'Not used to be worn as a Jewel': The wearing of precious stones in early modern England – ornaments or medicine?

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Abstract: Precious stones played an important role in early modern medicine. These widespread medicinal objects could be administered in a variety of ways and, most importantly, by wearing. It is here that these medicinal jewels overlap with the famous desire of the gentry of the period to partake in opulent displays of gemstones on their person. This paper examines whether it is possible to tease apart these intersecting motivations for ornamenting the body with gemstones: was it for health or was it for beauty? The wearing of stones for cures is often found in printed material of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Britain, including Nicholas Culpeper's famous *Pharmacopoeia*, but tracing records of actual medical use is complicated. Amulets and astrological sigils are an obvious source of jewellery worn for curative rather than primarily ornamental purposes, although these trod a perilous and blurred line between legitimate medicine and diabolic magic. The clearest examples are the wearing of stones with little or no aesthetic value (e.g. like the fabulous, to an extent fictional, toad-stone) which ultimately, it is argued, are of most use in determining the motivations for the wearing of medicinal stones.

Precious stones (in the contemporary historical sense of the term, which incorporated a variety of precious and semi-precious gemstones and associated valuable mineral objects) played an important role in early modern medicine. This role has too often been overlooked by historians and, as a consequence, has led to confusion when considering the wearing of such objects in jewellery from the past which, when it was held to have curative or other virtues, has often been seen as magical or amuletic. This is an unfair assumption however, for such objects were often not magical and such an assumption does not take into account the wide range of accepted and legitimate properties that precious stones were believed to possess. Far from being magical or atypical, precious stones were an important part of the medical culture of early modern Britain, a place they had held throughout the Middle Ages. These widespread medicinal objects could be administered in a variety of ways including tinctures, touch, swallowing and, perhaps most importantly, by wearing. It is here that these medicinal jewels overlap with the desire of the gentry of the period to partake in opulent displays of gemstones on their person. Is it possible to tease apart these intersecting motivations – health and beauty – for ornamenting the body with gemstones, and can we ever be sure for what purpose a jewel was worn? In the words of the seventeenth-century apothecary Nicholas Culpeper, when was it that a stone 'is not used to be worn as a Jewel' (Culpeper 1653, p. 33)?

This question is perhaps more complex to answer than it might at first seem. Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, is said to have worn a large diamond into the Battle of Grandson in 1476, losing both the diamond and the fight. The following January he then wore a smaller diamond at the Battle of Nancy. Unfortunately, on this occasion he lost both the battle and his life; the jewel was looted from his body (Graf 2001, p. 104). The motivation for the wearing of these diamonds was in part theatrical and in part a demonstration of the wealth and status of Burgundy. This was not mere vanity, however, for in choosing to wear this particular gemstone Charles may have hoped to acquire its virtue, described in one contemporary manuscript as that 'he þat bereth it schal not be ouercome in bataile... [for] it schall defend þe of þin enemye' (Evans & Serjeantson 1933, pp. 66–67).

Precious stones were an important and widely accepted part of conventional and orthodox medical practice in early modern Britain. The use of precious stones and the part they played in learned medicine can clearly be seen from the various editions of the pharmacopoeia, or handbook, of the London College of Physicians in which we find sections dealing purely with the medicinal properties of stones. In 1653, controversial apothecary Nicholas Culpeper issued an English translation of the College pharmacopoeia in an attempt to broaden popular medical understanding and challenge the power of the College. His version includes sixteen stones. Each had a long pedigree of use and was taken from the commonly accepted European lapidary tradition, stemming from the first-century Greek physician Discorides' work *De Materia Medica* (Culpeper 1653, p. 33). Here we find such instructions as

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'Jasper being worn stops bleeding, easeth the labour of women, stops lust, resist fevers and dropsies' and that emerald 'being worn in a Ring, it helps or at least mitigates the falling sickness [epilepsy], and vertigo...' (Culpeper 1653, p. 33). By the 1661 edition of the pharmacopoeia, over thirty gemstones were listed. Between the two editions, the manner of prescription had changed and increasingly the gemstones were taken orally, rather than worn (Culpeper 1661, pp. 34–35).

