2. "Pretty Frou-Frou" Goes Demon Dancing: Performing Species and Gender in Ruskin's Science

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“Pretty Frou-Frou”
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Performing Species and Gender in Ruskin’s Science

Athletic dancers at the Gaiety Theatre and the French play *Frou-Frou* (1867) might seem odd vehicles for the reconciliation of art and science, but Ruskin describes both for his Oxford students in *The Eagle’s Nest: Ten Lectures on the Relation of Natural Science to Art* (1872). He uses these theatrical performances and their audience’s reactions to illustrate the importance of gender-coded qualities such as appreciation and sympathy, which he sees as vital for audiences, artists, and scientists alike. *The Eagle’s Nest* and Ruskin’s other books on science—*Love’s Meinie* (1873–1881), *Proserpina* (1875–1886), and *Deucalion* (1875–1883)—raise basic questions for the Victorians and for us, such as, What is science? How does scientific knowledge relate to aesthetic knowledge? To identity performance and to ethics? To ontology and epistemology?

Ruskin’s contemporaries John Stuart Mill, John Henry Newman, and Matthew Arnold each urge universities to teach science, ethics and aesthetics, or the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, concerns that go back as far at least as Plato’s *Republic.* For Ruskin, these three categories overlap, and with their merger comes a concurrent blending of seemingly separate epistemological and ontological classifications. Ruskin’s great skill at minute observation and his genius for vivid particularity in describing what he sees serve
him just as well in botany and geology as in art and theater. Famously he declared as a young man that art should follow nature, a position he held throughout his life (3.624); similarly, he wants science to operate as a kind of reverence for nature both in choosing it as its topic of study and in proceeding without harm. If pursued in such reverential fashion, both science and art will respond ethically.

When Ruskin tells his Oxford students in *The Eagle’s Nest*, “you will never love art well until you love what it mirrors better” (22.153), he builds upon his belief that aesthetics depends on accurate, empirical scientific knowledge imbued with a kind of mythic animation of the natural world, and that the methods of both art and science require that we submit ourselves to the topic we study (22.150). This approach is not typical either for artists or for scientists. Critics have rightly noted that Ruskin’s natural history is old-fashioned even among Victorians. He disputes some of the greatest scientific innovators of his time, such as Charles Darwin and John Tyndall. However, his mythological approach to knowledge has some surprisingly radical side-effects: he creates an alternative science that is both feminized and performative. As a by-product of Ruskin’s effort to devise a different kind of science from his contemporaries, he undermines the gender hierarchy that partially constitutes Victorian science and he emphasizes the fluidity of epistemological categories through performed identity. He also calls upon theatrical examples to prove his point.

It has been well documented that within Victorian culture, science stands in gendered opposition to the Nature it studies. In contrast, Ruskin feminizes science. Most simply, in his “grammars” of botany and ornithology, as he called *Proserpina* and *Love’s Meinie* (25.xxx), as well as in his books on geology and mineralogy, *Deucalion* and *Ethics of the Dust* (1866), Ruskin includes women as active participants in scientific inquiry, appealing to authorities they would know and using arguments designed (rather condescendingly) to appeal to them. He also attacks violent and intrusive aspects of traditional science that have been gender-coded as masculine; he offers instead a gentle and frankly more passive science based on quiet, sympathetic observation, a science which corresponds to stereotypically feminine characteristics. In a sense, this perspective suggests not only that Ruskin encourages women to become scientists, but also that he encourages scientists to become (or at least to act like) women. Even more surprisingly he revises Darwinian evolution, which depends upon deadly competition for resources and for females, into a mythic principle of metamorphosis that Ruskin identifies as feminine. Ruskin expresses the transmutation of species in language suggesting that one species performs another. 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. He renames botanical orders according to the names of women in Shakespeare’s plays, classifying plants according to characteristics that reflect on what Ruskin sees as their moral bearing. Even flowers perform their species identity in Ruskin’s view, establishing their ethos through action-read-as-language rather than, as in more acceptable botanical classifications that rely on form, through origin or heredity.

The most subtle and most pervasive feminization of science comes from Ruskin’s placing all animals under the syncretic and formative power of the Greek goddess Athena as part of a system of natural hieroglyphs, in which every living and non-living object represents something else. I have argued extensively in the final two chapters of Ruskin’s Mythic Queen that Ruskin feminizes both metaphor and language through his use of mythology in the Ethics of the Dust and The Queen of the Air; my chapter here builds on my work in that book. An aspect of learning to decipher this language of nature is to study what in The Queen of the Air Ruskin calls “living hieroglyphs” or “Words of God” (the snakes, birds, crystals, and flowers Ruskin analyzes in his scientific texts). Empirically and appreciatively observing how the living signifiers move or grow or die leads to an understanding of what they mean. For Ruskin, “it is not the arrangement of new systems, not the discovery of new facts, which constitutes the man of science, but the submission to an eternal system” (22.150). Because he feminizes language in The Queen of the Air by (among other things) making it the province of Athena, and because scientific study is a mode of reading Athena’s natural hieroglyphics, science is feminized, too. Since Ruskin rejects the search for origin and focuses instead always on things as they change and what they represent at that moment, it is as though the world performs itself for him. The scientist is like the sympathetic, receptive audience or spectator at a play that the universe puts on. Under Athena’s rule, everything personifies something else; in nature’s play of signifiers, we can just sit back and watch the show of eternal signification.

**Women in Ruskin’s Science**

Technologies that ravage the landscape have long been figured as male: the common image of “raping the earth” expresses this tradition. Even pure science—exclusive of technological application—has generally pictured its object of study as feminine. Certainly Darwin follows this convention in The Origin
of Species, where he personifies Nature as female, and other instances abound. This construction of science and scientists as male and the subject they study as female implies not only bipolar opposition but also a power dynamic. Critics particularly point to Francis Bacon, founder of empiricism, who spoke of science as binding Nature and all her children to service and making her a slave (Mellor 305).6 Ludmilla Jordanova cites an iconographic example: the late-nineteenth-century statue in the Paris medical faculty of a robed woman with exposed breasts removing her veil, called Nature Unveiling Herself before Science, implies an erotics of gender hierarchy in scientific culture (87).

