



Romanticism on the Net

Foils and Diamonds: Using Material Culture, Reviews, and Prefaces to reappraise the Minerva Press

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Abstract

This article provides a targeted exploration of how one Minerva Press author, Eliza Parsons, engaged with Romantic era discourses about imitation and originality in literature through the paradigm of jewellery. It investigates how specific materials, jewels and foils, were perceived in wider Romantic culture and highlights the incongruencies between the literary critics', authors', and wider society's responses to them. By placing Parsons' prefaces in dialogue with commentaries on imitation, originality and aesthetic paradigms by Edward Young, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others, this article argues that the jewellery analogy afforded Parsons the opportunity to intervene in the era's denigrating ideologies about the value of imitation in novels. It reads Parsons' analogy comparing her work to foil in the preface of *Ellen and Julia* (1793) as a strategy which proposes that imitation does not preclude literary or commercial or cultural value. This paradigm indicates that imitative works are valuable for their wide appeal and for how they innovate upon tropes they imitate. The article concludes by suggesting that the jewellery and foil analogy posits that all works may originate from imitation to differing extents, just as diamonds can be made from foil.

Biographical Note

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I. Introduction

1. The Minerva Press was once Britain's largest publishing house of fiction, printing approximately a third of all new novel titles in London in the 1790s and thereby dominating the British book trade in an "overwhelming" manner (Raven 79). Yet, contemporary reviewers and critics derided the "flimzy [sic] compositions from Leadenhall-street"¹ as formulaic, derivative works which copied tropes, scenarios, narrative arcs, and characters from writers as temporally and formally diverse as William Shakespeare, Samuel Richardson, Frances Burney, and Ann Radcliffe. The Romantic era's fixation with originality, combined with nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars' neglect of the Press, has hindered pertinent readings of Minerva novels. It is only in the last decade that work by scholars including Elizabeth Neiman, Christina Morin, Yael Shapira, and Hannah Doherty Hudson, has begun to re-evaluate the Press.² They break from past critical perspectives by valuing the "variety and richness" (Shapira 247) of the Press' "shared circuit of conventions" (Neiman 91). As such, they overcome the historical literary biases which infiltrate current scholarship on imitation (Siv Gøril Brandtzæg 171-185).
2. To provide a new avenue of exploration into Minerva novels and imitation, this article focuses on prefaces, using them to illustrate how Minerva Press authors acknowledged, presented, and advocated for their imitative writings.³ Gérard Genette characterised the preface as a textual space of "creative power" (11). It is a "privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that – whether well or poorly

understood and achieved – is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (Genette 2). Prefaces are also “carefully crafted,” “complex spaces” which have lamentably “too often been given short shrift by critics” (Batchelor 2013, 89). This article traces how the Minerva author Eliza Parsons appropriated the rhetoric of material culture used by critics to denigrate formulaic novels, and it proposes that Parsons recrafted specific paradigms in her prefaces to illustrate alternate theories on imitation and originality and to indicate other ways to evaluate and value Minerva novels.⁴

3. Eliza Parsons (1739-1811) turned to writing to support her family after she was widowed. She produced eighteen novels, one translation, and a play between 1790 and her death in 1811. Parsons was listed on William Lane’s 1798 Minerva Press prospectus as one of the Press’ “particular and favorite Authors.”⁵ Despite her industriousness, the accolade on the prospectus, and the general contemporary popularity of her works with readers, her income from writing, supplemented by the £40 per year she received from her position as a Seamstress in Ordinary in the Royal Household, was insufficient.⁶ Her widowhood was spent in genteel poverty and she was dependent on five small grants awarded by the Literary Fund between 1792 and 1803. Moreover, reviewers accused Parsons of writing imitative, inferior novels. Her prefaces, particularly that of *Ellen and Julia* (1793), shed light on how she strove to improve the reception of her works in light of these criticisms.
4. To illuminate Parsons’ strategic positioning of her novels, and to uncover the complexities and nuances of ascribing literary value, this article first explores eighteenth-century ideas of imitation and originality. Clever imitations were often admired in the eighteenth century,

