The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination

WHEN DANTE ROSSETTI writes of Lilith, in the sonnet that accompanies his *Lady Lilith* painting, that "her enchanted hair was the first gold" ("Body's Beauty," *Works* 1: 216), he is alluding not to any legend about Lilith herself but to a long literary tradition of golden-haired ladies—a tradition that gathered peculiar force and intensity in the latter half of the nineteenth century. While women's hair, particularly when it is golden, has always been a Western preoccupation, for the Victorians it became an obsession. In painting and literature, as well as in their popular culture, they discovered in the image of women's hair a variety of rich and complex meanings, ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic. Golden hair, through which wealth and female sexuality are inevitably linked, was the obvious and ideal vehicle for expressing their notorious—and ambivalent—fascination both with money and with female sexual power. At the same time, golden hair became the crowning glory of the mythologized Victorian grand woman, whom Nina Auerbach describes in *Woman and the Demon*. When the powerful woman of the Victorian imagination was an angel, her shining hair was her aureole or bower; when she was demonic, it became a glittering snare, web, or noose. Silent, the larger-than-life woman who dominated the literature and art of the period used her hair to weave her discourse; immobile, she used her hair at times to shelter her lovers, at times to strangle them. But always, as Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* painting (fig. 1) suggests, the grand woman achieved her transcendent vitality partly through her magic hair, which was invested with independent energy: enchanting—and enchanted—her gleaming tresses both expressed her mythic power and were its source.

In developing this mythology of women's magically powerful golden hair, the Victorians thoroughly explored and greatly enriched a well-established literary tradition with roots in ballads, fairy tales, and Teutonic and classical myths. In the *Edda*, gold is called *Sifjar haddr*—Sif's hair—because Loki replaced Sif's yellow hair, which he had mischievously cut off, with gold hair forged by gnomes (Sturluson 108–09). Gold hair is also a motif in many ballads and fairy tales, in which it is not merely a synonym for blond hair but a symbol of something precious and powerful or sacred (Heuscher 241). Belonging to the gold-hair tradition, too, are the numerous folktales about the tangle-haired Frau Holda, the benign witch who oversees spinning and who rewards industrious girls with the gift of combing pearls and precious stones from their hair (Jacob Grimm 3: 966–67, 2: 464, n. i).

Through Frau Holda, who tangles both hair and flax, the female arts of hair combing and spinning or weaving are connected: her association with both suggests that just as the comb untangles the woman's hair, so the heckle smooths the flax; the strokes of the comb mirror the movement of the shuttle on the loom. The sister arts of spinning and combing are also linguistically connected: *kteis* and *pecten*, the Greek and Latin words for "comb," mean the heckle for combing wool and the reed for weaving. Both meanings, considered with the third meaning of *kteis* and *pecten*, the female pudenda, evoke the ultimately sexual and exclusively female power to weave the family web, to create the fabric of peaceful family and social existence. Like Penelope, the virtuous weaving woman is at least as good as gold; her price is far above the rubies that Frau Holda places in her hair.

Useful and industrious as this spinning woman, this *fridowebba*, may be, however, her resemblance to the spider has not been lost on writers who see that the web she weaves, whether of flax or hair, may be a mantrap rather than the tapestry of life. Venus, with her conventional abundant hair, her mirror, and her comb, may be dangerously narcissistic, or she may be the delightful goddess of love and fertility. This uncertainty creates a complicated ambivalence of language in many depictions of what Robert Burton, in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, calls "Cupid's nets, to catch all comers" (3: 81; pt. 3, sec. 2, mem. 2, subs. 2): Shakespeare's virtuous but tricky Portia, for example, has hair that is "a golden mesh t' entrap the hearts of men / Faster than gnats in cobwebs" (*The Merchant of Venice* 3.2.122–23). In "The Rape of the Lock," ambivalence also shadows
Fig. 1. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Lady Lilith* (c. 1864–73). Samuel and Mary R. Bancroft Memorial, Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington.
Pope's good-humored homage to Belinda's shining curls:

Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,
And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains.
With hairy Springs we the Birds betray,
Slight lines of Hair surprize the Finny prey,
Fair tresses Man's imperial Race insnare,
And Beauty draws us with a single Hair.
  (canto 2, lines 23–28)

Milton's Eve is another duplicitous descendant of Venus, whose "wanton" and "disheveled" golden ringlets (PL 4.300–04) suggest her sinister potential (Gilbert and Gubar 199); indeed, William Empson, in a passage as interesting in itself as it is for what it says about Milton, argues that Eve's curled hair,

modest but "requiring"... clutches at Adam like the tendrils of vine. Eve now then is herself the forbidden tree; the whole face of Hell has become identical with her face; it is filled, as by the mockery of the temptress, with her hair that entangled him; all the beauty of nature, through her, is a covering, like hers, for moral deformity. But at least now we have exposed her; her hair is corpse worms. . . . (176)

Penelope is not, then, the only paradigm of the weaving woman in literary history; her ascendancy is balanced, if not undermined, by the Odyssey's other weaver, Circe of the "glorious hair."

To the extent that the spinner, whether she works with flax or hair, resembles a spider, her menace is clearly sexual: as J. Hillis Miller imagines her, Arachne is a "devouring, phallic mother," weaver of a web, erion in Greek, which, like kteis and pecten, has a double meaning, signifying both wool or fleece and the ring of pubic hair (154). The combing and displaying of hair, as suggested by the legends of alluring mermaids who sit on rocks singing and combing their beautiful hair, thus constitute a sexual exhibition. And the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display, for folk, literary, and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness (Berg 26–30; Ellis 194). Anthropological literature, too, makes little distinction between the sacrifice of the genitals, or sexual surrender, and the sacrifice of the hair. James Frazer, for example, describes the practice at the sanctuary of Astarte in Byblus, where women had to shave their heads in the annual mourning for Adonis. Those who refused were obliged to prostitute themselves to strangers and to sacrifice their earnings to the goddess (5: 38). The ritual in primitive societies requiring brides to surrender their hair, the Orthodox Jewish tradition of shaving a bride's head, and the Roman Catholic nun's coif are all manifestations of this genital symbolism—and of the fear and fascination with hair that this symbolism evokes (Cooper 67). The impulse to mutilate or despoil the woman's hair, to "castrate" it, is, as Freud has pointed out, analogous to the fetishism of the old Chinese practice of first mutilating a woman's foot and then revering it (Berg 61).

But psychoanalytic ideas cannot wholly explain the fascination with women's hair in Western literature and painting. If woman is a spinner, and if some of the threads she spins are her own tresses, the web she produces may prove to be a dangerous snare. But it is also her art: the strands of hair she plaits, the threads she weaves are, as J. Hillis Miller and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noticed, analogous to the narrative thread, the story line, the strands of the plot. Even when, like Philomela, a woman cannot speak for herself, her weaving can speak for her, "becoming a strange prosthesis for her absent tongue" (Miller 154–61; see also Gilbert and Gubar 525–27). Sometimes her weaving not only tells a story but is accompanied by story-telling, as in Ovid's account of Minya's daughters, who, in defiance of the Bacchic celebration, continue to ply the thread and tend the loom while they recount a series of tales that involve, appropriately, veils, nets, spinning, combing, and ensnaring (Metamorphoses 4). More often, however, the weaving or hair combing is associated with music, whether the deadly song of the nixie, swan maiden, or mermaid or the mournful songs of Desdemona and the Lady of Shalott.

