
Anatomizing Shakespeare's Jewelry

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Widely differing approaches to Shakespeare's works come into vogue at various times. Character studies have been with us for two and half centuries; while feminist, materialist, and queer studies have a shorter history. The subject of Shakespeare's use of references to and items of jewelry in his plays began to emerge about three quarters of a century ago. At that time, G. Wilson Knight focused on *Timon of Athens*, a play with a fawning jeweler and Timon's jewel-loving flatterers, whose kindnesses to him he over-rewards until his wealth dries up and they cry in dismay, "One day diamonds, . . . next day stones" (4.1.120-21). Knight's enthusiasm for the hero occludes any thorough probing of these lines, of Timon's emotional needs, or of the values of Athenian males. Knight describes the jewelry motif in the play as simply a feature of the "conviviality" of the hero's coterie in the same way that Knight regards the extravagant spending of the lovers in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Caroline Spurgeon, writing at the same time as Wilson Knight, has a simple approach to jewelry, associating it mainly with glamour and attractiveness. True, she correctly notes that *Hamlet* and other works reveal Shakespeare's interest in gem-backing foils, used to enhance the brilliance of jewels. But when she comments on the place of Gaunt's wonderful description of England as a "precious stone set in the silver sea," she is too quick to conclude that the jewelry images throughout *Richard II* celebrate the whole cast's honorable patriotism. She maintains that the "touches of jewel imagery" "add beauty to the conception of the value of love, especially of love of country—a leading note in the play—and of the honour and devotion of her sons" (241). But what if her discussion had extended to the whole second tetralogy, embraced physical jewelry as well as just mere figures of speech, and extended beyond personal gems to the vast array of the decorations that denote officials well as affluent people and lovers? Would she then have had trouble reconciling her idealistic view of jewelry metaphors with the four plays' continual thievery motif:

with Hal's supposed theft of his dying father's crown, or the purported filching of Falstaff's copper(?) "seal-ring"—not to mention the larcenous struggles of Glendower, the Percys, and/or several Plantagenets over various crowns on either side of the Channel?

Properly nuanced readings of jewelry references are now, however, more prevalent in recent criticism. Valerie Wayne reminds us of connotations in the exchange of handfast gifts between Innogen and Posthumus. Since the couple's social and economic status is uneven, a queen's diamond ring is given for a pretty gold spangle. And when David Bevington and Karen Newman each scrutinize the exchange of rings in *Merchant of Venice*, we see that there is much more to deduce than a pun on ring-like vaginas. For Bevington, the women's returning the rings to the husbands, and the men's opening their hands to and for them, extend "a promise of restored trust in goodness" (Bevington 57-59). For Newman, the Lady Portia's giving her ring to Antonio, and ordering him to preside over Bassanio's reception of it, indicates the triumphal rejection of the original signification of the ring as "sign of male possession, fidelity, and values" (29; cited Owens & Harris 86).

Caroline Spurgeon's pioneering *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* merely tabulates and discusses figurative references to jewelry, which she calculates are one of the more prevalent of Shakespeare's metaphorical images. But critical scholarship today is generally more concerned with physical than with metaphoric jewelry. Two signs of the times are Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass's *Renaissance Clothing, and the Materials of Memory* and Nancy J. Owens and Alan C. Harris' "This Precious Stone': Literal and Figurative References to Jewelry in the Plays of William Shakespeare." The former finds room for discussion of clothing on stage, but the latter is narrowly focused on barely two dozen textual references, stated or implied, to Shakespearean jewelry. whereas any Shakespeare concordance and the indexes of books on Shakespearean stagecraft reveal that there are hundreds of jewelry references in the corpus. Not only are Owens and Harris' references too few, but so are the inferences drawn from them: the basic conclusion of these two authors is that Shakespeare used the sight and talk of jewelry to invest stage action with the reality of the spectators' own lives, where jewelry

was important to “status” and “courtship.” These findings are an advance, however, over the simplistic idealism in Caroline Spurgeon.