for example one may think of Alexander Pope's *Imitations of Horace* or William Gifford's satire *The Baviad: A Paraphrastic Imitation of the First Satire of Persius*. Gifford's text was modelled on Pope's *Dunciad* but it also followed a Classical model, similar to Pope's *Horace*. When discussing imitative works, reviewers frequently used analogies with materials, such as clothes or jewels, to praise original works and to indicate their superior value. Anna Maria Williams' *Julia; a Novel* (1790), for instance, was declared to be "a diamond."⁷ Meanwhile, literary critics condemned inferior imitative works of fiction by announcing that they were comprised of "shreds" or "patches [...] cut from a more valuable garment".⁸ Many Minerva Press novels received negative reviews in this vein and using this material rhetoric. This article argues that Parsons complicates and challenges the era's view of imitative works by engaging with this material rhetoric and, specifically, by invoking the paradigm of imitation jewellery. Imitation jewellery was highly lauded in the eighteenth century. Parsons' preface suggests that there are ways that this appreciation might be extended to literary works identified as imitative. She frames her "flimzy" compositions as items of concrete, recognisable value, importance, and influence. In so doing, her preface demonstrates how Parsons endeavoured to shape the reception of her work and it exemplifies how the preface enabled authors to engage with debates on imitation and value.

II. Originality and Imitation in the Eighteenth Century

5. Imitation and originality were highly contested topics in the eighteenth century and in the Romantic period. Despite the general "increasing disparagement directed at imitation"

(Macfarlane 21) in the eighteenth century, imitative and parodic works abounded; Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela* (1740) gave rise to Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), for example.⁹ In 1759, Edward Young polarised and hierarchised literary originality and imitation in *Conjectures on Original Composition in a letter to the Author of Sir Charles Grandison*. Young celebrated original writers as geniuses whose texts enriched and progressed society: "*Originals* are, and ought to be, great Favourites, for they are great Benefactors; they extend the Republic of Letters, and add a new province to its dominion: *Imitators* only give us a sort of Duplicates of what we had, possibly much better, before" (10). Young worried that imitation caused literary and artistic genius to be "at a stand" (10) or even "decay" (40). In turn, he feared this would have repercussions on social manners and on society's ethics.

6. Young took an absolutist approach which exalts originality. However, his myopia is revealed when he avoids defining it; "I shall not enter into the curious enquiry of what is, or is not, strictly speaking, *Original*" (9-10). This gap reveals the complexity inherent in the subject, and this author believes that the absent definition of originality is a lacuna which other scholars have not written about. Edmund Burke similarly eschews defining originality in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) but, unlike Young, Burke espoused a more equivocal view and did not rule that imitative works were necessarily inferior. Burke observed that to imitate is a "passion" (28) of society: there is "a desire of imitating, and consequently a pleasure in it" (28). While Young saw imitation as a threat to social progress, Burke contended that imitation is the basis of "our manners, our opinions, our lives" (29) and that imitative works

may not be substandard as “When the object represented in poetry or painting is such, as we could have no desire of seeing in reality; then I may be sure that its power in poetry or painting is owing to the power of imitation, and to no cause operating in the thing itself” (29). Burke’s theory on imitation highlights that the power of an imitated piece lies in the artistic skill with which the imitation is achieved as well as in the entity imitated. He was not as worried as Young about the vogue for imitative works because he believed that man’s desire of “excelling his fellows” (Burke 31) would protect and ensure originality. Nevertheless, Burke concurs with Young that to solely imitate would be to compromise man’s and society’s “improvement” (Burke 31).¹⁰ The nuances of his philosophy and the gap in Young’s exemplifies the subjectivity inherent in debates on originality and imitation. The subjectivity and mutability of opinions on originality and subjectivity are only enhanced when approached from different subject positions; Young was a clergyman and poet attempting to establish his reputation through compositions he believed to be original, while Burke was a philosopher and economist. Eliza Parsons, from her subject position as a popular novelist, interpreted and presented literary imitation differently as well.

7. The subjectivity of literary judgements is captured by Elizabeth Inchbald’s and Mary Wollstonecraft’s commentaries on imitation in novels. Both Inchbald and Wollstonecraft were novelists as well as reviewers and they therefore had a vested interest in maintaining the standard and reputation for a form in which they wrote. They express concerns over the era’s predilection for fiction writers to imitate; they broadly rearticulate the hierarchy of original and imitative writers; and they place restrictions on which writers ought to be imitated and who can imitate. Reviewing Mary Robinson in 1797, Wollstonecraft indicated

that Ann Radcliffe was an appropriate author to imitate, but that Robinson fails in this task: “In writing the present romance Mrs Radcliffe appears to have been her model; and she deserves to rank as one of her most successful imitators; still the characters are so imperfectly sketched, the incidents so unconnected, the changes of scenes so frequent, that interest is seldom excited” (M. 486). This review could be a sly critique of Radcliffe as Wollstonecraft states that Robinson’s “imperfectly sketched” characters are modelled on Radcliffe’s. Such a connection may mar Radcliffe’s own creations, hinting that Radcliffe’s works are also imperfect. Yet, three articles before her condemnation of Robinson, Wollstonecraft declared that Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797) deserved “the warmest praise” (M. 484). Thus, Wollstonecraft condemns Robinson for attempting to imitate Radcliffe, consequently raising Radcliffe’s reputation through this comparison and declaring Radcliffe imitable but matchless.

