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Rethinking Ruskin's Wife's Vulva

Virginia Braun

Introduction

We look at the past through contemporary eyes, understand it from our present, and can use the familiarities and *unfamiliarities* in what we see as a tool for critical insight—to render strange what has come to be taken for granted. Here I take a particular historical event—the non-consummation and eventual annulment of the marriage of UK art historian John Ruskin and socialite Effie Gray—as the starting point for a thought experiment intended to denormalise and reframe contemporary vulval modificatory practices. I have written about the vulval aesthetics, representation and practice for over 15 years (Braun 2004, 2005a, 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Braun and Kitzinger 2001; Braun et al. 2013; Braun and Wilkinson 2001, 2003, 2005); I now invite you to join my imaginative journey between the past and present, to (re)make sense of contemporary

V. Braun (✉)
School of Psychology, The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand

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aesthetic female genital labour *as* genital labour, rather than (just) personal aesthetics and choice.

Setting the Scene: 10 April 1848, Scotland

It is the wedding night of nineteenth-century Britain's 'greatest critic and social thinker' (Prodger 2013), the art writer John Ruskin. John, 29, has just married Euphemia 'Effie' Gray, 19. Presumed virginal, they will tonight consummate their union with coitus—and will go on procreate and live happily ever after. Except this does not happen. Six years later, Effie files for marital annulment, based on non-consummation. Speculation runs rife—is it Ruskin's 'aversion to children, his religious scruples, a wish to preserve Effie's beauty and to keep her from exhaustion so they could go Alpine walking' or 'a revulsion with body odour and menstruation' (cited in Prodger 2013) that led to this? John explains that 'it may be thought strange that I could abstain from a woman who to most people was so attractive. But though her face was beautiful, her person was not formed to excite passion. On the contrary, there were certain circumstances in her person which completely checked it' (cited in Prodger 2013). In a letter to her father, Effie describes that John '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 the first evening' (cited in Prodger 2013)—leading to the most popular theory[1]: John, familiar only with the smooth (marble) vulvas of classical art, was shocked and repulsed by the sight of *pubic hair* on his bride and could not desire his new wife.

(Re)Imagining the Past: Shifting Frameworks of Then

What ontological truth is relied on in this popular narrative? What implicit ideas about gender, gendered bodies, and sexual desirability and practice are (re)produced? I am struck first by how blame is located in the

[1] This theory has recently been questioned (Brownell 2013).

person/psyche of John rather than Effie. In contrast to a long tradition in which women's sexuality *has* been located as blameworthy (e.g. in sexual assault and rape), here it is John's failure to respond that is in need of explanation—he is a failed husband. In contrast, Effie's body occupies an ontologically unquestioned status—its desirability is not in doubt. Effie is not faulted for her hirsute state: neither her account to her father nor the popular theory suggests that *she* ought to change her body to conform to John's aesthetic preferences. Effie is *not* positioned as a failing/bad wife or woman. But this is not some feminist utopia: the narrative does rely on very traditionally gendered constructions of male and female bodies and sexuality, where women are positioned as the *recipients* of male sexual action, rather than active contributors *to* a sexual encounter—just 'lie back and think of England'. John's *fault* relies on us understanding him as the agent of sexuality and that particular sexual encounter. With Effie's embodied presence assumed naturally to excite male passion, she is situated as a passive object, the waiting recipient of John's active sexuality. These paired constructions render Effie both passive and faultless, and John blameworthy for his lack of action. We find familiar echoes of this story in contemporary western renderings of heterosex, including a trenchant sexual double standard meaning heterosex remains profoundly gendered (Farvid, Braun and Rowney in press). But it has major unfamiliarities, too, and we can use these to *undo* certain representations and positionings that have come to occupy places of truth. So what might the John and Effie story look like, in 2016?

(Re)Imagining the Past as the Present: John and Effie's Break-up, 2016

"When the clothes are off, she's just not that sexy"
***John's* shocking late-night tweets suggest rumours are true. *Is Joffie* really over?**

(*GossipRag*, 10 May 2016)

"Yes, it's over!"
***Joffie* confirm rumours of split!**

(*GossipRag*, 13 May 2016)

"John's addiction to porn ruined the romance"
Friends suggest it's John's fault!

(*GossipRag*, 14 May 2016)

"I tried everything!"
Effie reveals the truth behind *Joffie's* shock split!
"I was even booked in to get a designer vagina". In a revealing interview, Effie Gray, It-girl and now-former wife of TV art-celebrity John Ruskin, reveals the extent to which she tried everything, including considering labiaplasty, in an attempt to excite John's passions—which, she now reveals, remained dormant.

