"Monster top-knots and balloon chignons": purity and contamination in the false hair trade

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> "[W]hen a lady buys false locks she little knows the curious and mysterious tale each individual hair possibly could tell her."[1]

> "Topographically considered, the [price] list does, of course, supply the required information, but it affords no clue to the real source and mode of origin of a large proportion of the hair used in the English trade, which, startling as the assertion may appear, are intimately associated with one of the most difficult problems of hygiene and modern civilization."[2]

Since the so-called "material turn" in nineteenth-century studies, it has become widely recognized that the profusion of "things" that dominate the Victorian imagination, no less than their parlours or the pages of their novels, are endowed with a degree of agency that challenges the Cartesian binary of subject and object. "Like human subjects," Katharina Boehm argues, "objects have been found to possess complex biographies and histories, social and cultural lives."[3] Writing the hidden histories of the "things" that sit at the heart of thing theory, early advocates such as Elaine Freedgood (2006) and John Plotz (2009) have revealed the social and historical, personal and imperial significance of seemingly mundane Victorian objects, demanding recognition for what is too familiar to register as meaningful. At the same time, such readings have foregrounded the extent to which nineteenth-century subjects depend on inanimate objects in the construction (and reconstruction) of classed and gendered identities. Adding to this growing body of work, this chapter will explore the histories and biographies of the false hair that was imported into England by the ton to create the elaborate coiffures that, together with the appropriate dress and accessories, created the appearance of

genteel femininity in the 1860s and 70s. Equally important, it will also consider how the use of such hair – sourced from the heads of peasant "growers" or less palatable sources – challenged notions of purity and cleanliness upon which contemporary constructions of femininity were seen to depend.

According to Mary Douglas's foundational reading of purity and pollution, the term "clean" designates that which is "proper to its class, suitable, fitting" while dirt, in contrast, "is essentially disorder."[4] So conceived, dirt is "never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements."[5] Thus it is hardly surprising that "references to dirt in nineteenth-century texts are generally informed by bourgeois ideas of order, respectability, and propriety. A morally charged notion of cleanliness was a crucial component of the self-image of the middle classes, who sought to set themselves apart from the working classes."[6] Building on this construction of dirt as a relational rather than an ontological category – expressed most clearly in Douglas's assertion that dirt is "matter out of place"[7] – this chapter will argue that false hair can and should be read in the same way. As genuine human hair, as opposed to synthetic or animal-derived, such hair was "false" only in relation to the "real" hair to which it was added. Unlike dirt, however, the "place" of false hair is surprisingly difficult to determine. At the most basic level, where else might hair belong but on a head? If, however, matter "is conceived as dirt when it disturbs order and threatens to pollute what a social group cherishes as clear and pure,"[8] false hair is, as this chapter will demonstrate, most decidedly "dirty."

In tracing the literal and symbolic relations between false hair and contemporary constructions of purity and pollution, it is important to be mindful of the caveat offered in Ian Hodder's appropriately entitled *Entangled* (2012), that the "'return to things' in the humanities and social sciences has not quite made it to the things themselves": "Things in

themselves are skirted, always embedded in meaning and discourse."[9] To test Hodder's assertion one need only recollect one of the many heightened representations of hair in nineteenth-century fiction – Maggie Tulliver urging her brother to hack off her heavy tresses in a moment of impulsive rebellion or the golden hair of one of Mary Braddon's sensational heroines coming loose and tumbling down in a moment of unrestrained passion[10] – to recognize how our understanding of hair has been "conditioned by the discursive environment" in which it is read, first and foremost, "as a signifier, encoding and creating meaning."[11] Consider, in contrast, the following description of a journalist's trip to a large hair emporium:

> we found the four walls of the sale-room lined round with shelves, reaching from the floor to the ceiling, on which were piled up chignons upon chignons of all qualities and all shades of colour, from raven black to the most delicate blond, done up in packets of six, the smallest number sold by the house, which does no retail trade... In an adjoining warehouse the raw material was lying in heaps upon the floor beside scores of young women, who were sorting and weighing out the chignons of the future, allowing so many grammes for one sort and so many for another. The place, in fact, was redolent of hair. There was hair in all the drawers, hair in cardboard boxes, hair hanging from the ceiling and clinging to the walls, hair upon the counters, upon the chairs, and in the very inkstand; there was even hair in the air itself, moving about as it were in clouds, which when you agitated them disagreeably caressed you.[12]

