

Magical History, A Lion’s Tail, and a Lock of Hair [A Working Paper]

The story of Berenice begins with a love that’s been lost, as many stories do.

Queen Berenice II missed her husband. Only a few days after they got married, she sat at home in Egypt while her husband Ptolemy III was off fighting in Syria. Now, Ptolemy was her second husband, and she was his second wife. Up till then, she hadn’t had very good luck with men.

Her first husband was known as Demetrius The Fair because he was very handsome. He was so handsome, in fact, that Berenice’s mother fell in love with him, and he in turn fell in love with the mother. This made Berenice so jealous that she stabbed her handsome husband to death while he lay in her mother’s arms.

So Ptolemy (the new husband whom Berenice loved very much, and incidentally also part of her, as he was her brother as well as her husband), had gone off to fight in the Third Syrian War. His wife of only a few days missed him terribly. She promised Aphrodite that she would shear off her very long, very beautiful blond hair if the goddess returned her new husband safely to her.

(We know these promises. We make them in our pain: bring the missing piece of me back, I will replace it with another piece. Limb for limb, part for part, fraction for fraction. I am an incomplete object - make me whole in this way, and I will sacrifice my wholeness again in that way.)

He returned, and she kept her promise. She cropped off her long, beautiful hair and left it at night in the goddess's temple. By morning it had disappeared. No one knew what happened to it. Now, this was potentially scandalous: the lock of hair, if it fell into the wrong hands, could be used magically to work harm against our queen.

Luckily, the court astronomer, Conon, saved the day by announcing that he had discovered a new constellation. He pointed to the sky and told Ptolemy that the hair of Berenice had gone to join Virgo, Leo, and the other beings that dwelt in the sky...

...and this is where I met her. In doing so, and in doing what came next, I was practicing what I’ve come to think of as a kind of magical history. So, what do I mean by that?

Well, the formation of a historical narrative and the formation of a constellation (especially a storied one) have a lot in common. Both emerge on a number of levels or scales: in each case a whole emerges from relationships among a collection of parts.

The first scale, for a historian, is the level of the **trace**. Any object of inquiry – a thing, an idea, an event – will leave traces and it is through those fragments that we try to tell a story. (In truth the process is more like the historian finding a trace and recognizing and identifying it as a fragment of some object.

Object → Trace

Here, identification and recognition are creative acts.) This is like the relationship between Berenice and her hair.

Berenice II → Her hair

At the next level up, the historian has a collection of traces, making up an **archive**.

Trace
Trace
Trace → Archive
Trace
Trace

Berenice also has a kind of archive.

Starry traces
Literary traces → Archive of Berenice
Memorial traces

Now, what do I mean by that? What are these “literary” and “memorial” traces?

Last we saw her, the court astronomer Conon had claimed to find her hair in the sky. Callimachus wrote a poem about the event, which takes the form of a farewell by the constellation to the queen. For a poem ostensibly written from the perspective of a braid of hair, it’s actually quite moving.

Conon, he who scanned all the lights of the vast sky, who learned the risings of the stars and their settings, how the flaming blaze of the swift sun suffers eclipse, how the stars recede in set seasons, how sweet love calls Trivia from her airy circuit, banishing her secretly to the rocky cave of Latmus – the same Conon saw ME shining brightly among the lights of heaven, ME, the lock from the head of Berenice, ME whom she vowed to many of the goddesses, stretching forth her smooth arms...”

(Trivia was a goddess of sorcery and witchcraft who haunted crossroads and graveyards and was known as the Queen of Ghosts.) The lock of hair, in this poem, remembers the queen’s grief upon seeing her new husband go off to war: “How often,” it recalls, “did you brush away the tears with your hand!” And then the lock of hair itself weeps, for (just like Berenice felt about her husband) it, too, had been separated from its body and its love and the queen it was part of:

Unwillingly. O Queen, I was parted from your head unwillingly, I swear both by you and by your head...My sister locks, sundered from me just before, were mourning for my fate...me, too, wet with tears, and transported to the home of the gods...I do not so much rejoice in this good fortune, as grieve that parted, ever parted must I be from the head of my lady; with whom of old, while she was still a virgin, delighting herself with all kinds of perfumes, I drank many thousands.

