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Beauty Both Ubiquitous and Exclusive: Emmeline Stuart-Wortley and the Great Exhibition

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This brief article focuses upon Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley's response to the Great Exhibition of 1851, both her celebration of luxury goods in her poetry and her poetry as such a consumer good.

The role of the architect was displaced by the engineer in the planning and construction of Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, built to house the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations in 1851. Largely forsaking stonemasons and other such artisans, the structure was made of mass-produced elements of glass and iron. 'Simple in its construction, and requiring the multiplied repetition of few parts,' Charles Babbage writes approvingly, 'its fabrication was contrived with consummate skill.' Observing that 'the building itself was regularly manufactured', Babbage finds a pleasing symmetry between the structure itself and the industrial artefacts it was intended to display.[1] John Ruskin also acknowledges its 'mechanical ingenuity' as he distinguishes it from poetry:

> There is assuredly as much ingenuity required to build a screw frigate, or a tubular bridge, as a hall of glass; — all these are works characteristic of the age; and all, in their several ways, deserve our highest admiration; but not admiration of the kind that is rendered to poetry or to art.[2]

'In the centre of the 19th century,' Ruskin declares, 'we suppose ourselves to have invented a new style of architecture, when we have magnified a conservatory!' (p. 5). Paxton came to his design for the Crystal Palace as a gardener, who through his bold innovations in glasshouse construction became the pre-eminent engineer in prefabricated building construction. Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, who was a friend of Mary Shelley and Caroline Norton and a close friend of the Duchess of Kent and her daughter Queen Victoria, was socially well placed to offer a forthright assessment of the Crystal Palace and its contents. She does so in two vast poems, *Honour to Labour, a Lay of 1851* (1851) and 'On the Approaching Close of the Great Exhibition' (1851).

A triumph of applied science in manufacturing and engineering, the Crystal Palace's modular construction of plate glass, wrought iron, and concrete footings is transmogrified by Stuart-Wortley in ways that could have been calculated to horrify both Babbage and Ruskin. 'On the Approaching Close' figures the Crystal Palace as a jewel, as it enquires of the structure: 'Wert thou hewn from sapphire-quarries of some far, unclouded sky?'.[3] *Honour to Labour* praises it for being 'Rich as some brave

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[1] Charles Babbage, *The Exposition of 1851; or, Views of the Industry, the Science, and the Government of England*, 2nd edn (London: Murray, 1851), p. 63.

[2] John Ruskin, *The Opening of the Crystal Palace Considered in Some of Its Relations to the Prospects of Art* (London: Smith, Elder, 1854), p. 6.

[3] Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, 'On the Approaching Close of the Great Exhibition', in *On the Approaching Close of the Great Exhibition, and Other Poems* (London: Wright, 1851), pp. 1–47 (p. 38).

carkanet of gems, — its bickering lustre gleams'.[4] The exhibition offered among its displays ample inspiration and prompts for such imagery, including the Koh-i-noor diamond, which Victoria had acquired two years earlier, after the British annexation of the Punjab. A. Follett Osler's monumental Crystal Fountain, placed at the intersection of the transept, would also have suggested such imagery. The 'Transept, and arch, and gallery, [are] steeped in floods of jewell'd hues', and the structure is likened in Stuart-Wortley's poem to 'a frozen deluge [...] | All with molten pearls enrich'd and gemm'd, with branched coral grots commix'd' (*Honour to Labour*, p. 46). Stuart-Wortley was not only published in *The Keepsake* gift annual, but also edited the volumes for 1837 and 1840, and both of her poems on the exhibition are given to the 'jewelled style' that Clara Dawson sees as typifying gift annual verse.[5] *Honour to Labour* speculates about the contents of the Crystal Palace: 'What jewel-pyramids of boundless price, are in those depths amass'd[?]' (p. 23). The question is answered exhaustively by both poems. Matching and naturalizing 'fair luxury's proud array' (*Honour*, p. 66), both the goods displayed in the exhibition and its attendant natural phenomena are alike catalogued in legion terms of 'Pearlèd pomp', 'gem-flowers', 'jewelled rays', 'gorgeous treasuries of the clouds', and 'gems of price and pride' ('Approaching Close', pp. 40, 41).

With their poetic diction trading in a bejewelled currency and their images of nature crystallized as luxury goods, Stuart-Wortley's companion poems proclaim the new age of international trade and glamorous consumerism that the exhibition emblazoned: 'How this colossal Cornucopia pours right prodigally forth, | All the regal riches of the globe in their chief and costliest worth' ('Approaching Close', p. 39). 'In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country,' Marx and Engels observe in 1848, 'we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.'[6] Routinely rendered in *Honour to Labour* with such imperial figures as the 'Queenly Ship!' and 'this mighty ship of royal state', the Great Exhibition is also addressed as 'this Crystal Ark' (pp. 72, 71, 35). Extracting representative goods from across its empire, it offers elaborate proof that Britannia rules the waves. The figure returns in 'On the Approaching Close', where it focuses the poems' costume jewellery cosmology, as 'thou mighty Crystal Ark' (p. 23), full of the glittering prizes of modern consumerism: 'In Her hold, that some huge casket seems, lie gilded, starred, and pearled, — | All the Coronation-jewels of a glorious Queen, — The World!' (p. 23).

