

“CHAMELEON” WORDS:
GENDER INFLECTIONS IN RUSKIN’S
AESTHETIC AND SOCIOLOGICAL DISCOURSES

Lesley Higgins

A few words well chosen, and distinguished, will do work that a thousand cannot, when every one is acting, equivocally, in the function of another. Yes; and words, if they are not watched, will do deadly work sometimes.... There are masked words abroad, I say, which nobody understands, but which everybody uses, and most people will also fight for, live for, or even die for, fancying they mean this or that, or the other, of things dear to them: for such words wear chameleon cloaks ... of the colour of the ground of any man’s fancy: on that ground they lie in wait, and rend them with a spring from it.

– John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (18:66)

So prolific are Ruskin’s writings, and so diverse in subject matter, that it is common to work with them in discrete categories: the art theory and criticism, the architectural studies, the social and economic analyses. This essay insists upon the interconnectedness and ideological coherence of his texts in terms of the gender-specific view of the world which buttresses Ruskin’s theories of artistic creativity and social productivity. Although he prided himself on being contradictory rather than consistent in his thinking, aesthetic projects and social criticism alike are informed by (and hope to impose upon the reader) the same insistent gender ideology. Once one realizes the ways in which paradigmatic distinctions between truth and beauty first enunciated in *Modern Painters* are played out – extended and reinscribed – in Ruskin’s sociological discourse (especially *Sesame and Lilies*), the regime of gender difference which he consistently advances – Truth : Male : authority : Mind; Beauty (uneasily): Female : passivity : Body – will become explicit. As the conclusion to *Praeterita* evocatively states, “How things bind and blend themselves together” (Ruskin 35:561).¹