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DIAMONDS AND GENDER IN VICTORIAN POPULAR LITERATURE

(TITLE)

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Diamonds and Gender in Victorian Popular Literature

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If you peer into a British periodical published between 1830 and 1900, you are very likely to come across the subject of diamonds in one form or another, be it be an article about the famous and controversial Koh-i-Noor, a “how to” wear diamonds guide, a gossip column on who wore what, or a thrilling tale of diamond theft. In “Koh-i-Noor: Empire, Diamonds, and the Performance of British Material Culture,” Danielle C. Kinsey argues that “diamonds were a fraught commodity” throughout and prior to the Victorian era (391). In other words, diamonds were highly symbolic and required a delicate balancing act in order for one to properly wear them as jewelry. Depending on things such as social status and gender they could reflect positively or negatively on the wearer.

One important element of this balancing act rested solely on one’s gender. Gender conventions, specifically for males, began to change during the Victorian era; what was once appropriate in masculine display began to instead signify femininity. The notion of manliness became a widely expected trait of men of all classes, as opposed to the prior notion that men of higher status were to maintain a more gentlemanly air. In this paper, I will argue that as manliness came to be more highly expected, one of the many side

effects of this modification of conventions was that diamonds came to be labeled as feminine, thus negatively associating women with diamonds.

The expectations of men in all classes, but especially those of the elite, shifted during the Victorian era, as stated by Susie L. Steinbach in her cultural history,

Understanding the Victorians:

In the eighteenth century, the most admirable form of masculinity had been 'gentlemanly politeness,' which was characterized by elite social standing, sociability, and ease of manner. The replacement of gentlemanly politeness with manliness was a sign that the middle-class values were ascendant. Manliness was constructed around the life experiences of middle- and working-class men and privileged their experiences, in particular their commitment to hard work. Upper-class men were now seen as soft and lazy rather than as admirably at ease. In the eighteenth century, gentlemanly leisure and non-vocational learning had been admirable; in the nineteenth they came to seem like idleness and uselessness. (Steinbach 134)

This deviation of masculine expectations drastically affected men's relationship with diamonds, and in turn, women's relationship with them.

Believe it or not, diamonds were not always known as 'a girl's best friend'. Many articles and stories written during Victorian time depicted men, rather than women, as

the predominate diamond lovers. Early in the nineteenth century, upper-class men were looked up to for owning and wearing diamonds. A section of an 1824 publication of the *Examiner* titled “Newspaper Chat: Avarice,” reads: “If [a man] show a hundred thousand crowns worth of diamonds,...you consider him as a man of great magnificence, but not at all avaricious.” And in 1828, in *The Albion*, an article, “Gentlemen’s Fashion for April,” advises “diamond buttons” to be worn by fashionable men.

By the 1850s, not much along these lines had changed. In an 1859 article called “Trade in Diamonds,” the author writes of the foreign fashions of wealthy diamond-wearing peoples: “queens and princesses,” and “sultans and chiefs” alike. The author goes on to express that “here, in Europe, the same taste, a little modified, prevails. Men do not consider it effeminate or ridiculous to wear diamond-rings,” (“Trade in”). While the article goes on to claim that “women are often vainer of these brilliants [diamonds],” one can clearly see that the stigma against men wearing diamonds is not yet present.

The Duke of Brunswick, as specified in an 1857 article in the *Glasgow Herald* entitled “The Duke and His Diamond” was famous for his diamonds. The article states that the duke “whose passion for diamonds all the world knows, purchased, at an amazing sacrifice, the famous Agra diamond” thus making “the Duke the envy of the whole diamond-loving world,” (“The Duke”). This passage of the article makes clear that the duke was recognized and praised for his extensive diamond collection.

