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The unrealised potential of Robert Browning’s “Gold Hair: A Legend of Pornic”

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ABSTRACT
This article explores a hitherto neglected context of Robert Browning’s “Gold Hair” (1864), analysing the poem in relation to the tradition of “hair harvests” in Brittany, France, as well as the broader contexts of the hair trade and hairwork in the nineteenth century. In doing so, it makes a case for reading the textual evocation of hair in the poem literally to trace a cultural shift towards hair framed in material rather than corporeal terms. The girl of the poem has abundant golden hair that corresponds with gold, hairwork, and the hair trade in ways that highlight its potential against the girl's apparent rejection of common hair practices. Diverging from previous analyses that have read poetic representations of hair in Browning primarily as symbolic (especially in relation to sexuality), the pairing of hair with gold is shown in this poem to signify unrealised sources of credit, unprocessed matter, holding the potential to be exchanged or refined. This article considers practices of keeping, working, and selling hair in conjunction with the Browning’s collection of hair and hairwork held by the Armstrong Browning Library, in this way elucidating the materiality of hair in both the poem and the Victorian imaginary.

Hair is a source of uneasy fascination in Robert Browning’s “Gold Hair: A Legend of Pornic” (published in Dramatis Personae, 1864) in which an ostensibly saintly girl refuses, even in death, to part with her beautiful golden locks. Though this peculiar attachment is accepted by the girl’s family and friends as a foible and even taken as a sign of her heavenly disposition, the girl’s motivations are brought into question when, as her corpse is disinterred years after her death, gold coins are found hidden amongst her tresses. Yet as the girl lies on her deathbed and her long locks frame her corpse as though a periphery encircling the centre, her hair is figured as the thing wondered at – admired, pondered, questioned – as the apparent core of her enchantment.

For indeed the hair was to wonder at,
As it spread – not flowing free,
But curled around her brow, like a crown,
And coiled beside her cheek, like a cap (Browning 1862, lines 39–42)

The girl’s rather simplistic but severe materialism, as she accumulates her worldly wealth to take with her to the grave, is complicated by her attendant desire to preserve her hair. Its use as a means of hiding coins does not entirely answer for its significance. Indeed, “the hair” is here presented as an object separate from (though attached to) her and figured through its likeness to other objects, the accessories of the crown and cap that adorn rather than derive from the body. And though this is the girl’s careful arrangement, since on her deathbed she forbids anyone from touching it, “it” is the hair itself that spreads, curls, and coils, at once emphasising its profuseness (spreading and yet coiled to unfurl further) and its capacity to take on new forms. These looping, serpentine, Medusa-like curls and coils both challenge her apparent saintliness and figure the cyclical ouroboros, finding rebirth in death.¹ At the centre of this poem, then, is a separable, abundant, workable material with a latent potential to give expression to desires and anxieties through matter and form. As such, “Gold Hair” provides a useful case in point for a discussion of Victorian materialities, mingling literal and figurative gold while hinting at many of the paradoxical qualities of hair as a bodily material: its power to render the abstract tangible, the ephemeral enduring, and the dead as though still living.

This article will explore a hitherto neglected context of “Gold Hair” – of the tradition of “hair harvests” in Brittany, France, as well as the broader context of women’s hair in the nineteenth century as a material that was not uncommonly sold and worked – as key to grasping the materiality of hair in both the poem and the Victorian imaginary. The large collection of the Brownings’ hair and hairwork in the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, in itself indicates something of Browning’s engagement with hair as a material and prompts a reading of this poem against Victorian practices of keeping, working, and selling hair, as well as a consideration of how such objects might elicit new insights into the poem and its evocation of this highly suggestive material. Indeed, hair challenges our thinking on matter and materialism because it troubles the boundary between corporeality and materiality. Katharina Boehm describes “the porous boundaries, affinities, and frictions between Victorian subjects and objects, and bodies and things,” noting the reconfiguring impact of “rapidly advancing industrialization, the unprecedented growth of consumer culture, and the rise of evolutionary theories, physiology, and other biological sciences” (2012, 2–3). Such seismic cultural shifts can be seen at work in the growth and increasing variety of fashionable hair practices and especially in the proliferation of related material cultures in the period: barbers and hairdressers; wigs and hair pieces; tools and accessories; dyes, oils, and pomades; hairworkers, hair jewellery, and decorative arts; beauty and craft manuals; historical, social, and scientific studies of hair; as
well as the anxiety-ridden context of the hair trade. While the Victorians very much conceived of hair in terms of bodily expression, then, it also served as an object distanced from its individual corporeal context, as something to be worked, refined, sold, or studied. These encounters with hair apart from the body – especially in the form of hairwork and hair pieces – and as something requiring particular cultivation, maintenance, and styling call attention to its capacity to be crafted. The material, transmutable nature of the body is made tangible in workable, utilisable hair.

