Introduction
Unstable as Water

On the eve of the twenty-first century, two new hit shows featuring the Victorian author John Ruskin as a major character played to enthusiastic audiences in New York and San Francisco. It was the year 2000, centenary of the nineteenth-century British writer’s death. But a fever for anniversary trivia alone could not have triggered Ruskin’s sudden theatrical eminence. One of these plays, Greg Murphy’s The Countess, had opened off Broadway in 1999 to become the longest-running new production of that season. The other, Tom Stoppard’s prize-winning The Invention of Love, had previously premiered in 1997 at the National Theatre in London.¹ Even an opera based on Ruskin’s life had debuted in 1995.² Before this, the last puff of general public awareness about Ruskin had been the cheap and ubiquitous Ruskin Cigar, gone since the 1950s. Now, decades of middle-brow neglect abruptly ended. Suddenly, John Ruskin was a star.

But what kind of a star? These entertaining—even excellent—shows still playing regionally all over the United States create for present-day audiences a perverse, ineffectual, repressed effete who exists primarily as a favorable contrast to our currently more liberated selves. The distorted view of Ruskin’s life on stage helps us establish our contemporary identities as superior, an ignominious utility he shares with the rest of Victoriana. But in what other ways, beyond providing fodder for theater-going self-complacency, is thinking about Ruskin and performance useful
now? *Performing the Victorian* answers this question by examining Ruskin’s own ideas about theater, his conflicted understanding of identity as the result of performance rather than essence, and his fascination with all processes of performance and change. In addition to considering how contemporary theater presents Ruskin for us now and how Ruskin viewed theater and performance then, this study reintegrates Ruskin’s social and aesthetic critique (including his theater criticism) with the enigma of his sexuality. Unknowable, it can be seen as a dissident force that ruptures our settled concept of identity based on a polarity of sexual orientations.

John Ruskin’s radical social criticism helped to establish the English Labour party, famously motivated Gandhi to transform his life, and justified more progressive education for middle-class women and working men. He is even better known as the chief champion of the artist J. M. W. Turner, the most erudite advocate for the Gothic revival in architecture, and the theoretical inspiration for both the Pre-Raphaelite and the Arts and Crafts movements. Throughout these various accomplishments, his influential art and architecture criticism always carries explicit social critique. Perhaps he is best known among writers and critics as a delicious prose stylist whose word paintings were excerpted from weighty treatises for sale in diminutive gilt-edged gift volumes as examples of sheer beauty well into the twentieth century. The once-revered Victorian sage now symbolizes a repressed and outmoded Other to contemporary culture, which defines itself partly in reaction to a mis-remembered Victorian past. This representation of Ruskin appears not only in the theatrical productions mentioned above but also in much Victorian scholarship and the work of second-wave feminist literary critics. Even the unreadable cipher of Ruskin’s sexuality has made him easy to stereotype and dismiss. *Performing the Victorian: John Ruskin and Identity in Theater, Science, and Education* counters that popular and scholarly appropriation of Ruskin as the prime example of Victorian stodginess and stultifying patriarchy by showing how fundamentally Ruskin destabilizes categories of identity in much of his writing, but particularly in works on theater, science, and women’s education in the second half of his career. This is also the first book on Ruskin and theater in his own day or on theatrical representations of Ruskin in ours.

*Performing the Victorian* extends the work of my previous book, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen: Gender Subversion in Victorian Culture*. There I argue that, although Ruskin’s often-quoted “Of Queens’ Gardens” is typically seen as the quintessential statement glorifying Victorian women’s constrained domestic sphere, his richly mythopoetic prose offers an alternative dis-
course that surprisingly yields the tools to escape fixed categories of gender. In contrast to Coventry Patmore’s *The Angel in the House*, Ruskin’s essay provides an ideal of active queenship (based partly on Queen Victoria) that redefines the domestic sphere much more broadly. Myth, with its cultural cachet and myriad examples of bodily transformation, supplies the opportunity for gender subversion not only in Ruskin’s mythography, but also in the works of other nineteenth-century authors. Besides placing Ruskin’s use of myth into historical context, *Ruskin’s Mythic Queen* shows how he feminizes language by placing it under the control of the Greek goddess Athena.