Similar sentiments were written about a fictional character titled the Duke of Rustenburgh depicted in a story called “The Lost Diamonds” found within a yellowback railway book called *Revelations of a Lady Detective* (1864). This duke is also known as having an explicit love affair with his many diamonds. The Victorian author opens the story:

Every one knew the Duke of Rustenburgh. He was a celebrity in all the European capitals, not on account of his position, or anything that he has ever done to make himself conspicuous, but because he had in his possession the most famous precious stones in the world. They were extremely rare and valuable; the duke had been a collector of these glittering pebbles from his boyhood... He had no territorial possessions; what land he had acquired...he had long ago sold to provide money for the furtherance of his favourite hobby... He always wore as many [diamonds] as decency and propriety would allow him. (Hayward 42)

As one can see from this passage, not only was the duke obsessed with his diamonds, he was widely known for them and for his love of them as well. By definition, yellowbacks were “a cheap yellow-backed...novel; any cheaply issued or reprinted novel” (OED). Yellowbacks were not printed to be some sort of revolutionary, or high-brow literature. Quite the opposite, actually. And so, as these yellowbacks were written quickly and purely for entertainment, it is safe to assume that this concept—of a man loving diamonds—would not have been a completely foreign one to the readership of the time. Perhaps these two dukes would have been viewed as greedy, but certainly not unique.

However, there is one glaring difference between the two dukes’ stories. The author of “The Duke and His Diamond” does not dwell on an inappropriateness or silliness of a man loving and collecting diamonds, in fact, the article does not talk about or even hint at “the whole diamond-loving world” as females, but rather leaves diamond lovers as a collective completely unsexed. That was in 1857. By 1864, however, when “The Lost Diamonds” was written, the Duke of Rustenburgh was said to have “*ladies...beg*” to “have a peep” at his famous new diamonds, “which was turning the heads of half the diamond merchants in Europe,” (Haywood 43, emphasis added). Whereas the merchants have no expressed gender (and so, by nineteenth-century standards, are presumably male), they are not “diamond-loving,” but are rather

assumed as solely interested for the value of the diamonds, not for their beauty. The diamond loving is reserved for the “ladies” who are so eager to come see his diamonds.

Another narrative written in 1865 found in *The London Reader* entitled “Wearing Diamonds” addresses the same concept. The fictional story takes place at a party. A man and a woman talk about the difficulty most women have with properly wearing their diamonds. The woman then challenges the man by saying that not many gentlemen could pull off the look either, and the man defensively replies that “Human nature is very weak, and men, like women are human. Still, a weakness for diamonds is specially attributed to your sex, and I only spoke in reference to this alleged weakness,” (*London Reader*). The male speaker seems almost anxious at the thought of men wearing diamonds, and so makes a joke of women’s endearing infatuation with something as inconsequential as diamonds.

Nearly thirty years later, in an advice column of sorts also called “Wearing Diamonds,” but published in 1893, Florence Marryat lays down the law and makes clear that the proper etiquette of diamond-wearing is no joking matter when she writes that diamonds “should not be worn by men.” We can see that by this time, since the popular opinion has gone from diamonds being an “alleged weakness” of women’s to ‘men must not wear them,’ the stigma against men wearing diamonds has been concretely established.

The Duke of Rustenburgh of “The Lost Diamonds,” enacts this notion of gender propriety when the narrator relates that “he found out at a very early age that only a woman can display jewellery as it ought to be exhibited,” (Haywood 42). He resolves the dilemma caused by loving diamonds and wanting to flaunt them, but is not able to by societies standards, by marrying “the first woman he met, not because he loved her, but because he wanted a sort of barber’s-block upon which he could show his jewels,” (42-3). Charles Dickens had already used a similar trope in his novel written several years before *Revelations of a Lady Detective*.

In *Little Dorrit* (1857) Dickens writes that “Mr. Merdle wanted something to hang his jewels upon, and he bought it for that purpose,” (“it,” in this case, being Mrs. Merdle) (Dickens 167). Mrs. Merdle is repeatedly referred to as “the chest,” a designation that creates a connection between her bosom and a container for treasure. Jean Arnold comments in her study, *Victorian Jewelry, Identity, and the Novel*, that “because cultural practices of Dickens’ reading audience did not allow Mr. Merdle to display his wealth by wearing jewels, the narrator had needed to supply Mr. Merdle with a wife who would fill the class-marking function for him,” (1-2). Both Mrs. Merdle and the new Duchess of Rustenburgh are spoken of as material commodities whose solitary use is to display their husbands’ jewels and in the process are transformed from sentient beings into a “barber’s-block,” or a treasure “chest.”

