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Is Giselle a Virgin?

John Mueller

In his book *The Ballet Called Giselle*, Cyril W. Beaumont expresses a degree of puzzlement over an important plot development, one which has also bothered other observers: Giselle's remarkably sudden descent into fatal madness on discovering she has been deceived by Albrecht. "Quick temper and poor health might explain her frenzy and her tears," he observes, but what should cause "madness to result from what at worst is no more than a bitter disappointment?"[1]

His answer is a bit weak. He concludes that "Giselle must have been highly neurotic"[2] and advances as literary precedents the case of Ophelia (where madness is the "outcome of the bitter shock of thwarted love on a frail body inhabited by a hypersensitive nature")[3] and the case of Lucia di Lammermoor (where "the heroine loses here reason as the result of disappointed love").[4]

But these comparisons leave quite a bit to be desired. The madness of Ophelia and Lucia is far better motivated than that of Giselle. Hamlet does not merely "thwart" Ophelia's love; he savagely berates here in a near-deranged state and then murders her father. And Lucia's madness is inspired not simply by "disappointed love" but rather by a complex sequence of events in which she is betrothed to a man she doesn't love only after being deceived into thinking the man she does love has married another; her lover then returns and brutally denounces here in public for what he takes to be her deception.

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Furthermore, there seems little in the character of Giselle to suggest she is "highly neurotic." She may be extremely sensitive and overly-trusting, but the character is generally seen to be rather charming, attractively ordinary, and happily well-adjusted. No lurking neuroses there.

Giselle's sudden madness would seem better motivated if one assumes she and Albrecht have become lovers. In her society the loss of virginity would probably mean that she would be unlikely to be able to marry anyone else. In one sudden revelation, then, the young woman not only loses the man she loves, but she sees her whole future irrevocably shattered.

This explanation may seem perverse and even repellent if we insist on seeing Giselle as a "nice girl" in the conventional middle class sense—she must remain a virgin until her wedding night. But this is not the standard everywhere. In some societies it is the engagement bond that is crucial, not the wedding bond: couples can acceptably sleep together once they have become engaged.

A suitable literary precedent would be the tale of the beautiful peasant girl, Dorotea, in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. An aristocrat wants to possess her and she gives in to his advances only when he promises to marry her. By doing this, she observes, "I am setting no new custom or fashion" and she becomes "his wife before God." When the man forsakes his private promise and marries another, she sees that her life has been destroyed; dishonored, she dresses herself as a boy and wanders into the mountains to live the life of a hermit.

The custom may also be suggested in Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* when Donna Anna relates that she allowed the prowling Don into her room late at night because she mistook him in the darkness for her fiancée. (In part the custom also explains, incidentally, Don Giovanni's success with women—he promises to marry them, whereupon they give in. He is really then not so much a seducer as a deceiver—they give in not because he makes them give in to erotic urgings, but because he bribes them with a promise of a highly desirable wedded life.)

A more relevant Central European example comes from the romance of Vaslav and Romola Nijinsky. As she discloses in her book, *Nijinsky*, Romola had expected to sleep with Vaslav immediately after their engagement since her Hungarian education had taught her of "liberty for a girl after she had an engagement ring."[5]

This line of argument suggests, then, that it is neither unreasonable nor perverse to assume that Giselle and Albrecht are lovers and the assumption helps greatly to explain Giselle's sudden madness in the ballet. She is not merely jilted, but dishonored and utterly lost.

But is this interpretation consistent with the rest of the ballet's libretto? At first it may not seem so because an early scene on the ballet, as it is usually played, involves a great deal of byplay between Albrecht and Giselle as she shyly skitters away and he gently tries to win her affection. If they are lovers, why all the coy resistance?

But this byplay is not consistent with the original libretto by Théophile Gautier and Vernoy de Saint-Georges. According to Beaumont's translation, the scene is one in which two people in love reaffirm their affection: Giselle comes out of her house and runs into Albrecht's arms. "Mutual transport and delight of the two young people." Giselle relates a dream in which she was jealous of a beautiful lady he loved in preference to herself. Albrecht "reassures her; he loves Giselle and will never love anyone else."[6] Thus Albrecht does not woo and win Giselle in this scene; he quells her fears and he *reaffirms* his previous vows.

By this interpretation there are two scenes which are crucial to explaining Giselle's madness. One is the scene just discussed, the "wooing" scene which should be played closer to the original libretto showing two lovers exulting in each other's presence.

The other is the scene between Giselle and Bathilde, Albrecht's aristocratic fiancée. For if Giselle's undoing is her unqualified yielding to the deceitful Albrecht, the personality flaw by which she is shattered is her vulnerability (not her "neuroticism"). And her vulnerability can best be shown in this scene where she appears shy, awkward, and utterly guileless in the presence of the great lady.

If she cannot relate to Bathilde, except on terms of unabashed obsequiousness, it would be obvious that under no circumstances could she hope to be accepted, or comfortable, in

Albrecht's aristocratic world. Furthermore if it is clear that Bathilde graciously condescends to become Giselle's "friend" in this scene, it makes the final revealation triply shattering to Giselle: not only is Albrecht a member of a class to which she can never belong and not only is he already engaged, but he is engaged to Bathilde, a woman Giselle worships and who has generously allowed Giselle to become her devoted friend.

And what about those Wilis? Why is it, exactly, that they go around murdering men? The original libretto doesn't satisfactorily explain this (nor do contemporary ones). As Beaumont notes, the libretto suggests that the Wilis are "affianced maidens who have died before their wedding day." But why, he asks, "should these young women haunt the earth in order to induce some hapless male, encountered purely by chance, to dance to his death? It seems a most unreasonable and heartless proceeding."

Beaumont finds a more satisfying motivation by tracing the legend of the Wilis back to its Slavonic origin. There the Willis are "a species of vampire consisting of the spirits of betrothed girls who have died as a result of their being jilted by faithless lovers." This, Beaumont approvingly notes, "not only provides a cause for the maidens' early demise, but affords a reasonable excuse for their bitter vengeance on the opposite sex."[7]

It is a ghostly band Giselle is fully qualified to join.

Notes

1. *The Ballet Called Giselle* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1969), p. 79.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p. 80.
4. Ibid.. p. 107.
5. *Nijinsky* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 241.
6. Beaumont, p. 40.
7. Ibid., p. 19.