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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The more elaborate, but, to a great extent, exotic depiction of Erotion, Martial's beloved *vernula* in verses 1-13, is in sharp contrast with our author's abrupt, passing reference to the phoenix and mere allusion to its rarity in verse 13 of *Ep.* 5.37. The manifold purpose of this paper is therefore to determine by way of an analytic and interpretative investigation (i) Martial's poetical treatment of the *vernula* and the phoenix, (ii) the legendary bird's significance and function, if any, in this particular epigram, and (iii) any connection there might be between the *vernula* and the phoenix. These aims will, however, not necessarily be treated in this order.

## 2. TEXT

*Puella*<sup>2</sup> senibus dulcior mihi cynis,  
 agna Galaesi mollior Phalantini,  
 concha Lucrini delicatior stagni,  
 cui nec lapillos praeferas Erythraeos  
 nec modo politum pecudis Indicae dentem 5  
 nivesque primas liliumque non tactum;  
 quae crine vicit Baetici gregis vellus  
 Rhenique nodos aureamque nitellam;  
 fragravit ore quod rosarium Paesti,  
 quod Atticarum prima mella cerarum, 10  
 quod sucinorum rapta de manu gleba;  
 cui comparatus indecens erat pavo,  
 inamabilis sciurus et frequens *phoenix*,  
 adhuc recenti tepet Erotion busto,  
 quam pessimorum lex amara fatorum 15  
 sexta peregit hieme, nec tamen tota,  
 nostros amores gaudium lususque.  
 et esse tristem me meus vetat Paetus,  
 pectusque pulsans pariter et comam vellens:  
 'Deflere non te vernulae pudet mortem? 20  
 ego coniugem' inquit 'extuli et tamen vivo,  
 notam, superbam, nobilem, locupletem.'  
 Quid esse nostro fortius potest Paeto?  
 ducentiens accepit et tamen vivit.

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented at the 19th biennial conference of CASA, held at the University of Cape Town, January 1991. I am grateful to the referees appointed by *Akroterion* for their valuable criticism.

<sup>2</sup> Present author's italics, 5.37 (Loeb text).

### 3. TRANSLATION

A *maiden*, sweeter-voiced to me than dying (aged) swans,  
more tender than a lamb by the Phalantian Galaesus river,  
more dainty than a pearl from the Lucrine lake,  
before whom you would not choose Eastern gems  
nor the tusk, recently polished, of an Indian elephant 5  
and the first snow and the untouched lily;  
whose locks outshone the Baetic fleece (of a golden hue)  
and the (golden-coloured) knotted hair of the people  
of the Rhine region, and the golden(-coated) dormouse;  
whose breath was as fragrant as a Paestan bed of roses,  
as fresh honey of Attic combs, 10  
as a lump of amber snatched from the hand;  
compared to her the peacock was unsightly,  
the squirrel not lovable, and common the *phoenix*;  
warm on a pyre, yet new, Erotion (now) lies,  
whom the bitter decree of the most evil Fates 15  
carried off ere her sixth winter was completed,  
my love, my joy, my playmate.  
But my friend Paetus forbids me to be sad,  
while he beats his breast with both hands and plucks his hair:  
"Are you not ashamed to bewail the death of a paltry home-bred  
slave-girl? 20  
I," he says, "have buried my wife, a wife known to all,  
proud, high-born, and wealthy, and yet I live."  
What can be more steadfast than my friend Paetus?  
He has received twenty million sesterces - and yet still lives!