Removed from the "discursive environment" that renders it meaningful and possessing an uncanny agency and energy, this somewhat grotesque representation of hair has a dislocating effect that "interrupt[s] the habits with which we view the world, the habits that prevent us from seeing the world – to call us to a particular and particularizing attention" of the thing itself, in all its physicality.[13] Crucially, for Hodder, it is only when the "gaze shifts to look

more closely, harder at the thing" that the viewer can begin to recognize the extent to which "things are connected to and dependent on other things."[14]

In order to concretize these connections and dependencies, Hodder adopts the analogy of a house to foreground "the ways in which the front or visible parts of things often depend on back or hidden parts":

> The front of a house often looks neat, tidy and self-sufficient, concerned with expressing status, order, wealth and so on. It is only at the back of the house that one sees all the electricity wires, flues, gutters and outlets, the air conditioners and the communication dishes. And hidden away behind walls and beneath the floors there are the drains and sewers, the ducts and piping. Digging down we would uncover the dependencies of things. Behind the scenes there are the flows that make the front of the house possible. Things at the back service things at the front.[15]

For the purposes of this chapter, the "front" corresponds to the finished coiffures that are presented to the public in an effort to both perform and demarcate class and gender status in increasingly anonymized urban centres. The real interest, however, lies "at the back," where it is possible to trace the "hidden" histories of false hair, from its dubious origins – including the drains and sewers that were scoured by ragpickers for "dead hair" – to the point at which it is braided seamlessly into the natural hair of its "owner." This journey, "from poverty, tears, and parting kisses, to riches and ball-rooms" was, as noted by a writer for *The Hairdressers' Journal*, a "sad subject for contemplation."[16] According to this same journal, moreover, "no less than two hundred thousand pounds weight of human hair, or a little under one hundred tons" makes its way into Paris each year."[17] And from Paris, "the hair – manufactured and unmanufactured, prepared and unprepared, sorted in lengths and as it comes from the head, clean and dirty, lustrous and ragged – streams to all parts of Europe, nay, to all parts of the new and old world."[18] Given the potential for class and racial

contamination within this process – far more dangerous than a case of chignon fungus – it is hardly surprising that the traffic in hair was also an increasingly anxious "subject of contemplation" as the contemporary press alternately denied or exaggerated the threat it represented.

"A necessity of modern social existence"

> "[I]t may possibly be that only a small number of persons are really aware of the extent and the curious nature of this traffic."[19]

Before turning to the origin stories of false hair and its trafficking in the 1860s and 70s, it is important to establish the extent of its use. According to the physician Andrew Wynter, the "fashion of wearing false hair has become so universal, that the exception of the few persons contented with the crop Nature has supplied simply serves to prove the rule."[20] A similar view is offered by the *Times*, whose correspondent claims that "almost every woman wears, more or less, false hair, either in the shape of luxuriant locks, which the rich only can command, or in the shape of frizzets, or the foundations for those monstrous excrescences which are deforming the beautiful contour of the head in the shape of chignons."[21] While hardly a disinterested source, the *Hairdressers' Journal* rejoices that "the variety of hair-shapes is almost without end, and their number is of course daily increasing. Are there not fronts, bags, ringlets, coronets, rolls, plaits, plicaturas, and countless others, and has not each of these forms its many varieties?"[22] *All the Year Round* remains neutral and simply accepts the use of false hair "as a necessity of modern social existence."[23] Focusing on the financial and trade dimensions, other sources astound their readers with relevant facts and figures. Reporting on the French trade returns for 1877, the *London Reader*, for example, announces that "from 12,000 to 15,000 chignons of false hair are annually imported into this country from France alone, and at the same time enough unmade hair to furnish 10,000 more. The total value of the hair exported from France is set down at £88,000, of which by far the

largest portion is paid by the ladies of this country."[24] The "vast rise in its price," according to the *Daily News,* is attributable to "the enormous quantities of false hair used by ladies," explaining that this "has gone up 400 per cent within the last dozen years, while four times as much is used now as at that period. Sixteen times as much money is consequently spent upon this article of adornment in the present year as was devoted to it in 1856."[25]

