

**‘This subtle wreath’ :
the significance of hair in John
Donne’s ‘The Relique’ and an example of
seventeenth century hair lace**

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This essay explores the significance of hair in John Donne's 'The Relique' and an example of hair lace from the early seventeenth century. Whether given in courtship or threaded into a widower's button, hair is an integral part of expressions of love and remembrance in the seventeenth century, depicted in verse and incorporated into sentimental tokens. While a lock of hair could be offered as a sign of eternal devotion, relics of the body and of human hair in burial rituals underwent censure, regarded as examples of superstitious idolatry along with intercessory prayers for the deceased. Donne's 'The Relique' explores faith and doubt in a context of 'misdevotion'. 'The Relique' and the lace bracelet's use of human hair represent a desire to memorialise the body separate from institutionalised religious practices.

Idolatry, Faith and Doubt

By analysing a piece of hair lace the origins of which little is known and 'The Relique', I argue that hair is a way in which to reassert the importance of touch and the body in response to a culture wrestling with the power of persons, words and objects to transcend their materiality. Donne's poem 'The Relique' interrogates the possibility of an eternal union of lovers in death and the place of the body in this union, a theme of Donne's verse elsewhere in 'The Funeral'¹ and 'The Canonization'.²

Religious reforms of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries emphasised a 'theocentric'³ account of the afterlife emphasizing the primacy of the soul, not the body in burial rites. The inclusion of objects, hair bracelets and other love tokens, buried alongside the deceased in the grave (a feature of English burial practices pre-Reformation) was discouraged by the early modern church, regarded as a superstitious ritual of late medieval Catholicism. A 1551 injunction called on clergy to prevent 'any cross, wax or

wood or any other thing to be sewed or to be put secretly upon or about the dead body; or else whether any pardons, relics, or such other be buried by the dead body'.⁴ Practices such as having an individual parishioner's name inscribed into the wall of a church came to be regarded a form of simony, individuals' paying for a deceased family member's inscription in order to secure a loved one's place in heaven⁵. Reforms led to burials being permitted beyond the church walls avoiding the reuse of the same family burial plot because, as seventeenth-century writer John Dunton explains, 'souls shall not enjoy the less felicity for the remoter distance and separation of the bodies'.⁶

Llewellyn⁷ argues that the English Reformation marks the beginning of a process in which death, its associated rituals and material expressions in gravestones and mourning objects, undergo a process of secularization. This process of secularization of what were previously religiously inscribed burial rites find expression in the imaginative culture of the age. Greenblatt suggests

1 Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983, p.23.

2 Ibid, p.23.

3 Gittings, Claire. *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*. London: Croom Helm, 1984. Print, p.84.

4 Gittings, Claire. *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*. London: Croom Helm, 1984. Print. See also Hooper, John. *Later Writings of Bishop Hooper: Together with His Letters and Other Pieces*. United Kingdom, Printed at the University Press, 1852.

5 Ibid, p.245.

6 Ibid, p.245.

7 Llewellyn, Nigel. *The art of death : visual culture in the English death ritual c. 1500-c. 1800*. London, Reaktion Books, 1991.

that the many spectral presences of seventeenth century drama⁸ point to an intense preoccupation with death and purgatory. Writing in response to the theatre of the age, Greenblatt argues that the stage is able to entertain a momentary suspension of Protestantism which, like 'The Relique', reasserts aesthetics of idolatry of the lost faith; ghosts that return with 'sabled beards'⁹ and 'gory locks'¹⁰ reminds us that hair is an important early modern signifier of the continuance of the body after death.

In 'The Relique' the speaker imagines his grave is opened to make way for a second occupant. That it is a gravedigger that discovers the 'bright'¹¹ lock of hair indicates an early modern practice of reusing the same burial plot so that the departed might rest in consecrated ground.¹² Through different forms of misinterpretation by those that find their remains, the speaker's bone and the love token of the hair bracelet are transformed into relics of the old faith, Catholicism. The speaker's lover will become a 'Mary