It is, perhaps, not surprising in this context that another meaning of pecten—in addition to comb, heckle, and pudenda—is "instrument for striking a lyre," the strings of which are, by implication, threads or hairs. Woman's loom or hair is her instrument, in the fullest sense of the word: on it she may, mermaidlike, lure men to their deaths or, like Philomela, report her own destruction. The Scottish-Irish ballad "The Cruel Sister" is one of the most interesting examples of the self-reporting use of the hair lyre: it is the story of a beautiful
maiden drowned by a jealous older sister whose suitor prefers the yellow hair of the younger girl. A passing harper finds the body of the dead girl and, moved by the sight, fashions a harp of her breast bone and strings from her yellow hair. The instrument, "whose notes made sad the listening ear," ultimately condemns the murderer (Scott 3: 354–59). The younger sister in this ballad, like Philomela the victim of a crime of sexual passion, cannot speak for herself: the gifts of music and of self-expression have been transferred to the strands of her hair.

The legend of Saint Agnes, another victim of sexual degradation, seems also to reflect this tradition of women's hair as an instrument of expression. In one version of the story, the Roman prefect Sempronius, angry at Saint Agnes for refusing to sacrifice to the pagan gods and to marry his son, orders her to be loaded down with chains and exposed naked to the soldiers and the multitudes. But as her clothes are torn off, she prays to God, who miraculously causes her hair to grow so densely that, like a cloak, it instantly covers her (Blès 106). The story that Saint Agnes' hair tells does not involve words or pictograms or music: the hair is, rather, in its miraculous growth, an expression of divine grace and of the girl's faith and purity. Chained and humiliated, she cannot speak for herself, but, just as threads spin from a spider's body, so the hairs grow from Saint Agnes' head to proclaim her beatitude.

A secular equivalent to the legend of Saint Agnes is the fairy tale "The Goose-Girl," better known in the nineteenth century than it is today (Brothers Grimm 404–11). In the story, the power of which Heine recalls in his autobiographical poem "Germany: A Winter's Tale," a princess on her way to a distant kingdom to be married must trade places with her maid, who takes possession of her rich dowry, her royal apparel, and her talking horse and marries the prince, compelling the true bride to become a goosegirl and to take a vow of secrecy. Isolated in a strange country, bereft of her talking horse, too weak to challenge her usurping servant, and bound to her vow of silence, the princess can neither express nor avenge her wrongs. Like Philomela, the drowned girl in the ballad of the cruel sister, or Saint Agnes, she needs a "prosthetic tongue" to reveal who she truly is. And the tapestry that tells her story is unfurled when she combs and plaits her hair. For when the goosegirl lets down her hair, "which was like pure gold" (408), its brightness so delights the boy who tends the geese with her that he tries to pluck some. When she refuses to part with any, the angry gooseboy reports her suspicious behavior to the old king, who comes to spy on the mysterious girl and immediately recognizes that such wealth and radiance can belong to no ordinary goosegirl. Once her hair has revealed her true identity, the princess can be restored to her rightful place as royal bride and her wicked imposter punished.

The crimes against the drowned younger sister of the ballad, Saint Agnes, and the goosegirl princess all involve obliteration of identity: their attackers attempt not simply to murder or injure them but literally or symbolically to drown them, to destroy the innocent purity that is at the center of their being. The crimes are, in this sense, entirely malicious. And the girls, physically or emotionally silenced, achieve a miraculous self-assertion and self-expression. Their marvelous hair, like Philomela's weaving, talks for them, proclaiming who they essentially are.

But Medusa's hair says who she is, too, and Victorian painters and writers were fascinated by this range and contrast of values and significance. More intensely and self-consciously than any other generation of artists, they explored the symbolic complexities and contradictions of women's hair, at the same time developing and deepening its multiplicity of meaning. For them, Arachne, whether she spun a web of flax or hair, was an intriguingly ambiguous figure: victim and predator, trapped and trapper, Penelope and Circe, angel and mermaid.

This ambiguity was brilliantly epitomized by William Holman Hunt in his illustration of "The Lady of Shalott" (fig. 2). In Hunt's painting, the Lady of Shalott, swirling, spiderlike, in the center of her circular loom, is either frenziedly weaving her web or fighting to get free of it. She may be using the threads that encircle her—as her hair does—to weave her circular tapestry, or she may be trapped by them. Reinforcing this ambiguity is the iconography of the painting: the serpentine columns that support the loom; the devouring but self-destroying sphinx at the foot of the table in the lower right; the circular reflection of the window that may open up the space—or close it with bars.

The Victorian interest in the ambiguity of hair symbolism is also apparent in the numerous
Fig. 2. William Holman Hunt, *The Lady of Shalott* (c. 1886–1905). Courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford, Connecticut.
novels in which the hero learns—too late—that a deadly siren is hiding behind the benign mask of Penelope. In Middlemarch, for example, Lydgate blindly assumes that the “infantine blondness” of Rosamond Vincy’s “wondrous” hair plaits, like her industrious lacing, netting, and tatting, is the outward sign of her ingenuousness and wifely aptitude: not until escape is no longer possible does he see that with both hair and handwork she has been spinning the web that hopelessly traps him (Gilbert and Gubar 21). He had imagined, in his “old dreamland,” that Rosamond was “that perfect piece of womanhood who would reverence her husband’s mind after the fashion of an accomplished mermaid, using her comb and looking-glass and singing her song for the relaxation of his adored wisdom alone” (425; ch. 58), but he is not well versed in mermaid lore: mermaids, as the narrator in Vanity Fair points out, may look pretty enough when they sit on rocks with their harps and looking glasses, combing their hair, “but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims” (617; ch. 64). Yet, as both Eliot and Thackeray recognize, the mermaid’s triumph is more apparent than real, and in ensnaring the fly the spider may get imprisoned by her own threads. Thus, at the end of Vanity Fair, Becky is trapped behind a booth at a Fancy Fair for the benefit of the poor, while Rosamond is housed in a cage “all flowers and gilding, fit for the bird of paradise that she resembled” (610; ch. 86).

If a woman’s hair is the text that explains her, clearly it makes hard reading. Lydgate must marry Rosamond and undergo several attacks of paralysis before he can understand that, in her selfish obstinacy, she has turned them both to stone. Hardy’s Jude Fawley is too unread in worldly texts even to recognize an obvious forgery: only on his wedding night, when Arabella, the most heavy-handed of mermaids, hangs her long tail of false hair on her looking glass, does Jude begin to see the extent of her duplicity (Jude 103; pt. 1, ch. 9).

Victorian writers were fascinated not only by the problem of “reading” women’s hair—interpreting its meaning and exploring its symbolic value—but also by the hair itself. No other writers have lavished so much attention on the physical properties of women’s hair: its length, texture, color, style, curliness. There is scarcely a female character in Victorian fiction whose hair is not described at least perfunctorily, and often a woman’s hair is described repeatedly and in considerable detail. The brown, neatly combed heads of the virtuous governesses and industrious wives; the tangled, disorderly hair of the sexually and emotionally volatile women like Hetty Sorrel and Catherine Earnshaw; the artfully arranged curls of the girl-women like Dora Spenlow Copperfield and Isabella Linton are all familiar, even conventional, elements in Victorian character description.

In the more detailed and developed of these descriptions, a curious transfer of meaning sometimes takes place. The hair is not simply the outward sign of the woman’s inner self, the text that explains her—as Isabella Linton’s lank, uncurled hair, for example, bespeaks her desolation. Hair becomes, rather, in itself something vital, independent, energetic. Eustacia Vye’s thick, dark hair is described as animatc; her nerves literally extend into her tresses (Return of the Native 53; bk. 1, ch. 7). Similarly, Alice Marwood’s “rich black hair” has its own wildness: distraught at how its beauty has blighted her life, Alice seizes it “as if she would have torn it out!” and flings it back “as though it were a heap of serpents” (Dombey and Son 406; ch. 33). In Browning’s “The Flight of the Duchess,” the gypsy queen makes magical music that infuses the pining duchess—and her reanimated hair—with new life:

. . . that filling her, passed redundant
Into her very hair, back swerving
Over each shoulder, loose and abundant,
As her head thrown back showed the white
throat curving;
And the very tresses shared in the pleasure,
Moving to the mystic measure,
Bounding as the bosom bounded.