To explain such demand one need look no further than the hairdressers of the 1860s and 70s who had a vested interest in promoting the increasingly elaborate styles that complemented the evening wear of the period. Intricate coiffures that could not be executed by a lady's-maid, let alone the lady herself, kept hairdressers in business. Thus a correspondent of the *French Hairdressers' Journal* makes a formal complaint to its editor about the lack of new styles within its pages:

> For the past two years we have seen nothing but the same immortal head-dress which varies only in name... Mind I don't find fault with the coiffure, only it is so old that most ladies can dress it for themselves – and those who can't can easily find ladies' maids who will. I expect daily to see this style on the head of the next fish-wife.[26]

Nor is it irrelevant that the fees charged by hairdressers were relatively modest in comparison to the income generated by the sale of false hair; its many varieties displayed on waxen shop window dummies before being transferred to the heads of the customers inside. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that this same correspondent is quick to specify that any new style must have "plenty of false hair in it, – for you are right when you recommend the use of false hair. We pretty well live on it."[27] It is unlikely that the English *Hairdressers' Journal* would provoke such complaints as each issue contains two specially prepared plates representing the latest English and French styles, together with detailed instructions for their execution. Looking through these instructions, it becomes clear that the use of false hair is both routine and extensive. Figure 5.1, for example, representing a style that is recommended

"as one very becoming to English faces, and easy of execution" requires an unspecified number of "small frizzettes... a false curl for each side, and a set of three curls for the back hair."[28] Another style, christened the "NŒUD PSYCHE," requires only two pieces of false hair but one of these must be no less than 26 inches in length.[29] Such requirements were in no way atypical.

Coiffures made of the highest quality of manufactured hair bought "on foot" and imported from France or Germany were limited to women with sufficient income and leisure to enjoy them.[30] There were, however, alternative sources of cheap inferior hair which extended its use all the way down to the most common maid-of-all work. As noted by the *Daily News*, false hair was "manufactured to meet the wishes and the purses of all classes of society, from the sixpenny frizett sold to fill out the sparse locks of the servant-of-all-work to the ten-guinea head of hair made up to aid the beauty of a Duchess."[31] Although restricted to the use of inferior hair, servants and other members of the working classes were just as much affected by the climate of social emulation as those above them and did their best – much to the disgust of contemporary social commentators – to imitate the coiffures as much as the dress and manners of their so-called betters. As an anonymous commentator complained in 1863:

> we allow our lady's-maids to abandon the neat and suitable distinction of caps, and to wear either their hair well *coiffé*, or to stick on a ghastly bit of black lace, or a net; so that it is wholly impossible to know whether the good lady who condescends to bring up warm water for our toilet is madame, at your service – or ma'amselle – fish or fowl, mistress or maid.[32]

As a style designed for the elite market grew familiar and open to imitation from below – "Miss Lofty plaits or curls her aristocratic locks; in emulation so also does Biddy, the maid-of-all-work"[33] – it became as necessary to the customers as the hairdressers themselves that it

be replaced by something new. As a result, hairstyles became increasingly elaborate and voluminous, dependent upon more and more false hair. This pattern continued until the inevitably backlash, which can be dated to around 1880, when the hairdressers begin to "view with dismay, not unmixed with indignation, the present fashion of dressing the hair simply and without ornament. The absence of curls, the disappearance of plaits, the neglect of the once popular chignon, they regard as so many slights offered to themselves."[34]

Origin stories

> "I have provided half the young ladies in Paris with false tresses, and not one has ever asked me the slightest question as to how or where they were obtained."[35]

In order to meet the ever increasing demand for false hair, it was procured from a range of sources and the contemporary press appeared to delight in regaling its readers with both sanitized and sensational origin stories. As the *Saturday Review* recognized, "the subject of hair possesses our newspapers."[36] One of the earliest and most often cited of such stories comes from Thomas Adolphus Trollope's *A Summer in Brittany* (1840), which offers an illustrated account of the annual hair harvest that took place in the months of April and May. In the immediate description of the process – that which was most often re-produced within the periodical press – it appears fairly benign. Attributing the girls' willingness to part with their hair to the use of the close Bréton caps that hide its absence, Trollope describes how he saw "several girls sheared one after the other like sheep, and as many more standing ready for the shears, with their caps in their hands, and their long hair combed out and hanging down to their waists."[37] Most important within this description is the suggestion of free choice – there is no imputation of coercion or violence – and the connotations of cleanliness and health associated with the unadulterated country life of the peasant girls. While the price of hair fluctuated according to its length and quality, as well as the changing fashions that saw

