CHAPTER 3

Sexing the Sponge: Luxury, trade and the female body

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Introduction

As many of the authors in this collection attest, information and sources on the sponge are somewhat scant, and particularly where the cultural history of sponges is concerned. In the initial phases of my own research on the sponge and gender, which began with the simple intuition that women are frequently associated with sponges, I met with similar difficulties. However, in persisting I hope to achieve my goal in this essay, that being to make visible various associations of the sponge with the female body that are made frequently, if largely unconsciously. In what follows, therefore, I will suggest reasons as to why the female body is often associated with the sponge based on observations related to "global life of sponges" more generally, including the social, cultural, historic and political life of sponges. Taking these observations as the backdrop for my argument, I will also attempt to establish a connection between the use of sponges in the arts, medicine and personal hygiene since antiquity, as Emilio Rodríguez-Álvarez has done in his essay for this collection. In what follows, I will then argue that contemporary uses and misuses of sponges by and on women, and the range of popular associations of the female body with the sponge, have long cultural, economic and historical roots.

Pursuing the intuition that women and sponges are often thought of together, my initial foray into the topic led me to a number of areas, largely commercial, in which the female body is connected with sponges. For example, there are numerous familiar cosmetic products for women made of sponge, such as bath sponges, make-up sponges, sponge rollers and hair forms. Along with sponges intended for external use on women's bodies, there are also sponges created for more intimate purposes that seem to claim or betray some form of kinship with properties often associated with the "womanliness", such as softness and sponginess. This category would include brassiere padding, sponge fillers and postoperative prostheses, as well as menstrual sponges and contraceptive devices made of sponge. And where the home and domestic tasks are concerned, there is a host of household cleaning sponges that are at least tangentially connected with women, such as floor mops and sponges used to absorb kitchen grime. Quite startlingly, moreover, domestic sponges are also consumed and ingested by women with pica, a disorder that causes sufferers to crave non-food substances and objects. Indeed, pica sufferer and sponge addict Emma Thompson has achieved bizarre renown by eating up to twenty sponges a day soaked in apple-flavoured Fairy Liquid. [1]

Before I begin to unpack such issues and objects in greater detail however, I want to address some obvious objections that one might raise to the undertaking proposed here in relation to the social, cultural, historic and political life of sponges. For example, one could object that associating women with sponges is perfectly natural given the female form, hence the connection between the two is simple and motivated. Such a claim is, however, based on the blanket presupposition that women are always – and fairly uniformly – endowed with a voluptuous, soft, giving and pneumatic form. Indeed, were one to accept such a claim full stop, there would be no need for further investigation; however, as I hope to show, matters are somewhat more complex.

Figure 1: *Emma Thompson and her daily ration of cleaning sponges*

One could also point to Sponge Bob as a counter example from which to argue that men have their spongy bits too, so that the association of bodies with sponges is not necessarily limited to women. And, as Gelina Harlaftis notes following ethnographer Evi Olympitou, the reverse could also be argued, at least where the women of Kalymnos working in the sponge industry are concerned, who have been described as being "hard like men". This would again suggest that I should be discussing people and sponges rather than women only, however I want to stress that my intention is not to claim that sponges are sexed exclusively as female and associated uniquely with the female body. Rather, I intend to examine a number of cases in which this connection does indeed hold, and in a variety of aesthetic and biological forms. Where this last point is concerned, my attention to cultural associations of the sponge with the female body will also take in the economics of the sponge as a luxury item and how this relates to stereotypes of female consumers.

Sponges and female bathers

In this section I will briefly set the stage for my argument, by offering selected examples of aesthetic objects in, through, or on which, women are implicitly or explicitly associated with sponges. My list commences in classical antiquity and my purpose is to provide a basis from which to offer explanations as to how a tradition wherein women are linked – culturally, economically, aesthetically – with the sponge may have emerged. While this list is admittedly limited, my object is to make a first attempt at locating and identifying the emergence of a cultural tradition that connects women, both erotically and domestically, with the sponge. From this limited inventory I will then move forward to contemporary examples of women and sponges which are made legible, if perhaps not entirely comprehensible, from the base that I am endeavouring to establish.

