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Note

Bone Lace and Donne's "bracelet of bright haire about the bone"

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Phillips D. Carleton long ago suggested that Donne's famous reference in "The Relique" to "a bracelet of bright haire about the bone" (6)—as well as to "that subtile wreath of haire, which crowns my arme" (3) in "The Funerall"[1]—derives from his knowledge of a lock of woman's hair from the grave of Arthur and Guinevere as described in the *Speculum Ecclesiae* of Giraldus Cambrensis.[2] Jerry Leath Mills later argued that Donne could also have encountered this detail in John Leland's *Assertio inclytissimi Arturii* (1544), translated in 1582 by Richard Robinson as *A Learned and True Assertion of the original, Life, Actes, and death of . . . Prince Arthure*.[3] Each of these sources bears witness to the practice, current in Donne's own day and later, of using human hair as a memorial memento or love token. Thus, for example, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Egeus complains to Lysander that he has

[1]Quotations from Donne's "The Relique" and "The Funerall" are taken from *The Complete Poetry of John Donne*, ed. John T. Shawcross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967); line numbers are cited parenthetically.

[2]Carleton, "John Donne's 'Bracelet of Bright Hair about the Bone,'" *Modern Language Notes* 56.5 (1941): 366–368.

[3]Mills, "Donne's Bracelets of Bright Hair: An Analogue," *Notes and Queries* 15 (1968): 368.

"stol'n the impression of [Hermia's] fantasy / With bracelets of thy hair."[4]

Another possible source or physical analogue for Donne's image may derive from the fact that hair and thread could be used interchangeably in the making of love-tokens or sewn items bespeaking affection. This practice too could find literary expression. Margaret Sleeman cites a medieval Catalan ballad in which a young girl sews a shirt for her lover while waiting for his return; "When she runs out of gold thread, she sews with one of her hairs. . . ."[5] Such a near-equivalency of hair and thread as materials for crafted expressions of love or for fashionable dress may shed light on a non-literary source which Donne could have encountered firsthand: the making of bone lace. Bone lace was "lace, usually made of linen thread, made by knitting upon a pattern marked by pins, with bobbins originally made of bone."[6] In *Twelfth Night*, Duke Orsino alludes to "the free maids that weave their thread with bones" (2.4.45). Bone lace could be brightly colored, Randle Cotgrave's dictionary specifically linking the French *bobine* with bright thread; a bobine was "*a quill for a spinning wheele; also, a skaine, or hanke of gold or siluer thread.*"[7] John Nichols's *Progresses of Queen Elizabeth* records that "among the [queen's] New Years' gifts of 1577–8, a kyrtell of white satten (presented by the marquess of Northampton), is 'layed rownde abought with a bone lace of Venice golde.'"[8]

Weavers of Donne's era also employed human hair taken from corpses.[9] Shakespeare (who had lodged with the Huguenot tire-maker Christopher Mountjoy) recalls in sonnet 68 that "the golden tresses of

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[4]William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 1.1.32–33. Future references to works by Shakespeare are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[5]Sleeman, "Medieval Hair Tokens," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 17.4 (1981): 329–330. Sleeman mentions "The Relique" on p. 325.

[6]*Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. "bone-lace," 1.

[7]Cotgrave, *A dictionarie of the French and English tongues* (London: Adam Islip, 1611), s. v. "bobine."

[8]Quoted in M. Jourdain, "Lace as Worn in England Until the Accession of James I," *Burlington Magazine* 10.45 (1906): 168.

[9]Charles Nicholl, *The Lodger Shakespeare: His Life on Silver Street* (New York: Penguin, 2009), p. 161.

the dead, / The right of sepulchers, were shorn away / To live a second life on second head" (5–7), while in *The Merchant of Venice* Bassanio likewise refers to "those crisped snaky golden locks" which were "often known / To be the dowry of a second head, / The skull that bred them in the sepulcher" (3.2.92, 94–96). The use of hair from a corpse to adorn a youthful beauty would have been a *discordia concors* not lost upon Donne, whose poetic attention so often returned to the mingled realities of love and death. Such a skein of golden hair coiled on a bone bobbin to later beautify the living could easily be transposed to an image of similar hair encircling the wrist bone of the beloved dead.

E. L. Epstein concludes his close analysis of the sound pattern of Donne's line in "The Relique" by noting that its "'movement' is essentially metaphorical, a sudden sinking of the spirit from the smiling notions of 'bracelet' and 'bright hair' to the grimness of 'bone.'"[10] The term "bone lace" seems suggested in the line by the presence of the word "bone" itself, with "lace" implied by reversing the "l" and assonantal "a" in "bracelet." The bone imagery may further extend to a pun on "stay" (11), in that the bracelet not only prompts the lovers' "stay" or brief moment together on Judgment Day but also, as an amorous "device" (9), supports or upholds their love through time as bone stays upheld and strengthened garments. Given the growing number of weavers in London in the first quarter of the seventeenth century who supplied lace for decorating elaborate finery (perhaps including his own clerical robes), it is not impossible for Donne to have known of gold or silver thread, or possibly strands of blonde or silver hair, wound like a bracelet on bone bobbins used for the making of bone lace. His poetic image in "The Relique" may thus have been informed not only by his knowledge of the grave of Arthur but by actually having seen something very like his "bracelet of bright haire about the bone."

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[10]Epstein, *Language and Style* (London: Routledge, 1978), p. 33.