

Mary, Queen of Scots and Bothwell's bracelets

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ABSTRACT

One of the famous Casket Letters mentions Mary, Queen of Scots making bracelets for the Earl of Bothwell. Is this an implausible story which casts doubt on the alleged authenticity of the letters, or is it something she could have done? This article† examines an unusual aspect of 16th-century Scottish jewellery.

The jewellery of Mary, Queen of Scots (illus 1) was famous throughout Europe in her own time and outdid even the glittering array of gems possessed by Elizabeth I of England. Rather different in style, however, was a bracelet which features in the notorious Casket Letters. The eight letters and the long poem (printed and discussed in Davison 1965 *passim*), apparently discovered in the casket taken from one of the Earl of Bothwell's retainers, were produced by her accusers at Mary's first trial in York. If authentic, they proved that she had gone to Glasgow in 1567 with the deliberate intention of luring her second husband, Lord Darnley, to his death at the hands of Bothwell (illus 2), her alleged lover. If forgeries or artificial concoctions of some kind, they are evidence not of her guilt but of her enemies' determination to destroy her. Since the documents vanished in the 1580s and are known to us only in 16th-century copies, the originals cannot be subjected to scrutiny by modern scientific techniques, and so every detail they contain takes on a heightened significance.

The mention of the bracelet at first sight seems implausible. According to the copy of the second long letter made by the clerk at the Westminster Conference in December 1568 (Fraser 1969, 560) the Queen explained:

This daye I have wrought till two of the clock upon this bracelet to putt the keye in the clyfte of it, which is tyed with two laces. I have had so lyttle tyme that it is very yll, but I will make a fayrer, and in the meane tyme take heed that none of those that be heere doo see it, for all the world wold know it, for I have made it in haste in theyr presence . . . [Later, she continues] I have not seene him [Darnley] this night, for ending your bracelet, but I can fynde no claspes for yt: it is ready thereunto and yet I feare least it shuld bring you yll happ, or that it should be knowen if you were hurte. Send me word whither you will have it . . .

In short, rather than visiting her sick husband, a task she said she abhorred, Mary apparently sat up late working on this very personal gift for another man. Her fondness for playing cards until the small hours with courtiers who had included David Rizzio had already

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ILLUS 1 Silver medal commemorating the marriage of Mary, Queen of Scots and Lord Darnley, 1565, by an unknown artist. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery PG752a*)



ILLUS 2 Miniature, oil on copper, of James Hepburn, 4th Earl of Bothwell, 1566, by an unknown artist. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery PG869*)

been jealously noted by Lord Darnley (illus 3), but is it possible that a queen could actually make an item of jewellery? Although the word ‘wrought’ could be used in connection with, say, needlework, it is plain that more than sewing was involved. There was a key, a lock (the contemporary Scottish translation reads ‘for to put the key of it within the lock thair of, quhilk is couplit underneth with twa courdounis’) and there was a need for clasps. The notion of Mary undertaking any metalwork is out of the question. Only goldsmiths or silversmiths who had undergone years of apprenticeship and training could produce such an item, using specialist tools. Is the passage about the bracelet therefore a glaring inaccuracy, which casts immediate doubt on the authenticity of the Casket Letters, or could the bracelet have taken some form which does make an unlikely story plausible?

Bracelets certainly were worn by men in the 16th century, but not until the closing decades. In documentary evidence, it is often difficult to tell whether the bracelets mentioned are intended for men or women. A discharge by Mr John Lyndesay, parson of Menmuir, in Edinburgh on 28 April 1583 to James Guthrie, burges of Edinburgh on behalf of James, Lord Ogilvy is for 12 crowns in payment of a pair of bracelets, but there is no indication of whether these were for Lord Ogilvy himself or for a female friend or relative (SRO Airlie MSS GD16/32/2). Visual evidence in the form of paintings is, however, unambiguous.

The Scottish National Portrait Gallery holds in its Reference Archive more than 30,000 black and white photographs of portraits in public and private collections throughout Britain. Although the number of 16th-century portraits from any country is small, the selection in the Archive is comprehensive. There is not one example of a 16th-century English, French, German or Dutch male sitter wearing a bracelet. This is not altogether surprising, since the tight-fitting cuffs and hand ruffs of the period would make it virtually impossible to display bracelets, and for this same reason they are not to be found in female portraits of the period either.