(lines 545–51)

In Woman and the Demon, Nina Auerbach helps explain this infusion of power and meaning into women’s hair by pointing out “the totemistic aura parts of a woman’s body acquire in disjunction from the woman herself” (48). The “eerie potency in dissociation” to which Auerbach alludes is perhaps best illustrated by the “hair tent” that dot the landscape of Victorian lyric poetry. The prototypes of hair tents, which are
created, as William Tindall explains, when “your girl, lying on top of you, lets her long hair down around your head” (11–12), were constructed by Poe in “Annie” and Baudelaire in “Her Hair.” Later, Browning and, most frequently, Dante Rossetti and the early Yeats reused the image, infusing it with an aura of mystic power somewhat at odds with the hearty tone of Tindall’s explication. For these three Victorian poets, the hair tent is not so much the dark, perfumed, erotic mystery that Baudelaire imagines as it is a warm nest. Embraces are there, of course, but the hair tent is not primarily a bower of sexual love: it is a retreat from the world, a refuge for the poet, a cocoon. In Browning’s Pauline, for example, the hair tent is less a boudoir than a study where the lover, protected by Pauline’s loosened magic hair, is free to let loose his own imagination:

Pauline, mine own, bend o’er me—thy soft breast
Shall pant to mine—bend o’er me—thy sweet eyes,
And loosed hair and breathing lips, and arms
Drawing me to thee—these build up a screen
To shut me in with thee, and from all fear;
So that I may unlock the sleepless brood
Of fancies from my soul, their lurking place.
(lines 1–7)

For Rossetti, the most prolific of hair-tent builders, his beloved’s hair falling about his face makes possible a visionary moment of perfect dark silence:

Beneath her sheltering hair,
In the warm silence near her breast,
Our kisses and our sobs shall sink to rest;
As in some trance made aware
That day and night have wrought to fulness there
And Love has built our nest.
(“The Stream’s Secret,” lines 79–84)

In The Wind among the Reeds poems, Yeats describes a number of similar ecstatic moments, when the woman’s hair functions as a visionary talisman, setting O’Driscoll dreaming in “The Host of the Air” and providing the lovers in “The Heart of the Woman” and “He Bids His Beloved Be at Peace” with a quiet twilit perfect moment, hidden from the “bitter storm” of time and change. For the speakers of these poems, the world outside the hair tent is stormy and frightening: the woman’s hair has the power to shelter her lover from these dangers so that he may rest and dream.

Although the hair tent is dim, silent, and shadowy, a hushed visionary nest that shelters and nurtures the poet’s imagination, it is, sighs and twilight notwithstanding, essentially physical and concrete. The woman’s hair is a totem, not a symbol, and its power is so great that the poet-lover feels blind, exposed, frightened, and lonely without the protection it provides. The woman herself is without individuality, silent and spiritualized: her potency is concentrated in the disembodied hands, eyes, breathings, and, of course, hair that create a perfumed twilit atmosphere for the poet-lover’s reponse.

This literary fascination with the magical power of women’s hair coincided in Victorian everyday life with an intense popular preoccupation with hair and hair tokens. At the peak of the fad, in the forties and fifties, hair became something of a Victorian culture obsession: whole suites of jewelry were fashioned, as if through alchemy, from the plaited hair of family members, lovers, and friends, living and dead. Popular magazines urged young ladies to learn the art of making hair jewelry themselves to guard against dishonest tradespeople who might substitute the worthless hair of a stranger for the precious hair of a departed friend (Flower 21). Armed with a special hair-working kit, the Victorian lady, a new Midas, could weave hair into basket patterns or construct a landscape to hang on the wall. Elaborate hair work was shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and a full-length, life-size portrait of Queen Victoria made entirely of human hair caused a sensation at the Parish Exposition of 1855 (Gere 59; Flower 21).

From the anthropologist’s point of view, this sort of glorification of hair is perhaps not very different from the elaborate ritual disposal of hair, nail parings, spittle, and excrement in primitive societies, where it is believed that a “sympathetic connexion” persists between a person and everything that has once been part of the person’s body (Frazer 3: 268). But a literary perspective suggests that for the Victorians, excremental implications notwithstanding, the preservation and exchange of hair tokens were activities of the utmost dignity and importance. Hair was powerful, and the ubiquitous Victorian lock of hair, encased in a locket or ring or framed on the wall, became, through a Midas touch of imagination, something treasured, a totem, a token of attachment, intrin-
sically valuable, as precious as gold. Because hair was so precious, however, no counterfeit would do: the hair itself was needed for the magic to work.

The intensity of this preoccupation with the material hair appears in the courtship correspondence of the Browningings, when Robert Browning asks for “what I have always dared to think I would ask you for . . . one day! Give me . . . who never dream of being worth such a gift . . . give me so much of you—all precious that you are—as may be given in a lock of your hair.” As Elizabeth Barrett’s initial reply suggests, this is, next to a request for sexual surrender, the most intimate and serious of demands:

I never gave away what you ask me to give you, to a human being, except my nearest relatives & once or twice or thrice to female friends . . . never, though reproached for it,—and it is just three weeks since I said last to an asker that I was “too great a prude for such a thing!” it was best to anticipate the accusation!—and prude or not, I could not—I never could—something would not let me. (Kintner 288–89)

The sexual undertones in this exchange are clear enough, but equally important is both lovers’ insistence on the preciousness of the hair itself: when he finally receives the coveted curl, Robert Browning writes, “I am happier and richer now—My love . . . I will live and die with your beautiful ring, your beloved hair—comforting me, blessing me” (Kintner 300). Just as Loki substituted real gold for Sif’s hair, so then, as the Browning correspondence suggests, the popular imagination transformed hair into valued currency, “merchandise,” in the language of one of Elizabeth Barrett’s sonnets, to be bartered on “the soul’s Rialto” (Sonnets from the Portuguese 19).

This enthusiastic alchemizing of hair in Victorian popular culture coincided with a literary vogue of fairy tales, many of which involve golden-haired heroines or quests for golden hair. In stories like “The Goose-Girl,” “Rapunzel,” “The Goose-Girl at the Well,” “Our Lady’s Child,” “The Wounded Lion,” and “Dorani,” which were anthologized in the nineteenth century by the Grimm brothers, Andrew Lang, and Joseph Jacobs, the golden hair of the princess is the center and source of value. Well-read in such fairy tales and steeped in a culture that insisted on the preciousness of hair, Victorian writers inevitably focused their general interest in women’s hair on golden hair in particular. And because it links wealth and female sexuality, the image of golden hair enabled them not only to mine the fairy-tale tradition but also to express most fully their own shifting and ambivalent attitudes toward the power and value of both money and women.

For the Victorians, the hair of the mythic woman was, as we have seen, an obscure text, dangerous to read. If the woman was benign, her hair might be a nest, warm and sheltering, but if she was a treacherous mermaid, it could be an alluring but deadly snare. A strikingly analogous uncertainty characterized Victorian attitudes toward money: at its best gold was associated with the unearthly, with the radiance of the sun, with the activity of the divine spirit. But gold was also filthy lucre: hidden, hoarded, buried, deceptively bright, it was associated with death, dirt, and excrement; to desire it might be, as Ruskin warns in “Muna Pulveries,” to “take dust for deity” (17: 282–83). And just as a woman’s golden hair might be a shining snare for unwary men, so money might be “in fact, nothing more than a kind of Byzantine harness or trappings, very glittering and beautiful in barbaric sight, wherewith we bridle” other people (Ruskin, “Unto This Last” 17: 55).

