

## "The Ordinary Women": Stevens' *Fantasia on a Theme by Longfellow*

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THE ORDINARY WOMEN" (*CP* 10) first appeared with a group of six of Wallace Stevens' strongest *Harmonium* poems in the *Dial* for July 1922.<sup>1</sup> A letter to the *Dial*'s editor Gilbert Seldes suggests that Stevens himself did not place quite the highest value on the poem: "I have no desire to be persnickety about the arrangement of the group," he wrote, "except to make a good beginning and a good end. Accordingly, it does not matter how much you arrange the poems, if you begin with *The Bantams* and end with *The Emperor*" (*L* 227). Since then, critics have often admired the poem, and mention of it is regularly made in surveys of Stevens' work; but they have given it little detailed attention. This is a benign neglect: "The Ordinary Women" is a good poem, I think, but not Stevens at his most compelling or complex. The real reason for it, however, lies in the critics' failure to recognize Stevens' parodic intention. "The Ordinary Women" is, I am convinced, a playful fantasy on a once-familiar schoolroom classic by Longfellow.

In the criticism, the poem first was a prime exhibit in R. P. Blackmur's classic 1932 analysis of Stevens' diction in "Examples of Wallace Stevens." Beginning with an extended discussion of the phrase "Funest philosophers" from "Of the Manner of Addressing Clouds," Blackmur sets out to show that the diction is not merely precious, finicky, or ornamental, but a successful discovery of the only precise word, the elusive *mot juste*; but then, turning to "The Ordinary Women," Blackmur almost reverses his argument: "I am at a loss," he confesses, "and quite happy there, to know anything literally about this poem." It possesses the charm of "the approach of language, through the magic of elegance, to nonsense." Though not quite nonsense, he claims, "Somewhere between the realms of ornamental sound and representative statement, the words pause and balance, dissolve and revolve" (Blackmur 56–57). Subsequent critics have emphasized this quality: to Joseph Riddel, the poem is one that "develops almost exclusively through exaggerated tonal effects" (64).

Critics have, of course, discerned a kind of symbolic parable in the poem, and there is a fair degree of consensus about its purport. A. Walton Litz, who makes the highest claims, sees it as Stevens' "finest expression" of "the exaltations and betrayals of moonlight." The first and last stanzas

frame the women's adventure as they move from "dry catarrhs to guitars" and back again: "In the theatre of moonlight the ordinary women look at the abstract hieroglyphs of life, at the 'beta b' and 'gamma g' which follow 'alpha,' and there they read of 'marriage-bed,' life's living text. At the mid-point of the poem the ordinary women are balanced between imagination and reality, but as the poem unwinds, the initial situation is reversed." In the last half of the poem, "a mirror image of the first," the women dance "through the palace of art to the music of bare reality" (110–11). Other critics, including Riddel and Milton J. Bates, have produced variants of this reading, and I have no real argument with it.<sup>2</sup>

Stevens' poem gains both specificity and resonance, however, when it is held up against its model, Longfellow's "Hymn to the Night." Here is Longfellow's poem:

Hymn to the Night

Ασπαστη. τριλιςτος

I heard the trailing garments of the Night  
Sweep through her marble halls!  
I saw her sable skirts all fringed with light  
From the celestial walls!

I felt her presence, by its spell of might  
Stoop o'er me from above;  
The calm, majestic presence of the Night,  
As of the one I love.

I heard the sounds of sorrow and delight,  
The manifold, soft chimes,  
That fill the haunted chambers of the Night,  
Like some old poet's rhymes.

From the cool cisterns of the midnight air  
My spirit drank repose;  
The fountain of perpetual peace flows there,—  
From those deep cisterns flows.

O holy Night! from thee I learn to bear  
What man has borne before!  
Thou layest thy fingers on the lips of Care,  
And they complain no more.

Peace! Peace! Orestes-like I breathe this prayer!  
Descend with broad-winged flight,  
The welcome, the thrice-prayed for, the most fair,  
The best-beloved Night! (3)

I can offer little external evidence for my claim. There is no question that this poem has always been one of Longfellow's most frequently anthologized (and I would maintain, most satisfying) lyrics. Stevens' *Letters* reveal a pair of interesting general references to Longfellow. In response to some verses sent home in 1898, Stevens' father noted, ambiguously: "Your lines run prettily in the Stanzas sent and we may soon expect the shades of Longfellow to seem less grey" (L 21). This may be a disparaging reference to the poet's graying reputation, but, more likely, it suggests that the early verses seemed to be comparable to or modeled upon Longfellow's. Closer to the writing of "The Ordinary Women," in June 1916, Stevens wrote to his wife from Minneapolis, having made a tourist's visit to Minnehaha Falls: "Did you 'appen to know that Longfellow's poem concerning Hiawatha had its scene here?" (L 197). Most suggestive, perhaps, is Joan Richardson's information that Stevens, in the hospital on his deathbed, "entertained nurses by reciting Longfellow, one of Elsie's old favorite poets" (426). No one could be surprised that Longfellow's work was a presence of consequence to an American poet born in 1879.