While many poetic representations of hair engage with metaphors of entanglement, threads, and strands and give way to abstract, meandering thought, hair remains solid matter that can be cut, worked, worn, damaged, dyed, exchanged, or sold. I am concerned, therefore, with the way Browning represents “Gold Hair” in the context of its literal, and not only literary, uses. Scholars have read Browning’s women’s hair as symbolically threatening to masculine authority (Francomano 1999), noted its frequent relation to sexual violence (Gregory 2000), and traced his representations of dead bodies as aesthetic objects (Fox 2011; Christ 2014). In rethinking “Gold Hair,” I find that the girl’s golden hair is troubling not only because of the uncertainty or ambivalence of what its shade and abundance may signify, as in Elisabeth Gitter’s still pertinent argument about the dualistic representation of women’s hair in Victorian literature as signifying either the angelic or the demonic (1984, 936), but also because of its potential as a material to take on new forms and purposes. In other words, this anxiety surrounding hair is not necessarily or purely about female subjects and their sexual agency, but the uncomfortable overlap hair poses between body and object. This tension comes through in several other poems by Browning, most notably “Porphyria’s Lover” (published in Dramatic Lyrics, 1842), in which Porphyria’s hair works (or is worked) as a source of both protection and threat. Its function as a material, or as an object separate from Porphyria, is suggested throughout the poem: it is one of her damp outer garments (Browning 1836, line 13), a blanket (line 20), a string (line 39), and a garrotte used to strangle her (line 41). While the overtones of sexual entitlement in Porphyria’s murder should not be euphemised as mere metaphor, the speaker’s act of strangulation also constitutes a perverse, fetishistic attempt to forge a bond between them in death using her hair. Her corpse takes the place of the fetish object, wrought with the fetishistic potential that already resides in her hair. Hair is tactile, intimate, and able to remain in contact with the fetishist in a way that the person, or the body so desired, cannot. It outlasts the body while at the same time recording a particular moment in time, in life. Accordingly, Porphyria’s hair is the locus of her ability to change as well as her capacity to become changeless (or, rather, immobile) in death. It is the literal and figurative tool that disavows her potential to reject her lover, to be absent, and even to die. The girl of “Gold Hair” uses her hair for the less gruesome but
nonetheless morbid purpose of hiding money in her coffin. The correspondence between gold coins and golden hair again disturbs the subject-object divide. Her refusal to let others touch or cut her hair on her deathbed gestures to its unrealised potential as a vital part of what is at stake in the poem.

“Not my hair!” made the girl her moan –
“All the rest is gone or to go;
“But the last, last grace, my all, my own,
“Let it stay in the grave, that the ghosts may know!
“Leave my poor gold hair alone!” (Browning 1864, lines 31–35)

This plea signals that the girl’s hair may, indeed, be otherwise destined “to go.” Despite falling dangerously ill, when hair was often cut in an attempt to reduce fever (Ofek 2009, 55); despite nearing death, when a lock of hair might be taken as a memento or for hairwork for the bereaved; and despite being from Brittany, one of the most famous and highly-valued regions visited by hair merchants for an annual “hair harvest” (Rowland 1853, 157), the girl does not wish to part with a single strand of her abundant hair. Although my focus is principally on what the girl does not do with her hair, this unexplored context makes sense within the poem’s broader narrative concern with that which is to “hardly be seen” (Browning 1864, line 9) – unrealised potential, unrecognised desires, a life cut short:

Here, Life smiled, “Think what I meant to do!”
And Love sighed, “Fancy my loss!” (lines 19–20)