Thus the golden-haired woman developed in Victorian literature into a complex but powerful figure whose magnificent hair had multiple meanings and uses. When she was saintly—a wife, nurse, mother, or victimized princess—the gold on her head was her aureole, her crown, the outward sign of her inner blessedness and innocence. But when she was dangerous and corrupt, her gleaming hair was a weapon, web, or trap, a glittering symbolic fusion of the sexual lust and the lust for power that she embodied. Between these extremes, Victorian writers also recognized shades of meaning and value. The golden-haired innocent might be damaged or corrupted by the world; the wicked temptress might, like Mary Magdalen, be redeemed, her counterfeit gold gaining worth; women might barter, sacrifice, or sell portions of their gold in a variety of marketplaces, good and evil.

Dickens, more than any other Victorian writer, absorbed the visions and values of fairy tales into the larger landscapes of his novels, and it is therefore not surprising to find in his golden-haired women the nearest descendants of the golden-haired fairy-tale princesses. In the fairy tales, golden hair is the mark of special virtue; for
Dickens, too, its radiance is angelic and unex-
tinguishable, even in the darkest, most malevolent
worlds. Lucie Manette’s long golden hair func-
tions literally, in A Tale of Two Cities, to identify
her to her amnesiac father, who compares it to the
golden strands of her dead mother’s hair that he
has treasured during years of imprisonment. 
Although Dr. Manette does not yet know that
Lucie is his daughter, her hair has told him who
she truly is: “What is your name, my gentle
angel?” he asks. As the angel in his house, Lucie
will nurse him back to life, raise him from the liv-
ing dead: when they first embrace, “His cold
white head mingled with her radiant hair, which
warmed and lighted it as though it were the light
of Freedom shining on him” (76; bk. 1, ch. 6). In
Lucie’s golden hair reside all the beneficent powers
women’s hair can possess: nestled down with her
father, she can create for him a healing hair tent
to “curtain” him from the world, and she can spin
“the golden thread that united him to a Past
beyond his misery, and to a Present beyond his
misery” (110; bk. 2, ch. 4). Once married, with her
own family, she becomes a radiant frīddewba, an
angelic Arachne, “ever busily winding the golden
thread that bound them all together, weaving the
service of her happy influence through the tissue
of all their lives” (240; bk. 2, ch. 21).

Even in the turbulent, anarchic world of A Tale
of Two Cities, Lucie is readily recognizable as an
angel, and her golden halo of hair has the power
to recall the dead to life and to bind them lovingly
into a vital family network. But in Our Mutual
Friend, as in “The Goose-Girl,” the princess is
more heavily disguised, less able to speak for
herself, more damaged by evil that is not essen-
tially political, as it is in A Tale of Two Cities, but
purely and satanically malicious. The golden-
haired princess in Our Mutual Friend is, of
course, Jenny Wren, a Lucie Manette who has
been so twisted out of her truly royal shape into
shrewish deformity that she is unrecognizable: in-
deed, she is scarcely human, “a child—a dwarf—a
girl—a something” (271; bk. 2, ch. 1). Only her
magnificent hair, described as a “golden stream,”
a “Glory,” and, most suggestively, a “golden
bower,” confirms Jenny’s view of herself as a
Cinderella or an imprisoned princess from one of
“the bright little books” (493; bk. 3, ch. 2).

Isolated in a deformed and aching body,
tormented by those around her, exiled in a
blackened, wasted city, Jenny Wren, in goosegirl
disguise, cannot repeat Lucie Manette’s miracle of
recalling a deadened father to life. She is a dolls’
dressmaker, a spinning Jenny, but she can spin no
golden thread to rescue her child-father, Mr.
Dolls. As she reveals when her dying father arrives
home and she cries out, “My poor bad, bad boy!
and he don’t know me, he don’t know me! O what
shall I do . . . when my own child don’t know
me’ (800; bk. 4, ch. 9), her golden hair can have
no saving power on an insentient father who does
not know an angel when he sees one. And this in-
sentience is equally damaging to the angel, who,
in the face of it, must withdraw from her better
self into a desperate and embittered shrewishness.

Although Jenny’s misfortunes conspire to
deform her true angelic self, the visionary gleam
of her childhood fancies of angels, “all in white
dresses, something shining on the borders, and on
their heads” (290; bk. 2, ch. 2), still shines,
though often feebly, in her own aureole; under the
ecstatic effect of this recollection, she can throw
off her earthly disguise, holding out her
“transparent hand,” gazing upward, and looking
“for the moment, quite inspired and beautiful.”
But such moments are short-lived, for “sordid
shames and cares” transform the visionary artist,
the dolls’ dressmaker, back into “a little quaint
shrew; of the world, worldly; of the earth, earth-
ly” (294; bk. 2, ch. 2). As if to remind Jenny of
her true self, to restore to her that “higher and
better look” that fleetingly reveals her transcen-
dent beauty, Lizzie Hexam is constantly—in
almost every scene she and Jenny share—stroking
and combing Jenny’s hair.

Softened by these caresses, as well as by the
restorative powers of her own fancy, Jenny Wren
can ultimately fulfill the promise of her radiant
hair. The imaginative transformation she practices
on her “fairy godmother,” Riah, on a rooftop
early in the novel:

I fancied that I saw him come out of his grave! He
toiled out at the low door so bent and worn, and then
he took his breath and stood upright, and looked all
around him at the sky, and the wind blew upon him,
and his life down in the dark was over!

(334; bk. 2, ch. 5)

becomes a more lasting recall to life at the end of
the book, when Jenny turns him into her true
father. The “rich shower of her hair” also sum-
mons back to life the dying Eugene Wrayburn, for
whom she acts as “interpreter between this sentient world” and the border region of death inhabited by the unconscious man (809; bk. 4, ch. 10). Nursing Wrayburn with the restorative delicacy of touch her doll-dressmaking artistry has refined, Jenny redresses the man, remaking herself in the process into what Garrett Stewart describes as the “personification at Eugene's side of her own dream of heaven, the very vision of her vision” (220).

The brightest fairy-tale possibilities of gold hair are thus realized in Lucie Manette and Jenny Wren. But Loki’s willful violation of Sif and his underground excursion to the “dark elves’” to find a buried substitute for her natural hair suggest that gold hair can have a more sinister significance. And in “The Goose-Girl,” although the true princess, through her golden hair, ultimately triumphs, there are similar undertones of malice, envy, greed, and lust, both in the gooseboy’s attempt to possess the hair of the princess and in the maid’s usurpation of her dowry and true husband. By contrasting Jenny’s golden bower in Our Mutual Friend with the bower of the Golden Dustman, Boffin, Dickens is careful to preserve these darker mythic and fairy-tale meanings. All gold except the sort that Jenny’s hair represents is waste, dust, excrement: the novel is full of traders in “damage and waste”: even Jenny buys it to dress her dolls, who “wear it in their hair and on their ball dresses, and even... are presented at Court with it” (333; bk. 2, ch. 5). Although the Golden Dustman has changed the name of Harmony Jail to Boffin’s Bower, his Midas touch cannot change what the Mounds represent: the attribution of value to what is without value and the greed, ambition, and cruelty that this false value creates. The need to possess that motivates the goosegirl’s usurping maid and the gooseboy also drives the many thieves, pretenders, and double-dealers in Our Mutual Friend. The forces of true value prevail, but they are very nearly extinguished when the buried greed and passion of the darker characters erupt.

