

OUT OF THE HAIR TENT: NOTES FURTHER TO ELIZABETH GITTER'S "THE POWER OF WOMEN'S HAIR IN THE VICTORIAN IMAGINATION"

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Lucy Floyd was standing by an open piano, with her white dress and pale golden hair bathed in a flood of autumn sunlight. . . . Yes, this was his ideal. This graceful girl, with the shimmering light for ever playing upon her hair, a modest droop in her white eyelids. The thick plaits of her black hair made a massive diadem upon her low forehead, and crowned her an Eastern empress; an empress with a doubtful nose, it is true, but an empress who reigned by right divine of her eyes and hair. (Braddon *Aurora* 34-35)



It is obvious enough that hair—especially descriptions of the hair of main female characters—plays an important part in the Victorian novel. And the main trend of the critics and commentators has been to read hair as suggesting female sexuality: typical would be Juliet McMaster's comment that: "Human hair, like animal fur, does duty as sexual symbol in George Eliot's novels" (22). Feminist critics have also remarked on the magical female powers, sexual and otherwise, that are represented or symbolised by a woman's hair. In such interpretations, as in the essay by Elizabeth Gitter mentioned in the title of this paper, there are many references to metaphors of the female arts such as spinning, sewing and weaving, and also to female allure as expressed by combing or rearranging the hair. Hair, in fact, becomes a kind of female magic, a metaphor of the sexual attraction by which men are noosed, tied, entrapped, netted or enmeshed.

There are, however, benefits to be gained from questioning the rather narrow scope and trend of such interpretations. In the first place, is a woman's hair always and unrelentingly suggestive of female sexuality? Elizabeth Gitter's essay spends some time on a characteristically Victorian phenomenon, the hair tent. A hair tent occurs, in William Tindall's explanation, when "your girl, lying on top of you, lets her long hair down around your head" (qtd Gitter 942), and this certainly seems to suggest that the hair tent was primarily erotic. However, as Gitter notes, several Victorian poets create hair tents which are not so much erotic as domestic: cosy nests or retreats. The hair tent in Robert Browning's "Porphyria's Lover" in fact, is both domestic *and* erotic. As Porphyria bustles about, her actions show her to be a

little home-maker, but then she bares her smooth white shoulder, puts her lover's head on it, and spreads her yellow hair over all—thus making of her own body a home, or shelter. As Porphyria is subsequently strangled with her own hair, interpreting the hair as representing or "standing for" female sexuality seems superfluous, since Porphyria's actions are an explicit sexual invitation. The hair tent into which she arranges her passive lover hardly requires such interpretation. In addition, Porphyria's hair ultimately expresses not female power but rather female vulnerability, for the noose goes not round her lover's neck but her own. The poem moves, in fact, into a realm in which the narrator's derangement, fetishism and sadism are the focus. Browning's hair imagery should be read principally as a literary reference: an ironic inversion of the usual connotations of woman's hair as tent or noose or trap.¹

Hair symbolism, then, should not always be assumed to be a way of writing the unwritable. The two aspects of hair symbolism discussed here offer ideas about the meaning or significance of hair which move it out of the domain of the erotic or sensual. My claim is that, through these two areas of hair symbolism, the female body becomes politically controversial. This argument may also have the welcome effect of shifting focus on the Victorian female body away from seeing it as primarily or solely sexualised.

It does not seem that there was any *official* code, such as the pseudo-sciences of phrenology or physiology, on hair colour; nor does there seem to have been a vaguer, more poetic code available—such as the "language of flowers" or the meanings of different coloured gems and jewels. There was, and still is, however, a strong *unofficial* code about hair colour: in my own childhood, for instance, "red" hair was associated with a fiery temper in boys and a fiery temper *and* ultra-sexiness in women. In nineteenth-century novel-writing, a similarly powerful unofficial code operated which associated golden or fair hair with an angelic nature, and with heavenly glory. And, presumably because gold is the perfect metal, golden hair in a woman implied perfection in all the female virtues. But golden hair could also mean money—gold itself. Fairy tale princesses with golden hair are illustrations of this probably very ancient association of ideas.