shades fall in and out of favour, Bréton hair – and within the trade it was accepted as "a fact that there seems to be as much *breed* in hair as in other matters" [38] – retained its value. Ostensibly, this was because of its inherent qualities, including its fineness and pristine state (protected as it was by the peasants' traditional caps) but there is no evidence to suggest that the hair of this district was, in any way, quantifiably superior to that of others. Interrogating its privileged status within the trade, *Bentley's Miscellany* acknowledges that it is "not because their hair is particularly long or fine... they have no more of it than their neighbours."[39] Thus, it is entirely plausible that it was the benign nature of its origins, as represented by Trollope and disseminated through the press, which played a key role in establishing and maintaining its market value. There is certainly no question that the various versions of this origin story that circulate throughout the 1850s, 60s and even 70s concentrate on the quaint, even amusing, aspects of the harvest. Noticeably absent are Trollope's descriptions of the peasants themselves – not only "ragged and filthy" and "wretchedly poor" but also "invariably ugly... [and] very subject to scrofulous affections"[40] – that would call into question the health and hygiene of the hair itself.

To appreciate the appeal of this particular origin story, it may be helpful to return, if only briefly, to the discursive environments in which hair is read, first and foremost, "as a signifier, encoding and creating meaning." As already suggested, one of the most important of these environments is that concerned with literal and metaphorical, as well as personal and social constructions of purity and contamination. It was within this particular framework that hair was, as Galia Ofek argues, "invested with an over-determination of sexual meaning."[41] Clean and carefully arranged hair, most obviously in the well-ordered upswept day style adopted by middle-class married women, connoted modesty and a controlled and properly-directed sexuality.[42] Excessive or uncontrolled hair, in contrast, suggested unruly, even aggressive appetites. Such constructions were, however, rendered infinitely more complex by

the addition of false hair. As Ofek suggests, the "increasing popularity of artificial hair and very large and elaborate hairdos in the 1860s and 70s could be interpreted as a central route to constructing a sexual subjectivity."[43] While the agency implied by this act of self-construction was troubling enough, the notion of a "sexual subjectivity" dependent upon the marketplace brings the wearer of false hair dangerously close to the prostitute. Through the public display of their coiffures the wearers of false hair came to resemble a thing-like commodity: an object on display for the male gaze and a "creeping sense of unease results from boundary ambiguity, as a most private and personal part of the woman's body – her hair – is presented in public, for public admiration."[44] There is, moreover, little to choose between the living models used in hair contests and demonstrations, in which they sat immobile as an artist manipulated the "raw material" into the "realization of a Dresden china ideal,"[45] and the wax dummies of the hairdressers' windows, especially as described by *The Speaker*:

> There is a hairdresser (be his name accursed!) who advertises [his] wares on a mechanical model. Beauty (in wax) publicly lifts a certain appurtenance to her brow, to show with what ease and grace it can be fixed and detached! Throngs of women watch the movement with fascinated gaze... But man, brutal opponent of women's suffrage though he may be, hurries by with a sinking of the heart at such a monstrous exhibition. To him the thing is unspeakable... the wax image, moving its false hair to and fro with monotonous mockery.[46]

Part-subject, part-object, wearers of false hair were also open to charges of adulteration, making themselves more attractive through the addition of questionable material and thus participating in what Tammy Whitlock characterizes as a "growing retail culture of 'fraud'"[47] As the *Quarterly Review* demands, "From what source issue those pendant tresses gleaming in the background, with which the blooming belle, aptly entangling their snaky coil with her own, tempts our eligible Adams?"[48]

Thus the trade in false hair appeared to dehumanize those involved, reducing its sellers to "purveyors of the raw material"[49] and its wearers to commodities and positioning both within a contaminated and contaminating marketplace that involves "the substitution of real relationships and people for artificial objects and commercial transactions."[50] Consider, for example, the language used within the following report of "hair crime" – an increasingly common problem as the price of hair reached record levels:

> Human hair, amounting in weight to 87lb., and in value to about £400... has recently been stolen from the premises of Mr. Schletter... The hair stolen comprises nearly all the choicest specimens cultivated by Swedish girls for the market, and varies in length from 24in. to 33in., the latter, if of good quality, realising about a sovereign an ounce... It is alleged that the accused sold 9lb. of the valuable material to a local hairdresser at a price considerably below that paid to the actual "growers" themselves.[51]

Within such a climate, it is hardly surprising that Trollope's idealized representation, in which the preference for bartering meant that money rarely changed hands, was particularly appealing to its audience.

