

0240-0320 – Lactantius – Phoenix [Incertus]

The Phœnix

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II. Within our memory, also, Lactantius speaks of metres,—the pentameter (he says) and the tetrameter.²⁰⁰⁶

III. Firmianus, writing to Probus on the metres of comedies, thus speaks: “For as to the question which you proposed concerning the metres of comedies, I also know that many are of opinion that the plays of Terence in particular have not the metre of Greek comedy,—that is, of Menander, Philemon, and Diphilus, which consist of trimeter verses; for our ancient writers of comedies, in the modulation of their plays, preferred to follow Eupolis, Cratinus, and Aristophanes, as has been before said.” That there is a measure—that is, metre²⁰⁰⁷—in the plays of Terence and Plautus, and of the other comic and tragic writers, let these declare: Cicero, Scaurus, and Firmianus.²⁰⁰⁸

IV. We will bring forward the sentiments of our Lactantius, which he expressed in words in his third volume to Probus on this subject. The Gauls, he says, were from ancient times called Galatians, from the whiteness of their body; and thus the Sibyl terms them. And this is what the poet intended to signify when he said,—

“Gold collars deck their milk-white necks,”²⁰⁰⁹ when he might have used the word *white*. It is plain that from this the province was called Galatia, in which, on their arrival in it, the Gauls united themselves with Greeks, from which circumstance that region was called Gallograecia, and afterwards Galatia. And it is no wonder if he said this concerning the Galatians, and related that a people of the West, having passed over so great a distance in the middle of the earth, settled in a region of the East.²⁰¹⁰



THE PHOENIX

BY AN UNCERTAIN AUTHOR. ATTRIBUTED TO *LACTANTIUS*²⁰¹¹

There is a happy spot, retired²⁰¹² in the first East, where the great gate of the eternal pole lies open. It is not, however, situated near to his rising in summer or in winter, but where the sun pours the day from his vernal chariot. There a plain spreads its open tracts; nor does any mound rise, nor hollow valley open²⁰¹³ itself. But through twice six ells that place rises above the mountains, whose tops are thought to be lofty among us. Here is the grove of the sun; a wood stands planted with many a tree, blooming with the honour of perpetual foliage. When the pole had blazed with the

²⁰⁰⁶ From *Maxim. Victorin. de carmine heroico*. Cf. Hieron., *Catal.*, c. 80. We have also another treatise, which is entitled “On Grammar.”

²⁰⁰⁷ μέτρον.

²⁰⁰⁸ From Rufinus, the grammarian, on *Comic Metres*, p. 2712.

²⁰⁰⁹ Virg., *AEn.*, viii. 660.

²⁰¹⁰ From Hieron., *Commentar. in ep. ad Gal.*, l. ii., opp. ed. Vallars. viii. 1, p. 426. Hieron., *De Viris Illus.*, c. 80: we have “four books of epistles to Probus.”

²⁰¹¹ [A curious expansion of the fable so long supposed to be authentic history of a natural wonder, and probably derived from Oriental tales corroborated by travellers. See vol. i. p. 12; also iii. 554. Zezeedee bird-worship may have sprung out of it.]

²⁰¹² Remotus. The reference is supposed to be to Arabia, though some think that India is pointed out as the abode of the phoenix.

²⁰¹³ Hiat.

