

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

Reading honeymoons

If, as Leo Tolstoy famously suggested, narrative interest inheres only in unhappy marriages, this might help to explain why the most famous honeymoon stories are stories about failure. One could come up with a canon of honeymoon narratives, real and fictional, all of which end in disaster. In the realm of fiction, perhaps the place to begin is with the shortest honeymoon: Victor Frankenstein's abortive trip to Évian, where his bride, Elizabeth Lavenza, is murdered and probably raped by the monster as Victor ponders the Alpine scenery that was to become so central to Victorian ideals of the wedding journey. The richly realistic honeymoon in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is also, in conventional terms, a failure, as the newly married Dorothea Casaubon is found weeping in her hotel room by the young man who will later become her second husband. The honeymoons in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *Daniel Deronda* share elements of what I will be calling the honeymoon gothic: apparitions, spectral and otherwise, of other women and illegitimate sexual pasts; haunted jewels and symbolic caskets that in *Tess* become literal coffins; sleepwalking and female hysteria. The record of real-life stories is hardly more inspiring. The most famous story, with which we will have much to do, is the 1848 honeymoon of John and Effie Gray Ruskin, the subject of a variety of books, scholarly articles, and, most recently, a play. The Ruskin honeymoon is in the most obvious sense a story of what did *not* happen, as the marriage remained unconsummated until it was annulled at Effie's instigation. Also probably unconsummated, although not without incident, George Eliot's own honeymoon featured a dramatic leap from the hotel room into the canal on the part of the young groom.

One project of this book is to take us not so much *beyond* as *through* these spectacular honeymoon failures to provide a more nuanced and fuller account of a ritual that became, by the mid-nineteenth century, an important part of the landscape of British marriage. Part of the task here

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

will be to redefine failure and success, or rather to open up the question of what constitutes the success of a honeymoon. Put another way, this book tries to identify and to describe *what the honeymoon was supposed to do*. I argue in Chapter 2 that, for all of its enforced leisure, the honeymoon was expected to accomplish some very difficult cultural work: fusing two people with limited experience of the opposite sex, who often deeply identified with their families of origin and with communities of same-sex friends, into a conjugal unit that was to become their primary source of social and emotional identification. If the wedding ceremony served as a moment of legal transformation, the more extended rituals of the honeymoon were imagined to consummate and – in the language of the Victorian stage – to realize those changes, producing, if successful, a couple newly aligned with one another and with Victorian ideals of intimacy and sexuality. It is perhaps not surprising that this undertaking so often, for those who could afford it, involved a journey away from familiar landscapes to a place that thematized otherness in its very terrain: honeymoons, replete with their consuming rituals of tourism, sex, and shopping, produced, if successful, different subjects in different bodies and different clothes and with different kinds of knowledge.

I begin this project of tracing the imperatives of this work by juxtaposing two “real-life” Victorian honeymoons: one infamous, the other obscure. The first – the 1848 wedding journey to Scotland of John and Effie Gray Ruskin¹ – comes to us straining under the weight of its own perpetual retelling and the consensual sense of its failure. The other – the 1838 honeymoon trip of Eliza Dickinson Wemyss and Francis Wemyss from Bombay to Malabar Point – challenges notions of success and failure as it tantalizes with the incompleteness of its record.

The Ruskin affair is so well known that I risk telling a story with which people are all too familiar. Its ubiquity derives from several sources. First, of course, is the fame of John Ruskin, whose place as a Victorian art critic, social philosopher, and – more diffusely – cultural sage ensured attention to all aspects of his private life before and after his death. The

¹ It was a challenge throughout the writing of this book to choose what surnames to use for the women in my case study. Since I tend to catch them at a moment of transition – and since this is precisely the point of the project – it was often hard to know whether to identify them by the surname of their birth family or by their married name. This problem was further complicated by the differences in archival organizations: Martha Rolls Macready’s diaries, for example, are listed in the Rolls Family Papers, while Margaret Gladstone MacDonald’s are catalogued under her married name. I have attempted to resolve this problem by using both surnames in my initial reference to the women of my sample.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reading honeymoons*

3

Ruskin honeymoon, and in particular the wedding night, became, through the legal procedures surrounding the annulment, a matter of public record. The story is also compelling because of its climactic narrative structure, exemplifying by its very failure the Victorian expectation that the honeymoon accomplish a specific and difficult task.

