

**GEORGE
FREDERICK KUNZ**



**SHAKESPEARE
AND PRECIOUS
STONES**

George Frederick Kunz

Shakespeare and Precious Stones

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Peter Boyd

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Introduction

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Poised where poetic imagination meets mineral fact, *Shakespeare and Precious Stones* follows the way Shakespeare's language refracts crystals, pearls, and rare metals into signs of virtue, danger, wealth, and wonder, revealing how names, trade, craft knowledge, and theatrical context shape the values of stones while the stubborn material reality of gems in turn resists, redefines, and deepens metaphor, so that every reference on the page or stage becomes a miniature negotiation between physical properties and cultural meanings, between geology and rhetoric, and between the allure of rarity and the human urge to classify, possess, compare, and interpret.

Written by American mineralogist George Frederick Kunz, this late-nineteenth-century study blends literary scholarship with gemological commentary to survey the presence of precious stones across Shakespeare's plays and poems. Rather than reconstructing theatrical staging, it situates the text's jewels within the knowledge and commerce of the early modern world that Shakespeare inhabited, while speaking from the vantage of a period fascinated by classification and material culture. As a hybrid of concordance, handbook, and cultural history, the book catalogs references, clarifies nomenclature, and traces associations that would have been intelligible to Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences as well as to scientifically minded readers of Kunz's time.

At its core, the premise is straightforward: gather every gemstone that appears in Shakespeare's language and explain what it is, where it came from, and what it was thought to signify. Kunz proceeds methodically, moving from term to term with patient definitions, historical notes, and comparisons that keep the literary moment in view without retelling plots or disclosing pivotal outcomes. The voice is measured and precise, the tone quietly enthusiastic, and the style combines the clarity of a scientific catalog with the curiosity of a literary guide. Readers can dip into individual entries or read consecutively, discovering unexpected patterns that accumulate across the canon.

Across these pages, several themes emerge with cumulative force. The first is the making of value, in which a word like diamond or pearl anchors a spectrum of meanings—hardness, purity, peril, endurance—that move between physical property and moral claim. The second is the circulation of knowledge, as travel, trade, and rumor carry stones and stories into London, shaping how gems are named, priced, and praised. A third is the tension between permanence and change: gems seem immutable, yet their meanings shift across scenes and speakers, reminding readers that material objects acquire cultural life only through language, context, and use.

Kunz's method privileges careful philology joined to concise natural history. He notes variant spellings, untangles obsolete designations, and distinguishes between true minerals and objects that early writers grouped with them, such as organic pearls or fashioned ornaments. He also sketches geographic routes by which certain stones reached

early modern England and points to the ancient and medieval lore that continued to color Shakespeare's vocabulary. The approach remains rigorous but accessible, explaining technical properties—color, hardness, luster—only insofar as they illuminate figurative force. What results is a cross-disciplinary portrait in miniature: a lexicon that doubles as a map of cultural memory and material fact.

For contemporary readers, the book's relevance lies in its demonstration that literature and material culture are inseparable. It models how attention to objects can expand interpretation, a method that aligns with current interests in global trade, provenance, and the social lives of commodities. By showing how a single term condenses craft practice, geography, and belief, Kunz offers tools for thinking about branding, value creation, and the ethics of description today, without straying from textual evidence. Students, performers, and general readers alike gain a vocabulary for discussing how language confers prestige and suspicion, and how inherited classifications continue to shape imagination and taste.

Shakespeare and Precious Stones rewards many kinds of engagement: it can serve as a desk companion during close reading, as a compact history of gem lore for newcomers, or as a springboard for comparative study across arts and sciences. Kunz invites a deliberate pace, encouraging readers to pause over a term, follow its appearances, and consider how the same stone gathers new resonance from play to play. Without revealing plot turns, the commentary illuminates texture and implication. In an age still captivated by rarity and shine, this study clarifies how enduring

metaphors were cut, polished, and set in the language we continue to inherit.

Synopsis

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George Frederick Kunz's *Shakespeare and Precious Stones* is a scholarly survey of how gemstones and related materials appear throughout Shakespeare's works. Written by a leading American gemologist of the early twentieth century, the study combines literary attention with mineralogical expertise. Kunz gathers references from the plays and poems, then situates them within Renaissance beliefs and practices about stones. The book's central aim is clarification: to make sense of Shakespeare's terminology, to distinguish poetic flourish from period fact, and to show how gem lore circulated in Elizabethan England. It proceeds methodically, using examples to illuminate broader patterns while avoiding speculative biographical claims.

Kunz begins by cataloging the range and frequency of Shakespeare's gem-related expressions, noting their distribution across tragedies, comedies, histories, and the sonnets. He tracks variant spellings and terms inherited from classical and medieval sources, mapping how certain names—often unstable in premodern usage—shifted meanings. The analysis is both linguistic and contextual: each stone is treated as a word with a history and as an object with cultural weight. By setting the references side by side, Kunz reveals consistent habits of comparison and metaphor that Shakespeare employs to signal beauty, rarity, value, and moral judgment.

The book then embeds Shakespeare's language within the economic and social world of the period. Kunz surveys gem trade routes, courtly tastes, and common beliefs about the curative or talismanic powers of stones, drawing on lapidaries and inventories known in Renaissance Europe. This background clarifies why certain stones recur in theatrical speech and imagery. It also explains how audiences might have understood specific comparisons or plot devices involving jewels. Kunz treats precious stones not only as decorative items but as markers of status, diplomacy, and wealth, which helps to contextualize their symbolic force onstage and in poetic description.

With this framework, Kunz turns to representative stones—pearls, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and others—examining their dramatic uses and shifting connotations. Pearls often signal purity or costly extravagance, while diamonds suggest endurance, obligation, or rank. He notes places where jewels motivate action or substantiates character claims, including well-known instances of rings and caskets that test loyalty, judgment, or social aspiration. The emphasis remains on how the figurative and the material reinforce each other: a stone may be a prop, an image, and a cultural shorthand at once, depending on dramatic need.

A core contribution is Kunz's effort to reconcile Shakespeare's terms with mineralogical reality. He clarifies ambiguous names inherited from antiquity, distinguishes overlapping categories, and observes where period usage diverges from modern classification. Terms like carbuncle or jacinth, for example, are carefully unpacked according to

the language of Renaissance lapidaries rather than anachronistic definitions. Kunz also traces how notions of color, brilliance, and provenance informed Elizabethan valuation. By calibrating poetic language against contemporary knowledge, the study shows both Shakespeare's precision and the figurative license expected in his rhetorical world.

Kunz supports his readings with visual and documentary materials that situate jewelry in everyday and courtly life. He references portraits, inventories, and surviving pieces to illustrate how jewels were worn, described, and priced. Theatrical considerations also appear, including how costuming and properties might have shaped the stage presence of stones. These materials function as corroboration more than embellishment, anchoring literary interpretation in record and artifact. Throughout, Kunz balances admiration for Shakespeare's imagery with a careful insistence on historical and philological control, avoiding overstatement while clarifying recurrent puzzles in the text.

The study closes by emphasizing the interpretive gains of bringing gemology into literary criticism. *Shakespeare and Precious Stones* affirms that understanding the material culture of jewels sharpens readings of metaphor, character, and plot without reducing poetry to inventory. Kunz's interdisciplinary method offers a dependable reference for scholars and general readers, guiding attention to how language reflects commerce, faith, and fashion. The book endures as a model of precise, historically grounded commentary, demonstrating that even small details—names

of stones, flashes of color, statements of price—can illuminate the broader imaginative economy of Shakespeare's art.