Magdalene'¹³ and the speaker will be transformed into 'a something else besides'.¹⁴ It is the institutions that surround love and death that lead the poem towards the speaker's satiric treatment of idolatry and from which stem the problems of sanctioned and unsanctioned expressions of love, and remembrance. Relics of hair and bone may, the poet suggests, lead his decayed body and the love token buried with him to be mistakenly lauded as relics of long dead saints. The shock of the poem is that the beloved's 'bright' hair retains its colour and shape, tied in a bracelet, unchanged from the moment of its being given. A lock of hair, unlike the body, resists natural decay, explaining the significance of hair in cults of specific saints whose hair relics were regarded as having prophylactic powers and as such, offered devotees and pilgrims assurance of their divine status.¹⁵ Locks of hair were placed into letters, fabric and jewelry, functioning as expressions of loyalty and fidelity, hence the inclusion of hair in mourning jewelry, one of many examples of hair used in literary and material culture

with which to manifest a person's presence in their absence. A lock of hair was believed to embody the spiritual character of the giver, as Megan Kathleen Smith argues.¹⁶ In the play *How a Man may chuse a good wife from a bad*¹⁷ (1602) the hero says he was once a melancholic person 'one that did use much bracelets of haire'¹⁸ suggesting that wearing a lover's hair as a bracelet was, as for the Biblical Samson, hair used as a restorative, a quasi talismanic object.

In public life, hair was regarded as a social signifier of health and privilege as Snook demonstrates.¹⁹ In Lady Mary Wroth's 'Urania',²⁰ contemporary with Donne's 'The Relic', hair is a 'telling signifier'²¹ that declares social rank. Hair was an important marker of social status, its brightness of colour and softness a signifier of aristocratic birth as reflected in Wroth's poem 'Urania',²² Veralinda, a shepherdess,

has long bright tresses that declare her aristocratic origins, origins of which she is unaware. In Wroth's work, hair belongs within a pastoral pageantry tradition which delights in social transformation with aristocrats disguised as shepherds and vice versa, and of the romance tradition in which a hair lock might be given to seek preferment at court, a sign of affection in courtly love rituals.²³ The popular motif of the "boxer" figure in sixteenth and seventeenth century domestic designs and embroidered samplers of the period represents a male figure with one arm raised in offer of a flower to a lady, a design copied from continental embroidery pattern books of the previous century that memorialised courtship rituals in decorative sewn goods. In Thomas Carew's 'Poems with a maske',²⁴ a pastoral verse dialogue between the shepherds Cleon and Celia, the separation of lovers is marked by the giving of a wreath of a severed lock,

8 Greenblatt, Stephen. *Hamlet in Purgatory*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. Print. See also Greenblatt, Stephen. "Mutilation and Meaning." *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*. Ed. David Hillman and Carla Mazzio. New York: Routledge, 1997. 221-241. Print.

9 Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*: Revised Edition. India, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, p.123.

10 Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*: Third Series. India, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, p.175.

11 Gittings, Claire. *Death, Burial and the Individual in Early Modern England*. London: Croom Helm, 1984.

12 Gawler, Francis. "The Children of Abraham's faith who are blessed, being found in Abraham's practice of burying their dead in their own purchased burying places, are not to be reproved: but therein are justified in the sight of God, and the practice of holy men in former ages." (1663). *Early English Books Online*. Web. 08 August 2014. See also Geary, Patrick J. *Living with the Dead in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994. Print.

13 Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983.

14 Ibid, p.23.

15 See Kim Knight's work on saint's hair regarded as having prophylactic powers in Milliken, Roberta, ed. *A Cultural History of Hair in the Middle Ages*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020.

16 Snook, Edith. "Beautiful Hair, Health, and Privilege in Early Modern England." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 15.4 (2015): 22-51.

17 Cooke, Joshua. *How a Man May Choose a Good Wife from a Bad 1602*. United States, Hardpress Limited, 2012.

18 Ashelford, Jane. *Dress in the Age of Elizabeth I*. United States, Holmes & Meier, 1988, p.145.

19 Snook, Edith. "Beautiful Hair, Health, and Privilege in Early Modern England." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 15.4 (2015): 22-51.

20 Wroth, Mary. *Urania*. Chadwyck-Healey, 1997.

21 See Snook, Edith. *Women, Beauty and Power in Early Modern England: A Feminist Literary History*. Springer, 2011. and Hackel, Heidi Brayman. "Edith Snook. Women, Reading, and the Cultural Politics of Early Modern England. Women and Gender in the Early Modern World. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005. x 188 Pp. Index. Illus. Bibl. \$89.95. ISBN: 0-7546-5256-4." *Renaissance Quarterly*, vol. 62, no. 1, 2009, pp. 301-302., doi:10.1086/598455. See also Gray, Erik I. "Severed hair from Donne to Pope." (1997): 220-239.

22 See Firth, R. 1973 'Hair as a private asset and public symbol' in R. Firth *Symbols: Public and Private*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 262-298.

