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Hair in the Classical World On Berenice's Hair Wall Text

Bellarmino Museum of Art

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ON BERENICE'S HAIR

These excerpts come from the poem about Queen Berenike II's (267 or 266–221 BCE) hair, by the Greek poet Callimachus (ca. 310–240 BCE) and preserved by the Latin writer Catullus (84–54 BCE), which is written from the point of view of the lock of hair. (Berenice is the English translation of Berenike).

Me, the curled lock from Berenice's head,
Shining with heavenly brilliancy, whom she
To many gods an offering to be
Did dedicate, outstretching her smooth arms,
That so her lord might be preserved from harms.

So now I pay the vow that had been given,
And shine amid the brilliant host of heaven.
Unwillingly, O queen, did I thy hair
Part from thy head, this by thy head I swear,
And may they who this oath take lightly feel
Due vengeance, but what force can equal steel?
For steel o'erturned that hugest hill by far,
O'er which doth pass the sun's bright gleaming car,
When through mount Athos sailed the Median fleet,
And in new channels did the waters meet.
If 'neath steel's strokes such mighty things can quail,
How could a woman's tender hair prevail?

My sister-locks bewailed me lost to view
When through the air with quivering wings there flew
The Ethiop Memnon's brother, the winged steed
Of Chloris; me aloft he bore with speed,
We left Arsinoe's temple, and on high
Traversed in rapid flight the ethereal sky,
Till at the seat of Venus fair and chaste
Upon her bosom I the lock was placed.
For Zephyritis' slave her message bore
To the fair region on Canopus' shore,

That not alone in heaven's wide varied plain
Should Ariadne's golden crown remain,
But that I too my brilliant light should shed,
The golden spoils from Berenice's head;
So bathed in tears I reached the fanes divine
Where Venus did to me a place assign
'Mongst older lights a new star; where the sheen
Of Virgo and of Leo fierce is seen,
And where Callisto's nightly glories burn;
There towards the west my heavenly course I turn,

But why should me these glittering stars detain?
Would that I might my mistress' hair again,
As erst become; Orion's belt divine
Might then refulgent next Aquarius shine.