

VENUS' GLOVE:

A NOTE ON SIDNEY'S *ASTROPHIL AND STELLA*, SONNET 13

PHOEBUS was Judge betweene *Jove*, *Mars*, and *Love*,
 Of those three gods, whose armes the fairest were:
Jove's golden shield did Eagle sables beare,
 Whose talents held young *Ganimed* above:
 But in Vert field *Mars* bare a golden speare, 5
 Which through a bleeding heart his point did shove:
 Each had his creast, *Mars* caried *Venus'*glove,
Jove on his helme the thunderbolt did reare.
Cupid then smiles, for on his crest there lies
Stella's faire haire, her face he makes his shield, 10
 Where roses gueuls are borne in silver field.
Phoebus drew wide the curtaines of the skies
 To blaze these last, and sware devoutly then,
 The first, thus matcht, were scantly Gentlemen.

This poem depicts Phoebus as judge in a «beauty contest», the arms of three gods being the contestants (a dramatic setting which reminds us of the «judgement of Paris», who had to decide on the beauty of three goddesses). Each god is equipped with two pieces of armour: a shield and a helmet. Each shield is carved with a motif allusive to a love affair of the god who carries it. Thus, Jupiter's represents Ganymedes being carried off by an eagle to the Olympus (3-4). Mars' shield shows a spear piercing a heart, which perhaps alludes to his relation with Venus (5-6). Cupid's shield, on the other hand, is reminiscent of Astrophil's own erotic story since it shows Stella's face (10-11).

Let us now consider the other piece of armour: the helmet. The three helmets carry a symbolic attribute. Thus, Jove's displays a thunderbolt

(8) while Cupid's holds Stella's lock of hair (9-10). The only problem of interpretation is that of the attribute assigned to Mars' helmet: «Venus' glove» (7). I have not been able to trace any reference to a glove related to Venus in the classical mythology or literature. There is, however, a symbolic token closely associated to Venus: her «girdle» (more specifically a strip of material worn by Venus round the breast, possessed of magical powers in the service of love). The Greek term for this girdle was *kestós*¹ which in its turn was transliterated into Latin as either *cestos* or *cestus*.²

Sidney's knowledge of classical literature and mythology was beyond doubts excellent. Excellent was also his wit and sense of humour, most typically materialised through puns. Therefore, I would like to suggest the possibility that Sidney was mocking someone—a contemporary poet perhaps or he himself in his first naive readings of Latin texts³— who read something like *Veneris cestos* («Venus' girdle») in a Latin source, but mistook *cestos* for *caestus*, which is Latin for «boxing-glove». In fact, both words may appear as homonyms, both written as *cestus*, though with different case morphology.⁴ Thus, the phrase «Venus glove» in Sidney's text would be easily perceived as the translation of a conscious malapropism of the Latin source by his contemporaries, who were used to reading Latin versions of the mythology and were probably familiar with the association of Venus to her «*cestus*».

REFERENCES

- Ringler, W. A. Jr., ed., *The Poems of Sir Philip Sidney*. Oxford University Press, 1962.
 Galván, F., ed., *Astrophil and Stella*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1991.
 Oxford Latin Dictionary

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¹ The motif appears in Greek literature from Homer (Il. 14.214) onwards. See Call. *Fr.* 43.53; Bion 60; Antiph. *AP* 6.88, 1-2 and Phld. *AP* 5 121, 3-4.

² See Mart. 6.13.8 and 14.206.2, Stat. *Theb.* 5.63, and *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.u. «cestos».

³ In the ironic sonnet 63, «O GRAMMER rules...», Sidney, as F.Galván points out (p. 153, n 67), makes reference to Latin and not English grammar rules. So in his allusion to the teaching of those rules, «So children still reade you with awfull eyes», (2), he may be referring to his own experience as a child reading Latin before he was 10 at Shrewsbury School and later on at Oxford University.

⁴ The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* presents *cestus-us* as an alternative form for *caestus*.