The category of jewelry extends well beyond the rings, bracelets, and necklaces of private persons to the crowns, chains, badges of office, and the like of officials. It includes numerous kinds of removable and transferable decorations—usually of metal or stone but also cloth or leather (a glove or sleeve), and in non-European societies, shell, precious feathers, carved or painted coverings. Every social station has its identifying decorations, and social aspiration can consist of exchanging one set for another. Malvolio, born an impecunious “gentleman,” aspires to move from being the business manager of a countess to the status of her equal, exchanging his steward’s chain of office for another and more expensive and aristocratic adornment:

Seven of my people, with an obedient start, make out for [Toby]. I frown the while, and perchance wind up my watch, or play with my—some rich jewel. (*Twelfth Night* 2.5.52-55)

The functions of jewelry include the economic, the intimately interpersonal, the beauty-enhancing, as well as the power-based or status-creating. Many of these functions can be inferred from a famous pose of King James, where the painter or engraver depicts the monarch wearing in his hat an enormous diamond. The bejeweled hat enhances his attractiveness and underlines his wealth and power—that is until we learn that he felt he had to pawn and, later, sell the gem to surmount monetary and political pressure. In an age with limited lines of credit and no bank books or bank cards, it was convenient, a recent study of early modern clothing has suggested, to get a cash advance on one’s costly clothing and fancy jewelry (Jones and Stallybrass).

The real or simulated flash of gold and gems must have been evident in almost all plays that Shakespeare’s company produced. Characters like Shallow and Falstaff in the bourgeois *Merry Wives* were gentry, after all, and would wear some piece of personal and/or official jewelry as a signal of class, status, role, and personality. Painters show us nobles with cap badges; and officials in state or church with collars, chains, staffs, crosses, crooks, or episcopal rings. Onstage, a lover or his lass needs a ring and perhaps a picture-in-little. High-born lady or courtesan, each

requires her jeweled gown, bracelet, carcanet, coronet, bilament, buckle, girdle, brooch, pendant, pomander, girdle-book. Black Aaron would “shine” in “pearl and gold” (*Titus* 2.1.19), himself a precious black “pearl” (5.1.41) in the eyes of Tamora with her queenly crown and regalia, as recorded in the Peacham drawing (Ronan). And beside Hamlet’s uncle might lie the ‘gem’ that he would use to poison his elegantly fashioned wine cup.

Major governmental ceremonies and the festive moments of high society figures call for elaborate and bejeweled apparel. This is obviously important for mere readers to remember when studying instead of seeing *every* one of the plays, with the possible exception of *Merry Wives*, which involves no royals, high official, aristocrats, or wealthy burgers. *Much Ado About Nothing* is fairly typical of every work in the canon; here there are princes, a governor, a count, and numerous gentle folk participating in a martial victory celebration and a society wedding. The gown of the governor’s daughter is said to exceed in beauty even that worn by the far more eminent “Duchess of Milan” at her wedding. The latter is described as “cloth o’ gold, . . . laced with silver, set with pearls, . . . and skirts . . . with a bluish tinsel” (3.4.14-19). Any Chamberlain’s production that made Hero’s dress look much dowdier than this would occasion unwelcome laughter in the audience. Instead, representations of upper-class power and glamour are succinctly emphasized in all the plays by the sight, and mention, of jewelry and bejeweled apparel.

Current concern with the material context surrounding jewelry onstage and off has emerged in the course of such studies of the age as Ann Rosalind Jones and Peter Stallybrass’s *Renaissance Clothing*. Valuable works that codify the physical properties needed in stage productions include Alan C. Dessen and Leslie Thomson’s *Dictionary of Stage Directions* as well as by Jean MacIntyre’s *Costumes and Scripts in the Elizabethan Theatres* and Frances Teague’s *Shakespeare’s Speaking Properties*. When we reflect on the great variety of jewelry mentioned in the plays, we see the utility of these resources for any student of the thematic and architectonic structures of the plays.