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[4] Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, *Honour to Labour, a Lay of 1851* (London: Wright, 1851), p. 69.

[5] Clara Dawson, *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 73.

[6] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. by Samuel Moore <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> [accessed 12 May 2022] (p. 16).

The ‘mighty Crystal Ark’ is made to rhyme with ‘Imperial bark’, which, like the other imagery habitually deployed here, invokes the reign and reach of Queen Victoria.

Stuart-Wortley’s poems on the Great Exhibition do a brisk trade in jewelled imagery and descriptions of luxury goods. Moreover, the sustained affinity that her poems have with their subject matter, the first of the World’s Fairs, comes in part from their being commercial goods themselves. These poems are comparable to the products on display that their verses catalogue, savour, and consume. A popular poet, Stuart-Wortley responded to strong market demand by publishing some of her verse dramas even before she had finished writing them, and by composing poems quickly and voluminously, Paul Chipchase reports, ‘in large batches to make up the quantity of pages required by the publisher’.[7] In a review essay on her poetry, Hartley Coleridge commented astringently on Stuart-Wortley’s remarkable capacity for ‘multiplying words’, which was facilitated by loose prosody and the use of prefabricated modules of rhyme pairs, formulaic phrases, and recurrent imagery, sentiments, and ideas.[8]

While Stuart-Wortley’s verse does not lack independence and sincerity, it has the effect of unfurling evenly and remorselessly in the manner of the manufactory that Babbage applies to literary production and J. J. Grandville illustrates in a woodcut for *Un Autre Monde* (1844), which likens contemporary literary production to that of gallettes in a patisserie.[9] The following stanza from *Honour to Labour* typifies this facility, as it proudly describes in rolling iambs and easy rhymes James Watt’s steam engine and Richard Arkwright’s cotton spinning mills, the applied science that undergirds her age of consumerism:

> No Newtons lost, to Heav’n and Earth, shall perish in this age
> Unknown, uncrown’d, without a place, reserved in Fame’s great page —
> No Watt’s unprized, no Arkwrights scorn’d, — seek an untrophy’d grave,
> Foster’d shall be each faculty, the Almightiest Ruler gave. (p. 8)

Like cloth churned out by the factories, surplus to utilitarian requirement and so mobilized by fashion and advertising, Stuart-Wortley’s work is geared to the burgeoning middle-class luxury market, which was particularly receptive to affordable aristocratic artefacts, such as poetry by a real lady, or copies of her jewellery. As Dawson observes, by ‘setting single poems into a decorative book-object alongside illustrations’, such

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[7] Paul Chipchase, ‘Some Account of the Literary Production of Lady Welby and Her Family’, in *Essays on Significs*, ed. by H. Walter Schmitz, Foundations of Semiotics, 23 (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1990), pp. 17–59 (p. 33).

[8] [Hartley Coleridge], ‘Modern English Poetesses’, *Quarterly Review*, September 1840, pp. 374–418 (p. 398).

[9] J. J. Grandville [and Taxile Delord], *Un Autre Monde* (Paris: Fournier, 1844), p. 272.

gift book annuals as *The Keepsake* represent a new literary marketplace in which poems are fashionable and precious consumables, akin to the jewellery that had similarly become mechanically reproducible during the early decades of the century (p. 74). Stuart-Wortley's poems on the exhibition have an odd recursive quality in so attentively cataloguing and describing the consumer products that they parallel. They often draw attention to this parallel, as in the examples of 'jewelled style' discussed above. It is also perpetrated as an analogy in the following lines, which remarkably figure the imagination as a manufactory: 'Come! — let bright Imagination build her trophy-piles supreme, | A vast Pyramid of gorgeous Spoils, and a Mountain-height of Dream' (*Honour*, p. 18). This characterization of the imagination accords with Stuart-Wortley's facility for mass-producing verse. Conversely, it also recognizes the more tangible luxury items displayed at the exhibition as, like poetry, both produced and consumed by the imagination. Dizzying and mesmerizing, Stuart-Wortley's poetry is stimulating to the imagination in the manner of the miles of disparate displays at the Great Exhibition that it is naturally drawn to rendering. It piles up imagery and emotions in a declamatory style that is well matched to the excesses of the exhibition. The imagery from the lines on the 'bright Imagination', of dreams and gorgeous pyramids, and the analogy they make of poetry to luxury products, the Aladdin's cave of the exposition, is resumed more explicitly and powerfully five pages later: 'Though in sun-thoughted Poet's mind, such rainbow'd dreams might play, | What jewel-pyramids of boundless price, are in those depths amass'd' (*Honour*, p. 23). This is the Crystal Palace as sunny pleasure-dome. Apropos of this, *Honour to Labour* also presents the engineer of the Crystal Palace and the mass-produced components he works with as analogous to the poet and the poem; indeed, the poetic gems that Dawson discusses. The patented plate-glass panes that the Chance brothers made for the Crystal Palace are described in the poem as 'jewell'd pages', while in articulating them Paxton is likened, contra Ruskin, to 'some most rapt fantastic bard' (*Honour*, p. 38).