There is also a theatrical aspect to Victorian medical science, most literally manifested in the operating theater, in which a doctor performs an operation before an audience of eager students; the oldest surviving operating theater (in use from 1822 to 1847) is St. Thomas’s, where all the patients for these public surgeries were women and all the doctors and medical students were men.7 Even when scientific inquiry involves no cruelty to organic creatures and no plunder of the earth, the controlling metaphor of the Rational conquering the Mysterious, of the quest to penetrate the unknown and unseen, contributes to the stereotype of male scientist mastering female nature.

Substantial research suggests that nineteenth-century science regarded women as not only more closely tied to nature than men, but also so inferior to men as to be almost a different species, less evolved, not fully human.8 Londa Schiebinger points out that most European visual depictions of apes were of females, and that debates about whether apes could be educated paralleled those about women and Negroes, suggesting the liminal position all three groups held in Victorian scientific imagination (186). Darwin would not be so sloppy as to hint that women belong to a different species; Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer usually present women’s supposedly lower development in terms of their being child-like rather than animalistic. Woman is “intermediate between the child and the man” (Charles Darwin 717). In other words, because women generally do not grow as big or as hairy as men, they have appeared to these thinkers to remain less fully developed: the male appearance is considered the appropriate adult human state, while the smaller, less hirsute female appearance seems immature. The need for women’s arrested development was explained in reproductive terms: the energy required to come to full maturity was necessarily spent producing and nurturing young (Charles Darwin 295–96). But, like Freud, other Victorians managed to suggest that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” so that a less developed human is a less evolved and a less human one, after all.9 In each of these examples, women are understood by Victorian scientists to be closer than man to nature.10
Ruskin’s writing undermines the general Victorian hierarchy of masculine science over feminine nature. He redefines science as an exercise in wonder at nature rather than control over nature. Ruskin rejected those aspects of Victorian science and technology that were tied to aggression, to imperialism, to control, to mastery over nature, to greed that would result in bad stewardship of the earth, or to harsh use of colonial women and children (Sawyer 1985, 272). Whereas the early-nineteenth-century scientist Humphrey Davy applauded chemistry for inventing gunpowder (Mellor 292), Ruskin cites the power to blow up people as an example of precisely how modern science and industry have failed (34, 314). Ruskin loathed dissection to learn anatomy for either “a young boy, or girl” (22.233) and hated vivisection for any scientific purpose. He named the university’s decision to allow vivisection in Oxford laboratories as his reason for resigning the Slade professorship (Rosenberg 211). He disdained materialist science or “nescience” (22.130) that kills birds or insects in order to study them, and reviled technology that pollutes as it harnesses nature’s power. A spiritual or mythic science, science grounded in love of beauty rather than in its denial, would conserve rather than exploit (Sawyer 1985, 272). In short, he proposes a scientific approach in which the scientist, as nature’s non-intrusive, respectful observer, correlates to the audience’s proper role in watching a theatrical performance: appreciative, supportive, and sympathetic.

An example of this relationship between theater and science comes in *The Eagle’s Nest*. Ruskin describes having just gone to see the French play *Frou-Frou* (1869) by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, which he saw in a French-language London production at the Gaiety Theater on January 26, 1872. Nicknamed “Frou-Frou” for the sound her silk dress makes when it rustles, the vivacious main character Gilberte and her virtuous sister strike Ruskin with painful sympathy:

The most complete rest and refreshment I can get, when I am overworked, in London . . . is in seeing a French play. But the French act so perfectly that I am obliged to make sure beforehand that all is to end well, or it is as bad as being helplessly present at some real misery.

I was beguiled the other day, by seeing announced as a “Comédie,” into going to see “Frou-Frou.” Most of you probably know that the three first of its five acts are comedy, or at least playful drama, and that it plunges down, in the two last, to the sorrowfullest catastrophe of all conceivable—though too frequent in daily life—in which irretrievable grief is brought about by the passion of a moment, and the ruin of all that she loves, caused by the heroic error of an entirely good and unselfish person. The sight of
it made me thoroughly ill, and I was not myself again for a week. (22.173–74)

Ruskin goes on to wonder how it is that people can “endure such an action before them of a sorrow so poignant” without being pierced with feeling (22.174). He finds his answer in one young French woman’s response that the play is sad, yes, but “how pretty Frou-Frou looks in her silk dress” (22.174). Ruskin’s worry that audiences focus on fashion rather than the tragedy is well founded, since all we remember of this play he found so moving, 135 years later, is the English adjective “frou-frou,” meaning excessively frilly.13 But Ruskin’s point in describing this emotionless audience reaction in The Eagle’s Nest is that it parallels what is wrong in science. Such “apathy checks us in our highest spheres of thought, and chills our most solemn purposes” (22.174). The problem is that scientists do not feel sympathy with and admiration for what they study, but feel only curiosity and ambition. “The insatiableness and immodesty of Science” is “perilous” because it “tempts us through our very virtues” (22.175). He wants scientists to avoid vanity, but fears that as “every day [we] are more passionate in discovering,—more violent in competition,” are we not also “every day more cold in admiration, and more dull in reverence?” (22.176). By imagining a reverential science that values life and champions meticulous but passive observation of nature, rather than dominates or destroys it, Ruskin subverts the masculine/feminine hierarchy that partly constitutes Victorian scientific culture.14

In The Stones of Venice (1851–53), written long before Ruskin’s angriest diatribes against contemporary scientists in the 1870s and 1880s, Ruskin describes two kinds of knowledge-seekers, the scientist and the artist; Robert Hewison identifies the artistic perceiving man as Ruskin the naturalist (176).

The thoughtful man is gone far away to seek; but the perceiving man must sit still, and open his heart to receive. The thoughtful man is knitting and sharpening himself into a two-edged sword, wherewith to pierce. The perceiving man is stretching himself into a four cornered sheet, wherewith to catch. (11.52)

Ruskin presents both men positively, but he represents their opposition through sexual imagery. Given the gender polarity conventionally assigned the pairs of terms that Ruskin includes (active/passive, seeking/sitting, sword/sheet, pierce/catch) and given Ruskin’s choice of other words associated with the feminine that he gives to the perceiving man (open, heart, receive), the artist or perceiving naturalist becomes feminized within this dyad. This feminine
type is Ruskin’s model for scientists who perceive without piercing; who need no phallic swords or dissection tools or engines of war; and who open their hearts to receive the knowledge nature provides. And again, the parallel between a good scientist and a good audience is already at play: sitting still, opening one’s heart, receiving the message, and catching (the jokes).