Hair and hairwork: matter and form

The research for this article was undertaken at the Armstrong Browning Library, Baylor University, Waco, Texas (hereafter ABL), which holds the world’s largest collection of material related to the lives and works of the Brownings. There is a significant amount of hair in the collections: forty-five locks of hair (nine in lockets, two in brooches), three hair bracelets, and one hair ring listed across the Browning Collections Catalogue, the Altham Archive, and the Joseph Milsand Archive, the majority of it Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s hair. Though most are unworked locks, many of the articles of hair are composed and framed, either tied and looped within envelopes or plaïed and coiled into brooches and lockets, and a few pieces take the form of hair jewellery, elaborately worked into bracelets. The context of Victorian hairwork is important to consider in relation to this collection and to “Gold Hair” not only on account of its popularity in the mid-century but because it signals an additional layer to how hair was framed and viewed, perhaps even a shift in focus: from hair as essentially corporeal, understood in the context of the body, to its materiality, its potential uses, and values as an object.
Hairwork is hair crafted into a piece of jewellery or decorative ornament. Many earlier forms expressed the transience of life and decay of the body. From the sixteenth century, various kinds of *memento mori* jewellery featuring skulls, crossbones, and skeletons over a ground of woven hair were worn to remind the wearer of their mortality. The *memento mori* purpose of hairwork changed in the eighteenth century, however, to *memento illius*, from a reminder of mortality to “the commemorative remembrance of ‘another’” (DeLorme 2004, 65). Hair no longer stood for corporeality in general, but for the one specific body from which it was cut. By the mid-nineteenth century, the growing popularity and diversity of elaborate kinds of hairwork – aided by its commercialisation via professional hairworkers – further distanced its evocation of corporeality while emphasising the materiality of hair: its capacity to be worked. This is perhaps most evident in the appraisal of hairworker Antoni Forrer’s display at the Great Exhibition of 1851, which was commended for its “skill, taste, design, and variety” in “a class of manufacture of mediocre perfection hitherto” (Ellis 1851, 690). Victorian hairwork comprised an array of forms and processes, several of which were inventions of the period: hair was coiled and arranged into jewellery compartments; pasted onto palettes with gum (palette work); weighted across circular frames (table work); ground and mixed with pigment (sepia work); looped and secured with wire (gimp work); embroidered into fabric; and woven into all manner of intricate braids. Though hairwork retained its purpose as a commemorative and affective token of an individual and their relationship with the wearer or owner, its fashionable forms urged its burgeoning potential as a medium. The identity-based, personal, and intimate meanings of its matter became in many instances less apparent, secondary to the more overt social, and indeed economic, significations of its form.

While the Brownings’ collection demonstrates a clear investment in preserving and displaying hair, most of the articles do not neatly correspond with Victorian hairwork practices. They problematise the kind and extent of working necessary to be deemed “hairwork” proper. One example is a lock of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s hair given by Robert Browning to Mrs Thomas FitzGerald which is enclosed in a large glass locket encircled with gold (see Figure 1). The three discrete locks, two looped and one plaited, are of a warm light brown, closer to blonde on one side. The gold edge of the locket catches the light and picks out the golden shades in the locks and the yellow thread used to tie them. The bevelled edge of the glass ripples out from the three loops of hair and emphasises the circularity of the composition. It is by no means the most ornately worked or richly decorated of the Brownings’ hairwork, nor is it the most simple. The piece was not expertly made by an experienced hand, nor left in a “natural” state. It has been purposefully worked and framed in a fitting enclosure. The glass locket itself, corresponding with and structuring the hair enclosed, becomes a part of the composition. It enacts, even more clearly on the two looped locks than the already plaited
hair, a kind of hairwork in itself. As well as protecting the hair, it shapes it, holding the hair in place, preserving matter and form. There is a clear desire in pieces such as this to create an aesthetic object out of hair, to bring out and structure its sentiments (whether commemorative, mournful, romantic, or reconciliatory) in a pleasing form, and to indicate its value by encasing it in precious metals. They suggest a more imaginative, tentative engagement with hairwork but, as we shall see with the carefully arranged locks of “Gold Hair,” show the intention to lend expression to matter through form nonetheless. Indeed, poetry representing hair, and especially locks of hair, simultaneously constructs with and frames its material as with literal hairwork. It deals with the same tensions between the seeming ephemerality and eternity of hair; its corporeality and disembodiment; vitality and object matter; and sentimental and economic value. Browning may not be a hairworker in any literal or conventional sense, but “Gold Hair” constitutes an enigmatic rendering of the tensions posed by this material nonetheless.

