

## Thomas Carlyle's MS Notes for "The Diamond Necklace"

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CARLYLE WROTE THE FIRST OF THESE TWO CHRONOLOGIES FOR his essay "The Diamond Necklace" (1892) in the Advocate's Library, Edinburgh, between January and April 1833; the second he compiled in Craigenputtoch between October 1833 and February 1834. The first chronology may also have been relevant to his essay "Count Cagliostro" (1834). From the outset in his notes, he complained about the treacherousness of his primary sources: "Nearly all that is attainable about the D. N. being now on paper, it will be right to assort it, and finally dispose of it. There is the sorrowfullest lack of dates; of accuracy, in all respects, on all hands." Some ten months later, he was still trying to make sense of the affair. He announced on 17 December 1833 to John Stuart Mill that the essay was "now done" (*CL* 7: 57), but admitted to his brother Alexander on 18 February 1834 that "My *Diamond Necklace* is not done: I get along so miserably slowly" (*CL* 7: 98). New materials, particularly the two-volume *L'Affaire du Collier* (1785, 1789) that Adolphe d'Eichthal had sent him from Paris in mid-February, further complicated his efforts to make sense of this "*True Fiction*" (TC to John A. Carlyle, 22 July 1834, *CL* 7: 245). In the essay he acknowledged that what he had produced amounted to a "fraction" of "the mystic 'actual truth' of which, it lay not on the surface, yet shone through the surface, and invited even Prosaists to search for it!" ("Necklace" 89). For Carlyle, history was a perpetually evolving "Conversation" between historians, their sources, and their audience, in which "new meaning" was perpetually being disclosed ("Johnson"

[1832], *Works* 28: 45). If readers could bring the same spirit of “earnest inspection, faithful endeavour . . . [and] the strictest regard to chronology, geography . . . [and] documentary evidence” that he had brought to the study of the Necklace affair, then “this poor opaque Intrigue . . . might become quite translucent between us” (“Necklace” 90).

Carlyle’s deep intellectual and imaginative engagement with the form, content, and spirit of his sources enabled him to see that propaganda and partisanship were intrinsic to the meaning of “du fameux procès du Collier” (Georgel, *Histoire* 2: 1). His cacophonous style was designed to convey the “Real-Phantasmagor[ic] quality of the event, as well as to catch the “bodily concrete coloured presence of things” (TC to John Stuart Mill, [22 July 1836], *CL* 9: 14). He knew that it was impossible to sort out the affair with perfect clarity because so many of the people involved were preoccupied with justifying their actions and saving their reputations. More broadly, in a revolutionary epoch the symbolic dimension of the episode quickly eclipsed concerns about what exactly had happened. For the defenders of monarchy, the scandal suggested the cruel and tragic victimization of the King and Queen. For opponents, it symbolized the immorality of the *ancien régime* and the urgent necessity of radical change, with Lamotte becoming “the archetypal plebeian victim of the evil political designs and sexual excesses of the queen” (Maza 82). Carlyle illuminated these larger “hieroglyphic” (“Necklace” 90) features of the episode, at the same time as he lamented the jelly-like texture of his evidence. With his usual prescience, he rightly anticipated that crucial aspects of the affair would never be fathomed. Later historians with access to archives and a far greater range of sources have been obliged to agree with him. In the most detailed study of the episode, *The Queen’s Necklace* (1961), Frances Mossiker echoed Carlyle’s view that certain “doubts would never be resolved, neither by time nor by future research” (189). She too stressed the symbolic dimension of the Necklace scandal—it was the “spark” that “set off” the French Revolution—and relied on her readers to “exercise . . . [their] own wits upon the puzzle” (xv). More recently, Antonia Fraser has insisted in her biography *Marie Antoinette: The Journey* (2001) that the Queen was innocent, but she concedes that “the affair can never be unravelled with complete conviction as to all its

details" (280). More than two hundred years after the episode, therefore, historians continue to confirm Carlyle's ironic observation that "of our History the more important part is lost without recovery" ("On History" [1830] 6).

