationships. . . .<sup>14</sup>

This concept of exchange, with the religious background made explicit by means of ritual, informs the structure of movement in *Phoenix*. Tegeus and Dynamene start at a distance: she is asleep and he regards her completely dispassionately, although he declares an intuitive sympathy for her action. It is

Not curious;  
I've had thoughts like it. Death is a kind of love.  
Not anything I can explain. (p. 8)

Their relationship develops in a pattern of movement that brings them closer together at each step, but not in a steady direction. He asks her,

What is your opinion of Progress? Does it, for example,  
Exist? Is there ever progression without retrogression?  
(p. 25)

On the plane of personal relationships, the answer is obviously negative. "Would you consider we go round and round?" (p. 26), Dynamene asks him, and he replies,

We concertina, I think; taking each time  
 A larger breath, so that the farther we go out  
 The farther we have to go in. (p. 25)

Their relationship concertinas as they approach and withdraw, culminating in a kiss which is followed by a separation threatened by the ultimate separation of death. Each coming together involves an exchange of "part of the personality" and a consequent revitalizing of one another. Dynamene has given up her will to live and has chosen to die. One interpretation of her name suggests a fusion of the words "die" and "mean": she means to die. Tegeus also admits to a lack of the will to live, but the sight of her is

something, it's more than something,  
 It's regeneration, to see how a human cheek  
 Can become as pale as a pool (p. 12),

and he declares she has "renewed [his] faith in human nature" (p. 24) — his first step in finding "a reason for living" (p. 25). Despite the harmony that builds up in their dialogue, and in the joint recollections of childhood scenes in Pyxa,<sup>15</sup> Dynamene reasserts her desire to join Virilius:

I'm going to my husband. I'm too far on the way  
 To admit myself to life again. (p. 30)

This separation requires a deep breath from Tegeus and an eloquent appeal where he casts himself in the role of the dead husband. "Stop, stop," she cries, "I shall be dragged apart" (p. 31), but she closes with him in an embrace. Tegeus arouses in Dynamene her latent "dynamic" life force, which he indicates he fears by his reluctance to pronounce her name. But the force, once aroused in her, arouses passion in him, and the exchange turns Tegeus into Chromis. His love redeems her from death, and she replaces her idealism with some of his more practical aspects of personality. This exchange is exemplified in her scheme to utilize the body of Virilius to save Tegeus in a final "sacrifice" which gives "death/ The power of life" (p. 43). The reported relationship

between Dynamene and Virilius is also one of exchange, but is limited by his lack of human qualities. Virilius was Dynamene's moral (in the sense of conventional) mentor, the "peroration of nature," who exemplified a rigid code of conduct and taught facts. In exchange, Dynamene declares to his spirit, "I taught you/In your perceptive moments to appreciate me" (p. 5). The final irony is that Virilius, who denied the living qualities and experiences of life, is the sacrificial exchange through which Tegeus is saved and Dynamene enjoys a love denied to her during her husband's life. In this final exchange Virilius, whose name hitherto has been ironic, is the agent of life, and he earns Dynamene's true, emotional love, for she commands Tegeus to love her as she loves him and Virilius.

Whereas the first method by which *Phoenix* is made relevant to a modern audience is through its vital characters, the second method is through the use of a universal mythological pattern of death and resurrection which also incorporates Christian rituals. The relationship between the characters indicates a pattern of atonement. Dynamene and Tegeus attain a reconciliation through the sacrifice of Virilius in reparation for Tegeus' sin of losing the body and for Dynamene's sin of choosing to die and condemning her servant to do so "without/Any fair reason" (p. 36). The atonement brings resurrection after death, but not before a series of rituals has been enacted signifying the process. Four of the Seven Sacraments are performed during the play. Baptism is explicit in the renaming of Tegeus, and forms an essential step in his regeneration. His new name, Chromis, "has a bread-like sound" (p. 22) which associates him with the taking of bread and wine at Mass:

Here's a new roll with honey. In the gods' names  
Let's sober ourselves. (p. 26)

When Dynamene first takes the wine, she drinks to "My husband, and all he stood for" (p. 19). Tegeus corrects her to the present tense, "Stands for": the dead master

is still a living presence. There is a suggestion of Penance in Dynamene's regrets that she was guilty of "not having made a better marriage of it; she carries her self-punishment to the point of wanting to die."<sup>16</sup> Holy Matrimony is symbolized when the lovers kiss, and is blessed in the final action when they pledge their love with a sacramental toast to Virilius which confers grace on their marriage. These rituals form part of our modern consciousness, and their effect is to suggest a deeper content in the play's action.