Before turning to the sensationalized origin stories that became increasingly prominent in the later 60s as the craze for false hair reached, quite literally, new heights, it is worth pausing to consider "The False Hair: a Tale" (1852) another early, reassuring narrative that was published within the morally instructive and uplifting *Chambers's Edinburgh Journal*. Although this source pre-dates the marked expansion in the use of false hair, it effectively pre-empts the anxieties associated with the commercial dimension of the practice as just described. The tale focuses on a young and wealthy Parisian woman, Adelaide de Varenne, who is convinced by her hairdresser to supplement her own sparse tresses with "a long lock of soft golden hair."[52] While the practice itself is represented as commonplace, Adelaide's perception of it is not. Rather than viewing the hair as a commodity, she

constructs it as a memento that cannot be disassociated from the woman who sold it. As she informs the hairdresser, "'I shall be thinking of her continually" and, as her "thoughts were fixed upon the young girl whose beauty had been sacrificed for hers,... an unconquerable desire to learn her fate took possession of her mind.[53] In adopting this view of the hair, Adelaide effectively removes it from the marketplace and places it within a "gift economy." As Babette Bärbel Tischleder explains in *The Literary Life of Things*:

> Unlike the circulation of commodities, which is constituted by one-time transactions regulated by the market, the exchange of gifts entails a perpetual cycle of exchange, whereby objects function as social media between persons. The reciprocity between the giver and the recipient is the vital principle of the gift economy, in which things figure as connectors, actualizing the relations between groups or individuals through the cyclical processes of giving, taking, and returning.[54]

It is significant that when Adelaide fortuitously locates the young girl whose hair she wears, the donor is revealed to be as moral as she is beautiful, thus allaying any fears about symbolic contamination. Even more significant, however, is the fact that Adelaide reciprocates the "gift" of hair not with money – dragging it back into the commercial realm – but by clearing the name of the young woman's betrothed and securing him a position within her father's service. Thus the story ensures that the cycle of reciprocity that began with the "golden hair" is able to continue. Functioning as a "connector" between the two young women, the titular hair thus negates the imputation that its use dehumanizes and objectifies those involved.

Both *A Summer in Brittany* and "The False Hair" were written before the use of false hair came to be perceived as "universal"; it appears that while the practice was limited, the press could afford to be lenient. Moving into the mid- to late-1860s, however, commentators became increasingly vocal about what they saw as the *abuse* of false hair, now constructed as a "mental and moral disease... inherited from the remotest ages":[55]

> there is something repulsive as well as grotesque in the idea of decking one's head with other people's hair, and arraying living beauty with the spoils of the grave; but though chignons change their shape from time to time with Protean readiness, and shift from the nape of the neck to the crown of the head and back again, as fashion decrees, with wonderful uniformity, they do not appear to grow any smaller or more becoming. They are not used to replace the defects of nature or the ravages of time – the only intelligible pleas that could be advanced for such a custom – but solely and simply to disfigure nature by increasing the apparent proportions of the head, and overbalancing the figure; so that a small or short woman, whose hair is dressed in the height of the fashion, not unfrequently presents the appearance of a magnified tadpole, all head and no body, and, in less extreme circumstances, may be easily mistaken for the victim of a serve attack of water on the brain... Monster top-knots and balloon chignons are hideous enough when they are native, and to the wearer born: when they are the spoils of other scalps they are altogether intolerable.[56]

Far from enhancing its charms, false hair infects and distorts the female body, rendering it grotesque. In so doing, it reveals its ability to transgress bodily limits, collapsing the boundaries between subject and object. At the same time, its use represents a form of regression as the women who wear "the spoils of other scalps" come to resemble a "savage" racial other. A similar view is put forward by *The London Review*, which claims that the women of Africa wear chignons "not at all unlike what may be seen any day in Regent-street or Piccadilly." Indeed, the only "difference between the Ishogo and the English lady is that the former manufactures the chignon out of her own hair and head while the latter buys it ready-made in the shops."[57]

