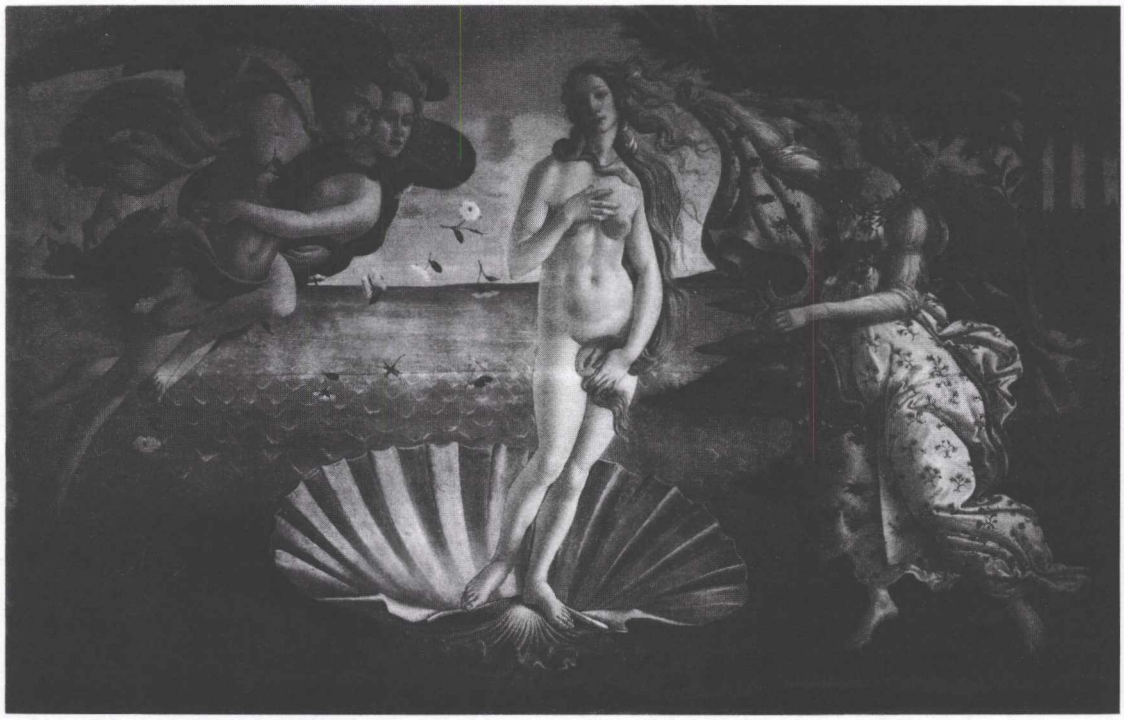

Sandro Boticelli. *The Birth of Venus*. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.
Photography by Eric Lessing. Magnum Photos, 1991.

"En la concha de Venus amarrado": The Female Body in Garcilaso de la Vega's "Ode ad florem Gnidi"

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During the Renaissance the female body gained prominence as a metaphor to examine the conditions of artistic inspiration and production. Through this development, art was given another dimension with which to consider the idea of *beauty*. Along with aesthetic factors, moral reproach or approbation were thus factored into artistic judgments. The excess of ornamentation in painting, for example, found expression in the seducing make-up of the "working girls" of the period, thus appropriating the female body into an already existing pictoric vocabulary. Using this language inscribed on the body of the female subject, line and color were transformed into moral signifiers. Jacqueline Lichtenstein describes this use of the woman in the production of art,

> Just as the magical attractions of coloring were found to be similar to the charms of feminine seduction, they also became the focus for the same moral reprobation. If a picture's embellishments could be seen as "makeup," the painting becomes a woman, and one of the most dangerous sort: illegitimate, like the pleasure for which she serves as a metaphor. (80)

Beauty and sexuality (perhaps, danger and morality) are now a commonplace association, standard fare in contemporary cultural productions. Garcilaso de la Vega (1503-1536), though, made this connection in the 16th century, a time when *beauty* was a near fatal glimpse of the divine, and suffering was the appointed task of those who did not hide their face from it. In his "Canción V," "Ode ad florem Gnidi," Garcilaso enters a vocabulary already prepared in the visual arts, and achieves a re-examination of beauty by taking on two roles not readily associated with romantic poets:[1] The first is that of the chronicler, recording the emotional decay of his friend rather than his own personal inner turmoil. Garcilaso writes the poem to doña Violante Sanseverino on behalf of Mario Galeota, a man who is desperately struggling for the lady's attention. The second role is that of the prophet, warning of the consequences that will arise if his words are not heeded.

