

TO DYE OR NOT TO DYE?¹

I first noticed a few grey hairs at the tender age of 26 – was it nature (genetic inheritance from my father who went grey in his 20's rather than my mother who didn't go grey until her 60's) or nurture (involving a somewhat turbulent adolescence requiring rather too much responsibility when all around me were simply having fun)? Always swift to anger and slow to reason, I stormed to the chemist to purchase my first hair dying kit.

This was the start of my long association with the art and science of dyeing.

My hair's natural colour was chestnut brown and was quite easily matched with hair dye that was made from ammonia-free natural products. All good – except at various times it ended up bright orange, deep black and tiger stripes due to hairdresser error or, in the latter case, my inadequate instructions.

Imagine the indignity of meeting someone I had hoped to impress with my head wrapped in hideous faux silk scarf (the only thing available at short notice) in order to disguise the hair which had just been stripped of all colour to enable a re-dye later that afternoon. I was so embarrassed that I could hardly make eye contact during our lunch and got away as fast as I could. And that was the end of that potential relationship.

A disaster of a different kind was my unkept promise to my cheeky children to dye my hair bright purple on my 60th birthday. I even bought the dye – the brightest and brashest I could lay my hands on – but became faint-hearted as the day drew nearer. I still feel sad that one of those children died before I could make good my promise – a tug of sorrow that I had denied him the chance to be amazed at my boldness.

The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to...

¹ With apologies to William Shakespeare, T.S. Eliot and long-suffering hairdressers everywhere

These stories come suddenly to mind and make me re-live the waking realities, but... what about sleep... perchance to dream?

It is cold in my cave but as I hate the glare of the Mediterranean sun I am glad to hide away and make what I can of my loneliness. I am Medusa – known to history as a gorgon – living at a time so long ago it has no date. Venomous snakes rooted into my scalp endlessly writhe around my head and twist towards any new sound to see if someone is approaching who needs to be turned to stone. My hair has such power it makes me proud. I wonder how many statues I will have to keep me company in my cave as time passes because all time is unredeemable.

It is the 1780's in Paris and I am an elegant courtesan of mature years but still strikingly beautiful, turning heads wherever I go. At the heart of a circle of artists, scientists and politicians and living in a mansion paid for by my rich and influential lover who visits me one night a week but otherwise leaves me free to be a lady of leisure and culture. On the days I am hosting luncheons or evening soirees, I wear an enormous wig of piled-high white curls festooned with innumerable (and, even to my mind, slightly ridiculous) colourful decorations. My hair necessitates walking with a ram rod straight back and avoiding at all costs any sudden movement of my head to right or to left. Even laughing is risky. I wonder how my lover feels when my wig is set aside and my increasingly thinning hair is what remains. I am thankful indeed that all intimate encounters take place in the forgiving light of flickering candles.

It is the 1920's in Berlin and I am a cabaret singer entertaining the idle rich night after night whilst in the surrounding streets many are starving. With long legs and sharp, black-painted fingernails, I wear severe almost masculine clothes. My hair is jet black cut in a tight, straight shoulder-length bob that frames my heavily made-up eyes and blood red mouth – willkommen... bienvenue... welcome. A forceful shake of my head as I end each song makes my hair tumble down to cover much of my face and conveys

what I feel without the necessity for words: whatever you have done already or will do in the future... don't you dare think for a moment that you can mess with me.

It is the 1940's, I am in the women's section of a concentration camp somewhere in Eastern Europe – miserably under-nourished, I am thin and with my crudely shaved head leaving only small tufts of my once glorious golden hair, I am indistinguishable from all the other women with whom I am incarcerated. How long do we have left? Will we make it through? Did my family get away? Does anyone still remember me? How am I even still living – if this can be called living?

Set against these disconcerting dreams my dyeing tribulations seem pathetic but at the time they felt painful and somehow diminishing.

A dye is (according to Wikipedia) *a coloured substance that chemically bonds to the substrate to which it is being applied*. Bonding or bondage?

When applied to hair, a dye can make all the difference between feeling hopeful and feeling hopeless. A dye brings colour to a colourless face. A dye is a lie that hides the truth. A dye is a mask behind which you can experiment with being a new form of you.

No, I am not Prince Hamlet nor was meant to be. I don't wear my heart on my sleeve, I am rarely indecisive and I never speak in riddles...but it is comforting to know that when this too solid flesh melts, the colour of my hair will finally be entirely irrelevant.