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RACHEL CHURCH

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Methinks A Diamond Ring is a Vast Addition to the little Finger of a Gentleman: **the use, importance and significance of diamond rings to men of the eighteenth century**

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Front cover:

Portrait of James Christie (1730-1803), by Thomas Gainsborough, England, 1778.

James Christie was famous for his diamond ring, which he used to mesmerise viewers at his auctions. He is wearing a large stone in a gold setting on the little finger of his left hand but the loose style of the painting leaves it unclear as to whether or not it is a diamond. The way in which his hand is draped over the gilt edge of the painting serves to display his elegant hand and fine ring. Gift of J. Paul Getty © Getty Center

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/552/thomas-gainsborough-portrait-of-james-christie-1730-1803-english-1778/>

Methinks A Diamond Ring is a Vast Addition to the little Finger of a Gentleman: the use, importance and significance of diamond rings to men of the eighteenth century

RACHEL CHURCH



Fig. 1

Admiral Edward Russell, 1st Earl of Orford, c.1710, portrait by Godfrey Kneller and detail of the large diamond ring on the little finger of his left hand, a choice seen in portraits of men of different social classes. Caird Fund, Royal Museums Greenwich BHC2992 © National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London <https://collections.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/14465.html>

Diamond rings, today often considered a female form of jewellery, were widely worn by men across the middle and upper classes in eighteenth century Europe. This can be seen across a range of written sources, including wills, legal proceedings and literature as well as in visual sources such as paintings and engravings. Male portraits often show the gleam of a diamond ring on the sitter's little finger. Examples like Admiral Sir Edward Russell (fig. 1); the writer sitting at his desk in Jean Etienne Liotard's *L'écriture* (1752);¹ John Sharp, the Archdeacon of Durham by Thomas Hudson (1757)² and George III (fig. 2) painted by Thomas Gainsborough (1780), are all posed to show off their diamond rings. While this is probably in part an artistic device, a way of adding a point of light and visual interest to the picture, it also reflects a pattern of use, suggesting that these jewels were important to the wearer and were used to help create the sitter's chosen self-image.



¹ Bundesmobilienvverwaltung, Vienna, MD 039862.

² Private collection.



Fig. 2
Detail of a portrait of George III by Thomas Gainsborough (1780-1). The king is wearing the streamlined 'Windsor uniform' which he had recently introduced. The only jewellery shown beside his Garter star is a large sparkling ring on the little finger of his right hand. Royal Collections Trust RCIN 401406 © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/401406/george-iii-1738-1820>

A portrait is a construction - a series of choices made by the artist and the sitter. The sitter has carefully chosen their clothing, pose and jewels to represent themselves and how they wish to be seen and remembered in that moment in time, whilst artists have their own views about how the sitter should appear.³ Objects shown in portraits or described in literature serve to communicate the identity of the subject but also their social standing and character. Gemstones such as diamonds held a range of meanings: particular properties had been ascribed to gemstones in classical and medieval lapidary texts⁴

and while these properties were no longer widely believed, they were still part of a communal cultural heritage. Diamond rings were associated with luxury and wealth although, as we will see, they were not restricted to the upper classes. They also carried connotations of eternity through the hardness and impermeability of the gemstone. Wearing a diamond ring could create and reinforce the social presentation of a gentleman, as examination of literary sources and crime records will show, however, this shared understanding of the different meanings of a diamond was sometimes subverted and exploited for comic or dishonest purposes in life and in literature.

This understanding of diamond rings as prestigious and long lasting objects meant that they were frequently used as personal and political gifts or as bequests in wills. Some of the rings in paintings may reflect a moment of professional or social triumph or record a personal relationship. Although surviving rings linked to specific men are not easy to find, especially as jewellery is so often remodelled, contemporary documents attest to their existence and portraits offer a reminder of the importance which these rings held for their owners.

'...the diamond ring I usually wear': male ownership of diamond rings

In previous centuries, sumptuary laws had attempted to define who was allowed to wear jewellery and what was appropriate at different levels of society,⁵ and although no longer legally defined, social expectations persisted. The merchant and jeweller David Jeffries underlined this in his 1751 *Treatise on Diamonds and Pearls* 'persons of rank and fortune are the proper purchasers of jewels; and the money laid out by such persons can no more be deemed luxury in them than that which is expended in equipping and furnishing sideboards and cabinets, and on all other costly personal equipments in gold and silver.'⁶ Can we detect a note of anxiety in Jeffries' assertions? Ownership of jewels certainly seems to have been rather more widespread than merely amongst 'persons of rank and fortune'.

It is difficult to say whether the design of male rings differed from those of women as most rings have survived without a record of their original owners. Portraits do not show any manifest differences, and the custom of wearing these rings on the little finger could account for variations in sizing. Diamond rings may have been considered interchangeable between the sexes, although some references do differentiate between male and female rings: an advertisement in the *Moniteur Judiciaire de Lyon*, December 1765, offered to sell 'A fine ring with three brilliant diamonds of the finest water, it can serve as a ring for a

3 Pointon, M. *Portrayal and the search for identity* London: Reaktion Books, 2012, pp. 121-80.

4 Lecouteux C. 'Adamas'. *A Lapidary of Sacred Stones: Their Magical and Medicinal Powers Based on the Earliest Sources*, Inner Traditions Publishing, Rochester, Vermont, 2012, pp. 34-8.

5 Scarisbrick, D. *Jewellery in Britain 1066-1837 A Documentary, Social, Literary and Artistic Survey*. Michael Russell (Publishing), 1994, p. 1; Riello, G. and Tublack, U. (eds) *The Right to Dress: Sumptuary Laws in a Global Perspective, c.1200-1800* Cambridge, 2019.

6 David Jeffries, *A Treatise on diamonds and pearls*, London, 1751, p. 66.

man or woman'.⁷ However, an advertisement in the same issue for 'Two fine rings for women, for sale, one has rosettes, at the price of six gold louis, the other has brilliants of a very fine water, price eight gold louis'⁸ seems to suggest that these rings are most suitable for a female wearer. Wills suggest that men and women would commonly leave jewellery to one another, although not necessarily always for personal use.

