Swimming in Stein's Poetic Waters: An Analysis of Sexual Tragedy in "Preciosilla"

David Johnstone

In "Preciosilla," a poem about feminine sexuality and death, Gertrude Stein employs multiple perspectives and voices to construct a cubist narrative, that is, one that exists simultaneously without clear order. While "Preciosilla" has been discussed in relation to a dancer of the same name, I would assert that other female figures in both history and drama, specifically St. Clare of Assisi and *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, are significant in helping to understanding the poem. Building on Stein's allusion to Ophelia, I will refer to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to demonstrate the poem's tragic nature. I will show how Stein's poem exists as a sexual tragedy that compares female purity to life and female sexuality to death and dying through several devices including imagery and symbolism.

In the poems first line, the speaker tells us that Preciosilla, our titular character, is "[c]ousin to Clare washing" and in doing so sets up her first allusion. "Clare" here resembles the word 'clear,' which emphasizes the cleanliness that comes from washing. The line alludes to St. Clare of Assisi, who is known for her washing. Specifically, she washed the feet of her

disciples (as Christ did) and even ventured to kiss their feet on occasion. St. Clare's kissing and washing of feet was an act of subservience, but it is also homoerotic (which emphasizes the reading of "sin" in "cousin"). The proximity of this homoeroticism and the word cousin also implies an incestuous relationship. The water in this image is a cleansing tool, but it is "dirty" in its sexuality. There is a relationship between women and water here as the speaker reveals how each can be pure, sexual, and, as apparent later in the poem, deadly.

The second stanza establishes the slightly ambiguous mourning narrative and tone of the poem. "[T]he band beagles," or bugles, and the celebration is revealed to be that of a "weeding match." Each of these words, "weeding" and "match," can have both positive and negative connotations. "[W]eeding" implies the removal of something, usually a plant (perhaps a lily), while also resembling the word "wedding" (which would render the fact that it is "arrange[d]" more problematic). On the other hand, "match" can be read as a fight or, as with "weeding," a unison. Weeds can also denote the mourning of a widow and the fact that "grief" and its "strange black" are mentioned later reinforces this meaning. The "arrange[ment]" of the "weeding match," as the speaker observes it, is the societal practice of dressing in black in order "to presume a certain point." That it is a "match" implies that the clothing is similar, but also that there is a competition

in the "sign[ing]," or signifying, of grief. Stein repeats "to exstate," a fictional English infinitive of the Latin verb *exstare* which means to exist or be visible. In this repetition, Stein calls to mind the contrast between the living and the dead, the existing and the non-existing, as well as reemphasizes the fixation on having one's grief be visible. There is a subtle allusion to *Hamlet* here as that prince is always seen in his "inky cloak [and] customary suits of solemn black" (1.2.77-78), while his uncle and mother have not grieved long enough and instead celebrate a wedding (a "weeding"). Additionally, when the speaker announces the drowning of Ophelia to Laertes, she notes how Ophelia's "crownet weeds / [were] Clamb'ring to hang" on a branch (4.4.171-72). Those "weedy trophies" then fall with Ophelia into the "weeping brook" and drown with her (4.4.173-74). Returning to Stein, "[L]o and shut" provides the image of one looking and then closing their eyes. Shut is repeated with "shut is life", and life comes to a close: death. This is also a declaration that death *is* life and, as is the case with binary opposites, they define each other.

The third stanza is the depiction of an assault as a seduction becomes a kind of physical forcing. Preciosilla is "bait[ed]" and teased by a "bait tore" (i.e., a baiter, or, perhaps, a masturbator). Violently, she is "tor[n]" like a fish on a hook. The baiter "tore her clothes," which reads as a kind of sexual assault, and, nearly homophonically, tore her close, "toward it, toward a bit, toward a sit." "[B]

it" implies a private bit (genitals) as well as being torn to bits, while "sit" implies a downward motion as well as Preciosilla's backside. Preciosilla is commanded to "sit down in, in vacant surely lots." The repetition of "in" as well as the second syllable of "vacant" (i.e., "cunt") further renders the image sexual and penetrative. The second "in" can also be read in conjunction with the word that follows it, so that the area is, in fact, "in-vacant", as Preciosilla occupies the empty space with her body. "[L]ots" connotes the abundance of vacancy, as well as lots as pieces ("bit[s]") of land. Furthermore, the context implies grave "[p]lots" as well as the ideas of fate and luck that come from drawing lots. The image is sadomasochistic in its combination of violence and sexuality.