The story of the Ruskins also compels because it is at its core a mystery story, inviting speculation about the honeymoon's central (non-)act. We do not know for certain what did or did not happen on the Ruskin wedding night, although, as we shall see below, there is no shortage of theories about and rehearsals of what did or did not take place as the Ruskins retired to bed. Like all good mystery stories, the Ruskin honeymoon deals in character as well as plot: the mystery of John Ruskin's motivation for not consummating his marriage is as endlessly canvassed as the mystery of his actions that night. (Effie's own motivations are usually treated as secondary; it is John who is imagined as the primary actor.) John and Effie's activities on a particular April night of 1848 also have been made to stand in for the larger unresolved mysteries of Victorian sexuality. Despite its unique features, the Ruskin honeymoon would seem to offer a window onto a rarely glimpsed moment – the wedding night – and a rarely glimpsed act of middle-class Victorian sex.

The Wemyss honeymoon, by contrast, involves actors by no means as prominent as John Ruskin. While Francis Wemyss was part of a relatively distinguished military family – Francis was a major in the Bombay Engineers – the young couple made no claims on the historical imagination, Francis's early death preventing him from making any particular mark. All we know about the honeymoon comes to us from a few pages in the meticulous diaries of each of the two protagonists: private, sometimes illegible documents about day-to-day life unstructured by a motivating event like the Ruskin annulment. Unlike accounts of the Ruskin honeymoon, many of which were written long after the wedding night to justify a choice or an opinion, the accounts of the Wemyss honeymoon are contemporaneous with each other and with the event. The sources for the Wemyss honeymoon are, however, unusual in their own way: in my sample of sixty-three honeymooning couples, the Wemysses are the only couple for whom I found parallel honeymoon diary entries.

Neither the Ruskin nor the Wemyss honeymoon went exactly as the couples had imagined. John Ruskin had planned an extensive trip to what became over the course of the century consecrated honeymoon ground: France, Switzerland, and the sights of the European continent. They were

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to have been accompanied by John's parents and to have stayed for three months. The couple's honeymoon plans, however, were scuttled by the revolutions of 1848 that made travel to the Continent dangerous, so they went instead to Blair Atholl, in Scotland, for two weeks. The Wemyss honeymoon from Bombay to nearby Malabar Point, where they borrowed the home of wealthy friends, was one day longer than the bride wanted it to be: Eliza wanted to shorten the honeymoon and to return to her mother's house after three days but was apparently prevented from doing so by her mother's social obligations.

The two journeys are helpful in thinking through what makes a successful honeymoon. Certainly, in terms of the presence of the definitive sexual act, it would seem that the Wemyss honeymoon was a success, the Ruskin honeymoon a failure. Although the limits (and temptations) of this kind of binary thinking about the honeymoon will be explored in detail in Chapter 3, I stress that the issues for these particular honeymoons are more complex than the legal and narrative binaries of annulment might suggest. Certainly the Ruskin honeymoon read like a success to John's parents when the couple returned. John's parents remarked approvingly on John's weight gain, claiming they had never seen him look so healthy in his life.² While I will argue in Chapter 2 that signs of positive change, readable upon the body, were expected outcomes of the honeymoon and thus might affect how friends and relatives saw and reported on couples as they returned from their wedding journeys, clearly the older Ruskins, who were not on the whole overjoyed about the marriage, saw the honeymoon as having done productive work. That they couched their satisfaction in terms of what seems like an improbable weight gain for a two-week period, suggests that they already had in mind a positive model of honeymoon transformation in terms of which they were willing to read their son's newly healthy body.

As far as we know, the Wemyss honeymoon was indeed consummated. The only indication of this is an oblique and negative one – Eliza's diary entry in which she vowed never to return to Malabar Point:

Though everything was arranged for our comfort and it was the place I would rather have been at the last few days than anywhere else, yet it is associated with a period altogether I should think the most unpleasant in a girl's life . . . I don't know what would have become of me with anyone other than David [her name for Francis], he has been very kind and good and considerate.³

² Mary Luytens, *The Ruskins and the Grays* (London: Murray, 1973), p. 111.

³ Eliza Dickinson [Mrs. Francis Wemyss], entry for 27 January 1838, Ms. diary, vol. 111, 1838, Colchester-Wemyss Family Papers, D36 F35.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reading honeymoons*

5

Eliza's discomfort – perhaps this is too weak a word – ironically suggests the honeymoon's success in conventional terms. It also brings the experience on Malabar Point into line with climactic narratives as Eliza rhetorically marks off the honeymoon period, suggesting that whatever happened during those three days is now over. Her diary entry relegates the honeymoon experience to a specific time and place in which she does not want to linger and to which she most emphatically does not want to return.