### 4. STRUCTURE

#### Diagram

The order of thought in this epigram can be structured as follows:

A 1-13: The girl's physical beauty and presence (Sensory), preciousness, chastity and charm

13: CLIMAX (of the first part, vv. 1-13):

*Suggested* BEAUTY and VIRTUAL IMMORTALITY of the legendary phoenix implied by *frequens phoenix* which accentuate Erotion's unique and exquisite beauty

#### PRIMARY FOCAL POINT:

B 14-17: *Death* and MORTALITY of precious Erotion immediately contrasting with the *virtual immortality* of the phoenix suggested in verse 13

Due to his genuine affection for this slave-girl Martial sincerely bewails his loss and the mortality of his precious gem

C 18-20: Disparagement and minimization of Martial's loss and sorrow

21-22: Paetus' "loss": also someone "precious" - his wealthy wife

## SECONDARY FOCAL POINT:

23-24: Climax and dénouement (of the second part, vv. 14-24): *exposure* of snobbish Paetus' *pretended/false grief*

The first part of the poem (vv. 1-13) can be characterized as poetically exotic and partly mythological in nature, contrasting strongly with the second part (vv. 14-24) which can be described as predominantly prosaic.

### 5. MARTIAL'S *Vernula*

The exquisite beauty and charm of Erotion, Martial's beloved little slave-girl, are depicted as follows:

By virtue of a mere suggestion (*senibus ... cycnis*,) the poet is already given the opportunity in the first line to claim that the enchantment of her sweet little voice surpasses the beautiful song of dying swans. The swan was celebrated for its singing, and especially for its dying song (Hor C. 4.3.20; Aus *Ep.* 20.8).

By way of comparisons, revealing a strong exotic tenor, our poet, to my mind, succeeds in convincing the reader that her unsurpassable physical beauty outclasses the *candor*, i.e. the dazzling "perfect" beauty of pearls, precious stones, ivory, snow, and the lily, not to mention the fleeces of a golden hue so characteristic of the sheep grazing on the banks of the Baetis river (A 1-7). Erotion's beauty, chastity and innocence is suggested by accentuating the colour white, the undisturbed, untrodden snow, and the untouched lily (A 1-8). The little slave-girl's blond hair must have had a special tint of gold to excel the golden hue of the fleece of the Baetis sheep, the plaited golden hair of the northern races, like the Germani of the Rhine region, and the golden-coated dormouse (A 7-8). In his employment of the image of the sheep grazing on the banks of the Baetis in the south of Spain (v. 7), Martial assumes, of course, that his readers are acquainted with the fact that their fleece has a golden hue. The same assumption is valid in the case of the golden coloured hair of the people of the Rhine region (v. 8).

According to our poet Erotion's breath was as fragrant as the aroma coming from the rose-gardens of Paestum (note that it's not just an ordinary rose-garden he has in mind), as aromatic as fresh Attic honey (also a special kind of odour), and as fragrant as the exotic scent given out by amber rubbed in the hand (A 9-11; cf. Mart. 3.65; 11.8.6; 11.13.6).

Apart from the different sweet odours Martial compares her breath with, colour also plays a very important part in his portrayal of the little slave-girl, created by a few strokes of his poetical brush, for example *white* (swans (1), pearls (3), lily (6)), *ivory* (elephant's tusks (5)), *gold* (fleeces of the Baetis sheep (7), the golden hair of the northern races (8), the golden-coated dormouse (8), golden honey (10)), the *variety of colours* to be enjoyed in admiring precious gems (4), a rose-garden (9), and the *yellow* amber (11).

The present author, being aware of the fact that our poet uses triads in verses 1-13, could not, however, establish any significant pattern or structure or special purpose other than that Martial is perhaps trying to create a *vivid* and *colourful* portrait of the little girl by employing these five triads (indicated below), and thus also succeeds in accentuating her frailty, tenderness, preciousness, charm, unique and exquisite beauty, and loveliness:

- vv. 1-3 Her sweet voice, frailty, tenderness, daintiness:  
(senses of hearing, touch, sight)
- A Her voice is sweeter than that of the dying *swans*  
She is softer than a *lamb*  
more dainty than a *pearl* (mother of pearl)
- vv. 4-6: Her preciousness, beauty and chastity:  
(senses of sight and touch)
- B she is to be preferred to Eastern *gems*  
to recently polished *ivory*  
to *first snow* and *untouched lily*
- vv. 7-8: Beauty of her hair:  
(sense of sight (and touch?))
- C Her hair outshone the *golden-hued Baetic wool*  
the *golden-coloured locks* of the Rhine-people  
the *golden-coated dormouse*
- vv. 9-11: Charm of her fragrant breath:  
(sense of smell)
- D Her breath has the fragrance of a Paestan *rose-garden*  
of *honey*  
of *amber* when rubbed
- vv. 12-13: Portrayal of her *unique and exquisite beauty* (culminating in the  
phoenix), and her loveliness:  
(senses of sight (peacock, phoenix) and touch (squirrel: house-hold pet  
(Keller 1963:181))
- E Compared to her a *peacock* is ugly  
a *squirrel* is not lovable  
even a *phoenix* is common.

By employing these above-indicated triads in his creation of this portrait, he also focuses the reader's attention on the following four *sensory* levels: (i) the sense of *hearing*, i.e. the sound of the little slave-girl's voice, e.g. *dulcior* (1); (ii) the sense of *touch*, e.g. *mollior* (2), *liliumque non tactum* (6), *inamabilis sciurus* (13); (iii) the sense of *sight*, e.g. *delicatiore* (3), *lapillos ... Erythraeos* (4), *politum ... dentem* (5), *nivesque primas* (6), *liliumque non tactum* (6), verses 7-8 and verses 12-13, and (iv) the sense of *smell*, e.g. *fragravit ore quod rosarium Paesti* (9). (See also lines 10 and 11). The senses of sight and touch seem to play a major role in this poem.

In his depiction of Erotion's beauty Martial employs a few comparisons that are negatively phrased, but which in fact ensure that her external appearance is presented in the best light and portrayed positively and clearly to his readers, e.g.

*cui nec lapillos praeferas Erythraeos*

*nec modo politum pecudis Indicae dentem* (vv. 4-5).

The fauna and flora as well as other things in nature employed by our poet in his comparisons in this particular epigram range from an elephant's ivory tusks (v. 5) to a dormouse's golden coat (v. 8) and the fineness of an exclusive pearl (v. 3): in his

comparisons he also uses the *petite* in order to portray this delicate little girl more successfully

## 6. THE PHOENIX AND THE *Vernula*

The *vernula* evidently features prominently in this epigram, the phoenix, however, as the last of the fauna and flora with which Erotion is compared in the first half of the epigram, apparently features rather latently and subtly, but in actual fact, as far as its *associative* power is concerned, proves to be very forceful indeed. Our poet merely concludes the first half of the poem with the following apparently vague, but still intriguing statement: *cui comparatus ... erat ... frequens phoenix*, "in comparison with her the phoenix was ordinary". The undisclosed and implied characteristics of the bird are of paramount importance in this poem. It is significant to note that the poet leaves it to the reader's imagination to conceive in what specific respects the little slave-girl surpasses the phoenix, one of a kind (Van den Broek 1972:61; Ov. *Met.* 12.524-531). We may well then ask ourselves what makes this bird, according to tradition, so *rara* and *singularis*?

First of all, some of the bird's extraordinary characteristics will be listed, and subsequently be discussed in order to determine whether these attributes have any bearing on the slave-girl's extolled qualities. The following will be considered: the alleged, beautiful sound of its voice when, as the sun bird, it sings to the sun, also when it allegedly sings its own dirge; its extraordinary beauty and external appearance; the bird's royal and supernatural character; the fact that it erected its own fragrant funeral pyre by collecting aromatics; and lastly, the cremation of the phoenix, and its subsequent resurrection symbolizing its long life and virtual immortality.

