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Hair: (A) matter that matters

Is hair actually that important? As it frames our face, it is one of the first things, if not *the* first thing, we notice when we encounter another person. Thus, it surely has a significant influence on how we estimate our contemporaries. However, in the Victorian era, its significance might have been even greater, because for a Victorian, a person's character and personality were thought to be visible, readable, in their body. The pseudo-science of phrenology as well as the theories on race and criminality of the time make that abundantly clear.

A person's hair, as Galia Ofek remarks, is one of the few body parts usually uncovered and thus constantly visible and readable. Therefore, it bore special significance: Ofek notes that hair determined how a person was esteemed by others and suggests it functioned as both a signal for character traits and as a discursive sign in the negotiation of gender roles.¹ In consequence, her conclusions regarding the representation of hair in Victorian *novels* inform several of my interpretations, but my analysis focuses on Victorian Arthurian *poetry*, specifically that of Tennyson, Arnold and Morris in the 1850s and 60s.

The middle of the 19th century can be described as an intensively Arthurian period, both in visual art and in poetry.² Generally, Alfred Lord Tennyson is heralded as the poet who modernized the legend for the Victorians, by 'ma[king sexual] morality [...] central to

¹ Galia Ofek, *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture*, 1; ix-x.

² Mark Girouard, *Chivalry and the English Gentleman: The Return to Camelot*, 180. The extent of this can be seen in Christine Poulson, *The Quest for the Grail: Arthurian Legend in British Art, 1840-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[...] both the kingdom and the home'.³ As a result, the fall of Camelot becomes entirely Guinevere's fault, Christine Poulson notes.⁴ I will discuss below how both her sensuality and her repentance are represented by her hair. Tennyson was possibly the most influential of the three poets I discuss; Poulson claims that bad reviews for his more Romantic works of the 1830-40s were one of the reasons why he did not publish Arthuriana again until the first *Idylls* of 1859, in which he had adapted to the public opinion.⁵ From then on, his engagement with the Arthurian legend continued in the same fashion until a final edition of the *Idylls* appeared in 1885, so that he had both the longest and most positive public exposure. While the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, to which William Morris belonged, produced a wealth of (often sensual) Arthurian art and influenced the public image of Arthurian characters to a great deal, Tennyson's Arthurian cycle with its moralistic tone expressed the more puritan spirit of the times, in contrast to the more forgiving attitude of Matthew Arnold and the much more sensual approach of William Morris.⁶ Which is possibly why, compared to the extensive body of scholarly work on Tennyson's poetry, Morris' and Arnold's poems have received less attention. Nevertheless, an abundant and/or peculiar use of hair imagery to transmit diverse messages can be found in any of the poems discussed here.

I have worked mainly on Tennyson's 'Merlin and Vivien', Lancelot and Elaine' and 'Guinevere' (1859), as well as 'The Holy Grail' (1869) and 'The Last Tournament' (1872), as well as Arnold's 'Tristram and Iseult' (in *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems*, 1852) and Morris' 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb' (in *The Defence of*

³ Rob Gossedge and Stephen Knight, "The Arthur of the Sixteenth to Nineteenth Centuries", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Arthurian Legend*, 103–19, 114.

⁴ Poulson, *Quest*, 55; see also her article "'That Most Beautiful of Dreams': Tristram and Isoud in British Art of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", in *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, 1514, 325–56, 332.

⁵ Poulson, *Quest*, 50-2.

⁶ David Newsome, *The Victorian World Picture: Perceptions and Introspections in an Age of Change*, 184-187; Inga Bryden, "All Dressed Up: Revivalism and the Fashion for Arthur in Victorian Culture", *Arthuriana*, 21.1 (2011), 28–41, 32.

Guenevere and Other Poems, 1858), the latter of which was inspired by a Rossetti painting.⁷ Critical commentaries of all texts tend to focus either on intertextual relationships, on the poems' moralism or sensuality, or on the politics of gender, but my investigation will take the conservative, patriarchal moral ideology described in the latter kind of criticism as a point of departure and examine its workings in images of hair, which 'ha[s] a symbolic status and can be interpreted as a system of signs', just as clothes can be.⁸ After studying in detail passages of the poems, chiefly of Tennyson and Morris, where images of hair appear as alternatively erotic or polluted matter, I will consider the role of hair as a sign of moral status, a process in which intertextual references to literature, myth and contemporary 'science' are joined. Finally, the potential of hair imagery to align characters will be examined in relation to Arnold's poem. For the sake of consistency, I use Tennyson's spelling for all character names, unless I quote directly.

1. Erotic Hair

Adult women in Victorian Britain were expected to put their hair up; 'loose and dishevelled hair [...] denote[d] "fallen" sexuality', and this can be traced in the poems which show Arthurian women with loose hair.⁹ For example, in order to pacify Merlin after her outburst, Tennyson's Vivien lets her emotions and her hair unravel, displaying her femininity to seduce Merlin: 'the braid/ Slipt and uncoiled itself, she wept afresh'.¹⁰ Similarly, 'the brown locks of Vivian's hair [...] play'd on her flush'd cheek' in Arnold's version, and Morris' Guinevere captivates her audience by performatively letting her hair loose as she narrates.¹¹

But shouting, loosed out, see now! all my hair,
And trancedly stood watching the west wind run

⁷ The inspiration for the latter poem was a painting by Rossetti; see James P. Carley, "Introduction", in James P. Carley, ed., *Arthurian Poets: Matthew Arnold and William Morris*, 1-22, 13; Poulson, *Quest*, 81.