If it is dark, and you look up, you might see that lock of hair: it's bound with starry barrettes and it fans out in the sky. Some call it the Coma Berenices.



(And here's a very different reading of that figure, where Berenice's hair is metamorphosed into a sheaf of wheat.)



Some have instead translated it into the tufted tail of Leo, the lion.



So collectively, this makes up part of a kind of archive of traces Berenice. But there's another level to all of this.

The third scale is a series of connections among the traces and beyond, connecting them to other times, stories, objects: this is a way to think about a **narrative**.

Relations among collected traces & beyond → Narrative

This is also, very much, how we can think of Berenice's story. And to understand that, we need to go back to her.

When Berenice cut the hair from her head, she set it in motion. The histories of that motion can be traced in a history of translations. We've shared a bit of Callimachus of Cyrene's poem about the hair: though his Greek is lost, the verse survives in Catullus' Latin translation. Alexander Pope wove a version of the hair into "The Rape of the Lock."

Not Berenice's locks first rose so bright,
The heav'ns bespangling with dishevell'd light.
The Sylphs behold it kindling as it flies,
And pleas'd pursue its progress through the skies.

Other artists have plucked the hair out of the sky and plaited it into sculptural or colored renderings of Berenice's story, in narratives of acrylic, or paint or prose. Like Tomás Saraceno's *Coma Berenices* (2013), made of acrylic and carbon and spidersilk, among other materials...



...and like Alice Maher's *Coma Berenices* of charcoal on paper...



...and like Ibram Lassaw's work from 1952 in bronze.

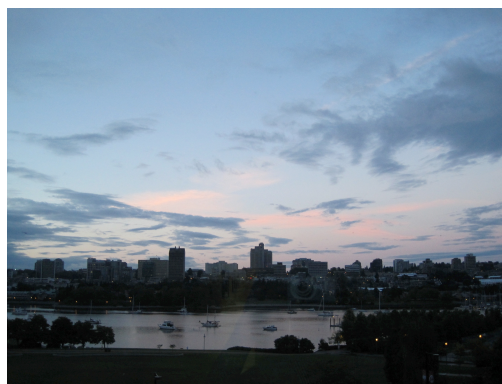


The hair is a kind of model for thinking about lives and what comes after: it was cut off, disappeared, and reappeared, changing into a new thing and generating the transformations of other things. It was originally part of a body, it was removed from that body and circulated, it was offered as a gift, it disappeared, it reappeared in a completely different setting, it became a constellation, it was taken up and translated and narrativized and changed (by poets, by astronomers).

For me, this has become a model of how I want to think about objects, words, ideas: as constellations, constantly changing, and made up of other things. They pass into and out of being. Sometimes they fade from us, and other times in an instant we suddenly see something there that we had never seen before, even when staring at exactly the same spot.

What happens to a constellation when the sun rises?

I sometimes get up early to find out, to write and think about Berenice in the midst of the opposite passing – from darkness to light. In these mornings, you can almost imagine the wispy clouds gradually appearing in the sky as Berenice's hair, the points of light that gradually become visible around 6 AM as her starry barrettes that have loosened and fallen and come to rest on the trees and sails and streets of False Creek. (Which I can see from my window.)



And I think about these parts that she keeps losing – first the hair, now the barrettes. Along with her barrettes, when I look out the window for her, seagulls fall out of her hair and drop onto the grass in David Lam Park. They seem tired, and plump – they've been up with her all night, fluffing up her dreams along with her hair. You can almost imagine the birds teasing her hair as they flap their wings.

