

JOHN RUSKIN'S UNHAPPY MARRIAGE: A HYPOTHESIS

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If his written works were to be the sole basis for judgement, we might conclude that John Ruskin had a heterosexual orientation, an appreciation of female beauty, and a conventionally patriarchal understanding of relations between men and women. But in 1854, after an uncontested legal process, his marriage “or rather show or effigy of marriage ... solemnized or rather profaned between the said John Ruskin and Euphemia Chalmers Gray falsely called Ruskin” was annulled on the grounds that “the said John Ruskin was incapable of consummating the same by reason of incurable impotency” (Lutyens, *Millais* 230).

Tim Hilton gives a concise summary of this historical problem: Ruskin’s “marriage to Effie was to cast a shadow over all of his later life, and indeed over all his biographers’ attempts to explain that life” (Hilton 115). Modern Ruskin biographers have suggested a number of possible explanations for the puzzling circumstances of his marriage, ranging from sexual dysfunction to “a horror of babies” (Lutyens, *Ruskins* 109).¹

Some writers propose a link between the events of Ruskin’s marriage and his later neuropsychiatric illness by citing psychodynamic concepts that associate repressed or distorted sexuality with a predisposition to psychiatric morbidity. The illness itself began with a series of attacks of “madness” or “brain fever,” characterized by various combinations of visual hallucinations, delusions, memory impairment, and altered consciousness, and led on to the severe cognitive disability of his last eleven years. It has usually been interpreted as a major psychiatric disease – bipolar affective disorder (formerly termed manic-depressive psychosis) or schizophrenia.² James Spates contributes to this subcategory of Ruskin scholarship with a recent argument for a diagnosis of Major Depression with Psychotic and Melancholic Features. According to Spates, a conflicted, love-restrained upbringing by his parents was an important factor for the difficulties in his adult relationships as well as his later psychiatric illness (18-58).