My first example is this image from a vase which dates from the 5th century BC, on display in the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki.

Figure 2: *Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, 5th century BC*

In this decorative scene, women wield various items in their ablutions including a sponge and, given the attendants, the image suggests that the woman being bathed is of noble birth, hence here the sponge is perhaps included in the image in order to connote wealth and luxury.

Another early example of the association of women with sponges in an aesthetic object – this time a sculpture – is housed in the entrance hall of the Ashmolean Museum. This rather poorly executed marble Aphrodite holds a sponge to her breast in what appears to have become a classic pose by the second century AD, the period to which the curators date this piece.

Figure 3: *Aphrodite*, Ashmolean Museum, Italy, AD 100-200, Marble

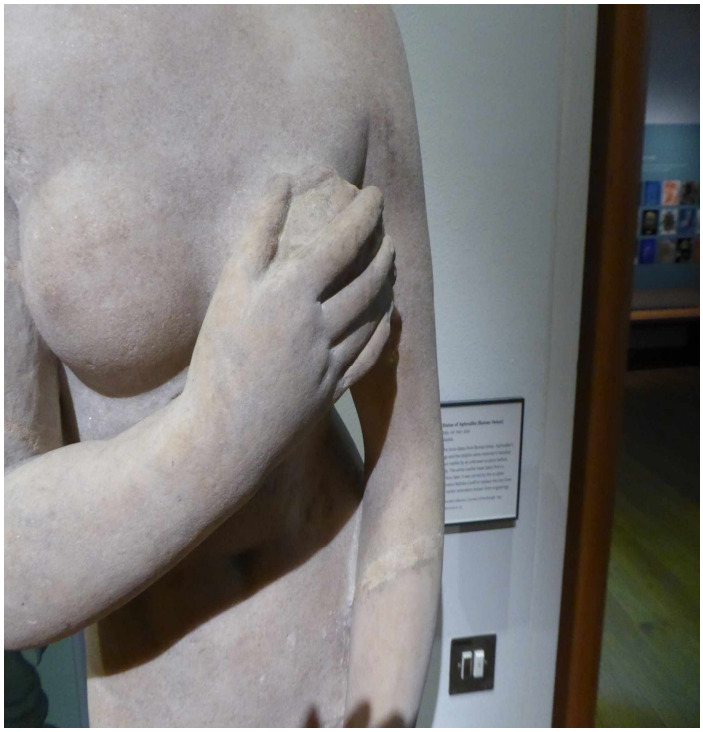


Figure 4: *Aphrodite*, Ashmolean Museum, Italy, AD 100-200, Marble [Detail]

Many centuries later, in 1815, Dufour & Cie of Paris, *Manufacture de Papier Peints et Tissus*, printed a set of twelve grisaille wallpaper panels depicting classical scenes from the life of Psyche, the mythical wife of Eros.

Figure 5: Louis Lafitte and Merry-Joseph Blondel, *Psyché au Bain* grisaille from woodblocks, on paper, Dufour & Cie of Paris, 1815.

The central panel of this suggestively erotic series, entitled *Psyché au Bain* [Psyche Bathing], contains a scene that visually and thematically harkens back to the examples

just cited from ancient Greece and Italy in the 2nd century A.D. As a form of light titillation, the action of the scene cues the spectator to imagine a nude Psyche in the company of her handmaids in what would logically be the next frame. And if the erotic visual cues with which this panel is replete were not enough – from the voyeuristic cherub on the left, to the bearded water carrier ejaculating a steady stream of liquid onto the floor next to the tub on the right – the myth of the rape of Leda by Zeus, who has taken the form of a swan, unfolds in bas-relief on the tub into which Psyche is about to be lowered. In this context, the seemingly innocuous sponge displayed prominently and centrally in the foreground becomes an integral part of an erotically charged composition and potentially plays a major role in the scenario that spectators may well imagine as taking place in a subsequent panel. Moreover, given the brief genealogy I am sketching, one might conjecture that by the 19th century, the sponge had become part of the art historical tradition of the "bathing goddess", as well as the implicit and explicit eroticism of such compositions.