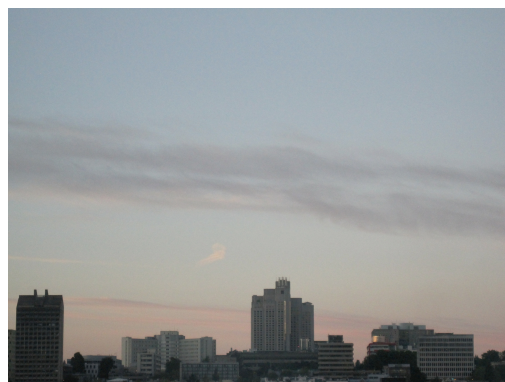


When I look at that wispy, tangled cloud-hair, I wonder what she was dreaming about that had her tossing and turning, that matted up the locks that used to flow so beautifully, so straight: the locks that were so gorgeous that a goddess brought a lover back from war just so she could snatch them up. These don't seem to be the same tresses that I see in front of me.

Every morning I look, and every morning her hair is different. If I can see such a dramatic change across successive mornings, these tiny units on this tiny scale, what about hemispheres and centuries? How do these vast scales smooth her hair, plait it delicately? Does the speed of the wind in her hair as it travels those dramatic distances calm her tresses, tighten her braids, secure her barrettes, keep the seagulls in place?



Sometimes, if she's slept fitfully (with those birds flapping and squawking, or perhaps dreaming of her husband, her brother), she sleeps in a bit. She's groggy and a bit scraggly. Could use a shampoo, needs to clean the feathers from her hair. She might stay with me well into the morning when that happens, cooling and graying the sky and keeping the sun at bay: often in those mornings it rains, and sometimes I shower along with her.



This is all part of the narrative that has become Berenice's. And here is where we come back to magical history.

At all of the levels of historical practice that I've shown you the relations and relationships that move us from scale to scale (object to trace, trace to archive, archive to narrative) are typically assumed to be, on some level, causal. The connections that emerge above are usually motivated by a causal explanation of some sort. (There's a reason WHY x is a trace of y. There's a reason WHY these traces – and not those – are collected together into an archive. There's a reason WHY we connect the traces in a particular way.)

So, what if we thought magically about history and the historical process? What might that do to change what I've just described? Magic messes up the expectation of an answer to "why," or at least it transforms what that answer might look like and where we might go searching for it. So, what might a magical history look like?

A magical history that is NOT interested in asking why, nor in authorizing stories about historical traces that are based on some sort of causal relationships, ceases to be about argument and proof. Instead, and more fundamentally, it is about **witnessing**.

And specifically in the case of Berenice and her hair, what I'm witnessing here is NOT some sort of major cultural/social/political force – it is instead a collection of **becomings** and **passings**. Witnessing becomes its own reason and basis for narrative: this kind of history doesn't ask those transformations (becomings and passings) to translate themselves into stories about why's and because's.

The **temporality** of magical storytelling is, as a result, very peculiar: witnessing here happens in **moments of recognition** – the way we suddenly see points of light in the sky as a face or a dog or a lock of hair. Opening oneself up to the possibility of such moments becomes a kind of self-cultivation that the magical historian brings to her craft. Here, **recognition** is an action, a **historiographical** tool, a form of **making**.

And in helping to recognize – to make – the becoming and passing of another entity, we simultaneously make our own passings and becomings.

Here the years make up our night sky, and historical traces are the stars, and the shape we conjure of them is a constellation in time: it's a lock of hair, a tufted tail, a sacrifice left by a lonely lover, an early morning dusted with seagulls.

And sitting with Berenice lets us begin to glimpse what can happen to our stories when we don't ask the relationships between our historical traces to take a shape determined by causal connections. We are gifted with a history not of explanations, but of comings into and out of being, of metamorphoses, made of moments of witnessing, and taking **recognition** as its craft.

This becomes a history read in pages and screens, across night skies and through windows. This becomes a history of barrettes, and distance, and longing, and a story about what it is to explode out of an archive of stars and reappear in bronze, in spider silk, in poetry voiced by hair, and in the early morning wakings of a historiography of objects.