(*GossipRag*, 16 May 2016)

"nuff muff?"
Leaked pics reveal Effie's 70s-style free-wheelin' muff. Is that the *real* reason for *Joffie's* split?

(*GossipRag*, 19 May 2016)

"They're private! Please don't view or share them"
***Effie* begs fans not to spread leaked naked pics.**

(*GossipRag*, 20 May 2016)

"Muff no more?"
Effie spied leaving vaginal spa.

(*GossipRag*, 21 May 2016)

(Re)Imagining the Past: Through the Framework of Now

These headlines illustrate how the John/Effie scenario might play out in a 2016 (Britain) context (let us imagine the evening as if each had never engaged in a sexual encounter before[2]). Effie and John are a hot couple, regulars on the covers of celebrity magazines, TV, and gossip websites.

[2] Now, it is *highly unlikely* that their marriage night is either's first sexual encounter—with each other, or anyone—making lack of desire/annulment unlikely.

Their romance and marriage are for public consumption, likewise any rift and breakup. Rumours swirl. Tweets and leaked photos purportedly reveal truths about what really happened. Experiential accounts (from Effie) tell *a* story of their romance, their sex life—or lack of it!—and their marriage and split. Their 2016 story is highly *narrativised*.[3] So how might this story flow? What interpretative frameworks would *they* bring to it, would *we* bring to it?

There are some interpretative continuities between the then (mid-nineteenth century) and the now (twenty-first century). The idea of cultural influence on aesthetics remains. John v1848's desires were understood as shaped by the visual culture (fine arts) he was professionally immersed in. Pornography now takes centre stage. Alongside widespread and normative consumption among men, pornographically informed representational modes (including advertising, Gill 2008) mean pornography penetrates the *everyday* worlds of many western people (Häggström-Nordin et al. 2006). In some complex way, it seeps into our aesthetics and, perhaps more significantly, our affects (e.g. Paasonen 2011). It is therefore highly *unlikely* that John v2016 has never encountered what a real-life vulva actually looks like. Or is it? Airbrushing and censorship rules mean the vulval images he has consumed as objects of desire and arousal often resemble each other (Drysdale 2010)—but they may not closely resemble Effie Gray's vulva. Without real, fleshy, sexual experience with women, John v2016 operates in a mode of sexual knowing *and* unknowing. His aesthetic preferences and understanding of vulval normality have been shaped by fairly narrow representations of sexy female bodies and sexually-appealing vulvas. In 2016, the ideal *and* the 'normal' vulva is 'small, neat and tidy', with 'invisible' labia minora and limited or no pubic hair, and despite access to some creative responses that challenge this homogenised imaginary vulva (e.g. the 'Great Wall of Vagina'[4]), John's aesthetics and affects remain normative.

By 2016, we understand Effie's aesthetics, desires, and anxieties as also formed through the same sociocultural melange: post-sexual revolution, Effie and John share access to cultural expectations for being sexy. Lying

[3] Their original story also was, albeit in a different way.

[4] See: http://www.greatwallofvagina.co.uk/

back and thinking of England is not a viable option for Effie v2016; her body and sexuality require her attention and unlike Effie v1848, she is highly unlikely to present John with an unmodified vulva.[5] Teen Effie v2016 has only known a world where vulval modification is required as part of a desirable body. Cosmetic surgery is normalised (Blum 2003), and female *genital* cosmetic procedures are popular and regularly promoted (Braun 2005a, 2009a). The 'Brazilian' wax is frequently discussed[6]—Effie first saw it in the super popular, glamorous *Sex and the City* she sneakily watched as a child—and most of her friends are completely pubic hair-free (Braun et al. 2013; Fahs 2014; Herbenick et al. 2010; Terry and Braun 2013). Friends like Cameron Diaz[7] have advised her on what is, and is not, 'sexy' for her pubic hair ahead of her wedding night, and if Effie has decided to keep any, it will be trimmed and shaped. She booked herself into a spa for a vajacial—a 'facial' treatment for the vulva (Chung 2015)—to present John the smoothest vulva possible (and to manage the consequences of pubic hair removal such as ingrown hairs), but even though fellow celebrities have promoted the wonders of 'vajazzling' (Huffington Post 2010), she has decided to leave that for another time. Likewise, she is not sure she needs to dye her labia (Stewart 2010) just yet.