Notably, the practice of bathing with sponges had also been joined by routine sponge bathing by the 19th century, often undertaken in a shallow pan as means of conserving water as well as the energy required to heat it. Yet while the sponge bath was *de rigueur* for both sexes, here again it is typically women who are depicted taking sponge baths, just as depictions of bathing with sponges from ancient times onward seem consistently to revolve around the female subject. Edgar Degas' (1834-1917) many pastels of women sponge bathing, executed over the last three decades of the 19th century, may perhaps be seen as a high-water mark of the aesthetic tradition I am attempting to establish, given the twenty-five known bather sketches he created. These works are likewise exemplary of the eroticism of the bather-and-sponge genre for which I have been arguing, "given that the only women they could conceivably represent are prostitutes because depiction of middle-class women bathing would have constituted an ideologically unthinkable breach of decorum" (Lipton: 168). Or, as one of Degas' contemporary reviewers wrote, each subject is pictured "bathing, washing herself with a sponge, taking care of herself, arming herself for battle" – that is, preparing to engage in sexual relations in exchange for money (J. M. Michel, qtd Bernheimer: 183).[2]

Figure 6: Edgar Degas, *Woman Bathing in a Shallow Tub [Femme au bain]* (c. 1886-8) Pastel on paper

Moreover, while women are the subject of Degas' series of pastels of bathers with sponges, it has furthermore been conjectured that the artist also *used* sponges as an implement with which he could mimic the soft textures of female skin. This conjecture would, of course, support the notion that the connection between women and sponges is somehow motivated by shared physical traits or the perception thereof. [3] Indeed, as one art history blogger claims, there is a compelling correspondence between Degas' compositions of bathing women brushing a soft, textured sponge over their own skin, "painting" themselves as the artist did, here again suggesting a tactile, erotic connection between the female form and the sponge. [4]

Importantly, while I have been arguing for various gendered associations of the female body with the sponge, and with representations of bathers as the most common aesthetic context in which we encounter sponges, a few notable counter-examples were also produced in the 19th century. I am referring to two compositions by Gustave Caillebotte (1848-1894) that feature male bathers, namely, *A Man at His Bath* [*Homme au bain*] (1884) and *A Man Drying His Leg* [*Homme s'essuyant la jambe*] (1884).

Figure 7: Gustave Caillebotte, *A Man at His Bath [Homme au bain]* (1884)
Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure 8: Gustave Caillebotte, *A Man Drying His Leg [Homme s'essuyant la jambe]* (1884). Oil on canvas. Brooklyn Museum, New York

Both of these works seem to be in dialogue with Degas' pastels, some of which Caillebotte acquired in the 1870s. Notably, however, art historians have seen Caillebotte's bathers as exceptional examples of the genre, precisely because they depict men rather than women. For example, Tamar Garb has argued that the "unconventional insertion" of a male nude into a domestic bathing scene maybe seen on "the one hand as a naturalist statement and on the other a symbol of the modern man. Stripped of his former heroic props and emblems of power and made vulnerable to the erotic gaze" (Broude: 4). And while inserting a male nude in the place usually occupied by a female subject highlights precisely how the bather genre is gendered, the omission of a sponge in these two paintings further supports my intuition that the sponge is somehow implicitly gendered as female and would, therefore, be out of place in Caillebotte's compositions.

While the examples I have cited thus far are all objects that have found a home in art galleries and museums, the clichéd theme of the female bather with sponge, arrested for the voyeuristic pleasure of the viewer, may be found in less lofty places as well. In fact, further evidence that the bather holding a sponge to her chest from classical antiquity has become an established aesthetic tradition in sculpture may be found in contemporary home furnishing and garden shops. The bronze pictured here was produced in the 1970s in the Netherlands and refers, however obliquely, to the bathing goddess exemplified by the Ashmolean Aphrodite, and is, as I have been arguing, part of an established convention.

Figure 9: Contemporary commercial garden ornament, The Netherlands

And finally, to close this discussion of female bathers and sponges represented in various cultural media, I would like to offer one last image, entitled "The Ordeal", by contemporary artist and photographer, Zanele Muholi.