Figure 1. Locket containing the hair of Elizabeth Barrett Browning given by Robert Browning to Mrs Thomas FitzGerald (ABL: H0479).
Golden Hair

There are two distinct hair tropes in nineteenth-century poetry that may relate to “Gold Hair.” On the dominant trope, Gitter writes that “Golden hair, through which wealth and female sexuality are inevitably linked, was the obvious and ideal vehicle for expressing [the Victorians’] notorious – and ambivalent – fascination both with money and with female sexual power” (1984, 936). As a consequence, the fair-haired woman who too willingly gives away a lock of her hair is frequently represented as morally dubious, if not suspicious, by poets and critics alike. She is commonly portrayed as sexually and economically fallen in relinquishing a portion of her hair, rather than empowered in being able to barter with it. The myriad, more often sexual than strictly economic, interpretations of Laura paying for goblin fruit with a curl of her golden hair in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862) are testament to this connection. Terrence Holt, for example, reads Laura’s giving up of a lock of her hair as not only “sexually problematic” but as suggesting rape (1990, 55) and even metaphoric castration (56). Victor Roman Mendoza reads Laura’s lock in terms of sexual pleasure (2006, 923), Mary Wilson Carpenter as an emblem of virginity (1991, 427), and Albert D. Pionke as a sign that Laura is “fully fallen” (2012, 901). Jill Rappoport attends to the economic dimensions of Laura’s lock but writes that, like the many other women in literature “whose sexuality is seized through a curl of hair, Laura trades a lock that ultimately surrenders her body” (2010, 854). Rarely is it allowed that Laura barters with legitimate currency.6 Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “The Ringlet” (1864) exemplifies this incarnation of the trope, presenting the golden lock given to the speaker by an unfaithful woman as a “golden lie” (line 43). Even in this negative framing of the lock of hair as a beguiling token deployed by women for the purposes of deception, gold serves as the tangible material upon which the abstract value of the woman may be determined. Even when the woman’s lock of golden hair is not given away by her and viewed somewhat voyeuristically in her absence or death, it may be represented with an air of suspicion. Walter Savage Landor connects pride, mortality, and gold in his quatrain “On Seeing a Hair of Lucretia Borgia” (1825):

Borgia, thou once wert almost too august
And high for adoration; now thou’rt dust.
All that remains of thee these plaits unfold,
Calm hair, meandering in pellucid gold. (lines 1–4)

The plaited hair at once “unfold[s]” Borgia’s corporeality, the mortal, bathetic reality of her physical “remains” (line 3), while it also forges something of an afterlife in earthly fame. The two couplets frame and reiterate the comparative and contrastive capacity of the lock of hair as a memorial which, in reducing the body to static matter – to “Calm hair” – unveils its immaterial, transcendent, yet
mobile and elusive potential – “meandering in pellucid gold” (line 4). In Dante Gabriel Rossetti’s “Jenny” (1870), golden hair is directly aligned with coin, as the speaker compares Jenny’s hair to gold and riches before laying gold coins in it, at once elevating the woman as a muse or idol and signalling her prostitution. The woman’s golden hair is not taken as symbolic of gold but something else which is almost always compromised in being given away: innocence, virginity, sexual agency, labour, well-being, faith, or salvation. Hence, Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” and “The Flight of the Duchess” represent women’s hair as part of a dubious negotiation of affection and power and, in so doing, show how the gift of hair may intensify anxieties surrounding its donor’s agency.

The second form of the trope, especially popular in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry concerning children, presents golden hair as connoting spiritual wealth, particularly when the child is dying or dead. Several poems in Henry Southgate’s collection of mourning poems Gone Before (1874) are part of this tradition of pondering upon a child’s death and linking a golden lock of hair with Heaven. The fairness of the hair is a signifier of the child’s salvation and its golden appearance a direct correlative of their value (to God as to their family). Sir Brooke Boothby’s “On a Locket, with Lock of Hair of Penelope His Child” (1791) begins: “Bright, crisped threads of pure, translucent gold!” (line 1). Here, the child’s golden hair is a medium through which Heaven may be seen and a sign of the angelic nature of the child mourned. Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Only a Curl” (1862) and its reflection on a dead child’s “single gold curl” (line 4) is also very much of this tradition. The poem’s dazzling diction of “bright” (line 8), “brightness” (line 23), and “light” (line 20) is not the lure of gold at all, but of Heaven. Saved from the grave, it reflects the child’s immortal soul as an incarnation of innocence that denies (however vainly) the loss of their body to age, death, and decay. Golden hair, in particular, is not a correlative of worldly goods, false gold, or a token of vanity, but a material through which God and Heaven, and the equivalence between children and angelic bodies, become tangible.