Evidence that diamond rings were frequently worn by men can be found in wills, newspapers and crime reports, sources which are particularly useful as they reflect real life use, often describing not only what men owned but how and where they wore their jewellery. Crime reports also offer information about men across the social classes, both as victims and perpetrators, shining a light on those who were too poor to make a will or leave a written trail. The controversial freethinker Matthew Tindal's will of 1733, made under duress, left to Eustace Budgell '£2100 [...] my strong-box, my diamond ring and all my manuscripts, books, papers and writings'.⁹ In 1741, the *British Chronologist* reported the gruesome murder of the lawyer John Penny, the late principal of Clement's Inn and deputy pay-master of the pensions, who had been murdered by his manservant and whose body, with its throat cut, was found in the bog-house. Among the items reported stolen were 'several sums of money, diamond-rings and other valuable effects'.¹⁰ The actor and theatrical manager Henry Gifford's will of 1757 left the 'diamond ring I usually wear and all my family pictures' along with his gold watch, clothes and books to his son William.¹¹ The will of the poet Thomas Gray in 1770 left to his friend Richard Stonehewer 'five hundred pounds reduced Bank Annuities, and desire him also to accept one of my diamond rings'. Another diamond ring and £500 was left to Dr Thomas Wharton,¹² while his watches, plate and unspecified rings were left to female relatives. Thomas Gray is shown to have owned at least two diamond rings and to have left them to male friends as a sign of friendship and a way to underscore their social bond.

Susanna Centlivre was one of the most successful poets and playwrights of the early eighteenth century and made use of the associations held by diamond rings in several plays.

7 'Une bague fine à trois diamants à brillants de la plus belle eau, elle peut servir de bague d'homme ou de femme'. *Le Moniteur judiciaire de Lyon: organe des tribunaux et des annonces légales*, Samedi 18 Decembre 1765, p. 310.

8 'Deux bagues fines pour femmes, à vendre, l'une est à rosettes, du prix de six louis d'or, & l'autre à brillants d'une très belle eau, prix huit louis d'or'. *Le Moniteur judiciaire de Lyon: organe des tribunaux et des annonces légales*, Samedi 18 Decembre 1765, p. 305.

9 *Biographica Britannica: or the lives of the most eminent persons who have flourished in Great Britain and Ireland*,. Vol VI, part 1, London: 1763, p. 3962.

10 *The British Chronologist: comprehending every material occurrence*, June 30 1741, Vol 2, p.258.

11 Highfill, P. *A Biographical Dictionary of Actors, Actresses, Musicians, Dancers, Managers & Other Stage Personnel in London, 1660-1800*, South Illinois University Press, 1978, Vol 5, p.194.

12 Gray, T. *The Poetical Works of Thomas Gray*, London, c.1795, p. xxiv.

In *The Gamester*, the father of the gambler Valere points out 'Mrs Security, who lent you once a Hundred Guineas upon your Diamond Ring that you lost at Play'¹³ indicating that a diamond ring was both a commonly worn jewel but also a commutable form of wealth. Valere himself described the air of magnificence that he felt a gambler had - with a fine coach and a gem-set finger which, when at the theatre, 'in the Side Box produces more Lustre'.¹⁴ Valere is using his diamond ring to convey wealth and respectability, irrespective of his true financial position.

Evidence is easily found for diamond rings worn in daily life and not merely for portraiture or for formal appearances. Trial reports from January 1725 reveal that Robert Wise, being blackmailed over an accusation of sodomy, was induced to hand over '(tho' with great Reluctance) a Diamond Ring from off his Finger'.¹⁵ A description of the assault on James Martin in St James's Park in 1718 tells us that he was attacked by a soldier wielding a sword 'which had in all probability cut off one or more of his Fingers, but the Edge of the Sword struck upon a Diamond Ring with that violence that the Sword broke it in half; and at the same time cut out the great Diamond, which was lost'.¹⁶ Similarly, when Roger Getting lost 5s 6d and a diamond ring, stolen by Mary Collier, the court proceedings reported that 'The money and Ring were taken out of the Prosecutor's Breeches which hung up in his Chamber'.¹⁷ Drinking in taverns with strange women was a dangerous pursuit, the Ordinary's Account of 1724 records that 'Mr Burroughs being in Liquor, they took the Diamond Ring off his Finger'.¹⁸ This danger was illustrated in William Hogarth's painting of *An Election Entertainment* (1755) in which a fashionably dressed but drunk young man is fondling a woman and failing to notice either that his wig is on fire or that a child is stealing his diamond ring from his finger.¹⁹

Written evidence therefore supports the evidence found in portraits that diamond rings were worn fairly widely by men as part of daily dress and by the middle classes as well as in court circles. The value ascribed to these rings, which explains their inclusion in portraits, is supported by the way in which they are listed as bequests and reported as substantial losses in accounts of crime.

13 Centlivre, S. *The Gamester*, London, 1734, p. 11.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

15 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 17 June 2019), January 1725, trial of Benjamin Goddard Benjamin Goddard Richard Rustead (t17250115-65).

16 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 07 February 2020), October 1718, trial of Joseph Shanon Elizabeth George Joseph Shannon (t17181015-13).

17 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 07 February 2020), August 1723, trial of Mary Collier (t17230828-4).

18 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 07 February 2020), January 1730, trial of Mary Sulivan, alias Wall, alias Stanley Isabella Eaton (t17300116-19).

19 *An Election Entertainment*, William Hogarth, Sir John Soane Museum 1755.

'He had so much the appearance of a gentleman': the importance of self-presentation and the problem of deceit

A fashionable young 'Spark', tricked by the notorious pickpocket Jenny Diver in 1741, turned up for his rendez-vous 'dressed very gay with a gold Watch in his Pocket, a gold hilted Sword by his Side, a Diamond Ring upon his Finger and a Gold headed Cane dangling in his hand.'²⁰ Descriptions of young gentlemen often list the expensive fabrics they wore and the accessories they carried. This was not merely a question of taking pleasure in self-adornment and of enjoying luxurious consumption but a way to present social position in a clear and visible way.