8. Similarly, Elizabeth Inchbald cautioned, “Beware how you imitate Mrs. Radcliffe, or Maria Edgeworth; you cannot equal them” (61) in “On Novel Writing” (1807). Inchbald implies that the authorial skills of Radcliffe and Edgeworth are so superior that they are unattainable for other authors and, as such, it would be futile for her implied reader-cum-writer to seek to emulate them. In this, she concurs with Young’s view that “*Imitators and Translators* ... sometimes rather raise their *Original*’s reputation, by showing him to be by them inimitable” (56). Inchbald and Wollstonecraft affirm imitations as inferior but they do grant some imitative texts a tokenistic value: imitations can augment the reception of the original, or imitations may be well executed. Furthermore, Wollstonecraft and Inchbald insinuate that the desire in a neophyte writer to emulate certain respected and established

writers is objectionable. They warn new writers that to aspire to equal eminent writers who have practiced and refined their talents, or who have influenced a whole genre such as Radcliffe with the Gothic, is unbecoming but also unachievable. Such comments police the expectations and activities of new writers and indicate to readers that literature is concerned with and enforces a hierarchy, where different writers occupy fixed places of different rank within it. Attempts to alter one's position are met with concern and criticism in reviews, demonstrating the reviewers' anxiety to maintain a hierarchical structure of literature which prioritises literary originality.

9. Many Minerva Press writers were criticised for imitating the styles and plots of their literary contemporaries and literary forbears. Reviewers denounced imitations of older works: "criticism must do its duty by pronouncing ... that the characters of the 'baron St. Osmund' and 'lady Egwinor' are palpably copied from Shakespeare's Macbeth."¹¹ Not only was imitation rife in the Romantic book trade and in Minerva Press novels, but it was also used to confirm the Press' literary inferiority; Elizabeth Helme's translation of Jean-Claude Gorjy's *St. Alma* (1791) "approaches too near the splendour of Rousseau, not to appear in a disadvantageous situation,"¹² for example. Such comments frustrate Burkean theories about the social utility of imitation as they position imitations as inferior to originals and imitative writers as amateurish versions of the original writers they mimic.
10. This section has drawn Burke's and Young's writings on imitation and originality to outline the general disapprobation of imitation but also to highlight the vexed nature of the debate on imitation due to the subjectiveness of the concept. It then looked at how this applied in

the sphere of novel-writing through Inchbald's and Wollstonecraft's reviews. They broadly condemn imitative works and imitative writers. By investigating the cultural appreciation and aesthetic properties of imitative jewels in the eighteenth century and how Parsons invoked these, this article now traces how Parsons' preface intervenes in reviewers' widespread condemnation of imitation in literary works as artistically inferior and socially regressive. This focused view on the analogy of jewels attests that this paradigm is of crucial hermeneutic significance when considering approaches and responses to imitative literary works in the later eighteenth century.

III. Originality, Imitation, and Jewels

11. In *Conjectures*, Edward Young drew on metaphors of botany ("flowers" (9)), medicine ("drugs" (10)), architecture ("foundations" (11)), and mechanics ("*manufacture*" (12)) to denounce imitation in practical, physical terms. Another paradigm reviewers invoked was that of jewels. A review of Frances Burney's *Cecilia, or Memoirs of an Heiress* (1782) dismissed all other works as dulled gems when compared to the brilliance of *Cecilia* as "Cecilia needs no props stolen from the dismantled fabrick of others; nor will their defects serve as a foil to enhance her beauties. They shine with their own native lustre, and are best seen in their own light."¹³ This review acknowledges the prevalence of imitation and states that *Cecilia* will be imitated. However, the reviewer nuances Young's contention that imitative works enhance the lustre of the originals by stating that *Cecilia* and Burney's authorship are too superior to be affected by these imitative works, the duller foils.

12. This paradigm demonstrates that reviewers saw books as items of concrete, albeit varying, value. However, the jewellery analogy is more complex than the reviewer allows. Genuine and artificial jewels are both of monetary, cultural, historical, and visual value. A foil was used to enhance or change the colour or brilliance of a real or an imitative gemstone. Using jewellery imagery of this kind thus potentially confounds a denigratory judgement proclaimed on a text because it activates the complexities and inconsistencies in eighteenth-century debates on imitation in material culture and in literary culture. This paradigm belies the inextricable relationship between originality and imitation, complicating the initial dismissal reviewers aimed for when referring to imitative works as inferior, dulled jewels or as foils, a metal product worth little money compared to a real gemstone.

