

# COWPER'S CAMEO RING



A MATERIAL WORLD



# CAMEO RING

## **Introduction**

In this study we look at a cameo ring which dates from the mid eighteenth century and is said to have belonged to William Cowper. We discuss too the romantic nuances associated with this ring.

## **About the ring**

The cameo is made of agate, a hardstone, on which has been carved the head of Omphale. Omphale, according to Greek mythology was Queen of Lydia, a kingdom in Asia Minor – probably modern day Turkey. The queen is shown here in profile, her head and features crisply cut. The sculptor has cleverly exploited the natural striping in this stone to carve away some of an upper white layer so as to allow her head to stand in relief and in clear contrast to the lower, background layer of dark blue. The cameo has a plain gold setting and a narrow gold ring band.

## **The Legend of Omphale and Hercules**

The best known legend about Omphale tells of her relationship with Hercules, a Greek hero, the illegitimate son of Zeus and a demigod. Before his dalliance with Omphale, Hercules has other trials and adventures. For our purposes, it is worth noting that amongst these was a brief bout of insanity. Hercules' mother, the Goddess Hera, sent him mad in revenge for Zeus' infidelity. While in his frenzied state Hercules killed all his children, and when he recovered he had to do penance for his crime. To this end, he was set the famous twelve 'Labours of Hercules'.

These tasks were extraordinarily demanding. Many of them involved encounters with dangerous animals and, to succeed Hercules needed to exercise superhuman powers. In the first Labour, Hercules had to slay 'The Nemean Lion', a ferocious animal with magical properties, which could not be killed by a mere mortal. These, and other stories of his derring-do and physical magnificence have led to the image of Hercules standing for a highpoint in Western masculinity: his name is associated with courage, strength and ingenuity and he is also known for his sexual prowess with both men and women.

The fact that Hercules was such a paragon of masculinity adds a special frisson to the tale of his time with Omphale. This came about as the result of another murder - Hercules accidentally killed a friend - and to purify him of this crime he was sold to Omphale, a foreign queen, and she used him as her slave.

So how the mighty Hercules was fallen! For a time he has ended up in service to a mere mortal and to a female barbarian to boot. Sophocles, an Athenian playwright, described the shame and dishonour that (in Greek eyes) was brought on Hercules by becoming a slave to a female outsider – an oriental. And to make matters worse for his reputation, while in service, he was made to dress as a woman and to do woman's work.

Many artists and writers over time have had fun with this part of the tale. He is often depicted, for example, carrying a basket of wool to help Omphale and her female assistants with their spinning. And, according to the poet Ovid, while Hercules wore a dress, Omphale sported his lion skin on her shoulders (the skin taken from the Nemean Lion that Hercules killed in his first Labour).



So the usual role and appearance of the two are reversed: our alpha-male hero is reduced to the effeminate underling of an all-powerful woman.

So why, we might well ask, would Cowper want to own a ring with such potentially demeaning associations? The implied references to insanity, to weakness, to a domesticated, somewhat foppish, bachelor surrounded by females sound rather too near the bone if we look suspiciously at Cowper's life - particularly at his life in Olney and Weston Underwood where he was companioned by the widowed Mrs. Unwin. To try and answer this question we need to look a bit more closely at Cowper's life and, in particular, at some of his relationships with women.

### **Cowper and his female friends**

Cowper was, it seems, very attractive to women. On a good day he was clearly very good company; he was amusing, liked jokes and was very attentive. Indeed sometimes his attentiveness could be interpreted as a little flirtatious. Perhaps unwittingly, but nevertheless determinedly, he knew how to charm by paying detailed, personal attention to people. His many letters, to both men and women, testify to this. To both sexes he is often seriously careful to describe what he thinks, feels and has been doing. As he says:

*I am fond of writing as an amusement but I do not always find it one...Being rather scantily furnished with subjects that are good for anything I often find myself reduced to the necessity, the disagreeable necessity, of writing about myself.*

He also claims that he likes to write:

*Entirely clear of the charge of pre-meditation...with simplicity*

His tendency to talk about himself and in a very easy, natural way (some of the conversational conventions of the mid

eighteenth century being taken on board) means Cowper's letters can read like shared intimacies. As such, it is reasonable to imagine that they provided recipients with rather a flattering experience, particularly once Cowper became a well-published, celebrated poet and translator of Homer.

The tone of his letters to ladies is perhaps lighter than the one he uses when writing to men but otherwise there is not much qualitative difference to discern. What comes across is a sense of concentrated and personal attention. What might be different however is the effect on readers – the apparent intimacy somewhat seductive to women, being more comradely to men? But so far we have only considered Cowper's acquaintanceships in general terms. What of his closer relationships and the light these might shed on the puzzling, rather demeaning Hercules/Omphale references connoted by the cameo ring?