⁸ Bryden defends her analysis of Victorian medievalist dress thusly, 29.

⁹ Ofek, 66, see also 13-4.

¹⁰ Alfred Tennyson, 'Merlin and Vivien', in *Idylls of the King*, edited by J.M. Gray, 142-67, ll. 886-7.

¹¹ Matthew Arnold, 'Tristram and Iseult', in *The Oxford Authors: Matthew Arnold*, 109-30, Part III, ll. 168-9.

With faintest half-heard breathing sound – why there
I lose my head e'en now *in doing this* [...]¹²

In this action, she unites images of female sexuality and madness, as Robert L. Stallman also suggests.¹³ This behaviour is a trait of her seductive personality; Lancelot recalls a matching habit of hers in 'King Arthur's Tomb': 'Guenevere/ Loved to sit still among the flowers [...] hair loosen'd, for she said, [...] that its fairness might/ Draw up the wind sooner to cool her head.'¹⁴ Regarding Tennyson's earlier, romantic poetry, Marion Shaw remarks that his alluring female characters suffer from the 'neurosis of the ordinary woman,' unlike the supernatural Romantic *femme fatales*, and Morris' Guinevere apparently subscribes to the same idea.¹⁵ The dangerously seductive woman here is a mortal with fits of erotic madness, not a mythical serpent, but that only makes her more threatening, I would argue, since this image is much closer to home.

Once a woman's hair is unbridled, the lover can touch it. 'O golden hair, with which I used to play/ Not knowing!' laments Tennyson's Arthur to his unfaithful wife.¹⁶ Morris' Lancelot makes the erotic connection explicit when he recalls '[t]ouching her hair and hand and mouth'.¹⁷ More than just an accessible body part, the lover's hair can stand as a synecdoche or fetish for her whole body.¹⁸ It can embrace: 'she would let me wind/ Her hair around my neck', Lancelot remembers, and later he begs 'fling/ Your arms and hair about

¹² William Morris, 'The Defence of Guenevere', in *The Defence of Guenevere and Other Poems*, 1-15, ll. 129-32, my emphasis.

¹³ Robert L. Stallman, "The Lovers' Progress: An Investigation of William Morris' 'The Defence of Guenevere' and 'King Arthur's Tomb'", *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 15.4 (1975), 657-70, 661.

¹⁴ William Morris, 'King Arthur's Tomb', in *Defence of Guenevere*, 19-37, ll. 24-28.

¹⁵ Marion Shaw, *Alfred Lord Tennyson*, 105, 107. For the influence of the Keatsian *femme fatale* on Tennyson's early work, see also Clyde L. de Ryals, "The 'Fatal Woman' Symbol in Tennyson", *PMLA*, 438-43, 439.

¹⁶ Alfred Tennyson, 'Guinevere', in *Idylls*, 269-87, ll. 544-5.

¹⁷ Morris, 'Tomb', l. 83.

¹⁸ Ofek, 20, 26.

me'.¹⁹ In her analysis, Elisabeth Gitter names this embrace a 'hair tent': chiefly an 'erotic mystery' that can 'shelter her lover', which is what Morris' Lancelot asks for.²⁰

Remarkably, in the *Idylls*, rather than with the hair of Vivien, the serpentine temptress, sexual hair-play happens with Merlin's beard.²¹ As she has climbs onto his knee, Vivien makes 'with her right a comb of pearl to part/ The lists of such a beard as youth gone out/ Had left in ashes'.²² Ofek names beards as symbols of masculinity, and like Buckler, I assume that the long grey beard represents Merlin's patriarchal status, the power and/of knowledge he possesses, which Vivien covets: "'And lo, I clothe myself with wisdom," [she said and] drew/ The vast and shaggy mantle of his beard/ Across her neck and bosom to her knee'.²³ Not only does she state her aspiration here, she also invokes the trope of seductive hair tent capturing an innocent victim, casting Merlin flatteringly in the role of the seducer as she 'call'd herself a gilded summer fly/ Caught in a great old tyrant spider's web'.²⁴ She is inverting the gender associations of hair seduction.

Moreover, Merlin is constantly feminized in the poem, as the object of sexual pursuit and ultimately as the victim of his feelings and sensual body. Thaïs E. Morgan ascribes to him 'an emasculating combination of desire and melancholy'.²⁵ In addition, Gitter remarks that in the image of the strangling hair of the dangerous woman,

[t]he language of the sheltering hair tent is [...] 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.²⁶

¹⁹ Ibid., ll. 44-5, 191-2.

²⁰ Elisabeth G. Gitter, "The Power of Women's Hair in the Victorian Imagination", *PMLA*, 936-54, 942.

²¹ See my section on 'dirty hair' for Vivien's snake-likeness.