We might, of course, think of the success or failure of a honeymoon in different terms – for example, as leading to a happy or unhappy marriage. Again, these issues get complicated. While in novels bad honeymoons lead inevitably and metonymically to bad marriages, testimony from real-life honeymooners suggests that wedding journeys and marriages were made up of a series of acts – from shopping to sex, from sightseeing to reading, talking, quarreling, sulking, or swimming – that may not have all tended the same way. Despite having bad memories of Malabar Point, Eliza Dickinson was careful to record Francis's kindness; the diary, which was begun during their courtship and continued after marriage, seems to place the honeymoon in the context of a long and loving, if not always perfectly harmonious, relationship. (Francis and Eliza's courtship was a somewhat problematic one, Eliza arguing for a delay in their marriage until Francis's relatives in England could be informed and Francis arguing for an early day.) The Ruskin annulment and surrounding scandal have tended to force a teleological reading of the wedding journey; Effie's letter to her father officially beginning the annulment procedure cites the honeymoon as the first and germinal moment of the problems that were to plague the marriage for its duration. But even Effie's letters and diaries make her seem – perhaps only seem – happy with John and with her marriage on many different occasions.

The success or failure of honeymoons brings us inevitably to the charged question of Victorian sexual knowledge and the related but by no means identical issue of sexual pleasure. Recent studies of Victorian sexuality have suggested that the Victorians might have been far less ignorant than was for a long time popularly assumed.⁴ The two honeymoons in question, although by no means representative, raise a number of questions about the sexual knowledge of the participants. Effie's letter

⁴ For a discussion of these “sex-positive” accounts of Victorian culture, see Chapter 3. Many of these studies argue for a Victorian knowledge about and emphasis on female orgasm as well as for a surprisingly widespread attitude that marital sex could and should be separated from reproduction.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

to her father describing the sexual history of her relationship to John claims almost complete ignorance about the “duties” of marriage: “To go back to the day of my marriage the 10th of April 1848. I went as you know away to the Highlands – I had never been told the duties of married persons to each other and knew little or nothing about their relations in the closest union on earth.”⁵ Effie’s ignorance might well be attributed to the special status of middle-class girls. But what of their male counterparts? Certainly it seems as though John knew something about what was expected of him on the wedding night – if only because he offered a series of explanations about why he had failed to fulfill them – but the record suggests that he too might have suffered from lack of sexual knowledge in a slightly different sense. This becomes clear when, in the same letter, Effie lists for her father the reasons John gave over time for what apparently became an active refusal to consummate the marriage:

For days John talked about this relation to me but avowed no intention of making me his Wife – He alleged various reasons, hatred to children, religious reasons, a desire to preserve my beauty, and finally this last year told me the true reason (and this to me is as villainous as all the rest) *that he had imagined women were quite different to what he saw I was*, and that the reason he did not make me his Wife was because he was disgusted with my person this the first evening 10th April.⁶

Like Effie, contemporary scholars have tended to take Ruskin’s final reason as the “true” one. Mary Luytens, whose many books on the Ruskin marriage make her an authoritative voice here, speculates that John’s “disgust” might have stemmed from lack of exposure to the female body:

John must have been familiar with the female nude from his study of pictures. It is probable, though, that Effie was the only naked woman he ever saw. In what way could her body have been different from what he imagined? In only one particular, it seems: the female nudes that he saw in galleries – statues as well as pictures – were either discreetly veiled or depicted as children. For a man as sensitive as he it may well have been a lasting shock to discover the adult reality. Had he seen other women he would have realised that the unattractive circumstances in Effie’s person were common to them all; in his ignorance he believed her to be uniquely disfigured.⁷

If we go with Luytens – and Effie – here, two different kinds of ignorance were being played out on the wedding night: Effie’s lack of basic knowledge about “the” sexual act and John’s ignorance of the

⁵ Sir William James, *John Ruskin and Effie Gray* (New York: Scribner’s, 1947), p. 220.