Garcilaso de la Vega's "Ode ad florem Gnidi" seems to borrow images from the celebrated Sandro Botticelli (1445-1510) painting *The Birth of Venus*. Careful consideration of this painting reveals at least three parallels: shared thematic concerns, the relationship between spectator and artistic model, and the unreturned gaze of the Venus figure.

The Birth of Venus presents a scene (see painting on page 16) in which a huge conch, riding the waves of the sea, transports the pagan goddess to Cythera's shore, an island that appears at the right hand of the painting. The internal perspective of the work consists of four characters. On the right, Spring receives Venus, offering her a cloak, on

which there appear three flowers connected in the shape of a triangle. On the left, in a storm of roses, the intertwined Chloris and Zephyr float in the air. As Edgar Wing notes, "The goddess's own posture, that of the classical *Venus pudica*, expresses the dual nature of love, both sensuous and chaste, of which her attendants represent the separate aspects" (131). One notes, in addition, the fluidity of the water that, stirred by the breath of Zephyr, has sent Venus to Earth. The first strophe of Garcilaso de la Vega's "Canción V" presents an almost identical scene:

1.
Si de mi baja lira
tanto pudiese el son que en un momento
aplacase la ira
del animoso viento
y la furia del mar y el movimiento,

Like a subject within the painting looking at the goddess and preparing her arrival, Garcilaso focuses on the turbulent environs from which his earthly deity will emerge

Traditional criticism of Botticelli's work has both focused on the central placement of the figure of Venus and emphasized the transcendence of her beauty. Michael Levey reflects this point of view, writing:

> The artistic convention of Botticelli's picture is reinforced by the likelihood that it has ethical and moral significance; it was probably painted not just as a large-scale decorative canvas but as a didactic one. A beautiful ruling deity remains its theme and the centre of its composition. (6)

This ideal of wholeness that Levey finds in the composition of the work would seem to transform the nude Venus into a figure suitable for aesthetic contemplation. This formulation, however, ignores a more sensual, and shocking, perspective. The point of focus that commands the central position of the work is not the complete image of Venus: it is the female organ that the goddess' hair and hand partially cover (or reveal). Transformed into the object of the gaze, Venus does not respond to her spectator: she looks away to an unknown place, almost beyond the spectator, a place where no one can reach or return her gaze.

By presenting beauty as the producer of sexual desire rather than a reflection of divine goodness, Garcilaso de la Vega contemplates the female subject in terms of the reaction that her body produces on the spectator. doña Violante's body functions as a *model of artistic reception* and thus delineates the poetic subject: Instead of only exalting the woman's beauty, the poet focuses on the *power* or the effect of this beauty. In doing so, Garcilaso maintains an aesthetic distance, appointing himself as an observer of the effects of sexual desire. Garcilaso writes that even if he had the chance to write an epic poem, he would not do it, for he has dedicated himself to the *fuerza* of doña Violante Sanseverino's beauty. In the first line, he mentions his humble lyre, but ends with a rejection of this supposed humility in strophes three through five:

3.
no pienses que cantado
seria de mí, hermosa flor de Gnido,
el fiero Marte airado,
a muerte convertido,
de polvo y sangre y de sudor teñido,

4.
ni aquellos capitanes
en las sublimes ruedas colocados,

por quien los alemanes,
el fiero cuello atados,
y los franceses van domesticados;

5.
mas solamente aquella
fuerza de tu beldad seria cantada,
y alguna vez con ella
también seria notada
el aspereza de que estás armada,

que 'stá muriendo vivo,
al remo condenado,
en la concha de Venus amarrado.

8.
Por ti, como solía,
del áspero caballo no corrige
la furia y gallardía,
ni con freno la rige,
ni con vivas espuelas ya l'aflige;

9.
por ti con diestra mano
no revuelve la espada presurosa,
y en el dudoso llano
huye la polvorosa
palestra como sierpe ponzoñosa;

Even with the title "Ode ad florem Gnidi," Garcilaso de la Vega reveals the point of transformation of the female subject to an artistic model. The title "Oda a la flor de Gnido" refers to both the Napolitan village in which Violante lived, *Nido*, and to *Cnidos* (from *Cos*), the village of Antiquity which had a temple and statue dedicated to Venus. On one hand, the poem is dedicated to doña Violante Sanseverino and deals with an exhortation that Garcilaso writes on behalf of his friend Mario Galeota, who had tried to court the protagonist without success. On the other hand, Violante's omnipotent beauty converts her into a statue-like Venus figure, one that, like Botticelli's Venus, avoids the gaze of her male spectator.

