

## Images of Hair Throughout John Donne's Work

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*When he was about the same age as most Dalhousie undergraduates, John Donne was quite the heart-throb. To judge by the Lothian portrait, he was sensationally good-looking as a young man, and he was aware of it. He is wearing a large hat in this portrait, at a melancholy tilt, but his headgear doesn't hide an ample endowment of dark hair, which he wears cut fairly long, down to the collar at very least, and well over the ears. It is a shame that we have no similarly revealing image of Ann More, the young woman he eloped with when he was twenty-nine and she sixteen.*

*Frances Dorenbaum's essay draws attention to hair as it appears not on Donne's head, but in his writing, both erotic and religious. I remember my own feeling of delighted anticipation when Frances first proposed writing her term paper on this topic for English 4061: John Donne, Poetry and Prose. The paper that grew out of this first conversation was already a very fine piece of work, because Frances has the subtlety of mind to follow Donne's ingenious metaphors to some quite remarkable places. But the essay has matured considerably since I first saw it, and it is even better now. I was on sabbatical leave when Frances presented this paper as part of the English department's honours colloquium. While I was away, Christina Luckyj very kindly took on the mentorship of Frances Dorenbaum's work, so the essay has already had a number of admiring readers and auditors. I hope that, in its published form, it will have many more.*

*- Dr. Ronald Huebert*

Hair is a recurring image in much of John Donne's work; the poet is, as John Carey notes, "an unusually attentive hair watcher" (141). Although most of the references to hair are brief, sometimes confined to a single line, patterns nonetheless emerge in his use of the image. As Donne uses hair to describe beauty and ugliness, age and life, vanity and sin, he always connects the image to impermanence and mortality. In his early lyric poem "The Anagram," he focuses on hair as physical and temporal, incorporating it into the description of a woman's beauty. In "The Funeral" and "The Relic," both published in *Songs and Sonnets*, hair is represented in an ambiguous position between life and death. This ambiguity allows Donne to experiment with the idea of hair helping to transcend one's physical mortality. Finally, however, Donne rejects this idea and returns to his original focus on hair as something merely physical. The development in meaning is perhaps due to Donne's transformation from a young, playful poet to one of the most respected preachers in England. Although Carey claims that Donne wanted his work to give a different impression in his later years (10), identifying the image of hair in both his earlier erotic poetry and later religious works reveals that it maintains a similar meaning, gaining new depth each time it is used in a different context. Tracing this image throughout Donne's work, I argue that he uses hair to express the inevitability of temporality.

In Donne's early romantic and erotic elegies, he uses hair imagery to suggest feminine beauty. The contemporary Elizabethan ideal of feminine beauty consisted of "light hair and a snow white complexion complemented with red cheeks and red lips"

(*Elizabethan Upper Class Fashion*). For example, the Countess of Leicester, cousin to the Queen, possessed this ideal appearance and was considered one of the most beautiful women in court ("Elizabethan Make-up 101"). The courtly style for women's hair was to "tightly [curl] the front portion and [arrange] it into rolls on either side of the head" ("Elizabethan Make-up 101"). In addition, "hair was dressed [plainly], though frequently covered with jewels" ("Clothing in Elizabethan England"). Dying hair was common for both men and women: "[they] dyed their hair, not to conceal the fact that it was turning gray, but to please a passing fancy" ("Clothing in Elizabethan England"). Hair was often dyed blonde, the ideal colour, using "a mixture of saffron, cumin seed, celandine and oil" (*Elizabethan Upper Class Fashion*). It was so common to dye hair that the colour was sometimes chosen to match specific outfits ("Clothing in Elizabethan England"). An alternative to dying hair was to wear wigs, and there are records that Queen Elizabeth possessed eighty different wigs at one time ("Clothing in Elizabethan England"). Hair for wigs was so desired "that children with handsome locks were never allowed to walk alone in the London streets for fear they should be temporarily kidnapped and their tresses cut off" ("Clothing in Elizabethan England"). This attention to physical presentation demonstrates the extent to which the Elizabethan ideals of beauty were made manifest through one's hair. Many of these ideals are evident in Donne's poetry, and he devotes particular attention to yellow hair.

In "The Anagram," written between 1593 and 1596, Donne notes a woman's hair in an atypical description of her appearance. He begins the poem by stating that she is not conventionally beautiful: "she / Hath other things, whereby others beauteous be" (Donne "The Anagram" 17, 1-2). He goes on: "And though her harsh hair fall, her skin is rough; / What though her cheeks be yellow, her hair is red" ("The Anagram" 17, 6-7). This woman's appearance is an inversion of the Elizabethan ideal of beauty, as her hair should be yellow and her cheeks should be red. By courtly standards, this woman is ugly. This approach to beauty is curious because much of Donne's work is in accordance with the tradition that often emphasizes the fairness of his lover's hair. For example, in the opening of "The Bracelet," Donne states, "in colour [the bracelet] was like thine hair" (*Major Works* 9, 1), suggesting that the lady's hair is the same colour as gold. In "Elegy 18," Donne mentions "the Sun-beames of [a lady's] haire" ("Poems" 141, 26), also implying golden hair. In comparison, it is clear that the hair of the woman in "The Anagram" is not considered beautiful, but is mentioned solely to emphasize the irregularity of her appearance.