Neither trope fully explains “Gold Hair.” The girl is not only caught between childhood and womanhood, but her narrative does not align neatly with either of the tropes’ typical trajectories. Moreover, it would neglect other more pertinent contexts to read the poem as either a rendering of hair caught up in anxieties surrounding female sexuality or a simplistic inversion of the child’s spiritual gold. In the girl’s case, her duplicity lies in inserting coins in amongst her own hair and her emphatic refusal to let others take or even touch it (and so too with her coins). The relation established between golden hair and gold coins here is about an improper and selfish attachment to material things, avarice, and additionally, if the girl’s local fame is an intentional aftereffect of her deathbed declaration, vanity or pride. It is not the girl’s sexual agency that is brought into question by her hair, nor its latent spiritual significance, but the nature of her materialism: her desire to hoard and hide gold within it. What is
more striking about golden hair in the poem is how it is portrayed as like the gold coin it secretly stores. It is comparable as matter that has the potential to be exchanged or accrued, to hold value, and to be worked into new forms, though it is also not utilised by the girl in an expected way. Like her gold (the source of which is not explained), her hair serves only to fill her coffin.

Before the girl's coin hoard is revealed and literal gold separated from hair, the poem presents a proliferation of associations and replications that appear to collapse the distinction between the two. Though consistent in end-rhyme, there are moments of quasi-alliterative verse as though the poem is structured by likeness, the repetition of sound, the correspondence of like ideas, with gold and hair as the focal pairing:

Yet earth saw one thing, one how fair!  
One grace that grew to its full on earth  
Smiles might be sparse on her cheek so spare,  
And her waist want half a girdle's girth,  
But she had her great gold hair. (Browning 1864, lines 11–15; emphasis added)

Following the repeated “one,” which sets the girl apart from her hair, alliterative sets are spread across each line, becoming pairs and pulling closer before being merged, the “great gold” syntactically inserted into the idea of “her [...] hair.” The following lines continue this growing abundance of alliteration that evokes the luxuriant expanse of the girl’s hair: “Hair, such a wonder of flix and floss,/ Freshness and fragrance – floods of it, too!” (lines 16–17). These terms of “flix and floss” – “flix” referring to the down of an animal and “floss” as in rough silk – suggest that her hair is an unworked material, as yet unprocessed and unfined. Thus, “Gold Hair” positions hair in relation to gold as another base material with a tangible market value that goes unrealised by the girl. The hair harvest in France, along with imports to Britain from Germany, Switzerland, and Prussia, was a key source of hair for use in wigs and hairpieces. It was rumoured that this hair also made its way into hairwork and “French artists,” or *artistes en cheveux*, were well known in Britain for working hair “in very elaborate forms with gold or jewels” (Dodd 1857, 13). Edwin Lankester makes the connection implicit when he mentions hair harvests in France and Germany alongside the manufacture of hair into “a variety of articles of ornament, as bracelets, necklaces, watch-guards, brooches, rings” (1876, 332). Hair merchants sought out hair from particular regions, with different “crops” fetching higher or lower prices according to demand for specific shades. Hair from Brittany, where “Gold Hair” as “A Legend of Pornic” is set, was one of the most desirable for use in hairpieces owing to its being fine, abundant, and relatively easy to procure in a place where “custom enforces among the young people the use of the cap” (Sutton 1903, 21). According to Henry Vizetelly, “[i]n Brittany selling the hair is [...] as old as the Roman invasion of Gaul, and while I was living there, it used to be remarked that the custom ran in the blood” (1893, 291). In his travel
memoir, *A Summer in Brittany* (1840), Thomas Adolphus Trollope writes on “Hair Dealers,” recalling peasant girls lining up to meet the barber to sell their hair, “sheared one after the other like sheep […] their long hair combed out and hanging down to their waists” (323). Emma Tarlo notes that this became such a public event that local authorities in Brittany introduced hair-cutting tents at fairs to deter spectators (2016, 41). The hair harvest was still a regular occurrence at fairs and marketplaces in Brittany at the turn of the twentieth century (Géniaux 1899, 430). Golden hair – which, according to Andrew Wynter, was unusual in Brittany where women were famous for their fine, long black hair (1874, 252–253) – held an even higher monetary value. The fair-haired girl of “Gold Hair,” as “a boasted name in Brittany” (Browning 1864, line 4), is thus located at a centre of the hair merchants’ territory yet holds on to one of their most desired crops. Her refusal to part with her hair goes against an established local tradition and shirks a routine means of generating income.