Figure 10: "*The Ordeal*", Zanele Muholi. Tate Modern, Liverpool

This is one of a series of photographs entitled *The Aftermath*, which series was intended to "record and make visible the marginalized bodies of LGBT women in South Africa". [6] The titles, "Aftermath", "Ordeal", "Flesh II", "In-security", "allude to previous trauma", such as institutionalized rape. At the same time, some of the images in her series recall and seem to reference works such as Degas' bathers, establishing an intertextual relationship that then, in this new context, becomes both political and critical; a topic to which I shall return below.

Women and sponges: other contexts

While the examples I have discussed so far have been largely erotic depictions of the female nude, there is at least one religious image of a woman using a sponge, composed in the 17th century by Dutch artist Johannes Vermeer.

Figure 11: *Saint Praxedis*, Johannes Vermeer 1655 (copy Felice Ficherelli (1603 – 1660))

In this chaste religious scene entitled *Saint Praxedis*, a fully clothed female saint is pictured wringing out a sponge filled with the blood of Christian martyrs. Notably, this painting also connects the woman and the sponge depicted with domestic labour, however gory or far removed from the home that labour might be.

In that same century, this time in writing rather than painting, the libertine John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, bemoaned the intimate hygiene of a prostitute with whom, despite his repugnance, he had become besotted in 1680. Here, he entreats his

> Fair nasty nymph
> Be clean and kind
> And all my joys restore
> By using paper still behind
> And sponges for before

According to Sara Read, historian of early modern sexuality, the speaker here is implying that, in order to improve his predicament, Wilmot "would prefer the sponge to […] remain in place during intercourse" (9). Read concludes that the poem "suggests that the use by some prostitutes of a sponge to enable them to continue working during their menstrual period was common knowledge", even though 17th-century texts about menstruation suggest that anything stopping the free flow of blood could have severe health implications for women (9-10).

So, given the examples cited thus far, it would appear that sponges have been part of women's bathing rituals since ancient times, and that sponges were being used to absorb menstrual flow beginning in the early modern period if not earlier. John Wilmot's ode to a prostitute of 1680 also suggests that women were using sponges as a contraceptive device in the 17th century, and by the eighteenth century, prostitutes had in fact begun dipping sponges in various solutions, including vinegar, lemon, and astringents to be used as a contraceptive with the idea that various tinctures would kill sperm. It is then quite possible that the association of sponges with prostitutes inspired such bawdy images of women as this anonymous 18th-century painting of a prostitute engaged in her intimate toilette.

Figure 12: 18th-century, Artist unknown.

By the 19th century, sponges had made their way from the brothel into working class circles and by the 1880s "sponges, soluble pessaries, rubber diaphragms and syringes were sold by chemists […along with] spermicidal solutions for use with sponges [which] had to be mixed by the woman herself, using quinine and other ingredients in a process resembling a chemical experiment" (Knight, 58). Moreover, there were a number of dangers associated with their use, and Read conjectures that the practice may well have contributed to early death in working class women (10).

Other medicinal uses of sponges in the 18th century include vinaigrettes or small decorative containers that held vinegar-soaked sponges. Vinegar was used in case of fainting or foul odors, and people commonly held sponges soaked with aromatic tinctures to their noses in order to mask heavy odors such as raw sewage and rotting garbage. While both men and women used them, vinaigrettes commonly hung from long chains, or were mounted on bracelets or finger rings, and decorated with Italian mosaics, mother-of-pearl and gem materials. Hence, as jewelry, these sponges too would have been more frequently associated with the "weaker sex", along with various forms of corporeal delicacy including fainting spells.