Effie v2016's world offers a smorgasbord of opportunities for vulva modification, but we can theorise these as obligation as well as opportunity: through an expanded mode of potentials, we are invited into diverse moments and modes of vulval attention and vulval vigilance, to ensure the perfect vulva. Vulval modification is not only normative, it is—for many—*mandatory*. Not a question of *whether*, but of *what* and *how*. The practices of vulval modification are not only aesthetic labour formed around management of the risk of having

[5] John v2016 is quite likely to have also removed or trimmed some of his pubic hair (Terry and Braun 2013); he *may* have considered some temporary pharmaceutical modification, to alleviate 'performance' anxiety.

[6] The poor Brazilian has suffered some 'challenges' in very recent times (Adams 2014).

[7] In what offers a compelling and distressing example of the way female friends' 'police' each other's bodies—something Winch (2013) has referred to as the 'girlfriend gaze'—Cameron Diaz notoriously forcibly 'insisted' that Gwyneth Paltrow modify her pubic hair, for the sake of her marriage, an event she has recounted publicly as humorous (see spookylorre 2013).

a 'wrong' vulva, but a normative compliance with expected—even unquestioned—embodiment. It is unimaginable that Effie, a popular 19-year-old 'It girl'[8] with a high public profile, who embodies (privileged white) hetero-feminine desirability, would not 'invest in' her body and her 'self', to present what she imagines to be, what she herself *believes* to be, the ultimately desirable body to John on their wedding night. All this is a lot of *work*—a point nicely captured by British feminist writer Caitlin Moran's (2011) description of her routine of preparation of her body before 'going out' into situations where a sexual encounter is on the menu. The female body—and the female psyche (Farvid and Braun 2013a, 2013b)—unworked on is situated as unfit for sexual presentation, not able to be desired, or not desirable *enough*. This makes the unmodified vulva a (legitimate) site of anxiety. Pregnant women, for instance, seek advice about what they should do with their pubic hair for the birth (e.g. Eckler and Parker-Court 2014). That women even consider the acceptability of an 'untamed bush' in childbirth demonstrates how much a modified vulva has become part of the imaginary apparatus of embodying not just a desirable, but an *acceptable*, female body.

Unlike 1848, Effie and John's aesthetic preferences will likely closely converge in 2016. Effie's modified vulva will probably satisfy John's anticipated/desired vulva. But what if—gasp—Effie has labia minora that *do* 'extrude' beyond the 'clam shell', the 'Barbie' vulva—as many women's do? What if these labia are asymmetrical? Or have some darker pigmentation? What if—bear with me—John simply cannot desire Effie's vulva? Although vulval appearance is claimed not to be important by many men (Horrocks et al. 2015), others indicate *strong* preference for certain aesthetics (e.g. YouTube features videos of men who admonish women with pubic hair), and this may be the case for John. Alternatively, what if John has difficulty responding sexually to a real woman after intense pornography consumption (Weiss 2013)? Despite Effie's 'nice, tidied up' vulva, success is not guaranteed. So *what if* John does not respond?

[8] I use 'It girl' as a heuristic tool, as the term evokes an almost incalculable sexuality and hipness that elides any of the work which goes into embodying such a position.

(Re)Making the Female Body, Now

Our twenty-first century interpretative framework for non-consummation would be very different to that of 1848: while John *may* be situated as a failed husband, Effie would *definitely* be positioned as a failed wife. I end this thought experiment by arguing that Effie, in having a body not 'desirable enough' for John, has failed in her duty as a twenty-first century woman: to *labour enough* on her body that it becomes unquestionably desirable, unquestionably conformist, yet still 'unique'. Given the nexus of discursive and ideological representations and resources she is immersed in, Effie v2016 will not think of herself and her tasks in terms of conformity (Gill 2008). What women do to their bodies is now typically made sense of—including by women themselves—through two dominant and interlinked explanatory frameworks: personal choice and personal aesthetic preferences (Braun 2005b, 2009b). Our choices and preferences are indelibly shaped by context, but we are active in enacting them. A 'labour' framework can move us beyond the 'dupe versus agent' arguments that have stymied some feminist debate, as it seems to position women as *inherently* agentic, no matter on what and how they labour, and whether that labour is towards or away from conformity. But we have to theorise labour *within* context, because the ways we labour, the point and purpose of that, is always responsive to context.