The interfusion of death, life and love forms the central concern of the play. Doto associates the three in her opening speech:

. . . life and death  
Is cat and dog in this double-bed of a world. (p. 1)

Tegeus declares "death is a kind of love" (p. 8), and later admits that death "may be life's reason" (p. 25). Dynamene, whose love for Virilius expresses itself in the desire to join him in death, comes to realize the adumbration of the Christian message in the sacrifice of Virilius:

I loved  
His life not his death. And now we can give his death  
The power of life. Not horrible: wonderful! (p. 43)

*Phoenix* and *The Firstborn* have a similar death-and-resurrection pattern, but an essential difference in *Phoenix*, in addition to the comic rather than the tragic direction, is the emphasis on love. The regenerative power of love is suggested in *The Firstborn* in the potential which is explicit in the union of Rameses and Phippa, and Seti asserts that

Love is the dominant of life, to which all our changes  
Of key are subdued in the end (p. 81),

but the idea is not expanded or fulfilled in the action. In *Phoenix* the whole pattern of action evolves from the burgeoning love between Dynamene and Tegeus. "Love is the only discipline," she declares, "And we're the disciples of love" (pp. 41-42). Just as Moses is driven by a force of fate, so Tegeus feels a force impelling his

footsteps: "O . . . why/Was I led here? What stigmatism has got/Into my stars?" (p. 15), and he declares his arrival "was more than coming. I followed my future here . . ." (p. 21). Love is a prime agent of fate, or of the life force:

We're set upon by love  
To make us incompetent to steer ourselves,  
To make us docile to fate. (pp. 38-39)

Through the suggestion that love is a cosmic force, Fry links the *eros* of sexual love with the *agapé* of brotherly or divine love. Similarly, an appreciation of the world of the senses is not opposed to an appreciation of the spiritual world — rather it is an essential step towards it. "Rendering to living its rightful poise is not/Unimportant" (p. 19), declares Tegeus, and Dynamene replies:

A mystery's in the world  
Where a little liquid, with flavour, quality, and fume  
Can be as no other, can hint and flute our senses  
As though a music played in harvest hollows  
And a movement was in the swathes of our memory.  
Why should scent, why should flavour come  
With such wings upon us? Parsley, for instance. (p. 20)

Fry's attitude is that of the Affirmative Way, that God is immanent as well as transcendent, and "mystery and goodness and beauty are primarily mediated through created things, if not wholly through them."<sup>17</sup> Although the world of the body and the senses often "confuses/The nature of the mind" (p. 18), it is fortunate for us that Nature "winds her furtive stream all through/Our reason" (p. 24), because we can then act not in accordance with the doubtful dictates of our conscious minds, but through the impulses of sub-conscious life-forces. We thereby avoid being deceived by the discrepancy between appearances and reality,

And what is madness  
To those who only observe, is often wisdom  
To those to whom it happens. (p. 31)

The literal reality of the phoenix may be questioned, but the reality of the love-phoenix rising from its ashes, of the interrelationship of life, death and love, is an unques-

tionable pattern of truth which the play reasserts.

Despite the ancient setting, Fry succeeds in giving the play a distinctly modern flavour. The language captures the contemporary speech idiom demanded by T. S. Eliot, broken only by reference to the gods — Zeus, Aphrodite, “Koeos, Krios, Iapetos, Kronos, and so on” (p. 16) — whose names are valuable mainly for their humorous and euphonic effects. Fry is extremely successful in combining the poetic and colloquial styles. For example, *Dynamene* declares:

For me

The world is all with Charon, all, all,  
 Even the metal and plume of the rose garden,  
 And the forest where the sea fumes overhead  
 In vegetable tides, and particularly  
 The entrance to the warm baths in Arcite Street  
 Where we first met; — all! — the sun itself  
 Trails an evening hand in the sultry river  
 Far away down by Acheron. (p. 5)

Here poetic imagery and association shift smoothly into the mundane and back to the poetic. The movement in language between the two styles parallels the concertina-like structure of the action. There is no harsh juxtaposition for effects of contrast, rather a blending of style with style and subject with subject to show the essential unity in diversity: an exchange of levels of language in which the poetic acquires an everyday quality and the colloquial some of the stature of poetry. Another example is *Dynamene's* berating of Tegeus:

If I were still of the world, and not cloistered  
 In a colourless landscape of winter thought  
 Where the approaching Spring is desired oblivion,  
 I should write sharply to your commanding officer.  
 It should be done, it should be done. If my fingers  
 Weren't so cold I would do it now. But they are,  
 Horribly cold. And why should insolence matter  
 When my colour of life is unreal, a blush on death,  
 A partial mere diaphane? I don't know  
 Why it should matter. Oafish, non-commissioned  
 Young man! The boots of your conscience will pinch  
for ever  
 If life's dignity has any self-protection.  
 Oh, I have to sit down. The tomb's going round.  
 (pp. 14-15)

Fry also gives the events of a past era modern connotations. For example, Doto explains how Dynamene circumvented the eternal official mind:

. . . at first  
Madam had difficulty with the Town Council. They said  
They couldn't have a tomb used as a private residence.  
But madam told them she wouldn't be eating here,  
Only suffering, and they thought that would be all right.  
(p. 9)

This comic encounter with authority foreshadows the more serious life-and-death matter of the missing body. The Regulations of social institutions can "snuff the great/Candles of creation" (p. 42), as they have done with the six men hanged on the thinnest of pretexts: both the ludicrousness and the inhumanity of institutions, Fry implies, are by no means confined to past eras. The materialism of Virilius, who even died "checking the pence column as he went" (p. 6), is another facet of life that is both ancient and modern. His inability to appreciate the world of emotion, art and nature — the wonder of existence — is the deficiency in modern life that Fry is constantly endeavouring to rectify. The assertion of *Phoenix* is that in any era, love can transcend senseless killing, the oppression of institutions and deadening materialism.

It has already been suggested that the flow of language parallels the structural movement between antithetical positions, and results in a blending of the oppositions. A further language-structure-theme parallel is the manner in which the imagery reinforces the comic pattern of action by affirming a positive view of the world. Dynamene exults:

What a mad blacksmith creation is  
Who blows his furnaces until the stars fly upward  
And iron Time is hot and politicians glow  
And bulbs and roots sizzle into hyacinth  
And orchis. . . . (p. 6)

The dialogue between Dynamene and Tegeus when she first drinks some wine indicates a multiple harmony in nature between antitheses, between the couple and nature in their awareness, and between each other in their rapport:

DYNAMENE. How good [the wine] is  
 How it sings to the throat, purling with summer.  
 TEGEUS. It has a twin nature, winter and warmth in  
 one,  
 Moon and meadow. Do you agree?  
 DYNAMENE Perfectly;  
 A cold bell sounding in a golden month.  
 TEGEUS. Crystal in harvest.  
 DYNAMENE. Perhaps a nightingale  
 Sobbing among the pears.  
 TEGEUS. In an old autumnal midnight. (p 19)

Just as the action is predominantly comic but includes a real threat, so the pattern of imagery stresses the positive aspect of antithesis but recognizes the negative as a distinct alternative. Contrasts of death-life, dark-light, cold-hot, and down-up, pervade the language, revealing the tensions of which life is composed, yet always asserting the positive. The opening lines of the play establish a comic expectation: the dark is "Nothing but the harmless day gone into black" (p. 1), and is soon dispersed by the Promethean lamp-flame. The same speech indicates which side of the life-death antithesis is to be weighted: "life and death/Is cat and dog in this double-bed of a world" (p. 1). The negative thought of death is outweighed by the humour of the metaphor and by the positive sexual connotations of the "double-bed." As the play develops, the outside darkness comes to represent the evils of society, epitomized by the six bodies, but is bathed in moonlight so bright that Dynamene thinks it is dawn. Tegeus becomes associated with the moon because he appears out of the dark and uses "The lamplight and the moon so skilfully" (p. 29) to enhance his appearance. Dynamene is constantly associated with bright light and the sun. At first, asleep, she is "all dark," but Tegeus soon sees her as "luminous with sorrow," and as their love grows her light dazzles him. Coming to her, he leaves the darkness and cold of "wrenching ice/To walk in the sun" (p. 30). The design on his drinking bowl, which echoes Dynamene's dream, also symbolizes the action of the play and encapsulates the imagery:

The corded god, tied also by the rays  
 Of the sun, and the astonished ship erupting

Into vines and vine-leaves, inverted pyramids  
 Of grapes, the uplifted hands of the men (the raiders),  
 And here the headlong sea, itself almost  
 Venturing into leaves and tendrils, and Proteus  
 With his beard braiding the wind, and this  
 Held by other hands is the drowned sailor. (p. 17)