⁶ *Ibid.* (italics mine). ⁷ Mary Luytens, *Effie in Venice* (London: Murray, 1965), p. 21.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reading honeymoons*

7

female body, derived, ironically enough, in part from his cultural expertise.⁸

The issues of sexual knowledge raised by the passage are not limited to the Victorian context. At crucial moments the passage seems to be not so much reporting what John or Effie said about the wedding night as identifying with John's putative gaze. When Luytens explains that if John had "seen other women he would have realised that the unattractive circumstances in Effie's person were common to them all," the word "unattractive" as applied to all women's bodies signals a slippage between author and biographical subject. It also moves the passage out of the immediate context of John's assumed degree of sexual knowledge to another domain to which the term "sexual knowledge" might refer. We might ask not only "What did the Victorians know (and when did they know it)?" but "What do we as contemporary scholars of the Victorian period know about how much they knew (and how)?"

Sexual knowledge *about* the Ruskins has often taken the form of the identification of the offending body part. Scholars since Luytens have been less restrained in naming what they imagine to be the anatomical solution to the dilemma of the Ruskin failure. Phyllis Rose's blithe summary of Luytens's argument gives us a different tone:

According to Mary Luytens . . . what disgusted John about Effie's body was probably her pubic hair. She reasons that John had never seen a naked woman in his life and that even the representations of the female nude he had seen in art were either censored or highly idealized, like classical statues. He expected therefore a smooth, hairless, small-breasted body, and the signs of sexual maturity on Effie's body (it may have been no more than her breasts – the gown may never have slipped below her shoulders) disconcerted and dismayed him.⁹

Like Luytens's solution on which this is based, Rose's speculations focus on uncovering the body part in question. The investment in the body-part-as-solution may be hinted at in the "it" of "it may have been no more than her breasts"; the "it," with its problematic grammatical referent, suggests a singular solution in the act of nominating another part of Effie's body. (Other critics, also focusing on parts above the waist, for reasons we shall see later, have weighed in on behalf of armpit hair.)

What interests me most about the debate over Ruskin's reasons, however, is not the solution to the mystery but the investment of scholars

⁸ In *The Ruskins and the Grays*, Luytens implies that the real reason for Ruskin's refusal is the horror of children.

⁹ Phyllis Rose, *Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (New York: Knopf, 1983), p. 52.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

in a singular solution that takes the form of privileging one of John's explanations over others and, indeed, one bodily part over the rest of the body. This attempt to locate on the body of Effie and in the mind of John Ruskin one element among others that produced a complicated honeymoon and marriage says as much about our desire to know the Victorians as it does about John's desire – or lack thereof – for more conventional forms of carnal knowledge.

This singular critical focus is all the stranger given that John's own accounts are characterized by repetition, revision, and contradiction. Effie's long list of reasons for John's refusal to consummate the marriage in her letter to Mr. Gray is, in fact, incomplete. In his own defense at the annulment proceedings, Ruskin also alleged, first, that he was trying to spare Effie anxiety by not forcing sex upon her and, second, that he knew even then that she was "mad." John also was not perfectly consistent about whether he would ever change his mind and try again to consummate the marriage. While at times he seemed to cast his decision as final, at others he seemed to entertain the possibility of a fully sexualized marriage. Fairly early in the marriage, in a letter to Effie, he seemed to hint at another attempt at a wedding night. Writing to Effie from Paris, having finally realized his desire to travel to the Continent with his parents (Effie was unwell and at her mother's house), he says, "Do you know, pet, it seems almost a dream to me that we have been married. I look forward to meeting you; and to your *next* bridal night; and to the time when I shall again draw your dress from your snowy shoulders: and lean my cheek upon them."¹⁰ This passage – incidentally the evidence for John not having seen much below Effie's shoulders – gestures to several reiterations: writing from the site of his first fantasy of his honeymoon about the failures of the honeymoon that proved such a pale shadow of that fantasy, he stages in writing a repetition of the wedding night. In repeating the act of drawing the "dress from [her] snowy shoulders," however, Ruskin in effect not only repeats his actions of the first wedding night but also reiterates the point at which those actions stopped. While it is unclear what Ruskin imagines (or wants Effie to imagine) will happen on the "next bridal night" after he leans his cheek on her shoulder, the narrative, at any rate, comes to a resting place that echoes the end of the original wedding night in Blair Atholl. Once again we have the problem of too much information, too many explanations, too many honeymoons, real and imagined. To represent this record of repetition, fantasy,

¹⁰ James, *John Ruskin and Effie Gray*, p. 138.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Reading honeymoons*

9

and contradiction as a matter of simple ignorance is to do an injustice to competing forms of ignorance, knowledge, and information at work in the Ruskin marriage. In the struggle to identify a single “problem,” a single moment or body part, we may lose sight of the complexities raised by the infamous acts and non-acts of John and Effie’s wedding night.