This image of sexual violence contrasts with the beauty and purity of the lily, which renders the image even more disturbing. The rhyming "single mingle" connotes unison, as well as masturbation, as there is an intermingling of the "bait and wet" and they are one "single establishment." From this a "l i l y lily grow[s]." The spacing of "l i l y" and then "lily" exemplifies a cubist device, allowing the reader to see multiple perspectives simultaneously. The effect is that we see the lily literally grow, but we also see it open and close (as lilies do at day and night, respectively). This binary opposition (i.e., opened and closed) echoes the assertion that "shut is life" as the lily lives in both instances while going

through a cycle of quasi-rebirth. The lily represents purity and the female genitalia; classically, it symbolizes the virgin Mary. St. Clare, too, is traditionally depicted with the lily in her hand. However, this purity is corrupted by the water and "Clare's washing" is undone. Preciosilla "come[s]" (i.e., orgasms) as she enters the "water." While water traditionally purifies and cleans, here it taints in the same way that sexuality taints the suggested virginity of Preciosilla.

The poem begins to depict sexuality in a seemingly more positive and safe light, setting up for a contrast with the fifth stanza's images of death and dying. The "lily" is "wet" and is therefore possibly a water lily on a lily pad. Its wetness also signifies the aroused genitalia, which "is so pink so pink in stammer." The pinkness is fleshly and vaginal, as "so pink" describes how wet it is: "so pink" / sopping wet. The "single curly shady" is reminiscent of a pubic hair, but it also renders the scene of sexuality slightly ominous with its dark isolation. The next stanza continues with this tone. The speaker says "have can whither," which implies that the act of possession, of having, can be fleeting. Additionally, "can" (i.e., agency and ability) is also that which "whither[s]." With "sleep sleeps knot," Stein suggests the image of a "sl[i]ps knot" (which is a tool of both suicide and execution), while also suggesting that sleep does not sleep, as death does not die, and is therefore unavoidable. Stein calls the noose a "lily scarf"

and in doing so romanticizes it as a tool of death, but also rebirth. This is also to say that the scarf is *meant* for the lily, the virginal Preciosilla.

The poem continues to develop images of death and dying, but its subject seems to switch from Preciosilla to nobles. However, this is only partially the case. The line "nobles are bleeding bleeding" hyperbolizes that loss of blood while also suggesting that the nobles are losing, or "bleeding," the very ability to "bleed." With nobles bleeding, there is the implication of revolution, but with them "bleeding bleeding," they seem to lose the ability to die and there becomes a kind of infinite rule, a truly total totalitarianism. The syntax also leaves the possibility that the nobles are "bleeding two seats," two thrones. Notably, the Spanish *precio* means 'value' while *silla* means 'seat'. This is the simultaneous death of a woman and what she symbolizes, the throne. The speaker asks "[w]hy is grief," but ends the question with a period as if it were a statement. This is to say that asking "why" is the essence of grief and to not ask questions is to accept and therefore be done with grieving.

The poem concludes with the promise of death. When the speaker says that "[w]e will not swim," she implies the drowning of Preciosilla in the water. The personal pronoun is used by the speaker, and it characterizes her as vulnerable and mortal, whereas she has been detached and seemed (and still seems) to be

Preciosilla's baiter (perhaps this is an instance of misery loving company?). This device also implicates the reader as vulnerable and mortal (although, perhaps it is a royal "we," given that "nobles are bleeding"). The drowning here calls back to mind the image of Preciosilla being "bait[ed]" towards the water and being told to "come in". This renders Preciosilla suggestive of the drowned Ophelia. Although there is a distinction here to be made between murder and suicide, the poem blurs that line. The baiter is malicious, pulling her to the water to drown. Alternatively, the situation may be that of a "single mingle," a conversation that Preciosilla is having with herself. Ophelia's gravediggers questioned whether her death was suicide, "willy-nilly," or not, for "if the / water come to him and drown him, he drowns not himself" (5.1.16-17). The speaker further complicates this relationship by alternating between "bait[ing]" and asking Preciosilla to come to the water. It is as if she can only pull her to the water, and entering it must be done of her own volition (e.g., "please get wet").

Stein's poem complicates traditional notions of sadomasochism by queering them. The tragic poem pits the female body against the female body (Preciosilla is against both herself as well as the likely female baiter). Preciosilla's purity is implicitly tied to her life, and with the awakening of her sexuality comes her death (and her orgasm: *la petite mort*). For Stein, death itself is a sexual exploration. Tying sexuality to the tragic narrative

results in the problematic, though traditional, notion that sexual exploration is, especially for women, sinful and damnable. However, the poem still complicates the nature of patriarchy by largely excluding men. Stein leaves room in certain places for interpretation and in doing so baits us into the vacant water. Will we swim?

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark." *The Norton Shakespeare: Essential Plays & The Sonnets*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al., 3rd ed., Norton, 2016, pp. 1194–1283.

Stein, Gertrude. "Preciosilla." *Selected Writing of Gertrude Stein*. Edited by Carl van Vechten, Random House, 1990, p. 550.