It has been argued that the eighteenth century saw ever increasing social mobility, typified by the continued rise of a middle class, whose wealth was based on trades, professions and the financial markets, rather than on the landed wealth and titles of the aristocracy.²¹ However, this social structure was unstable - men were under pressure to maintain their gentlemanliness, sometimes aggressively.²² The Swiss author Guy Miège, who spent most of his life in England, put this clearly in 1703: 'anyone that, without a Coat of Arms, has either a liberal or genteel education, that looks gentleman-like (whether he be so or not) and has the wherewithal to live freely and handsomely, is by courtesy of England, usually called a gentleman.'²³ The question of how to look gentleman-like relied on self-presentation through dress and jewellery as well as on possessing genteel manners. Objects such as watches, canes, snuff boxes and rings were used as symbols of gentility, part of the system of dress, accessories and manners which identified a gentleman and his place in the social order, but which when misused or exaggerated, could cause disquiet.²⁴ Diamonds remained prestigious jewels but the widening of supply made possible by the discovery of important deposits in Brazil and the opening of the Minas Gerais mine in 1725 helped to reduce their price and made them available to a wider social group.

This language of appearance could be subverted by tricksters and confidence men to deceive. In an age when the business of tradesmen, including goldsmiths and jewellers, relied upon extended credit cycles and when the willingness to extend credit relied very much on the perceived social status and respectability

of the customer,²⁵ the trappings of the gentleman could be exploited. Tradesmen, who were offering goods on credit or for approval, needed to assess the appearance of their customer accurately but without causing offence. When one jeweller was questioned in court as to why he had been unwilling to challenge James Hardy Vaux, a career thief who was later transported to Australia, he claimed that he was unwilling to cause offence as he 'had so much the appearance of a gentleman that I thought I might be mistaken [...] He wore whiskers and an eye glass and was very nicely powdered.'²⁶ When the 'celebrated Swindler' Thomas Tyler decided to defraud a London jeweller, Mr Morrison, in 1790 he presented himself as a wealthy young gentleman wearing a suit of deep mourning and arriving in a chariot. On the strength of his appearance he obtained a silver tea kettle and stand and went on to solicit a diamond ring for a 'gentleman I wish to make a present to.' The account continues: 'Our hero took the brilliant bauble, put it into his pocket, and ordering the coachman to go on, carried away the tea-kettle and stand – the Lord knows where.'²⁷

Similarly, in 1742 two confidence tricksters used their appearance to distract attention from their thefts from taverns:

Carr dressed himself in a very rich Livery, and Ramsey, as a young Gentleman of Fortune, who took the Title of a Baronet, (which first gave Rise of his being called Sir Robert Ramsey) [...] But to return to our Baronet; that he got so much after this Manner, that he always used to appear in black Velvet, with a good Watch in his Pocket, and a Diamond Ring on his Finger, and being a Person well educated, and had other Accomplishments, he and his Man passed on very successfully in this Practice for upwards of two Years.²⁸

Wearing velvet combined with a watch and diamond ring, themselves the rewards of crime, was enough to create an impression of gentility which allowed the two criminals to go unsuspected. Two other thieves making use of diamond rings were Joseph Paterson and Joseph Darvan, who were on trial for stealing linen waistcoats in 1731. Darvan was described as 'a young lad, near 19 years of Age, pretty well-set, wears a light Wig, a new Hat with a Silver Loop and Button, a blue grey coat and a work'd Waistcoat [...] Each of them wears a small Diamond Ring.'²⁹ Their landlady said that they had presented themselves

20 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 04 September 2020), *Ordinary of Newgate's Account*, March 1741 (OA17410318).

21 Earle, P. *The making of the English middle class: business, society and family life in London 1660-1730*, California, 1992.

22 Shoemaker, R.B. *The London mob: violence and disorder in eighteenth-century England*, London, 2004, pp. 162-5.

23 Miège, G. *The New state of England under our sovereign Queen Ann*, London: J. Nicolson, 1702, p. 154.

24 McNeil, P. *Pretty Gentlemen: Macaroni men and the eighteenth-century fashion world*, Yale, 2018, pp. 130-184.

25 Finn, M.C. *The character of credit: Personal debt in English culture, 1740-1914*, Cambridge, 2003.

26 Vaux, J.H. *Memoirs of James Hardy Vaux*, London, 1819, p. 92.

27 *A complete narrative of the life, adventures, frauds, and forgeries, of Thomas Tyler, the celebrated swindler, who was executed November 24, 1790, etc.* Anon, London, 1790, p. 9.

28 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 27 February 2020), *Ordinary of Newgate's Account*, January 1742 (OA17420113).

29 *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 21 June 2019), December 1731, trial of Joseph Paterson, alias Paternoster, Joseph Darvan (t17311208-26).

as 'Gentlemen's Sons and had 700/ [pounds] left to them by their Godmothers'. The diamond rings worn by Paterson and Darvan, whether genuine diamonds or convincing substitutes, created an impression of respectability and wealth which persuaded their landlady to house them and helped to shield them from suspicion when committing crimes. Diamond rings were therefore worn by a wide range of men: by wealthy aristocrats and gentlemen, by conmen and tricksters passing themselves off as wealthy gentlemen, and by criminals who may have obtained them through the proceeds of crime.

A crucial element of the plot of Mrs Centlivre's play *The Wonder* (1714) centred on the movements of a diamond ring. In this play, which was one of the most frequently performed of the eighteenth century, the heroine Violante gave a ring to Lissardo, the servant of her lover Don Felix, to pass to his master. Lissardo put on the ring and became transfixed by it, exclaiming, 'methinks a Diamond Ring is a vast addition to the little Finger of a Gentleman.' A comic scene followed, frequently represented in images of the celebrated actors of the time (fig. 3):

Egad, methinks I have a very pretty Hand - and very white - and the Shape! - Faith, I never minded it so much before! - In my Opinion, it is a very fine shap'd Hand - and becomes a Diamond Ring, as well as the first Grandee's in Portugal!³⁰

Putting on the diamond ring has transformed Lissardo (in his own eyes, at least) into a fine gentleman and given him the confidence to flirt with the female servants, who are themselves attempting to obtain the diamond. The comedy of the scene relies on the servant aping the manners of his master, as well as the idea that a diamond ring was the perfect foil for a white, shapely hand.