Dickens carefully distinguishes between the true gold that Jenny Wren’s hair represents and the false gold that other characters blindly pursue. But for Hardy, who also uses fairy-tale and Norse myth motifs, the very possibility of true gold is open to question. For him, the goosegirl, as she is embodied in Marty South in The Woodlanders, is a more ambiguous, less triumphant figure, whose glory is diminished by her inability to withstand the pressures of a corrupt world. Thus Marty, the isolated, innocent queen of the novel’s forest Eden, is like the goosegirl in possessing, in the rare arboreal chestnut of her hair, great intrinsic wealth, but when she loses her naturally rightfuy bridegroom to a usurper, she parts with her riches by cutting off her hair and selling it for two gold sovereigns to the rich Mrs. Charmond, who wants it to ensnare a lover. Because the integrity of the forest and its inhabitants, including Marty herself, has been undermined by ambition, greed, and selfishness, Marty’s precious hair is not, like the goosegirl’s, inviolate. Indeed, braided and coiled on Mrs. Charmond’s head, the hair is another of the book’s several mantraps, and through its workings most of the characters in the novel are maimed or destroyed. Although Marty, like Jenny Wren, is virtually asexual, once she has made of herself a willing Sif, submitting to the “rape of her locks,” the “deflowering of her visage” (58; ch. 3), and the substitution of gold for her hair, she has unleashed the sexually mischievous potentialities of the novel’s various Lokis: her coil of hair (to mix mythologies) becomes a serpent in the woodland garden.

By placing both good and evil values in the same symbol—Marty’s hair—Hardy suggests that it is the mark of her special innocence and worth, but only to a point: once sold, the hair becomes false, and Marty, out of her inarticulate despair, becomes a participant in the commercialization of human relationships that pervades The Woodlanders as much as it does Our Mutual Friend. Just as Melbury wants his daughter to be false to Winterbourne so that she can fetch her full value as an educated lady in the marriage market and just as Fitzpiers, regretting that he did not get better value for his old family connections, is false to Grace, so Marty, finding that her hair has no value as an attraction to Winterbourne, decides to exchange it for gold sovereigns.

Thus, on the one hand, Marty is unmistakably Winterbourne’s true bride: sharing his intelligent intercourse with nature, “she had formed his true complement in the other sex, had lived as his counterpart, had subjoined her thoughts to his as a corollary” (399; ch. 44). On the other hand, lacking the imagination, insight, and wit that allow Jenny Wren to prevail in a corrupt and fallen world, Marty is unable, at least in life, to
take her rightful place. While Jenny can defend herself with her satiric versifying and sardonic mockery and assert her true identity with her lovely singing, Marty is a Philomela, unable to speak and unable, bereft of her hair, to show who she really is. Silent and, like the goosegirl, beset by the pretenders and predators about her, she makes the best bargain she can for her hair, for in the fallen Eden she inhabits, it has no power or value as a sign of true identity: its only worth is commercial.

While hair is an important key to character in many Victorian novels, it functions more broadly in *A Tale of Two Cities*, *Our Mutual Friend*, and *The Woodlanders*, as it does in fairy tales, both to reveal character and to define or represent true value. Hardy and Dickens, in these books, contrast the spiritual integrity that their heroines' wealth of hair represents with the false values and counterfeit emotions of the dark worlds in which these women shine. For Dickens the power of the golden halo is greater than that of the golden coin—or the golden calf: Lucie and Jenny can therefore use their innocence and compassion to raise the living dead around them. In their hair tents they shelter men injured by life, and if their hair is their text, it reads: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

But for Hardy that light can be obscured by the more glittering brightness of money and worldly ambition. Thus Marty's shining arboreal hair becomes an instrument not of salvation and life but of sordid commerce; its meaning and value are reduced to the two gold sovereigns for which she sells it.

This theme of commerce in hair was also explored with considerable subtlety by many Victorian poets, particularly the Rossettis, Browning, and Tennyson, who were fascinated by the variety and meaning of trading in women's hair. The golden-haired woman they depict, at her most virtuous, may use her hair in the marriage market, saving and trading it for the possibility of wedded bliss. In her more sinister incarnation, she uses it for sexual entrapment and destruction, spending it selfishly for her own pleasure or profit. Whether she is purchasing domestic happiness or vicious profit, however, in using her hair the woman compromises its value as an emblem of sublimity.

In "The Ringlet," Tennyson employs a series of wordplays that show how gold hair, when used to turn a profit, becomes false. The speaker in the poem begins by begging for one of his beloved's curls, which he values as "all true gold," an emblem of her innocence and fidelity. By the end of the poem, however, he has discovered that her gold is counterfeit: the gold ringlet cannot be a metaphor for her constancy, for she that gave it is "bought and sold, sold, sold." Indeed that very gold has made her salable: the wealth of her hair is what the buyer wants—what all gooseboys want—and what, ironically, the lover himself has asked for, "to kiss it night and day."

The idea that the worth of golden hair is undermined when the woman who possesses it uses it for her own pleasure or profit is taken up by Christina Rossetti in "Goblin Market." When golden-haired Laura, longing for the goblins' fruit, bemoans her penilessness, the goblins reply:

> "You have much gold upon your head,"

> . . . . . . . . . . .

> "Buy from us with a golden curl."

> She clipped a precious golden curl,

> She dropped a tear more rare than pearl,

> Then sucked their fruit globes fair or red.

(lines 123–28)

That this transaction is sexual is obvious: Laura's golden hair is her currency, and in squandering it she surrenders her innocence—and herself. While the goosegirl becomes a bride by refusing to part with even a single golden hair, Hardy's Marty South and Laura both impulsively "spend" their natural wealth and thus make themselves unmarriageable, Marty by disfiguring herself, Laura by abandoning herself to illicit pleasures. Patronizing the goblin market costs Laura all her gold and removes her from the marriage market: inevitably her hair turns thin and gray, and "the joys brides hope to have" are nearly lost to her. Only when her sister has restored her does Laura regain her wealth—her "gleaming locks"—and with it the possibility of marriage and motherhood that the poem offers as the highest good the girls can purchase. That Christina Rossetti may have recognized another, perhaps better, use for a woman's wealth is implied in *Maude: Prose and Verse* in Maude's tribute to her friend Magdalen, who has chosen to enter a convent, even though men found her yellow curls beautiful. Magdalen has not squandered her golden hair, as Laura did, or spent
it wisely in the marriage market; she has renounced the vanities of the world: “Gold was left behind, curls shorn,” and wedded to Christ she has become “a bride no gems adorn” (95).

For Christina Rossetti, then, the spiritual value of gold hair can be redeemed if it is put to good commercial use: if the girl saves her hair for the right bridegroom, if she spends it in a truly profitable marriage, her gold is proved true and lasting. In Dante Rossetti’s poetry, however, because the commercial use of hair is always a form of sexual entrapment, women who trade in their gold hair irretrievably undermine its transcendent potential. His golden-haired women are not the passive, helpless objects of a gooseboy’s desire: they are, at best, accomplices, knowing participants in sexual barter; at worst, they are instigators, destructive and dangerous femmes fatales who use their gold to tempt, to corrupt, to strangle.

The ambivalent desire and contempt that such golden-haired temptresses awaken is epitomized in Rossetti’s description of the prostitute Jenny, who sells her “countless gold incomparable” in “market night in the Haymarket,” where “things which are not yet enroll’d / In market-lists are bought and sold.” As a prostitute, she embodies the fusion of lust and avarice, trading the golden wealth of her body for pleasure, like Laura, and for profit, like the woman in Tennyson’s “The Ringlet.” But Jenny is also a victim: like Jenny Wren, she is, in the imagery of the poem, a caged bird, imprisoned in a cold, corrupt, and hostile city where even the children jeer and mock; she, too, is inland far from the pastoral paradise of her childhood innocence, forced to sell herself in the goblin market created as much by “Man’s transgression at the first” as by her own lasciviousness and greed.

