Shelley’s Hair

In November 2013, Lord Abinger presented to the Keats-Shelley House a substantial tress of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s childhood hair. In the nineteenth century, children’s hair was rarely cut before the age of four or five, at which point boys started to look different from girls. The hair, once cut, was usually kept by the family as a kind of good luck charm, and presumably as a reminder of the subject’s once child-like state. A miniature portrait in the Bodleian library, Oxford, depicts Shelley as a child with the long brown hair which is now held at the Keats-Shelley House. A lock of hair shared with a friend or family member was often a very personal memento, and the Keats-Shelley House also owns a lock of Shelley’s adult hair, as well as hair from John Keats, Leigh Hunt, Elizabeth Barrett-Browning, and John Milton. Shelley’s childhood hair, however, is something quite different, for instead of representing a relationship between two people, it draws us to consider his youth and his apparently permanent childlike appearance.

Shelley grew up in the countryside of Sussex with four sisters (he also had a brother, John, born in 1806). Accounts of his childhood tell of a bright individual with a formidable imagination and a penchant for the supernatural and the terrifying. He made his adoring sisters the audience for his imaginative tales of ghosts and monsters. Shelley never lost his fascination with horror and the occult; it influenced some of his first publications—the Gothic novels *Zastrozzi* (1810) and *St. Irvyne* (1811)—and came to fruition in one of his greatest works—the subversive drama *The Cenci* (written 1819).

At the age of 10, possibly after an incident which involved setting fire to the family butler, Shelley was sent away from Field Place to boarding school by his father, Timothy Shelley. Too young for Eton, he was sent to Syon House Academy where, by all accounts, he endured years of terrible bullying. Shelley’s cousin, Thomas Medwin, four years ahead of him at Syon House, described his appearance at that time:

Shelley was at this time tall for his age, slightly and delicately built, and rather narrow chested, with a complexion fair and ruddy, a face rather long than oval. His features, not regularly handsome, were set off by a profusion of silky brown hair, that curled naturally. The expression of countenance was one of exceeding sweetness and innocence. His blue eyes were very large and prominent (*The Life of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 1847).

Shelley did continue to Eton, and from there to Oxford University; he had read widely, begun to write poetry, and was already railing against the institutions which he would position himself against in his career. It was at Oxford that Shelley’s formal education came to an end. His anonymous publication of the pamphlet ‘On the Necessity of Atheism’ earned him an expulsion, but it was a mere sample of the polemical writings to come.

While viewing portraits of Shelley, one might wonder if he ever stopped being a boy. The Victorians fashioned his image as angelic and childlike, which was encouraged by many of Shelley’s family and friends who wished to subdue the polemic idealism and radicalism which had defined him in life. And yet, one cannot ignore that accounts of Shelley by those who knew him insist upon a unique, boy-like appearance which is seemingly at odds with the nature of his poetry. Indeed Shelley’s friend, Edward John Trelawny, who would later oversee his funeral and burial, recorded his bewilderment on first meeting Shelley:

I could hardly believe as I looked at his flushed, feminine, and artless face that it could be the Poet […]. I was silent from astonishment: was it possible this mild-looking, beardless boy, could be the veritable monster at war with all the world?—excommunicated by the Fathers of the Church, […] discarded by every member of his family, and denounced by the rival sages of our literature as the founder of a Satanic school?

Trelawny’s veracity has always, rightfully, been questioned, but one cannot completely dismiss his corroborated observation: Shelley’s appearance conflicts with his character and literary works. Twentieth-century scholarship did a great deal to overcome the Victorian idea of Shelley, enabling new readers to look past the idealised, angelic notion of him perpetuated in Victorian society; the idea of the ‘ineffectual angel’, as he was so damagingly labelled, is now largely banished. Ultimately Shelley was not a beautiful child-like poet, but a man whose fierce radicalism, uncompromising activism, and desire to improve the world could not be contained.

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