In addition to the use of overt ridicule and palpable disgust, the press published a series of increasingly harrowing and sensationalized origin stories in the hope that, if

"anything could check the fashion, it would be the impossibility of dissociating it from thoughts of disease, putrefaction, and decay."[58] To appreciate this change in climate it may be instructive to compare "The Lock of Hair" to "The First Coiffeur of his Age," again from *Chambers's Journal* but published at the height of the false hair craze in 1869. This narrative relates the story of the titular coiffeur, M. Gastelet, in his attempt to obtain a rare shade of hair to fashion a wig for a Russian princess who, significantly, suffers from an infectious medical condition that requires her head be routinely shaved. Having searched high and low using all legitimate channels, Gastelet resorts to employing a questionable agent – "a dark-complexioned, dwarfish, monkey-like man" – to procure the unusual shade for him, promising to pay a high price and ask no questions about its source.[59] When the agent returns with the hair after an absence of several months, Gastelet, although doubtful of its provenance, creates the wig that allows the Princess to join the fashionable elite of Paris. Ensconced within a select box at the theatre with her "lace and satin-covered hoop, at least four yards in circumference, [and] her towering coiffure, a pile of curls and a blaze of diamonds,"[60] the Princess's reign of power comes to an abrupt and sensational end when "a long bony hand" with "claw-like nails" appears out of nowhere and tears the wig from her head, revealing the artificial nature of her beauty.[61] As time passes and the crime remains a mystery, rumours begin to circulate that the hair was obtained by murdering some unfortunate young woman whose ghost has returned to reclaim its rightful property. M. Gastelet is arrested for the crime and is saved only when an old priest arrives in Paris with a young woman who is in possession of the stolen wig. As the priest explains, she is an insane *crétine* cared for by his convent where Gastelet's unscrupulous agent tricked her into a neighbouring forest and forcibly robbed her of her hair. "[R]emarkable for more than ordinary cunning, dexterity of hand, and the pride she took in the uncommon-coloured hair," this young woman travelled to Paris in search of her stolen locks and, having spied them on

the head of the Princess, managed to conceal herself in the theatre to retrieve her property.[62] Although Gastelet is set free, his reputation is left in tatters and he is forced to retire. Fallen from her pedestal, the Princess retires to Vienna where she loses herself to cards and gaming. The moral of this cautionary tale is clear. In sharp contrast to the idealized "cycle of reciprocity" established between two beautiful and virtuous women in "The Lock of Hair," the history of the Princess's "towering coiffure" is characterized only by violence (including a symbolic rape), deceit and disease. Female readers are thus encouraged to pause and consider the hidden dependencies and connections that may well link their own chignons, frizettes and curls – weighing down their heads as they read the story – to such contaminated and contaminating sources.

Moving from the realm of fiction to "fact," the contemporary press of the 1860s and 1870s tended to focus on two of the least palatable sources of false hair where the potential for contamination was writ large for all to see. While there is no doubt that English women relied heavily on false hair imported from the continent, this was supplemented by a limited native supply derived from convents, paupers, hospitals – where "fever lays its contribution daily, hourly, in the hands of the manufacturer"[63] – and, primarily, prisons. As was widely reported, "the majority of the long English tresses come from the heads of criminals."[64] Even after the Prison Act of 1865 legislated against the practice, the shearing of female convicts remained routine until the end of the century.[65] Ostensibly undertaken on the grounds of hygiene, the act was also a significant element of the prisoners' moral reformation. According to Elizabeth Fry, the cutting of felons' hair was "a certain yet harmless punishment; and would promote that humiliation of spirit, which, in persons so circumstanced, is one indispensable step to improvement and reformation."[66] As described by contemporary commentators, however, the operation appears anything but "harmless":

> The first inexorable rule to which the new prisoner has to submit, and which is a trial that is always one of the hardest to bear, is that of having the hair cut... Women whose hearts have not quailed, perhaps, at the murder of their infants, or the poisoning of their husbands, clasp their hands in horror at this sacrifice of their natural adornment – weep, beg, pray, occasionally assume a defiant attitude and resist to the last, and are finally only overcome by force... On such occasions the guards on duty in the outer yards, or in the men's prison, are summoned to put the handcuffs on, while the necessary ceremony is gone through. In [one] case it required three men to secure her wrists whilst her hair was cut the requisite length, she struggling, and cursing, and swearing long after the operation was over.[67]

