

x Excerpted from 'Fault Lines and Points of Light' chapter 1 of my new book

In Antiquity and the Middle Ages the mineral world was characterised, like the vegetal and animal realms, by monstrous deformations intended to increase human understanding. Carved gem-stones, in particular, and those with pronounced markings, were understood by Pliny and others as independent of human artifice. Gems were the signature of the cosmos: they could be read as texts in which the unnatural was the basis of nature, the grotesque the origin of form, and monster a key to meaning. ⁱ Belief in the revelatory capacities of gems diminished, or morphed, following Enlightenment preoccupations but precious stones in general and diamonds, in particular, have remained productively connected to the idea of understanding and legibility. The lapidary tradition of speaking stones survived into the eighteenth century in commonplace, sayings, metaphors, and similes. 'I once did wish for fame', declared Walpole, 'now I dread it, for it is like diamonds, of little value unless of the first water -- and who would be fine in Bristol [ie rock crystal] stones?' ⁱⁱ and when Mrs. Delany encountered the young Duke of Devonshire prior to his marriage to Georgiana Poyntz, she remarked; 'to be sure the jewel has not been well polished: had he fallen under the tuition of the late Lord Chesterfield he might have possessed les graces, but at present only that of his dukedom belongs to him.'

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Owing much to the legacy of the 'Vanitas' tradition and sanctioned by biblical texts and emblem literature, the allegorisation of gems gained new impetus in the nineteenth century, possibly partly as a result of the translation into English of classic Lapidaries such as that of Marbode. ^{iv} While diatribes against artificiality were commonplace in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, the very qualities of beauty, value, and captivation of the gaze of others meant that jewels were central to personal ornament and thus to social and economic discourse; Maria Edgeworth's popular novels indicate just how instrumental diamonds were understood to be economically and how necessary as a yardstick of moral rectitude in particular and social relations in general. The promise of independence that ownership of jewels could provide - in fantasy if not in fact - is amusingly instanced in *Castle Rackrent* (1800) in which Lady Cathcart is locked up by the husband from whom she has managed to conceal her diamonds. She

succeeds in throwing the jewels out of a window and, having recovered them on being granted her freedom, flees 'to spend the rest of her days upon her own income and jewels in England'.^v For her part, the dissolute Lady Delacour in *Belinda* (1801) rejects diamonds as a demonstration of her reformation. In the same novel the Rousseauesque Virginia passes the test of simplicity by preferring rose buds to diamond earrings,^{vi} inflecting a trope familiar throughout eighteenth-century European painting in which young women are represented discarding jewellery in favour of flowers, as with Jacques-François Courtin's *Young Woman in front of a Mirror* (1713, The State Hermitage Museum). By the middle of the nineteenth century diamonds would be proscribed for young women in advice manuals. Whereas eighteenth-century commentators often laughed at plain or older women laden with jewels,^{vii} nineteenth-century regulatory discourse linked bodily and mental health with an avoidance of ornaments and insisted that 'Costly cashmeres, very rich furs and diamonds, as well as many other brilliant ornaments, are to be forbidden a young lady'^{viii}. In Mrs. Walker's words, 'jewels are fit only for the aged'.^{ix}

William Blake, in the verse I have quoted, was indignantly responding to the work of Sir Joshua Reynolds but he might also have had in mind Gainsborough and the great majority of English eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century portrait painters for whom, whether their subjects were gentry (as with Joseph Wright of Derby's relaxed image of Hon. Mrs. Boyle ca. 1761-3, Auckland City Art Gallery) or royalty (as with Sir Thomas Lawrence's portrait of Queen Charlotte 1790, London: National Gallery), the detail of personal apparel and, in particular, the glitter of jewels were a major component of the work. In Trevisani's painting, the precious stones might be seen as sanctioned by biblical imagery such as that in the description of the Heavenly Jerusalem in *The Book of Revelations* but the pearls that run freely through the sleeves and the knotted Oriental scarf around the waist in Gainsborough's portrait of Penelope, Viscountess Ligonier (1771, The Huntington Library Art Collections) are non-specific, non-functional, and superfluous to any semantic message. Literally 'fancy' they tell us nothing about the subject's status; they are purely eye-catching surface ornament. And yet they are one of the portrait's distinguishing features.

By the late eighteenth century precious stones were also established in the primarily secular philosophical discourse of men such as Lord Kames and Adam Smith. Lord Kames, writing his *Elements of Criticism*, in 1761, responding to the cult of surface that portraits by artists such as Gainsborough exemplify and typifying a shift from the moral to the psychological, believed that seeing and hearing were elevated above the other senses and sought to define what was most agreeable to the eye and why. Novelty, he concludes, 'has a more powerful influence even than beauty or greatness when an object comprehended in a single view touches the mind more effectively'.^x In 1767, revising this work, he benefited not only from Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) but also from the suggestions of the blue-stocking Elizabeth Montagu in analysing the relationship between ornament and visual pleasure, concluding that although 'of all subjects ornaments occasion the greatest variety of taste', they ought always to be of a form suited to their real or apparent destination.'^{xi} He had in mind the examples that Montagu had cleverly proposed. On jewels she deftly sought a way to position gem-stones within a matrix bounded by social and economic contingency on the one hand and propriety based on gender and class on the other:

Too curious adorning of the Person makes a Man appear effeminate, a Woman Coquettish. Jewels seem most noble appropriated to some purpose {because there is a littleness of mind in ostentatious parade}. The regard they obtain from the beholder is chiefly as signs of wealth. A dress clasped or button'd with diamonds looks more noble than the same quantity of jewels placed as ornaments, because in the first place they seem limited merely by the use in the other by fortune & intimate that ye Persons wealth could not go any further, besides, nothing expresses such affluence as when the richest and most elegant things administer to a Persons ordinary occasions, & where there is no intended ostentation.^{xii}

In portraiture strictures concerning function were an irrelevance; viewers were less interested in being able to work out whether a waistcoat as depicted could or could not be fastened than in the extraordinary effects that oil paint on canvas could produce in

the interests of representing the diverse and eye-catching material that the novelty-minded purveyors of fashion had devised. Fashionable portraits - particularly those of female sitters - by Reynolds and Gainsborough were later sought by wealthy collectors like Lord Rothschild at Waddesdon Manor or Henry Clay Frick and Henry Huntington in America. They became cultural reference points, denoting for writers of subsequent generations, like Hazlitt, the extravagance, sophistication and glitziness of a now obsolete age.^{xiii} An equivalent status is seldom accorded to male portraits. Dress and personal ornament are germane to the overall pictorial effect in European female portraiture, so much so that in modern writing the term 'costume-piece', originally used in the nineteenth century to describe dramas in which the characters wore historical clothing, is now applied to eighteenth century portraits. The term 'costume' itself, meaning the manner of wearing clothing, hair and ornaments, enters the English language from the French word 'coutume' or custom in the early eighteenth century and testifies to the keen interest at this time in the manipulation of the body and its coverings within national cultures.

The word 'jewellery' derives from French *joaillerie* and, although it always had strong associations with personal adornment, in early modern Europe it tended to mean any precious and valued small-scale object (as, for example, illuminated manuscripts and *objets de vertu*). By the late seventeenth century, 'jewellery' had begun to acquire its modern exclusive meaning of items of personal adornment made from precious metals and gemstones. But the original, wider, sense still applies as evinced by the range of luxury goods carried by, for example, Asprey's, the Bond Street jeweller. 'Jewel' is most often used to indicate the gem-stone set in a piece of jewellery, but it may be used to describe an object containing gem-stones in its entirety. This elision signals the way in which the most precious element (the gem-stone rather than the setting) has come to stand for the whole. In an historical sense, jewellery may be understood as an index to forms of pleasure; it also serves as agency in the construction of identity and, therefore, also in the articulation of power. In short, jewellery as a phenomenon in cultural history links the economic with fascination and desire.

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- ⁱ I am paraphrasing here D. Williams, *Deformed Discourse*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996, pp. 213-4. On lapidaries see J. Evans and M.S. Serjeantson, *English Medieval Lapidaries*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1933), 1960
- ⁱⁱ Horace Walpole to Lady Ossory, 12 Jan 1775, , vol. 32 (1956), p. 222
- ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in A. Foreman, *Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire* (1998), London: Harper Collins, 1999, p.17
- ^{iv} In the 1758-60 Hertel edition of Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* , Superbia (pride) is pictured wearing many jewels and admiring herself in a mirror; Painting (Ars Pictoria) has jewels in her hair; reprinted ed. E.A Maser, *Cesare Ripa Baroque and Rococ Pictorial Imagery*, New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1971. Marbodaeus or Marboeuf, Bishop of Rennes, born ca. 1035, was the author of *De Gemmarum Lapidumque Pretiosiorum Forma*, printed 1531. On the Victorian enthusiasm for moralising lapidary allegories and the translation of ancient texts on stones see K. Tetzli von Rosador, 'Gems and Jewellery in Victorian Fiction' in *REAL*, 2, 1984, p. 304, p. 300. The most accessible text on Lapidaries for English readers is J. Evans, *Magical jewels of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance Particularly in England*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922.
- ^v M. Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent; an Hibernian Tale, Taken from Facts and from the Manners of the Irish Squires before the year 1782* (1800), London: J. Johnson, 1810, p. 60
- ^{vi} M. Edgeworth, *Belinda* (1801), London: Everyman, 1993, p. 275, p. 351.
- ^{vii} See for example, Mrs. E.J. Climensen, *Passages from the Diaries of Mrs. Philip Lybbe Powys ... 1756-1808*, London: Longman, Green & Co., 1899, p. 152: 'A woman fat and plain and looking unfashionable in jewels'
- ^{viii} Anon, *Etiquette for Ladies*, 1838, p. 64, quoted in K. Tetzli von Rosador, op. cit., p. 293
- ^{ix} Mrs. A. Walker, *Female Beauty as preserved and improved by Regimen, Cleanliness and Dress*, New York: Scofield and Voorhies, 1840, p. 366 advice by Sir Anthony Carlisle. The first edition was published in London in 1837

^x Home, Henry Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (dedicated to the King December 1761, preface to third edition 1763), New York: Prior and Danning, 1819, xvii, pp 218-226.

^{xi} H.W. Randall, 'The Critical Theory of Lord Kames'. *Smith College Studies in Modern Languages*, Northampton, MA: Smith College, 1944, pp. 105-6.

^{xii} Elizabeth Montagu to Henry Home, Lord Kames, 13 April 1767, MS. Huntington Library MO 1175 A&B. The section in parenthesis is an addition in the author's hand.

^{xiii} On this see P.J. Barlow, ' "The Backside of Nature", the Clique, Hogarthianism, and the problem of Style in Victorian Painting', Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1989, especially ch.1