Some Victorian heroines exemplify such an association in a straightforward way: George Eliot's Eppie in *Silas Marner*; or Lucy Deane in *The Mill on the Floss*; or that young goddess Romola—wearer of a "golden crown" of hair. Other fair-haired heroines, like Celia Brooke and Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, Cynthia in Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and Laura Fairlie in Collins's *Woman in White*, are variations on the type. All these are to a greater or lesser extent

¹ The hair noose was not a purely literary phenomenon. As Cynthia Griffin Wolff records, Emily Dickinson's sister Vinnie (Lavinia) had a sweetheart called Joseph Lyman between 1846 and 1850. In a letter Lyman wrote: "I was very happy once in Vinnie's arms—very happy. She sat in my lap and pulled the pins from her long soft chestnut hair and tied the long silken mass around my neck and kissed me again and again" (106). (The letter, written six or seven years later, was addressed to his then fiancée, Laura Baker).

parodies of, commentaries on, or significant deviations from, the "perfect" woman and her feminine qualities. And some golden-haired heroines, of whom the best example is in *Lady Audley's Secret*, are outrageous parodies of the type: indeed, Lady Audley disguises herself in literature, and as the simple governess, Lucy Graham, draws to herself all the descriptive detail usually lavished on a genuine fair heroine: "soft blue eyes," a "fair face" that "shines like a sunbeam" (4), and a "wealth of showering flaxen curls" (5). She has even renamed herself with the fair-haired heroine's classical name, Lucy: for fair-haired heroines' names typically suggest either light, as in Lucy, or the heavens or heavenly lights, as in Celia or Cynthia. Elizabeth Gitter deals fully with golden hair and its various associations—especially the association with money.

The field of meaning associated with dark, or black-haired, heroines is almost as strong and consistent as the moral force-field surrounding a fair-haired heroine. Thus George Eliot depicts the outcast Molly (Eppie's mother) as black-haired and dark-eyed, and her other fallen women like Hetty Sorrel, Mrs Glasher, and Mrs Transome are all also dark. Indeed, Eliot is remarkably consistent in coding female hair colour. Morally equivocal heroines like Gwendolen, Tessa or Esther Lyon have brown hair, indicating the mixture of good and potential for harm in their natures; dark-haired heroines are either sexual sinners or social deviants, rebels or proto-feminists like Maggie Tulliver, Dorothea Brooke or Mary Garth.

This symbolism of hair colouring presumably derives from old associations of darkness with the demonic, hellish underworld that lies beneath, in eternal opposition to the heavenly lights. In Romantic symbolism, however, darkness seems also to belong with the night-time world of irrational, instinctive, uncontrolled behaviour rather than with the day-time world of conscious, controlled, socially conventional behaviour. In Walter Scott's novels, for instance, as Alexander Welsh has demonstrated, a dark-haired heroine is more likely to belong to an isolated, archaic, or exotic—possibly primitive or violent—social group, and she is more likely to remain solitary at the end of the novel. The fair-haired heroine belongs in contemporary civil society, and is successful in love, marriage and the production of children to carry on the historic triumph of the rule of law. These patterns, which are not only found in Scott's novels (compare Byron's poetry, or de Stael's *Corinne*²), presumably played their part in producing mid-Victorian texts in which a dark female character is quite likely to be either of

² See Byron's *Oscar of Alva*:

Dark was the flow of Oscar's hair
Wildly it streamed along the gale
But Allan's locks were bright and fair
And pensive seem'd his cheek, and pale.
But Oscar owned a hero's soul
His dark brow shone through beams of truth;
Allan had early learned control
And smooth his words had been from youth.

mixed race, preferably Italian, or to suggest in some way racial otherness: Maggie Tulliver, for instance, is associated with the gipsies, Bertha Mason Rochester is of mixed blood, while Italianate heroines include Caterina in "Mr Gilfil's Love Story," Bianca in Geraldine Jewsbury's *The Half Sisters*, and the Meredith heroine Emilia Sandra Belloni.