23 'For a Long Wigg / For a Blunderbuss / For a pair of Buttons with my Wife's Hair set in Gold— 35 s , & for a Locquet with her Hair & my Daughter's -15 s'. Morris, Claver, Edmund Hobhouse, and MD MA. *The Diary of a West Country Physician (C. Morris), AD 1684-1726*. Edited by Edmund Hobhouse.[With a Facsimile.]. Simpkin Marshall, 1934, p.65.

24 Carew, Thomas. *Poems, with a Maske (Caelum Britannicum)* ... The third edition revised and enlarged. United Kingdom, For H. M.; to be sold by J. Martin, 1651, p.223.

again suggesting a hair lock belongs within a culture of late Medieval love rituals, given as a vow of devotion and a way in which to unite lovers for eternity:

But this small wreath, shall ever stay
In its first native prime,
And smiling when the rest decay,
The triumphs sing of time.²⁵

A lock of hair could be worn close to the heart, sewn into an embroidered handkerchief or set into a mourning ring. As a textile, hair could be in daily contact with a beloved's skin, tied to the wearer as a physical manifestation of an absent loved one. The household inventory of sixteenth century widower Claver Morris records his commission for gold buttons and a locket incorporating strands of his wife and daughter's hair. The feminist textile historian Rozsika Parker²⁶ suggests women's embroidery be interpreted as a record of women's emotional life with symbols such as broken hearts, a way in which women could express private sorrows in love. Men's wearing of hair in garments and fastenings for clothing expressed emotional attachment in the domestic sphere, in ways that a man's wearing of a lovelock signified his betrothal publicly, as seen in paintings of the age such as Van Dyck's portrait of Henri II.²⁷ The gold threaded buttons

commissioned by Claver Morris on the occasion of his wife's death suggest hair had a private domestic meaning for men as sentimental objects worn in mourning.

Rather than revere the sentimental meaning of objects, 'The Relique' satirises rituals of idolatry that make impositions on secular love. Donne's lovers' return from the dead as visceral domestic presences that move, eat, touch and kiss. All of the phrasing emphasises touch; touch is depicted as the route to understanding the lovers' lived experience, without recourse to God, miracle or state decree to prove its truth, a view further reinforced by the implication that the lovers do not marry 'our hands ne'er touched the seals which... Nature... sets free'.²⁸ The speaker argues that it is the Church and monarch's authority through which the authenticity of the imagined (and mistaken) relics are canonized or become sacred, suggesting ways in which public institutions of state and Church impose themselves on the private intimacies of love. From the gravedigger's discovery of the hair and bone relics, the second stanza proceeds to satirise those that authorise the sacred status of the bone and the hair, the 'bishop' and 'king'.²⁹ The poem develops an increasingly ironic treatment of religious relics,

traducing the superstitious adoration of fragments of hair and bone as absurd superstitious lore.³⁰ Donne's speaker treats the culture in which 'women and some men' 'adore'³¹ relics with an irreverence which, whilst admonishing idolatry, regards physical touch as forging its own epistemology. The incongruity of 'bright hair'³² against bone 'out-flashes the commonplace'³³ with its blunt confrontation of eroticism and death. Donne's imagined future in 'The Relique' is one in which a misreading of a grave object makes the poem's transformation of a remnant of bone or hair into a sacred relic, an idolatrous act in which a private secular love, and the authentic beloved, is, paradoxically, the authentic and rare miracle.

Love Tokens and Locks of Hair

Figure 1, Example of hair lace, seventeenth century, V and A.³⁴

The beloved's misinterpretation as a Mary Magdalene represents the problem of misdevotion in 'The Relique'. Her image remained a popular

subject of embroidered tapestries of the period. Depicted with flowing yellow locks of hair Mary epitomises penitence. Susan Frye argues in *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England*: 'A woman's embroidery of biblical Women Worthies allowed her to express connections with female exemplars known for their personal virtue and beauty, as well as for adventures marked by eroticism and violence, all within the socially sanctioned activity of sewing.'³⁵ The resurrected Christ's words 'Noli me tangere'³⁶ to Mary Magdalene would have stood as a further reminder to Christian devotees of a faith that does not require physical proof to be believed, ideas which find resonance in Donne's sense of secular devotion as an act of faith in 'The Relique.'

Seventeenth century embroidery underwent a change away from religious images towards secular designs that celebrated English and more exotic birds, flowers and trees. The hair lace's scene of a hunt is, like the hair bracelet in 'The Relique', testament to love as a ritual that requires the submission of

25 Carew, Thomas, et al. *Poems, with a Maske*. H [umphrey]. M [oseley]. and are to be sold, 1976. p.45.

26 Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. I.B. Tauris, 2010, p.65.