The transformative and performative power of the diamond ring was also exploited in *The Spectator's* 1734 description of auctioneer and well known society figure, James Christie, (fig. 4) claiming that the 'displaying of a fine Brilliant glittering on the little Finger, when the hand waves gently along with a soft smooth sentence, adds an irresistible Force to whatever you deliver, gives it the Stamp of Sterling Wit and makes it pass current.'³¹

The diamond ring here is attributed a magical, hypnotising power to transform commonplace language into the outpourings of a talented orator, just as wearing a diamond ring could make the wearer appear a gentleman of means and respectability, even if in reality a servant, thief or conman.



Fig. 3

These two images show the pivotal scene from a popular late eighteenth century play *The Wonder* in which the servant Lissardo puts on his master's diamond ring and feels himself transformed. a) Print *Mr King as Lissardo in The Wonder*, engraving and drawing by Roberts, published by Bell, London 1776. Width 10.3 cm. V&A no. S.1553-2013, Harry R. Beard Collection, given by Isobel Beard. b) Tile, tin-glazed earthenware with transfer-printed decoration entitled *Mr King in the character of Lissardo*, probably printed by Guy Green, Liverpool c.1777-1780. Width 12.7 cm. Given by Lady Charlotte Schreiber V&A no. 414:832/2-1885. © Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum.

30 Centlivre, S. *The Wonder: A Woman keeps a Secret*, London, 1756, p.14.

31 *The Universal Spectator*, 1734, quoted in Pointon, M. *Brilliant Effects: a cultural history of gemstones and jewellery*, Yale, 2009, p. 58.



Fig. 4

Portrait of James Christie (1730-1803), by Thomas Gainsborough, England, 1778.

James Christie was famous for his diamond ring, which he used to mesmerise viewers at his auctions. He is wearing a large stone in a gold setting on the little finger of his left hand but the loose style of the painting leaves it unclear as to whether or not it is a diamond. The way in which his hand is draped over the gilt edge of the painting serves to display his elegant hand and fine ring. Gift of J. Paul Getty © Getty Center

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/552/thomas-gainsborough-portrait-of-james-christie-1730-1803-english-1778/>

'The Town swarms with Fine Gentlemen': the risks of display

Although wearing a diamond ring could be construed as a necessary part of a gentlemanly appearance and self-presentation, used inappropriately it risked attracting mockery. The importance of appearance is clearly asserted in the popular press and literature of the eighteenth century. *The Guardian*, a weekly journal which began in 1713 and carried articles by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, made the point at length. In a 1713 discussion of 'Fine Gentlemen', they remarked that the 'Town swarms with fine Gentlemen' but advised their female readers: 'The Gilt Chariot, the Diamond Ring, the Gold Snuff-Box and Brocade Sword-Knot are no essential parts of a Fine Gentleman; but may be used by him, provided he casts his Eye upon them but once a Day.'³² In the same year, they lamented 'Dress is grown of universal Use in the Conduct of Life. Civilities and Respect are only paid to Appearance. 'Tis a Varnish that gives a Lustre to every Action, a Passe-par-Tout that introduces us into all polite Assemblies, and the only certain Method of making most of the Youth of our Nation conspicuous.'³³ This concern that fine clothing, jewellery and showy manners could distract from a fundamental lack of quality was expressed some years later in William Etheredge's play *The man of mode*: 'Varnished over with good breeding, many a blockhead makes a tolerable show.'³⁴

When the politician and author James Harris wrote to his sister Gertrude from Paris in 1768, he described the overly fashionable young men he saw. 'If you see an idiot just out of college with three rows of curls on his head, a purse the size of a shield and three diamond rings hating the music at the opera, you cannot persuade him that he does not like it. "I'm enjoying it wonderfully - this music is delightful." Ask him why, he will not give you any other reason other than it is fashionable.'³⁵ Harris uses the excessive quantity of diamond rings, the oversized purse and ridiculous hairstyle to underscore the wearer's lack of taste and judgment and perhaps to express wariness of fashionable French life. Attitudes towards French fashions in Britain vacillated between a strong attraction and a fear that this was undermining the manliness of British men.³⁶ Harris's young men may have been following a particularly Continental fashion - the singer shown in Hogarth's *Marriage a la mode: The Toilette*, generally thought to be based on one of the fashionable Italian castrati such as Farinelli or Senesino, is wearing a profusion of diamond jewellery, including a number of rings.³⁷ Castrati singers were disturbing to some commentators

because of the adulation they received, accompanied by lavish gifts, as well as of their blurring of traditional gender boundaries.

Joseph Wharton's satire of 1747, *Ranelagh House* mocks:

a young Lecturer, who preaches prettily, has a graceful lisping delivery and abounds in the most smart antitheses [...] tis he with a smooth round face and a neck-cloth so white and so well plaited under his florid double chin. He preached last Sunday in a silk gown with a Lawn Handkerchief in his hand, and a fine Diamond Ring upon his finger, upon this well-chosen text; *And why take ye thought for Raiment?* He bows so well, and flatters so smoothly and has so little spirit or honesty that he will certainly be a Dean.³⁸

In this example the expensive fabrics and fine diamond ring serve to underscore the insincerity and vanity of the cleric whilst the lisping delivery and smooth round face may hint at a perceived lack of manliness.