### 6.1 Song of the Phoenix

The first quality to be taken into consideration in an attempt to establish a connection between the *vernula* and the phoenix is the alleged, beautiful sound of its voice. When singing as a sun bird, the beauty of its voice, according to 3rd century Lactantius's evidence, surpasses even the song of the nightingale, of the dying swan, as well as the sound of the Cirrhaean flute and the Cyllenian lyre (Lactantius, 41-50; cf. Herodotus 2.73; Van den Broek 1972:282-284). Since the poet in the opening line implies the singing of swans on the point of death, one tends, of course, to succumb to the temptation to force a connection between the suggested sweet voice of Martial's beloved little slave-girl and the allegedly beautiful voice of this legendary bird. Although Ezekiel, the Dramatist (*Exodus* 264), already in the 2nd century BC testifies to the outstanding quality of its voice, insufficient evidence that its singing was mentioned in the Latin literature of the 1st century AD, forbid any speculation that Martial had any knowledge of this particular aspect of the myth. According to Philostratus and Gregory of Tours (both 3rd century AD), the bird in a sweet voice also sang its own dirge (Van den Broek 1972:201, 185). Claudian, the 4th century poet, in his poem entitled *Phoenix* (vv. 45-54), also celebrates this phenomenon.

### 6.2 External appearance (beauty)

This legendary bird's extraordinary beauty is a particular feature which is undoubtedly confirmed by Herodotus (2.73) as early as the 5th century BC, also by contemporary and later evidence, and a quality which plays an extremely important role in this epigram: the exquisite blazing colours of its gold and deep purple-red feathers, and allegedly multicoloured wings, bluish tail with rosy quill-feathers, purple breast, and its head, neck

and back coloured with saffron yellow and red mixed together (Van den Broek 1972:254-255) surpassed the beauty of all other birds (Tac. *Ann.* 6:28; Plin. X.3; Solinus 33.11; Van den Broek 1972:253-254). The phoenix excelled even the peacock in beauty (Achilles Tatius 3.25; Van den Broek 1972:252), but, as the comparison in verses 12-13 clearly suggests, the exquisite beauty of the mythical bird is nevertheless surpassed by the divine beauty of Martial's *vernula* (v. 13). This particular quality can be regarded as a very important factor in this epigram in that it serves as common ground for comparing the physical appearance and beauty of the *vernula* and the phoenix.

### 6.3 Royal character

The royal character of this proud, distinguished, noble and lordly bird is first touched upon by Ezekiel, the Dramatist (*Exodus* 265-269), in the 2nd century BC, and also ascribed to it by authors of the 1st century AD such as Martial himself (*Ep.* 6.55.2) and Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.28) as well as later writers such as the 2nd century author, Achilles Tatius (3.24, 3.25.5), 3rd century Lactantius (147-149), and 4th century Zeno of Verona (*Serm.* 1.2.19.10-20.1; Van den Broek 1972:179, 193, 227-228, 188). Lactantius for example describes it as a bird *regali plena decore*, "full of royal dignity" (147-149; cf. also Claudian *Phoenix* 75-80). The fact that Martial in verse 13 terms the phoenix *frequens* is an indication that he in this context regards the bird as a commoner in comparison with his *vernula*, and also suggests that he ascribes a certain nobility to his slave-girl.

### 6.4 Sun bird

A connection between the bird and the sun, explicitly mentioned by Tacitus (*Ann.* 6.28) and Achilles Tatius (3.25), is confirmed by the fact that its head was often crowned with a magnificent halo or rayed nimbus (Achilles Tatius 3.25, 2nd century; Van den Broek 1972:235, n. 1). This rayed nimbus, of course, might be an allusion to the sublime head array of Phoebus (Lactantius 139-140). Achilles Tatius' evidence confirms that the luminous halo was already known in the 2nd century AD. It was also represented as early as the beginning of the 2nd century on two Roman coins Hadrian had struck in 118 AD on the consecration of his predecessor Trajan (Van den Broek 1972:427-428, Plate VI). Therefore Martial, who died in ca. 104 AD, must have been acquainted with this circular halo which is not only an indication of the phoenix's connection with the sun (Tacitus 6.28), but also a symbol of the lustre that, according to the Greeks (Van den Broek 1972:238), radiates from gods and beings with supernatural power. Consequently, in the light of the above evidence, the assumption that our poet might have had knowledge of the sacred and supernatural nature ascribed to the phoenix, is not too far-fetched. In spite of the fact that the evidence preceding line 13 does not provide manifest proof of any divine qualities ascribed to Erotion, the reader, on the grounds of the phoenix's traditionally accepted divine attribute and sacredness (Herodotus 2.73), may conjecture that Martial in his comparison, which does not favour the phoenix, and due to the previously emphasized divine beauty of the little girl, might have attributed a certain divineness in this context to his beloved *vernula*. Perhaps the fact that in line 12 her beauty is also compared with the peacock, the sacred bird of Juno, also contributes to this suggestion of her divineness.