²² Tennyson, 'Merlin', ll. 242-4.

²³ Ofek, 3; William E. Buckler, *Man and his Myths: Tennyson's Idylls of the King in Critical Context*, 97; Tennyson, 'Merlin', ll. 253-5

²⁴ Gitter, 943; Tennyson, 'Merlin', ll. 256-7.

²⁵ Thaïs E. Morgan, "The Poetry of Victorian Masculinities", in *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian Poetry*, 203-27, 212.

²⁶ Gitter, 950.

Therefore, Merlin loses his identity twofold, once by giving in to Vivien's 'serpentine embrace', and once more by becoming femininely passive, the figure whose hair is played with – even if it is a beard. In a similar vein, Linda Shires argues that Tennyson brings male anxiety to the surface with his Merlin because his 'disempowerment [...] prefigures the fall of Camelot'.²⁷ Moreover, Merlin's loss of self-control robs him of his morality, patriarchal authority, and identity, as Buckler notes:²⁸ he is 'lost to life and use and name and fame'²⁹ – much like the Victorian Fallen Woman, as Linda K. Hughes also mentions – after his seduction by Vivien.³⁰

Seduction of a different sort occurs in Morris' 'Defence of Guenevere', which presents the queen as a kind of siren or mermaid. No explanation is given for Guinevere's 'wet hair' at the beginning of the poem, but the sexually evocative image of wet hair connected with bodily motion recurs throughout her speech.³¹ In tears, she 'wrung her hair', and the motion extends to a 'passionate twisting' of her whole body.³² This resembles Vivien's serpentine clinging, but is less threatening because it is essentially autoerotic. Guinevere also describes a beach scene, her 'hair like sea-weed', a shimmering, wet mass, and in her final pledge of beauty-as-innocence, she fully aligns herself with the ocean, a 'breast [...] Like waves of purple sea'.³³ With this maritime vocabulary and her hair-play, she resembles the siren who sings and combs her hair; 'an alluring but deadly snare' to lure

²⁷ Linda M. Shires, "Patriarchy, Dead Men, and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*", *Victorian Poetry*, 401–19, 408. Interestingly, she notes that the Victorians probably felt a 'cultural need for a virile, wise, dependable father figure' due to two weak Kings followed by a Queen on the British throne: *Ibid.*, 403.

²⁸ Buckler, *Man and His Myths*, 109. See also Derek Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance: A Short Introduction*, 126.

²⁹ Tennyson, 'Merlin', l. 968.

³⁰ Linda K. Hughes, "'All That Makes a Man': Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* (1859) as a Primer for Modern Gentlemen", *Arthurian Interpretations*, 54–63, 58.

³¹ Morris, 'Defence', l. 2. Both Stallman and Hanson draw attention to the foregrounding of the body in 'Defence', but only the former mentions hair, and neither treats it explicitly. Stallman, 658; Ingrid Hanson, "'Bring Me That Kiss': Incarnation and Truth in William Morris's *The Defence of Guenevere, and Other Poems*", *English*, 349–74, 354.

³² Morris, 'Defence', ll. 58, 60.

³³ *Ibid.*, ll. 100, 227–8.

sailors into the shallows, as Gitter describes her.³⁴ Stallman considers Guinevere's use of 'the sexual and archetypal imagery of the sea' in her defence, but stops short of the possible conclusion that Guinevere's wet hair and her association with slick seaweed and the ocean all refer to her sexual willingness and thus point to her assumed sexual "nature".³⁵ In a similar vein, the adulteress Isolt of Ireland appears in Arnold's poem with seawater 'spray [...] on [her] cloak and hair'.³⁶

However, hair does not even have to be connected to the body to function as an erotic signifier. As synecdoche, the gift of a lock of hair symbolizes giving oneself to a lover.³⁷ Such presents of hair could be worked into jewellery and then worn as a permanent physical link.³⁸ In the process, hair could also become commoditized and thus desexualized; the allusions to hair tokens in the *Idylls*, however, clearly retain the personal erotic significance. Vivien aspires to this when she fantasizes about attaining 'one curl of Arthur's golden beard', and an extreme version occurs in 'The Holy Grail', where the nun girds Galahad with a belt wrought from her own hair.³⁹

the wan sweet maiden, shore away
Clean from her forehead all that wealth of hair
Which made a silken mat-work for her feet;
And out of this she plaited broad and long
A strong sword-belt [.]⁴⁰

She thus pledges herself to him in a kind of spiritual marriage, but also endows him with her own femininity.⁴¹ The two mystics identify with one another and symbolically fuse: 'as she

³⁴ Gitter, 938, 943. The performativity of Guinevere's defence also recalls Scheherazade, who captivates her audience 'through calculated degrees of self-revelation' in order to stall death: Carley, 10. For a detailed account of her performative strategy, see Stallman, 659-665.

³⁵ Stallman, 660.

³⁶ Arnold, 'Tristram', II, l. 18. An Irigarayan reading of the poems might provide further insights.

³⁷ Ofek, 26. Gitter, 938.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁹ Tennyson, 'Merlin', l. 58.

⁴⁰ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Holy Grail', in *Idylls*, 206-30, ll. 149-53.