The coin the girl hides in her hair, however, far exceeds the pittance routinely offered by hair merchants. Women were often given only a few sous or francs for their hair, a full head being far lighter than the sum offered per pound, or else they were paid “with ribbons, handkerchiefs, and other trinkets” (Dodd 1857, 13).9 There was greater profit to be made by processing hair – “So much does it rise in value by the collecting, the sorting, the cleaning, and other preparatory processes, that its wholesale market price is generally from thirty to sixty shillings per pound” (Dodd and Wills 1854, 63) – which might indicate there is still gold to be found “in” the girl’s hair. Yet these steep profits gave rise to anxieties over how especially desirable hair might be harvested. An article on “The Human Form Divine” (1866) discusses the hair markets of France and Germany along with an account of a French hairdresser luring women with beautiful hair to his salon and assaulting them, “depriving them by violence of their locks” (49) for use in wigs and chignons. Although an extreme incident, this account is not unlike some of the cases recorded by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886). As discussed by Krafft-Ebing, some hair-despoiler fetishists, driven by sexual desire rather than monetary gain, stalk women and cut their hair by stealth or force. Thus, though the girl’s “floods” of unrefined, unworked “flix and floss” (Browning 1864, lines 17, 16) might be sold, and may fetch much more if processed, she avoids exposure to an exploitative and potentially dangerous market.

**Enduring matter**

The girl’s erroneous logic, then, is not that there is money to be made by selling her hair, but that she hides coins within it that are of no use to her, or anyone else, in the grave. Both hair and coins remain unrealised sources of credit. In the several additional stanzas of the poem (which became 21–23, added by Browning after George Eliot argued that the girl had insufficient motivation
for her actions), the idea that it is the coin that is base, an affront to Heaven, and not the girl’s hair is made clear. In the added framing, Browning shows the girl to value her hair almost purely for its capacity to hide the coins.

“Gold I lack; and, my all, my own,
“It shall hide in my hair. I scarce die loth
“If they let my hair alone!” (Browning 1864, lines 113–115)

Hair is shown to hold its value for the girl in the context of her desire to acquire more, possess more, and remain physically and avariciously attached to her “yellow wealth” (line 47). Jane Bennett considers part of the psychology of hoarding as amassing objects which present “the reassuring illusion that at least something doesn’t die” (2012, 253). There is, at the same time, something of a death drive underlying this compulsion, a desire to become one with inorganic matter, to let a material agency take over and become purely and permanently object (252, 258–259). If the girl’s hoard of gold and hair is understood in these terms, it satisfies and helps to realise her desire to (contrarily) live on in death as static matter. She gains what she feels as a “lack” by becoming one with it. Whether the girl’s hair is understood as a part of her body that she enmeshes with the gold or as an object (nonetheless connected to the girl) to carry and surround the coins, it is liminal stuff, a kind of boundary that allows for both a practical and imaginary subsuming of the gold into and alongside her corpse. Indeed, her hair and coins might be regarded as vibrant matter, wondered upon as objects somehow exerting a will to be seen (contrary to the girl’s desire to remain untouched, her hoard undiscovered) when they spill out from the rotten coffin, encouraging those exploring the church’s burial space to “dig deeper” (line 95). As Bennett explains, “a vital materiality can never really be thrown ‘away,’ for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity” (2011, 6). The girl’s hair becomes somewhat menacing from this perspective: at once life-sustaining, promising a means of continued existence, and life-taking, having its own trajectory beyond, and even against, that of its owner. By hoarding gold and hair, the girl initiates the process of her body being overwhelmed by dead matter.

If hair can enclose and outlast the body from which it came, it also preserves the appearance of bodily vitality as a part of its enduring matter. The girl’s hair both undermines and extends the vitality of her body, prefiguring and then vivifying her corpse.