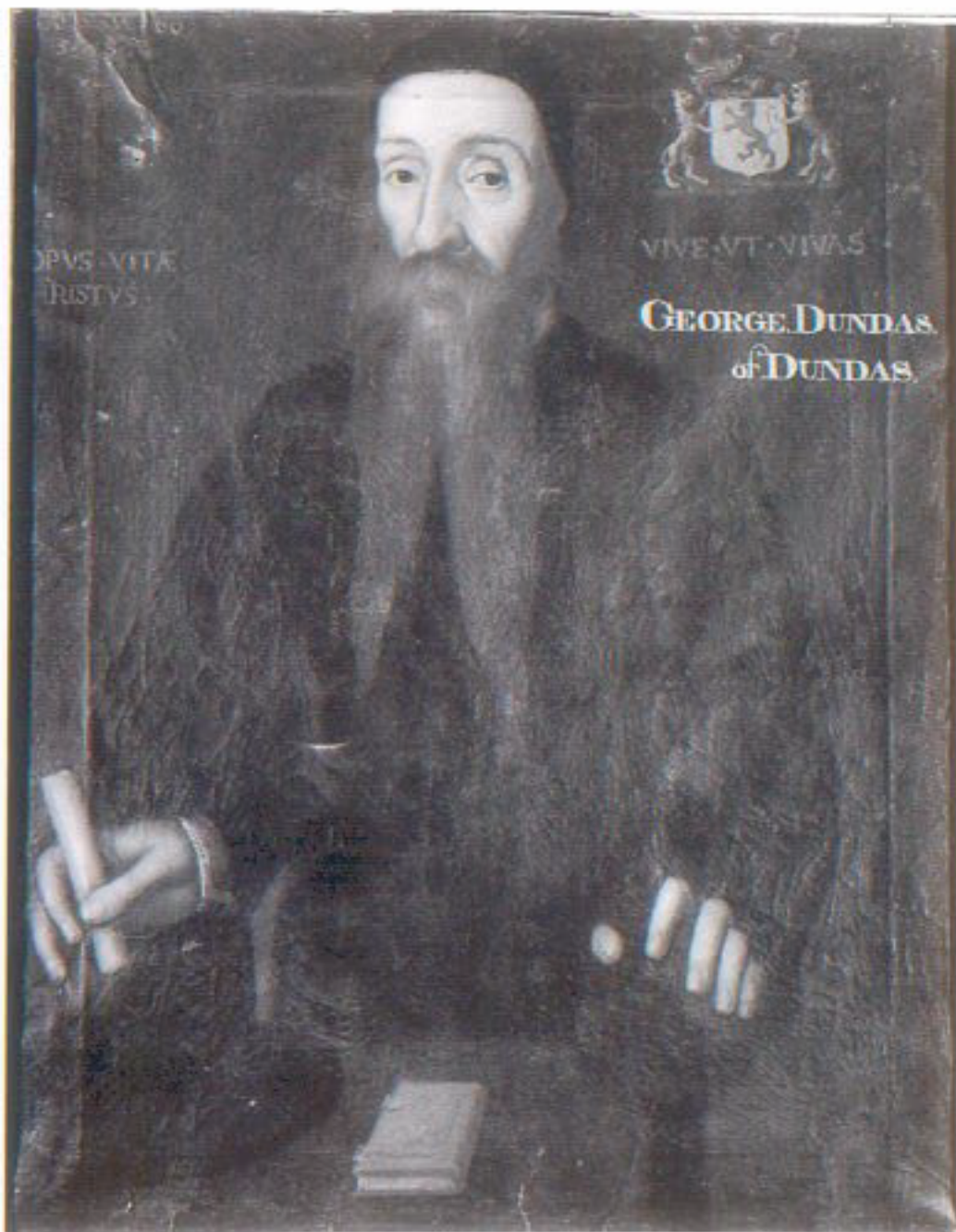
Interestingly, there are two Scottish examples in male portraits, but not until the end of the century: the 1586 painting of George Dundas of Dundas by an unknown artist (illus 4), and the