Imaging Herself a Good Woman: Effie v2016

In an exclusive post-breakup post-photo-leak interview, Effie offers her public some insight into her practices, preferences, and anxieties around appearance and John's failure to respond:

> John was hot—anyone would think so. And I thought our sex life would be great. But it wasn't. John just didn't seem to be that into me, he didn't find me hot. I don't know why! My body's not that different to what he looks at in mags and things.
>
> I've always waxed—it just feels cleaner, and I really like the smooth clean look. Who wants hair? It's dirty, and gets in the way. It looks and feels bet-

> ter without it, more natural. But John wasn't into me. So as crazy as it sounds, I thought I'd try something different—to give me an edge. I grew my muff out a bit—ick. But even that didn't make a difference.
>
> I tried everything. I even booked in with a surgeon to have a labiaplasty. One of my lips is a bit longer than the other—and you can see them. I've never liked them, and they worry me—even though many men say they don't mind. This is all about me, and being able to relax, and know my body is the way I want it to be. Being able to feel sexy. I haven't had it yet—John sent that nasty tweet, and after that it was clearly over. But I still plan to go ahead. I need to do it, for me.
>
> John always said it was him, not me. He's not gay, so I'll never really understand why he wasn't into me.
>
> (*GossipRag,* 31 May 2016)

What can we make of this (imagined) reveal? Effie v2106, a child of post-feminism, is a good subject of neoliberal times (Braun 2009b; Gill 2008; Gill and Scharff 2011). She thinks about herself in individualistic terms, as an independent woman who acts and chooses of her own free will. Context and culture (e.g. advertising, pornography, media) provide a net of information and resources from which she decides on how to be, on what it is she likes, but she does not see these as *telling her* how to look, as telling her what is 'hot'. She understands her aesthetics in interior terms, as reflecting her own inherently natural aesthetics.

This cultural narrative also situates the modified vulva within evolutionary logic—a progression beyond the inherent ugly, non-modified body, to a better-than-before state. Long-standing cultural associations of woman with (savage) nature, and the 'natural' female body as always-on-the brink-of-abjection (Braun and Wilkinson 2001) echo here. This orientation to evolution invokes the idea of a sexual marketplace, where value is accrued through the display of desirable sexual features, yet Effie v2016 is not a cold and calculating woman, callously motivated by what she sees as others' desires. Although 'what John may want' hovers nearby, Effie's story reveals that it is her own aesthetic preferences, her beliefs about what is sexy, that drive her actions. That there *is* a close resonance between her own preferences and what is culturally valued, between her own and John v2016's aesthetics, between her body and 'what he looks at' elsewhere, is happenstance. Effie understands bodily labour as part of

what being a woman is—it is not modification; it is just a required part of living—and she is endlessly engaged in this project of herself, a project towards fulfilment, well-being, and happiness, towards *being her true self*. Her body, where it fails to meet her (or John's) aesthetic ideals, becomes a barrier to being the *real* Effie. So when John v2016 fails to respond in their sexual encounter, Effie has, effectively, failed at the key task of hetero-femininity: being attractive to, and therefore securing, a sexual partner/(future) husband. The excuse 'it's me, not you' is never quite reassuring; the female body always teeters on the edge of failure.

Reimagining Effie v2016 as Aesthetic Labourer

We do not tend to explain what women do with their bodies through a framework of 'labour', but we ought to view Effie v2016 as an aesthetic labourer, engaged in an ongoing job of *working* on her self—body *and* mind—to manage, present, and produce a body that is, effortlessly, 'It'. A labour framework orients to (feminist) work around 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) and 'aesthetic labour' (Sheane 2012) which has recently blossomed in work studies (e.g. Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Hall and van den Broek 2012; Warhurst and Nickson 2009). The concept of *aesthetic* labour, most regularly applied around the intersection of employees, their bodies, and their appearance/comportment/presentation, highlights aesthetics as an (often invisible) part of employee expectations, and the often invisible labour deployed in the doing of aestheticised identities/presentation in the workplace. If we transpose this onto the everyday living of the individual body/self—the key work object of the neoliberal subject—the framework fits perfectly.

By orienting to *work*, an aesthetic labour framework allows us to destabilise contemporary framings of vulval modification. It takes us away from personal preference, indulgence and pleasure, and even 'just what you do'-type understandings. By destabilising these, it provides a fruitful tool for *de-naturalising* the practices, affects (including desire and disgust), perceived obligations and 'preferences' that become normalised when, ontologically, the vulva shifts from being something that is 'just the way it is', to something that is always *potentially* different, always

sitting on the edge of change. This re-ontologised vulva requires us to take responsibility for its state of being—and taking responsibility means *work*. With the vulva shifted into this tenuous ontological state, of never quite being, it becomes a mandated site of work—whether we depilate, whether we undergo a vajacial (sometimes to minimise the effects of depilation!), whether we contemplate labiaplasty, as Effie v2016 has done, or whether or not we actually do anything to it. Even 'doing nothing' requires us to do *some*thing (Blum 2003). Doing nothing with this re-ontologised vulva is now an action—it requires resistance to cultural imperatives and involves psychological and possibly emotion work.

