



## “Playing with Her Bracelets and Rings”: Jewelry, Character, and Objectification in Jane Austen’s Novels

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THE JEWELRY THAT APPEARS in Jane Austen’s novels carries a rich medley of meanings that illuminate character, morality, and conflicts of value. These meanings stem from jewels’ powerful historical associations, but Austen transforms them through the lens of Regency culture into symbols of a character’s moral composition. The jeweled items in Austen’s works can signify traditional, inherited wealth as they did in the earlier, neoclassical period; they sometimes appear as sentimental mementos in the fashion of Austen’s contemporary Romantic period; and they also hint at a proto-Victorian moralistic indictment of jewelry as superficiality, materialism, decadence, or class pretension. Moreover, as items of display exhibited on the body, they often work to indicate characters’ tendencies to commodify or objectify either themselves or other people.

Austen’s Regency was a time of rapidly increasing social mobility and conspicuous consumption in which any consumable, fashionable item—from poetry to pineapples—signaled a person’s social status. Thus, jewelry in Austen’s works often signals class aspiration. In *Emma*, Mrs. Elton insists that pearls are her prerogative since they proclaim her wealth and married status (Benedict 141; Wright, “Mrs. Elton’s Pearls”). In *Northanger Abbey*, Isabella Thorpe dreams of hoop rings that will compel the “admiration of every new acquaintance at Fullerton, the envy of every valued old friend in Putney” (124–25), rating the pleasure of lording it over “valued old friend[s]” above that of “valuing” them for their friendship. Such arrivistes hope fashionable and

expensive jewelry will propel them out of their class into a higher one marked by fashion and wealth. But jewelry can also dramatize the contest between moral and immoral characters.

This contest appears sharply in a wonderfully ironic scene in *Sense and Sensibility* in which Austen uses jeweled or precious items to stage the contrast between meritorious and deplorable practices, manners, and values. The Dashwood sisters sit politely awaiting the attention of the shopkeeper at Gray's in Sackville-street, where "Elinor was carrying on a negotiation for the exchange of a few old-fashioned jewels of her mother," since Marianne is too numb with grief to help (250). The scene dramatizes significant parallels and contrasts between the purposes and responses of the Dashwood sisters and those of Robert Ferrars as both spend their temporal, emotional, and financial resources in the shop: staring, shopping, calculating price and value. Robert's narcissistic consumption and display of his personal purchase highlights the Dashwoods' frugal and thoughtful use of time and money and underscores the dangers luxurious consumption poses to sociability and true self-improvement. How do—and how should—you spend your time and money? Robert uses jewelry for individual showing-off whereas the Dashwood sisters illuminate its function as a social bond.

The exact nature of the Dashwoods' "exchange" remains unclear, but removing jewels from inherited jewelry and resetting them in a more modern style was common during the Regency. However, the Dashwood sisters, given their impoverished state, may be "exchanging" their mother's jewels for less valuable or even paste imitations not for fashionable but for financial reasons. Such exchanges were not uncommon during the eighteenth century and Regency as gambling debts, shifting social hierarchies, and financial instability ate into the resources of the gentry and aristocracy. But Austen depicts the practice as the clash of old and new values. Before the sisters can begin the transaction, they must attend the pleasure of Robert Ferrars, who "was giving orders for a toothpick-case for himself" (251). Any notion the Dashwoods have that he will hurry up out of old-fashioned courtesy to them vanishes because "the correctness of his eye, and the delicacy of his taste, proved to be beyond his politeness" (250–51). Their business must wait upon his, as must their time.

Robert also appropriates the shop's space in his pursuit of luxury. Clearly, he prefers purchase to politeness: he spends his time and money on a self-adornment that projects his vanity into the social space of the shop. His purchase and his elaborate performance of aesthetic discrimination are intended as public exhibitions of his elite fashionability and taste. Ironically,

such newly manufactured items as toothpicks were popular consumables not merely for the gentry but for artisans and well-paid laborers, so actually they put Robert's *nouveau riche* pretensions on display (Mui and Mui 244). He also ensures that the Miss Dashwoods observe him performing discrimination:

till [the toothpick-case's] size, shape, and ornaments were determined, all of which, after examining and debating for a quarter of an hour over every toothpick-case in the shop, were finally arranged by his own inventive fancy, he had no leisure to bestow any other attention on the two ladies, than what was comprised in three or four very broad stares; a kind of notice which served to imprint on Elinor the remembrance of a person and face, of strong, natural, sterling insignificance, though adorned in the first style of fashion. (251)

Robert's attitude toward the sisters resembles his attitude toward the toothpick-case: both are objects of arrogant, consumerist surveillance (with a prurient implication that they also serve as candidates, metaphorically, to encase his toothpick). His act of selecting his jeweled item is an act of self-display and power. The Miss Dashwoods' "negotiation," in contrast, is a display of familial connection across generations. The jewels in their case are family possessions, perhaps heirlooms whose preservation (albeit in altered form) binds the women in a family, rather than newly fashionable commodities. Moreover, since jewelry was considered—and often designated in wills—as women's personal property, handed from mother to daughter, it represented a specifically female inheritance. Robert thus appears to usurp a province of female power.