### **Cowper's mother.**

Cowper's mother died when he was just six years old. Most biographers suggest this left a scar which never quite healed: she died just too soon, too early, in Cowper's life, leaving him vulnerable to those feelings of insecurity and worthlessness that he would later describe. A persisting sense of loss, relating to his mother, is evident in some poignant lines Cowper wrote when he was 59. He had been sent a portrait of his mother by one of his female cousins and this gift prompted a vivid memory of a childhood moment: a floral dress his mother wore as she stroked his hair:

*And thou was happier than myself, the while,  
Wouldst softly speak, and stroak my head, and smile  
Could those few pleasant days again appear,  
Might one wish bring them, would I wish them here?*

In his 'thank you' letter to his cousin, Cowper says of the picture:

*I viewed it with a trepidation of nerves and spirits somewhat akin to what I should have felt, had the dear original presented herself to my embraces. I kissed it, and hung it where it is the last object I see at night, and of course the first on which I open my eyes in the morning.*

Sad indeed. According to some psychological theorists, this early trauma may have contributed to Cowper's indecisiveness and his unwillingness to commit to marriage. Some suggest too, that it contributed to a certain weakness and effeminacy of character which they go on to connect with probable impotence.

This sort of theorising has been used to illuminate Cowper's long relationship with Mrs. Unwin. Indeed it is perhaps because of this enduring but quiet relationship that some people have been quick to raise their eyebrows and to query Cowper's masculinity. From this perspective Cowper's ownership of the Omphale cameo ring does look a little puzzling; it is time we met her.

### **Mrs. Unwin**

Cowper got to know and admire Mr. and Mrs. Unwin through lodging with them for two years in Huntingdon. They became good friends, with Cowper admiring particularly their devout Christian regimes. On the death of her husband, and with the help and encouragement of the Reverend John Newton, Mrs. Unwin and Cowper moved to Olney and lived there together for 18 years. They then went to Weston Underwood to share a home there. Clearly there was some concern about the propriety of this arrangement and perhaps for this reason the two became briefly engaged. But Mary Unwin was a very pious woman; the idea that there might have been any sexual intimacy between the two



of them seems highly improbable. Their relationship was close, comfortable and was usually described as between a mother and son. There seems little reason to doubt this.

Cowper wrote of typical days and evenings spent with her in Olney consisting of prayers, church, meals, the occasional game or shared domestic pastime, a walk and readings from the scriptures. At Weston Mrs. Unwin used an attic room as her private space for prayers. Cowper commented on the peacefulness of such a domesticated life and of its rural setting. Significantly in one letter to Mrs. Unwin's son William, he writes:

*In the morning I walk with one or other of the ladies, and in the afternoon wind thread – thus did Hercules, and thus probably did Samson, and thus do I; and were both of those heroes living, I should not fear to challenge them to a trial of skill in that business, or doubt to beat them both. As to killing lions and other amusements of the kind, with which they were so delighted – I should be their humble servant, and beg to be excused.*

So here we have it: Cowper knows the legend and, it seems, is proud to be associated with it. He gives no sense of his feeling demeaned by performing 'womens' work'. He was after all a very practical man and enjoyed all sorts of productive 'hands on' tasks in Olney, from gardening, building a glass house and mending a wall, to making nets to catch birds and knocking up wooden hutches for his tame hares. Cowper may have seen such 'rural pursuits', including wool-winding, as all of a piece and ungendered; more likely he simply was not bothered by any such distinction. He was happy doing whatever needed to be done. On this sort of evidence it is less surprising for Cowper to own this Omphale/Hercules ring. Indeed it is perhaps only from the perspective of later Victorian and twentieth century commentators that the relationship between him and Mrs. Unwin has looked strangely dependent and weak and, by

extension, to imply Cowper's possible impotence or his homosexuality.

So let us look at some of his other key female friendships to see if these shed further light on Cowper's character and values and their relevance to his ownership of the Omphale cameo.

### **Theadora and Harriot – Cowper's cousins**

In his late teens and early twenties Cowper appears to have led a normal enough life as a young man about town. He wrote, for example, to an old school friend, nick-named 'Toby', to comment on the idea of marriage - its pros and cons - and to tease Toby about his rakish London ways. But Cowper evidently enjoyed a bit of city high life himself. He was, he said:

*...Dancing all last night; in bed one half of the day and shooting all the other half...*

Also we are told, he was not above remarking on a well-shaped lady. There is not much sign of the more reclusive and shy Cowper of his later years at this point; nor indeed of the effeminate and impotent man of some later interpretations.

Cowper also wrote to Toby about Theadora. Theadora is an important character in any account of Cowper's women. In the early 1750's, when Cowper was in his twenties, he enjoyed many hours with Theadora and Harriot at their home in Southampton Row. Together with these girls he '*giggles and makes giggle*'. Indeed at this time there seems to have been much laughter, teasing and general good humour.