Ruskin also feminizes science by removing scientific education from an exclusively masculine province; by constructing a female audience within his scientific prose; by teaching science to girls at the forward-looking Winnington School; and by often lecturing to women on scientific topics. He repeatedly comments that his books on botany and ornithology are for young people, explicitly including girls (25.35, 413, 45, 483, 504). He writes a mineralogy textbook for “little housewives” (Ethics of the Dust, discussed in chapter 3), despite the fact that mineralogy was not typically seen as a subject of study for the female sex. An additional way in which Ruskin endeavors to include women in scientific study is to quote profusely from botanical authorities that women readers would know and find non-threatening. The source of this kind that he most frequently alludes to (albeit condescendingly) is Lindley’s Ladies’ Botany, and on more than one occasion he refers to “Aunt Judy” (naturalist and children’s author Juliana Gatty), whose 1859 Aunt Judy’s Tales were well known. By giving authorities like these almost equal footing with Linnaeus, Ruskin undermines the privilege that the “master” texts (aimed at and written by men) normally have, especially since in this case the standard authorities are by far the more respected, for good reason. He also implicitly gives an aura of feminine authority to scientific inquiry by subordinating empirical knowledge to mythical, so that he invokes Proserpina, Demeter, Athena, Iris, and the Egyptian Neith as authorizing his scientific texts.15

Despite the patronizing tone Ruskin often uses when directly addressing his female readers and listeners in his scientific treatises, the mere fact that he includes them at all is significant. An example is a lecture in Deucalion on gems called “The Iris of the Earth,” where he urges women to be tabernacles, to adorn themselves wisely with jewels. Here women establish their identity as holy temples through appropriate costume and performance of the scientific principles he has outlined: reverence for and conservation of the earth that produced such gemstones and wearing the gems out of an appreciation for both their beauty and their significance rather than through a superficial desire for status. As Paul Sawyer points out, Ruskin uses his “characteristic tone of saccharine condescension” when speaking to young women (1985, 27n). Yet by constructing the readers of Deucalion as women, Ruskin alters the notion that geology—or any science—is the exclusive province of men.
The effort is compromised by his patronizing attitude and by the sudden address of this particular lecture, on jewelry, to women, when the lectures in Deucalion on glacial movement are addressed to a universal (and thus silently understood as male) reader. However, even in The Eagle’s Nest, his Oxford lectures of 1872 reconciling science and art, where the audience is specifically identified as male, Ruskin conjures the image of women as successfully engaging in scientific investigations. He requires his male undergraduate listeners to imagine two young women resolute in pursuit of astronomy, and he applauds the one who braves catching a cold in the observatory to view the night sky (22.141–43). Despite his grating sweetness in referring to the starry-eyed girls, he puts them in the masculine preserve of the observatory, where serious astronomical observation takes place; that the Victorians saw this as a men’s sanctuary is clear also from The Mill on the Floss, in which George Eliot depicts Maggie’s assumption that all astronomers hate women and refuse to allow them into their “high towers” because “if the women came there they might talk and hinder them from looking at the stars” (162). Moreover, Ruskin speaks of his girl astronomers in the all-male classrooms of Oxford, where he indoctrinates the young college men toward acceptance of female scientists.

Ruskin defines scientific activity as suitable for women; nevertheless, he retains the traditional sense that the material studied is feminine, complicating his diffusion of the rigid gender hierarchy he writes against. For example, he names his book on botany Proserpina and then claims that every young woman is Proserpina (25.435), indicating every girl’s right to study science and simultaneously every girl’s identity with the topic itself; young women are both subject and object of botanical inquiry. He thus intensifies the convention that positions women closer than men to nature. He repeatedly identifies women as women with birds, flowers, and gems. These are entirely traditional identifications; for example, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, calling a young woman a “bird” goes back to the fourteenth century. Naming a girl a “jewel” or a “flower” is just as trite. But Ruskin makes unusual use of the convention, because these traditionally feminine objects are exactly those he examines in his natural histories and encourages women to examine, too. Science as the empirical study of these objects becomes for women a kind of ontology, as they study the nature of their own being. The clearest example of how he redoubles women’s connection to the material studied is his description of the swallow from Love’s Meinie, an ornithological incarnation of the ideal housewife in “Of Queens’ Gardens.”

When describing the swallow’s virtues, Ruskin echoes that essay from
Sesame and Lilies (1865), Ruskin’s best seller and a volume often presented to young women as a gift (18.5; Helsinger 1983, 96). First, here is the passage from “Of Queens’ Gardens”:

This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as . . . the hostile society of the outer world is allowed . . . to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home. . . . But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth, . . . so far it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of Home.

And wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is. (18.122)

Kate Millett’s attack on Ruskin in Sexual Politics has prompted decades of debate between critics who, agreeing with Millett, consider Ruskin’s mythic vision to limit women’s role and those who consider the essay to widen women’s sphere of action by redefining domestic power more broadly. Complicating either conclusion about “Of Queens’ Gardens” are the parallels between the wife and the swallow in Love's Meinie. The bird seems always to be female:

Understand the beauty of the bird which lives with you in your own houses, and which purifies for you, from its insect pestilence, the air that you breathe. Thus the sweet domestic thing has done, for men, at least these four thousand years. She has been their companion, not of the home merely, but of the hearth, and the threshold; . . . showing better her loving-kindness by her faithful return. . . . [I]n her feeble presence, the cowardice, or the wrath, of sacrilege has changed into the fidelities of sanctuary. (25.71)

Like the “true wife,” the “sweet domestic” swallow guards the home, the hearth, the threshold. Both keep their homes for men, and have done so for as long as there have been women and birds. The swallow purifies the home from pestilence, cowardice, wrath, and sacrilege; likewise, the woman protects from injury, terror, doubt and division. The woman is at home in the wilderness, the wild creature is at home in a house. Like any “true wife,” the bird is a faithful companion, loving and kind. In making the swallow so startlingly like the celebrated woman from “Of Queens’ Gardens,”
Ruskin does more than emphasize attractively domestic qualities in the feral bird: he mythologizes both real women and real birds, investing each with far more power than a practical Victorian audience might willingly admit. He also exalts the notion of identity between observer and observed, between the female naturalist and the objects of nature she studies, foreshadowing such twentieth-century notions of feminist science as expressed by Nobel Prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock in becoming one with what she studied. In another sense, as the woman becomes the swallow, so the bird becomes the housewife, playing her domestic role, just as later we will see Ruskin portraying flowers in the roles of Shakespeare’s Juliet and Viola. Women’s special connection to birds or flowers does not disable their understanding. For Ruskin, disconnection and objective distance from the material studied are more debilitating to genuine knowledge than a sympathetic bond.