ILLUS 3 Portrait of Henry, Lord Darnley, c 1565, by an unknown artist. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery PG2279*)

1591 portrait of the elegantly clad Sir James Anstruther by an unknown artist (illus 5), both in private collections. The Dundas bracelet (illus 6), worn on its plainly dressed sitter's right wrist, is composed of metal links, with an undecorated clasp. (The left wrist is not visible.) The Anstruther bracelets, one on each wrist (illus 7), are more elaborate. A matching pair, they have a double row of what appears to be woven gold thread, held in place by fancy, engraved clasps. Not until 1603 is there an English example, with *Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton* attributed to John de Critz, in a private collection (illus 8), showing several strings of coral beads on his left wrist (illus 9); the right wrist is concealed. After that, gem-set and bead bracelets appear frequently in female and occasionally in male portraits, their presence facilitated by turned-back lace cuffs.

Mary, Queen of Scots was not, then, creating a gem-set bracelet that night, but could she have been using another material? She was worried that her gift would be instantly recognizable. Her correspondent must let none of the courtiers see it, she told him, for they had watched her make it and they would know it again at once. More significantly, she worried that at some future date the Earl might be wounded, in which case the bracelet could be revealed and recognized. She



ILLUS 4 Portrait of George Dundas of Dundas, 1586, by an unknown artist. (Collection of Mrs A Dundas-Bekker, Arniston House, Midlothian)

had not yet found clasps for it, so the identifying features must either have been the small lock and key or the material from which the bracelet was made. She obviously expected that the recipient would wear it well concealed below his shirt sleeve, perhaps under the cuff or, more likely, on his upper arm. Could it possibly have been made of her own hair?

Hair jewellery for mourning was well known in the 18th and 19th centuries, when brooches, rings and lockets frequently incorporated hair of a dead relative or friend, often woven into an elaborate pattern (Marshall & Dalgleish 1991, 52; Murdoch 1991; Scarisbrick 1993). Literary and documentary evidence show that hair jewellery existed at least as early as the late 16th century, not as part of mourning but in a more romantic context. A hair bracelet was, in fact, a well-known love-token requested by a man from his mistress.