Rossetti’s narrator acts out the shifting and conflicting moral and sexual attitudes of the poem when he lays gold coins in the sleeping Jenny’s golden hair. Although he says he does this because she may be dreaming of gold, or because he wants to remind her of his sexual forbearance or to mock her with his private joke about her awakening as a Danaë and hearing in the falling coins the ring of true love, what is startling about his gesture is its ambivalence. Does he put the gold in her hair out of tenderness or contempt? Is she receiving a gift or being soiled or degraded? The obscene implications of his gesture are suggested in *My Secret Life*, when on two occasions the narrator, bringing the “mercantile business” to its “logical conclusion,” fills the vagina of a prostitute with shilling pieces (Marcus 159). Whatever the declared intentions, in both “Jenny” and its pornographic reflection, *My Secret Life*, the narrators, as Marcus suggests (160), are using money to act out fantasies of power and dominance, while revealing their own fearful loathing of the women they also desire.

This element of disgust and loathing implicit in the image of money hidden in hair appears in a less obviously sexual, but perhaps more grotesque, context in Browning’s “Gold Hair: A Legend of Pornic.” In this poem Browning recounts the story of a lovely, delicate girl, seemingly too unearthly for this world, whose deathbed request is that her magnificent wealth of hair not be disturbed. The legend of her saintly life, the outward sign of which was her aureole of precious hair, grows until, many years later, the floor of the church is taken up for repair and the village boys begin digging for buried jewelry. They find, not the armor adornsments or rings they had expected, but a gold coin and the remains of the saintly girl:

And lo! when they came to the coffin-lid,
   Or the rotten planks which composed it once,
   Why, there lay the girl’s skull wedged amid
   A mint of money, it served for the nonce
   To hold in its hair-heaps hid.

The girl’s golden hair, which others had assumed was a symbol of her inner blessedness, is thus revealed as a bower of secret corruption; the apparent emblem of spirituality conceals an appalling underlying materialism. What the narrator of *My Secret Life* does to prostitutes is parodied by what the dying girl does to herself: she, too, brings what is ultimately revealed as the “mercantile business” of her living and dying to its “logical conclusion.”

The language of decay and corruption in “Gold Hair” emphasizes what is only implied in “The Ringlet” and “Jenny”: that women’s hair (and its double meanings, genital and excremental, are important here) conceals an underlying and sinister filth. Perhaps it is this association with dirt and decay that accounts for Browning’s and other Victorian poets’ persistent use of the image of buried golden hair, sometimes enduring, even flourishing, in the graves of dead women. In Christina Rosset-
ti's "The Poor Ghost," long golden hair, "all fallen" below the knee, is part of the ghostly paraphernalia of the forgotten woman who returns from the dead to summon her lover:

From the other world I come back to you,
My locks are uncurled with dripping drenching dew.
You know the old, whilst I know the new:
But tomorrow you shall know this too. 

Despite the poem's title, this ghost is far more sinister than pitiable; her long, clammy, golden hair understandably terrifies the lover, who recognizes the dangerous—indeed, murderous—energy that it represents. The gold hair of the murdered woman in Bram Stoker's story "The Secret of the Growing Gold" is more directly her instrument of revenge: although she has been walled up in her lover's fireplace, her gold hair continues to grow through a crack in the stone until it mysteriously kills both the lover's pregnant new wife and the badly frightened lover, who is discovered staring "with a look of unutterable horror" at his feet, about which he twined "tresses of golden hair, streaked with grey" (28). More subtly, in Browning's "A Toccata of Galuppi's," Wilde's "Requiescat," and Rossetti's "Life-in-Love," Donne's "bracelet of bright hair about the bone" becomes a chilling evocation of buried female energy. The story told after the exhumation of Lizzie Siddal that her hair had continued to grow after her death for such a long time and so luxuriantly that it filled her coffin also belongs to this tradition. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar observe in The Madwoman in the Attic:

Lizzie Siddal Rossetti's hair leaps like a metaphor for monstrous female sexual energies from the literal and figurative coffins in which her artist-husband enclosed her. To Rossetti, its assertive radiance made the dead Lizzie seem both terrifyingly physical and fiercely supernatural. "Mid change the changeless night environeth, / Lies all that golden hair undimmed in death," he wrote [in "Life-in-Love"].

In "He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead," Yeats modifies this theme of buried hair, imagining instead that the dead woman's hair is "bound and wound / About the stars and moon and sun."

While this image lacks the obvious gruesomeness of the clammy, dripping Pre-Raphaelite corpse's hair, it arises out of similar assumptions about female energy. The narrator wishes his beloved were "lying cold and dead" because in life she has "the will of the wild birds": her anger at him—her refusal to serve as his hair tent—her independent energy make him long for a compliant ghost who would bend her head over him, lay his head on her breast, and murmur tender and forgiving words. The willful energy that her hair represents would be tethered to the stars and tamed, just as the ancient gods tamed the powerful mortals whom they loved by hanging their images in the skies as constellations. This association with the constellations and also, perhaps, with the Coma Berenices, to which Yeats alludes several times in later poems, lends to the image an airy majesty that does not alter the vengeful paradox at its center: in binding the woman's hair to the stars, her lover, like Porphyria's in Browning's poem, has trapped the trapper and ensnared the snare; the spider is held motionless by the strands of her own web; the lady is looped in the loops of her own hair.

The hair web or snare on which Yeats, writing at the turn of the century, imaginatively turns the tables had a much deeper and more sinister hold on the imaginations both of earlier Victorian poets and of contemporary and later Symbolists. Examples from painting and literature suggest the centrality of the image of strangling, entrapping hair. Goethe used it in his description of Lilith in the WalpurgisNacht scene in Faust, Shelley translated the lines (4: 304), and Rossetti inscribed Shelley's translation on the back of his 1867 Lady Lilith watercolor and around the same time translated the passage himself:

Hold then thy heart against her shining hair,
If, by thy fate, she spread it once for thee,
For, when she nets a young man in that snare
So twines she him he never may be free.

(2: 469)

Rossetti's 1855 illustration of Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is yet another representation of this image: in the drawing, the woman's hair, in a striking anticipation of Edvard Munch's Attraction and Separation, is wound in a stranglehold around her lover's neck. John William Waterhouse also adopted this image in his 1893 version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" (fig. 3), in which the kneeling knight, mesmerized by the gaze of the enchantress, submits to the noose of golden hair she has wound around his
Fig. 3. John William Waterhouse, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* (1893). Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, West Germany.
neck. Waterhouse's painting could almost equally well illustrate the scene (3.2) in Maeterlinck's *Pelleas and Melisande*, in which the love-stricken Pelleas, symbolically accepting his own destruction, wraps Melisande's golden hair around his neck.

When not woven into a web or noose, the hair of the Victorian femme fatale may be braided into a serpent. The Prince, in Christina Rossetti's "Prince's Progress," is waylaid by a seductive milkmaid

Who twisted her hair in a winning braid,
And wvirthed it in shining serpent-coils,
And held him a day and night fast laid
In her subtle toils.

In Tennyson's "Merlin and Vivien," Vivien undergoes a similar metamorphosis: "The snake of gold slid from her hair, the braid / Slipped and uncoiled itself..." (lines 886–87). Lust and avarice are even more obviously intertwined in Rossetti's "Eden Bower" in the persona of Lilith, who invites the gold serpent, after symbolically wreathing him with the "bright tether" of her golden hair, to "mingle" their "love's caresses, / I in thy coils, and thou in my tresses!"

The decorative aspect of the gold serpent–gold hair association in "Eden Bower" does little to mask the perversity of the relationships among Adam, the demonic Lilith, and the serpent. Lilith describes the joys of her love with Adam in terms of entanglement, envelopment, and strangulation: "Sweet close rings of the serpent's twining, / As heart in heart lay sighing and pinning" (lines 31–32). The language of the sheltering hair tent is distorted in these lines—or, rather, brought to what is perhaps its logical conclusion—in a description of sexual love as a fusion in which the male loses his separate identity, entangled in the woman's clinging, serpentine embrace.4 Replaced by Eve as Adam's wife, Lilith returns to her first lover, the serpent, asking that, in a "bliss past hearing or seeing," they "drink of each other's being," so that she can borrow his serpent shape long enough to tempt Eve. This serpentine transformation is imagined sexually:

Wouldn't thou know the heart's hope of Lilith?
(Eden bower's in flower)
Then bring thou close thine head til it glisten
Along my breast, and lip me and listen.