13. Eliza Parsons harnessed the plurality of this discourse. Parsons participated in debates concerning imitation, literary taste, and a text's purpose through invoking jewels and jewellery in the preface to *Ellen and Julia* (1793). In so doing, the preface modifies the commonly derogatory approach to imitation and to the popular novel in the Romantic literary marketplace. Parsons writes in her preface:

The following Work I submit to the Judgement of the Public with much greater diffidence and anxiety than when I first threw myself on its candour and indulgence; because the many late excellent productions of other female writers painfully convince me of my own inability and deficiencies, and at the same time lays me open to the imputation of presumption and undue vanity. But as the foil sometimes serves to give

additional brilliancy to the Diamond, I may be at least pardoned for the attempt to follow, though I cannot overtake, those celebrated Ladies to whom the Public are so much obliged for their amusement. To the shafts of criticism I bow with respect, neither deprecating their severity nor imploring their indulgence, since either would equally offend their impartiality and judgement.¹⁴

Projections of authorial modesty pervade this passage. Parsons states that her work will not be as good as those of the “celebrated Ladies,” and she expects to receive “criticism” following the novel’s publication. The observation that “as the foil sometimes serves to give additional brilliancy to the Diamond, I may be at least pardoned for the attempt to follow” apologises prematurely for the novel and reaffirms the hierarchy of original and imitative works. Additionally, any achievement of her work is mediated by the tentative “sometimes.” Her work is simply foil; the works of celebrated ladies, perhaps Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, Clara Reeve, and Anna Maria Bennett, are diamonds. It was these writers whom she namechecked and praised in the preface to her debut novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790).¹⁵ Parsons’ modesty is perhaps an attempt to placate the critics or to pre-empt their chagrin. Her novel, published by the uncelebrated Minerva Press, is foil and, as such, Parsons implies that it poses no real threat to literary standards and values.

14. If taken at face value, Parsons’ preface plays precisely into how critics used jewels as an aesthetic paradigm to dismiss imitative works. However, by attending to the eighteenth-century cultural appreciation of foil and simulacrum gemstones, this analogy reveals the false equivalency between aesthetic imitation and literary imitation and the consequently

implied lack of literary worth. My reading of Parsons' analogy uses the prevalent cultural appreciation of foil in the eighteenth century to uncover the complexities and incongruencies inherent in an aesthetic paradigm which was popular with literary reviewers. Parsons' use of the aesthetic paradigm, in contrast to how eighteenth-century reviewers employed the paradigm, proposes that imitation does not equate to valuelessness or even inferiority in literature.

15. Foiling and artificial gemstones were lauded practices in the eighteenth century. Foiling was the practice of backing a gemstone with a metallic sheet, a foil, primarily to improve its optical performance: to make it look better to prospective purchasers and subsequent wearers. It could occur in three different ways. Firstly, genuine foil backs were used to improve the ocular performance of a real gemstone. Secondly, false foil backs were used to alter the colour of the real gemstone. The final method was where imitation foil backs were applied to glass stones, giving them the appearance of a real gemstone. Additionally, foil itself could be heated and compressed to become a simulacrum of a gemstone. Ginny Redington Dawes and Olivia Collings observe that using paste, glass, and foil in jewellery making was "one of the great joys of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Pastes were not seen as faux gems made solely to copy but as exciting jewels in their own right. ... The stones would also be foiled to add extra brilliance and further catch and reflect light" (93). Such sets of jewellery "would have shone at the greatest of occasions" (Redington Dawes and Collings 93). Redington Dawes and Collings write that augmented jewels were present in the highest echelons of society and that the ocular impression of a jewellery set or jewel prevailed over the materials used to make them, be those materials real or artificial.

16. In her preface, Parsons capitalises upon the capacity of foil to augment other stones, to enable imitation, and to be an imitation itself. Parsons does not give her work false brilliance by presenting it as a diamond, but she does celebrate its imitative and influential properties. She counters the reviewer of *Cecilia* by positing that imitative works aggrandise the merits of their originals by “giv[ing] brilliancy” to them. Parsons’ preface suggests that the comparison between an original work and its imitation casts the original work in a more favourable light, concurring with an older system of the value of imitation that Young articulated in 1759: imitations can “raise their *Original*’s reputation, by showing him to be by them inimitable” (56). Yet, Parsons does not preclude her work from ever attaining similar praise as she wishes to “follow” her “celebrated Ladies” if not “overtake” them. If this work is foil, and if imitation is valued for its own sake, for being foil, then Parsons’ jewel paradigm does not preclude imitative works from being valued in ways similar to that of works which are diamonds. My reading of Parsons’ analogy implies authorship is a process of imitation, development, and innovation. Parsons’ preface posits that this process should be more widely recognised as this paradigm indicates that all literature, to varying extents, proceeds from imitation.