fires of Phaethon, that place was uninjured by the flames; and when the deluge had immersed the world in waves, it rose above the waters of Deucalion. No enfeebling diseases, no sickly old age, nor cruel death, nor harsh fear, approaches hither, nor dreadful crime, nor mad desire of riches, nor Mars, nor fury, burning with the love of slaughter.²⁰¹⁴ Bitter grief is absent, and want clothed in rags, and sleepless cares, and violent hunger. No tempest rages there, nor dreadful violence of the wind; nor does the hoar-frost cover the earth with cold dew. No cloud extends its fleecy²⁰¹⁵ covering above the plains, nor does the turbid moisture of water fall from on high; but there is a fountain in the middle, which they call by the name of “living;”²⁰¹⁶ it is clear, gentle, and abounding with sweet waters, which, bursting forth once during the space of each²⁰¹⁷ month, twelve times irrigates all the grove with waters. Here a species of tree, rising with lofty stem, bears mellow fruits not about to fall on the ground. This grove, these woods, a single²⁰¹⁸ bird, the phoenix, inhabits,—single, but it lives reproduced by its own death. It obeys and submits²⁰¹⁹ to Phœbus, a remarkable attendant. Its parent nature has given it to possess this office. When at its first rising the saffron morn grows red, when it puts to flight the stars with its rosy light, thrice and four times she plunges her body into the sacred waves, thrice and four times she sips water from the living stream.²⁰²⁰ She is raised aloft, and takes her seat on the highest top of the lofty tree, which alone looks down upon the whole grove; and turning herself to the fresh risings of the nascent Phœbus, she awaits his rays and rising beam. And when the sun has thrown back the threshold of the shining gate, and the light gleam²⁰²¹ of the first light has shone forth, she begins to pour strains of sacred song, and to hail²⁰²² the new light with wondrous voice, which neither the notes of the nightingale²⁰²³ nor the flute of the Muses can equal with Cyrrhaean²⁰²⁴ strains. But neither is it thought that the dying swan can imitate it, nor the tuneful strings of the lyre of Mercury. After that Phœbus has brought back his horses to the open heaven,²⁰²⁵ and continually advancing, has displayed²⁰²⁶ his whole orb; she applauds with thrice-repeated flapping of her wings, and having thrice adored the fire-bearing head, is silent. And she also distinguishes the swift hours by sounds not liable to error by day and night: an overseer²⁰²⁷ of the groves, a venerable priestess of the wood, and alone admitted to thy secrets, O Phœbus. And

²⁰¹⁴ Cædis amore furor. There is another reading, “cedit.”

²⁰¹⁵ Vellera, “thin fleecy clouds.” So Virg., *Georg.*, i. 397; Tenuia nec lanæ per cœlum vellera ferri.

²⁰¹⁶ Vivum.

²⁰¹⁷ Per singula tempora mensum.

²⁰¹⁸ Unica, “the only one.” It was supposed that only one phoenix lived at one time. So the proverb “Phœnix rarior.”

²⁰¹⁹ Birds were considered sacred to peculiar gods: thus the phoenix was held sacred to Phœbus. [Layard, *Nineveh*, vol. ii. p.

462.]

²⁰²⁰ Gurgite.

²⁰²¹ Aura. So Virg., *Aeneid*, vi. 204: “Discolor unde auri per ramos aura refusit.”

²⁰²² Ciere.

²⁰²³ Aëdoniae voces. The common reading is “Ædoniae,” contrary to the metre.

²⁰²⁴ i.e., strains of Apollo and the Muses, for Cyrrha is at the foot of Parnassus, their favourite haunt.

²⁰²⁵ Aperta Olympi, when he has mounted above the horizon.

²⁰²⁶ Protulit.

²⁰²⁷ Antistes.

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when she has now accomplished the thousand years of her life, and length of days has rendered her burdensome,²⁰²⁸ in order that she may renew the age which has glided by, the fates pressing²⁰²⁹ her, she flees from the beloved couch of the accustomed grove. And when she has left the sacred places, through a desire of being born²⁰³⁰ again, then she seeks this world, where death reigns. Full of years, she directs her swift flight into Syria, to which Venus herself has given the name of Phœnix;²⁰³¹ and through trackless deserts she seeks the retired groves in the place, where a remote wood lies concealed through the glens. Then she chooses a lofty palm, with top reaching to the heavens, which has the pleasing²⁰³² name of phoenix from the bird, and where²⁰³³ no hurtful living creature can break through, or slimy serpent, or any bird of prey. Then Æolas shuts in the winds in hanging caverns, lest they should injure the bright²⁰³⁴ air with their blasts, or lest a cloud collected by the south wind through the empty sky should remove the rays of the sun, and be a hindrance²⁰³⁵ to the bird. Afterwards she builds for herself either a nest or a tomb, for she perishes that she may live; yet she produces herself. Hence she collects juices and odours, which the Assyrian gathers from the rich wood, which the wealthy Arabian gathers; which either the Pygmæan²⁰³⁶ nations, or India crops, or the Sabæan land produces from its soft bosom. Hence she heaps together cinnamon and the odour of the far-scented amomum, and balsams with mixed leaves. Neither the twig of the mild cassia nor of the fragrant acanthus is absent, nor the tears and rich drop of frankincense. To these she adds tender ears²⁰³⁷ of flourishing spikenard, and joins the too pleasing pastures²⁰³⁸ of myrrh. Immediately she places her body about to be changed on the strewed nest, and her quiet limbs on such²⁰³⁹ a couch. Then with her mouth she scatters juices around and upon her limbs, about to die with her own funeral rites. Then amidst various odours she yields up²⁰⁴⁰ her life, nor fears the faith of so great a deposit. In the meantime her body, destroyed by death, which proves the source of life,²⁰⁴¹ is hot, and the heat itself produces a flame; and it conceives fire afar off from the light of heaven: it blazes, and is dissolved into burnt ashes. And these ashes collected in death it fuses,²⁰⁴² as it were, into a mass, and has an effect²⁰⁴³ resembling seed. From this an animal is said to arise without limbs, but the worm is said to be of a milky colour. And it suddenly increases vastly

