

DECORATING THE BODY: AN INTRODUCTION

In Edith Wharton's first bestseller, *The House of Mirth* (1905), protagonist Lily Bart attends the high society wedding of Jack Stepney and Miss Van Osburgh, and enviously recognises that the bride's jewels are a symbol of wealth, status, and social acceptance:

They had paused before the table on which the bride's jewels were displayed, and Lily's heart gave an envious throb as she caught the refraction of light from their surfaces—the milky gleam of perfectly matched pearls, the flash of rubies relieved against contrasting velvet, the intense blue rays of sapphires kindled into light by surrounding diamonds: all these precious tints enhanced and deepened by the varied art of their setting. The glow of the stones warmed Lily's veins like wine. More completely than any other expression of wealth they symbolized the life she longed to lead, the life of fastidious aloofness and refinement in which every detail should have the finish of a jewel, and the whole form a harmonious setting to her own jewel-like rareness. (2001: 95)

Lily, a poor relation who understands that she has to marry—and marry well—in order to survive the ruthless society in which she resides, recognises that the Stepney bride jewels not only represent the wearer's wealth and standing but that the actual receiving and wearing of the jewels brand the new bride as part of the Stepney family; she is now protected by their old money name. The bridal jewels are not being worn here; they are literally on display as part of the wedding entertainment, laid out for the guests to admire. In a wonderful illustration of Veblen's conspicuous consumption, Lily is mesmerised by the aesthetic beauty of the "precious tints" of the array of pearls, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds. She has a physical reaction to the jewellery, with her heart giving "an envious throb" as the sheen of the stones "warmed Lily's veins like wine". The bridal jewels represent everything that Lily wants, and she is astute enough to recognise their symbolic significance. Displayed like objects in a museum, they are both tantalisingly close to Lily, and simultaneously a world away from her lived reality of poor relation. Wharton, who knew a thing or two about fashion and jewellery, describes the allure of the bridal jewels in sensuously descriptive language. Lily's later fall from grace and eventual rejection from the society that she so longs to be a part of is made more terrible by these earlier scenes of her material longing. The bridal jewels represent everything that Lily will never have.

For female characters, the emphasis on gems and jewellery in literature often has a specific cultural significance. For example, as consumer culture developed rapidly in America alongside the rise of the department store in the early twentieth century, it is noticeable that literary characters in American novels are increasingly rendered in terms of what they own (or in Lily's case, what they do *not* own). Historically, the purchase of costly jewellery was a time-honoured way of stock-piling financial security for women during periods when they could not own property, and served as a solid legacy for their daughters who, under similar legislature, would be barred from inheriting property. In Rebecca Ross Russell's *Gender and Jewelry: A Feminist Analysis* (2009), she argues that jewellery has the power to both oppress and emancipate its female wearer, and writes that "[j]ewelry responds to our most primitive urges, for control, honor, and sex. It is at once the most ancient and intimate of art forms, one that is defined by its connection and interaction with the body. In this sense it is inescapably political, its meaning bound to the possibilities of the body it lies on" (2009: 1). For the writer, then, the literary representation of jewels, gems, and body adornments offers a special opportunity to —as the articles in this dossier evidence— critique political systems, explore female embodiment, reconsider literary forms, re-read classical literature, and reflect on jewellery's role as a way of meditating on the past and the present. Jewellery is never simple; it offers a story about the wearer and/or (as in Lily Bart's case) the viewer of the jewels on display. Like fashion, jewellery must be carefully considered and decoded so that its importance in a literary text can be truly understood. In Guy de Maupassant's 1884 short story "The Necklace", the diamond necklace of the title is used to structure a tale of morality and obsession. In Alexandre Dumas's classic *The Three Musketeers* (1844), the heroes must retrieve Queen Anne's jewels from the Duke of Buckingham in order to protect her from the condemnations of the royal court. The Queen's jewels function as symbol of France's political power on the global stage, and as such they must be restored. Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) is widely considered one of the foundational texts for the English detective fiction genre and features one of the most famous diamond thefts in literary history. The Tippoo diamond —the "moonstone" of the title— encapsulates the British imperialist horrors in India and is finally restored back to its hereditary guardians at the end of the novel. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Hester's wearing of the A and her decoration of it is an empowering moment of creative feminist activism. Another way of rethinking this text might be to consider the A as a form of *accessory* for Hester, the material item that she grows to construct her identity around. Anita Loos's comic masterpiece *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1925) features a major plotline involving a fake diamond tiara that serves as part of Loos's savage critique of consumer culture, as gold-digger extraordinaire Lorelei Lee causes havoc on her European tour. These are just a few examples of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American

texts where jewellery plays a significant role; there are, of course, many other texts to explore and consider, and this special issue of *Lectora* seeks to deepen and enhance the debate.