### 6.5 Fragrant funeral pyre

Both the main versions regarding the death and rebirth of the phoenix contain the common element that before its death the bird makes a fragrant nest or funeral pyre (Stattius, *Silvae* 3.2.114; 2.4.33-37; Mart. 5.7.1-4; Plin. 10.3-5; Claudian *Phoenix* 55). According to the more wide-spread tradition, the old phoenix burns with the aromatics it collected, which

are usually ignited by the heat of the sun; from its ashes arises the new phoenix (Van den Broek 1972:413, 146). The use of aromatics must be seen against the background of Classical practices: it was customary to place many kinds, sometimes even huge quantities of scented materials on the deathbed, the bier, and even next to and in the grave, as well as to combine them with the pyre and mix them with the ashes in the urn (Van den Broek 1972:169; Mart. 10.97.2; 11.54.1-3; Statius, *Silvae* 2.4.33-37; Ov. *Tristia* 3.3.69; Plin. 12.83, 85; 10.97; 11.54.1-3). The pleasing fragrance of the aromatics used in connection with death and funerals in the Classical world was an indication of the life that triumphs over death (Van den Broek 1972:171, 413). In this connection Erotion's fragrant breath is also a symbol of precious life.

Although Pseudo-Jerome is the only source mentioning amber as one of the many aromatics used by the phoenix on the pyre, it seems as though its inflammable, but also aromatic quality, explicitly stated by Pliny the Elder (*H.N.* 37.11.43, 48; 37.11.30; cf. Mart. 3.65.5; 9.13.6; 11.8.6; Juv. 6.573; Van den Broek 1972:164, n. 1) increases the possibility that it could also have been used in Martial's time as a funeral aromatic. Pseudo-Jerome maintains that the heat of the sun ignites the amber which sets the pyre and the phoenix afire (Epistola XVII ad Praesidium: de cereo paschali (PL 30 187B; Van den Broek 1972:203, 210-211). It is interesting to note that, since fragrance played such an important role in Classical funerals, the amber in verse 11, although mentioned in a cosmetic context (Plin. 37.11.30), might also be an adumbration of Erotion's death and funeral mentioned in lines 14-16.

## 6.6 Cremation and resurrection

The cremation and subsequent resurrection, which, just as the bird's extraordinary beauty, play a very significant role in this epigram, are merely suggested by the words *phoenix* and *busto*. But in *Ep.* 5.7, verses 1-4 Martial unmistakably implies that the phoenix is rejuvenated by fire. The abrupt reference in line 13, rousing our curiosity, does not imply, of course, that he did not know anything else about the bird. He only made a passing reference to particular elements of the myth which were relevant to his subject. The cremation version of the myth was, in fact, so generally known in Martial's time that an allusion to it could be considered sufficient (Van den Broek 1972:410-411).

