"Peter Quince at the Clavier"

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Wallace Stevens' four-part poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier" was first published in the magazine Others in 1915 and later released in Stevens' first book of poetry, Harmonium, in 1923.

I

Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the self-same sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.
Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,
Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. It is like the strain
Waked in the elders by Susanna;
Of a green evening, clear and warm,
She bathed in her still garden, while
The red-eyed elders, watching, felt
The basses of their beings throb
In witching chords, and their thin blood
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

II

In the green water, clear and warm,
Susanna lay.
She searched
The touch of springs,
And found
Concealed imaginings.
She sighed,
For so much melody.
Upon the bank, she stood
In the cool
Of spent emotions.
She felt, among the leaves,
The dew
Of old devotions.
She walked upon the grass,
Still quavering.
The winds were like her maids,
On timid feet,
Fetching her woven scarves,
Yet wavering.
A breath upon her hand
Muted the night.
She turned –
A cymbal crashed,
Amid roaring horns.

III

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,
Came her attendant Byzantines.
They wondered why Susanna cried
Against the elders by her side;
And as they whispered, the refrain
Was like a willow swept by rain.
Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame
Revealed Susanna and her shame.
And then, the simpering Byzantines
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

IV
Description

In Part I of the poem, Peter, the speaker, describes seeing a striking figure in "blue-shadowed silk" while playing the clavier. He is intrigued, equating his feelings to music. He imagines them similar to the feelings felt by the elders who had spied on Susanna. Part II describes Susanna bathing in the spring, reminding him of times past. She begins to walk away when suddenly a breath on her hand from the elders stops her in her tracks. Part III details Susanna's "attendant Byzantines" coming to her aid, wondering why she could possibly be upset, and fleeing "with a noise like tambourines." Part IV is the speaker's reflection on beauty—it is "momentary in the mind— / The fitful tracing of a portal; / But in the flesh it is immortal." Even after something dies, whatever comes after it sustains the beauty that was created.

Themes

The poem is rife with musical references and themes. The very structure of the poem is like that of a symphony—there are four parts, or movements, "each related to the others by theme and motif, each different from the others in rhythm and key" (Tindall, 461). Stevens uses words like "pizzicati," "melody," and "choral" in his descriptions, adding to his early declaration that "music is feeling, then, not sound" and helping the reader understand the feelings in the poem as music (Stevens, 89-91).

The poem also references the biblical story of Susanna in the book of Daniel in which Susanna is spied upon by two village elders who threaten to accuse her of committing adultery if she does not make love to them. In Stevens' poem, the moment Susanna discovers her watchers is written in musical terms: "A cymbal crashed, / And roaring horns" (Stevens, 91).

Critics of "Peter Quince"

"Peter Quince at the Clavier" is a poem that many critics have recognized as the point at which Stevens "came to poetic maturity" (Riddel, 308). Critic Louis Untermeyer agreed, saying that "Peter Quince" reaches "a verbal elegance that far surpasses Stevens' more habitual dexterities" (31). While some critics were not as impressed (William York Tindall said that while it is "suggestive of music, maybe, the poem is not music" and that Stevens "lacked the high musical abilities of Milton or T.S. Eliot" (461)), most critics agreed that "Peter Quince at the Clavier" was, and is, one of Stevens' most magnificent poems.

While the titles of many of Stevens' poems are not necessarily indicators of their subjects, some critics believe that this title is more relevant than it at first appears to be. Peter Quince is a reference to William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. Peter is the stage manager of "Pyramus and Thisbe," the play (within the play) performed at Theseus and Hippolyta's wedding. Author Ronald Sukenick described him, sitting at the clavier, as also "the stage manager of the imagination" and what follows is "a flight of imagination" (69). As critic John Serio described, Peter Quince, through the story of Susanna, realizes that "the immortality of beauty derives, paradoxically, from the mortal" and, in "Pyramus and Thisbe," observes how the two lovers "sacrifice their lives for their love and, thus, translate their devotion into an eternal form" (Serio, 21). Serio declared that Peter Quince "presents a brief drama illustrating the ideal nature of love, beauty, and art" in both "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and A Midsummer Night's Dream, eventually recognizing that "the ideal must take form, and thus become less than ideal, before one can know it" (Serio, 23).

References and Works Cited