Evolution and Metamorphosis

Refusing to recognize Darwinian evolution that occurs meaninglessly through cut-throat competition, Ruskin seeks instead an alternative paradigm that allows for transformations between species to occur without competition and with transcendent significance. Ruskin accomplishes his revision of Darwin by advocating a science based on traditionally feminine principles that substitute metamorphosis for evolution.

Natural selection depends on excess population and on rabid competition to produce conditions in which only the “fittest” survive; Ruskin exiles such a scenario to a nightmare landscape exemplified in the barren, choking brambles he describes at Brantwood (25.293). Unlike Darwin or Malthus, for Ruskin there can be no excess population when, aphoristically, “there is no wealth but life” (17.105). He disapproves of competition in any form, even among students (22.243). He offers instead—as I shall show in a moment—a rich world of chaotic flux, traditionally characterized as feminine. The identification of competition as masculine is clear from “Of Queens’ Gardens,” where women guide men away from the fatal competition of political economy. Because women “enter no contest,” they remain morally untainted by the “inevitable error” that corrupts men, who must enter the rough world of the free marketplace (18.122).

Critics often talk about Ruskin’s disagreement with Darwin’s ideas. He repeatedly makes fun of Darwin’s theory of evolution, much to his friends’ and editors’ embarrassment (25.xlvi). In the overtly scientific books, Love’s
Meinie and Proserpina, Ruskin’s speculations on the descent of various plants contain numerous low jokes and irritated outbursts about the theory of evolution that support the critical commonplace that Ruskin opposed Darwin (25.263, 268, 291, 301). But despite Ruskin’s often deserved reputation as anti-Darwinist, his position is not so simple, and occasionally he admits that Darwin is right. For example, in The Queen of the Air, Ruskin claims that his own theories “are in nowise antagonistic to the theories which Mr. Darwin’s unwearied and unerring investigations are every day rendering more probable” (19.358n). Even in Proserpina Ruskin uses Darwin to uphold his point when it is convenient; for example, he twice respectfully refers to Darwin’s work with carnivorous orchids as an authoritative source for his own analysis (25.224, 25.546). In fact, Darwin epitomizes what Ruskin demands from scientists: a meticulous observer who loves the profusion of nature without exploiting it, who records resemblances in richly metaphorical language (Beer 62). But after claiming no antagonism to Darwin’s “unerring investigations,” Ruskin continues: “The aesthetic relations of species are independent of their origin” (19.358n). He shifts the significance of species from their origin through natural selection to their mythic or aesthetic or moral meaning, which for Ruskin is the same thing.

Why does Ruskin display such ambivalence toward Darwin’s ideas? For two reasons: aesthetics and spirituality. Darwin’s discussion of the peacock provokes two of Ruskin’s most blatant attacks in both Love’s Meinie and Proserpina (25.36, 25.262–63). To Ruskin, explaining those fabulous feathers as the result of generations of sexual selection misses the point by distracting the observer’s attention away from what is really important about the peacock, its beauty. Far different from the creationist arguments brought against Darwin by Samuel Wilberforce and others, Ruskin's objections to natural selection stem from his sense of aesthetics as moral: natural selection seems ugly and meaningless, while for Ruskin the world’s beauty manifests intensely felt spiritual truths. Although Ruskin lost his evangelical certitude as he matured, his belief in a direct correspondence between material and spiritual beauty remained, infusing empirical study with a kind of religious meaning. Darwinian correlations among species depend on mere descent, on accidents of time, and on deathly competition, not on mythic significance.

Ruskin cannot deny evolution through natural selection on empirical grounds. Like Darwin he knows that organic forms shift continually. But he is hostile to a science that degrades the interpretation of these variations into a mere quest for beginnings. He alters the explanation of continual change in natural forms from linear evolution to free-flowing metamorphosis. Gillian Beer has pointed out that Darwin draws on the notion of metamorphosis
to establish the idea of evolution through natural selection (104–45), so in a sense Ruskin reverses Darwin’s revision. In providing a mythic alternative to evolution, Ruskin unwittingly feminizes it; mysterious shape-shifting has long had feminine associations in Western culture.

The wifely swallow from Love’s Meinie serves as an example of Ruskinian flux as opposed to Darwinian evolution. Ruskin describes the swallow metamorphosing from one creature to another:

You can only rightly describe the bird by the resemblances, and images of what it seems to have changed from,—then adding the fantastic and beautiful contrast of the unimaginable change. It is an owl that has been trained by the Graces. It is a bat that loves the morning light. It is the aerial reflection of a dolphin. It is the tender domestication of a trout.22 (25.57)

The metamorphic quality of Ruskin’s description self-consciously invokes evolutionary change, only to debunk it a moment later: “the transformations believed in by the anatomist are as yet proved true in no single instance, and in no substance, spiritual or material”; Ruskin opts instead for a mythological understanding of animal significance: “the transformations believed in by the mythologist are at least spiritually true; you cannot too carefully trace or too accurately consider them” (25.57). The parallel structure of the prose here gives the two kinds of transformation equal weight, even though Ruskin knows perfectly well that, though not yet proven, Darwin’s theory of evolution is very likely (19.358n). His point is not to promote curmudgeonly disapproval of new-fangled science, but to enjoin his reader to love and appreciate the natural beauty around him or her: “I cannot too often, or too earnestly, urge you not to waste your time in guessing what animals may once have been, while you remain in nearly total ignorance of what they are” (25.57). Seeing the swallow as potentially owl, bat, dolphin, and trout helps us understand not only the spiritual truths about the swallow, but also that everything can be similarly seen as incipiently something else. Each creature plays at being another, blurring our sense of distinct species as we recognize the startling similitude across previously sturdy boundaries. Since both nature and the principle of change are typically figured as feminine, to picture nature in constant chaotic flux (as opposed to linear evolutionary progress) is to intensify the feminine quality of what is already seen as feminine in Western civilization.23 This metamorphic understanding of species identity is in a sense another kind of performance: each aspect of the swallow depends upon how she acts, upon what other creatures she can impersonate rather than on an inherited or inherent essence. The swallow’s seeming metamorphoses are part
of being the bird version of the housewife-queen of the earlier essay. There
Ruskin praises women for their capacity for change.