17. Furthermore, the foil paradigm highlights that imitation begets a craftsmanship of its own, engendering its own originality as it innovates upon concepts it also reproduces. The plot of *Ellen and Julia* elucidates this by drawing on two key tropes: the lost manuscript and the pair of sisters. The novel follows two sisters, Ellen and Julia Woodville, as they court and marry. In the novel, they are handed a packet of letters by the mysterious Mary Danvers. Danvers’ sentimental life story fills up two thirds of the novel’s first volume and

is returned to at the novel's denouement. The trope of the hidden or lost manuscript was used influentially by Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). It subsequently featured in many Minerva Press novels but in different forms. Agnes Musgrave wrote that *Cicely; or, The Rose of Raby* (1795) was the product of discovering "papers of great importance" (I, ii) in a trunk while Elizabeth Bonhote excoriated the lost manuscript trope in the preface to *Bungay Castle*: "She [the author] might, indeed, to evade the danger of having her work condemned, pretend to have found it in some recess of her favourite ruins, or to have discovered it artfully concealed in the bottom of an old chest" (I, viii). Both Musgrave and Bonhote add their own inflections upon this common trope in their prefaces to frame the plots of their novels as they saw fit. Additionally, dyadic sisters can be found in Regina Maria Roche's *The Vicar of Lansdowne* (1789), Elizabeth Meeke's *Palmira and Ermance* (1797), along with Ann Radcliffe's *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Ellinor and Marianne Dashwood in Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and Jane and Elizabeth Bennett in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Both tropes are effective devices to progress a plot. They provide fantastical origin stories and enable authors to explore character trajectories and comparisons, but they open the author to accusations of imitation and mimicry. A contemporary review of *Ellen and Julia* states that the novel is original to some extent, but "through a great part of the second [volume], the writer's invention appears to flag."¹⁶ However, it is by attending to Parsons' specific use of the foil paradigm that a reader can realise the nuances and modifications authors brought to these tropes. Popular novels may have imitated other works, but they did not simply copy verbatim the tropes found elsewhere. It is in examining the precise details of the tropes that invention and originality is discernible within the imitation.

18. Parsons innovates upon a third common trope, that of the quixotic female character, in *Ellen and Julia*. The nuances to this trope demonstrate the subjectivity, mutability, and reader intuition inherent in using tropes and in identifying imitation. I consider the second volume of the novel to be original, to some extent. It follows the quixote Ellen as she tries to conduct her life as if she were a fictional heroine. She becomes embroiled with her “hero”, Lord A-, and then she elopes with him to France. In a marked difference to the usual trajectory of the quixotic and often fallen woman, Ellen marries Lord A- (eventually). They remain abroad due to the shame surrounding their relationship. Ellen does not die nor is she abandoned by the man she pursued. Thus, Parsons departs from the usual trajectory of this character type. While tropes connect novels to a network of other texts, novelists innovate upon the tropes, revealing that imitation leads to an originality as the tropes are redesigned and modified for the purpose of a specific text.¹⁷ Moreover, Ellen’s position as a wife, albeit an exiled one, married to the man she pursued reads as a partial, subtle vindication of a woman’s right to direct her own life.

19. If we read prefaces as strategic spaces which position the reader to have a “more pertinent reading” of the whole text, as Genette proposes, then Parsons ensures this view of authorship, that imitation begets originality, is specifically outlined ahead of the reader encountering the novel proper through her jewel analogy. This is a strategic set up for Parsons’ argument outlining the value of imitative works and their potential influential role on other literary works.

20. In aesthetic fields, Maxine Berg concurs on the importance of imitation, arguing that “imitation was considered to be part of the inventive process. Invention [was] based on ‘imitative’ principles, especially in taste.”¹⁸ This view on authorship is delineated in the preface; in casting her work as foil, Parsons activates practices of jewellery making in which real jewels, foils, and faux gems were used alongside one another in the creation of and augmentation of new pieces of jewellery. Thus, the distinction between originality and imitation is not clear cut, emphasised by the ambiguity of the role of foil in how Parsons invokes it and accentuated by the uncertainty of identifying when imitation ends and originality begins. Parsons poses this question at the start of her text, in the preface, and thereby frames the novel plot as a product which is conscious of its imitative elements, but which is also original, to certain extents. The reader is left to ponder the distinction between imitation and originality as they encounter Ellen and Julia Woodville, Danvers’ manuscript, and other tropes, and as they read of and realise the nuances Parsons adds to these conventions.