Commenting on the use of hair sourced in this manner, the *London Review* insists that those who resort to its use "should at least be informed that [it is] never obtained without oaths, prayers, and blasphemous imprecations upon the despoilers, which the drawing-room belles little dream of, as those purchased tresses dance pendulous upon their cheek in the heated saloon."[68] The explicit reference to touch within this warning – especially within the context of an overheated saloon – suggests an inappropriate intimacy between the pure and the impure. If, moreover, Lucia Zedner is correct in asserting that the cutting of the felon's hair "served the symbolic function of divesting the woman of the tainted character of her former life,"[69] the women of England were, in a particularly worrying form of adulteration, assuming the symbolic taint of their unfortunate sisters.

Even less palatable than prison hair was the so-called dead hair upon which the lower end of the hair market depended. Contrary to what is implied by its name, dead hair was not sourced from corpses – although such practices did exist on a limited scale[70] – but, rather, from the natural shedding of hair that occurs as it is being groomed. Dead hair could easily be distinguished from its more expensive counterpart, sourced "on foot," by the presence of the

root or bulb, showing that it had been pulled rather than cut from the head. Many women collected their own dead hair, saved within the ornate hair catchers that graced their vanity tables, in order to make the "rats" (rolls of hair) needed to achieve extra height or volume in their coiffures. And, when conducted on a personal scale, the use of dead hair was one of the least threatening and most hygienic ways in which a woman might source false hair, as its origins were both known and "safe." When conducted for trade purposes, however, the harvesting of dead hair – conducted primarily in Italy and contributing an estimated 80,000lb of hair to the English market per year[71] – is positively harrowing in its potential for contamination. As described in the *Examiner* in 1874, it involves three distinct steps:

> The Italian women, like their sisters in other parts of the world, have the practice of twisting into a coil all the hairs which become detached from the heads in the operation of combing or brushing. These coils, in the total absence of house drains, are thrown with other refuse into the open gutters, which seldom fail to supply an Italian household with a near and ready means of disposing of the offcastings of their habitations. This is the first step in the proceeding. The next is affected when the scavenger appears on the scene with his springless cart, and, like another Neptune, trident in hand, wades through the gutter, and hooks up every floating tangle of hairs. These he carefully consigns to a separate receptacle, and keeps by him – for he well knows their value – till the hair pedlar, technically known in the trade as "the Cutter," makes his next round and gathers in the season's harvest, which is forthwith conveyed to Genoa and other seaport towns, where the coils are disentangled, and separated by children who are employed in the business... It is said that of late years many hundred-weights of these heads and tails, grimly characterised as "dead hair," annually cross the Alps, or round the Rock at Gibraltar, on their way to our more northern centres of civilization, where existing

> systems of drainage present insuperable obstacles to the retention and utilization of refuse coils of hair.[72]

Returning to Hodder's notion of entanglement in which "the front or visible parts of things often depend on back or hidden parts," the use of dead hair establishes a direct connection between genteel English femininity and its lowest other: the refuse of the foreign and filthy gutter. Although this hair was "washed with bran and potash, carded, sifted, classed, and sorted" before being fashioned into a marketable hairpiece, the symbolic taint of its origins is not so easily removed.[73]

No discussion of the potential for contamination harboured within false hair would be complete without reference to the microscopic parasites, known as gregarines, which were discovered by a Russian scientist in 1867. As was widely reported by the press, including *The Lancet*, this research claimed that three quarters of the Russian hair used to produce chignons for export was infested with gregarines deposited by lice. Although *The Lancet* suggested the need for the results to be verified, it did not hesitate to engage in what amounted to scaremongering and, like many other sources, focused in upon the purported effect of a heated ballroom on the parasites, causing them to "revive, grow, and multiply by dividing into many parts – so called germ globules; these fly about the ballroom in millions, get inhaled, drop on the refreshments – in fact, enter the interior of people by hundreds of ways."[74] The *Daily Telegraph* was quick to capitalize on the resulting furore after a correspondent identifying themselves as an "Investigator" reported the results of his own experiments – involving strands of false hair being wound around the neck of a live chicken to mimic the heat generated by a woman's head – in order to describe how "when heat gradually warms their gelatinous envelope, they increase, get antennæ, feet, organs of all kinds, and start upon their travels."[75] Here, as with Italian dead hair, a direct connection is made between high and low, pure and impure, as the public is forced to consider, albeit

mistakenly, that "those glossy hypocrisies at the back of ladies' heads could be nests of unmentionable animalculæ, bred in the unclean huts of Mongol or Calmuck peasants, and hatching, like eggs in a hydro-incubator, on the warm necks of our ladies."[76] The piece ends with a final plea, suggesting that if "nothing can kill what comes over with the chignons, let the chignons die out themselves."[77]