Unfortunately, texts like this do not necessarily help us with uncovering the motivation behind wearing gemstones; was it for medical conditions or merely for adornment? Sadly, people rarely record why they are wearing items of jewellery. For instance, a ruby ring might be worn for its dazzling beauty; the ruby also had medical properties attributed to it, however, with the Cambridge lapidarist and son of a physician Thomas Nicols noting in 1659 that

> if worn in an Amulet, or drunk, it is good against poison [a common term for many infections] and against the plague, and to drive away sadnesse, evil thoughts, terrible dreams, and evil spirits [in modern terms mental health disorders] ... [it also] cheareth the mind, and keepeth the body in safety (Nicols 1659, p. 58).

While these natural properties of the stones were seen as medical, we still cannot be sure that this was the motivation for wearing it.

One instance where there is a clear record of motivation for health regarding precious stones comes from the sixteenth-century Italian mathematician Girolamo Cardano, who earned a living as a physician and lecturer (supplemented by gambling). He recorded several cases in which he used precious stones (mainly taken orally in powder) as a cure for patients. In 1560, when he was struggling with madness and depression late in his life, he treated himself with an emerald. He followed instructions given to him in a dream, placing the emerald, which hung round his neck, in his mouth which caused him to forget his grief so long as it remained there (Cardano 1575, p. 208). Far from being a bizarre treatment this was within standard contemporary treatment procedures and Cardano was merely using an acceptable and widely recognized piece of his medical pharmacopoeia.

For some stones there is more evidence that people wore them for reasons that were supplementary to their aesthetics. Turquoise had protective and diagnostic properties, even prognosticating death. It was reportedly used by Ivan the Terrible of Russia to dramatically foretell his death in 1548 when he displayed it to the English ambassador Jerome Horsey. He said

> this faire turcas [turquoise] you see; take in your hand; of his natur arr orient coullers; put them on my hand and arm. I am poisned with disease; you see they shewe their virtue by the chainge of their pure culler into pall: declares my death (Bond 1856, p. 200).

This was not a magical property of the stone but a commonly held belief in its natural properties. The sixteenth-century English poet John Donne commented: 'The sympathizing Turcois true doth tell, By looking pale, the wearer is not well' (Swan 1635, p. 296), while his contemporary John Cleveland noted: 'The Lapidary tells you how the Compassionate Turcoise confesseth the Sickness of his Wearer by changing colour' (Cleveland 1677, p. 166). This was no literary fancy or metaphor on their part; on the contrary, they were utilizing conventionally understood geological properties (as a human diagnostic) of the stone in their poetic works.

The Imperial Physician to Emperor Rudolf II, Anselmus Boetius de Boodt, had personal experience of the virtues of turquoise when he wore it in a ring when travelling from Padua to Bohemia: despite falling from his horse, he was not injured. However, the next morning a quarter of the gem in the ring had fallen out. Later, lifting a heavy pole, he heard his ribs crack and thought he had injured himself. Luckily he was only strained, but the protective turquoise had broken into two (Thorndike 1941, p. 322; Evans 1973, p. 217). Interestingly, De Boodt comments that turquoise seems to have been worn exclusively by men in the early seventeenth century and that no man considered his hand well adorned unless he wore one (Kunz 1913, p. 111; see also Awais-Dean 2013). There are some gemstones then that certainly could have been worn not just for beauty but for the physical and medical properties that they would provide the wearer. This is evident in the use of stones found in amulets.

Amulets are a contested area of definition, but for our purposes they can be anything 'worn about the person as a charm or preventive against evil, mischief, disease, witchcraft, etc.' and in the past was sometimes also applied 'to external medicines, whose virtue or manner of operation is occult' (OED 2016). Amulets and gemstones engraved with astrological sigils, such as those prescribed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries by 'astromages' (unlicensed astrological-physicians), are an obvious type of jewellery worn for curative rather than primarily ornamental purposes. However, these talismans trod a perilous and blurred line between legitimate medicine and diabolic magic (see Blaen 2012, pp. 146–156). As such they were a contentious issue, and were often not considered 'medical' in a natural sense by many contemporaries who increasingly preferred to administer gemstones orally during the seventeenth century. We can probably assume that they were worn at least in part for

medicinal purposes, but these amulets are not always straightforward to identify.