There is, however, a similarity between the Dashwoods' enterprise and Robert's. Not only are Elinor and Robert engaged in parallel forms of shopping, but they also exchange parallel looks in which each character perceives the other as a commodity. Robert scrutinizes the women as he does the frivolous luxury he is buying, although the toothpick-case earns more respectful and prolonged observation:

At last the affair was decided. The ivory, the gold, and the pearls, all received their appointment, and the gentleman having named the last day on which his existence could be continued without the possession of the toothpick-case, drew on his gloves with leisurely care, and bestowing another glance on the Miss Dashwoods, but such a one as seemed rather to demand than express admiration, walked off with an happy air of real conceit and affected indifference. (251)

Robert guarantees that the Miss Dashwoods watch him adorn himself with his gloves by acting with deliberately “leisurely care,” imagining that their captured glances express their “admiration” of him and wasting yet more of their time. Nonetheless, Robert and Elinor’s mutually commodifying stares—both of which express the characters’ sense of empowerment—also indicate some important differences: whereas Robert acts out his power to rate the women based on their looks, Elinor keeps her thoughts, prompted by his words and behavior, to herself (although the narrator, of course, lets us in on her views). He, in other words, judges entirely by appearances; she also judges by actions.

Moreover, although there is a further similarity between the Dashwoods’ maternal jewels and Robert’s personal purchase—since both are pricey objects obtained at a jeweler’s shop and worn on the body—this similarity actually highlights a difference. It makes Robert seem effeminate, as does his fussy fascination with the expensive and showy material “appointments.” The definitions of the word “appointments,” according to Samuel Johnson’s 1755 *Dictionary*, include a social agreement and a decree or order *before* the fourth meaning of “Furniture,” or “equipment” apparently used here. The *OED* defines it from the late middle ages as an act of “agreeing,” “coming to an arrangement,” “agreements for a meeting,” or “assignation.” These multiple meanings ironically indicate the gap between the Dashwoods’ valuation for social commitment—they are handling inherited jewels by agreement with their mother and the shop vendor—and Robert Ferrars’s value for selfish display. The scene dramatizes the cultural shift from sociability to materiality and the consequent clash between the sisters’ familial negotiation, as their mother’s representatives, and Robert’s date with his toothpick-case.

The scene also dramatizes a shift in social manners and gender-related power. Elinor, on seeing him staring at her, experiences “troublesome feelings of contempt and resentment, on this impertinent examination of their features, and on the puppyism of his manner in deciding on all the different horrors of the different toothpick-cases presented to his inspection” (251). Just as Robert, indifferent to or unaware of the fact that they can see him staring at them, objectifies the sisters by his impertinent stares, so Elinor—in the narrator’s parlance—objectifies *him* as an affected vehicle of “fashion,” a “puppy” of “sterling insignificance.” The phrase “sterling insignificance” is an oxymoron that juxtaposes a term denoting monetary and moral value, “sterling,” meaning “thoroughly excellent, capable of standing any test” (*OED*), with a term meaning valuelessness: “insignificance.” In the context of the evaluation of precious materials—jewels, ivory, gold, pearls—this striking contradiction in terms contrasts the Dashwood sisters’ social values with Robert’s self-centeredness.

The themes of value, time, attention, class, power, and luxury raised in this scene reappear in Austen's works often in episodes concerning jewelry or precious luxuries. In British culture and literature, jewelry traditionally denoted wealth, luxury, inheritance, and memory; however, because of the increasing availability and relative affordability of jewelry in the Regency, it was not only the aristocracy and nobility who bought it, although the association with royalty certainly continued to imbue jewelry with *éclat*. Indeed, once the middle classes could afford it, jewelers and bookshops increased markedly (Mui and Mui 61), and jewelry and jeweled items became more widely used as personal symbols. Wearing jewelry became a way to display sentimental relationship (Pointon, *Brilliant Effects* 2). This sentimental display is the case with Edward Ferrars's hair ring, which Elinor interprets as her own hair but which is, in fact, her rival Lucy Steele's. The fact that Edward wears the ring, despite its painful associations, hints at Austen's ironic attitude toward such exhibitions of sentiment: Edward's wearing of the ring suggests both her skepticism about the fashion for displaying sentiment on the body by means of commodified objects and Edward's own conformity and spinelessness in submitting to the emotional bondage of the manipulative Lucy. The public display of sentiment



*Regency gold necklace. Collection of the author.*

is also the Crawfords' problematic motive when Mary Crawford coerces Fanny into accepting Henry's elaborate necklace as a prelude to her accepting his hand. Ironically, the necklace is too heavily wrought to hold William's amber cross, the symbol of suffering, redemption, and piety: the luxurious item cannot accommodate Christian simplicity. In both Edward's and Fanny's cases, the sentimental object on display violates the wearer's real feelings.