The potential for contamination did not end with the sourcing of false hair; as the plaits passed from hand to hand – from the ragpickers and cutters to the agents, dealers and wholesale merchants through to the hairdressers – they became entangled, quite literally, with equally tainted or troubling locks. Describing a trip to a large hair warehouse, a reporter for *The Daily News* describes how "huge canvas sacks, each weighing 150 lb., and containing about 600 heads of hair, were standing unpacked in one of the workshops. These give out a close and fusty smell, suggesting some furrier's establishment where none but coarse and common furs are sold."[78] When one of these sacks is opened for his perusal:

> a strange variety of matted, greasy, unpleasant-looking hair is seen. Here is the iron-grey of middle-life, the snowy white of old age, the brown and black and flaxen of comparative youth, all roughly twisted up together like so many piebald horses' tails. Some of the hair is long, some short, some coarse, some fine, some neglected and dirty, some carefully combed and clean.[79]

Defying all notions of classification and order, this tangle brings together the hair of the old and the young, the clean and the unclean and of different nations and regions. Sharing the odour of animal skins and resembling horsetails, it also challenges human/animal boundaries. Such disorder, moreover, is mirrored in the individual chignons, which are constructed by "mixing together, in certain proportions, hair of the same tint and slightly varying in length. To arrange a grand chignon the hair-worker will at times employ the spoils derived from the heads of no less than thirty women."[80] Foregrounding the racial hybridity of chignons, the

merchant goes on to explain that hair from the South of France is "too coarse to use alone, though it worked up very well mixed with other kinds." Spanish hair, in turn, is "too decidedly black, too sombre, to suit ordinary complexions; it was therefore requisite to mix this also, to soften it, in fact, with hair of a more delicate shade; the same with the tow-like tint of the Flemish hair, which had to be made more sunny-looking by the addition of German hair of a richer blond."[81] It would be difficult to imagine a more complex representation of symbolic miscegenation than that presented by the seamless intertwining of these hybrid hairpieces into the natural hair of English women.

Conclusion

"Away with these abominable nests of foreign horrors."[82]

Rationalising the popularity of false hair during the period, Ofek explains that:

> As Victorian fashion emphasized the grooming of women's hair, the latter seemed to transform from a chaotic, wild and natural growth into a well-trimmed, man-made and decorative bower... The demands for both order and artificiality were compatible, as both suggested an advanced state of cultivation, sophistication and civilization, and distanced hair from its organic, untidy origin. As a result, false hair became fashionable, and ladies used enormous quantities of it.[83]

While there is no doubt that well-groomed hair connoted order, the assertion that "order and artificiality were compatible" is based on the erroneous assumption that false hair is, in Douglas's terms, "clean"; that is, "proper to its class, suitable, fitting." What Ofek's argument fails to recognize – and what this chapter has attempted to demonstrate – is the extent to which the origins and "secret histories" of false hair undermine, at both a personal and social level, the "advanced state of cultivation, sophistication and civilization" that middle-class Victorians aspired to. Whether sourced from scrofulous French peasants, English convicts or Italian gutters, false hair bears an indelible trace of its origins and therefore disturbs the

systems of classification and order upon which cleanliness depends. Gathered from "the most objectionable and repulsive sources," it establishes a direct connection and dependency between the morally and physically pure body of English femininity and its most polluted others.[84] In an age of sanitary reform, where cleanliness was a marker of middle-class status and "the dichotomy of purity and pollution cohered around, and produced the meaning of 'woman' with particular intensity," it is hardly surprising that the contemporary press adopted a series of increasingly sensational strategies to discourage its use.[85] More surprising is how the extraordinary volume of false hair used by English women has itself been caught and tamed by discursive frameworks that mask its material complexities. The process of untangling these complexities has only just begun.

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