It is often said - by family and other commentators - that both Theadora and Harriot were in love with Cowper. But Thea is the one he fell for and to whom he became engaged. Their love-affair ran a fairly typical course, if this snippet written to Toby is anything to go by. It relates to a minor row between them where

she had called him a coxcomb - a bit of a conceited dandy:

*All is comfortable and happy between us at present and I doubt not will continue so forever. Indeed we had neither of us any great reason to be dissatisfied and perhaps quarrel'd merely for the sake of the reconciliation – which you may be sure made ample amends.*

Cowper wrote several poems dedicated 'To Delia' - his poetical name for Theadora – which reveal his complete devotion to her. But in the end they did not marry. They were first cousins and both of them suffered from inherited mental problems, which led to periods of frightening melancholy throughout their lives. Thea's father was concerned about their marriage partly given their consanguinity and partly due to a recent breakdown in Cowper's health. The engagement was eventually broken off. Much pain, much sorrow, was suffered all round at this point. Theadora is said never to have recovered and to have been rarely, if ever, directly mentioned to Cowper again by friends and family.

If Theadora was the passion of Cowper's life, her sister Harriot was his stalwart friend; someone he loved deeply but with whom he was not 'in love'. In August 1763 he writes to her:

*So much as I love you, I wonder how the deuce it has happened I was never in love with you.*

But they corresponded often and Harriot (by now married and sometimes at court) used to exchange London gossip for Cowper's country news. Harriot also looked after him in later life; in particular she looked after his general welfare and finances and cared for him when his health failed. She also played an important role as a comforting reminder of happier, youthful days.

These were two significant women in Cowper's life and in each case there is the sense of 'not quite, but almost'. Instead of wholehearted commitment we see an unrealised marriage with Theadora and a loving sistership with Harriot; and similarly, more fuel for the debates about Cowper's sexuality and his puzzling ownership of the Omphale cameo.

### **Lady Austen**

And so to Lady Austen - the lady Cowper spied in the street from his Olney window, liked the look of and had Mrs. Unwin invite to tea so he could meet her properly. Apart from this rather dashing beginning, the exciting part about this relationship is that it seems to have got a little out of hand. Cowper, ever charming and enjoying being charmed in his turn by lively wit, laughter and a bit of novelty, perhaps unwittingly overdid his attentions.

For Lady Austen was not just an entertaining companion, she was also useful: she it was who suggested – or perhaps challenged Cowper with - the subject (a sofa!) for his major work – *The Task*. She also told him the story of John Gilpin, a story that Cowper turned into his immensely popular ballad. Cowper clearly found her zestful company and, perhaps thus fired up, made the mistake of writing her an over gallant poem in which he described how he felt when addressing her:

*...that itching, and that tingling,  
With all my purpose intermingling,  
To your intrinsic merit true,  
When call'd t'address myself to you.*

On receiving this, Lady Austen must have felt it was in order to reciprocate by indicating she was falling in love with Cowper. Then Cowper in his turn had to write and explain he was just being friendly – not amorous.

Lady Austen flounced off at this news, but was soon back. Unfortunately Cowper hadn't learned his lesson. His habitual pleasure in being charming may have led him astray again. He noticed that Lady Austen had set a lock of his hair (he'd been persuaded to give her this) in an expensive, sparkling necklace; he ignored the dangerous implications of her publicly wearing this dashing piece of jewellery and instead managed to sound encouraging by writing her some further complimentary verse:

*The star that beams on Anna's breast  
Conceals her William's hair...  
The heart that beats beneath that star  
Is William's well I know...  
The ornament indeed is hers,  
But all the honour mine.*

Not a good move, and Lady Austen has to be turned away again. So here we have another 'nearly': perhaps Cowper was tempted by Lady Austen but then changed his mind. If so, what was this indecisiveness? Was it fear? If the latter, fear of what?

### **The single Cowper**

There are other explanations however for Cowper's remaining single - apart from those which pick up on theories referring to Cowper's effeminacy. One which has considerable appeal comes from Cowper himself. In a letter to John Newton written in 1783, he says about his life in Olney:

*It is the place of all the world I love the most, not for any happiness if affords me, but because here I can be miserable with most convenience to myself and with the least disturbance to others.*

Such a view explains quite well Cowper's resistance to marriage or to any other close partnership. He sees himself as a problem, as someone who should not impose himself on another; his mother/son relationship with Mrs. Unwin is the only allowable exception.

But we still need to know perhaps how Cowper came by the Omphale cameo.

### **Enter a second ring.**

The cameo ring discussed so far was bequeathed to the museum by Mary C. Barham Johnson - a relation of Cowper. She died in 1997. In the ring case that came with the cameo there was a scrap of paper saying it had belonged to the poet.