Reading symbolic content in hair colour may not be as important as the mysterious, but apparently necessary, contrast or difference in hair colouring between paired heroines which is so persistent in the nineteenth-century novel. Thus heroines such as those named above are almost never without their sisters or half-sisters, their companions, rivals, or counterparts, and these doubled figures invariably have differently coloured hair. Moreover, many descriptive passages invite the reader to reflect on the details of the appearance of these heroines and on the contrast between them. Rosamond Vincy and Mary Garth, for instance, stand together before a mirror enabling both young women as well as the reader to make an explicit comparison; Molly Gibson and Cynthia are also seen together before a mirror. In *Adam Bede*, more formally, Eliot devoted Chapter Fifteen to twin scenes: in one bedchamber Hetty Sorel lets her long dark hair down and regards herself in the mirror, becoming a beautiful picture to herself; while at the same time Dinah, in the bedroom next door, is sitting looking out the window; her outward gaze is a symbol of her unselfish and outwardly opened mind. When Dinah enters Hetty's room the narrator remarks: "What a strange contrast the two figures made."

Laura Fairlie and Marian Halcombe in *The Woman in White* are introduced in set-piece descriptions which register the fact, later crudely summarised by Marian herself, that "I am dark and ugly, she is fair and pretty" (60). Of the two sisters in Meredith's *Rhoda Fleming*, the narrator remarks that they were "fair-haired, black-haired girls, a kindred contrast, like fire and smoke, to look upon" (3). Again, in *Vanity Fair*, when Thackeray depicts Becky Sharp and Amelia entering a room arm in arm, he draws them as two very different physical types. The proliferation of such vignettes of difference indicates the probability that the symbolising power of dark and fair hair, with their traditional and particular associations, is not as important as the fact of difference itself; a difference which is represented in numerous ways, in numerous pairs of contrasted heroines—different hair colour being only one of these ways.

In this way, different coloured hair may simply be a representation of difference and, since innumerable mid-Victorian novelists represent this difference, it is clearly in itself interesting, scandalous, or difficult. This might be because the model of femininity presented by the official literature of the period was so remarkably powerful, monolithic, consistent, and insistent in implying that all women are necessarily the *same*. Victorian novels persistently develop a contrasting pattern in which one heroine arrives at the destiny of everywoman—marriage, prosperity and children—and another heroine attempts, however abortively, to escape this already written story. However, difference between

women might also be scandalous because the definition of woman is, of course, "different from man"; to shift this system over, by interposing another system of difference *between women*, often generates narrative. Such stories frequently culminate in the elimination of the different woman: she inevitably gets into sexual trouble and dies. A few bold novelists manage to claim the privilege of difference for their heroines and still allow them to survive, even though such heroines, by the fact of their difference, clearly encroach on the realm of the masculine. Becky Sharp and Dorothea Brooke are good examples. Within the systems of their novels, these heroines are freed for their ambiguous and precarious position by the presence in the background of a truly womanly woman from whom they notably differ, in this case, Amelia and Celia Brooke. Such contrasting pairs of womanhood will, of course, always have contrasting coloured hair.

Although there are powerful traditional or popular associations with dark and fair hair colouring, there are also many variations on the traditional model. This seems to support the theory that different hair as representing *difference in itself* was a useful image for many novelists. One variation is the fashionable gentle dark-haired Victorian heroine (possibly a serious and scholarly person like Dickens's Agnes in *David Copperfield*), who nevertheless exemplifies all the womanly virtues and is by no means feminist. Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters* is typical. As Virginia Mae Allen remarks, "not all sinners are brunette, nor all saints blonde, not even in Gothic novels, let alone in the visual imagery that emerged in their wake" (76). This variation seems to indicate that for Victorian authors the symbolic content of hair colour imagery came to matter less than the more abstract idea of difference between women. Both George Eliot and Wilkie Collins, for instance, comment on what they evidently recognised as a formula: the two young heroines with hair of contrasting colours. George Eliot makes fun of the "spirited young lady, with raven hair" and the "meek young lady, with auburn hair" in her 1856 essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (311), and Wilkie Collins, in "A Petition to Novel-Writers," complains:

I know that it is a rule that, when two sisters are presented in a novel, one must be tall and dark, and the other short and light. I know that five-feet-eight of female flesh and blood, when accompanied by an olive complexion, black eyes, and raven hair, is synonymous with strong passions and an unfortunate destiny. I know that five feet nothing, golden ringlets, soft blue eyes, and a lily-brow cannot possibly be associated by any well-constituted novelist, with anything but ringing laughter, arch innocence, and final matrimonial happiness. (483)