In a gossip column of sorts written in 1858, an article entitled “The Diamond Tiara” is written about a viscount and his wife. The viscount was “running after a place, and consequently...in hot pursuit of the Court,” and so was adamant that his wife “[shine] with a peculiar lustre from the splendour of her diamonds, which [he] insisted should be worn upon all occasions,” (“Diamond Tiara”). While there is no evidence of the viscount marrying his wife for the sole purpose of diamond display, we again see a husband treating his wife as a mannequin to be dressed up and the diamonds shown off. This time, however, the diamonds are not purely for display of wealth, but also for hopeful political gain.

One may be tempted to argue that these instances are dramatizations of reality, as they are of two categories: (many times pulp) fictional stories or gossip. However, Kinsey affirms this concept when she writes that “*nabobs*, or well-to-do gentlemen who made their fortunes in India and returned to the metropole, were known for their diamond wealth, often displayed in the jewelry on *their wives*,” (392, emphasis added). The fact that there were multiple fictional portrayals as well as published gossip written on this idea of wives being used to display jewelry, when set alongside this concept of *nabobs*, is indicative that it is not an outrageous, or even out of the ordinary notion during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Just as a balance shifts when one side changes, the other side of the gender balance must always shift when the one does. As a result in direct response to the

shifting of norms concerning *men* and their accepted roles in relation to diamonds, so too were women's relationship with diamonds was affected. Because the Victorian world stopped accepting men as wearers of diamond-studded jewelry, the balance determined that the role would shift to women.

And the queen herself was not safe from the now shifted diamond-gender expectations. The Koh-i-Noor diamond—a famous diamond 'won' from India and privately given to Queen Victoria in 1850 by a man called Lord Dalhousie—was said to have had a curse:

The curse rumor infuriated Dalhousie, particularly after he received a note from Victoria herself saying that she was anxious about the curse. He sprung into action, constructing the diamond as a benevolent talisman...

But the newspapers did him one better by articulating a different antidote: the queen's status as a female rendered her exempt from a curse indisposed only toward "Oriental" male despots. This, discursively, set the diamond in the same context as the feminine body of the British monarch.

(Kinsey 400-1)

Just as women becoming "barber's blocks" for men's diamonds proved to be an acceptably feminine solution for a masculine problem, so Dalhousie was able to come up with this acceptably feminine "antidote" for this supposed curse. The Koh-i-Noor diamond was put on display during the Great Exhibition of 1851. Once this famous and

prized stone was shown to the public and found to “not [live] up to expectations,...the Koh-i-Noor, as well as diamonds in general and the appreciation of them” became highly feminized (405).



“The Front Row of the Shilling Gallery,” *Punch*, 5 July 1851, 10. via Kinsey.

Cartoons, such as the one included above from *Punch* magazine, were published illustrating women’s obsession with diamonds, specifically the Koh-i-Noor. In this particular cartoon, the women are represented flocking to the diamond display like

“moths” to a “candle,” with little to no men in sight, and the men who are in sight are using this ridiculous gathering of ladies to practice their wooing expertise on the ladies in their vulnerable states (407).

An article written by a man and published in 1862 describes the spectacle of the diamond in the golden cage (also depicted above) as a

glittering sight—stars of earth in a firmament of purple velvet—sparklings of light...enhanced by a golden halo of fabulous cost, eloquence of splendour, which has enthralled the *daughters of Eve* in all ages—the dark-eyed *beauties of the East*, sunk into ignorance and steeped in sensuality, and the bright-eyed intelligence of educated English *women*.” (“Reflections From,” emphasis added)

The *Spectator* provided what Kinsey calls “perhaps the most lurid account of the Koh-i-Noor’s lodging,” which was a gold-gilded bird cage-type cell (405). She writes that “the sexual overtones of” terms the spectator uses in his writing such as “‘impregnable,’ a ‘cavernous retreat,’ and the phallic ‘privileged key’ of authority are unmistakable” in the passage written by the Spectator, “feminizing and sexualizing the diamonds and implying that their ‘virtue’ remains intact through the security measures that both ‘restrain’ and ‘protect’ the gems,” (405). Kinsey also points out that the shape of the cage resembles that of ladies’ hoopskirts of the time, “allowing for a commentary on the protection of the ‘diamond within,’” (406). For such a famous diamond to be so

unanimously dubbed feminine was detrimental to the reputation of diamonds in general, as 'feminine' and 'negative' were largely synonymous in many ways.