Effie v2016 is employed in the individual (but collective) job of creating and presenting a (desirable) normative female vulva—and body—as if it is naturally and effortlessly like that. But although it *is* work on her body and her mind, Effie does not see it as onerous. Framing it as about prioritising *herself* and her desires, about 'pampering' herself, about taking the time and money to put into herself, to invest in herself, about how much she values herself and her body, elides the effort involved. But the invisibilised work towards this normative vulva is extensive. It requires planning and psychological vigilance, with daily attention given to its aesthetic state—inspections of hair, of labial appearance, and odour. It requires consideration of when and how hair removal is needed. 'Big days' like a wedding need to be planned for in advance. It requires money—the tools of this work are not freely available, and Effie often pays *others* to labour on her body: the woman who waxes; the woman who does the 'vajacials'. Effie is not only an aesthetic labourer, she is also an aesthetic consumer—and as with much consumption, relationships of exploitation are part of this.[9] To keep her edge, she needs to keep abreast of new products and practices. She has just read about Gwyneth Paltrow's latest thing—vaginal steaming[10]—which she is keen to try. She is also

[9] Exploitation in the beauty industries has been highlighted in relation to manicures and pedicures (see Nir 2015), revealing the erased 'dark side' of the (western) consumption of services from invisible bodies in global-cheap-labour movements.

[10] 'Vaginal steaming' refers to a practice whereby herb-infused steam enters the vagina through a combination of a steam-delivery device and an appropriate seating position; the claimed purpose ranges from pampering to fertility enhancement (Vandenburg and Braun 2016).

seeking the best 'odour-masking' product, having not yet found one she is happy with.

Around the edge of her existence, worry about the not-quite-rightness of her vulva teeters, pulsing in and out of consciousness, depending on what is coming up in her life. This reveals the psychological, emotional, and attentional energy, the emotional/aesthetic *labour*, she gives to this small body part, as well as the financial and time investment she puts into it. It might be on the way to (nearly) perfect, but a lot of time, energy, and money are required to get and keep it that way. And it is always on the brink of betrayal.

Inconclusion

I have used this thought experiment of imagining what John and Effie's 'failed' sexual encounter/marriage might look like if it happened *now*, to destabilise some of our contemporary taken-for-granteds. What this reveals is that the contemporary western vulva and the vulva of the nineteenth century are ontologically different objects. Although they share the same fleshy starting point, the actual product of experience and engagement currently offered up to women is a different one to that of Effie's time. A confluence of old ideas and new makes the contemporary vulva ontologically an object of incompleteness, an object of potentiality, an object of required engagement and work. This vulva, ontologically, is always never quite there, never quite finished, never quite 'fixed', never *just*, always potentially *improvable*. But more than this, it is now a *should-be-modified* body part.

Through this ontological state of uncertainty, a (cisgendered, western) woman in 2016 has a (likely) very different relationship with her vulva compared to 1848. She is 'invited' into an embodied regime of (endless) work to seek an (imagined) end-state of 'rightness'. But that state is either illusory—an apparition or a mirage—or transitory if achieved, and it soon seeps away (see also Dosekun, this volume). Even if her ideal material 'perfection' is achieved, shifts in representational context, in the discourse of what constitutes the perfect vulva, mean she is always vulnerable. Her own aesthetic preferences are not inherent, not fixed. They

evolve and shape themselves in response to context and experience. The search for vulval normality/desirability is an ongoing task, for someone who cares. But even the woman who does not care—who does *not* work on the aesthetics of her vulva—has work to do, has to work to disengage from performed desirable hetero-femininity.[11] While 'opting out' is always possible (and potentially easier for women somewhat older than Effie), doing nothing is no longer the *default* position where the vulva is concerned. Dominant cultural narratives now position vulval modification as normative, and even as key to embodied heteronormative feminine success. Indeed, as the final (current) chapter of John and Effie's tumultuous relationship is revealed to the public, a culturally compliant Effie links her and John's reunion and happiness to a now-logical (but still extreme, and risky) vulval modification:

> **"Our sex life is amazing, and we're happier than I thought possible" Effie reveals labiaplasty was key in *Joffie* reunion.**
>
> (*GossipRag*, 18 September 2016)

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[11] It is problematic to essentialise queer women as a group, suggesting that they necessarily (all) sit outside such cultural imperatives, but their identities *may* give access to different investments and engagements with different potentialities than those typically accessed by heteronormatively invested straight women.

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