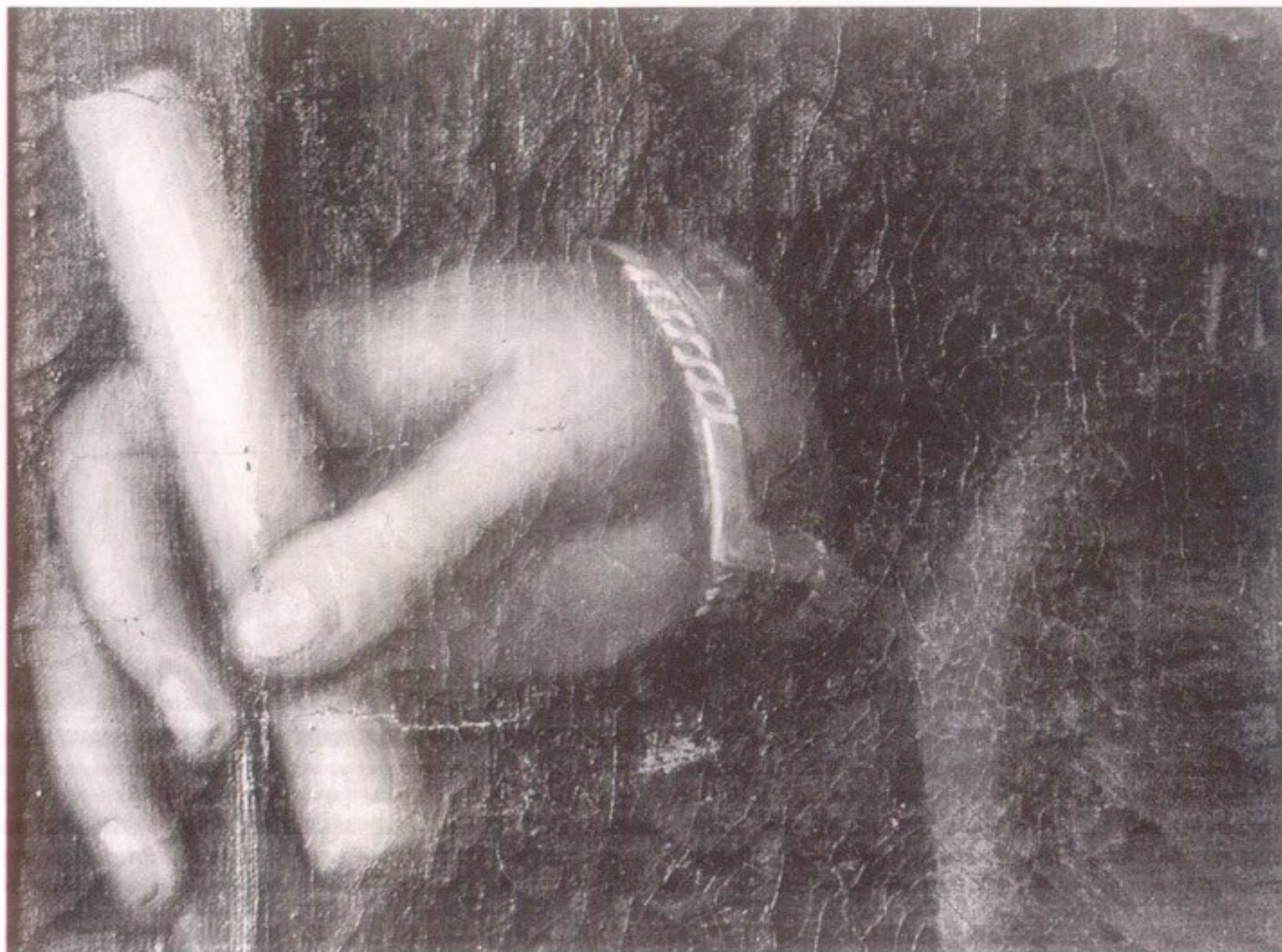
Writing in the last decade of the 16th century, the English metaphysical poet John Donne makes at least three allusions to such bracelets. In *The Relique* he imagines someone opening up his grave for another funeral and finding on his skeleton 'A bracelet of bright haire about the bone', placed there because he and his mistress 'thought that this device might be some way/To make their soules, at the last busie day,/Meet at this grave, and make a little stay' (Hayward 1962,



ILLUS 5 Portrait of Sir James Anstruther, 1591, by an unknown artist. (Collection of a Descendant)

46–7). In *The Funerall*, he urges, ‘Who ever comes to shroud me, do not harme/Nor question much/That subtile wreath of haire, which crowns my arme’, a wreath which his mistress had given him (*ibid*, 43–4). Finally, in *The Bracelet*, he mourns the loss of a chain bracelet, presented to him by his mistress, ‘Not that in colour it was like thy haire;/For Armelets of that thou maist let me weare’ (*ibid*, 78). About 15 years later, Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher in *Cupid’s Revenge* mention ‘Bracelets of our lovers’ hair/Which on our arms shall twist/With our names carved on our wrist’ (Murdoch 1991, 43).

Unfortunately, although hair is very long lasting, only one surviving example of an early hair bracelet has so far come to the attention of the present writer, and that is a very elaborate one in the Danish Royal Collection at Rosenborg Castle (Anon 1960, 599). Dating from about 1597, it was probably a gift from Christian IV of Denmark (brother-in-law of James VI & I) to his wife, and the hair from which it was composed was presumably his own. Catalogued as being ‘of pierced enamelled gold (blue lions, heart with arrow) and the crowned letters AC for Queen Anna Catherine. Beneath the arrow and monogram, braided hair’, it is, in fact, a bracelet of braided hair ornamented with gold, the hair being clearly visible beneath the open work of the lions (illus 10).