*Performing the Victorian* builds on this earlier work, concentrating now on Ruskin’s understanding of theater and performance rather than on his ideas about myth; it argues that Ruskin destabilizes all identity classifications, not just the gender divide. While most Victorianists recognize that viewing Ruskin as merely old-fashioned ignores his originality and revolutionary significance, they do not generally go far enough in acknowledging Ruskin’s inventive subversion of basic categories, both ontological (such as gender, nation, race, species, and self) and epistemological (such as animal, vegetable, mineral, art, science, theater, and even life). Ruskin not only pushed social reform and aesthetic innovation—changing the course of art, literature, and politics for both the Victorians and the Moderns—but also presaged postmodern and poststructuralist conceptions of a fluid subjectivity. Ruskin, once in every anthology of literary theory, has all but disappeared, while his contemporaries and students, such as Pater and Wilde, remain. *Performing the Victorian* intervenes in current criticism to demonstrate Ruskin’s usefulness as a theorist today.

Part of Ruskin’s reputation as an unrepentant prude surely stems from the 142-year-old story, corroborated by Ruskin himself, that he presided over the 1858 burning of Turner’s drawings “of the most shameful sort—of the pudenda of women” (Harris 400) in order to protect the great artist’s reputation, having concluded that Turner would only have drawn them “under a certain condition of insanity” (Warrell “Exploring” 2003, 7). But Ian Warrell, curator at the Tate Gallery in London, has recently concluded that the supposedly burnt drawings remain intact at the Tate. Far from having torched them, Ruskin had merely tucked them away in an elaborate cataloging system. The news of Ruskin’s not having destroyed the drawings made major newspapers on both sides of the Atlantic in December 2004 and January 2005. Warrell speculates that Ruskin might have deceived the world in order to save the drawings and to protect those responsible for their safety, in response to the 1857 Obscene Publications
Act, which could have resulted in the curators’ prosecution for holding pornography. Besides rescuing Ruskin from a reputation as an over-zealous, art-burning, Puritanical ultra-censor, Warrell’s discovery puts Ruskin in the position of playing the expected role of prude in order to safeguard art and those responsible for it. From our current perspective, that means that Ruskin was already “performing the Victorian.”

Ruskin certainly recognized his own role-playing, warning readers in *Fors Clavigera,* “If I took off the Harlequin’s mask for a moment, you would say I was simply mad” (*The Works of John Ruskin* 28. 513). He also noticed both the function of theater to help establish identity and the ways in which the self forms through other kinds of performance. Because theater best illustrates Ruskin’s notion of identity as performed, *Performing the Victorian* focuses on Ruskin’s recurrent writing about theater as it appears throughout his enormous oeuvre. Sprinkled in books as celebrated as *Modern Painters* (1843–1860) and as obscure as *Love’s Meinie* (1873–1881), Ruskin’s theatrical metaphors and examples drawn from his frequent attendance at the theater illustrate his points about social justice, aesthetic practice, and epistemology. Employing opera, Shakespeare, pantomime, puppet shows, French comedies, melodrama, minstrel shows, juggling acts, and dance to tease out a variety of issues seemingly unrelated to the stage, Ruskin displays fascination with performed identities that cross gender and other boundaries. These discussions are obviously of particular relevance in Ruskin’s writing on drama and spectacle, but they also reveal the primacy of performance to his understanding of science and education.

A professional critic of painting and architecture rather than of the performing arts, Ruskin might seem more likely to display a static theory of ontology and of epistemology than a dynamic one. But his organic vision of architecture and his belief in painting from nature are both dynamic; ideas of movement, change, and metamorphosis drive his understanding of identity, of existence, and of knowledge. Ruskin’s stressing organicism might suggest an unfolding of an innate or true nature, a stance at odds with a notion of identity constructed through performance; yet they have the crucial similarity of change. In other words, in a critic whose most celebrated and most voluminous discourse is about solid, unmoving things (such as paintings and buildings) as opposed to ephemeral time-bound things (such as theater), the use of kinesis everywhere to picture stasis reveals Ruskin’s view that everything is in flux. A good example comes in his fascination with glaciers, which he sketches, paints, describes, studies, and publishes geological discourses upon throughout his life. As Kate Flint
points out, it is the movement, the liquid behavior of solid ice, that
entresses Ruskin and brings him to write about them in *Deucalion*
(1875–1883).12 The paradoxical allure of fluid characteristics in solids
prompts Ruskin to write about crystals in *Ethics of the Dust* (1866) as well:
just as glaciers flow, so do minerals before they crystallize, another exam-
ple of change in stasis. Likewise Ruskin’s girl students at the progressive
Winnington school, whom he identifies with crystals throughout the
*Ethics of the Dust*, flow randomly by his direction about the playground
before coalescing in pre-arranged dances to form crystalline shapes.13 In the
same vein, theater provides the most vibrant example of how something
seemingly immovable—a person’s core or essence—similarly shifts and rei-
fies with each performed iteration.