A few years later the museum purchased another ring depicting Omphale. This time she is shown wearing Hercules' lion skin - the result of his first Labour. The carving here is the reverse of the cameo: the image is indented rather than in relief. It has been cut from carnelian to make a seal. You can see how the carving looks from the wax impression on display in the museum.



This ring was loaned in 1810 by Cowper's family to a large London exhibition of historical objects. These were mostly paintings but included some 'relics' and mementos in celebration of prestigious people. The Cowper-Johnson family loaned Cowper's portrait as painted by Abbott, the Omphale seal ring and the ball of yarn he had famously wound for his companion Mrs. Unwin while living at Olney.

It is interesting that the family offered the ball of wool along with the Omphale seal ring given their combined significance for the tale of Hercules' performing womanly tasks. But it suggests that they, along with Cowper but unlike the Greeks, saw no dishonour in such activity. So the museum now owns two rings said to have belonged to Cowper both of them associating him with Omphale – and by extension with an effeminate and dominated Hercules. On the face of it this is still a puzzling choice of ring for him to own.

A note on the provenance of the seal ring posted in the London exhibition stated that it had been given to Cowper by Theadora. This explains a great deal: it is easy to understand that Cowper would treasure a present from his fiancé and be happy to wear the seal. The reference to Omphale and Hercules makes sense too: again it is easy to imagine a teasing reference between them to a Cowper enslaved by his love to Theadora.

But we are not much further forward with his ownership of the Omphale cameo. How might he have come by this? And why a second such ring? There is no conclusive evidence on these questions, but there are a few possibilities.

The cameo is one size smaller than the seal ring that we know Cowper owned and was given by Theadora. This allows the speculation that the cameo was either a woman's ring, or that

Cowper wore it on his little finger. It is just possible that Cowper gave the Omphale cameo to Theadora in exchange, as it were, for the seal ring she gave him. The problem with this theory is that Cowper never seemed to have any money, indeed he was always borrowing from and supported by his family. So we might wonder how he could afford it. Another possibility is that Theadora gave him this second ring as well as the seal, but perhaps at a much later date. We know that she gave him money and presents in the 1780's, but signed herself 'Anonymous'. She gave for example, a desk and a snuffbox with a painting (by the celebrated Romney) of





Cowper's three hares on it. There were probably many more such presents, but not usually spoken of and with the giver always disguised under the title 'Anonymous'. Whether Cowper knew these were from Theadora or not is not known for certain, though it is usually denied. However, there is interesting evidence in a letter he wrote to Harriot, which tempts further speculation. He was writing to convey his effusive pleasure in and thanks for the snuff box Anonymous had sent him. So why say all this to Harriot? Cowper explains:

*...it is also very painful to have nobody to thank for it. I find myself driven therefore driven by stress of necessity...that I will constitute you my Thank-receiver General for whatsoever gift I shall receive hereafter, as well as for those I have already received from a nameless benefactor. I therefore thank you my cousin, for a most elegant present....*

It is tempting to think that Cowper knew exactly who was sending him these gifts and wanted Theadora to know of his pleasure at receiving them. It is tempting too to imagine a continued bond between them and to see the giving and receiving of presents as a kind of secret messaging.

On this reasoning we might imagine Theadora wanting Cowper to know that she still loved him - or wanting to remind him of their youthful bond - and we might think she sent him the Omphale cameo to this end. Harriot was of course in touch with her sister and could convey to her disguised messages - such as the quoted extract above - from Cowper. Such an argument puts rather a romantic spin on the Tale of the Cameo but - is there a better, or more probable story, one that fits the evidence we have?



## Cameos in History

By way of a post script to the particular cameo we have been looking at it is worth noting that cameos in general became very popular in the last three decades of the eighteenth century. The catalyst for such an interest was the discovery of archaeological remains at Pompeii and Herculaneum. Many English and French artists, scholars, and engravers travelled to Rome and Naples to study the finds. They, and their work, became the inspiration for a revival in taste for Classical Greek thought and practice.

The new mood in art ushered in by these finds was for refinement, for fluid lines, and even a touch of romantic sentiment. There was also a preference for direct copying of early Greek and Roman models. (By way of distinction, in the classical revival of the Renaissance, Greek forms tended to be re-interpreted rather than directly copied, and their mood more severe.) In this later, Neo-Classical revival for example, we find a mood more for cameos that directly depict Greek mythological scenes and figures.

And so back to our Omphale cameo: in style and subject it fits the fashion of the last decades of the eighteenth century. This suggests it was probably purchased later in Cowper's life - that is, **after**, rather than **during** his courtship of Theadora. Given the existence of the earlier Omphale seal ring – the 'Theadora ring' – it seems unlikely that anyone else would dare to replicate such a passion-laden gift - either Cowper to another lady, or another lady to Cowper.



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