⁴¹ Linda K. Hughes, "Scandals of Faith and Gender in Tennyson's Grail Poems", in *The Grail: A Casebook*, ed. by Dhira B. Mahoney (New York: Garland, 2000), 1510, 415-45, 429; see also Shires, 410.

spake/ She sent the deathless passion in her eyes/ Through him, and made him hers' (ll. 162-4). As Shires notes, through this fusion Galahad becomes androgynous and thus able to achieve the Grail, but there is also an inherent threat in this process.⁴² By means of her hair, the nun is holding his sword; in a Freudian reading of the sword as a phallic symbol, this act may evoke castration anxiety.⁴³ Galahad's sword-belt illustrates this fear of being taken over and emasculated, not by a seductive woman such as Vivien but by religious hysteria, which is also coded as feminine. In both cases, the close identification of women's hair with their sexual "nature" results in a tangle of erotic and threatening strands.

2. Dirty Hair

The association of Tennyson's Vivien with a snake, which was explored by numerous critics, links her to at least two mythical women, Eve and Medusa.⁴⁴ In Victorian depictions, Eve's hair is often tangled with the snake; this points to the cultural identification of the woman seeking knowledge/power with the devil; the literally snake-haired Medusa was also a popular theme in Victorian Art.⁴⁵ Similar to the hair-belt, the snake-haired woman evokes castration anxiety due to the function of hair as phallic symbol. Ofek relates this outbreak of male fear to the destabilization of male identity by historical developments such as the emerging suffragist movement.⁴⁶ The resulting fear of women was projected onto their hair. Tennyson's Vivien plays with this association complex of hair, snakes and the devil: when '[t]he snake of gold slid[es] from her hair', she is acting vulnerable to entice Merlin.⁴⁷

⁴² Shires, 410.

⁴³ Tennyson's view of celibacy, initially positive, became more troubled over time, because it 'could also be a mark of effeminacy – an absence of "proper" sexual desire': Hughes, "Scandals", 417.

⁴⁴ For instance, Knight, 160; Poulson, *Quest*, 145-8; Gordon S. Haight, "Tennyson's Merlin", *Studies in Philology*, 44.3 (1947), 549–66, 551-2.

⁴⁵ Ofek, 72, 16. Tennyson links Vivien to the devil/snake by alluding to *Paradise Lost*, see J. M. Gray, "Notes on Merlin and Vivien", in Tennyson, *Idylls*, 337.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 15. See also Robert L. Patten, "The Contemporaneity of 'The Last Tournament'", *Victorian Poetry*, 47.1 (2009), 259–83, 279; Linda H. Peterson, "Tennyson and the Ladies", *Victorian Poetry*, 47.1 (2009), 25–43, p 26, 34, p 38-41.

⁴⁷ Tennyson, 'Merlin', l. 886

However, hair gets dirtied with more than just reptiles, sea-weed and (salt) water. As he returns to Guinevere in 'King Arthur's Tomb', Lancelot remembers 'her hair/Was mingled with the rushes on the floor' at one point during their affair, and when she, now a nun, finds him on the tomb, she bends over him 'till some of her long hair/ Brush'd on the new-cut stone'.⁴⁸ Rather than spun gold, hair seems to resemble a broom here; it becomes associated with dirt possibly through the following displacement of metaphors. As Gitter puts it, '[t]he language of decay and corruption [implies] that women's hair [...] conceals an underlying and sinister filth', and thus hair was thought to reveal moral or sexual defilement.⁴⁹ This can easily be sublimated to physical dirt, pollution and illness, as Arthur demonstrates in 'Guinevere', when he describes her as 'a new disease' and 'polluted'.⁵⁰ As Ofek notes, hair was also seen medically as transmitter of disease and excretive organ, so it was assumed to transmit physical pollution.⁵¹ For instance, the Victorian practise of using hair pieces was vilified for fear of infection, not only with disease but with the untidiness and low morals of the underclass women who provided the hair.⁵² Since the racism, classism and misogyny of Victorian science attributed criminality and general vice to the lower classes, especially women, it is easy to imagine that, in the public consciousness, physical and moral infection easily blended into one.⁵³ Thus, I would argue, arose the fear that immorality, like physical dirt, might be transmitted through hair. What creates a woman's seductive beauty also carries the dirt and pollution of her sexual sins.

In addition, Richard Altick describes how the increased use of false hair pieces strengthened the constant link of blonde hair with gold and hence greed; so 'fair' women

⁴⁸ Morris, 'Tomb', ll. 114-5, 187-8.

⁴⁹ Gitter, 947.

⁵⁰ Tennyson, 'Guinevere', l. 515, l. 552.

⁵¹ Ofek, p 54-5.

⁵² Ibid., 10.

⁵³ Ibid., 53.

could also be marred by vulgarity – to the extent of prostitution.⁵⁴ Therefore, the fear of infection by hair might also refer to venereal disease. It was believed that prostitutes spread VD's intentionally in order to 'undermin[e] the social structure'; thus, as a socially destructive, polluting fallen woman, Guinevere is strongly linked to them.⁵⁵ Her repentance, then, evokes the cultural persona of Mary Magdalene, the penitent prostitute, who also was a popular subject for Pre-Raphaelite art.