**Reuben’s Curse**

Ruskin even describes himself as “unstable as water” (28.275). He uses
the words in a pleasantly self-deprecating fashion. Having just shown a fac-
simile of his awkward childhood handwriting, he pokes fun at himself, call-
ing attention to the misshapen letters as “evidence . . . of the incurably
desultory character which has brought upon me the curse of Reuben,
‘Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel’” (28.275). To prevent anyone
from thinking that he is too harsh on his child-self, he goes on merrily:
“But I reflect, hereupon, with resolute self-complacency, that water, when
good, is a good thing, though it be not stable; and that it may be better
sometimes to irrigate than to excel” (28.275). Certainly, Ruskin’s affinity
for water is of long standing: he wrote three chapters in *Modern Painters
II* on how water is represented and what it represents. Ruskin’s invocation
of Reuben closes the notorious (and disingenuous) memory of his toyless
childhood, in which he claimed he had nothing to amuse himself but
examining the intricate patterns of his carpet. In this same section of both
*Fors* and *Praeterita*, Ruskin vividly recalls “the most radiant Punch and
Judy” puppet set, given to him for his birthday by his Croydon aunt but
confiscated and disposed of by his evangelical mother, who disapproved of
all kinds of theater.14 While in these early memories Ruskin sees instabili-
ty as largely positive, elsewhere he is less sanguine about suffering from
what we might now call Attention Deficit Disorder. Ruskin even consid-
ered the phrase “Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel” for his epitaph,
feeling mightily displeased with his difficulty in sticking to one task.15

But there is much more to the words Ruskin claims for his identity than
he elaborates on here. The phrase “unstable as water” comes from a passage in Genesis, in which Jacob calls his sons to him as he lies dying. It is the moment the men have long awaited, knowing that their father will bless them. Jacob says to Reuben:

Reuben, thou art my firstborn, my might, and the beginning of my strength, the excellency of dignity, and the excellency of power: Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel; because thou wentest up to thy father’s bed; then defiledst thou it: he went up to my couch. (Genesis 49:3–4)\(^6\)

Given that this quotation from the Bible tells of how Jacob curses his oldest son Reuben for incestuously sleeping with Jacob’s wife (Genesis 35:22), one might expect Ruskin’s describing himself as “unstable as water” to be an insult. Ruskin ignores the Oedipal transgression that causes Jacob to curse Reuben precisely when and where his son might have expected a blessing, at his father’s death-bed, symbolically the very bed that Reuben defiled.\(^1\) Yet Ruskin’s characterization of his creative contributions as stemming from his being “unstable as water” seems unconscious of this aspect of the story.

Two things make Ruskin’s omission worthy of note. First, Ruskin knew the Bible as well as anyone and far better than most, having, as a child, read it aloud with his mother chapter by chapter every morning after breakfast, from beginning to end and over again, leaving nothing out, not even the “hard names, numbers, or Levitical law” (28.318). Thus one must presume that, in however limited a way he uses the phrase “unstable as water” in this discussion of his own identity, he knows its full Biblical context. Second, while we can safely assume that Ruskin never went to bed with his mother, he never went to bed with anybody else either. The great transgression of Ruskin’s sex life was that of inactivity, and all of his romantic relationships remained unconsummated. As a result (or as the cause), his deepest reciprocal emotional attachment to any woman was to his mother. While I do not want to wallow too deeply in Freudian analysis of a man who has been dead for over a hundred years, Ruskin’s obliviousness—or sublimation—of the passage’s connection to Oedipal incest seems striking. It is almost irresistible to point out that the instability of water as a shaky foundation for character (Ruskin’s and everyone else’s) is connected at heart with sexual transgression, which, in Ruskin’s case, is sexual purity.

Tim Hilton reports that Ruskin understood the curse as negatively describing his difficulty completing projects (2000, 154). John Rosenberg
goes farther and reads the quotation as representing Ruskin’s increasingly unbalanced mind, culminating in his final madness (147). I would like to take the image farther still to suggest that “unstable as water” articulates the ontological and epistemological instability that Ruskin also expresses through metaphors of performance, as this book shows. Certainly Ruskin’s psychology and sexuality bear not only on his personal identity but also on his views about identity formation.

