

ANALYSIS

“Peter Quince at the Clavier” (1923)

Wallace Stevens

(1879-1955)

“Since this poem first appeared in a book called *Harmonium*, we might read the title as Peter Quince at the keyboard of a harmonium (a reed organ). In literature, Peter Quince is the stage-manager of the interlude, ‘Pyramus and Thisbe,’ in Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The tale of Susanna and the Elders is related in a book of the Apocrypha, the History of Susanna. A group of Hebrew elders attempt to seduce Susanna, wife of Joachim, and when she cries out against them, they claim that she lured them on. Susanna’s innocence is proved, and the elders executed.

Joseph N. Riddel (in *College English*, January 1962) has written of ‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’: ‘The poem is an exercise in form as well as an articulation of the pertinence of form to life and art. The musical analogy suggested in the title is sensitively developed, with a slight variation on the three-part sonatina framework: exposition, development, and recapitulation with coda. The two-part developmental section is largely an elaboration of the minor or dramatic theme, which connects the opening stanza with the brilliant recapitulation of Part Four, a summary statement of which is compact and redolent of lyric beauty.’”

James E. Miller, Jr.
The Literature of the United States 2, 3rd edition
(Scott, Foresman 1953-66) 977

“‘Peter Quince at the Clavier’ is a soliloquy built around the idea that human emotions are equivalent to music and that music itself is ‘feeling then, not sound.’ The Biblical legend of Susanna and the elders is used as a skeleton; each emotion of Susanna and her watchers is interpreted in musical terms. Though these emotions die away with the passing of man (Stanza IV), abstract beauty lives on in successive individuals; Susanna’s memory stirs music (emotions) in moderns like a ‘clear viol’.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 522

“The story of Susanna and the Elders is told in the Apocrypha and in the Donay Bible, Daniel 13. The beauty of Susanna, wife of a rich man in Babylon, aroused the lust of two elders who had recently been appointed judges. Concealing themselves in her garden, they watched her bathe, then threatened her with blackmail unless she lay with them. When she refused, they raised an outcry which summoned her maids, and accused her of unchastity with a young man. Because of their position as judges they were believed and Susanna was condemned to death. The prophet Daniel, however, trapped the elders in conflicting testimony, convicted them of false witness, and had them put to death instead.

This story, in Wallace Stevens’ poem, becomes the subject of Peter Quince’s meditations as he plays the clavier. He imagines the story in the form of a musical composition having four movements, each movement with its distinctive rhythm and rhyming. The composition is scored for strings, horns, cymbals, and tambourines. It begins in Part I with Peter Quince’s meditations on the relationship of music and feeling, and ends in Part IV with a major statement of theme: ‘Beauty is momentary in the mind.... But in the flesh it is immortal.’ ‘Music is feeling...not sound,’ thinks Peter Quince in Part I, and, if this is so, then feeling must be music, or at least translatable into music. The rest of the poem is an exemplification of this proposition, as Peter Quince translates the feelings of the elders, of Susanna, and of her maids into musical terms, and embodies them in the structure of a symphony or sonata.

In Part I the aroused desires of the thin-blooded elders are conveyed through the witching chords and pissicati of the basses. (Stevens’ spelling of *base* makes it mean both bottom or foundation and bass, and

perhaps also suggests ignoble.) In Part II the languorous feelings of Susanna as she bathes in the green water are translated into flowing melody, probably of violins, until the lascivious elders intrude with a crashing of cymbals and sudden roaring of horns. In Part III Susanna's simpering maids come mincing back with a rattle of tambourines to hear the accusation of the elders against their mistress. Finally, after the statement of them in Part IV, the composition is concluded with a brief return of 'the bawdy strings' of the elders, followed by an ironic counterpointing of 'Death's ironic scraping' and a 'sacrament of praise' played upon the 'clear viol' of the memory of Susanna's beauty. (The adjective 'clear' prompts us to read *viol* also as *vial*.)

What does Stevens mean by declaring that 'Beauty is momentary in the mind... But in the flesh it is immortal. / The body dies; the body's beauty lives'? The statement has been variously interpreted. One interpretation is that though the feelings aroused in the mind by beauty (whether of music, or of a bodily form such as Susanna's) are transient, and though the body (e.g., Susanna's) itself dies, yet the body's beauty is perpetuated in other embodiments, just as one evening dies to be followed by another, and as a wave keeps flowing though the water which composes it is perpetually left behind. Another interpretation is that beauty survives when it is given the form and structure ('the flesh') of music or poetry. However we interpret it, Stevens' poem itself 'makes a constant sacrament of praise' both to the beauty of Susanna and to the immortality created by the artistic imagination when it embodies human feelings in enduring works of art."

Laurence Perrine
100 American Poems of the Twentieth Century
(Harcourt 1966) 68-70

Michael Hollister (2015)