This mid-sixteenth century English pendant of garnet, peridot and sapphire (Fig. 1) is in a popular Tudor style, with Henry VIII's third wife Jane Seymour painted wearing a similar piece in a 1536 portrait by Hans Holbein (now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna). Remarkably it is inscribed on the back 'DEI ANNANISAPIA' [for epilepsy] and 'IHS MARIA DETRAGRAMMATA' [the 'Christogram', the Virgin Mary and the 'tetragrammaton'], a spot where only the wearer would have been aware of the inscription. Clearly the wearer wished to appeal to God for help with their medical condition; the open back to either facilitate the transmission of light or contact with the skin could possibly indicate a desire for medicinal benefits. It is certainly magical in tone and Christian names, words and symbols, especially the tetragrammaton (the hidden name of God), were commonplace in magical charms. This particular inscription is not necessarily magical, and indeed highlights how difficult it is to presume something is a magical amulet. The stones used might themselves have been part of contemporary medical treatment for epilepsy since the green stone, although now identified as peridot, could well have been mis-identified as emerald in the sixteenth century, a stone which (as already noted) is listed in Culpepper's dispensary as good for epilepsy. Protestant reformers would have seen such religious inscriptions as magical, but in the contested confessional world of the English Reformation this would not necessarily have been the case for Catholics. Catholics and those traditional in religious practice would have regarded religious writing worn as a charm as an act of piety and not magic, so again we have to be careful of making assumptions as to classification of an object without clear understanding of the context of the specific object at this time. It is noteworthy that in Holbein's portrait of Jane Seymour, a woman traditional in her religious beliefs, she also wears a jewel with a Christogram formed of diamonds. While writing on a jewel could improve the medicinal properties of the object, it did leave it open in some eyes to charges of magic. However, we can at least be clear that the wearer wanted medicinal benefits from it.

Fig. 1. Back of an English pendant of garnet, peridot and sapphire, inscribed: DEI ANNANISAPIA & IHS MARIA DETRAGRAMMATA (mid-sixteenth century). Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

In addition to an inscription, the presence of an astrological engraving or 'sigil' could indicate a medicinal purpose for a stone, precious or otherwise. Astrology, the influence of the heavens and planets on earthly bodies, was widely accepted to be a powerful force in the natural world. In general orthodox medical practice, considerations such as the opportune moment for a bleeding or the relationship between a certain drug and a part of the body would often include reference to astrology. Astrology also had a more magical dimension however, one that is frequently illustrated by its use alongside precious stones, by engraving a sigil or other astrological characters to enhance or modify their natural virtues. This was recommended by some of the key occult philosophers of the Renaissance, men such as Paracelsus and Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, both of whom practised as physicians.

There are some extant records of people explicitly making astrological jewellery. For instance, in 1599 the notorious Elizabethan astrologer and physician, Simon Forman, had a gold ring made for himself and set with a coral that had been engraved with a sigil. He wrote:

> This ring must be worne on the little finger on the lefte hand & yt prevaills against witch[c]rafte divells. Against thunder lightning storm & tempest & to give favour & credit & to mak[e] on[e] famous in his profession & to overcom enimies (Traister 2001, p. 101).

In his *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* the infamous Renaissance magus Agrippa gave instructions for the engraving of a 'figure of a scorpion; [which] it giveth understanding and memory, it maketh a

good colour, and aideth against evil spirits, and driveth them away, and bindeth [controls] them' (Agrippa 1533, p. 396). This should be cut on a 'sardonius' or sardonyx – onyx with white layer of chalcedony – a stone with links to the zodiac sign of Scorpio and the planets Saturn and Mercury (Agrippa 1533, p. 99). In the collections of the Victoria and Albert Museum is an early fifteenth-century Italian ring set with an ancient Roman onyx, complete with engraved scorpion intaglio that perfectly matches Agrippa's prescription (Fig. 2). This seems a perfect example of a magical-medical object, something to be worn for its virtue rather than a purely aesthetic reason. The carving is, however, Roman and the Renaissance had a huge appetite for fashionable classical objects like this which, despite its occult setting, is also a beautiful object. The motivation for wearing it could have been multi-faceted: a desire for a beautiful object and a desire for a magical-medical effect. Even here we cannot be sure it was worn solely for an astrological-medicinal benefit. If it was worn as a talisman, even with its astrological-medical properties it would have been seen as magical since orthodox religious thought (both Catholic and Protestant) was that any astrological engraving was magical since it was a form of written communication (witting or unwitting) with a demon. As the seventeenth-century playwright and poet Thomas Heywood explained:

> Now these stones at set hours they would cut Faces, in which the Heav'nly Signes should put Strange vertue... But our Theologits and Doctors all (Without exception) this, plaine Magicke call... what they by the Stars procure, Is meere deception and illusion vaine, By Sathans cunning crept into Mans brain (Heywood 1635, pp. 445–447).