The many internal parallels between these two specific poems are obvious. Longfellow's fine prosopopoeia of "night" as a goddess, mysteriously appearing, becomes in Stevens a host of unnamed, ghostly female figures, not strictly personifications but unquestionably creatures of the night. The palatial "marble halls," "celestial walls," and "haunted chambers" of Longfellow become a more ambiguous but still metaphorical architecture in Stevens, first named a "palace," then expanded with such phrases as "nocturnal halls," "lacquered loges," and "beachy floors." The female figure in Longfellow wears "trailing garments" and "sable skirts"; the women in Stevens wear "cold dresses," while they flaunt "explicit coiffures" and "civil fans." Longfellow's night goddess is associated with music and poetry, "manifold, soft chimes" and "some old poet's rhymes"; Stevens' women are serenaded by "gaunt guitarists" while they "study / The canting curlicues / Of heaven and of the heavenly script." The women in both poems are delicately eroticized: to Longfellow, the personified Night is "a calm, majestic presence As of the one I love"; to Stevens, the women read of the "marriage-bed" ("Ti-lill-o!") and emanate "insinuations of desire." (The marriage bed allusion reanimates Joan Richardson's comment about Elsie Stevens' fondness for Longfellow.)

All of these parallels could be taken as accidental: the tropes, taken singly, are not especially unusual, and one could argue that both poets, having settled on a female figuration for Night, invented the rest independently as a matter of course. But one less obvious point of contact is singular enough, I think, to betoken more convincingly Stevens' conscious use of Longfellow: his ordinary women look

From the window-sills at the alphabets  
At beta b and gamma g.

If I am right, the source of these heavenly hieroglyphics is Longfellow's Greek epigraph.

There is no indication in Stevens' poem that he recognized or understood the Greek tag offered by Longfellow, the preternatural linguist, and the phrase contains neither beta nor gamma. In the household editions it is not identified or translated (I owe my own information to the editors of a school anthology). But Stevens treats the letters not for their meaning but as a form of mysterious writing, "canting curlicues / Of heaven and of the heavenly script" which the ordinary women "read right long." This divine revelation, which stands in contrast to the nonsense "zay-zay and a-zay, a-zay" of the palace musicians, forms yet another example of the enigmatic writing identified as a leitmotif of the American Renaissance and studied so elegantly in John T. Irwin's *American Hieroglyphics*.

Longfellow's Greek phrase, quoted from the eighth book of Homer's *Iliad*, line 488, means "Welcome, thrice-prayed for" (Foerster 735). In context, it refers to the night bringing relief to the hard-pressed Greeks, while Zeus promises them a victorious destiny. Night, to Longfellow, is a site not of fear or anxiety but of solace. Longfellow translates *τριλλιστος* in his final stanza, linking it with Orestes seeking peace from the pursuing Furies, the reminiscences bringing a deeper, more solemn tone into the poem. As Newton Arvin, the poet's biographer, remarks, Longfellow was always to be "a poet of the Night, or the Twilight" (64).

It is this quality that Stevens appropriates, half mockingly, half in earnest. In his letter to Gilbert Seldes, Stevens notes that, since the two poems rejected by the *Dial* from his submission were both "moonlight poems" (L 227), the group as a whole required a new title. Stevens had apparently wished to highlight his ironic treatment of a romantic cliché. Despite his elusive and evasive ironies, however, "The Ordinary Women" remains an attractive early tribute to the consolations of romantic moonlight.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The poems were "Bantams in Pine-Woods," "The Ordinary Women," "Frogs Eat Butterflies. Snakes Eat Frogs. Hogs Eat Snakes. Men Eat Hogs," "A High-Toned Old Christian Woman," "O Florida, Venereal Soil," and "The Emperor of Ice-Cream."

<sup>2</sup> Riddel notes an "elegant sport with religious imagery," which turns "a ritual of asceticism into a ritual of epicureanism" and back (64). Barnes, probably expanding on the phrase "lacquered loges," over-specifies the architectural milieu, seeing the women "flit through the walls of a movie palace to seek in Hollywood fantasies ('guitars') the excitement lacking in their humdrum and sexually unfulfilled lives" (106). In this he may be following Fred Stocking's 1945 exegesis in *Explicator*, the earliest attempt to paraphrase.

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