This notion of the performed fluidity of form as feminine shows up appro-
priately enough in Ruskin’s discussion of water plants in *Proserpina.* The leaves
that remind Ruskin of Persephone’s field of flowers he calls “Arethusan” for
the Sicilian fountain near the site of her abduction. The chief characteristic
of the Arethusan leaves are their capacity for infinite change in form, which
is a traditionally feminine feature, based on the female body’s changing shape
in pregnancy.” Flowers are in rapid, continual flux: “they grow as you draw
them, and will not stay quite the same creatures for a half-an-hour”
(25.252–23), reminding us of what Ruskin says about his maturing young
friend Rose: “children are as bad as clouds at sunrise—golden change—but
change always” (Hilton 2000, 21; *Winnington Letters* 312). This sense that
the universe shifts as Ruskin attempts to record it, even in half an hour, per-
vades the whole of *Proserpina,* reflected in the book’s wild attempts at cod-
ification and cavalier admissions of the impossibility of the task.

For Ruskin, as for Darwin, no species remains fixed. Physical forms shift.
The difference is that while for Darwin the shifting morphology signifies the
species’ origin through natural selection, for Ruskin the shifting morphology
signifies the current moment’s performance of continual metamorphosis. Beauty
resides in the momentary form, for Ruskin every bit as much as for his younger
colleague Walter Pater, whose *The Renaissance* (1873) famously urges read-
ners to refine their aesthetic sense to apprehend each fleeting moment of beauty.
As Ruskin puts it, the aim of the fruit is the flower, not the other way around
(25.250). “How far flowers invite or require, flies to interfere in their family
affairs—which of them are carnivorous and what forms of pestilence or infec-
tion are most favorable to some vegetable and animal growths,” these ques-
tions, typical of Victorian botany, seem obscenely wrong-headed to Ruskin.
He complains, “They will next hear that the rose was made for the canker
and the body of man for the worm” (25.414). He objects not to recognizing
the fact of insects, cankers, and worms, or to empirical evidence of their roles
in plant reproduction and decomposition, but to a science that subordinates
beauty to biological process, and whose greatest metaphor for change relies
on chance and violence. Ruskin prefers the feminine paradigm of free-flow-
ing multiple metamorphoses instantiating species through a moment’s per-
formance that is replete with eternal, mythic significance; he rejects the masculine
paradigm of one-way linear movement of species, focused on a point of ori-
gin, dependent upon fatal combat, disregard for life, and spiritless sexuality.
While Ruskin’s studies of plants and animals react to Darwin and to the Victorian acceptance of evolution, in *Proserpina* Ruskin also responds to the eighteenth-century botanist Carl Linnaeus, abandoning Linnaean method and the great taxonomist’s gender-based hierarchy in plant classification. As with his revision of Darwin, Ruskin’s impetus in rewriting Linnaeus is squeamishness about a taxonomy that focuses on reproductive organs instead of floral beauty. Ruskin turns to myth and to dramatic literature for help in reorganizing botany. By developing a nomenclature that reverses Linnaeus and generally privileges women’s names, Ruskin again unconsciously feminizes science and emphasizes species performance.

Most people who set out to create a new and better terminology expect its success to depend upon its fixity, its reliability, its authoritativeness. Not Ruskin. He pokes fun at Linnaeus (whom Ruskin clearly also respected and borrowed from heavily), by basing his orders and classes and species of flowers on Greek goddesses and Shakespearean heroines, replacing the father of botany with myth, theater, and fictional females. Linnaeus organizes his Orders and Classes on plant morphology; physical similarities demonstrate relatedness. Ruskin, on the other hand, defines his Orders of plants with a play on words: plant orders are like religious orders or orders of knighthood, based on the plants’ symbolic spiritual, ethical, or chivalric qualities, such as grace (26.348). As in *Ethics of the Dust*, in *Proserpina* Ruskin elides scientific education and ethical prescription. He delineates a hierarchy of ideal women very similar to his discussion of literary role models for girls in “Of Queens’ Gardens.” He ranks “levels of loving tempers in Shakespearean wives and maids,” from the most nobly spiritual and greatest to the still completely positive but simplest and most earthly. Isabel, a novice, rises to the top; Viola and Juliet stand at the bottom (25.416–17). The stage heroines give their names to families of flowers in the Order that Ruskin calls Cytherides: Cytherea is a name for Venus; all the flowers in this category are associated with love. The floral families of Viola and Giulietta each share a name with one of Shakespeare’s characters; these two families, made up of violets and pansies, are placed in Cytherides to emphasize their connection to “those who love simply, and to the death” (25.416). Ruskin finds the source for his revised categories in the theater, suggesting that more important than the plants’ biological processes are the meaningful roles that pansies and violets play. What matters is what they signify.

In addition to creating mythic and Shakespearean nomenclature that Victorian women would find more accessible than Linnaeus, Ruskin makes his
botany into an opportunity to preach about ideal characters and behavior for women; he can more successfully control the botanical Viola and Juliet in his prose than his lost almost-fiancée Rose or even his little cousin Lily in real life. The parallel listing again links flowers to females in Ruskin’s world, and shows Ruskin at his most conventionally Victorian in ranking sexless over carnal love. The linkage works both ways, though. While he aims both to include women in scientific study and to preach his ideas of ethical behavior, he suggests that plants (like the birds we discussed in Love’s Meinie) also in some sense “behave” or act. Each entity manifests a sort of ethos that exists, in his view, because it performs in certain ways. This idea is a radical departure from the notion that organisms merely receive a label constituted solely by their appearance or morphology or—worst of all for Ruskin—their origin. Personifying flowers, Ruskin implies that the botanical orders based on girls’ names describe the plants’ significance because of the plants’ own actions. He further implies that such significance or identity could change—indeed must change—if their behavior changes, as over time it will. Such a modification in behavior would require another revision in nomenclature and thus in species designation. The interchangeability of action and language moves us into the realm of a performative science, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

This is very different from Linnaeus, who not only uses plants’ reproductive characteristics as the primary method of classification, but also—in contrast to Ruskin—describes plants’ sexual relations with great gusto, although always through metaphors that replicated his society’s gender relations. For example, for Linnaeus plants are not just male or female, but husbands and wives, who wear wedding gowns; more suggestively “flower petals spread as ‘bridal beds,’ . . . while the curtain of the corolla” lends “privacy to the amorous newlyweds” (Schiebinger 23); and the marriages are either “public or clandestine” (Schiebinger 25). Likewise, Erasmus Darwin viewed the plant world through the lens of human sexuality, as in his steamy botanical poem The Loves of the Plants (1789), where flowers indulge in wanton passion, incest, and suicide.

