



Adriaen van de Venne, *Cavalier at a Dressing Table*  
Private coll. S&d. 1631 40.6 x 33 cm Oil/panel



# Adriaen van de Venne's *Cavalier at a Dressing Table* : Manhood and Parody in 17<sup>th</sup> Century Dutch Art

## Martha Hollander, Art History

During the 17<sup>th</sup> 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.

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.

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.



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 unmask 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."**