Despite these remarks, Eliot and Collins both creatively exploit precisely these same conventions. And the field of reference of this convention is, it seems, not principally to do with female sexuality, the safe depiction by synecdoche of the

unsafe; nor is it to do with magical powers and mythic goddesses: it is to do with politics. Are women naturally different from each other, and can this difference be controlled? The one who is different from a woman is a man. Thackeray acknowledged this by drawing Becky Sharp as a female Napoleon, while Nina Auerbach remarks of *The Woman in White* that "if Laura is the ideal woman, Marian may indeed be masculine" (138). The implications arising from the use of contrasting hair as an emblem in the description of pairs of contrasting women, and their drawing away from each other, suggest that such descriptions may have more to do with feminism and the dissatisfaction increasingly voiced by middle-class women about their seclusion from the public worlds of education, work, business and government, than it does with the secrets of women's sexuality. Exploring difference among women implied, only too clearly, a nudging over of women into what had been man's space.

The disposition or arrangement of women's hair is another area where description can acquire political meaning. As already noted, Hetty Sorrel's hair is curly. It is assigned active verbs as if it had a life of its own, as it steals once again onto her forehead after being pushed back, or "runs" at every opportunity into delicate rings. Curly hair, in fact, is often associated with a wayward or imperfect character: another woman with "wavy" hair is Lady Glencora Palliser, while Carry Brattle, a Trollope character in *The Vicar of Bullhampton* who has gone astray, is characterised by "floating curls" (36). Such deviant hair could have fatal effects. However, the question of how female hair is disposed to grow and how it is arranged, is too big a question to pursue here in detail. I will focus, instead, on one particular image: the woman whose hair streams back behind her, and thus, away from her face. The image, which can bear some fruitful analysis, first struck me in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet to George Sand:

Thy woman's hair, my sister, all unshorn,
Floats back dishevelled strength in agony,
Disproving thy man's name.

George Sand's hair is long, thus revealing that the cross-dresser, the "masculine" genius, is really a woman. This is straightforward enough. George Sand is Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sister because they are both writers and because she is another woman—all women being, in the Victorian male eyes, a "sisterhood" likely to resemble itself and to cohere together. That also seems straightforward. Penny Gay has also pointed out that the "unshorn" Samson reference here is a sign of Sand's heroic strength. But why does the hair have to float back, and why does it float back "dishevelled strength in *agony*"? If this agony is just the general painfulness of being a woman, particularly of being a woman writer like "sister" Barrett Browning, why is the pain expressed by her hair? Is there a reference to a portrait? Which portrait? Even if there were a reference to one, this hardly removes the difficulty of the image. It strongly recalls, however, another picture,

this time from *Bleak House*: "the woman pacing her own rooms with her hair wildly thrown from her flung back face, her hands clasped behind her head, her figure twisted as if by pain." These two images have in common extremity of painful emotion and flung-back hair. But what is the explanation for this association of ideas? Why do these women not pull their hair *forward over* their faces and weep in their agony?

My suggestion for reading this image is that a woman's hair frequently functions in Victorian description as a veil: it signifies concealment, modesty, and (by implication) a private and proper femininity. George Sand and Lady Dedlock, of course, are both actors or impostors: Lady Dedlock is not the virtuous society wife whose role she plays, and George Sand is not a man but a woman impersonating a man, in various ways. In each case, the flung back hair reveals a truth to the gaze. And each of these women is one who lives a *public* life. Lady Dedlock's moment of private self-revelation is, in fact, positioned within a long and fascinating chain of images including the veil, the screen, and the mask.³

Evidently, the disposition of a woman's hair is only one of a number of available metaphors, symbols and literal images to deal with the difficult area of a woman's presence in the public view. Height is another example. The tall woman, often a difficult character, one who misses out on the rewards of life compared with the "tiny and even 'insignificant' Lucy's and Fanny's" (Michie 22), is so interesting just because she is so visible in a crowd or on the street. She is too public. Little Dorrit, in contrast, is protected by her childlike stature when she has to walk through the streets at night. As Helena Michie remarks: "Women who earned their bread . . . inevitably made their bodies, as well as their work, public" (31), and Dickens often provides his industrious young heroines with escorts: Riah in *Our Mutual Friend* and Maggie in *Little Dorrit* are examples. Related to these problems of a virtuous young virgin and her appearance in the street, or in the public view, are such gestures as Margaret Hale's in *North and South* when she pulls her own hair forward to hide the scar left by a thrown stone after she makes her dangerously public appearance in front of the strikers at Mr Thornfield's mill. Small stature is one way of staying properly out of sight. Another sign of virtue and modesty in Victorian heroine descriptions is to appear, in one way or another, veiled: to hide the face or to have a face shaded or downcast or only gradually revealed to the male view, or to have "a modest droop" in one's white eyelids.

