

The Rapunzel Syndrome

By Aimee Lee Ball

For some women, giving up long hair is harder than giving up chocolate, sex, or men.

The Victoria's Secret catalog just arrived in the mail. On nearly every page, creamy models loll about in wispy bits of silk and lace that shriek, "Baby, I'm yours." But I am not looking at their lingerie; I am looking at their hair—miles and miles of tousled, cascading hair, as silky as the camisoles and tap pants. Victoria's Secret sells only the underwear, but the message in these photographs is clear: The way to a man's heart is via skimpy garter belts and lavish hair.

There is an undeniable mystique about long hair, as evidenced by all the women who can't give it up, even past the age when reason would dictate something more...well, reasonable. (Think of Ginger Rogers, Geraldine

Golden Oldies



They Belong at the Head of the Class: From left, Ginger Rogers, Geraldine Fitzgerald, Sylvia Miles.

Fitzgerald, Sylvia Miles.) The mystique is nurtured in history, literature, and the common culture, where hair seems to signify sex, youth, power. Rapunzel, imprisoned in a tower, lets down her hair to facilitate a rescue by her shining prince. Lorelei, combing her hair on the banks of the Rhine, lures boatmen to their doom. "Generally, in our culture, women are supposed to have long hair," says Robert Mashman, a San Diego psy-

chologist who has studied the significance of physical appearance. "Long hair is associated with femininity and sensuality, so women might think that a more unisex look is threatening or displeasing to men. An *obsession* with long hair comes from other sources—perhaps a desire to maintain youthfulness."

The symbiotic association of hair and sex is hardly an exclusively female prerogative. New York City stylist Maury Hopson reports that most *men* sit for a haircut with their hands crossed over their crotch.

Each sex participates in its own hair inanities—sins committed in the name of a supposedly youthful image. The woman who wears gray hair in a ponytail has a male counterpart in the wrap-around baldy: the one with 11 strands at the nape of his neck, grown seven feet long to wrap around his entire head. "Hopefully," suggests Hopson, "someone will gently tell a silly-looking man or woman, 'Stop doing that.'"

But women persist in the notion that men want long-haired partners as a celebration of the differences between the sexes. Perhaps the progenitor is the Neanderthal man grabbing his woman by the hair and dragging her into the cave. In Victorian times the requisite bedtime routine meant the unpinning of hair at a mirrored vanity before a woman performed her wifely duties (preferably eyes closed, thinking of England). The folks at the bar in *Cheers* once tried to get Lilith into the arms of Frasier by insisting that they needed her hairpins to pry open a lock, as if the sight of her hair



Past-Prime Time

Meet the Tress: Clockwise from top left, Faith Daniels, Leeza Gibbons, Lesley Stahl.

tumbling out of its prim knot would trigger a Pavlovian response. And it did.

"There is this symbolic thing about a man running his hands through a woman's hair," says Hopson. "I think it's related to the idea that long hair looks good on a pillow. There's such a limited audience for that—how much time do you spend being observed in bed?" Hopson speculates that a woman's protracted attachment to long hair may relate to a first traumatic experience with a shorter cut. "It can be crippling if you had long braids as a child and your mother took you to a hairdresser who sliced them off." He also suggests that the development of women who hold on to the long hair of their youth may be arrested at a stage of life when they got the most approval, felt the most secure.

Women with bra-length, belt-length, and, so help me, boot-length hair, many of them traumatized by hairdressers who promised "a trim," often show up in tears at the Madison Avenue salon of long-hair guru George Michael, a hearty 73-year-old graduate of both a Soviet medical school and the Wilfred Academy of Beauty Culture. According to Michael's sometimes loony-sounding philosophy, long hair is healthier because it moves more easily and "exercises" the roots, increasing blood flow. He permits no bangs (layered cuts "confuse" the hair, because we are mammals

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who are always trying to “equalize” our “wool”), and he insists on right-side parts (because hair follicles grow from left to right, and a right part makes your hair do “push-ups”).