In response, Ruskin embarks on his project of creating new terms because the old ones are “apt to be founded on some unclean or debasing association, so that to interpret them is to defile the reader’s mind.” He continues, “I will give no instance; too many will at once occur to any learned reader, and the unlearned I need not vex with so much as one” (25.201). He even scruples against pointing out when he has changed the authoritative term, so as not to call attention to the old corrupting name, even making up new ones in cases where he considered the old ones acceptable, to
 prevents arousing curiosity and pointing out the offending terms (25.202). Botany’s emphasis on sexuality disturbs Ruskin, and his new system silently “corrects” it. Although his motivation stems from personal and cultural sexual repression, Ruskin more urgently sees the change in names as a progressive one that will enable him to teach botany to girls. In a letter to Daniel Oliver (herbarian and librarian at Kew Gardens) Ruskin complained that existing botanical nomenclature “is in many ways disgusting and cannot be translated to girls” (Birch 1981, 152). Ruskin’s fanciful rejection of Linnaeus’s botanical sexuality allows him to educate boys and girls identically in their scientific studies, as I discuss in chapter 3.

Ruskin revises an even more significant structural aspect of Linnaeus’s taxonomy. Linnaeus defines Orders of plants by characteristics of the flowers’ pistils or female parts, and defines Classes (above Orders in Linnaeus’s taxonomy) on the characteristics of flowers’ stamens, or male parts, resulting in a botanical reflection of eighteenth-century European gender hierarchy (Schiebinger 17). Because Ruskin avoids classifying kinds of plants along sexual lines, he resists inscribing in his botanical system the same hierarchy that Linnaeus has. Ruskin uses linguistic gender in assigning flowers Latin names to create a syrupy compliment to women: masculine endings only indicate a flower’s strength and endurance; feminine endings may also be used of strong flowers, but they must also be good and/or pretty to achieve a feminine name. Existing flower names that are also already established names for women “always signify flowers of great beauty, and noble historic association” (25.345). In his effort to avoid reproductive discussion, Ruskin also reverses Linnaeus hierarchy by ranking the female higher than the male.

Proserpina is amazingly fragmented, with chapters that start sometimes twenty years before they finish, often recording their own evolution—including dates—as much as any subject matter. Just as the natural world that Ruskin tries to define is always in flux, so his “grammar of botany” is a process rather than a product (25.216). The instability of Ruskin’s system coupled with the fragmentation of the text undercuts not just his own classifications, but all scientific classifications; as he says in Deucalion, “no existing scientific classification can possibly be permanent” (26.418). To expose flaws in existing scientific systems, Ruskin performs what Kirchhoff calls “systematic desystematizing” (1977, 257). This scientific deconstruction produces a text that remains always unfinished; the nomenclature never gels. Ironically, like Darwin’s tangled bank, Ruskin’s depiction of botany produces more ideas and images than can possibly survive in a single text. The result is a dizzying picture of nature that is as untamable and unstable and pro-
lific as Ruskin himself. But in that superabundant chaos lies the opportunity both to revise science as feminine and to recognize that the natural world defies notions of fixed species, permanent categories, or stable identities. Instead, Ruskin creates a performative science in which plants’ and animals’ identities depend upon what roles they play.

ATHENA’S NATURAL HIEROGLYPHS AND THE PLAY OF SIGNIFICATION

Ruskin subverts the Victorian sense of science as masculine more subtly by reading the objects of Naturalist study mythically, as living, acting hieroglyphs within the Greek goddess Athena’s “natural language.” Finding that Athena ultimately controls science through language should not surprise us since, in The Eagle’s Nest, Ruskin specifically identifies Sophia—the Christian abstraction of Athena—as controlling both science and art (22.132–34).

The Athena that Ruskin creates in The Queen of the Air governs language in several ways: she is goddess of the air, personifying and controlling the medium through which sound waves and thus spoken discourse travels; she wields “formative” or syncretic power, bringing together like and unlike elements to build crystals, to give life, to make metaphors, to bind signifier to signified; and she controls a system of “natural hieroglyphs.” In Ruskin’s thinking, each corporeal animal is a hieroglyph: real living, breathing, flying, crawling creatures are signs; the “grammars of zoology” that followed The Queen of the Air during the next fifteen years interpret Athena’s hieroglyphics. Every item in Ruskin’s hieroglyphic code, in which serpents and birds are “living Words,” is “wholly under the rule of Athena” (19.345). His most vivid example is the snake, which Ruskin describes as “that running brook of horror on the ground”; the serpent evokes “horror . . . of the myth, not of the creature” (19.362). It is “a divine hieroglyph of the demoniac power of the earth. . . . As the bird is the clothed power of the air, so this is the clothed power of the dust; as the bird is the symbol of the spirit of life, so this of the grasp and sting of death” (19.362–63).

Ruskin thus feminizes signification itself, not only by giving Athena governance over the “living hieroglyph,” but also and more importantly by having Athena’s formative power forge the linguistic link between each hieroglyphic signifier and its inevitable signified. Because for Ruskin all living things and natural objects are signs in Athena’s grand system of hieroglyphics, and because scientific investigation is in part an effort to decipher
their meaning, Ruskin’s sciences on any topic are already positioned under Athena’s control. But even more to the point, two of his science books are about animals specifically identified as Athena’s hieroglyphs in *The Queen of the Air: Love’s Meinie* on birds and *Deucalion’s* chapter “The Living Wave” on snakes. Furthermore, the crystals in the *Ethics of the Dust* (and the jewels from “The Iris in the Earth” in *Deucalion*) are the province of Neith, whom Ruskin identifies as the Egyptian Athena.