Because of this illogical, negative association of women and diamonds, fiction writers began depicting women in their stories as greedy and diamond craving. In Wilkie Collins' novel, *The Moonstone* (1868), when Rachel receives the beautiful Indian Diamond from her deceased uncle, she is immediately smitten with it. Against her mother's wishes, she insists on wearing the diamond straightaway to the dinner party. Although we find out in the end of the novel that her depression is more linked to her deep disappointment in her belief that her beloved is the one who stole the diamond, throughout most of the novel the reader is lead to believe that Rachel goes into this deep silence and depression because she has lost her newly acquired diamond.

As it became less acceptable for men to wear diamonds, some men were prone to critiquing the way in which women wore them, as the man in the In the *London Reader* story, "Wearing Diamonds," does. The man in the story scrutinizes each and every woman to see who is wearing their diamonds 'correctly'. He ultimately comes to the conclusion that only a couple of them are. He talks about how unnatural most of the ladies who are wearing diamonds look, and that if they were not so conscious of their jewelry, they would look more beautiful wearing the diamonds. The entire story is a critique of women; some of them do not wear the diamonds the right way because they are so infatuated with them that they cannot forget about them. Even the women who

are able to pull off the diamond-clad look still maintain this “alleged weakness” to the diamonds themselves.

Not only had a negative stereotype been assigned to women as being infatuated with diamonds, but there also developed a trend of women in fiction as craving diamonds to such an extent that they were often depicted as diamond thieves. In *The Moonstone*, the first narrative is told by a man, Mr. Betteredge, who views and projects women in extremely stereotypical ways, such as his explanation of Rachel as “unlike most other girls of her age, in this—that she had ideas of her own,” and in his discussion of the nature of women as inconsistent and moody: “Study your wife closely, for the next four-and-twenty hours. If your good lady doesn’t exhibit something in the shape of a contradiction in that time, Heaven help you! – you have married a monster,” (109). In line with Betteredge’s attitude towards women in the first narrative, the reader is lead to believe first that the Indians stole the diamonds. However, both Rachel and Rosanna, two somewhat unstable female characters, become suspect as well.

Similarly, in a story written in installments published in *Chamber’s Journal* in 1898, Chapter V of “Lady Stalland’s Diamond: A Story of Circumstances” depicts a scandalous diamond theft. In a conversation between a commander, who is doing some sleuthing of his own, and a bishop, who is in all actuality guilty of the diamond theft, the Commander says to the Bishop, “I am presuming, you observe, that it was one of those silly women. No man would do such a mad thing.” and “The Bishop nodded in

agreement,” (“Lady Stalland’s” 825). The author of the story was obviously going for a shock to the readership, as the thief is supposed to be a man of God. The fact that he is a man is just for added effect; no one would have suspected a man to “do such a mad thing”—even though he did. Interestingly enough, the Bishop never gets caught or punished for his thievery. Even though he thinks he has stolen the diamond, he has actually stolen a crystal that was given to Lady Stalland’s daughter to play with. The young girl took the actual diamond in question without knowing it. This twist both relieves the Bishop from being an actual thief, but perhaps more significantly, proves to be a commentary on the supposed nature of females. Even a girl young as this one (who could not properly pronounce “wobber”), is depicted as craving diamonds. Not only is this young girl given crystals as pretend diamond play things, because ladies were supposed to love diamonds, but she is the “wobber” of diamonds at such an early age, perhaps suggesting this as a genetic flaw unique to females.

The commander goes on to describe women to diamonds as “after the style of the moth and the candle,” (825). This is the second place in which I have found this particular analogy used to describe women’s relationship with diamonds, the first being in the *Punch* comic depicting the scene of the Koh-i-Noor diamond on display referred to by Kinsey. This is a degrading comparison on so many levels. Not only are moths small and insignificant creatures, but they are also mindless and lacking of self control, specifically when placed near a flame. Today we see moths repeatedly running into a

light bulb, which makes them look silly, but does not kill necessarily them, but when a moth goes into a flame, like any living creature, it dies. When Victorian writers refer to women drawn to diamonds as moths to a flame, not only are they commenting on the supposed stupidity of their love for diamonds, but they are also commenting on the idea that the love of diamonds is detrimental to a woman.