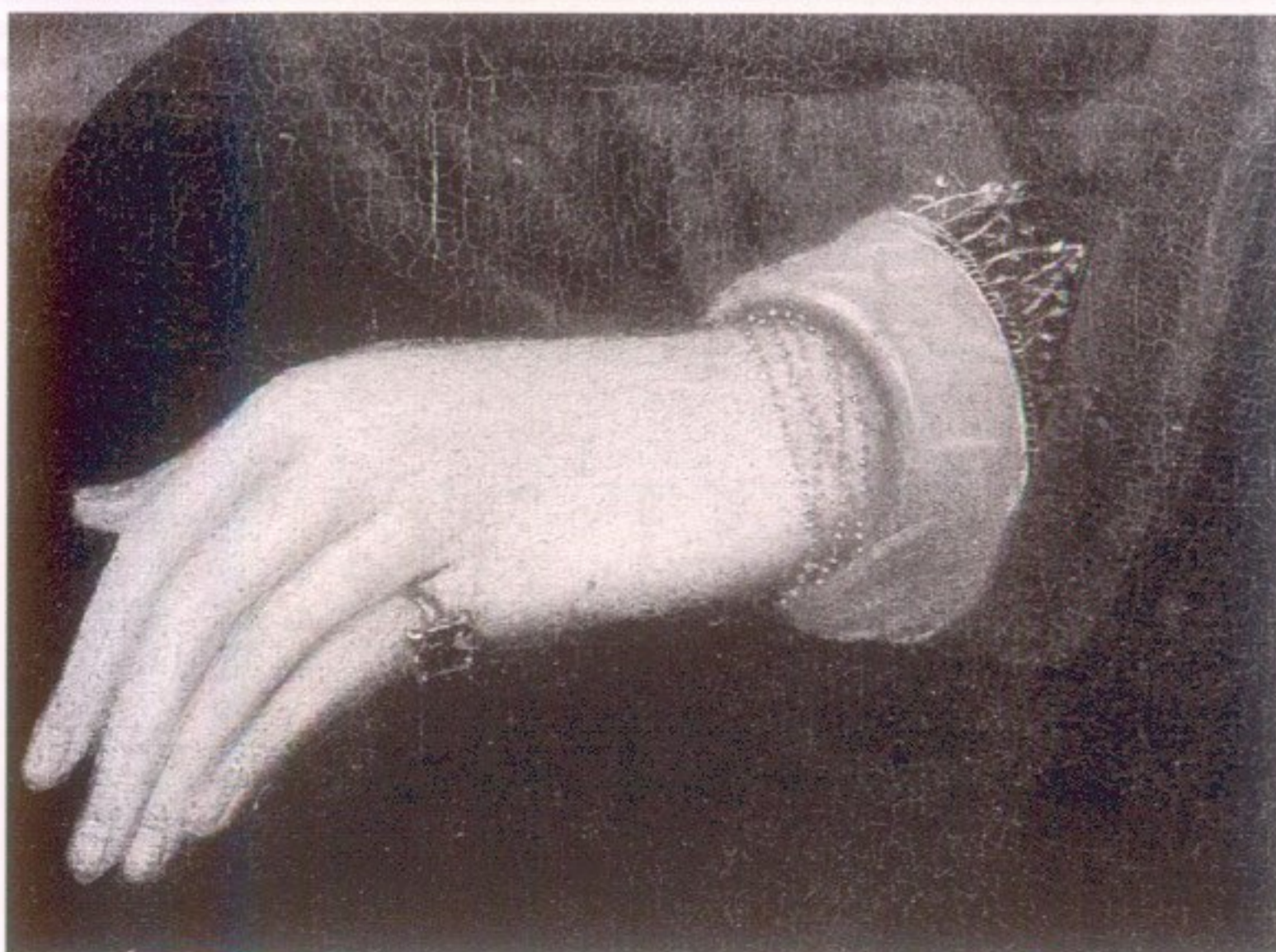
ILLUS 6 Detail of portrait of George Dundas of Dundas, 1586, by an unknown artist. (*Collection of Mrs A Dundas-Bekker, Arniston House, Midlothian*)



ILLUS 7 Detail of portrait of Sir James Anstruther, 1591, by an unknown artist. (*Collection of a Descendant*)