Each essay in this dossier interrogates the role and representation of jewellery, gems, and other accessories in literature by considering a variety of literary texts and time periods. In recent years, the scholarly field of fashion, material culture and literature has grown significantly. Recent writings by Katherine Joslin, Cynthia Kuhn, Cindy Carlson, and Clair Hughes have enriched the scholarly debate and have worked to develop further links between literature and fashion culture. Kuhn and Carlson suggest that “fashion is a visible language with meanings that change over time and within cultures” (2007: xiii) and Joslin argues that, in society, dress “functions as hieroglyph” (2011: 7). Jewellery, of course, functions as part of this fashion language and symbology than can be read and decoded. Dress has always been a vital and often highly personalised expression of identity, and this pattern can be traced back to the European middle ages. Dress and fashion—including jewellery, hairstyles, and accessories—have historically been used to symbolise the wearer’s status, occupation, and gender. Work on the role of jewellery in literature is not currently as developed as the focus on fashion and literature has become in the last few years, and so this collection of articles aims to help develop the conversations surrounding representations of jewellery and literary culture. As Hughes helpfully summarises, “[i]nterestingly enough, costume historians have frequently drawn on literature for evidence and information. Literary critics have been puzzlingly slow to return the compliment—novelists do not, after all, send their characters naked into the world but criticism has often acted as though they do” (2005: 2). How a writer chooses to dress and decorate their characters can tell us so much more than surface detail, as each article in this collection illustrates.

Recent scholarship to help develop ideas surrounding literature and jewellery include Jean Arnold’s monograph *Victorian Jewellery, Identity, and the Novel: Prisms of Culture* (2011) which argues that material objects played an integral role in the social formation of the nineteenth-century British Empire. Reading jewels and gems as “prisms of culture”, Arnold suggests that pieces of jewellery as represented in the work of writers such as Wilkie Collins, George Eliot, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Anthony Trollope function as symbols of innate power and cultural status. Arnold’s work develops readings of material culture, fashion, and the novel, and offers an important and timely analysis of Victorian literature. Deborah Lutz’s *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture* (2015) explores death culture and absence in Victorian writings by a range of authors including Dickens, Emily Brontë, and Tennyson, by considering objects such as death masks and hair jewellery as part of the Victorian fondness for relic culture. Sarah Heaton’s chapter in *Fashion and Contemporaneity* (Brill, 2019) entitled “My Dress, My Shoes, My Wedding: The

Weaponry of Wedding Apparel Unveiled” reads a range of literary wedding dresses (including those written by Dickens, Wharton, and Dorothy Baker) and associated accessories as signifiers of personal agency as opposed to patriarchal oppression. Much of the current focus of literary scholarship and the material culture of jewellery tends to focus on nineteenth-century writing. This edition of *Lectora* is able to develop the field by offering dynamic analyses of drag culture, contemporary poetry, the *Iliad*, Spanish realist writing, and neo-Victorian texts.