Too often an effort to think seriously about Ruskin’s unconsummated marriage to Effie Gray and his later love for the adolescent Rose La Touche has resulted in an overt focus on pathology. Both scholarship and popular staging have speculated on what could have caused Ruskin to reject his bride on their wedding night and every night thereafter for six years. As interesting and revealing as such studies focusing on Ruskin’s nocturnal omissions are, it is his odd sex life that provokes continued interest, not because of his later mental illness, but instead because it does not fit into current paradigms that define people within a polarity of heterosexuality and homosexuality. Neither homosexuality nor bisexuality, figured as oscillating between homo- and heterosexual behavior, unsettles people as much as Ruskin’s enigmatic transgression against the dominant ideology of sex and its available identities. While some consider Ruskin’s intense love of Rose and his teaching at the Winnington school for girls to make him a pedophile, the truth is that we know almost nothing of what Ruskin’s sexual feelings were, or even if he had any. Of his sexual actions, if they took place, we know virtually nothing either. Critics, biographers, playwrights, librettists, students, teachers, and curators all seem nonplused by his aberrant inactivity as we cast about for an appropriate identity label based on sexual orientation. Ruskin’s transgressive behavior of mysterious inactivity skews or queers our expectations and operates as a kind of sexual dissidence. The function of Ruskin in literary criticism at the present time could be to create a current of fresh ideas about sexual identity, to irrigate—if not inseminate—through what one is tempted to call non-performance theory.

As we will see in the remainder of this book, for Ruskin everything seemingly stationary continually shifts, like water. His fascination with the natural world is largely an enchantment with evolution masked as metamorphosis. He loves glaciers for their motion in apparent fixity. Hard rocks flow before they crystallize. Ruskin’s affection for theater and most particularly for pantomime is largely delight in its potential to realize fantastical transformations; indeed, the transformation scene for which Victorian pantomime is so famous is always his favorite. His devotion to
girls’ education is a dogged attempt to channel what he knows to be their inevitable but unpredictable patterns of development. In his characterization of himself as unstable as water, without a permanent base or solid core, Ruskin notes an ever-changing fluid self, one that always has the potential to crystallize through performance of an action, then to melt back again. As we will see in his writing on theater and his use of theatrical and performance metaphors in his other works on education and science, this mutability is the volatile foundation of all existence.

**Terms of Performance**

In this book I use the words *identity, subjectivity, and self* almost interchangeably. Other critics, such as Regenia Gagnier and Donald Hall, have pointed out that the terms *identity* and *subjectivity* are not synonymous; an elegant way to describe the difference is to say subjectivity is identity plus a critical self-consciousness of how identity is constructed (Hall 2004, 2–3). Ruskin’s own word is *self*. For him *identity* usually suggests correctly naming a plant or mineral, while *subjectivity* means the opposite of *objectivity*, as he explains in his definition of the pathetic fallacy, where he derides the vocabulary of German philosophy (5.204). While acknowledging the usefulness of the term *subjectivity* as one that designates this linguistic foundation of the self or subject and heightens readers’ awareness of identity as constructed rather than essential, I find that *identity* does the job just as well, once we establish that identities result from social factors, that the supposed core of being exists more extrinsically than intrinsically.

How does Ruskin’s understanding of the self fit into this postmodern insight? As the following chapters will show, he reluctantly recognizes the instability of the self, both predicated by and undermined by processes of performance. As he invokes the theater to make important points about society, education, science, art, and the theater itself, Ruskin reacts anxiously when confronting performances that blur boundaries between basic categories of existence, such as gender, species, and the difference between animate and inanimate objects. At the same time, he continually under-mines those distinctions in his writing and performances. In addition, Ruskin’s theatrical qualities as lecturer and even as audience underscore the importance of identity performance.

Judith Butler’s ground-breaking insights have been most influential in driving contemporary discussions of gender construction as the result of
performance. In Butler’s philosophy, performances of gendered acts cite previously performed gendered acts, which further reinforce existing gender paradigms—while also allowing for change through altered performances for later citation. While in *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* Butler considers all kinds of gendered acts, her points apply clearly to the theater (as she discusses in “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution”), because theater supplies both stereotyped characters that reinforce existing gender distinctions and a range of others that subvert them. Theater, in which live performers may recreate a realistic portrayal of contemporary life or may just as easily produce the illusion of fantastical bodies unthought of before, is part of a system that molds and remolds genders, and if genders, then all aspects of identity and embodiment. It is one of the “regulatory schemas that produce intelligible morphological possibilities” (Butler 1993, 14) that can be revolutionary as well as repressive in its constitution of norms.