Thus, while in Austen's work jewelry can exhibit intimate relationship, its symbolic meanings as social power and as personal memento are almost always compromised, as in the instances above, and often specifically so through its representation of value, be this sentiment or class. Many of Austen's jewels or precious items are mementos that actually memorialize injustices or mistakes. In *Mansfield Park*, Susan's silver knife is a legacy from her dead sister, coveted by her younger sister Betsey, that seems to represent sad memory but actually represents fashionable consumption. Whereas Fanny Price believes that the knife's value comes from its unique expression of sororal love, as Susan avers, it turns out that Betsey is happier with the knife Fanny buys her precisely because of its newness (although also, possibly, out of infantine, undisciplined jealousy). Moreover, since silver signaled class-stamped luxury, here, again, the old value for relationships fades before the new value for fashion (Benedict 132). The knife becomes a replicable commodity. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Lucy's "small miniature" (151) of Edward Ferrars serves not as a token of love, but as a grim reminder of Edward's foolish proposal, chaining him to a past he regrets. In that novel, Marianne wears a miniature around her neck that her sister Margaret fantasizes portrays Willoughby when in fact it portrays a great-uncle, possibly the very one responsible for their current poverty (Sabor 32). Rather than a sign of heritage, it represents disinheritance.

The irony of Marianne's wearing this deceptive miniature further shows Austen's subtle use of jewelry to suggest conflicts of old and new values. Early-modern and Regency jewelry often memorialized lost lovers, friends, and relatives; worn on the body, as it was, it cemented an intimate, often physical, relationship. Hair jewelry like Edward Ferrars's exemplifies this sentimentalization of material artefacts because of its capture of part of the loved one's body itself, but miniature portraits also performed the same function of re-creating the loved one's body. In the eighteenth century and the Regency, such miniatures appeared on a range of small, often jeweled items: "snuffboxes, necklaces, watchcases, locketts, or pearl bracelets," intended "to announce and cement social relationships" (Pointon, "Surrounded" 48; Battigelli 9) and to flatter rich relatives (Todd 52; Sabor 32). Peter Sabor observes that, since the miniature in

*Sense and Sensibility* represents not Marianne's lover Willoughby but the same great-uncle who had willed their inheritance to their stepbrother, Marianne's wearing it shows her disinterestedness (Sabor 32). This idealistic disinterestedness, however, serves her ill in her relationship with the fortune-hunting Willoughby: again, the object exhibits the clash between sentimental and mercenary values.

Perhaps the most transparently symbolic jewel in Austen's works, and one again that represents worldly disinterestedness with an ironic twist, is Fanny's amber cross. The fact that Henry Crawford's necklace does not fit the cross that Fanny's brother William gave her but the chain from soon-to-be-ordained Edmund Bertram does symbolizes not merely that Henry is no fit for Fanny but also that Henry's and Edmund's value systems collide; the irony lies in the failure of Henry or Mary to find a chain suitable to ensnare Fanny. Henry's mercurial, immoral pleasure-seeking contrasts with Edmund's serious Christianity and moral nature. In addition, the two gifts represent different ideas of jewelry, time, and commitment: the necklace, originally a specific gift to Mary, can be symbolically exchanged for Fanny's hand (or neck), whereas the cross, specifically bought for Fanny, represents eternal love. Edmund's simple gold chain represents the purity of his feelings for the priceless Fanny Price (Duquette 146) as does the modesty of William's gift of an amber cross (as opposed, incidentally, to Austen's own, rather pricier topaz cross).

Indeed, Austen often signals characters' moral weakness by their attitude toward jewels, notably in contrast to their attitude toward books: the former exhibit the body while the latter improve the mind, so women who value the one tend not to value the other. Characters who flaunt jewelry reveal vulgarity or immorality; characters who can look away from it exhibit moral strength. Austen often stages this test (or revelation) of character in libraries. Libraries in the Regency varied considerably: private libraries, like Mr. Darcy's, were exclusive bastions of male inheritance and cultural power open only to the owner; subscription libraries, such as the ones that Fanny patronizes and the one that appears in *Sanditon*, rented books to local customers who bought what amounts to a membership; and circulating libraries, like the one in Bath, lent books for a fee to transient visitors, often specialized in recent novels, and constituted fashionable meeting-places and sites of commercial exchange. In both *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sanditon*, Austen depicts female characters in circulating libraries that feature not merely books to borrow but jewelry to buy and people to see: the choice between these consumables presents the characters with a moral test. Characteristically, Lydia, the perennial shopper (and talker),