But long hair is *old* hair, often damaged hair, often hair with a mind of its own. “My greatest fear is getting stuck standing on the subway next to someone with a big head of dead, dry hair,” says one woman commuter I know. “It travels. It gets in your face. It intrudes on your space.” It’s difficult to understand what such women are seeing when they look in the mirror, but long hair on middle-aged women seems to make the same sort of political statement that the hair of *Hair* made for men of another era: It says, “I’m young, I’m relevant, I dare to be different, and I don’t give a shit what you think.” Unfortunately, it also says, less intentionally, “I have no idea how foolish I look.” Jackie Onassis seems to get away with her perennial shoulder-length pageboy because she has *good* hair—strong, thick, shiny, and not damaged by years of lightening—and because the style fulfills what New York City hairdresser Charles Fremolaro calls a standard of “hair acceptance” required in certain social circles, among the ladies who lunch. Gloria Steinem fares less well: She took off the aviator glasses but still clings to the center part and straight veil of hair from her investigative Playboy Bunny days.

“Long hair is a security blanket for some women,” says Fremolaro. “If a woman is not comfortable with her-

self, she may hide behind her hair. You’re more naked with short hair—all of a sudden you have earlobes, you have cheekbones, you have a chin. You may be showing a nose or a neck you’re not comfortable with. Long hair will disguise all that. When you take it off, you’re really coming out.”

We ask a lot from our hair—security, aplomb, emotional well-being. We ask long hair to represent us in the world, to be an asset we can flaunt, and we seem to be caught up in its implications, more than in those of eyes or lips or legs or anything else. “The hardest part of my business is suggesting change to a client,” admits Fremolaro, “finding a diplomatic way to say, ‘This is getting boring or matronly.’ Too-long hair can be quite aging—look at the Miss Americas, who are 21 and look 40.” The Farrah Fawcett look is alive and well around the country—“we call it ‘mall hair,’” says Fremolaro. “But short hair can be extremely soft, full, sexy. Long hair *is* sexy—I’m not saying otherwise. But it depends on the bearer, and it depends on the hair.”

TV news is the true wasteland of long hair—there must be an unspoken rule that human hair should not move. The crimes of prime time include the back-combing of Connie Chung, the helmet head of Lesley Stahl, and the velvet headband of Betty Furness. “A woman over 50 should not have a bow in her hair,” says Hopson. *Today’s* Faith Daniels must be going for a world’s record—she will soon be sitting on her hair. *Entertainment Tonight* offers a truly frightening-looking mane in the person



Lifers

Don’t Change a Hair for Us: Amy Irving and Cher.



of Leeza Gibbons, who could hide bombs in her head, à la Debbie Harry in *Hairspray*.

There *are* some women who should never snip off more than split ends, no matter what. In the “Don’t Change a Hair for Me” category are Amy Irving and Cher, who might be painful to behold without their signature manes, rather like Kris Kristofferson without facial hair. But lots of women haven’t dusted off the old eight-by-ten glossies in a long time. In the “Give It a Rest” category, the winner by a long shot (pardon the pun) is Loni Anderson, although I am willing to concede that she may need all that hair for warmth, since her chest is so rarely adequately covered. Runners-up would include Sissy Spacek (who favors long and stringy), Ann-Margret (who favors long and brassy), Jane Curtin (who should have left the Darien divorcée look to *Kate & Allie* reruns), Mary (as in Peter, Paul and—the world’s oldest teenager), Candice Bergen (who favors long and fluffy), Jackie Collins (long and bodice-ripping), and Angie Dickinson (long and ratty, which is utterly distracting). Yes, I know, men *love* Angie Dickinson, but this appeal must be on some channel I don’t receive, like that whistle only dogs can hear. Dickinson also qualifies in the category of “Long Hair in Bad Movies,” a particularly disagreeable combination, but the winner here must be Dolly Parton.

I am deliberately choosing to ignore Crystal Gayle.

Some fearless public role models do exist, women who hike up their hair as confidently as their skirt lengths—like Mary Tyler Moore (who must recognize that she left Laura Petrie far behind), Meryl Streep and Glenn Close (who will cut anything for a good role), Blair Brown and Barbra Streisand (who seem to enjoy change), Demi Moore (Bruce doesn’t mind), and Melanie Griffith (Don doesn’t mind). Their bravery should serve as inspiration for anyone still wedded to the long-hair mystique. So should Maury Hopson’s epigram: “I’ve never given a permanent haircut.” ●



After the Mall: Clockwise from top left, Loni Anderson, Candice Bergen, Sissy Spacek, Ann-Margret, Angie Dickinson, Dolly Parton.



Hanging Offenses