In contrast to the idea of women being immediately suspected for diamond thefts, the story of the “The Lost Diamonds,” written at an earlier date, portrays the concept of thieving women as somewhat of an out-of-the-ordinary phenomenon. In the story, a male servant is immediately suspected by a vast majority of the detectives. However, the story ends with the Duke’s new “barber’s-block” wife as the diamond thief. Likewise, “Lost, Stolen, or Strayed” by Augusta Johnstone ends with what would have been a surprise ending in 1859: the best friend of the Lady whose diamonds were stolen is revealed as the thief, similarly after the servants are accused and thoroughly searched time and again. During this earlier time, the stigma seems to have been more focused on the lower class being the diamond thieves. However, as time goes on and the stereotype of women’s strong desire for diamonds develops, it became old hat for a woman to be depicted as guilty of diamond theft.

In this fashion, in a story called “The Diamond Robbery” published in 1893, a woman, allegorically named Mrs. Dymond, is identified immediately as the lone suspect of a diamond crime. The author opens the story: “It was one of the most audacious shop

robberies ever committed: the thief—I was sure she must be the thief—had been taken almost red-handed, and yet no trace of the stolen property could be found,” (“Diamond Robbery”). By 1893, it was no surprise to the readership for a woman to be guilty of such a crime. The surprise in this particular story came in the *way* in which she was able to steal the diamonds—in her wig. This even further feminizes the now stereotypical scenario of a woman diamond thief. No man would have been depicted as hiding a stolen item in his hair. And so now, not only is the person and the object wholly feminine, the means is feminine too. Whereas one generally thinks of robbery as a masculine crime, robbery of diamonds had clearly become a feminine one.

If you take all the Victorian texts I referred to and put them in chronological order a clear evolution of diamond-gender relationship norms materializes:

- **1857**, “The Duke and His Diamond”: A said to be true story of a man who openly and proudly loves his diamonds.
- **1858**, “The Diamond Tiara”: The story is that of a man forcing his wife to wear diamonds
- **(January) 1859**, “Lost, Stolen, or Strayed”: Shock is the *expected* result of a woman diamond thief.
- **(December) 1859**, “Trade of Diamonds”: It is still acceptable for men to wear diamonds.

- **1862**, “Reflections From the Diamonds at the Great Exhibition”: Article in which a man describes, in a very enthusiastic way, the Koh-i-Noor diamond. Regardless of his enthusiasm, however, he writes how the *ladies* must be estatic.
- **1864**, “The Lost Diamonds,” *Revelations of a Lady Detective*: Not only is the Duchess forced to wear her husband’s diamonds, but she also steals them.
- **1865**, “Wearing Diamonds,” *London Reader*: The male speaker in the story comments that diamonds are a “weakness” specifically of women.
- **1868**, *The Moonstone*: Two young women are each independently suspected of stealing the Moonstone, second and third only to the foreign men.
- **1893**, “The Diamond Robbery”: A woman steals diamonds by hiding them in her hair.
- **1898**, “Wearing Diamonds,” *Bowbells*: “[Diamonds] should not be worn by men.”

It is clear that during the latter half of the nineteenth century, an abrupt shift in the conventions of masculine expectations caused an equally abrupt change to occur in the popular view of diamonds in general. It went from men openly loving and wearing diamonds, all the way to women being depicted time and again as diamond thieves. It is

safe to say that while men were unmistakably the ones who craved the diamonds as well as the status that came with it, women were stuck with the stigma of being covetous diamond lovers. Kinsey writes that “the cultural discourses of fashion, jewelry giving (and jewelry wearing), and female consumption created a much more ambiguous reading of the diamond exchange, one that went beyond the context of the exhibition,” (412). And it certainly did. No one could have fathomed the result of a swell in interest in diamonds alongside a shift in the definition of masculinity as such an immediate and significant one.

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