Astrology was a confused and contested arena, and stones engraved with astrological sigils trod a dangerous line between acceptable natural medicine and demonic magic. Although it is more likely that they were worn for reasons other than ornamentation, it is still likely that aesthetic and ornamental motives were present. However, one final area that can be studied, and where it can conclusively be understood that stones were being worn for curative and talismanic purposes rather than aesthetic, are those stones that are inherently ugly.

Typical here is the toad-stone (Fig. 3) which was a fantastical animal-stone that was held to grow in the head of a toad, and was recommended as a test or touchstone for poison (Nicols 1659, p. 159). As Christopher Duffin notes, extant examples of toad-stones are fossilized fish teeth which were generally brown and, despite their many assumed protective properties, a visually underwhelming gem (Duffin 2010, pp. 3–4). This must, therefore, indicate that the motivation for its wearing was primarily for its medical or talismanic properties. The stone could have had some other appeals to a wearer, since fantastical stones like this could be valued by collectors for their rarity or as fabulous novelties (Findlen 1990, pp. 318–319). The toad-stone in Figure 3 has been polished to increase its attractiveness, indicating some concern for its aesthetics. However, its identification as a toad-stone would not have been apparent to an onlooker, negating some of these motivations. Indeed, wearing such a dull gemstone rather than the dazzling array of other possibilities strengthens the medical motivation. Another good example of a stone that has to be worn for its medicinal properties, since it is an unattractive, unshapely stone of no aesthetic value, is the eagle-stone, a fabulous stone that was said to be found in the nests

Fig. 2. Italian ring set with a Roman onyx with engraved scorpion intaglio (early fifteenth century). Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig. 3. German ring set with a 'toad-stone', a fossilized fish tooth (sixteenth century). Courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

of eagles and was once an established part of medicine in the seventeenth century. We would today call it a geode, a hollow rock that usually has a smaller stone rattling inside so that it was described as a 'pregnant stone' (Duffin 2012, pp. 189–191). This had a specific medicinal virtue as an aid in birth and pregnancy. It was considered to have the effect of drawing a foetal child towards it, in a manner described as somewhat like a magnet with iron, so it was considered effective in preventing miscarriages when tied (usually in a pouch or small bag) to the upper body and in aiding labour when it was tied to the thigh. One account even credits it with causing a post-natal haemorrhage when the physician neglected to remove the stone quickly enough (Nicols 1659, p. 187). The seventeenth-century Platonist Lady Anne Conway and Elizabeth Cavendish, the Countess of Newcastle, each borrowed one from friends and wore it during their pregnancies. In 1686 one 'tied up in a piece of black ribbon with two long black strings at the end' was lost by a Mrs Ellis between Lincoln's Inn and the Strand in London, and she posted an advertisement in the *London Gazette* offering a guinea reward for its return; presumably it was being worn by Mrs Ellis at the time (H. W. R. 1894, p. 518; Blaen 2012, p. 263). The practice was clearly widespread, and it is even recorded that Canterbury Cathedral had an eagle-stone in the keeping of the Dean's wife which was lent out to members of the congregation during pregnancy (Forbes 1966, p. 67).

It is with the eagle-stone that we have at last moved from jewels that could overlap the medicinal and aesthetic spheres to those which are purely functional medicinal objects. It is really only the 'ugly', functional stones, and to a lesser extent those modified with inscriptions or engraving, that we can be sure were worn for medicinal properties. With other jewels there will always remain the conundrum of what motivated the wearer; of course, with precious stones, medicine and beauty are not mutually exclusive. Ornamentation of the body with gemstones is, in all but a few specific areas, too complex an action to enable us to discover if the owner was primarily wearing a gemstone as simple jewellery or for a much more important medical purpose; in the latter case the gemstone was 'not used to be worn as a Jewel'.

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