²⁰²⁸ Gravem, i.e., a burden to herself.

²⁰²⁹ Fatis urgentibus; others read “spatiis vergentibus.”

²⁰³⁰ Studio renascendi.

²⁰³¹ Venus was worshipped in Syro-Phœnix.

²⁰³² Gratum; others read “Graium,” Grecian.

²⁰³³ Quà; another reading is “quam,” that which.

²⁰³⁴ Purpureum. There may be a reference to the early dawn.

²⁰³⁵ Obsit.

²⁰³⁶ Some ancient writers place these fabulous people in India, others beyond Arabia.

²⁰³⁷ Aristas. The word is sometimes applied, as here, to spikenard.

²⁰³⁸ Et sociat myrrhæ pascua grata nimis; another reading is, “et sociam myrrhæ vim, Panachaia tuæ.”

²⁰³⁹ In talique toro; others, “vitalique toro,” i.e., on a death-bed.

²⁰⁴⁰ Commendat.

²⁰⁴¹ Genitali, “productive;” observe the antithesis.

²⁰⁴² Conflat.

²⁰⁴³ Effectum; others read, “ad foetum seminis instar habent.”

with an imperfectly formed²⁰⁴⁴ body, and collects itself into the appearance of a well-rounded egg. After this it is formed again, such as its figure was before, and the phoenix, having burst her shell,²⁰⁴⁵ shoots forth, even as caterpillars²⁰⁴⁶ in the fields, when they are fastened by a thread to a stone, are wont to be changed into a butterfly. No food is appointed for her in our world, nor does any one make it his business to feed her while unfledged. She sips the delicate²⁰⁴⁷ ambrosial dews of heavenly nectar which have fallen from the star-bearing pole. She gathers these; with these the bird is nourished in the midst of odours, until she bears a natural form. But when she begins to flourish with early youth, she flies forth now about to return to her native abode. Previously, however, she encloses in an ointment of balsam, and in myrrh and dissolved²⁰⁴⁸ frankincense, all the remains of her own body, and the bones or ashes, and relics²⁰⁴⁹ of herself, and with pious mouth brings it into a round form,²⁰⁵⁰ and carrying this with her feet, she goes to the rising of the sun, and tarrying at the altar, she draws it forth in the sacred temple. She shows and presents herself an object of admiration to the beholder; such great beauty is there, such great honour abounds. In the first place, her colour is like the brilliancy²⁰⁵¹ of that which the seeds of the pomegranate when ripe take under the smooth rind;²⁰⁵² such colour as is contained in the leaves which the poppy produces in the fields, when Flora spreads her garments beneath the blushing sky. Her shoulders and beautiful breasts shine with this covering; with this her head, with this her neck, and the upper parts of her back shine. And her tail is extended, varied with yellow metal, in the spots of which mingled purple blushes. Between her wings there is a bright²⁰⁵³ mark above, as²⁰⁵⁴ Tris on high is wont to paint a cloud from above. She gleams resplendent with a mingling of the green emerald, and a shining beak²⁰⁵⁵ of pure horn opens itself. Her eyes are large;²⁰⁵⁶ you might believe that they were two jacinths;²⁰⁵⁷ from the middle of which a bright flame shines. An irradiated crown is fitted²⁰⁵⁸ to the whole of her head, resembling on high the glory of the head of Phœbus.²⁰⁵⁹ Scales cover her thighs spangled with yellow metal, but a rosy²⁰⁶⁰ colour paints her claws with honour. Her form is seen to

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²⁰⁴⁴ Cum corpore curto; others read, “cum tempore certo.”