Some part of history, however, is occasionally recovered. These manuscript notes, located in the Beinecke Library at Yale University, are published here for the first time. They give readers a richly complex first-hand view of Carlyle the historian at work. His approach is haphazard yet curiously coherent. Throughout the notes he tries to experience events from the vantage point of the participants, while maintaining sufficient distance to question dates and details. He immerses himself in his materials, keenly alert to the endless instances of tergiversation that dominate the narratives in *L'Affaire du Collier*. With increasing impatience, he struggles to define a clear plot, but the promise of enlightenment eludes him even as it propels him to research more assiduously. Carlyle realizes that his sources are hopelessly biased. At one stage early in the notes he remarks that "the truth is to be sifted out of them with great accuracy caution." Nonetheless he perseveres, confident that some kind of tenuous order can be imposed on this inchoate mass of contradiction. Restlessly, he veers back and forth between the need to construct a chronology, and the desire to gauge the personalities of those involved. What gradually emerges is a skeletal framework, which he begins to flesh out with an intricate array of biographical and historical detail.

In his dialogue with his untrustworthy witnesses, Carlyle exhibits a mixture of humor and exasperation. From Henri II's entry in Michaud's *Biographie Universelle* and from the appendix of the English translation of Lamotte's *Memoirs*, he extracts details of the Countess's genealogy: "Henri II . . . seems to have had four wh . . . s; first a Scotch, then an Ital.; then Nicole de Savigny . . . come 7 generations; La Motte . . . (Had done nothing but produce her: all the seven)." He notes that in addition to the "4268 livres" that the Count and Countess Lamotte had given Guay d'Oliva for agreeing to disguise herself as the Queen, they also promised her "15000 with seas and mountains besides."

He savors the subtitle of Georgel's "Mandement" in *L'Affaire du Collier* for Rohan, "qui permet l'usage des Œufs pendant le Carême, jusqu'au Dimanche des Rameaux, exclusivement." Reacting to Lamotte's lurid story of the Marquis d'Autichamp's

attempts to seduce her, Carlyle exclaims, “Naughty!” In Georgel’s judgment, the Countess “s’énouçoit avec facilité . . . nous verrons bientôt que ces dehors séduisants cachent l’âme et les talens magiques de Circé” (*Histoire* 2:35). Carlyle is bewildered by her “Circean” resourcefulness. She claims that in April 1785 Cardinal Rohan had advised her to sell the irregularly-sized stones from the necklace that the Queen had given her as a gift: “[My husband] approved of the Cardinal’s advice. . . . [H]e, that same day, called upon a jew [sic] named Franks, who . . . undertook a journey to Amsterdam, for the purpose of disposing of the jewels; but the troubles that had arisen in Holland, rendering the transaction impracticable at that time, the Jew returned without effecting the business” (*Life* 129). To this detail Carlyle responds: “A likely story!” Elsewhere, he is skeptical of her detractors, querying Rohan’s outburst, “Femme, qui vantez le nom que vous portez, femme intrigante, & parjure . . . desirez encore de paroître adultere” (*Réflexions Rapides, L’Affaire* 7).

The mendacity of Carlyle’s sources seems to irritate him less than the absence of precise dates. Lacroix notes that Beaumarchais’s *Marriage of Figaro* “attira la plus grande affluence de spectateurs pendant plus de cent représentations” (6: 58). The detail is important to Carlyle because Guay d’Oliva later recalls in her memoir that soon after her first meeting with Lamotte, “la dame . . . me mène à la comédie française, où l’on jouoit le *mariage de Figaro*” (*L’Affaire* 37). Carlyle realizes that if he can obtain more information about the Figaro performance, then he might be able to pinpoint the date of the famous interview between Rohan and d’Oliva, disguised as the Queen, in “la scène du bosquet” (Georgel, *Histoire* 2: 82). But Lacroix gives neither the months nor the year, prompting Carlyle to conclude, “impossible to discover about 1784.” Guay d’Oliva’s descriptions are equally opaque. On the evening of the Figaro performance, she remarks, “J’étois dans la voiture, avec la dame de la Motte, le sieur de Villette, & l’officier supérieur dont j’ai parlé” (*L’Affaire* 37). Carlyle later discovers that this second figure is the Baron Lilleroy, but the lead proves fruitless. The exact date of “la scène” continues to trouble him: “Mariage de Figaro with Villette and Lilleroy . . . what was the date of the interview? Au mois de juillet says Lamotte . . . 11<sup>th</sup> of Aug<sup>t</sup> says Rohan: are Lamotte’s letters forged as to dates then?” Eventually Carlyle accepts that it took place 28 July 1784