Women, sponges, luxury, economy

Following this brief catalogue of representations of the female body when it is associated aesthetically, erotically, hygienically or medicinally with the sponge, I now want to offer some suggestions as to how these associations may have arisen. In northern Europe, at some of the earlier moments in the history I have traced, sponges were luxury imported items, hence the association of the female body with the sponge would be further evidence of how women have been construed as prime consumers of luxury goods since the (early) modern period. According to Maxine Berg, "[h]istorians of luxury […] noticed the increase in the place of domestic settings for the display of

luxury and the part played by women, [and how] after the seventeenth century women drew luxury into the confines of the domestic sphere" while "mistresses and courtesans sensualized and refined luxury" and became "the sirens of consumer society", indulging in "conspicuous consumption, female vanity and fashion" (39, 234). In the case of prostitutes, as noted above, sponges would have been both a luxury and a professional necessity that would have enabled them to keep working while menstruating, and served as a contraceptive at other times. More generally, given the cultural construction of females as eager consumers, "gendered stereotypes of the female consumer have [been the basis of] associations between consumption and sexuality and they have related to elite women [as well as to] servants" (234).

Used cosmetically in the form of sponge fillers for the hair, for applying rouge and lead-based paints, or as contraceptive devices, sponges would logically have become associated with female rapacity and pleasure, "whether that pleasure be related to material effects or bodily pleasures" as Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace has argued (Wallace, 1997: 108). As she also notes, "feminist scholars have recognized for a very long time, that mind is gendered as male, while matter is gendered as female" and that "potential female depravity" is often related to women's supposed "inordinate attraction to 'things'" and luxurious objects with which to luxuriate, such as the sponge (Kowaleski-Wallace, 2018: 119, 1997: 53). In other words, rapacious consumption of luxury items has been, since the early modern period, seen as a female trait; sponges, which had to be extracted from the Mediterranean and exported to Northern Europe, were a luxury item in the early modern period; sponges have been aesthetically and culturally framed as the natural feminine bathing accoutrement; and given that the supposedly female predilection for consumption is understood as a form of sexuality, it is little wonder that the sponge, also used as a contraceptive, would be so strongly associated with women.

In light of these observations, I now want to turn to Kowaleski-Wallace's analysis of *The Rape of the Lock*, a mock-heroic, high burlesque, narrative poem penned by Alexander Pope in 1712. As Pope explained in a letter to Mrs Arabella Fermor to whom the poem is dedicated, his "heroi-comical poem" was "intended to divert a few young ladies who have the good sense and good humour enough to laugh […] at their sex's little unguarded follies" such as being attracted to expensive baubles (*NAEL* 2686). Of interest here is the poem's heroine, Belinda, a "gentle belle" (line 8) accustomed to a great deal of luxury, as richly illustrated in a famous scene wherein she is occupied with her toilette and a panoply "display'd, Each silver vase in mystic order laid, […] Unnumberd off'rings of the world" […] "India's glowing gems, Puffs, powders, patches" (canto 1, lines 135-8). While this passage provides one more example of how women have long been associated with extravagant tastes and the sensual consumption of luxury goods from exotic lands, Pope brings these items magically to life as "busy Sylphs surround their darling care; [some] set the head, [some] divide the hair".

In analyzing this scene, Kowaleski-Wallace, for whom Belinda's magical commodities have particular significance, enlists the work of scholars who identify themselves as New Materialists or flat ontologists, and who make no distinction between "the types of things that exist and treat them equally" (Bogoost: 17). Kowaleski-Wallace, who bases her essay on *The Rape of the Lock* on this recent scholarship, similarly argues that "[c]ommodities are rarely the dead, lifeless objects they may seem to be. Instead they often reflect human purpose, improve upon or enact human desire" (2018: 118). At the same time, Pope's world of magical things is understood as "owing much to a residual, vitalist interpretation of the physical world that remains an implicit object of attack for the poet's satire" (2018: 106). As a New Materialist, Kowaleski-Wallace then

reads this scene as evidence of how Pope straddled the shift from vitalism to rational enlightenment logic and "struggles to disavow an alternative understanding of vital matter in the poem [yet…] it is still very present in the persistence of analogical thinking rooted in alchemy" (2018: 107). Hence, in their materiality, Belinda's toiletries commemorate the moment when "nature passed into culture" the moment when "raw material combined with human labor and technology to satisfy cultural design" (2018: 118-9). In this reading moreover, the poem is also evidence of the vitalist tendency to see the world in terms of horizontal affinities, a point which "has particular importance for gender" so that Belinda, who is typically read as an immobile entity, may now be understood as potentially dynamic in a world of flat ontologically defined objects, that is, objects to which the potential for dynamism is attributed.