Janelle Reinelt reminds us that for Derrida, theater—like all language—is *iterable*; its iterability makes theater not only a language but also both a metaphor for and an example of how gender comes into being through repeated performance. Even more pressingly relevant to Ruskin, for whom—as we will see—process is more vital than product, gender only maintains existence if it is continually performed. As Elin Diamond explains, “It’s not just that gender is culturally determined and historically contingent, but rather that ‘it’ doesn’t exist unless it’s being done” (4). This is finally the point of Judith Butler’s recent book title *Undoing Gender*. It is in this sense of reiterated performance producing identity that I use *performativity* and *performance* in *Performing the Victorian*; however, *performance* encompasses acting, singing, dancing, and juggling before an audience as well as ritualized reiteration of behaviors that constitute identity. *Theatricality* I reserve for moments of discussion that suggest a heightened awareness of a performance experience’s artifice and its effect on an audience. Of these words, Ruskin, of course, only uses *performance*, which for him often means “accomplishing” or “doing.” But as we have just seen from Diamond and Butler, performing gender and (un)doing gender are the same thing.

**Identity and Work**

Ruskin’s reluctant recognition that identity is performed rather than innate obviously differs from Matthew Arnold’s understanding of a core or
“genuine self,” to quote his poem “The Buried Life.” It also differs from Thomas Carlyle’s and George Eliot’s idea that we are what we do, that our work defines us. The difference between them and Ruskin lies in Ruskin’s reliance on process rather than product. For Carlyle and for Eliot, it is work that matters; accomplishing something means being someone. For example, by the end of Middlemarch, Eliot’s Dorothea marries Ladislaw, taking on a more traditional role than she imagined for herself when she married Casaubon to help find the Key to all Mythologies. We read that what matters finally is her incalculably diffusive influence in her new job as Ladislaw’s wife. She gives up a fortune in order to take on that task, her goal being not only love but also usefulness. While Eliot recognizes society’s control over the development of women’s subjectivity (Hall 2004, 46–49), she nevertheless maintains that within limits we can remake ourselves through work.

For Ruskin, in contrast, what makes us who we are is not just our utility (and certainly not our money, clearly not Eliot’s contention either). In Unto this Last, Ruskin influentially announces that “there is no wealth but life” (17.105), and, for Ruskin, life is transformation, dynamism, change, metamorphosis, performance. Norman Anderson and Margene Weiss point out that for Ruskin “being or selfhood” is “a state of becoming” (12). We exist in performing not solely through a Calvinist “work while there is day” notion of labor that Carlyle proclaims in Sartor Resartus (and that, at a fundamental level, binds all three of these Victorian sages together), but also through reiteration of acts that shape us for the moment and only for the moment, thus requiring continual reiteration. Thus it is the process of work, not the product or good result or incalculable influence or Carlyle’s anti–self-consciousness deriving from work (which so impressed John Stuart Mill), that differentiates Ruskin’s notion from the others’ we-are-what-we-do mentality. A better way of explaining it might be to say we are what we are doing.

Perhaps Ruskin’s particular obsession with the teenage Rose and his appreciation of young girls in general is a profound vision of the fleeting quality of existence and a fascination with the temporality of beauty, which exists only in the moment that it is appreciated. In other words, the point for Ruskin is not a lascivious warning to virgins to get busy gathering rosebuds because life is short, but instead a rueful recognition that life consists entirely of change. Each moment even of a young girl’s life so far is already over, and each new moment is also already over, and so on. For example, Ruskin wistfully remarks to the Winnington girls that Rose, with whom he has just visited, is growing and changing so rapidly, that “I shan’t
see her again for ever so long. . . and then she’ll be somebody else—chil-
dren are as bad as clouds at sunrise—golden change—but change always” (Hilton 2000, 21; Burd 1969, 312). This is different from a *carpe diem* philo-
osophy because the point is not to seize the day for pleasure because soon we will die or at least lose our bloom, but rather to recognize that all we think of as fixed and permanent is in reality constantly changing.25