27 Van Dyck, Anthony, *Sir. Henri II De Lorraine, Duc De Guise, 1634*, pp. Data from: University of California, San Diego.

28 Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983, p.23.

29 Ibid, p.23.

30 An engaging study of prie-dieu prayer stools reflects that money or other goods could be stored in religious domestic items suggesting a relationship between religious faith and personal wealth in domestic life. See Anderson, Caroline Corisande. *The Material Culture of Domestic Religion in Early Modern Florence, c. 1480-c. 1650*. Diss. University of York, 2007.

31 This is a view dismissed by others who regard the line 'we never touched those seals' to suggest that the lovers die chaste. For a fuller discussion of the paradoxes in 'The Relique' between chaste and amorous love see Altizer, A.B.. *Self and Symbolism in the Poetry of Michelangelo, John Donne and Agrippa D'Aubigne*. Netherlands, Springer Netherlands, 2012.

32 Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983, p.23.

33 Scarry, Elaine. *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

34 V and A, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O10701/band-of-lace-unknown/>

35 Frye, Susan. *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England*. United States, University of Pennsylvania Press, Incorporated, 2011.

36 Moshenska, Joe. *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England*. OUP Oxford, 2014.

one body to being “caught” by another. The lace band in Figure 1 memorializes the chase of the stag and the dog, itself an image invested with medieval ideas of love as a pursuit; the inclusion of the parrot on a branch reveals the fashion for displaying fauna of distant lands into English embroidery designs. Donne’s verse, however, rejects Petrarchan poetic ideals of the medieval age. Its bravura dismissal of a distant beloved of Petrarchan poetic forms with a continual emphasis on touch is a view explored by Moshenska and others who read ‘bone’ meeting ‘hair’ to imply the lovers’ sexual intimacy is intended in the hair and bone image.³⁷ Whether designed to memorialise intercourse or not, Donne ‘insists on the obligation to touch the human body, whether acutely alive or newly dead’³⁸ suggesting that touch confers its own authority in experience existing separately from Biblical, poetic or church authority as a history of the body.³⁹ As Scarry writes ‘Touch,’ for Donne, ‘is the model of all the senses’.⁴⁰

In Renaissance Clothing and the Materials

of Memory,⁴¹ Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass argue that the act of dressing was, in the early modern period, a time consuming exercise involving the lacing, tying and fastening of fabric around the body in the bodice or codpiece. The sheer amount of lacing required by an aristocratic woman meant a second pair of hands was necessary as Mary Verney’s letters testify; her lack of a housemaid to help dress expresses this anxiety. Dressing is a daily reminder of the making and unmaking of what Llewelyn terms ‘the social body’⁴² of the Renaissance. ‘The Relique’⁴³’s speaker, like the unknown wearer of the lace band performs a tying ritual. Each hair lock’s “wearer” “puts on” part of a lover’s body, suggesting that hair not only outwits time but closes the distance between loved ones, hence its inclusion not only lace but in wax seals of letters of the period, given as a sign of the good faith of the giver,⁴³ Catholic poet Thomas Carew’s 1656 grave inscription utilizes a similar metaphor of tied fabric as a signifier of a love that transcends death, ‘They die but not depart who meet/In wedding

and in winding sheet’.⁴⁴ The emphasis in Carew’s inscription is on a union of souls in the afterlife whereas the hair lace creates a lasting memorial to a chivalric ideal of courtship in the lace’s love chase motif.

Famed Lovers

In their work on Donne, Leath Mills and Carleton⁴⁵ suggest two specific sources for Donne’s startling ‘bright’ hair image that exemplify hair’s significance in literary histories of famed lovers from the medieval Romance tradition.⁴⁶ A gift of a hair lock as a love token is mentioned in Chretien de Troyes’ twelfth century romance, ‘The Knight of the Cart’ and is concealed into a garment in ‘Eliduc’ by Marie de France. Leath Mills suggests that in writing ‘The Relique’ Donne had in mind an image from Giraldus’ ‘Speculum Ecclesiae’⁴⁷ in which a burial scene leads to the discovery of famed lovers’ remains.

Heere hence they opening the tombe

44 In Thomas Carew’s poem on the same theme of separated lovers, ‘To my mistriss in my absence’, contemporary with Donne’s verse, Carew writes of a heavenly-based union of lovers in a ‘wreath’ that ‘weaves’ a ‘net’ of ‘secret thoughts’.