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. (Browning 1864, lines 98–100)

It is unclear in these lines whether it is the girl’s skull or money that is hidden in the heaps of hair, blurring the boundary between body and objects. It may be the hair that holds in place the coin, which in turn fixes the girl’s skull at the
centre, framing the revelation of those that disinter her. But whichever has “served for the nonce” (fulfilled its purpose or served for the time being), the girl’s skull, money, and hair wedge each other in. In preventing the circulation of something designed to circulate – the coin – and preserving the integrity of something so often cut – her hair – the girl has anticipated and orchestrated the place of her corpse as an object among objects. Or, considering the coins, the double “Louis-d’or, some six times five” (line 116) that surround her in the grave with the king’s likeness in gold, she gestures towards a corporeality impressed upon matter. The coins hint at how her own “crown” may have facilitated her earthly elevation as a material means of self-representation.

For indeed the hair was to wonder at,
As it spread – not flowing free,

But curled around her brow, like a crown,
And coiled beside her cheek, like a cap,
And calmed about her neck – ay, down
To her breast, pressed flat, without a gap
I’ the gold, it reached her gown. (Browning 1864, lines 39–45)

The girl’s hair – “like a crown” and “like a cap” – is caught between symbolic wealth and poverty, between heaven and earth, or perhaps between her actual local identity as a girl of Brittany, donning the cap (that ironically, as aforementioned, facilitated the harvesting of hair from girls in the region), and an aggrandised fantasy. She has purposefully arranged her hair, spreading it out to conceal the coins, and in so doing has created an aesthetic composition. Although this is more of a hairstyle than hairwork (since it remains attached to her head), the description has clear correlatives with the processes and compositions of hairwork. Her hair is “not flowing free” but arranged into a fixed, lasting creation. It is “curled,” “coiled,” and “calmed” in a way that evokes the rounded enclosure of a compartment, the repeated “c”s of these lines effecting the circular, returning structure of the curl as it lies in the analogous enclosure of the coffin. It is “spread” as with a tool, “pressed flat” like a piece of palette work. The sentimental or affective value that might be derived from the girl’s hair as this kind of memento, however, is explicitly denied when she requests that in her death her family, and even the priest that buries her, “leave it alone awhile,/ So it never was touched at all” (lines 59–60). This refusal to let another touch her hair, along with its burial arrangement, signals a further aspect of its unrealised (or perhaps, in this instance, supplanted) potential. Hairwork is designed to be exchanged, to circulate, to be on display, or at least, as in mourning jewellery, to have saved a lock of hair from the grave. The girl confines her hair’s innate and wrought beauty to the grave, forgoing the affective touch of loved ones while her “hand grope[s]/For gold, the true sort” (lines 123–124) and her hair facilitates, instead, the legend of her supposed saintliness.
Even in considering the girl’s hair hoarding and artistry as confined to the grave, there emerge more subtle resonances with the enclosures that so often surround hairwork. Several of the locks of the Brownings’ hair are on long-standing display in the ABL’s Hankamer Treasure Room and John Leddy-Jones Research Hall. These locks, all of which are within lockets or brooches, are protected behind glass compartments and glass-fronted display cases. The double barriers that enforce the “look but don’t touch” etiquette deny tactile engagement even while drawing attention to it. The hairs of the poets and their families are tantalisingly close and yet closed-off, simultaneously revered in their elaborate casements and positioned as objects of unease kept at a distance. A brooch containing the hair of Browning’s grandfather surrounded by seed pearls demonstrates this most clearly (see Figure 2). The tiny brooch is a commemorative mourning piece, inscribed on the back: “Robert Browning Esqr./Obt. Decr. 11th 1833. At. 84.” It sits on a gold and red velvet mounting encircled with yellow gold and sinks into the dip in the fabric in a way that makes it appear all the more coffin-like. The golden-grey hairs appear almost child-like in shade and sheen, while the woven pattern, as with the girl’s locks in “Gold Hair,” effects a fullness that leaves the composition “without a gap/I’ the

Figure 2. Brooch containing the hair of Robert Browning (Browning’s grandfather) surrounded by seed pearls (ABL: H0500).
gold” (Browning 1864, lines 44–45). The bevelled edge of the cut glass both frames and contains the hair and emphasises how it goes beyond the visible edge, as though it might splay out of its enclosure were it not so firmly trapped. Yet the flat, pasted palette work also accentuates its lifelessness, that the hair of the dead is confined to a sealed chamber. As with the girl’s hair in the grave, which is both part of her corpse (her body as dead matter) and a distinct material that frames and represents it (her body and legend ornamented and enlivened), the hair in this brooch presents a tension between life and death, and mortality and eternal. Both “Gold Hair” and hairwork such as this draw attention to the capacity of hair to outlast the body, to express complex and contrary ideas, and to effect an elevation of their subjects as aestheticised, enduring matter. They deal with the same tensions between the ephemerality and durability of hair; its corporeality and disembodiment; sentimental and economic value; seeming vitality and dead matter.