The insight Ruskin offers is the kind of aesthetic criticism we associate with Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, whom Ruskin influenced. The notions of a fin-de-siècle transgressive identity may be more solidly Victorian than we are used to thinking, at least as far as Ruskin is concerned. We see this in Ruskin’s writing not only about art and architecture, but also about science, education, theater, and so on, as he expresses his fascinated uneasiness over universal flux. For instance, evolution clearly unnerves him, so he explains it by way of mythic metamorphosis instead of natural selection. The example of identity transformations on stage, which stand for transformations in life, causes anxieties far different from the solace and comfort of self-knowledge that Carlyle paradoxically draws from the anti-self-consciousness of labor. Eliot seeks identity for Dorothea from purposeful intellectual effort, but Ruskin cannot find identity in work alone because the work—art, acting, writing, building, teaching, or learning—requires a viewer, an audience, a reader, a tourist, a student, a teacher. In other words, because it is the result of performance, identity for Ruskin is a fundamentally social phenomenon.26

Identity built through performance requires an audience to reify it as well as other performers to model it. Dinah Birch has hinted that, after his father John James Ruskin’s death, Ruskin changed his career from writer to lecturer, from focusing on the written product to the performed experience (2002, 127). Although Ruskin subsequently brought out those lecture series as books, the point is that his published lectures, such as *Sesame and Lilies* and *The Eagle’s Nest*, and his published open letters, such as those in *Time and Tide* and *Fors Clavigera*, are as close to performed conversation as possible in a written form. After 1864, for Ruskin all writing aspires to the condition of performance.

**What Follows**

In the chapters that follow, we will see that, for Ruskin, belief in a stable self falters when confronted with the theater’s manifest purpose in entertain ment through role-playing, with scientific evidence of change through
evolution, and with education’s point in fostering improvement. Finally, turn-of-the-twenty-first-century performances portray a fictive Ruskin’s sexual repression in order to establish current identities as more advanced and more liberated than the Victorians; in contrast, concurrent portrayals of Oscar Wilde create in him an example of gay existence for contemporary audiences to use in building present-day identities. However, a closer glance at Ruskin’s enigmatic sexuality emphasizes the constructedness of our own dominant sexual ideology that establishes subjectivities within a narrow bipolar paradigm of homo- and heterosexuality.

Chapter 1, “‘Mechanical Sheep’ and ‘Monstrous Powers’: John Ruskin’s Pantomime Reality,” delineates Ruskin’s ideas about the theater, which he attended voraciously, often going several times a week. For him, theater best exemplifies the pliability of the self: actors construct alternative identities on stage, highlighting the ways in which we all perform our parts in life. Ruskin sees theater serving many conflicting purposes: it offers amusement, role models to imitate, skillful artists to appreciate, and an abundance of popular culture examples that he uses in his most prominent works to make important points about social justice. Moreover, pantomimes boast fantastically beautiful transformations that Ruskin views as a truer vision of reality than the poverty, pollution, and misery he finds outside the theater in the streets of London. For Ruskin, the theater creates a heightened ontological state in which existence is more real even for the audience than in non-theatrical spaces. But paradoxically, Ruskin is unnerved by the permeability of identity boundaries he observes in theatrical performance. His descriptions of operas, plays, and pantomimes reveal a surprisingly pronounced ambivalence toward staged performance from *Modern Painters* IV (1856) to *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84). His remarks generally focus on performance moments that blur identity boundaries, including divisions between races, species, and the categories of reality and fantasy, but most particularly the gender divide. For example, in his book *Time and Tide* (1867), Ruskin criticizes several instances that both attract and disturb him: a crossed-dressed pantomime of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* in which a cigar is not just a cigar, a juggling act by a Japanese family in which nationality and species categories collapse, and a serpentine dance by a teenage girl. Each of these examples flouts divisions between gender, race, nationality, and species. Ruskin fiercely yearns for adamantine boundaries; yet their portrayal on stage as fluid, along with his own alternately fascinated and horrified depictions of metamorphosis, shows how strongly if reluctantly he recognizes the instability of all orders of identity and epistemology.
Chapter 2, “‘Pretty Frou-Frou’ Goes Demon Dancing: Performing Species and Gender in Ruskin’s Science,” shows how in four scientific books, *The Eagle’s Nest* (1872) on reconciling art and science, *Love’s Meinie* (1873–1881) on ornithology, *Proserpina* (1875–1886) on botany, and *Deucalion* on glaciology (1875–1883), Ruskin creates a feminine science. Throughout these works, he uses theatrical examples as a vehicle to articulate the performative quality of all existence. As a by-product of his effort to devise a new kind of scientific inquiry based on principles different from his contemporaries, he undermines the gender hierarchy that partially constitutes Victorian science. A respected member of the Royal Geological Society, Ruskin attacks violent and intrusive aspects of science that have been gender-coded as masculine; he offers instead a gentle and more passive approach based on quiet observation, corresponding to stereotypically feminine characteristics, constituting the identity of “scientist” both as feminine and as a good audience, appreciating nature’s performance. Ruskin also casts women as participants in scientific study, appealing to authorities they would know and using arguments designed to appeal to them. More surprisingly, Ruskin revises Darwinian evolution, which depends upon deadly competition for resources and for females, into a mythic principle of metamorphosis that he identifies as feminine. The shape-shifting of one species into another suggests to Ruskin not the species’ origin, as it does for Darwin, but rather a natural language that Ruskin teaches. Ruskin also rewrites Linnaean taxonomy, based on a hierarchy of male over female parts of flowers, into a system of moral classification that privileges the female. The new system takes its nomenclature from the names of Shakespeare’s heroines, suggesting that even plants perform their place in Ruskin’s botany, where art and science merge. By identifying women with their object of study, Ruskin demolishes the walls between scientist and specimen. Traditional classifications evaporate: non-human species are named according to their behavior instead of their form; science fuses both with art and with ethics.