on the evidence of the “Lettre du Cardinal a la Reine,” included in the appendix of Lamotte’s *Mémoires justificatifs* (Appendix 5–6). Yet the date remains a conjecture, he admits, since many of the “royal autographs” published here “seem to be misdated as to the day of the month” (“Necklace” 124).

The genesis of the necklace itself is shrouded in confusion. In a series of vague statements, Campan records that “Ces boucles d’oreilles avaient été destinées à la comtesse Du Barry, avant la mort de Louis XV” and that “Lamotte se présenta un jour chez madame la comtesse Du Barry, depuis la mort de Louis XV; elle venait s’offrir pour être sa dame de compagnie. (*Mémoires* [1826] 1: 94, 2: 365). Carlyle notes these details, but queries the phrase “after the death of Louis XV (how long? 1774).” Campan’s memoirs yield little in the way of an exact sequence of events. She remembers that the jeweler Bøehmer “s’occupait depuis plusieurs années de réunir un assortiment des plus beaux diamans en circulation dans le commerce, pour en composer un collier à plusieurs rangs” (*Mémoires* [1826] 2: 3). Without providing the year of the transaction, she then reports, “Un an après cette tentative infructueuse, Bøehmer fit encore proposer au roi d’acheter son collier de diamans, partie en paiement à diverses échéances et partie en rentes viagères” (*Mémoires* [1826] 2: 4). Further exchanges between the jeweler and the Queen are mentioned, but again, no date is given: “Après plusieurs mois de démarches inutiles et de vaines plaintes, [Bøehmer] obtint une audience de la reine qui avait près d’elle la jeune princesse sa fille” (*Mémoires* [1826] 2: 5). At this final meeting he informs her, “D’ici, Madame, je pars pour aller me précipiter dans la rivière” (*Mémoires* [1826] 2: 5–6). “O for dates!” Carlyle exclaims. Through the fog of confusion, he can only deduce that the “Necklace had been making ‘for several years’ . . . said to have been intended for Du Barry therefore prior to 1784 . . . then again ‘a year after’; and ‘some months after that’ [Bøehmer] threatened to drown himself.”

In her mémoire in *L’Affaire du Collier*, Lamotte asks, “Somme-nous donc dans les régions de la Féerie & de les chimeres? A quel siècle, à quelle Nation, à quels Juges vient-on offrir la métamorphose de ce brillant tissu?” (3). Carlyle’s manuscript notes for “The Diamond Necklace” show how thoroughly he was able to re-create the atmosphere of this “brillant tissu” by probing the interior of his sources. Simultaneously, his relentless quarrying led him

to a recognition of the wondrous limitations and possibilities of history. In the essay he likens the process of re-creating the past to the creation of the diamonds themselves. Campan's phrase, "composer un collier à plusieurs rangs," reminds Carlyle that these stones were not made, but "arranged and agglomerated" ("Necklace" 92). The distinction is relevant to him as an historian. Those nineteenth-century chroniclers who vaingloriously defined their discipline as "Philosophy teaching by Experience" ("On History" 4) and assumed that human events could be subordinated to a fixed pattern—whether the Whig march of progress or the Tory defence of tradition—were as deluded as poor Bøehmer. Declared Carlyle, "Could these aged stones, the youngest of them Six Thousand years of age and upwards, but have spoken,—there were an Experience for Philosophy to teach by!" ("Necklace" 92). It was only by recognizing the limits of what could be known that an historian could "converse" with the past and render its content "visible without telescope" ("Necklace" 90).

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