It comes as no surprise, then, that a painting of this saint appears in 'King Arthur's Tomb'. Reminiscing about her guilty love, Guinevere recalls 'Mary Magdalen repenting there,/ Her dimmed eyes scorch'd and red at sight of hell/ So hardly 'scaped, no gold light on her hair'.⁵⁶ Magdalene's dulled hair may represent her tainted body and sinful past; the loose hair common to depictions of her points to her sexual sin.⁵⁷ Accordingly, when Tennyson's Guinevere receives Arthur in the nunnery where she has taken refuge, she performs bodily repentance. Her hair and body, though externally beautiful, lie in the symbolic darkness and dirt of sin as she

grovelled with her face against the floor:
There with her milkwhite arms and shadowy hair
She made her face a darkness from the King:
And in the darkness heard his armed feet
Pause by her [...]⁵⁸

Tennyson is clearly alluding to the traditional image of Mary Magdalene washing Christ's feet with her hair. Although the actual biblical scene involves an unidentified woman sinner who 'wept at [Christ's] feet, wiped the tears with her hair [...] and obtained forgiveness', the

⁵⁴ Richard D. Altick, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*, 315. See also Gitter, 943.

⁵⁵ Shaw, 124.

⁵⁶ Morris, 'Tomb', ll. 314-6.

⁵⁷ As a result of the sexual and pollutant-retaining qualities attributed to it, reformed prostitutes had their hair cut off when they were accepted into Victorian 'Magdalen houses'. Ofek, 66.

⁵⁸ Tennyson, 'Guinevere', ll. 411-6.

person was commonly identified as the ex-prostitute Mary Magdalene, and thus emerged the image of hair ‘as a locus of both sexual sin and redemption’.⁵⁹

Similar references occur in both Tennyson’s Vivien and Morris’ Guinevere. In the course of her seduction, Vivien positions herself at Merlin’s feet as well and even kisses them. During the poem, she is repeatedly referred to as a ‘harlot’ - it is just that, unlike Magdalene, she remains an unreformed one.⁶⁰ Morris’s Guinevere also enacts the Magdalenean repentance, at least verbally: “[S]peak to me, Christ! I kiss, kiss, kiss Your feet; / Ah! now I weep!”⁶¹ In contrast to Vivien’s mocking laughter, Guinevere’s tears of relief suggest that she, too, has obtained forgiveness and will be cleansed of her defilement. By throwing herself at the feet of her husband, who represents god (see below), Guinevere may become ‘fair’ again.⁶² In other words, in addition to its functions and meanings as a physical object, hair can also become a moral qualifier and reveal the state of a character’s soul. This happens chiefly through its colour.

3. Hair Colour in Cultural Context

The first version of ‘Merlin and Vivien’ was published together with ‘Enid’ as *The True and the False*, so ‘woman is stereotyped for ill and good’ from the beginning.⁶³ With this set-up, Tennyson participates in the cultural process which confines women between two extreme positions, angel or whore.⁶⁴ His ideal women are devoted nurses and long-suffering wives or chaste lovers, like Enid and Elaine, and both are marked by fair hair and blue eyes.⁶⁵ This

⁵⁹ Ofek, 66.

⁶⁰ Stephen Knight, *Arthurian Literature and Society*, 164. See also Poulson, *Quest*, 216.

⁶¹ Morris, ‘Tomb’, ll. 181-2. Also observed by Stallman, 668.

⁶² See Gitter, 943; Buckler, *Man*, 137-8; Girouard, 182; Poulson, *Quest*, 56.

⁶³ Gossedge & Knight, 113. See also Girouard, 182; Peterson, 40; Shaw, 134; Norman Vance, “Heroic Myth and Women in Victorian Literature”, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 12, Heroes and the Heroic Special Number (1982), 169–85, 174. Arthur L Simpson Jr. argues that Tennyson’s view of cultural prejudice was more critical than usually assumed, “Elaine the Unfair, Elaine the Unlovable: The Socially Destructive Artist/Woman in *Idylls of the King*”, *Modern Philology*, 341–62, 348.

⁶⁴ Shaw, 125-6. See also Ryal, 441-3.

⁶⁵ Raymond Chapman, *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*, 51. See also Clinton Machann, “Tennyson’s King Arthur and the Violence of Manliness”, *Victorian Poetry*, 199–226, 206, for the construction of gender roles in the warrior/nurse paradigm. Simpson too identifies Elaine as nurse, 351.

points to ‘Tennyson’s consistent equivalence of dark and light with the presence or absence of sin’ – fair or dark hair becomes a symbol of social evaluation.⁶⁶ In the Victorian imagination, Ofek states, ‘fairness is linked to the pure, childlike state’, and signals a woman is ‘infantile, helpless, asexual and passive’.⁶⁷ Thus, even though Elaine embarks on a search for Lancelot and offers to be his mistress – ‘I care not to be wife/ But to be with you still [...] to follow you thro’ the world’ – her actions are usually not seen as transgressive, because she is blonde and therefore seen as childlike, thus harmless.⁶⁸