Chapter 3, “Playground and Playhouse: Identity Performance in Ruskin’s Education for Girls,” demonstrates that Ruskin’s plan for the education of girls is not only far more progressive than he is generally credited with, but also a script for identity performance. In his best-seller *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), in his crystallography textbook for girls *Ethics of the Dust* (1866), and in his letters to the real-life girls whom he lectured at the liberal Winnington school, Ruskin considers how young women should be educated to take on their gendered duty. Critics justly complain that part of Ruskin’s aim in improving women’s education is to make them more
suitable companions for future husbands; however, this expressed goal cannot explain the very rigorous improvements he proposes (and helped to implement at the Winnington School). As I have already shown in Ruskin’s Mythic Queen, rather than nullifying Ruskin’s suggestions for reform, this slippage between Ruskin’s theory and practice undercuts his stated goal and hints at the instability inherent in his gender classifications. Indeed, he erases gender from student identity. He subverts divisions and hierarchies by couching all the mineralogy lessons in Ethics of the Dust in the form of Socratic dialogues; these playlets de-center his own authority and question the notion of identity. Ruskin questions what a “self” is and provokes the girls into wondering if crystals are alive. Likewise, by presenting education as performance, Ruskin hints that the roles the girls learn to play both in their classroom theater and in life are malleable. Ruskin undermines distinctions between animate and inanimate, teacher and student, performer and audience, lecturer and listener as radically as he subverts the distinctions between genders and species in his scientific and theatrical writings. The girls learn that, just like the crystals with which their teacher links them so strongly, their seemingly essential selves only appear to be stable, but instead flow—unstable as water—before crystallizing; they can re-crystallize differently in the future.

In chapter 4, “Ruskin and the Wilde Life: Self and Other on the Millennial Stage,” we shift from considering Ruskin’s ideas about theater to considering theater about Ruskin—and his friend Oscar Wilde. The chapters preceding this one argue that, for Ruskin, identity and indeed all ontological and epistemological categories are in flux. Yet the Ruskin that we know from current theatrical representations erases the multivalent Ruskin that his own contemporaries revered as a sage or reviled as a radical. These productions include David Lang and Manuela Hoelterhoff’s opera Modern Painters (1995), Gregory Murphy’s off-Broadway success The Countess (1999), and Tom Stoppard’s critically acclaimed The Invention of Love (1997), which also showcases Oscar Wilde. Thousands of theater-goers, viewing Ruskin’s repression as prototypically Victorian, learn only self-complacency, a point that James Kincaid has made about current uses of other Victorians, such as Charles Dickens (Epstein 129–32); other Victorianists, such as James Eli Adams, have also noted this about Victorian culture more generally (1999, 126). Instead of presenting Ruskin’s revolutionary art, architecture, or social criticism, contemporary enactment of John Ruskin as a stage character satisfies our most caricatured expectations of Victorian culture, giving us a foil against which to define ourselves as more progressive, more feminist, more liberated. The
historical Ruskin’s unreadable sexuality makes labeling him to our advantage very easy. As a stage character, Ruskin becomes our stodgy Other.