Yet as the poem develops, this hair takes on a more significant meaning. Donne reveals that "Love built on beauty, soon as beauty, dies, / Choose this face, changed by no deformities" ("The Anagram" 18, 27-28): love based on beauty will not last. He further supports this claim, noting the temporality of beauty: "Tis less grief to be foul, than to have been fair. / For one night's revels, silk and gold we choose, / But in long journeys, cloth and leather use" ("The Anagram" 18, 33-5). According to this metaphor, cloth and leather are more enduring than silk and gold. For Donne, beauty may satisfy for one night, but it is not as enduring as other qualities. Cloth and leather are not as attractive as silk and gold, but they are more lasting. Hair, as a component of physical beauty, is therefore linked to impermanence. Although hair is not the primary focus of the

poem, Donne uses the image to elucidate the physical, earthly ideal of beauty. Physical beauty, because it is temporal, does not last. Hair represents the temporary state of one's physical prime, demonstrating that when love is based on beauty, it is fleeting. At this early point in his career, Donne uses the image of hair to express this temporality as he focuses on issues of vanity.

Although the themes in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets* differ from those in his erotic elegies, they maintain this underlying connection between hair and temporality. Although the dates of much of Donne's work are unknown, the earliest estimated date for *Songs and Sonnets* is close to 1602 (*Major Works* 88). In these poems, written a few years later than "The Anagram," hair symbolizes the possibility of transcending temporality. This transcendence is especially evident in "The Relic" and "The Funeral." Carey observes that both poems are "simultaneously and indecisively sacred and secular" (45); hair is no longer simply a component of physical appearance, but now adopts a religious connotation as a relic or a means of securing love in the afterlife. Both poems do address temporal life, but they shift their focus to the possibility of transcending temporality as Donne contemplates various buried lovers.

In "The Funeral," hair is shown to overcome the impermanence of the human body. The poem concerns a man being buried with a relic of hair from his lover, who is eventually revealed to have rejected him. At the outset of the poem, the speaker struggles to overcome death by resisting decomposition. When he implores, "Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm / Nor question much / That subtle wreath of hair, which crowns my arm" ("The Funeral" 127, 1-3), he attempts to use his lover's hair to prevent his body from "dissolution" ("The Funeral" 127, 8). He hopes that, contrary to earthly nature, this hair will preserve him; the relic will help to overcome the impermanence of his physical body.

Donne's choice of relic in "The Funeral" is in line with ideas of the time, as hair signified life and health. Edith Snook refers to Helkiah Crook, Donne's contemporary and the author of an influential book on anatomy, to explain this point: "Hairs...are 'bodies engendered out of superfluous excrement of the third concoction, torried by the natural heate'; that is to say hair is produced from the body's superfluous moisture" (118). Hairs were considered more likely to grow with abundant moisture, and more likely to be curly with heat. Hair needs moisture to grow, but also counteracts this moisture by forcing the pores to open, letting air in (118). Therefore, someone with a full head of curly hair was thought to have a well-balanced body and was considered healthy. A man with a dry humoral disposition, by contrast, would become bald. Snook synthesizes this theory by saying, "Situated at the body's cavities, hair at once mediates between internal physiology and the external environment and embodies the body's balance, its complexion" (119).

Donne maintains that hair is connected to life. While the future corpse struggles to overcome physical existence, hair itself also lingers between life and death. Carey notes that "Donne's attentiveness to the poetic effects that could be gained when the living and the non-living merged seems to have been accompanied, as we might expect, by a

medical interest in those parts of the anatomy, such as hair and bones, where life and sensation have only a dubious and qualified existence" (139). Attitudes of the time held that hair could be sensitive to pain, just as the hair-like nerves of the body. On this basis, Donne endows the hairs on this dying body with life. In the first stanza Donne calls hair "the sign you must not touch," suggesting that the relic is also tactile. Then in the second stanza, he writes, "For in the sinewy thread my brain lets fall / Through every part, / Can tie those parts, and make me one of all" ("The Funeral" 127, 9-11). Here the description of the "sinewy thread" of hair evokes the nervous system. These nerve-like hairs will continue connecting the physical parts of his body, but this passage may also imply that they maintain life throughout the body. This poem explores the potential for hair to overcome its own death and pain and, consequently, the possibility for the speaker to overcome his mortal decay.