A diamond ring, usually worn on the little finger, was highly visible and men used different strategies to show it off, whether posed in a portrait, with the hand angled to emphasize the ring, or worn in daily life. The frequent mentions of diamond rings being displayed and flashed may perhaps be related to the growing popularity of the brilliant-cut, which increased the sparkle of the stone and created eye-catching, rainbow flashes of colour.³⁹ The success of auctioneer James Christie was jokingly attributed to the flash of his diamond ring and the elegance of his gestures, whilst the ritualised movements required to take snuff elegantly, an essential social ritual, would also be given extra brilliance by the sparkle of diamond set fingers. Expensive snuff boxes, made of precious materials, were often mentioned alongside rings, both as part of elegant dress and as gifts. However, unwise wearers might lay themselves open to mockery. Wearing a diamond ring was a gentlemanly prerogative, but appearing too proud or interested in it would cause disquiet.

Descriptions of diamond-wearing men by female authors ridicule male pretensions, presenting them as vain and possibly effeminate or as uncouth and unmannerly. Lady Sophia Burrell's *Picture of a Fine Gentleman* (1793) paints a damning portrait:

Florio in his vis-a-vis [...]

pomp of dress and lovely spite of haughtiness [...]

A finger with a diamond graced

And to complete the finished Beau

A giant buckle hides his shoe.⁴⁰

Elizabeth Thomas's 1722 satire on a man who dislikes 'bookish women' advised the painter charged with representing 'a large two-handed surly clown in silver waistcoat' that the fashionable but ridiculous accessories should include:

32 *The Guardian*, Number 34, Monday April 20, 1713, p. 142.

32 *The Guardian*, Number 34, Monday April 20, 1713, p. 142.

33 *The Guardian*, Number 149, Tuesday September 1, 1713, p. 486.

34 Etheredge, W. *The Man of Mode*, London, 1676, Act III, scene 1.

35 Burrows, D. and Dunhill, R. *Music and the theatre in Handel's world: the family papers of James Harris*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 525.

36 Cohen, M. *Fashioning masculinity: national identity and language in the eighteenth century* Routledge, 1996.

37 William Hogarth, *Marriage a la mode: 4 The Toilette*, 1743, National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/william-hogarth-marriage-a-la-mode-4-the-toilette>

38 Wharton, J. *Ranelagh House*, London, 1747, p. 22.

39 Ogden, J. *Diamonds: an early history of the king of gems*, Yale, 2018, pp. 167-81.

40 Quoted in Lonsdale, R. *Eighteenth century women poets: an Oxford Anthology*, Oxford, 1990, p. 225.

Mechlin lace to shade the clumsy fist [...]

Two diamond rings [...] always in sight like Prim's, the

formal beau,

But if rude company their notice spare,

Then draw the hand elated to his ear

And at one view let diamond ring and golden bob

appear...⁴¹

The notion of using a diamond ostentatiously and to laughable effect appears in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's riposte to Jonathan Swift, in which she mocks:

Doctor in a clean starch'd Band [...]

With care his Diamond Ring displays

And artful shows its various Rays...⁴²

Although wearing a diamond ring was in itself uncontroversial, attempting to exploit it by florid gestures or making the desire to show it off too obvious would open the wearer up to ridicule and undercut the impression of masculinity and gentility it was intended to convey.

This same distaste for excessive display appears in the 1729 *Character of a FOP* which claimed that although 'he is no great friend to the tobacconist for fear of his lungs, yet he holds a pipe in his mouth to make his diamond ring the more conspicuous, and to that end he has an excellent faculty in playing upon the table with his fingers [...] Thus the simple animal is composed of pride, ignorance, conceit, vain-glory and imagination and Men of Sense will draw from him as from a pestilential infection.'⁴³

The FOP is condemned both for his unmanly dislike of tobacco and his abuse of pipe and snuff-box as a strategy for showing off his diamond ring. The artist Panton Betew, described as being dressed in an eccentric and old-fashioned manner, was well known to all the fish vendors in Lombard Court, Seven Dials, as a purchaser of fish for two; 'which provender he was not ashamed to carry home in a dark, snuff-coloured handkerchief, always taking care to hold it in his right hand, that he might display a brilliant ring, which he said he wore in memory of his mother.'⁴⁴

A sparkling ring, in life and in portraiture, served to attract attention to the white and finely shaped hand of the gentleman. Gentlemen were not expected to carry out manual work and their white, well cared for skin demonstrated this. A well-shaped white hand was also part of the accepted standard of male beauty and supported the idea that regularity in bodily form followed spiritual health and social conformity. The male ideal of beauty, as described

41 Elizabeth Thomas, *The True Effigies of a Certain Squire Inscribed to Clemena*, London, T. Combes, 1726.

42 'The Reasons that Induced Dr. S. to Write a Poem Call'd the Lady's Dressing Room' in

Fairer, D. and Gerrard, C. (eds), *Eighteenth century poetry: an annotated anthology*, Blackwell, 2018, p. 220.

43 McCormick, I. *Secret sexualities: a sourcebook of seventeenth and eighteenth century writing*, Routledge, 2003, pp.149-50.

44 Smith, J.T. *Nollekens and his times*, London, 1828, Vol. I, p.177.

by Henry Fielding in *Tom Jones* involved 'cherry cheeks, small lily-white hands, sloe black eyes, flowing locks ...'⁴⁵ Tom himself, despite his doubtful parentage, was described by Sophia's maid as 'a very fine Gentleman, and he hath one of the whitest hands in the world.'⁴⁶ A white hand, however, did not always connote manliness - a satirical article of 1712 in the London magazine, *The Spectator*, recommended the craft of knotting for 'pretty Gentlemen not meant for any Manly Employments and for want of Business are often as much in the Vapours as the Ladies.'⁴⁷ Knotting, as well as providing this much needed employment, would also, they suggest, have the advantage that 'it shews a white Hand and Diamond Ring to great advantage.'

Men had to tread a delicate path between being appropriately dressed for their station and being overly invested in their appearance by showing off their jewellery, making them appear ridiculous, vain or unmanly.

