Adriaen van de Venne’s *Cavalier at a Dressing Table*: Manhood and Parody in 17th Century Dutch Art

**Martha Hollander, Art History**

*During the 17th century, men were acutely conscious of their appearance.* They shaved, and combed their hair daily. Yet this subject was almost never depicted by artists of the Golden Age.

Images of personal grooming were widely produced, but exclusively as a woman’s business, associated with vanity, beauty and seduction. Men are sometimes present, but only to admire the women.

*Adriaen van de Venne,* a playful and inventive artist working in the Hague in the 1630s, decided to create a male equivalent. His cavalier is getting dressed: his shoes are untied; his collar is undone. On the floor are his cuffs, some scattered pins for fastening them, a clothes brush, and curling tongs heating in a brazier. He’s combing his hair, while his servant holds up a mirror.

Men dressing sometimes appear in scenes of *military life.* No mirrors, though, and no hair-combing. “Primping” men were thought effeminate and weak, and foreign - a threat to the body politic.

Van de Venne’s cavalier, with his love-lock and his mirror, is an easy target: a man in a feminine context. Clearly Van de Venne is poking fun at the ideal of manhood. But in creating a unique image of a common private activity, he unmasks that ideal. Revealing the disorder (pins, brush, mirror, cuffs, and jewel) behind the cavalier’s public self is startlingly modern. *Parody is not only a satirical form of imitation, but functions as a form of liberation from a society’s norms and deepest anxieties.*

Van de Venne has also given his man a *love-lock.* This lock of hair, grown extra long and worn over the left shoulder, was worn by both sexes: mostly the aristocracy and faddish young people in Europe and England.

*Writers everywhere condemned the love-lock,* calling it “that lousie commoditie,” or “a powdered, ashen and fearful nest of nits... That is a half-woman, by all manner of Judgment.”

Private coll. S&d. 1631 40.6 x 33 cm Oil/panel

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