ILLUS 8 Portrait of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, c 1603, by J de Critz. (Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry KT)



ILLUS 9 Detail of portrait of Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, c 1603, by J de Critz. (Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry KT)



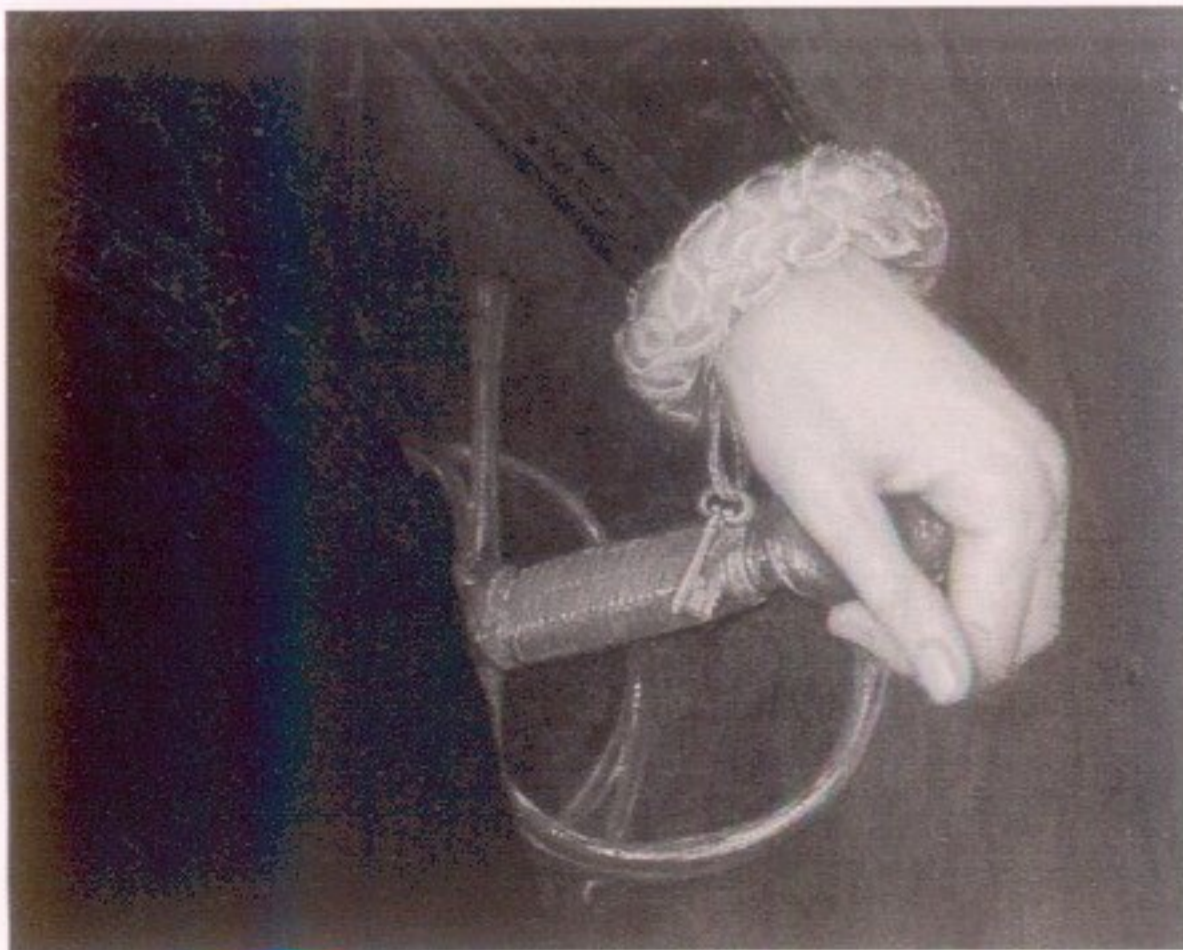
ILLUS 10 Enamelled gold and hair bracelet probably given by King Christian IV of Denmark to his wife, Queen Anna Catherine, c 1597. (*Danish Royal Collection, Rosenborg Castle*)