In his private life, Shakespeare belonged to a polite tradition, where one willed mourning rings to honored friends. Furthermore, if the Chandos portrait is really of him (Schoenbaum), he occasionally wore one or more earrings—an article of male jewelry

that was far from automatic; it is missing from some paintings of allegedly Marlowe, Jonson, Southampton, Donne, and most of the retainers in Peake's *Eliza Triumphans* (Strong; Murdoch).

As a member of the King's Men, Shakespeare was occasionally called upon to parade in red velvet livery, topped with embroidered and appliquéd gold thread, and with a hat bearing an enamel royal badge. More importantly, in his daily professional life as playwright and theatrical sharer, Shakespeare would be of course highly aware of his literary options and business resources. Jones and Stallybrass assume that garments pawned by the rich and noble might have been not just sold or passed on to the players but actually rented to them for performances. Many spectators would know first-hand the beauty of Europe's Renaissance jewelry, as popularized in England since the days of Holbein. Our sense of what stage jewelry (Leel, "V & A"; Anderson) probably looked like is informed by three sources: surviving jewelry (much splendidly displayed in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London), numerous renaissance paintings of English and continental figures of Shakespeare's time, and the chance survival of the mock-up display jewelry of an upper middleclass goldsmith of about 1600. In this last, we can see the highly imaginative and flamboyant baubles that blazed on the already brilliant clothing of both sexes. Also, there seems to have been an industry of fake gems, at least of pearls, for Owens and Harris speak of ordinary rich people, not actors, wearing fancy apparel on which were sewn imitation pearls costing a penny apiece. If the actor playing Falstaff really ever wore a shiny "seal-ring" (allegedly an inheritance from the character's grandfather), it was likely to have been made in copper, not gold, and thus the byplay in *1 Henry IV* would have taken on the look of a metatheatrical joke. In any case, Francis Bacon objected to performances where noble or royal regalia was represented with brass instead of gold thread ("lace")—a hint that *some* stage costumes and jewelry might have been fairly valuable, even if in less than new and pristine condition (Jones and Stallybrass,).

The jewelry visible onstage functions like much else in early modern drama—as paradoxically encouraging both metatheatrical distance and a willing suspension of belief. The shifting perspectives on jewelry thus mirror the frequent shifting of value that characterizes so many of the plays (Muir). In *Hamlet*, "rich

gifts wax poor”; in *Troilus* Helen is a “pearl,” but “What is aught, but as ’tis valued?” The love-gift of a simple turquoise ring can be more valuable to a Shylock than bags of gems and gold or a New World “wilderness of monkeys.”

Obviously, I am emphasizing that scholarship deserves, and is certainly in need of, a full anatomy of Shakespearean jewelry, physical and metaphoric. Rings are very prominent in several plots: *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Comedy of Errors*, *Richard III*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, and *Cymbeline*. But are all rings of equal monetary and emotional value? Nothing is more touching than the sudden patriarchal love that peeps through Brabantio’s anger when he disowns Desdemona and yet calls her his “jewel”—and later dies of a broken heart at her elopement. The tone is quite different when Benedick jests about Hero with Claudio:

Benedick Would you buy her, that you enquire after her?

Claudio. Can the world buy such a jewel?

Benedick. Yea, and a case to put *it* into.

(*Much Ado* 1.1.143-47)

Status, power, affluence, beauty, permanence and impermanence, and comic or serious sexuality all have been implicitly claimed by anyone appareled in jewelry and similar bodily decoration. All of these have long been presented, evoked, and/or imitated in ceremonials for thousands of years. In rituals of religion, the state, and popular entertainment, jewelry has asserted and advanced the roles of high priests, magistrates, kings, lovers, and even mimes. Always with nuance: Professor Arthur Kinney has remarked in my hearing that he meditates on the meaning of Cleopatra’s “right royal” appearance to Caesar. For a moment earlier her corpse needed Charmion’s aid in fixing the crown as it sat on her head “awry.”