'...a sparkling diamond will be always playing in my eye': the diamond ring as a token of memory

Diamond rings are frequently mentioned in wills as specific bequests and may often be seen in male portraits. A portrait is an art work associated with memory - an object created in a moment in time and which records that moment for posterity. It is therefore apt that the diamond, with its own associations of immortality, was often chosen to be represented. Some of the rings seen in portraits of the eighteenth century may record personal relationships, rings received as gifts of friendship, bequests from friends and family or as rewards obtained in a professional capacity. Just as a portrait aimed to shape the image of the sitter, wills were used to commemorate lifetime relationships and to manage the memorialisation of the deceased. Diamond rings were valuable items which owners took pains to leave to chosen recipients. The Dutch naturalist Joan Gideon Loten (1710-1789), who amassed a fortune as governor of Ceylon, brought back silver plate 'with which I can shine a little bit more in Utrecht and England',⁴⁸ and once in London, marked his success by buying a diamond ring valued at 500 guineas 'so I shall look like a small Indian Seigneur.'⁴⁹ When making his will in 1785, he left it as a 'small memento' to Gijsbert Jan Van Hardenbroek, describing it as 'a Brilliant ring which the appearor has been used to wear.'⁵⁰ The gift was valuable, not only financially, but as a personal token worn during life and passed on to a friend who, it was hoped, would keep Loten's memory alive. The *General Evening Post* reported in 1759 that General Wolfe,

45 Fielding, H. *The History of Tom Jones: a Foundling*, Dublin, 1749, Vol I, p. 40.

46 Ibid., p. 197.

47 *The Spectator*, London, Friday 14 November, 1712.

48 Raat, A.J.P. *The Life of Governor Joan Gideon Loten (1710-1789): a personal history of a Dutch virtuoso*, Hilversum, 2010, p.196.

49 Ibid., p. 196.

50 Ibid., p. 471.

who had recently died after a notable victory against the French in Quebec, left 'his plate, watch and diamond ring to Admiral Saunders, in token of his great regard for him as a friend and gallant officer.'⁵¹ Not only did these items have a financial value, but the watch and ring were personal objects which Wolfe would have worn and used regularly.

The custom of leaving money for rings to be worn in memory of the testator was a well-established one.⁵² Wills often specified the value of the memorial rings to be made and the names of the recipients, and occasionally details about the design were also provided. Some of the diamond rings which appear in wills were most likely included as personal, valuable items which would make appropriate bequests but occasionally diamonds were to be bought for purpose made gifts. Small diamonds were sometimes used as part of the decorative scheme of conventional mourning rings, set on the shoulders or used to make up diamond urns and other funerary motifs,⁵³ but occasionally the diamond is the main element of the ring. When Francis Fauquier, the Lieutenant governor of Virginia made his will in 1768, he asked that his executors:

purchase one single stone Brilliant Diamond Ring of the value of one hundred pounds sterling at least which I bequeath to my much esteemed and respected Patron George Montague Dunk, Earl of Halifax, as a small token of my Gratitude to him for the many favours conferred on me unmerited on my part; and which I hope he will do me the Honour to wear in remembrance of a Man who never one Moment forgot the great Obligation he had to his Lordship.

This ring is made to serve both as a reminder of Fauquier but also to emphasize the fact that Fauquier himself remembered and acknowledged the favours he had been given during his lifetime. As well as this particularly generous bequest, he also directed:

that my Executors purchase four other single stone Brilliant Diamond Rings of the value of twenty five Guineas each [which] I bequeath them not as a reward for their trouble I have hereby given them, for I well know that they have [...] bore it, but which I desire they would wear in remembrance of a Man who once loved them and dies in the belief that they loved him.

Fauquier has chosen diamond rings as the best means to both reward his patron and his friends for their support during his life, through the gift of jewels which were widely worn by gentlemen, but also in the hope that, through wearing his ring

and seeing it sparkle upon their fingers, it would keep him alive in their memory and, in the case of the Earl of Halifax, perhaps encourage him to extend his favour and good will towards Fauquier's surviving sons.⁵⁴

This use of diamond rings as a means of seeking favour can be seen in Horace Walpole's letter of 30 January 1757 reporting a joke by his acquaintance Mr Chute, who had been sent a diamond mourning ring by a cousin and was calling it '*l'anello del Piscatore*'. Rather than the Fisherman's ring commonly worn by the Pope, Chute was suggesting that his cousin was using the diamond ring as a way of 'fishing' to be the unmarried Chute's heir.⁵⁵

The particular appeal of diamond rings as bequests can be seen in the 1769 will of the actor Charles Holland, who left his 'Best Diamond Ring [...] as a Mark of My Affection and great Regard' to fellow actor David Garrick and his 'other Diamond Ring and the Sum of Twenty Pounds' to George Garrick.⁵⁶ A diamond ring had the advantage of being a jewel which could be worn daily and would be noticed by onlookers but was also an object which would catch the eye of the wearer himself and keep the circumstances of its acquisition in his mind.

The dual function of the diamond ring both as a gift or payment and as a prompt to memory was exploited to good effect in literature. The diamond works as a bribe and as a symbol of memory, both for its financial value and because, as laid out in lapidary texts, the hardness of the stone was associated with permanence and imperviousness to external factors. In Sir John Vanburgh's *The Confederacy* (1705), a diamond ring is used as a so-called 'ring of remembrance' in a blackmail scene between Brass and Dick. Brass has already extorted a wedding suit and a silver-hilted sword, but goes on to claim that he 'would not forget all these favours for the world: a sparkling diamond will be always playing in my eye and put me in mind of them.'⁵⁷ Similarly, in John Dryden's *Amphitryon* (1691) the chambermaid Phaedra claims that she will forget 'all that was done over Night in Love-Matters, unless my Master please to rub up my Memory with another Diamond'.⁵⁸ Here the diamond is used both as a token of memory but more immediately as a bribe. The same idea is used in Dryden's *Marriage a la Mode* (1673) where Philotis marvels over the softness of Palamede's hand and uses this as her prompt to solicit a bribe. When challenged that despite taking the twenty gold pieces, she might forget to further his suit, she goes on to say that 'if you distrust my memory put some token on my finger to remember it by. That diamond there would do nicely.'⁵⁹

54 Will in the Public Record Office, PROB 11/973; Francis Fauquier's Will *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 8, no. 3, 1900, pp. 171-7.