21. Parsons’ use of the foiling paradigm places her as part of larger and wider discourses on using jewels as a means of imputing literary merit. Henry Crabbe Robinson recorded that Samuel Taylor Coleridge described Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, as wanting “modifying power – he was a jewel-setter; whatever he read he instantly applied to the formation or adorning of a story” (90). Unlike Parsons, Coleridge sees no worth in the setting of the jewels; the value lies in the gemstones themselves. Thus, Southey merits no literary praise from Coleridge as he simply adorns or sets the jewels. Nearly twenty years later, Thomas Medwin would recall that William Hazlitt invoked this same analogy.

Medwin and Hazlitt were discussing the American writer Washington Irving. Hazlitt asked Medwin: “Is he not a mere “reflector,” a new setter of old jewels, like Moore in poetry? They both suit people who do not like the trouble of thinking, or cannot think”.¹⁹ Hazlitt implies that literary imitators are jewellers who simply reset the gemstones, disregarding the era’s understanding of the craft in the jeweller’s role and privileging one form of creativity over another. Hazlitt, of course, was heavily influenced by William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge at a young age, and this is evident in his unappreciative view of jewellers. Similarly, in 1848 William Beattie invoked jewels and jewellery-setting when describing Thomas Campbell’s letters. Beattie wrote of his gladness that his editorial errors “will neither impair the freshness, nor mar the beauty of Campbell’s letters, which, like true gems, can lose nothing of their intrinsic value by a plain and homely setting” (ix). Beattie compares Campbell’s letters with real gemstones which will retain their brilliance despite any editorial faults. It is the natural brilliance of true gemstones which he believes will ensure their longevity.

22. In contrast to Hazlitt, Parsons’ jewel analogy is more in tune with older systems of value, those embodied by texts by individuals such as Pope and Gifford. Parsons, writing in her fifties in the 1790s, articulates this view during the rapidly growing and increasingly commercialised late-eighteenth century literary marketplace. This causes a tension to be present between the plot of the popular novel she writes, the literary traditions her preface hearkens back to, and the literary marketplace in which her novel circulates. Parsons’ use of jewels shows that she worked against the emerging discourses on originality which would come to be the hallmarks of Romanticism. She does see value in the jeweller’s

craftmanship and in a jewel's setting. Parsons argues that her work is of some material, cultural, and therefore literary, value. She connects her novel with the material world, imposing a cost price and referring to the current demand for novels. Her work is foil. As foil, it is a commodity of frequent use and deliberate purpose. It might be considered an essential element of a larger literary set, suggesting she perceives a utility and universality to her work which others ignore.

23. Invoking jewels and foil spotlights another way of understanding the contribution and value of the Minerva Press and popular novels in the Romantic literary marketplace. Minerva Press literature was a more accessible type of literature. Redington Dawes and Collings write that “jewellery, previously the sole prerogative of the aristocracy, became available to an ever-expanding middle class” (10) in the Georgian era. Gemstones and jewellery are items of concrete, material, and visual value to which readers of varying social statuses and different levels of education can relate. Employing metaphors of material culture and visual value when discussing literature is thus an incisive strategy for writers to adopt when arguing for the value of their own works. Calling a work foil alludes to faux gems and jewellery sets, which in turn connects to the increasing availability and accessibility of jewellery, signifying the wider audience for and of such works. Popular novels intended to amuse the general reader but not to intrude upon a reader’s other duties; they “amuse” (Bennett, I, vii) during a “vacant hour” (Bennett, I, vii) or an “idle hour” (Anon, *Adeline*, I, ii), as these other Minerva writers have written in their prefaces. This is highly pertinent to note when discussing the Minerva Press, the publishing house which expanded the boundaries of the literary marketplace and made novels increasingly

accessible to provincial readers through its network of circulating libraries.²⁰ These prefaces, along with Parsons', imply that reviewers' judgements were based on a misguided understanding of the audience of these works and an unrealistic expectation of the purpose of this form.

