

Symbolic Levels in Christopher Fry's *A Phoenix Too Frequent*

"[I]n comedy, eternity is a moment. . . . There is an angle of experience where the dark is distilled into light: either here or hereafter, in or out of time. . . . 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."—"Comedy"

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth? For the woman which hath an husband is bound by the law to her husband so long as he liveth; but if the husband be dead, she is loosed from the law of her husband. So then if, while her husband liveth, she be married to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if her husband be dead, she is free from that law; so that she is no adulteress, though she be married to another man. . . . For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do. Now if I do that I would not, it is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me. I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?"--
Romans 6:23-7:3, 19-24

"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." --I Corinthians 10:16-17

When Christopher Fry was working on his Mercury Theatre contribution, *A Phoenix Too Frequent*, he had also been reading the epistles of St. Paul, especially the Epistle to the Romans. The play is based on a story taken from the Latin comedian Petronius, which for the bawdy comic was simply a tale mocking how sexual desire will overpower people even in the oddest of circumstances. Jeremy Taylor, the Anglican divine, however, in his *The Rule and Exercises of Holy Dying* read the story as a failure of the ethical mean: an obsession with fidelity even to the point of starvation leads to an alternate obsession with drink and desire. Fry saw that another meaning might be accorded the tale, one having parallels with Pauline views of law and grace, of sacrament and substitution. While Fry insisted that theatre viewers need not pick up on the Christian symbolism in the play to enjoy it, he openly admitted that for him, this meaning was present in the writing of *Phoenix*. (For example, he admitted in a letter to Stanley Wirsma that Tegeus's fear of section 6, paragraph 3 of the Regulations was included with Romans 6:23 in mind. The holly tree is traditionally a symbol for the cross, and the imagery on Tegeus' cup echoes Christian symbolism.) At least three levels of symbolism are present in the play:

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| Erotic | Doto, Dynamene, and Tegeus (as well as Virilius) represent the desire for life and love in its bodily and sexual form even in the face of death. |
| Existential | Each character has a symbolic, if not allegorical, meaning in which false ways of invoking love, the maid Doto's and bookkeeper Virilius', are opposed to a true one in Tegeus and Dynamene. Ultimately there is a desire for choice in the face of death. |
| Salvific | Dynamene must learn she is no longer wedded to the law, as Tegeus must learn that the Regulations' just demands may be fulfilled by a surprising substitute, and together the new lovers must partake of the sacraments of communion and marriage. |

Meanings of the Names

Doto	Dowry (i.e. Property, sounds also like dotting and dodo)
Dynamene	Power/ Energy
Virilius	Virility
Tegeus	Covering (also sounds like “tedious”)
Chromis	Color (also sounds like the English bread, hovis)

Discussion Questions

- Describe the characters, including the dead Virilius. What do we learn about each one and how they contribute to the meaning of the play?
- Should the audience be aware of (or informed of) the meanings in the play beyond the bawdy obvious? Why or why not?
- What purpose do the hanged men serve in the play?
- How important is it to see Tegeus’ cup as a chalice?
- In the play, what makes love a mystery, especially in the face of death?
- How important is the substitution of the body of Virilius to the play’s overall meaning?
- What is the meaning of the title?