Flowers ruled by Proserpina also fit into Athena’s hieroglyphic code. One way Ruskin manages this is to turn flowers into birds and snakes, and vice-versa. For example, he compares blossoms to birds by explaining an etymology for “petalos” in Greek meaning “to fly” “so that you may think of a bird as spreading its petals to the wind” (25.231). He recognizes the fundamentally metamorphic method of his hieroglyphic thinking by quoting Charles Bonnet, the eighteenth-century discoverer of parthenogenesis, to say “sometimes it was difficult to distinguish a cat from a rosebush” (25.220). Ruskin is joking, but he also means it. Athena’s living hieroglyphs shape-shift not only across species, but also from animal to vegetable to mineral and back again. Even in the order of Cytherides (home to all of Shakespeare’s heroines), a serpent influence appears: the Viola Cornuta’s stalk is “thickest in the middle, like a viper.” Its calyx has a “fanged or forked effect; feebly ophidian.” Ruskin sums up this flower by complaining, “On the whole, a plant entirely mismanaging itself,—reprehensible and awkward, with taints of worse than awkwardness; and clearly, no true ‘species,’ but only a link” (25.40–42). The corruption of this flower is not just in its being half violet (or Viola), half pansy (or Juliet), but in its inability to decide if it is a runner or not. Again he identifies the plants by their behavior or performance, not by their hereditary stock or any other traditional Linnaean method of classification. Paradoxically, Ruskin expects his hieroglyphs to incarnate eternal types, so that pansies and violets, as similar as they are, remain distinct; runners should stay runners and not individual stems. He envisions a universe where living signifiers transmute themselves metaphorically rather than physically, where, even while dissolving and reforming, the ideal forms and what they represent are still identifiable. Yet he knows, with his flimsy Darwinian joke about “species” and “link,” that there are no fixed species and that there are myriad links. Ruskin here abominates all things hybrid and mutated and half-evolved, but he evokes them in fascination. His powerful descriptions revel in their existence and in the process of metamorphosis, because finally mutations are hieroglyphs, too.

The serpent ranks as a hieroglyph for Ruskin not only because of its mythic and cultural associations, but also because of its ability to perform symbolic serpent feats. Ultimately, a serpent represents a serpent because it acts like
a serpent: were a serpent to look exactly the same—having inherited precisely the same physique and claiming exactly the same descent—but were to behave in some other fashion, for Ruskin it would not represent “serpent.” It is the snake’s observed action that earns it Ruskin’s horror and admiration, not its origin in the primordial slime—or as he calls it, the “calcareous earth” (19.359). Nor is he interested in its originary source of energy, as other scientists would be, which as he acknowledges in The Eagle’s Nest is the heat and light of the sun. What interests Ruskin, as he describes a “small steel-grey serpent” by the Lake of Brienz (22.196), is the snake’s “exquisite grace, strength, and precision of the action” that the animal displays as “[w]ith an almost imperceptible motion, it began to withdraw itself beneath a cluster of leaves” (22.197):

> Without in the least hastening its action, it gradually concealed the whole of its body. . . . I saw what I thought was the glance of another serpent, . . . but it was the same one, which . . . used its utmost agility to spring into the wood; and with so instantaneous a flash of motion, that I never saw it leave the covert, and only caught the gleam of light as it glided away into the copse. (22.197)

Ruskin’s fascination with the serpent, as with the Japanese jugglers and the little dancer with the donkey I discussed in chapter 1, is with its skill. Even though the snake is not on any stage, not acting with an audience in mind, still Ruskin reacts to its precision, strength, and grace in action with the same tribute he gave to performers who demonstrate similarly astonishing talents. Just as the swallow establishes its ethos of wholesome domesticity though its behavior, so the snake establishes its ethos of mystery and unnaturalness though the execution of its seemingly unaccountable motion. Living hieroglyphs gain their mythic meaning through performance.

As with the codification of flower names and their mythic significances in Proserpina, the correlation of gemstones with moral qualities in Deucalion builds a readable language of “natural hieroglyphs,” like that described in The Queen of the Air. When women dress themselves in the right jewels (which are not so much the gold, crystal, and onyx of the subtitle as moral characteristics, such as charity or grace, as in Proserpina), they take on an important role. The tabernacle they should decorate turns out to be both their own bodies, equally with those of their “poor sisters” (26.196). As Sawyer explains,

> In the logic of the lecture, jewels are the primary signifier that renders three
other systems interchangeable—women, the nation (Tabernacles), the natural order. In all these ‘grammars,’ and in so much of Ruskin’s thought, the unacknowledged wish appears to be to control the world through signs, which are made ontologically primary to the things they signify. (275n)

Again women perform both the subject and object of study. Like the crystals personified as little girls and the little girls themselves as readers of crystal-signs both within and without the Ethics of the Dust, like the women-as-flowers and readers of flower-signs in Proserpina, like the wives and swallows in Sesame and Lilies and Love’s Meinie, in Deucalion the reader, constructed here specifically as female, cannot stand outside the system to read from a meta-position, but is already implicated in it as another sign. Sawyer suggests that the psychological motivation for creating these signs is a wish to control (or at least to organize) the outer world through them. This is certainly true for Ruskin, as it is to some extent for all of us. It is the fiction that language offers us; we structure disorder and pretend to control it by naming what we experience and manipulating the names. Since for Ruskin a species achieves its species identity through action and the nomenclature must adapt, action and language become identical, bringing us vertiginously into the realm of a performative science.

Ruskin’s rhapsody on the swallow and his glorification of the wife in such similar terms sometimes backfire and belittle women rather than elevate them. But his syntheses emphasize not only that Ruskin sees everything hieroglyphically, but also that for him these likened terms are again interchangeable, reminding us of Fischer-Lichte’s insight into the semiotics of the theater, in which actors are signs of signs, and so on. For Ruskin, a swallow is a woman; we have seen that a woman is a tabernacle (26.195–96); clearly a tabernacle is a church (26.196); a church is a crystal (18.320–24); a crystal is a girl (18.271, 221); a girl is a flower (25.388); a flower is a snake (25.221, 283); a snake is a bird (26.308–309). The circle of slipping signifiers works in any other direction, and the distinction between girl and woman is not significant here: for example, a woman is also a flower (18.142), a bird is a flower (25.242), a flower is a crystal (25.250), and so on in dizzyingly metamorphic vision of the world as each unit acts like, performs, or becomes the next. Since all these objects, including women, are interchangeable signs, not only can everything be seen as performing something else, but also everything, including girls and women and swallows, is a hieroglyph in Athena’s language. To pursue botany, mineralogy, geology, ornithology, or astronomy rightly, in Ruskin’s view, brings the scientist to a better understanding of each hieroglyph studied and to a better chance of learning to read its (interchangeable) meaning. 39
Conclusion