It can be argued that ‘Lancelot and Elaine’ is based on a moral dichotomy, a contrast between innocent Elaine, who is described as ‘fair’ eleven times in the poem, and sinful Guinevere, as perceived by Lancelot.⁶⁹ The traditional connection of beauty and moral goodness in the word ‘fair’ had been challenged repeatedly but was still retained in the Victorian age, so Elaine could be golden-haired and pure while Guinevere is golden-haired and corrupt.⁷⁰ In consequence, when marriage is unavailable to Elaine, the only path of purity left is death, or rather, she remains pure only because she dies instead of becoming Lancelot’s mistress.⁷¹ Elaine’s ‘passion remains unconsummated, unlike Guinevere’s,’ and her sexuality is contained by death before it ‘threatens male control and male meaning’.⁷² It is because of this, death before corruption, that she remains ‘fair’ and childlike. Unlike the loose hair of adult women, which is read as sexual license, Elaine’s ‘bright hair streaming down’ on her death barge is read not as a sign of loose sexuality, but of virginal purity.⁷³ Children wore

⁶⁶ Knight, 164.

⁶⁷ Ofek, 61, 62.

⁶⁸ Alfred Tennyson, ‘Lancelot and Elaine’, in *Idylls*, ll. 932-4. The non-ideal qualities of Elaine are treated at length, but sadly judgementally, by Simpson.

⁶⁹ Buckler, *Man*, 120. See also Elaine Jordan, *Alfred Tennyson*, 164.

⁷⁰ See Bryden, 33.

⁷¹ Buckler, *Man*, 112.

⁷² Ann F. Howey, ‘Reading Elaine: Marjorie Richardson’s and L.M. Montgomery’s Red-Haired Lily Maids’, *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, 86–109, 91; *Ibid.*, 92. Shaw, 131.

⁷³ Tennyson, ‘Lancelot’, l. 1149.

their hair loose,⁷⁴ and she dies a child, not a woman. Nevertheless, her brightness creates a contrast to the (blonde, but) ‘shadowy hair’ and moral character of Guinevere. They are also contrasted by Elaine’s denial of the body until death, when her hair is ‘streaming *down*’, passively, versus Guinevere’s sinful, actively sensual body.⁷⁵

Although a mother, Arnold’s Isolt of Brittany is also infantilized, chiefly through identification with her children: ‘golden hair’ is attributed once to her and twice to them.⁷⁶ Both she and Elaine are feminine because they are nurses and childlike because they are storytellers: Elaine fantasizes over Lancelot’s shield and Isolt narrates Vivien’s story to her children. They also both lose a lover to a sexually aggressive rival, but while Guinevere is still (deceptively) blonde, Isolt of Ireland has ‘raven hair’ in Arnold and ‘black-blue Irish hair’ in Tennyson.⁷⁷

According to Ofek, dark hair evoked ‘a strong, independent, energetic and therefore threatening woman’.⁷⁸ Whereas Tennyson’s Irish Isolt is certainly strong and threatening – ‘her hand is hot/ With ill desires’ – Arnold’s acts under compulsion of the love-potion, and her lone crossing of the sea to attend dying Tristram shows her strength and independence in a more favourable light.⁷⁹ Not only women are typified by their hair colour, however. A strong contrast emerges between Tennyson’s Arthur, idealized sun-god, and all-too-human Lancelot, and it is partly expressed in hair symbolism. Linda Hughes points out how the three meanings of ‘fair’ all apply to Arthur: he is beautiful, just and blonde, fair both in appearance and moral greatness.⁸⁰ While he embodies ‘feminine’ qualities such as chastity,⁸¹ the

⁷⁴ Ofek, 3.

⁷⁵ Shaw, 132.

⁷⁶ Arnold, ‘Tristram’, I, l. 51, I, l. 341; III, l. 34.

⁷⁷ Ibid., I, l. 123; Alfred Tennyson, ‘The Last Tournament’, in *Idylls*, 248-68, l. 403.

⁷⁸ Ofek, 62. She gives examples of Pre-Raphaelite painting, where dark women appear as lustful and murderous. Bryden also comments on Pre-Raphaelite hair, 35.

⁷⁹ Tennyson, ‘Tournament’, ll. 413-4.

⁸⁰ Linda K. Hughes, “‘Come Again, and Thrice as Fair’: Reading Tennyson’s Beginning”, in *King Arthur’s Modern Return*, ed. by Debra N. Mancoff, 51-64, 55-6, 59.

resulting criticism of Arthur as unmanly can be countered by emphasizing his masculinist imperialist action.⁸²

But Arthur's masculinity is also assured by his 'divine' qualities. He is golden and bright like the sun: Tristram describes '[h]is hair, a sun that rayed from off a brow' and '[t]he golden beard that clothed his lips with light'.⁸³ Moreover, as Poulson notes, he comes to and leaves his realm by the sea, like sunrise and sunset on the British Isles.⁸⁴ This links him to solar myth, the story of a sun god who dies and is reborn, which was popular at the time, as well as to Christ.⁸⁵ Another Judeo-Christian allusion, according to Poulson, is the scene in 'Guinevere' in which he towers over his repentant wife and forgives her: his 'blessing and the flowing beard give Arthur a patriarchal, even Jehovah-like, appearance'.⁸⁶ In this vein, golden-haired and -bearded Arthur becomes a divine being: 'this king is fair/ Beyond the race of Britons and of men', his sister Bellicent describes him, thus conflating his golden, 'fair' appearance and his personality.⁸⁷