24. Parsons' view about the wider appeal and alternate value of novels was echoed four decades later by Catherine Gore. Gore makes the universality of her novel explicit through invoking a paradigm of a household material item: coal. In the preface to *The Fair of May Fair* (1832), Gore writes of prose fiction: “[l]ike Esop’s diamond, it is derided as useless by the heroes of the barn-door. Modern science, however, can decompose the gem; and, by reducing it to charcoal, render it available to household purposes” (iv-v). Gore writes that her work has value and purpose, but not in an erudite or elitist literary sense. *The Fair of May Fair*'s role is in the quotidian, like charcoal. As such, its appeal and usage are wider than that of literary diamonds. There are differences in signification between Parsons' foil and Gore's coal. Gore's analogy comparing her text to coal addresses the increasing accessibility of literature as the prices decreased later on in the nineteenth century.²¹ In Parsons' case, literature is also cast as a fashionable commodity. Despite these nuances, Gore and Parsons package the popular novel as an everyday item but also either as desirable or as useful. They are developing a more functional, approachable and practical model of literature, set against more elitist paradigms. As such, foil and coal are apposite analogies through which to consider such works, more so than the elitism of real diamonds. Indeed, charcoal and foil were used in households of the highest echelons of society, even if the aristocracy did not like to think they were associated with building fires, false jewellery, or

popular works of fiction. Parsons and Gore thus emphasise their works as having wide appeal and a greater practical value for a wider circle of readers.

IV. Conclusion

25. Parsons' preface and her analogy of authorship and jewellery points scholars towards a new avenue of insight into the Minerva Press and how its authors valued and presented their works. Together, a foil and a diamond make a piece of jewellery. Parsons, indicative of popular novels, and Burney, representative of traditionally more esteemed novelists, are both seminal components in the Romantic literary marketplace and yet the former was dismissed while the latter was celebrated in the eighteenth century and after. However, Parsons' preface argues that the foil is not too lowly to be noticed or appreciated. It affects the brilliance and the colour of the other gemstones. It can be an imitation stone itself. Thus, noticing the minor reference to foil in the preface to *Ellen and Julia* and connecting it to wider literary discourses on imitation, originality, cultural and literary values, provides a new way to understand one role of Minerva novels: they possess a dynamic, symbiotic relationship with the novels they circulate alongside in the marketplace; they innovate while they imitate; and they entertain the general reader. Parsons' analogy anticipates the current zeitgeist in Minerva Press scholarship, which values literary reproductivity and the recycling of well-known tropes as a means of perceiving authorial innovation. Her preface prompts scholars to recognise Minerva novels such as *Matilda St. Aubin*, a "patchwork" which followed "Miss Burney or Mrs Smith", and *Manfredi* as texts reinventing tropes

made famous by literary predecessors in ways designed to complement and compliment the originals.²²

26. By setting up an analogy between her work and foil, Parsons complicates the subjective reception of her book as she humbly disclaims any pretensions to equality with contemporary novels and novelists but posits that her work is still meritorious. This preface demonstrates that the author had specific, strategic ways of valuing her works as composite parts of much wider literary conventions and environments. Her novel would have to undergo a miraculous water-into-wine transformation to enable it to change its material structure into that of a diamond. However, foil is still worthwhile and valuable as it affects the brilliance of real gemstones and it also reflects, refracts, and spreads light. Its reach extends beyond that of a diamond. When this aesthetic paradigm is applied in the realm of literary culture, it indicates that foils enhance the accessibility of literature. The textual space of the preface and the analogy of jewels affords writers like Parsons the ability to enter into critical debate about literary value and to identify where they perceive the value of their own works.

27. Parsons may have had grander pretensions than her work being merely foil, but she uses this analogy to encourage readers to see the Minerva Press as the foil underneath the eighteenth-century literary marketplace, serving to enhance the lustre of numerous other works and authors. Recollecting that foil can be compressed into a diamond and that it can be used to frame faux gems as real jewels, it is evident that the Romantic review periodicals' and authors' concerns over literary originality, imitation, and influence are

more complex than their uses of botanical, architectural, material, and jewellery imagery allows. The diverse applications and manifestations of these aesthetic paradigms reveal that value can be realised in texts in different ways, ways which span high culture to popular, commercialised reading. Furthermore, value and originality are vexed topics which resist being defined conclusively and identified concretely. Invoking foil and jewellery suggests that a work can never be wholly non-imitative in its language, form, genre, content, or characters, and that an imitative work is not necessarily inferior. All works proceed from imitation to certain extents. Moreover, if foil can be transformed into a diamond, then it suggests that some of the traditional literary diamonds were once foil. Realising this has a seismic effect on our understanding and perception of authorship, literary culture, and the nebulous, subjective concepts of originality and imitation. It is now evident why there is a lacuna in Edward Young's theory and why he does not, cannot, define 'originality'.