(lines 73–76)

Through the coupling Lilith enacts with the serpent, wrapping her hair around him while he "folds," "binds," and "bends" her in his coils, she will somehow absorb his shape, metamorphosing into a snake that can not only ensnare and strangle but also, as Lilith's prediction about Cain and Abel to her serpent-lover suggests, devour and bite: "The soul of one shall be made thy brother, / And thy tongue shall lap the blood of the other" (lines 195–96).

In "Eden Bower" Rossetti has brought together the most sinister meaning of gold as a glittering, deceptively radiant lust for power and the most nightmarish associations with women's hair as aggressively serpentine, strangling, and biting. Lilith transforms herself in the poem by sexually absorbing the snake, so that she becomes his lover and, at the same time, when she takes on his shape, becomes the snake himself. Snakes have already come out of her womb, as the "shapes that coiled in the woods and waters," the offspring of her union with Adam: her serpent-lover now enters her in the perverse coupling the poem describes. This myth that Rossetti invents—or embroiders—in "Eden Bower" seems to be related not only to the myths Lévi-Strauss describes in *The Raw and the Cooked* (103, 124, 156) of women who carry snake-lovers or snake-sons inside their bodies but also to psychoanalytic descriptions of the phallic woman, imagined as having a vagina with teeth or as harboring in her vagina a snake that may bite or castrate (Hays 59, 94). And lurking behind such fantasies is, inevitably, the head of Freud's Medusa, described by Ferenczi as "the terrible symbol of the female genital region, the details of which are displaced 'from below upwards'" (360; Freud 105). The terror of the Medusa is that of the boy's first sight of the female's penisless, therefore castrated, genitals, surrounded by hair; the hair-snakes serve to mitigate his terror of castration because they replace the penis, "the absence of which causes the horror." But the female, endowed with a reptilian phallus, remains terrifying and, as "Eden Bower" amply demonstrates, deadly and dangerous to the sons of Adam.

Examples of the phallic female abound in the literature and art of the last half of the nineteenth century, in the femmes fatales whose lineage and offspring Mario Praz has traced in detail in *The Romantic Agony*. Femmes fatales, often golden-haired like Rossetti's Lilith, became increasingly
Elisabeth G. Gitter

stylized—and increasingly commonplace—by the end of the century, especially among the Symbolist poets and painters. The Freudian Medusa may repeatedly be glimpsed in Mallarmé’s Salomé and Herodias, and in numerous hair-obsessed Symbolist paintings—Fernand Khnopff’s The Blood of the Medusa, Giovanni Segantini’s The Evil Mothers, Jean Delville’s The Idol of Perversity, Lucien Levy-Dhurmer’s Eve, Franz von Stuck’s Fatality, and Edvard Munch’s Vampire, among many others—the visual and emotional associations between hair and serpents are explored with relentless misogyny. In these works the women’s hair represents such obvious peril that its beauty is compromised; the complexity and ambivalence that inform the golden hair imagery of Tennyson and the Rossettis give way to a more unqualified fear and disgust.

The stylized phallic female—the embodiment of Freud’s Medusa—who dominates the imaginations of these European Symbolists can also, of course, be identified in the work of many Victorian painters and poets. But for the Victorians the Medusa was not a single, universal type: she was a complex, ambiguous figure whose significance shifted with the perceptions of each Perseus who approached her. As Jerome McGann points out in “The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in Romantic Literary Iconology,” Praz’s definition of the nineteenth-century Medusa does not do full justice to the multiplicity of her meanings for English writers. Like other images of women in Victorian literature, the image of the Medusa defies simple classification. Her serpentine hair is replete with a variety of meanings; her gaze may be deadly, thrilling, or pathetic; her powers may be redemptive or murderous.

The hair of the Medusa-wife Robert Dempster deliriously imagines in Eliot’s story “Janet’s Repentance” functions, for example, as an instrument of revenge:

“She’s coming . . . she’s cold . . . she’s dead . . . she’ll strangle me with her black hair. Ah!” he shrieked aloud, “her hair is all serpents . . . they’re black serpents . . . they hiss . . . let me go . . . let me go . . . .” (381)

A similarly perverse and nightmarish quality characterizes the narrator’s vision of the beloved Medusa he has murdered in Rossetti’s “A Last Confession”:

. . . she wrung her hair out in my dream
Tonight, till all the darkness reeked of it.
Her hair is always wet, for she has kept
Its tresses wrapped about her side for years;
And when she wrung them round over the
floor,
I heard the blood between her fingers hiss;
So that I sat up in my bed and screamed
Once and again; and once to once she
laughed. (lines 432–39)

In these passages, the hair, as if possessed by a demonic energy of its own, has come to life in retaliation against the men whose guilt has conjured up these fantasies. Janet and the murdered girl in “A Last Confession” are Medusas, but only in the guilty imaginations of their tormentors, for both Rossetti and Eliot make clear that the men, blind to the true qualities of the women they both love and hate, have manufactured femmes fatales so that they may abuse them. The irony in both works is that these imaginary phallic women ultimately turn on the men who have invented them, while the women themselves, Philomela-like, are silent, unable to protest their mistreatment. Thus the snaky-haired alter egos of the silent, abused women function for them as agents of vengeance, although the revenger’s tragedies in both works are enacted, from start to finish, in the guilty men’s imaginations.

The victimized Medusa appears again in “The Doom of King Acrisius” by William Morris, who is particularly interested in the ambiguity of hair-serpent symbolism. Perseus, initially eager to murder Medusa, sees, as he flies closer, that the seeming monster is really the pitiable victim of Neptune’s lust and Minerva’s implacable rage. Her golden locks have not been turned into serpents but rather have been invaded by them; the snakes are not weapons Medusa uses against others but tortures inflicted on her:

. . . the golden tresses of her hair
Were moved by writhing snakes from side to side,
That in their writhing often times would glide
On to her breast, or shuddering shoulders white. (3: 203)

These repulsive dark serpents endlessly and hideously reenact Neptune’s violation of the once innocent Medusa, who, hopelessly isolated from human society, is as unable to express herself as Philomela was; her only hope is for “the rest of
Death, and dull forgetfulness” (3: 205). When Perseus finally kills her, it is not out of a cruel selfishness like Neptune's but out of what McGann characterizes as “a wonderful love” (20).

Swinburne's Medusas also inspire love, though of an even more complex and ambiguous sort. Many of Swinburne's cruel and powerful women—Dolores, Venus, Sappho—have serpentine hair that burns or strangles or stings:

Ah with blind lips I felt you, and found
About my neck your hands and hair enwound,
The hands that stifle and the hair that stings,
I felt them fasten sharply without sound.

("Laus Veneris," lines 321-24)

But Our Lady of Torture in her various guises does not inspire in Swinburne the sort of terrified misogyny reflected, for example, in the paintings of Stuck or Munch: in Swinburne, the phallic woman is the subject of praise, for “With nerve and bone she weaves and multiplies / Exceeding pleasure out of extreme pain” ("Laus Veneris," lines 119-20). The antithesis of Morris' Medusa, Swinburne's Lady of Pain takes pleasure from her phallic hair-serpents, on whom she performs a sadistically imagined fellatio:

And the litre long throats of her snakes reach
round her, their mouths overcome hers,
And her lips grow cool with their foam, made
moist as a desert with dew,
With the thirst and the hunger of lust though
her beautiful lips be so bitter,
With the cold foul foam of the snakes they
soften and redden and smile;
And her fierce mouth sweetens, her eyes wax
wide and eyelashes glitter,
And she laughs with savor of blood in her
face and savor of guile.
She laughs, and her hands reach hither, her
hair blows hither and hisses
As a low-lit flame in a wind, back-blown till
it shudder and leap.