In recent depictions, Oscar Wilde, however, becomes an equally stereotyped model, but for emulation instead of rejection. In addition to The Invention of Love (and others), two more plays appeared during the same years as those about Ruskin: Moisés Kaufman’s brilliant Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde (1997) and David Hare’s The Judas Kiss (1998). Audiences identify profoundly with representations of Wilde as a gay icon, locating in him the possibility of a public homosexual existence; nevertheless, as with Ruskin, these theatrical representations flatten out the historical Wilde, largely ignoring his art, his aesthetics, his concern for social issues, and significant aspects of the biographical record in order to make room for his utility in constructing current identity categories based on sexuality. Yet each of these powerfully poetic critics describes a fluid, performed self that contrasts vividly with the fixed types now appearing on stage. Likewise, both offer social critique that could question the efficacy of these very plays. All of these plays offer examples of what happens when life writing and criticism become theater, raising important theoretical questions about performance, identity, and realism. Based on an unexamined assumption that our own modes of being must be more expansive and pliable than the nineteenth century’s, fin-de-millennium theatrical representations of Ruskin and Wilde offer a set of static identity labels that constrain contemporary audiences more rigidly than does the flexible prose of either Ruskin’s or Wilde’s Victorian writing.

The Conclusion, “Queering Ruskin,” analyzes Ruskin’s sexuality in more detail, particularly regarding his scandalously unconsummated marriage and his much discussed relationship with the young girl Rose La Touche. It questions current constructions of identity based on sexuality, which the anomaly of Ruskin’s desire resists; Ruskin’s unusual sex life suggests a postmodern queering of the heterosexual/homosexual/bisexual triad. “Queering Ruskin” does not argue that Ruskin is gay, but rather points to the transgressive effect of Ruskin’s sexuality on our rigid set of identities based on recognized sexual orientations. The verb to queer does not mean to out, but rather to ask that we look from an alternative perspective, to recognize how something not-fitting proves the inadequacy of existing paradigms.28 Although queer has expanded in meaning as an identity label since its reclamation by gay activists in the 1980s from the status of slur, the primary synonym for queer is still strange. Everyone knows Ruskin’s sexuality is odd; the point is that seriously confronting Ruskin’s strangeness—rather than dismissing it and disposing of it as pathology—
unsettles our own polarities of gender and sexuality. Ruskin’s concern over the instability of gender, nation, race, and species distinctions in the theater and enacted in science and education broaden our own recognition of gender identity as performed. Instances of identity performance unnerve Ruskin; he recoils in purple prose that has echoed across time. Ruskin’s sexuality unnerves us; we register our worry in derision that eclipses his significance and utility.

As a preeminent Victorian polymath, the multi-talented Ruskin exemplifies the man of many masks. Mary Ann Caws points to Ruskin’s claim in _Praeterita_ (35.457) that he was “no orator, no actor, no painter,” but of course she argues correctly that he’s all three (27). He slips in and out of his myriad roles as author, artist, art critic, art historian, architecture scholar, social critic, economic prophet, collector, museum curator, professor, school teacher, geologist, botanist, ornithologist, old lecturer, passionate moralist, mad governess, Victorian sage, and the Master of St. George’s Guild. His variable identities illustrate the shape-shifting he writes about in his theater writing, his scientific studies, and his educational efforts. As he performs for the students of Winnington, he not only transforms them from girls into rocks, snakes, and birds, he also transforms himself. Such shifting identities do not appear in current theatrical representations of Ruskin, which marginalize him as the ultimate sexual Other who deflects sexuality from life onto art. In other words, Ruskin’s primacy in Victorian aesthetics makes him the perfect foil to establish postmodern identities not only as sexually and socially more liberated, but also as somehow more genuine, because in contrast to Ruskin’s sublimation into artifice, present-day sexualities seem direct and unmediated. But this view—aside from its overly simplified inference about both current and Victorian sexualities—obscures Ruskin’s radically metamorphic vision in which the ostensible core identity is as mercurial as any, because it too is established through reiterated acts.
“Engaging Children for the Christmas Pantomime at the Drury Lane Theatre.”
The Illustrated London News 51 (December 7, 1867): 612.