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² Please see the special issue of *Romantic Textualities*, 'The Minerva Press and the Literary Marketplace', edited by Christina Morin and Elizabeth Neiman, vol. 23 (2020). It features essays by Jennie Batchelor, Megan Peiser, Hannah Doherty Hudson, and others.

³ Jennie Batchelor discusses Eliza Parsons' preface to her first novel, *The History of Miss Meredith* (1790), and connects its contents to that of Frances Burney's in *Evelina* (1778), in *Women's Work: Labour, gender, authorship, 1750-1830*, pp. 163-165. This article focuses on the preface to Parsons' fourth novel, *Ellen and Julia* (1793).

⁴ Megan Peiser investigates the rhetoric of reviews of Minerva Press works in Romantic era review periodicals in 'William Lane and the Minerva Press in the Review Periodical, 1790-1820,' *Romantic Textualities*, vol. 23, 2020, pp. 124-148, and concludes that the prejudiced rhetoric of the review periodicals filters through subsequent scholarship.

⁵ William Lane. "General Prospectus, Minerva Literary Repository, Library and Printing-Office." 1798. St. Bride's Library, London. Acc. no.: 7375.

⁶ Eliza Parsons' Royal Literary Fund case file details that she worked as a "Seamstress in Ordinary to the Wardrobe of Her Majesty's Household." Please see RLF Loan 96 1/21. British Library, London. Matthew Sangster quotes that she earned £40 per year in this position in *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, p. 208.

⁷ "Art 14. *Julia; a Novel, interspersed with some poetical Pieces.*" *The English Review*, vol. 15, 1790, pp. 304-305 (p. 305).

⁸ "*The Fair Cambrians, a Novel.*" *The Critical review, or, Annals of literature*. Vol. 69, 1790, p. 712. *British Periodicals. ProQuest*; "*Matilda; or the Efforts of Virtue. A Novel....*" *The Critical Review, or, Annals of literature*. Vol. 59, 1785, p. 395. *British Periodicals. ProQuest*.

⁹ Robert Macfarlane's, *Original Copy: Plagiarism and Originality in Nineteenth Century Literature* (2007), provides a comprehensive overview of eighteenth and nineteenth century critical texts on imitation and originality, tracing the ideas of Edward Young, Alexander Pope, William Duff and Isaac D'Israeli, amongst others, in the eighteenth century. Please see pages 18-22 in particular.

¹⁰ Please see the special edition, 'Networks of Improvement' in *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 38 no. 4, 2015, pp. 475-626 for recent insightful and incisive work on eighteenth-century ideas and writings on improvement. The writer of this article thanks reviewer 1 and reviewer 2 for making them aware of the work on this topic.

¹¹ "*Manfredi, Baron St. Osmund. An Old English Romance. By Sarah Lansdell....*" *The Critical review, or, Annals of literature*. Vol. 20, London, 1797, p. 353. *British Periodicals. ProQuest*.

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¹⁴ Eliza Parsons. *Ellen and Julia. A Novel, in two volumes*. London, Printed for William Lane, at the Minerva Press, Leadenhall-Street, 1793. All future references to this text are from this edition. The preface does not have page numbers but spans leaves 5 and 6 of the novel's first volume.

¹⁵ Eliza Parsons, *The History of Miss Meredith; a novel. By Mrs. Parsons, In two volumes*. Vol. 1. London, Printed for the Author, 1790, p. v. *ECCO*.

¹⁶ E., "Art. 44. *Ellen and Julia*. By Mrs. Parsons," *Monthly Review, or, Literary Journal*. Vol. 14, 1794, pp. 465-465. *British Periodicals. ProQuest*.

¹⁷ Yael Shapira has written about how Isabella Kelly innovated upon the trope of the married heroine, comparing Kelly's use to that of Ann Radcliffe, in "Beyond the Radcliffe Formula: Isabella Kelly and the

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¹⁹ Captain Medwin, “Hazlitt in Switzerland: a Conversation.” From *Fraser’s Magazine*. Quoted in *The London and Paris Observer*, Vol. 15, 1839, pp. 167-169 (p. 169).

²⁰ William St. Clair expands upon this in *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 237.

²¹ Matthew Sangster discusses this more in the first chapter of his book, *Living as an Author in the Romantic Period*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, pp. 51-82.

²² “*Matilda St. Aubin, a Sketch in 2 vols.*” *The Critical review, or, Annals of literature*. Vol. 9, London, 1793, pp. 117-118 (p. 117). *British Periodicals. ProQuest*.