45 Carleton, Phillips D. “John Donne’s” Bracelet of Bright Hair about the Bone.” *Modern Language Notes* 56.5 (1941): 366–368.

46 Rogers, D. W. (ed). 1984 *Lancelot, the Knight of the Cart: Chrétien de Troyes*. New York: Columbia University Press. See also Sleeman, M. 1981 ‘Medieval hair tokens’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 17(4). 322–36 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/fmls/XVII.4.322>

47 Dimock, James Francis, et al. *Giraldi Cambrensis Opera*. United Kingdom, Longman & Company, 1873.

48 Robinson, J. 2011 ‘From altar to amulet: relics, portability, and devotion’ in M. Bagnoli, H.A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann and J. Robinson (eds) *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, London: British Museum. 111–16. See Leland’s translation of Giraldus Cambrensis’ ‘Speculum Ecclesiae’ details the exhumation of Arthur and Guinevere using similar phrasing to Donne’s poem ‘The Relique’.

49 Carleton and Leath Mills disagree on the potential origins for the ‘yellow hair’ image that finds resonance in Donne’s ‘bright hair’ image. See Carleton, Phillips D. “John Donne’s” Bracelet of Bright Hair about the Bone.” *Modern Language Notes* 56.5 (1941): 366–368.

50 Gibson, Edmund, and Camden, William. *Camden’s Britannia, 1695*. United Kingdom, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1971.

51 Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983.

37 This is a view dismissed by others who regard the line ‘we never touched those seals’ to suggest that the lovers are chaste. See Saunders, Ben. Introduction. *Desiring Donne: Poetry, Sexuality, Interpretation*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006. 1–37 Print. See also Joe Moshenska on Donne and Touch. Moshenska, Joe. *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England*. OUP Oxford, 2014.

38 Scarry, Elaine. *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

39 Thomas and Anne Carew’s grave inscription from 1656 at Haccombe, Devon offers a similar image of love conquering death.

40 Scarry, Elaine. *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

41 Jones, Ann Rosalind, and Peter Stallybrass. *Renaissance clothing and the materials of memory*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

42 Llewellyn, Nigel. *The art of death: visual culture in the English death ritual c. 1500–c. 1800*. London, Reaktion Books, 1991.

43 Pomata, Gianna, and Siraisi, Nancy G.. *Historia: Empiricism and Erudition in Early Modern Europe*. United Kingdom, MIT Press, 2005. See also Daybell, James. *The Material Letter in Early Modern England: Manuscript Letters and the Culture and Practices of Letter-Writing, 1512–1635*. United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

lock retains its lustre and “youth” when the giver does not),⁵² he does not revere the Petrarchan artifice with which false idols are made grounded in worldly love. The lace bracelet imitates the fecundity of nature through its pastoral scene of interweaving vines, foliage and flowers, visually similar to Elizabethan blackwork which features free flowing designs of flowers and vines. Its use of hair may be regarded as a way in which the giver offers a part of herself or himself in courtship, in lace designs which in their delicacy and transparency, loop and flow recreating vines suspended in the air.

Donne emphasises the contradictions inherent in choosing between art and nature, the body or the word, as the authoritative history or “text” of a person. While arguing for the potential longevity of (his) art, ‘this verse will instruct’⁵³ the speaker acknowledges the failure of language in capturing the totality of the beloved ‘she’. It is the miracle of the beloved that rejects false interpretation, and secular love that ushers in the transformation of the lovers’ remains from death to life making the speaker’s ‘masculine verbal force’ an antidote to a Petrarchan ideal of the distant adoration of a woman. A lock of hair perhaps unlike other love tokens of the period made of wood, or in textiles sewn with any other thread, is its own apotheosis, arriving from a distant past to shock the present with the resurrection of a lost body in

material form. In both the poem and the hair bracelet, hair is a revelation of the private body memorialised, unencumbered by society and free of religious censure. A lock of hair recovers the body from its public creation reinstating its erotic, secular and domestic meanings either as a renunciation of Petrarchan conceits or through the continuance of the love chase hunt, material culture enabling a post-Reformation world to maintain a belief in the transformative power of the body, and in love to outwit time.

⁵² Erik Gray. Gray, Erik. “Severed Hair from Donne to Pope.” *Essays in Criticism* 47.3 (1997): 220–220.

⁵³ Donne, John, and Theodore. Redpath. *The Songs and Sonnets of John Donne*. 2nd ed., Methuen, 1983, p.23.