However, Arthur unites the imperial image of the vanquisher of lesser "heathen" peoples with his Christ-like persona. His Anglo-Saxon look attests to his alleged 'racial superiority': according to the racist pseudo-science of the Victorian era, blonde and blue-eyed Anglo-Saxon Britons were endowed with a natural propensity to rule over "heathen" peoples such as Celts, whose 'dark hair and eyes, and their short stature signified the moral and physical degeneracy typical of the lower and criminal classes'.⁸⁸ The dedicatee of the *Idylls*, Prince Consort Albert, was of Anglo-Saxon appearance; thus, Arthur in his 'fair' looks and

⁸¹ Elliot L. Gilbert, "The Female King: Tennyson's Arthurian Apocalypse", *PMLA*, 863–78. She provides an interesting discussion of the positive feminine attributes of Arthur. Shires even argues he can symbolize patriarchal authority threatened by female power, 406-17.

⁸² Machann, throughout.

⁸³ Tennyson, 'Tournament', l. 661, l. 663.

⁸⁴ Poulson, *Quest*, 233.

⁸⁵ For solar myth, see Hughes, "'Come Again'", 59; Poulson, *Quest*, p 227-33. For his Christ-like qualities, see Pearsall, *Arthurian Romance*, 135; Steven C. Dillon, "Milton and Tennyson's 'Guinevere'", *ELH*, 129–55, 144; Machann, 204; Shires, 409.

⁸⁶ Poulson, *Quest*, 218.

⁸⁷ Alfred Tennyson, 'The Coming of Arthur', in *Idylls*, 21-35, ll. 229-230.

⁸⁸ Hughes, "'Come Again'", 59; Poulson, *Quest*, 57.

morality is put on a wholly different level, destined to rule, both as an Anglo-Saxon identified with the Prince Consort and as a mythical ruler with divine qualities; and both of these justifications are visible in his hair and beard.⁸⁹

Unsurprisingly, Lancelot, who struggles and fails to adhere to Arthur's standards, has 'night-black hair', a face '[d]ark-splendid' and 'large black eyes'.⁹⁰ As a Celt, he is inherently inferior to Anglo-Saxon Arthur from a Victorian perspective, and in need of guidance and regulation. David Boyd links Arthur's clearing of the forests in 'The Coming of Arthur' to the spiritual 'light of his soul', which 'in the likeness of Arthur, comes into the dark realms of man's moral nature'.⁹¹ One can see Lancelot's soul as one 'dark realm' or a personification of the human weakness and ignorance which Arthur/Christ strives to illuminate. Fittingly, Tennyson himself suggested reading the *Idylls* allegorically, as 'the struggle of sense (Guinevere) and soul (Arthur) for what is most admirable in man (Lancelot)'.⁹² If Guinevere's tainted golden hair symbolizes corruption and Arthur's golden beard righteous masculine authority, Lancelot's dark complexion represents his "un-enlightened" state, caught in between.

In his analysis of the *Paradise Lost* references in 'Guinevere', Steven Dillon reads Tennyson's Lancelot as 'formally and delicately satanic – he who tempts Eve/Guinevere from Adam/Arthur'.⁹³ Certainly, Lancelot's dark hair provides an image for Guinevere's fall, when her 'white hand [...] wander'd from her own King's golden head,/ And lost itself in darkness'.⁹⁴ However, since Arthur can also represent God/Christ, he is placed above human, erring Lancelot and Guinevere. His 'speech to the fallen Queen is clearly related to the

⁸⁹ He had died shortly before the first publication. See Poulson, *Quest*, 56; Vance, 170.

⁹⁰ Alfred Tennyson, 'Balin and Balan', in *Idylls*, 125-41, l. 503; Tennyson, 'Lancelot', ll. 336, 829.

⁹¹ David L. Boyd, "Tennyson's Camelot Revisited: An Augustinian Approach to the *Idylls*", in *The Arthurian Tradition: Essays in Convergence*, 163-74, 168. He does not name the sun imagery directly.

⁹² Poulson, *Quest*, 53; Pearsall, 136; see also Girouard, 182.

⁹³ Dillon, 136.

⁹⁴ Tennyson, 'Balin', ll. 504-6.

judgment [...] upon Adam and Eve'.⁹⁵ Lancelot thus represents Adam, destined to struggle to redress his sin – or more exactly, the sin of his female mate, for unlike dark-haired women, Lancelot is not stigmatized as evil or 'wanderingly lewd'.⁹⁶ Instead, his laudable quality is constantly emphasized in 'Lancelot and Elaine', where the epithet 'fair' is used six times. In his case this can only refer to his courteous reputation, not his appearance; although Elaine is naïve and Guinevere possibly sarcastic when they call him so.