In comedies, tragedies, histories, and romances, Shakespeare expects audiences to respond to traditional connections between sensuality and jewelry, connections varying from the mystical and dignified to the amusing and tawdry. Four thousand years ago, Gilgamesh’s divine mother wears jewelry to highlight her bare breasts when she seeks the favor of a superior god. “Saint-seducing gold” (*Romeo and Juliet* 1.1.207) jewelry is wooer’s equipment, perhaps as much for a Hamlet as for a

Roderigo. Outrageous Petruchio knows he must at least talk of giving his future bride “rings and things,” (*Taming of the Shrew* 2.1.315) and King Polixenes, in dignified non-royal disguise, assumes that passionate lovers will woo with jewelry trifles like the “horn-rings” that Autolycus sells. *Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, and *Cymbeline* complicate—but do not deny—the omnipresent comic and romantic idea that finger rings, expensive or not, and vaginal rings are linked in a complex of sensual beauty and excited bodily expression:

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and a hey-nonny-no,
That o'er the green corn field did pass,
In spring-time, the only pretty ring-time,
When birds do sing, hey ding-a-ding ding.
Sweet lovers love the spring.
(*As You Like It* 5.3.14-19)

Elsewhere in this play about “country copulatives,” the libertine Jaques voices more doubles entendres on rings and on young aristocratic youths’ rhetorically con-ning City wives into an ac-quaint-ance:

You are full of pretty answers; have you not been
acquainted with goldsmiths’ wives, and conn’d them out of rings?
(*As You Like It* 3.2.270-72)

In a far darker and more mysterious mood, Romeo seeks love in the grave, telling Paris a contorted tale of necrophilia—that his mission is to recover his “ring” from his dead lady’s finger (*Romeo* 5.3.30-32).

Shakespeare’s plays contain thousands of moments when jewelry is represented, discussed, or displayed—often in quite interesting and creative ways. The sheer numbers ensure that. Of merely *verbal* references, I calculate (Charts I and II below) that the canon contains approximately 500 mentions of regal crowns, 400 references to gold or gilding, 90 to silver, 180 to finger rings, 40 to pearls, 20 to diamonds, and 30 to other stones. It is time that Shakespeare’s frequent observations upon the human interest in jewelry should be given the full investigation, classification, and evaluation that only a full-fledged literary anatomy can provide.

Chart 1. Approximate Number of References to Sovereigns' Crowns in 7 Plays and Whole Canon	
Plays	Crown(s)/Crowned, Coronet & Crownet, Diadem
<i>3 Henry VI</i>	67
<i>Richard II</i>	24
<i>Richard III</i>	21
<i>2 Henry VI</i>	13
<i>The Tempest</i>	9
<i>Macbeth</i>	7
<i>Hamlet</i>	5
Canon (Total)	396

Chart 2. Approximate Number of References to Jewelry and Treasure Bags in 7 Plays and Whole Canon						
	Jewel/ Gem	[Gem]stone/ [Gem] Bag	Ring	Pearl/Diamond/ Other ¹¹	Bracelet/Chain/ Picture-in-Little	G[o]ld(en)/Silver
<i>TGV</i>	3/0	0/0	10	5/0/0	0/0/0	3/1
<i>ERR</i>	2/0	0/0	9	0/2/2	0/66/0	24/1
<i>LLL</i>	4/0	0/0	1	3/1/0	0/0/0	5/1
<i>TN</i>	3/1	0/0	7	1/0/1	0/1/1	6/0
<i>MV</i>	5/1	5/4	40	0/1/2	0/0/0	20/6
<i>AWW</i>	3/1	0/0	35	0/0/0	0/0/0	5/0
<i>CYM</i>	7/0	2/0	16	0/7/2	2/0/0	18/3
<i>TIM</i>	12/0	3/0	0	0/1/0	0/0/0	28/3
Canon	101/9	40?/17	180?	41/21/29	6/90?/5	404/88

Notes

1. Alabaster, Sapphire, Ruby, Carbuncle, Opal, Turquoise, Chrysolite, etc.

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