55 Walpole, W. *The Letters of Horace Walpole*, Vol 2, n-360, letter 210, 'To Sir Horace Mann.' Arlington Street, Jan. 30, 1757.

56 Highfill, P. et al. *A biographical dictionary of actresses, musicians, dancers 1680-1800*, vol. 7, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, p.368.

57 Vanburgh, J. *The Confederacy. A comedy ... By the author of The Relapse*, London, 1705, p.46.

58 Dryden, J. *Amphitryon or the two Sosias*, London, 1721, p. 48.

59 Canfield, J. D.(ed.) *Broadview Anthology of Restoration and early Eighteenth century Drama*, Broadview Press, Plymouth, 2001, pp. 370-1.

51 *The General Evening Post*, Supplement, 1 November 1759.

52 Oman, C. *British rings 800-1914*, London, 1974, pp. 71-81; Crisp, F. *Memorial rings Charles II to William IV in the possession of Frederick Arthur Crisp*, London, 1908.

53 The 1788 ring commemorating William Fauquier, brother of Francis, was set with an urn decorated with half pearls and tiny diamonds. (Victoria and Albert Museum, inventory number 849-1888).

'... a present of a ring from his Royal hand': the diamond ring as a personal and professional gift

Diamond rings made very acceptable gifts, both between friends and as a reward for a personal or professional favour. In 1707 Thomas Pitt, the governor of Fort St George (later known as Madras and then Chennai) used a diamond ring to convey his thanks to Lord Scarborough who had been particularly efficient at sending him supplies of wine. The difficulty of receiving fresh supplies which had been well enough packed to survive the long journey was a regular complaint and Pitt recorded that Lord Scarborough 'has been very generous in sending me the best liquors I have had from England'.⁶⁰

A beautiful ring in the Royal collections, (fig. 5) set with rose cut diamonds around a panel of hair and surmounted by the Prince of Wales feathers, with more diamonds decorating the hoop, was given by Frederick, Prince of Wales to his friend John Chardin in 1736. It was a particularly personal gift, set with the Prince's device, his hair and a classical inscription on the back of the bezel, designed to showcase the friendship between the two men.⁶¹

Court life was characterised by a system of gift exchanges, including the longstanding tradition of showing favour through gifts of silver plate, jewellery, jewelled portrait miniatures (*boîtes à portrait*) and snuff boxes, sometimes accompanied by a

monetary payment but often in lieu of one. Rings were also used in diplomatic exchanges - in 1626, the Duke of Buckingham urged Charles I to smooth over disputes with the ruler of Algiers about Muslim captives with the dispatch of a letter and 'a present of a ring from his Royal Hand'.⁶² By the eighteenth century, the diamond ring had become a standard gift to a departing ambassador throughout Europe. The ambassadorial relationship was marked by a carefully calibrated exchange of gifts, designed to show the largesse of the host court and the cordiality of relations between the rulers represented. Exchanges often included gifts given to the Ambassador as personal tokens to reflect the success of the mission.⁶³ A diamond ring was an appropriate item to use in these gift exchanges - it was portable, personal and had a clear and easily measured intrinsic value. The list of items presented to the Turkish Ambassador when he left the court of Spain in 1778 included 'a ring garnished with diamonds, value 19000 florins [...] From the Prince of Asturias, a valuable diamond ring worth 12000 florins and from the Prime Minister, a gold snuff box value 1500 florins'. To put the value of these rings in context, 300 florins were considered sufficient to cover his daily expenses for 84 days.⁶⁴ The Dutch merchant and diamond trader Cornelis Calkoen owned a particularly large and splendid diamond ring (fig. 6), possibly obtained or worn during his diplomatic posting as ambassador to the court of the Turkish Sultan Ahmed III, now in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.⁶⁵

Personal association with the ruling family must have formed a large element of the appeal of a tiny diamond ring, still in the



Fig. 5

Gold ring set with diamond, hair and enamel, presented to Sir John Chardin by Frederick, Prince of Wales, 1736. The inside of the hoop is engraved with a line from the Aeneid: *Semper Honos Nomenque Tuum Laudesque Manebunt* (Your honour, name and praise will endure forever). Royal Collections RCIN 9020 © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020

60 Dalton, C.N. *The Life of Thomas Pitt*, Cambridge, 1915, p. 115.

61 Royal Collections Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/9020/ring-0>

62 Matar, N. *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the age of discovery*, Columbia, 2000, p. 28.

63 Heal, F. *The Power of Gifts*, Oxford, 2014, pp. 168-77.

64 *The Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, Vol. 58, part 1.

65 Rijksmuseum <http://hdl.handle.net/10934/RM0001.COLLECT.501904>

Royal Collections. It was given to the infant Prince George in 1763 by his parents George III and Queen Charlotte. The back of the ring is engraved with their initials G and C. A year later, his governess Lady Charlotte Finch wrote that the Prince, then aged 3, 'gave me off his little finger a little ring of a single brilliant, being the present of the King and Queen to him last Christmas.' Eighty years later, the ring was given to another baby prince by Lady Finch's grand-daughter.⁶⁶ In this instance, a diamond ring was seen as an appropriate gift both to a small boy from his parents and from the same boy to his governess.⁶⁷

Although many of these diamond rings are likely to have been regifted or converted into cash, others were worn and kept as treasured heirlooms, given a 'biographical label'⁶⁸ to record their provenance. This is demonstrated in the items listed in the 1714 inventory of Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, which included objects such as 'A brilliant of the first water, and very lively weight in a ring; the gift of the Emperor [...] Value 900/ [pounds]' and 'A large rose diamond set in a ring, the gift of the King of Poland [...] Value 1500/ [pounds]'. In this list, the royal provenance of the ring is given equal weight to its financial value.⁶⁹

Messengers bringing news or sent to carry out delicate political

manoeuvres would also expect to be rewarded. In 1708, *The British Apollo* recorded that the Envoy Extraordinary sent to the Bishop of Munster to conclude a defensive alliance was rewarded with two 'Diamond Rings of great Value'.⁷⁰ In 1761, the *General Evening Post* in its October 10 notice from Vienna reported the storming of Schweidnitz in the Third Silesian War: 'The Emperor and Empress have each sent a letter of thanks to General Laudohn, with two boxes containing valuable presents. Colonel de Vins, the messenger who brought the news of that General's glorious achievement, received a present of 2000 ducats from the Emperor and a rich diamond ring from the Empress.'