The "corded god" is Tegeus himself, tied by the rays of Dynamene's sun. Virilius has already been described as a ship which "flew figurehead foremost into the sun" (p. 2) and his eruption into vines and grapes forecasts the fruitful outcome, despite the threat of the raiders who represent society and the real possibility of death in the drowned sailor who represents the executed men. Dynamene picks up the images and adds the mind-body dichotomy to emphasize the tenacity of life:

Oh, how the inveterate body,  
 Even when cut from the heart, insists on leaf,  
 Puts out, with a separate meaningless will,  
 Fronds to intercept the thankless sun.  
 How it does, oh, how it does. And how it confuses  
 The nature of the mind . . .  
 When the thoughts would die, the instincts will set sail  
 For life, And when the thoughts are alert for life  
 The instincts will rage to be destroyed on the rocks.  
(pp. 17-18)

The description of the bowl, and the manner in which the images in it are echoed and reworked, is characteristic of Fry's poetic method of treatment by expansion, and exemplifies his integration of language, theme and movement.

In *Phoenix*, as in *The Firstborn*, Fry is manipulating antitheses to show that ultimately they form a unity which transcends their difference. The alternatives are not mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent. Death and resurrection form the overriding pattern, but the treatment is different from the anguished manner of *The Firstborn*. The deeper concern is distanced by the comic pattern, and less vital antitheses present figural patterns of the basic archetype. The internal tensions of the play lead to a series of delightfully comic ironies, which Spears observes are

neat and symmetrical: her perfection of purpose revives  
 his faith in human nature and desire to live; his love

makes her give up her perfection of purpose; he converts her so completely that she volunteers to negate her former faith . . . so that they may live and love. Thus the love-phoenix rises from its ashes; cosmic laughter affirms joy.<sup>18</sup>

The "cosmic laughter" is perhaps the audience satisfaction at witnessing a neat resolution of the tension and an affirmation of life which enables them, like Tegeus, "to feel as the gods feel" (p. 32). In a well-known statement, Fry asserted

that there is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time: where our tragic fate finds itself with perfect pitch, and goes straight to the key which creation was composed in. And comedy senses and reaches out to this experience. It says, in effect, that, groaning as we may be, we move in the figure of a dance, and, so moving, we trace the outline of the mystery.<sup>19</sup>

*Phoenix* exemplifies this process: night is distilled into dawn, the tragic is transcended, and the movement of the play traces "the figure of a dance" as Dynamene and Tegeus concertina in the throes of Langer's "life rhythm," which is part of the eternal mystery of death and resurrection embodied in the Christian and Phoenix myths, and in the plot and language of the play. This demonstration of unity is far from "too frequent."

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Feeling and Form* (London: Scribner, 1953), p. 346.

<sup>2</sup>*The Firstborn*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>*The Human Image in Dramatic Literature* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), p. 163.

<sup>4</sup>A *Phoenix Too Frequent* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), n.n. Subsequent references to page numbers are given in parentheses.

<sup>5</sup>Jeremy Taylor, *The Whole Works*, ed. Rev. Reginald Heber, revd. Rev. Charles P. Eden (London: Longman, 1862), III, 449.

<sup>6</sup>Nelvin Vos, *The Drama of Comedy: Victim and Victor* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1966), pp. 81-82.

<sup>7</sup>"A *Phoenix Too Frequent*. A Study in Source and Symbol," *Modern Drama*, VIII, iii (Dec. 1965), 293-302.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 205.

- <sup>10</sup>Vos, p. 96.
- <sup>11</sup>Emil Roy, "Structure, Characterization and Language in the Drama of Christopher Fry," Diss., U. of Southern California (1961), p. 52.
- <sup>12</sup>Fergusson, pp. 162-63.
- <sup>13</sup>Wiersma, 300.
- <sup>14</sup>Charles Williams, *Writers and Their Work*: No. 63 (London: British Council, 1955), p. 26.
- <sup>15</sup>The name "Pyxa" suggests "pixie-land," the fairy-tale world of childhood and fantasy, but an associated connotation is the "pyx," a vessel in which the consecrated bread of the sacrament is placed.
- <sup>16</sup>Wiersma, 297.
- <sup>17</sup>Corbin S. Carnell, "Creation's Lonely Flesh: T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry on the Life of the Senses," *Modern Drama*, VI, ii (June, 1961), 145.
- <sup>18</sup>Monroe K. Spears, "Christopher Fry and the Redemption of Joy," *Poetry*, LXXVIII (April, 1951), 34.