This special issue brings together five articles exploring the role of jewels and jewellery in literature. From drag culture to contemporary poetry, it aims to offer an exciting and invigorating investigation into how literary representations of jewellery and body adornment can be usefully explored. Łukasz Smuga’s article, “El peso de la moda. Joyas, perlas y pamelas en la trilogía esperpéntica de Terenci Moix” considers the purpose of jewels, pearls, and luxury fashion in Moix’s fiction. Focusing on the representation of drag culture and Moix’s camp aesthetic, Smuga analyses how a variety of characters utilise both fashion and jewellery as a form of political embodiment and as an effective means of critiquing neo-liberal capitalism. In Julieta Flores Jurado’s work, “Pearls, Diamonds and Coins: Fashioning the Beloved’s Body in Carol Ann Duffy’s Poetry”, she forges connections between jewellery and the poetic form. Focusing on how Duffy explores women’s jewellery and the gaze, Flores Jurado reads the importance of pearls, gems, gold, and jewellery in a selection of Duffy’s poetry to consider how the representation of aesthetic ornamentation in the poems connects with Duffy’s reworking of the conventions of traditional love poetry. Elena Almirall Arnal’s essay for this collection, “El *kestos himas*, la gran joya de Afrodita”, offers a reading of the jewels of Aphrodite, the goddess in possession of the *kestos himas*, a magical ornament. Almirall Arnal reconsiders the *Iliad* in the light of the *kestos himas*, exploring how within the tradition of Aphrodite, jewellery has traditionally been perceived as a weapon of seduction for Greek women, and reconsidering the *kestos himas* offers a way to reflect on the role of jewellery as part of a subversive tradition of patriarchal resistance. In Inés Corujo Martín’s article, “Adornando el cuerpo femenino: objetos de moda y género en *La de Bringas* (1884) de Benito Pérez Galdós”, the focus shifts to considerations of consumerism, clothing, and modernity. Analysing the role of ornaments and accessories in Benito Pérez Galdós’s novel *La de Bringas*, Corujo Martín considers how the fashion explored in the text offers a discursive space for women to develop a complicated relationship with modernity, looking especially at the rise of the department store, and the related debates about women and public space. The final piece in this collection is by Rosario Arias, “Sensoriality and Hair Jewellery in Neo-Victorian Fiction and Culture”, and considers the practice of wearing hair jewels and jewellery as an entanglement of subjects, objects and sensory human experience. Reading neo-Victorian texts including Catherine Chidgey’s *The Transformation: A Novel* (2005), Deborah Lutz’s

The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects (2015), and Laura Purcell's *Bone China* (2019), Arias contends that hair jewels are not only remnants of the past but offer a response made through the senses, ultimately allowing us to reconsider our own relationships with the historical past.

As Lily Bart recognises as she views the Stepney bridal jewels in *The House of Mirth*, jewellery is often an unapologetic marker of social class, wealth, and status. Each of the essays in this collection offers up new ways of reading jewellery, material culture, gender, consumerism, and literature. They challenge the reader to consider different modes of interpretation when examining the literary function of jewels and other body ornamentations in writing, and ask crucial questions about how this aspect of material culture can help us to understand the politics of body decoration and adornment.¹

ANNE-MARIE EVANS
York St John University

WORKS CITED

- Arnold, Jean (2011), *Victorian Jewellery, Identity, and the Novel: Prisms of Culture*, London, Ashgate.
- Collins, Wilkie (1998), *The Moonstone*, London, Penguin. [1868]
- Dumas, Alexandre (1992), *The Three Musketeers*, London, Wordsworth Editions. [1844]
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel (2015), *The Scarlet Letter*, Richmond, Alma Classics. [1850]
- Heaton, Sarah (2019), "My Dress, My Shoes, My Wedding: The Weaponry of Wedding Apparel Unveiled", *Fashion and Contemporaneity: Realms of the Visible*, Laura Petican (ed.), Amsterdam, Brill: 266-284.
- Hughes, Clair (2005), *Dressed in Fiction*, Oxford, Berg.
- Joslin, Katherine (2011), *Edith Wharton and the Making of Fashion*, Durham, University of New Hampshire Press.
- Kuhn, Cynthia, and Cindy Carlson (2007), *Styling Texts: Dress and Fashion in Literature*, New York, Cambria Press.

¹ My thanks to the *Lectora* team for all their brilliant work and support during this process, and especially to those who took on additional editorial duties. Thank you to all the contributors for writing such thought-provoking and stimulating essays. A very special thank you to Cristina Alsina Risquez for her patience, good humour, and unstinting support over the last few years. It's been a pleasure to work on this collection.

Loos, Anita (1998), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes and But Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*, London, Penguin.

Lutz, Deborah (2015), *Relics of Death in Victorian Literature and Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

Maupassant, Guy de (1997), *The Best Short Stories*, London, Wordsworth Editions.

Russell, Rebecca Ross (2009), *Gender and Jewelry: A Feminist Analysis*, Scotts Valley, CreateSpace.

Wharton, Edith (2001), *The House of Mirth*, Florence, Giunti. [1905]

