

66. THE LOCK OF HAIR: BERENICE



e who gazed at all the lights in the vast heavens,
 who learnt the rise and setting of the stars,
 how the fiery beauty of the swift sun's darkened,
 how constellations vanish at fixed times,
 how sweet love entices *Diana* [p. 210], secretly passing
 near the *Latmian* [p. 217] cliffs, in her airy course:
 that same *Conon* [p. 207], the astronomer, saw me shining brightly
 at heaven's threshold, a lock of hair from *Berenice's* [p. 202] head,
 she who stretching out her delicate arms
 made promises to a multitude of gods,
 at that time when the great king newly married
 was gone to lay waste the borders of Assyria,
 bearing sweet traces of nocturnal strife,
 those that are brought about by virgin spoils.
 Is *Venus* [p. 237] really hated by new brides? Is parents' joy
 deceived by their false tears, shed copiously within
 the threshold of the bed? If it were truth they sighed
 they'd not have supported my divinity so.
 My queen taught me that, with her many woeful cries,
 when her new husband went off to grim battle.
 And is it not the bereavement of an empty bed you mourn,
 but the tearful separation from a dear brother?
 How sad cares eat at the heart's core from within!
 As though, troubled, your mind is wholly lost,

robbed of all feeling in your breast!
But I recognise true greatness in a girl.
Surely that brave act is not forgotten by which a husband's
kingdom was gained, that no one stronger dared?
But what sad words were said in sending off this husband!
Jupiter, how often your eyes were brushed by your hand!
What god has changed you so? Or is it a lovers wish
not to be absent from the beloved body for long?
And, there too, you promised me, to all the gods,
not without blood of bulls, for your dear husband,
if it brought his return. It did not take him long
to add captive Asia to the bounds of Egypt.
I discharge former promises, for those deeds,
by this new tribute that joins me to the heavens.
Unwillingly, O Queen, I was parted from your hair,
unwillingly: I swear it by you and that head of yours,
that is worthy, even though one were to swear in vain:
but who could claim to be equal to steel itself?
Even the mountain's overthrown by it, the greatest
bright child of *Macedonia's* [p. 235] shores, over-passed
when the Persians created a new sea, when barbarians
drove their fleet through the midst of *Athos* [p. 200].
What can hair do when such things fall to the blade?
By Jupiter, that the tribe of *Chalybes* [p. 205] might all perish,
and those who first pursued the search for veins of metal
below the earth, and how to cut tough things with iron!
A little while ago the sisters were mourning my fate
as a shorn lock, when, out of Locri, *Arsinoe* [p. 199] sent

the winged horses of Ethiopian *Memnon* [p. 220] himself,
 beating, with quivering wings, *Zephyrus* [p. 238]'s,
 the West Wind's, air, the brother born with him,
 and carrying me through the shadowed sky, he flew,
 and placed me in chaste Venus's lap.
 Arsínoe herself sent her servant there,
 Greek inhabitant of the *Canoptic* [p. 204] shore.
 My arrival changed the heavens, so the golden crown
 from *Ariadne's* [p. 199] brow might not be fixed alone
 in the bright sky: but, so that I too might shine,
 a faithful spoil of that golden hair, the goddess
 passing, wet from the flood, to the gods' temple,
 placed me as a new constellation among the old.
 For, touching the *Virgin's* [p. 238] stars and the savage *Lion* [p. 218],
 joined to *Callisto* [p. 204] daughter of *Lycaon* [p. 204],
 I fall towards the west, leading slow *Boötēs* [p. 203],
 who merges tardily with the deep *Ocean* [p. 222].
 But though the footsteps of the gods touch me by night,
 light still returns me to *the ancient sea* [p. 234].
 (Let this be known, by your leave, Fate, Virgin *Ramnusia* [p. 230],
 since I hide nothing of the truth through fear,
 nor though the stars disperse me with angry words,
 do I choose to hide the buried truth of the heart.)
 I don't delight in these things, as much as I suffer
 from being parted, parted from my lady's hair,
 with which, when the girl used to try out
 all perfumes, I myself absorbed many thousands.
 Now you, whom the longed-for marriage torches join,

don't surrender your bodies to mutual embrace,
baring your breasts with clothes removed,
before the onyx delights me with its pleasing gift,
your onyx, you who by right adorn the chaste bed.
But she who gives herself to impure adulteries,
let her absorb from sin the vain gift of light dust:
since I seek no prize from the undeserving.
But let great harmony, O brides, always inhabit
your house, continual love always.
You, *my Queen* [p. 202], when you see your divine constellation,
as you placate Venus with festive lights,
don't leave me free of your perfumes,
but endow me with more great gifts.
I wish that the stars would fall! I'd become royal hair,
and then let *Orion* [p. 223] shine next to *Aquarius* [p. 198]!



'Bacchus and Ariadne'
Gerard de Laireesse (Dutch, 1641 - 1711)
The Rijksmuseum