*Jane Austen's topaz cross. Courtesy of Jane Austen's House.*

focuses on flirting and buying things: indifferent to her father's disapproval of her passion for officers in regimentals, she interjects into their discussion, "Mama, . . . my aunt says that Colonel Forster and Captain Carter do not go so often to Miss Watson's as they did when they first came; she sees them now very often standing in Clarke's library" (33). Lydia regards the library merely as a place to meet men, who are there on display much as the books and trinkets. When she is at Brighton, Lydia writes to her mother that "they were just returned from the library, where such and such officers had attended them, and where she had seen such beautiful ornaments as made her quite wild; that she had a new gown, or a new parasol" (264). Lydia is charmed by the novelty and acquisition that ornaments (and regimentals) represent: books are a matter of indifference to her.

Austen presents in more detail a similar scene contrasting spending time, spending money, and reading in the unfinished novel *Sanditon*. In contrast to Lydia, the rather more self-disciplined Charlotte Heywood, visiting the eponymous resort town, makes her "immediate purchases" at the Library, "for the further good of everybody"—in other words, to support the commerce of the town (*Later Manuscripts* 167). Austen's narrator explains that Charlotte balances her desire for trinkets with both her wish to please Mr. Parker, the town's chief promoter, and her own common sense, gleaned from learning the lessons in sensible behavior and self-control of Burney's conduct novel *Camilla, or, a Picture of Youth* (1796):



The library, of course, afforded every thing; all the useless things in the world that could not be done without, and among so many pretty temptations, and with so much good will for Mr. Parker to encourage expenditure, Charlotte began to feel that she must check herself—or rather she reflected that at two and twenty there could be no excuse for her doing otherwise—and that it would not do for her to be spending all her money the very first evening. She took up a book; it happened to be a volume of *Camilla*. She had not *Camilla's* youth, and had no intention of having her distress,—so she turned away from the drawers of rings and brooches, repressed farther solicitation and paid for what she bought. (167)

In the novel's context, Charlotte's purchases represent her good-natured participation in the town's eager drive for popularity and profit. Charlotte's sensible, disciplined behavior also contrasts with that of Miss Whitby, the daughter of the Library's owner, who, when Charlotte arrives, must be "hurried down from her toilette, with all her glossy curls and smart trinkets to wait on her" (167). Not only does Miss Whitby waste her time on self-ornamentation, but her status as a saleswoman bedecked in her own goods renders her a walking advertisement, excessively (and tastelessly) adorned, and thus implicitly equivalent to an object herself. Austen underscores this implication by describing the proprietor Mrs. Whitby, dully awaiting visiting shoppers, "sitting in her inner room, reading one of her own novels, for want of employment" (166). This rhetoric implies that Mrs. Whitby only turns to novels to pass the time rather than, like Charlotte, to derive moral lessons from them.

This conflict between intellectual self-improvement and a physical self-display that smacks of the commodification of both self and others appears earlier in *Pride and Prejudice*. Here, Mrs. Hurst manifests her boredom by fiddling with her jewelry. When the party at Netherfield gathers after tea in the parlor, Bingley spends the evening talking to Jane, while, baulked of a card game, "Mr. Hurst had therefore nothing to do, but to stretch himself on one of the sofas and go to sleep. Darcy took up a book; Miss Bingley did the same; and Mrs. Hurst, principally occupied in playing with her bracelets and rings, joined now and then in her brother's conversation with Miss Bennet" (60) while her sister toadyingly imitates Darcy by pretending to read the second volume of the work he is reading. By depicting Mrs. Hurst "playing with her bracelets and rings," Austen suggests an equivalence between Mrs. Hurst's infatuation with symbols of luxury and status and her sister's infatuation with Darcy as a symbol of luxury and status; these infatuations are intensified by

the sisters' own connection to trade, to which they owe their fortunes, a fact that they energetically ignore. The jewelry and the extremely valuable Darcy represent social ambition incarnate. In contrast, Elizabeth Bennet actually is reading, until the amusement of the social antics before her turns her attention; in doing so, she shows an indifference to the attempts to present herself as a commodity that she also exhibits when she arrives at Netherfield with dirtied petticoats and a glowing face to care for Jane.

Jewelry and precious objects appear in Austen's work as symbols of the contest among the values within Regency culture and among the values of individual characters: the value for social duty, spirituality, love, and faith and the values of consumption, commodification, luxury, and display that were newly cresting in the Regency. Austen uses jeweled and precious items in her novels to dramatize the dissociation of material wealth from history and of personal possessions from social value. Ultimately the danger jeweled items pose is that they make people into things.

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