Ruskin’s view of nature as revealing spiritual truth sounds at times like Natural Theology, which reads nature as God’s other scripture. This movement was vanquished by mainstream Victorian science. Ruskin, like Tennyson and so many others, had already lost his childhood belief to the clink of geologists’ “dreadful Hammers” (36.115) even before *The Origin of Species* (1859) was published and rocked the Christian world’s religious confidence. Nevertheless, in rejecting so much that he felt was wrong about his century’s science and technology, Ruskin did not simply return to the position of Natural Theology. Despite his interpreting the living hieroglyphs as “Words of God” and despite the often reactionary tone Ruskin takes regarding Darwin and others, his late scientific studies do not evince an orthodox Christianity; his luminous hieroglyphs have too much independent life and are too pagan to be satisfying evidence for the argument from design. Instead of religion, Ruskin uses notions of myth and performance to interpret transcendent truths that he feels materialist science necessarily overlooks.

I have argued that for Ruskin the feminized scientist plays the role of the appreciative audience at nature’s play, but he uses a theatrical analogy to put the scientist on stage, too. The opening chapter of *The Eagle’s Nest* describes a dance performance Ruskin attended at the Gaiety Theatre about two years earlier, and the purpose of his story is to point out that the great skill, artistry, imagination, and good can be subverted, used for what he sees as ultimately an evil purpose:

>The supposed scene of the dance was Hell, which was painted in the background with its flames. The dancers were supposed to be demons, and wore black masks, with red tinsel for fiery eyes; the same red light was represented as coming out of their ears also. They began their dance by ascending through the stage on spring trap-doors, which threw them at once ten feet into the air; and its performance consisted in the expression of every kind of evil passion, in frantic excess. (22.133)

Having previously told his sports-prone undergraduates that the opposite of good rowing is not bad rowing, but ignorance of how to row, Ruskin here distinguishes between the wisdom and folly in rowing versus the wisdom and folly in dancing. Unlike rowing, “the folly . . . of dancing does not consist in not being able to dance, but in dancing well with an evil purpose; and the better the dancing, the worse the result” (22.133). He explains his point:
These demon dancers . . . were earning their bread by severe and honest labor. The skill they possessed could not have been acquired but by great patience and resolute self-denial; and the very power with which they were able to express, with precision, states of evil passion, indicated that they have been brought up in a society which, in some measure, knew evil from good, and which had, therefore, some measure of good in the midst of it. Nay, the farther probability is, that if you inquired into the life of these men, you would find that this demon dance had been invented by some of them with a great imaginative power, and was performed by them not at all in preference of evil, but to meet the demand of a public whose admiration was capable of being excited only by violence of gesture, and vice of emotion. (22.134–35)

The moral point Ruskin makes is obvious: great artistry can be employed for ethically suspect purposes. Although norms change over time (and whatever disturbed Ruskin about this dance might appear very tame in the age of MTV and late-night digital cable), the point that art and ethics messily intertwine remains with us. What Ruskin asks his students and readers is that as scientists, artists, and stage performers, we refuse to devote our best work to evil ends.

In employing mythical and theatrical examples to remake scientific study into a way to read and to appreciate the natural world, to understand and to love it better, to serve it and to preserve it, Ruskin feminizes science. Indeed, Ruskin’s nineteenth-century vision of science presages twentieth-century eco-feminism, which also bases its philosophy on valorizing ancient claims of innate connections between women and the earth. Ruskin’s life-long effort to reconcile science and art culminates in his late “grammars” of ornithology, botany, and mineralogy. That he should try to capture science as his ally is not surprising in a time when science had just become the “new mythology” (Levine 1987, 8). In effect, Ruskin tries to redefine science so that he can pursue it in good conscience. This is what makes it finally feminine, since in his view women are men’s moral guides. In The Laws of Fésole Ruskin declared “all great Art is Praise” (15.351). He picks up the aphorism again and applies it to history in The Bible of Amiens: “all great Art is Praise. So is all faithful History and High Philosophy” (33.29). But what of all great science, of what Victorians still called Natural History and Natural Philosophy? The science Ruskin proposes in these books is a science of praise. As he tells his undergraduates in The Eagle’s Nest, he wishes to teach “to all persons entering life—the power of unselfish admiration” (22.286); here he goes so far as to say that the highest form of charity is justly “giving praise”
Appreciative applause in a theater, too, is a necessary “sign of praise” (17.337). This great task of praise that comprises the work of artists, historians, philosophers, philanthropists, audiences, and scientists, happens also to be that of women. In “Of Queens’ Gardens” Ruskin charges women that their “great function is Praise” (18.122). A science that nurtures and preserves the natural world, that sees beauty without destroying it, that builds upon a sense of identity with rather than antagonism toward nature, that studies nature to understand it and to appreciate it better rather than to enslave it, that praises rather than dissects, this is—in Victorian terms and in the terms Ruskin himself uses—a feminine science.

Throughout Ruskin’s scientific texts, his scrupulously careful empirical appreciation of nature becomes indistinguishable from his technique for remarking with equal meticulousness on art, architecture, or theater. While recognizing the conservatism of Ruskin’s science as he reacts against some of the most significant innovations and discoveries of his time, we must also recognize the progressive and even revolutionary qualities of Ruskin’s scientific thinking: there is first his promotion of women in science through the many avenues discussed here, but also there is the way in which his thinking undermines fixed epistemological and ontological categories, and finally there is the way in which he insists that all modes of intellectual endeavor connect. For Ruskin, actions constitute identity even for non-human species, concern for the environment and for social justice converge, aesthetics cannot retreat from science or vice versa. Nature acts upon scientists who respond as an analytical but reverent audience. Ruskin draws on mythic symbolism to anthropomorphize stones, flowers, and birds; as they perform their roles in a universe burgeoning with metamorphosis, so we learn to perform ours, he hopes, in a better, more compassionate way. But we also learn the fragility of all categories of knowledge and thus of our own ever-shifting identities.
Top: *Beauty and the Beast* at the Princess; middle: *Cinderella* at the Crystal Palace; bottom: *Harlequin, the Children in the Woods, the Old Father Aesop, Cock Robin, and Jenny Wren* at the Adelphi.