Though Garcilaso's poem would seem to deify and centralize doña Violante, the focus, has more to do with the effect that her beauty produces. Just as the spectator's attention is called to the female organ of Botticelli's Venus, Galeota can not stop his obsession for Violante's conch. The conch (now the vagina) of the female subject leaves him stupefied. Garcilaso describes this condemnation to the conch from which his dear friend suffers:

7.
Hablo d'aquel cativo
de quien tener se debe más cuidado,

Playing on Mario Galeota's last name, Garcilaso transforms his friend into a type of slave or *galeote* (literally, galley slave) visually tied to the lady's conch. According to Garcilaso, doña Violante is responsible for Galeota's pathetic state, for she intentionally does not return his glances. Ever since Galeota fantasized about the powerful sexual image of his beloved, he has apparently lost all reason. Witnessing this, Garcilaso blames the female subject for not responding to his friend's amorous advances, and thus stealing from him all desire for achievement in conquest and war.

The narrator further warns "la flor de Gnido" that the brilliance of her beauty can not be separated from the extreme reactions of those who gaze upon her. Just as color and line construct a moral vocabulary for the visual artist, her beauty bears with it an ethical responsibility. In strophes 14 through 20, Garcilaso reminds doña Violante of the case of Anaxarete, the mythological figure whose deliriously infatuated and exasperated pursuer eventually hung himself outside her door in a last attempt for her

attention. When approaching her window to contemplate his burial, the mythic Anaxarete is transformed into a marble statue. Much like an inversion of the mythological figure of Medusa, Anaxarete is transformed by the gaze of the deceased into an inanimate object:

14.
Hágate temerosa
el caso de Anajárete, y cobarde,
que de ser desdeñosa
se arrepentió muy tarde,
y así su alma con su mármol arde.

15.
Estábase alegrando
del mal ajeno el pecho empedernido
cuando, abajo mirando,
el cuerpo muerto vido
del miserable amante allí tendido,

16.
y al cuello el lazo atado
con que desenlazó de la cadena
el corazón cuitado,
y con su breve pena
compró la eterna punición ajena.
. . . . . .
18.
Los ojos s'enclavaron
en el tendido cuerpo que allí vieron;
los huesos se tornaron
más duros y crecieron
y en sí toda la carne convertieron;

19.
las entrañas heladas
tornaron poco a poco en piedra dura;
por las venas cuitadas
la sangre su figura
iba desconociendo y su natura,

20.
hasta que finalmente,
en duro mármol vuelta y transformada,
hizo de sí la gente
no tan maravillada
cuanto de aquella ingratitud vengada.

Garcilaso likens doña Violante's ingratitude and rejection of his friend's advances to Anaxarete's indifference to her admirer. Should the artistic model look away and avoid Galeota's gaze set eternally upon her beauty, she runs the risk of being transformed into the lifeless condition of a statue. If she were to be devalorized and challenged as a symbol of the celestial beauty of love, doña Violante Sanseverino's cruelty would be petrified by stone and ink, forcing her to lose the aura of her cultic presence. In this event, Garcilaso warns that only the tragedy of her coldness will be immortalized—much like the words of the poem that freeze her self-centered harshness. If she continues to brush off Mario Galeota's attempts, Garcilaso reminds her that the poem itself will serve as the final act of vengeance:

21.
No quieras tú, señora,
de Némesis airada las saetas
probar, por Dios, agora;
baste que tus perfetas
obras y hermosura a los poetas

22.
den inmortal materia,
sin que también en verso lamentable
celebren la miseria
d'algún caso notable
que por ti pase, triste, miserable.

Garcilaso was obviously not some prototypical male feminist. He used the position of chronicler to divert the moral responsibility of sexual desire away from his friend, and he used prophetic authority to compel doña Violante into affirming his perspective. Using a pictoric vocabulary prepared by Botticelli, he internalizes the male gaze

and writes it onto the female subject, threatening her with his power to transform her into a silent, frozen object. Yet he was keenly aware of what few seem to remember today, that to be "pretty as a picture" usually means to be as silent as one too. By focusing on the limited power a woman did possess, Garcilaso warns of the dangers of this inanimate state and the insensibility of a subject that only exists to be gazed upon. Recording the acrimony her beauty wreaks, and prophesying the dread consequences for both viewer and viewed, Garcilaso de la Vega pleads for her to use her own eyes and, unlike Botticelli's Venus, realize that she should not wish to be elevated above love.

Note

[1] In this paper, the term *romantic poets* refers to those authors whose subject is love—both amorous and unrequited.

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