Still holding the potential to be exchanged or refined at the close of the poem, the unprocessed matter of “Gold Hair” brings the uncertain, shifting materiality of hair to the fore through its realised and unrealised uses: the imaginative possibilities the girl’s hair holds because she does not engage with, cut, sell, or work it in an expected way. The hair trade as well as the broader context of Victorian hairwork, while peripheral to the text, are significant undercurrents that help to unpick why, when the girl’s hair is represented as in some ways like gold, it nonetheless holds other kinds of value and potential that distinguish it from her coins. Indeed, because the poem gestures to tangible forms and uses without severing hair from head, it indicates more clearly an uneasy oscillation between corporeality and materiality. Looking to bodily materials and objects such as hair and hairwork (and perhaps other objects of this nature that sit at the boundary of Victorian material culture) shows the body to be not only caught up in the processes of production and consumption but to itself constitute a source of workable, usable material capable of capturing and expressing the desires and anxieties of its donor, worker, or possessor. If hairwork, broadly conceived, manifests attachment, purpose, design, touch, and the desire to beautify and preserve, both the Brownings’ collection of hair and “Gold Hair,” in representing hair so deliberately composed and preserved, tap into this context in which hair can literally and figuratively become more than the sum of its material.

Notes

1. In Victorian jewellery, the serpent is commonly taken as a symbol of eternity or unending love, especially when used on rings and bracelets. More broadly, however, it may hold threatening associations with the Edenic serpent (temptation, banishment, and death) or Ancient Egypt’s primordial snake (rebirth, cyclical time).
2. See Galia Ofek (2009) for a wide-ranging discussion of these phenomena in their Victorian contexts.

3. See, for example, John Keats’s “Lines on Seeing a Lock of Milton’s Hair” (composed 1818), Leigh Hunt’s “To Robert Batty, M. D., On His Giving Me a Lock of Milton’s Hair” and his two other poems “To the Same, On the Same Subject” and “To the Same, On the Same Occasion” (Foliage, 1818), and Mary Cowden-Clarke’s “On a Ring of Leigh Hunt’s Hair,” “On Mrs. Somerville’s Hair,” “On Florence Nightingale’s Hair,” and “On Garibaldi’s Hair” (Honey from the Weed, 1881).

4. Gitter highlights the ambiguity or even deceptiveness of depictions of female hair as follows: “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” (1984, 936).

5. Several of the notable representations of hair in Browning’s poetry are cited by Harry T. Baker (1911): Sordello (1840), Pippa Passes (1841), “The Statue and the Bust,” “By the Fire-Side,” and “A Toccata of Galuppi’s” (Men and Women, 1855). To Baker’s list, I would add “The Flight of the Duchess” (Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, 1845), in which the Duchess bestows a plait of her hair on the servant speaker, and The Ring and the Book (1868–1869), in which Guido fantasises about how he might have strangled Pompilia and cut off her hair while he waits to be executed for her murder.

6. Clayton Carlyle Tarr provides one exception in arguing that Laura’s exchange is presented as “a perfectly normal marketplace transaction – an exchange that is not charged with sexual transgression, which many have argued, but with symbiosis: Laura’s hair is flaxen, valuable enough to the goblins for her to feast, and more valuable than Lizzie’s ‘silver penny’” (2012, 305).

7. See Wassholm and Sundelin (2018) for a discussion of the hair trade in late-nineteenth-century Finland.

8. Brittany is also cited by Henry Vizetelly (1893, 288–90), Charles Richard Weld (1856, 219–221), and Andrew Wynter (1874) as the source of some of the most desirable and valuable hair for use in wigs and hair-pieces.

9. Vizetelly writes of one woman complaining to a hair merchant on behalf of her granddaughter that “[o]ne handkerchief is not enough for such a quantity of hair” (1893, 290) and notes customs elsewhere in France of betrothed girls selling their hair in exchange for their wedding trousseau and farmers’ wives selling their hair for a dress (291).

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