This elaborate bracelet was very different from the simple love tokens envisaged by Donne, but clearly it was inspired by similar sentiments. No doubt it was preserved because of its value and its royal associations. Presumably the more homely tokens were discarded when love faded, or were buried with the wearer. That hair bracelets were not merely a figment of the poetic imagination is, however, further proved by some Scottish correspondence of 1668. In that year, the Earl of Airlie was courting the widowed Mary, Marchioness of Huntly. Despite the fact that she was a Roman Catholic and he was not, she seemed inclined to listen to his advances until an unfortunate rumour came to her ears. The Earl had been drinking in a tavern, it seemed, when a hair bracelet with a little ring slipped from his arm. His companions were immediately desperate to know where the token had come from, and he had boasted that the Marchioness had given him both ring and bracelet. When she heard, she was furious. The ring had certainly been hers, she admitted, but as to the hair, 'I disown it, for you was never so unreasonable as to desire such a thing and I swear, though you had, I would not have wronged modesty so far as to have granted it.' When the Earl strenuously denied that he had ever uttered her name in public, she relented sufficiently to allow him to travel towards her as far as Banff, but forbade him to call on her in Elgin, since that would stir up more unsavoury gossip. Eventually, they did marry the following year (Marshall 1983, 69–70).

Although none of these examples is as early as the 1560s, it seems reasonable to suppose that hair bracelets were probably an accepted form of love token at that time too. If so, the notion of Mary, Queen of Scots sitting up late to make a bracelet for Bothwell is entirely plausible. Before her flight to England, when she cut short her long and luxuriant auburn hair in order to change her appearance, she would have been well able to make both the original and the planned second bracelet with no difficulty. She had presumably looked for the clasps she needed among her jewels. Inventories of the 16th and 17th century very often record loose pearls, precious stones and beads along with necklaces and other finery, so it would be likely enough that extra fastenings were also kept.



ILLUS 11 Portrait of Alexander, 1st Earl of Dunfermline, 1610, by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery PG2176*)



ILLUS 12 Detail of portrait of Alexander, 1st Earl of Dunfermline, 1610, by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger. (*Scottish National Portrait Gallery PG2176*)

The reference to the key and the lock is more puzzling. The 1610 portrait of Alexander Seton, 1st Earl of Dunfermline, by Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger (illus 11) shows him with a small key suspended from a fine silk cord wound round his left wrist (illus 12). The cord might even be made of hair. Its significance has long puzzled observers. Could it have been a love token? The key could conceivably have had some symbolic significance as the key to a lady's heart, or it might have opened a coffer of a private nature. However, since the sitter was the former Lord Chancellor of Scotland, and a man in his middle fifties, a romantic explanation for this detail of a public portrait seems unlikely. Perhaps it is an allusion to the fact that he had become a member of the English Privy Council the previous year.

Finally, the fact that Mary was making a single bracelet is not without significance. It was customary to wear precious bracelets in matching pairs, one on each wrist, but a hair bracelet was a single item, sufficient in itself. Of course, Mary wrote of her intention of making another bracelet, and Bothwell did indeed receive more than one from her. On 10 August 1569, Nicholas Howbert, better known as Paris, was interrogated in St Andrews about the events leading up to the explosion at Kirk o' Field. In his deposition, he alleged that Mary sent him from Glasgow to Bothwell 'avec des brasseletz', and that he delivered them to the Earl (Pitcairn, *Trials*, i, pt 2, 507). The Casket Letter makes it clear, however, that the second bracelet was not intended as a matching fellow for the first, but as a more satisfactory replacement for the original. Its status as a love token was thus emphasized. Unlikely as the tale of Mary making bracelets may at first seem, she could well have done so, and one small doubt about the Casket Letters is therefore removed. From the evidence of other hair bracelets, we may conclude that the anecdote was not a clumsy and implausible invention, but even so we are no closer to knowing whether or not the letters are authentic. Was the story of the bracelets a deft touch by a calculating enemy determined to incriminate the Queen, or the involuntary admission of a young woman ready to sacrifice everything for love? Like so much else in her life, the answer remains veiled in mystery.

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