In verses 12 and 13 our poet's exotic portrayal of the little girl's exceptional beauty reaches a climax which, ironically, culminates in the funeral pyre. The legendary phoenix is not only the transitional link between the first and second half of the poem, but also the associative bond, as well as the key to the whole poem: the phoenix "ends" on the funeral pyre, and so does Erotion. She excels the phoenix in all respects except *one* - the poet makes the reader realize this with bitter irony: Erotion can never become alive again, the phoenix, according to the legend, can indeed. Erotion surpassed all the transitory things, the beauty of flowers and animals in nature with which Martial compares her: the phoenix is, however, virtually immortal, delicate Erotion unfortunately, regrettably not. By contrasting the two different consequences of their respective funeral pyres - in the case of the phoenix, the prospect of a rebirth, a new life (Ov. *Met.* 15.392), in Erotion's case death - the *finality* of the little slave-girl's death is emphasized. Or can we perhaps also detect a silent sigh, meant to be an unuttered wish for the prolonging of the short life of Martial's frail, youthful, beloved (now deceased) playmate and apple of his eye, while her ashes are still warm on the funeral pyre? Is it perhaps an unspoken wish that the magical practice, attested to by 1st century Lucan (6.680, 714) of the Thessalian sorceress, Erytho, using among other magical things the *ashes* of the phoenix in order to bring a recently deceased person ("descendentem animam") back to life, might become a reality?

## 7. SUSPENSE

From the beginning to the end of the first half of the epigram Martial maintains an increasing line of suspense by keeping the reader in the dark as follows: in the first place, the reader in the beginning does not know that a five year old girl is celebrated, at least, not before he reaches line 16ff.; secondly, not before verse 20 that she is in fact a slave-girl, and thirdly, not before verse 14 what her name is; fourthly, very early in the poem the poet by virtue of the words *senibus ... cynis* (an allusion to dying swans, v. 1), and the verbs *vicit* (7), *fragravit* (9), and *erat* (12) in the *past* tense, suggests that the little girl is dead, but the reader with some surprise only realizes it in line 14, and then retrospectively, with the aid of the words *phoenix* and *busto*, connects it with the phoenix's life-giving death. Right up to the end the focus, by implication, is on the preciousness and pricelessness of his *vernula*, Erotion.

## 8. CHANGING MOOD OF THE POEM

The epigram's mood is initially characterized by tenderness (A 1-13), later by its earnestness and pathos (the latter brought about by the associative power of the phoenix, B 14-17) - a change of mood which is maintained till the 17th line. Pathos and bitterness are implicit in the next few lines (15-18), embodied in, for example, the words *amara* (15) and *tristem* (18). Verse 18 marks the beginning of a further change of mood, whereafter the tone becomes bitter and harsh. The mention of Paetus' attitude causes a significant change in the mood of the poem: it tears Martial away from his beautiful memories of Erotion, to Paetus' disguised reality, away from the poet's sincere sorrow to his feigned grief: Erotion, in the eyes of Paetus, was only a miserable, paltry little slave-girl, not even worthy of Martial's sorrow and mourning (C 18-20). Although a "break" in the poem can clearly be observed between verses 17 and 18, i.e. the transition from the poet's genuine affection for a little slave-girl (1-17) to the hypocritical attitude of the snobbish Paetus (18-24), I am nevertheless of the opinion that there are also transitions (so far as the mood of, and units of thought in the epigram are concerned) between verses 13 and 14, and again between verses 17 and 18, from the lyric celebration of the girl's unique beauty (1-13) to the heart-breaking and mournful announcement of her tragic death (14-17), which, of course, leads on to the final bitter and harsh, but pointed solution of the whole poem (vv. 18-24). Three distinct main statements can be observed: the first, Erotion is beautiful, frail, precious, and unique (vv. 1-13); the second, the poet's joy and playmate is dead (vv. 14-17); the third, Paetus is a snob and a hypocrite (vv. 18-24). Martial, the epigrammatist, simply cannot let the opportunity slip to expose Paetus' pretended grief with an unexpected humoristic twist! With his tongue in his cheek our poet lets Paetus quite "earnestly" say that he also lost someone "costly": a well-known, proud and noble woman - his *wealthy* spouse (C 21-22). With fine sarcasm Martial at first corroborates Paetus' "courage" to surmount his "great" sorrow, but then comes the poet's venomous and final thrust: she left him a fortune which makes Paetus' "loss" all the more bearable and profitable! (C 23-24).