Conversely, Morris envisions a light-haired Lancelot: Guinevere remembers being distracted during mass by his 'red-golden hair'.⁹⁷ However, red hair was especially stigmatized among the Victorians, as Altick elaborates. From the 1850s onward, the Pre-Raphaelites somewhat challenged this view by painting both villainesses and saints with red hair; nevertheless, a link to sexual immorality remained. While having red hair was most unfortunate for women, even a red-headed man was expected to have vices. Yet, he could 'prove[...] himself a gentleman before a novel's end'.⁹⁸ Accordingly, Lancelot's red-golden hair may be an attribute of the fallible, but ultimately redeemable, hero: despite his sinful love, he will 'die a holy man', as Tennyson put it.⁹⁹ Men could reform, because they were not blamed for sin (as Eve/Guinevere was), and this links Tennyson's and Morris' Lancelot, despite the differences in their portrayal, within the broader cultural context.

4. Identification Realignment by Hair in Arnold's 'Tristram and Iseult'

Having discussed the shades of blonde, black, and red, now brown hair, as Arnold's Tristram and Vivien have, must be looked at. There seems to be no general consensus regarding the moral status of brown-haired people, which allows for the more ambiguous position of Arnold's Tristram. With his 'locks [...] yet brown', he is visually placed between his two

⁹⁵ Dillon, 142.

⁹⁶ Tennyson, 'Holy Grail', l. 148.

⁹⁷ Morris, 'Tomb', l. 306.

⁹⁸ Altick, 316, 321-3, 324-8, 328. The only actual red-head appearing in the poems discussed here is the heathen knight Palomides in *Defence*, whose '[r]ed heavy swinging hair' (Morris, 'Tomb', l. 339) emphasizes his wildness.

⁹⁹ Tennyson, 'Lancelot', l. 1418.

women, fair nurse Isolt of Brittany and black-haired adulteress Isolt of Ireland.¹⁰⁰ He does have redemptive qualities, such as genuine care for his wife, whom he sends to bed when he sees her exhausted from nursing him; still, she is ‘not the Iseult [he] desire[s]’.¹⁰¹ Arnold’s Tristram can be portrayed more sympathetically than Tennyson’s because Arnold retains the love-potion plot which makes the lovers guiltless, tragic figures. On the other hand, Arnold’s Vivien is a less ambiguous figure; like Tennyson’s, she is a seductress and ‘false fay’.¹⁰²

Yet, she is strongly linked with Tristram. She has ‘brown locks’, the same as he, and she also wears green when she pursues Merlin through the forest, recalling Tristram’s reputation as a hunter in ‘dark green forest-dress’.¹⁰³ Because of this, I would argue that Isolt of Brittany does not identify with Vivien when she tells this tale in order to come to terms with her life, as has been suggested.¹⁰⁴ Instead, she casts Tristram as Vivien. Arnold links the two by describing their hair with the same phrase, and the claims narrator Isolt makes for Vivien fit him, too. After the marriage, Tristram probably got ‘weary of [Isolt’s] love’, because he longed for his lover; like Vivien leaves Merlin to his death-sleep, Tristram left his wife when he died, and his widow is now imprisoned in her duties like the charmed Merlin in the magic circle.¹⁰⁵ It has been suggested that Tristram, when sick, is feminized by his pain and melancholy; I would extend the argument to claim that in this case, he can be represented as a female seducer, while Isolt chooses Merlin, the person knowing, yet doomed to be betrayed, with whom she identifies.¹⁰⁶ It is only by paying close attention to the functions of hair imagery that this interpretation arises.

Concluding Remarks

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, ‘Tristram’, I, l. 10.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., I, l. 8.

¹⁰² Ibid., III, l. 161.

¹⁰³ Ibid., III, l. 168, 175, 178; I, l. 16.

¹⁰⁴ William E. Buckler, *On the Poetry of Matthew Arnold: Essays in Critical Reconstruction*, 127; Carley, 4.

¹⁰⁵ Arnold, ‘Tristram’, III, l. 224.

¹⁰⁶ Morgan, 211.

In the previous sections, various associations of hair imagery have been pointed out. Loosened hair suggests the lapse of sexual restraint, and the touch of the hair is synonymous with the touch of the body, to the extent that it becomes a fetishistic substitute. It can also represent the bearer's characteristics. Merlin's beard stands for his wisdom and power, whereas the sexual "nature" of Vivien, Guinevere and Irish Isolt is represented by their loose, wet or dirty hair. The blonde hair of Elaine and Breton Isolt denotes their innocence, whereas Arthur's golden hair and beard emphasize his divine perfection, in contrast to Lancelot's inferiority and human faultiness. Racial and classist prejudice, social customs and fashions as well as myth and folklore feature in the cultural construction of the 'meaning' of a character's hair colour and hair style.

Therefore, this analysis of the use of hair imagery in Victorian Arthurian poetry opens up a view of multiple meanings. Perhaps it could even give an impulse to new interpretations, as suggested in the analysis of Arnold's poem: for example, a Kristevan reading of the connections between hair, dirt and disease, which could not be undertaken here, might yield new conclusions about the role of hair in the constitution of the self.

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