Eliza Wemyss’s diary registers in an immediate sense not so much ignorance but fear. I make this distinction despite the fact that much contemporary scholarship on sexuality conflates these two categories as if knowledge and pleasure were synonymous terms. Her identification of the honeymoon as “a period altogether I should think the most unpleasant in a girl’s life” suggests a trauma as deep as Effie’s or John’s to which we have no verbal access. By focusing on the general (“a girl’s life”), Eliza’s words suggest a degree of assumed knowledge, a sense, perhaps shared with other “girls” or women, of unpleasant routine. We cannot know, of course, whether Eliza’s “knowledge” came to her before or after the wedding night; all we can know is that by the day after the wedding the unpleasantness of the wedding night had achieved almost proverbial status.

If we move, as we did with the Ruskins, from the sexual knowledge of the participants to the sexual knowledge of the contemporary commentators, the Wemyss honeymoon in many ways presents an opposite epistemological problem. If there is too much conflicting material on the Ruskin honeymoon, there is too little on the Wemysses’. Eliza’s three-sentence commentary on the sexual aspects of the wedding night is as brief as it is cryptic: right after she mentions the unpleasantness of the honeymoon, she continues, “I am happy now it is one’s . . .” The rest of the sentence is frustratingly illegible. The closest I could come was “duty to be reconciled.”

Nothing thematizes the problem of scholarly ignorance more efficiently than the illegible letter or diary entry. If the published record of the Ruskin honeymoon forces me to question the investments of Luytens and Rose, my own experience with the unpublished archive brings questions of knowledge and desire squarely home to me. How can I know what Eliza wrote when her handwriting is unclear, much less what she meant or felt about what she wrote? While I pursue the problems raised by what I call the erotics of the archive at greater length in Chapter 3, I want to focus for a moment on the specific act of reading and interpreting Eliza’s (almost) illegible sentence. The desire to know can distort reality: how can I know for certain that it was not my own wishes – for closure, for Eliza’s happiness, for complete knowledge – that led me to construe Eliza’s words so

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86874-7 - Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal

Helena Michie

Excerpt

[More information](#)

they read “duty to be reconciled”? Are the words illegible because Eliza herself does not quite believe in the possibility of that reconciliation and thus blurs the words as she writes them? Are they illegible to me because I do not believe in her reconciliation or because I want to believe in it too much? These questions illuminate for me my own desires for this project, from the personal and identificatory (I want Eliza to have been happy), to the ideological (I want, or wanted before I began this project, to be part of the movement in Victorian scholarship toward a revisionist, more actively erotic account of Victorian women’s lives), to the epistemological (I want to know as much as I can about Eliza Dickinson, even and especially what she might not have wanted anyone to know).

If the honeymoon by definition revolves around the presence or absence of indicatively private acts, it also rewrites relations to family and community. Both honeymoons also took on the work of what in Chapter 2 I call the “reorientation” from the birth family to the new conjugal unit. In the case of the Ruskins it was the original, idealized honeymoon that included John’s parents; Effie seems to have been somewhat resistant to this idea. John responds to Effie’s uneasiness with a letter that exposes the tension between his roles as son and husband:

You say we can’t expect to be always taken care of – I know we can’t – and that’s why I want to be while we *can*. It is so nice, Effie, not to have to take care of oneself. And yet, I must confess to you, that I have had more misgivings since I came home this last time, than before, about your being *quite* so happy as I had hoped – until we are indeed alone – There are little things that often sadden me now, in my father and mother – Still – I am always happiest when I am most dutiful – and although you may be sure, Effie love, that I will not sacrifice my wife’s comfort in any degree to an exaggerated idea of filial duty – still, I think you will find you can give so much pleasure on this journey by very little self-denial, that you will not in the end have reason to wish it had been otherwise planned.”

While recent biographers have focused on what is perceived to be John’s unhealthy attachment to his parents, Ruskin’s syntactical and psychological negotiations of his two commitments are in some ways typical of this time of ritual transition. The almost excruciating balance of his sentences leveraged by the two uses of the word “still” suggests the difficulty of the transition from one psychological identification to the other. The passage opens by locating the uneasiness with his parents in Effie’s mind – it is her happiness that is at stake, her happiness that will and must be deferred until the two are “indeed alone.” Still, Ruskin does finally own that he is himself

¹¹ Luytens, *The Ruskins and the Grays*, p. 78 (italics in original).