## 9. WORD POSITION

In line 13 it immediately strikes one that, as far as the position of words is concerned, the poet deliberately places the word *phoenix* at the end of the line, in the first place not *metri causa*, but in an attempt on the one hand to strengthen his argument with respect to Erotion's exceptional qualities, on the other, to emphasize the cruel reality of her mortality. The word *phoenix*, the last word in the first half of the poem, is therefore in



significant contrast, of course, with *puella*, the very first word of the poem, embracing, as it were, our poet's depiction of Erotion's beauty and charm. The striking position of the two words is a further indication of the significant relation between the *vernula* and the phoenix. A closer look at the semantics of word position in the first half of the epigram, disclosed that the words *pavo* (v. 12), and *phoenix* (v. 13), are both prominently placed at the end of their respective lines, stressing the well-known fact that both birds were rivals in beauty, but also swiftly leading up to the realization that the phoenix, supported by its striking and climactic word position, and the implication of the word *indecens*, according to tradition surpassed the peacock in beauty, which, of course, in its turn emphasizes the quality of Erotion's beauty all the more effectively. Even more important is the fact that the words *phoenix* and *busto*, both concluding their respective lines, contrast the funeral of the phoenix and the *vernula*. *Cycnis*, the last word in the first line, begins as it were the first half of the epigram: the words *senibus ... cycnis* symbolize the death of the little girl, while the word, *phoenix*, with its associative power, simultaneously serving as the climax and conclusion of the first half, focuses even more sharply on her mortal nature by suggesting the long life and virtual immortality of the phoenix. In accordance with Classical funerary symbolism the phoenix is here related to the death of Erotion and the life hereafter (Van den Broek 1972:419, 230-231).

## 10. MYTHOLOGY

In this poem Martial frequently uses exotic words with associative power and especially with a geographical connotation. Although Martial censures mythology as being remote from real life (which he intends to portray frankly, 4.49 and 10.4), he, strangely enough, in this epigram employs myth itself in order to depict reality more sharply and truly. The exotic, mythical phoenix with which our author compares Erotion's extraordinary beauty, but which also accentuates her mortality, serves as evidence.

## 11. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it can be asserted that the mention of the phoenix in this epigram does not only serve as a transitional link between the two distinct parts of this poem, bringing about a drastic change of mood, but also, as the associative key to the whole poem, to accentuate Erotion's exquisite beauty and preciousness, and the cruel reality of her much bewailed mortality. Through the associations called up by the mention of the mythical phoenix our poet is able to depict this reality much more forcefully. Martial deliberately chooses the phoenix as a unique champion of its kind to emphasize dramatically Erotion's uniqueness, unsurpassable beauty, and mortality.

The main connection between the *vernula* and the phoenix is their exquisite beauty and the phoenix's virtual immortality in sharp contrast with Erotion's mortality. In accordance with Classical funerary symbolism the phoenix is related to the death of Erotion and life hereafter. The implicit resurrection of the phoenix can also be interpreted as a yearning for the prolonging of Erotion's (short-lived) life, snatched away by cruel Fate.

The conviction that the mention of the phoenix is more concerned with human existence than with the animal world (Van den Broek 1972:9), is confirmed by Martial's affection for his *vernula*, his humane treatment of the theme, in fact, by the whole spirit of the poem. The beauty and pathos of this charming poem, especially the tenderness towards children, that radiates from this (as far as Martial is concerned) somewhat unusual epigram, acquaint us with a different side of Martial's poetical character: one in which intellectual ingenuity and genius, poetical skill and emotion, emanating from his genuine

poignant grief over the loss of the most precious little thing in the world, earnestness and play, as well as mythological connotation, all illustrating Martial's splendid poetical treatment of the *vernula* and the phoenix, are tied together in concise, epigrammatic harmony. Finally, in comparison with Martial's customary short epigrams, this longish epigram is a telling proof of his poetic ability also to distinguish himself as an excellent epigrammatist even in a poem of this length.

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