Finally, hair is used as an eternal memento of the speaker's shared love with the woman. The speaker begins by glorifying his lover, fashioning her hair into a relic in the manner usually reserved for relics of a saint. He continues to venerate her as he says this relic will "crown his arm" and that her hair is his "outward soul" ("The Funeral" 127, 3-5). He feels that the hairs of his lover will be better able to keep his body intact than his own attempts: "These hairs which grew upward, and strength and art / Have from a better brain / Can better do it" ("The Funeral" 127, 12-4). However, he realizes that her hair wrapped around his arm is not meant to help him, but to cause him "pain" ("The Funeral" 127, 15). Rather than allowing himself to feel "manacled" like a prisoner by this hair, he decides to have it buried, along with his body, as retribution for her rejection of him: "So, 'tis some bravery, / That since you would save none of me, I bury some of you" ("The Funeral" 127, 23-4). The speaker's love for the woman is eternally defined by his last act, effectively triumphing over her rejection of him. In using hair as a symbol of eternity, the speaker attempts to redefine his love by transcending temporality.

Donne uses hair similarly in "The Relic," as he seeks to overcome the secular and sacred dichotomies of life and death, and of earthly and eternal life. As in "The Funeral," "[h]air and bones combine, and Donne imagines them retaining, after death, something of their submerged and inscrutable mode of life" (Carey 140). "The Relic" begins with a description of the exhumation of a dead man wearing a relic of hair, presumably from his lover. Donne writes, "And he that digs it, spies / A bracelet of bright hair about the bone" ("The Relic" 130, 5-6). Hair transcends dichotomies because "[t]he hair itself is dead, but its unnaturally prolonged brightness seems to vouch for some persistent subterranean vitality" (Carey 140). Carey suggests that hair, in this case, overcomes the mortality of the physical body, since it is "bright", and therefore still filled with light or energy. Thus, hair itself transcends temporality as its brightness connotes its holiness.

Furthermore, hair is used in the hopes of making the lover's love eternal. The scene of "a loving couple [lying]" with "[a] bracelet of bright hair about the bone" invokes an image that suggests "death and life [are] coiled together" (140). The two images of entwinement, of the lovers and of the bracelet of hair, are both tangible entities linked together to represent eternity. Donne makes this link quite evident: "Who thought that his device might be some way / To make their souls, at the last busy day, / Meet at

this grave, and make a little stay?" ("The Relic" 130, 9-11). The speaker imagines that the hair will prevent them from being separated, since the exhumers will associate it with their undying love for one another. The hair is what will connect them on Judgment Day when they will be joined for eternity.

In Donne's earlier poems, hair is tied to physical appearance and beauty. In later works, he suggests that it might transcend physical mortality. Finally, in his sermons, Donne takes up both of his preceding ideas, as hair is connected to physical appearance and the subsequent determination of eternal fate. In Sermon 14, given at Lincoln's Inn in 1627, he refers to Job's statement that many will become corrupt by valuing outward beauty (Donne, "From a sermon" 113). This idea recalls "The Anagram," where Donne focuses heavily on beauty and outward appearances. It seems his purpose for evoking the image of hair has changed with his shift in career and belief; he now uses hair in a religious context as part of a cautionary tale. He goes on to say:

It is not a clear case, if we consider the propriety of the words, That *Absolon* was hanged by the hair of the head; and yet the Fathers and others have made use of that indifferency, and verisimilitude, to explode that abomination, of cherishing and curling haire, to the enveagling, and ensnaring, and entangling of others. ("From a sermon" 113)

With this reference to Absalom's death, which was due to his hair getting caught on a bush during battle, Donne attaches a negative connotation to hair. This biblical story suggests that vanity will lead to one's downfall, as the cause of Absalom's death, hair, is only corporeal. Donne represents the coveting of stylized hair, "that abomination, of cherishing and curling haire," as a corrupt action that only occurs in *this* life, further demonstrating hair's connection to mortality. Therefore, hair can be used as a means of ending one's life. Earthly and physical, it causes sinning as it directs focus to the body rather than the soul ("From a sermon" 117).

Donne's later opposition to the vanity of hair is connected to Puritanical ideas: according to the Bible, both Leviticus and Corinthians forbid hair beyond the ears (Latimer Seaver 9). Furthermore, Puritan men believed long hair was "unsuitable to their Magnanimous, Masculine and Heroicke sexe" (9). As a preacher, Donne returns his attention to hair as a symbol of physical appearance with the crucial difference that his focus is no longer on its function in this life, but rather on how it affects the state of one's soul in the afterlife.

Throughout all of these works, Donne clearly relates hair to temporality. In "The Anagram," hair is connected to beauty, a quality that fades due to mortality. Donne considers hair as a vehicle to transcend this mortality in "The Funeral" and "The Relic;" however, in Sermon 14, he returns to the idea of long hair as representing vanity, as it relates to mortality. It is interesting to see the progression from Donne's early poems, in which he plays with the societal ideals of beauty, to his later religious texts, in which he

rejects those ideals as vain and sinful. Despite the variations in the use of hair imagery in relation to the temporal and the eternal, he finally associates hair with impermanence. In Donne's own words, "nothing in life is permanent ... a hair will grow gray, of itself" (*Major Works* 374).

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