Grateful recipients were not always expected to keep these tokens. Amongst the descriptions of court gifts compiled by Johann von Besser in the early eighteenth century, he reported that, at the English court in 1711, 'in the past, one made these gifts as gold vermeil services, then as a ring or rosette of diamonds for an Ambassador with the portrait of the King on the back, but because there was deceit, for several years one has given a Bank Draft of such a value, payable on arrival, and the one who receives it, sends to the bank to convert it into gold or silver. Since adopting this method, few ministers have chosen to ask for it in gemstones.'⁷¹



Fig. 6
Man's ring, Istanbul, c.1740, silver, gold, diamonds, formerly owned by Cornelis Calkoen. Museum no. NG-2011-24. Purchased with the support of the Maria Adriana Aalders Fonds/Rijksmuseum Fonds © Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

66 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/15/collection/65426/ring>

67 <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/11/collection/65426/ring>

68 Heal, F. *op. cit.* p. 9.

69 Thomson, A.T. *Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough*, London, 1839, p. 469-70.

70 *The British Apollo*, Aug. 20 to 25, 1708.

71 Cassidy-Geiger, M. *et al.* 'Documents of Court Gifts Collected by Johann Von Besser (1654-1729).' *Studies in the Decorative Arts*, Vol. 15, no.1, 2007, pp. 114-177.

'the promise of other brilliancies to come': the use of diamonds in cultural patronage

Rings were used in cultural patronage, given to reward actors, musicians, authors and painters. Diamond rings were used in patronage for a number of reasons - they had a clear, measurable value, they could be given to male or female recipients, they did not need to be fitted to size, they were easily portable and they reflected the magnificence and generosity of the donor. The composer Giovanni Hasse, for example, was given a diamond ring and 1000 thalers by Frederick the Great for a performance of *Armenio* in Dresden in 1745,⁷² and in 1798 musician Frederic Himmel was given a ring set with brilliants by the Russian Emperor.⁷³ Joseph Haydn received a diamond ring worth 300 ducats from Friedrich Wilhelm II after sending him the Paris symphonies and later claimed, rather sycophantically, that he could not compose unless he was wearing it.⁷⁴ He appears in an unfinished painting of 1791 by John Hoppner with a diamond ring on the little finger of his right hand as he sits composing.⁷⁵

Amongst the jewels given to artists, writers and actors, diamond rings were particularly preponderant. The philologist and classical scholar Christian Friedrich Matthaei who catalogued important and previously little studied texts by Greek authors in Russian libraries received four diamond rings between 1803 and 1808.⁷⁶ Author Nikolai Gogol was favoured with a diamond ring in the same year.⁷⁷ A ring could signify not just public appreciation but be used to show official favour. In 1835, the Russian historian Nikolai Polevoi who had got into political trouble was brought back into acceptability by the Emperor Nikolai. As a contemporary wrote: 'The Emperor sent him a diamond ring, and signified his approbation in other ways also. Polevoi has now assumed courage: that brilliant ring seemed the promise of other brilliancies to come.'⁷⁸

Rings were given for scientific and engineering achievements as well as cultural ones. Mr Greathead of South Shields was the perhaps surprising recipient of a diamond ring from the Emperor of Russia in 1790 for his invention of the safety lifeboat,⁷⁹ whilst Mr Oliver Lang of Woolwich was given a diamond ring worth 100 guineas by the King of Denmark for his 1835 development of the safety keel and new scuttle for ships. As the Nautical Magazine explained 'It is gratifying to see the merits of our country men acknowledged by foreign powers.'⁸⁰

Conclusion

Examination of contemporary literature, wills, court cases, printed media and letters shows the widespread ownership of diamond rings by men in the eighteenth century and the range of meanings attributed to them. Although the discovery of diamonds in Brazil in the 1720s had increased the supply, diamonds were still highly valued and notable jewels. Diamond rings could serve as a gentlemanly possession, bought, worn and recorded in portraits to show social standing but they could also be satirized and dishonestly exploited. The gift of a diamond ring was considered a suitable reward for ambassadors and diplomats but could also be used as a sign of appreciation and a means of payment for social inferiors such as authors, artists, musicians and inventors. Diamond rings made excellent bequests to family members, friends and social superiors to thank them for support in life and in the hope of being remembered after death. Worn on the little finger of a gentleman (or one who wished to pass as such), the diamond ring was indeed a vast addition.

72 Moore, J.W. *Complete Encyclopaedia Music, Elementary, Technical, Historical, Biographical, Vocal Instrumental*, Boston, 1880, p. 380.

73 *Ibid.*, p. 406.

74 Stendhal; Gardiner, W.; Brewin, R.; Carpani, G.; Winckler, T.F. *The life of Haydn, in a series of letters written at Vienna. Followed by the life of Mozart, with observations on Metastasio, and on the present state of music in France and Italy*, London, 1817, p. 97.

75 Portrait of Franz Joseph Haydn, John Hoppner (1791-2), Royal Collections Trust, <https://www.rct.uk/collection/406987/franz-joseph-haydn-1732-1809>

76 Wes, M.A. *Classics in Russia 1700-1855: Between Two Bronze Horsemen*, Brill, 1992, p.125.

77 *Ibid.* p. 280.

78 Johann Georg Kohl, 'A Russian Author', *Russia. St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, the German provinces on the Baltic, the steppes, the Crimea, and the interior of the empire*, London, 1842, pp. 294-7.

79 *The Nautical Magazine: a magazine for those interested in ships and the sea*, 1873, p. 191.

80 *The Nautical Magazine*, 1835, p. 302.

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