Similarly, while previous commentators on the subject have remarked that profuse hair is a sign of vigorous passions in a heroine, I believe that plentiful hair can be a natural veil. Another diminutive Victorian heroine is "little" Amy

³ The radical change in Esther Summerson's appearance after her illness should be linked with these images. Esther as a perfectly modest young woman can hardly reveal to us the private fact of her own physical beauty. It can only be unveiled to us by the fact of its disappearance. What happens to Esther is also complicated by the way her loss of beauty seems to be an act of unwilling conspiracy with her mother, for Esther's growing resemblance to her is screened from the public gaze by the change.

Edmonstone in *The Heir of Redclyffe*, who has "long shady" curls in her girlhood and is given to hiding her face—for instance, when she is being proposed to by Guy in Chapter 13. At the close of this scene, "Amy was at the window, he saw her head bending forward, under its veil of curls, in the midst of the roses round the lattice" and Amy, having allowed her eyes to meet Guy's once, then falls on her knees by the bed "with hands clasped over her face." So modest is Amy that her own mother has to make the appropriate responses during the proposal. On the day before her wedding, Amy appears with "her deep blushes and downcast eyes almost hidden by her glossy curls" (239). And Amy remains attached to her wedding veil, in which she reappears at her husband's funeral, and to enshrouding white curtains and garments generally. At the opening of the final chapter of the book she is found with her baby, who has "pulled down all the light, shining locks, while under their shade the reddening, smiling face recalled the Amy of days long gone by."

This "shaded," blushing, hair-veiled face, the apotheosis of all that is officially desirable in the Victorian heroine, gives some idea why a revealed face and back-flung hair are so significant—for they certainly are significant, and even powerful. (The opposite of the vision of hair-veiled Amy is probably the visitant who enters Jane Eyre's room the night before her wedding, "a woman, tall and large, with thick and dark hair hanging long down her back," who first puts on Jane's wedding veil and then tears it in two.) During Laura's crisis in Rossetti's "Goblin Market," when the second dose of goblin fruit is working on her as an antidote:

Her locks streamed like the torch
Borne by a racer at full speed,
Or like an eagle when she stems the light
Straight toward the sun,
Or like a caged thing freed,
Or like a flying flag when armies run.

Here are four similes to describe one image: hair streaming back. And they are all of things released, moving, and free, even powerful—significant images indeed.

To conclude, I return to Charlotte Brontë, to chapter twenty-five of *The Professor*, where Hunsden shows the newly wed Frances and William a miniature portrait of a woman. In Crimsworth's account, this portrait represents:

A very handsome and very individual-looking female face, with . . . "straight and harmonious features"—it was dark; the hair, raven black, swept not only from the brow, but from the temples—seemed thrust away carelessly as if such beauty dispensed with, nay, despised arrangement: the Italian eye looked

straight into you, and an independent, determined eye it was: the mouth was as firm as fine; the chin ditto. (261)

Frances speculates that Lucia is one who "once wore chains and broke them . . . social chains of some sort" (261). Perhaps she was an artist, an actress like Vashti in *Villette*, "whose hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel's hair, and glorious under a halo" (340). In Vashti, the flying hair represents release, freedom, passion unrestrained—and as such is not entirely approved of. But it also has an implication of woman unveiled—revealed—the eye of such a woman looks straight at you. The female body evoked by such imagery, then, is not, or is not only, the sexualised female body, but rather a body that is controversial because it is no longer evading the gaze but is visibly in public space. If there ever was such a thing as a feminist hairstyle in Victorian England, this must be it. The woman with hair flying back has come out of the hair tent with a vengeance. Her hair, while still the readable hair of every Victorian heroine, now signifies the presence of woman in the public view: nobody is going to make a home or nest in this hair any longer.

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