("Hesperias," lines 63-70)

While Dolores' lover occasionally asks for release from her poisonous kisses, he also celebrates their power and their pleasure: she is the “mistress and mother of pleasure” who, in giving and receiving pain, exchanges the “languors” of conventional virtue “for the raptures and roses of vice” ("Dolores"). Her numerous lovers knowingly and willingly enjoy her lamialike embrace, delighting in the burning, stifling coils of her “eager hair.” Like other Victorian hair tents, that of Swinburne's Medusa affords the poet-lover a perfect visionary moment, but it is a moment when, hearing the “sudden serpents hiss across her hair,” he celebrates her power, as the Penelope of vice, to weave pleasure from pain.

Swinburne's ladies of torture are at times so powerfully phallic that they become androgynous: indeed, in "Fragoletta," Swinburne praises a boy-maiden Medusa, complete with hair-serpents, as the perfect "double rose of Love." The existence of this androgyne fatal reinforces the sense that Swinburne's poetry is not essentially misogynistic, in part because his Doloreses and Venuses are more phallic than female and their erotic activities are sexually ambiguous, if not, at least in "Dolores," suggestively homosexual. Hélène Cixous, in "The Laugh of the Medusa," complains that men, trapped in the old "phallocentric sublation," have found the Medusa horrible because she awakens fear of castration, whereas "You have only to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing" (885). For Swinburne, too, the Medusa is beautiful, but for him that may be because at her most potent she is no longer a woman. Her hair-serpents are not symbolically phallic but actually so: the phallic woman, as Swinburne imagines her, has thus successfully metamorphosed into a hermaphrodite, if not into a boy.

Idiosyncratic as Swinburne's version of the Medusa is, it is nevertheless typically Victorian in its insistence on the power of the hair itself. As is so frequently true in Victorian imagery, the woman's hair has a life of its own: it is active, aggressive, erotic, and powerful. Swinburne's particular fascination with golden hair is also typically Victorian, although for him golden hair is no Dickensian aureole; its gleaming serpentine curls represent the woman's "proud and passionless lust after gold and blood" ("Notes on Designs of the Old Masters at Florence," Works 15: 160); they are the diadem of what McGann describes as the "apocalyptic Sadean hero" (16). Medusa's hair is thus at once beautiful, evil, erotic, and heroic: it asserts Medusa's identity while retaining its own totemic, animistic power.

The Victorians did not, of course, invent the image of serpentine hair, which is at least as old as the Furies. For centuries Medusa, Cleopatra, Venus, and Eve have been conventionally por-
trayed with serpentine locks. Renaissance portraits—Piero di Cosimo’s *Simonetta Vespucci* is one of the most familiar examples—frequently explore the resemblances between plaits of hair and serpents. But Victorian writers infused this conventional image with complex power, animating it, in the fullest sense, with many conflicting meanings while retaining an intensely concrete fascination with the hair itself. Their obsession with the totemic and magical power of golden hair and with its possibilities as an expression of lust and avarice on the one hand, and spirituality and saintliness on the other, led to the invention of images as macabre as Swinburne’s and as richly luminous as Dickens’.

The Victorian vision of magic hair did not survive long into the twentieth century. Hélène Cixous’ assertion that the Medusa is in truth beautiful and laughing was anticipated in art nouveau, which transformed the frightening serpentine locks of the Medusa into decorative tendrils and curlicues. Robbed of its Victorian totemic concreteness, hair was put into service to create the characteristic flowing, abstract patterns of art nouveau, functioning often as an intricate frame or filling spaces with playful decorative elaboration (Goldwater 61–68).

Women’s hair has been similarly demythologized in this century by writers like the later Yeats, who transformed the powerful tresses of the grand women he had earlier celebrated into the lovely—but funny—“honey coloured ramparts” at the ears of the yellow-haired Anne Gregory. The sentimental humor of O. Henry’s “The Gift of the Magi” and the irony of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “Bernice Bobs Her Hair” also suggest how deliberately and thoroughly the moderns have undone the magic of the Victorians. For just as the intricate and playful abstractness of art-nouveau treatments divested women’s hair of its complex and potent meanings, so the laughter—whether affectionate, ironic, sentimental, or condescending—of later writers has trivialized the mythologized woman’s crowning glory. Bereft of its magic, the hair of the twentieth-century popular heroine has at times degenerated into an object of ridicule, the peroxided mane of the dumb blond. But this devaluation of women’s hair has increasingly been offset, especially for the most recent popular and literary heroines, by their growing powers of self-expression: these women have been free to bob their hair, exchanging their magical halos, webs, and bowers—the “prosthetic tongues”—for the more potent gift of speech.

*John Jay College, City University of New York*
New York, New York

Notes

1 My view of Jenny Wren has been shaped by the chapter Garrett Stewart devotes to her (198–221).
2 The sexual implications of placing gold in hair are also suggested in John Updike’s novel *Rabbit Is Rich*, when the protagonist, excited by his purchase of gold coins as a hedge against inflation, makes love to his wife after masking her pubic hair “with a triangle of unsteady coins overlapping like snake scales” (217–18).
3 See also L. A. Willoughby 27, David Sonstroem 115; and Virginia Surtees 118.
4 See Philip Slater for a more comprehensive discussion of serpent imagery.

Works Cited

Ferenczi, Sandor. “On the Symbolism of the Head of the
Medusa." In his Selected Papers. New York: Basic, 1952, 2:
360.
Frazer, James George. The Golden Bough. 13 vols. New York:
St. Martin's, 1966.
Freud, Sigmund. "Medusa's Head." In his Collected Papers.
Gilbert, Sandra, and Susan Gubar. The Madwoman in the At-
cic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagi-
New York: Pantheon, 1944.
———. The Return of the Native. Ed. James Gindin. New
Citadel, 1969.
Heuscher, Julius. A Psychiatric Study of Myths and Fairy
Kintner, Elvan, ed. The Letters of Robert Browning and
Univ. Press, 1969.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude. The Raw and the Cooked. Trans. John
Weightman and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper,
1969.
McGann, Jerome. "The Beauty of the Medusa: A Study in
Romantic Literary Iconology." Studies in Romanticism 11
Miller, J. Hillis. "Ariadne's Thread: Repetition and Narrative
Line." In Interpretation of Narrative. Ed. Mario Valdés
Morris, William. The Collected Works. 24 vols. New York:
Longmans, 1910-1915.
Pope, Alexander. The Poems of Alexander Pope. New Haven:

Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979–
———. Maude: Prose and Verse. Chicago: Herbert Stone,
1897.
Ruskin, John. The Complete Works. Ed. E. T. Cook and Alex-
Scott, Walter, ed. Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border. Ed. T. F.
Sonstroem, David. Rossetti and the Fair Lady. Middletown,
Stewart, Garrett. Dickens and the Trials of Imagination. Cam-
Stoker, Bram. "The Secret of the Growing Gold." In The
Surtees, Virginia. The Paintings and Drawings of D. G. Rossetti
1971.
Gosse and Thomas James Wise. 20 vols. London: Heinemann,
1925–27.
Tennyson, Alfred. The Complete Poetical Works. Boston:
Houghton, 1898.
Thackeray, William Makepeace. Vanity Fair. Ed. Geoffrey
Yeats, William Butler. The Collected Poems. New York: Mac-
millan, 1956.
Wilde, Oscar. Poems. Ed. Temple Scott. New York: Brentano's,
1923.
Willoughby, L. A. Dante Gabriel Rossetti and German