²⁰⁴⁵ Ruptis exuvii. The same word is used by Virgil to describe the serpent slipping its skin—“positis exuvii.”

²⁰⁴⁶ Tineæ.

²⁰⁴⁷ Tenues; others read “teneri.”

²⁰⁴⁸ Thure soluto.

²⁰⁴⁹ Exuvias suas.

²⁰⁵⁰ In formam conglobat.

²⁰⁵¹ Quem croceum. The word is properly used to denote the colour of saffron; it is also applied to other bright colours.

²⁰⁵² Sub cortice lœvi; the common reading is “sub sidere cœli.”

²⁰⁵³ Clarum insigne; others read, “aurum...insigneque.”

²⁰⁵⁴ Ceu; others read, “seu.”

²⁰⁵⁵ Gemmea cuspis. Her beak is of horn, but bright and transparent as a gem.

²⁰⁵⁶ Ingentes oculi; others read, “oculos.”

²⁰⁵⁷ Hyacinthos; gems of this colour.

²⁰⁵⁸ Aequatur.

²⁰⁵⁹ i.e., the rays of the sun.

²⁰⁶⁰ Roseus; others read, “roseo honore.”

blend the figure of the peacock with that of the painted bird of Phasis.²⁰⁶¹ The winged creature which is produced in the lands of the Arabians, whether it be beast or bird, can scarcely equal her magnitude.²⁰⁶² She is not, however, slow, as birds which through the greatness of their body have sluggish motions, and a very heavy²⁰⁶³ weight. But she is light and swift, full of royal beauty. Such she always shows herself²⁰⁶⁴ in the sight of men. Egypt comes hither to such a wondrous²⁰⁶⁵ sight, and the exulting crowd salutes the rare bird. Immediately they carve her image on the consecrated marble, and mark both the occurrence and the day with a new title. Birds of every kind assemble together; none is mindful of prey, none of fear. Attended by a chorus of birds, she flies through the heaven, and a crowd accompanies her, exulting in the pious duty. But when she has arrived at the regions of pure ether, she presently returns;²⁰⁶⁶ afterwards she is concealed in her own regions. But oh, bird of happy lot and fate,²⁰⁶⁷ to whom the god himself granted to be born from herself! Whether it be female, or male, or neither, or both, happy she, who enters into²⁰⁶⁸ no compacts of Venus. Death is Venus to her; her only pleasure is in death: that she may be born, she desires previously to die. She is an offspring to herself, her own father and heir, her own nurse, and always a foster-child to herself. She is herself indeed, but not the same, since she is herself, and not herself, having gained eternal life by the blessing of death.



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A POEM ON THE PASSION OF THE LORD

FORMERLY ASCRIBED TO LACTANTIUS

WHOEVER you are who approach, and are entering the precincts²⁰⁶⁹ of the middle of the temple, stop a little and look upon me, who, though innocent, suffered for your crime; lay me up in your mind, keep me in your breast. I am He who, pitying the bitter misfortunes of men, came hither as a messenger²⁰⁷⁰ of offered peace, and as a full atonement²⁰⁷¹ for the fault of men.²⁰⁷² Here the brightest light from above is restored to the earth; here is the merciful image of safety; here I am a rest to

²⁰⁶¹ The pheasant.

²⁰⁶² Magniciem. Some take this as denoting the name of a bird, but no such bird is known.

²⁰⁶³ Pergrave pondus; others read, "per grave pondus," by reason of the heavy weight.

²⁰⁶⁴ Se exhibet; others read "se probat."

²⁰⁶⁵ Tanti ad miracula visus. [Deut. iv. 17.]

²⁰⁶⁶ Inde; others read, "ille," but the allusion is very obscure.

²⁰⁶⁷ Fili, "the thread," i.e. of fate.

²⁰⁶⁸ Colit. [Badger's *Nestorians*, vol. i. p. 122.]

²⁰⁶⁹ Limina, "the threshold."

²⁰⁷⁰ Interpres.

²⁰⁷¹ Venia, "remission."

²⁰⁷² Communis culpæ.