In *A General Theory of Magic*, anthropologist Marcel Mauss also commented on the role of women in premodern or vitalist belief systems, writing that "women are particularly disposed to hysteria, and their nervous crises make them susceptible to superhuman forces, which endow them with special powers [although] the magical attributes of women derive primarily from their social position" (35). This then would add yet more credence to Kowaleski-Wallace's argument that the magic surrounding Belinda in Pope's poem, which is in part attributable to her social position, is evidence of the last vestiges of the poet's vitalist tendency to read movement into objects and associate magic with women. Mauss likewise discusses the notion of horizontal affinities or what he referred to as sympathetic or symbolic magic (63), whereby "the part stands for the complete object" just as sponge, if my reading is correct, is metonymically related to women, "and can bewitch or enchant" (78- 79).

Figure 13: 18th-century sponge holders

Given the foregoing, and the consideration that women used sponges in their toilette, and that sponges would have been a luxury item kept in the kinds of silver holders created precisely for that purpose in the 18th century, sponges seem remarkably absent from Pope's inventory of Belinda's combs and precious beauty accoutrements. Indeed, given the history of the association of the female body with the sponge, either through what Mauss called "mimetic sympathy", or the alignment of women with the consumption of luxury goods, the absence of the sponge here seems nothing short of astounding, and in the following section I want to offer a few possible explanations as to why.

Sponges: a love story

First, let me return to the early history of sponges as a contraceptive and to a somewhat later work by Richard Carlile that discusses the sponge in this connection, entitled

Every Woman's Book: Or, What is Love (1828). Undertaken with a view to making greater sexual freedom possible for women, Carlile claimed that his work would be "valued as one of the most important little books in the English language" because, in his view, the ideas contained in it had the potential to revolutionize society at large (1). As Carlile laments "under the present state of society, love is a subject on which some women will not talk" so that men are forced "to answer for them, to take for granted that the passion is reciprocal" (7). Due to this inability to discuss sex and treat it rationally in society, modern marriage, in which the majority of his readers found themselves, had become "a system of degradation and slavery" (24).

Part of Carlile's programme involved championing improved sexual health and hygiene for women, and he argued that in "the old maid, the passion of love, like an over-flowing gall bladder for lack of proper absorption, tinges every other sensation with bitterness" (5). Yet while the virgin is like an "over-flowing gall bladder", he also concludes that "the female has no seminal organs like the male; but there is a stimulating *something* that may result in the effusion of a seminal fluid by the female", although he cautions that "this happens only in lascivious women or such as live luxuriously" (14, emphasis in the text).

In an effort to correct all of these societal ills, including women's approach to their own sexuality, Carlile proposes giving women more control over reproduction through various methods of birth control, explaining that "[t]he use of the sponge is the female's safeguard" (39). He therefore counsels "the female [to] introduce into her vagina a piece of sponge as large as can be pleasantly introduced, having previously attached a bobbin or bit of narrow riband to withdraw it" to be used as a preventative to conception (38). Arguing that contraception will lead to the sexual liberation of women, Carlile notes that "[t]he practice is common with females of more refined parts of the continent of Europe, and with those of the Aristocracy of England. An English Duchess was lately introduced to the writer, who never goes out to a dinner without being prepared with the sponge. French and Italian women wear them attached to their waists, and always have them at hand" (38-39).

Although as Foucault pointed out in his history of sexuality, the sexual liberation of women has most often led to further forms of oppression, and while I expected yet another dictatorial "mansplanation" of what women should do with their bodies in Carlile's *Every Woman's Book* of 1828, what I discovered was a genuine effort to make the expression of female sexuality acceptable. It is notable as well that in previous centuries women were already protecting themselves from unwanted pregnancy with sponges, so perhaps it these associations of female sexuality and sexually empowered agency that accounts for the somewhat remarkable absence of the sponge from Pope's rendering of Belinda's boudoir. Both banal and intimate, sponges are things in which women have taken comfort – either as a contraceptive or as a part of an intimate moment – and their imperceptibility during intercourse has made it possible to avoid unwanted pregnancies and potentially subvert both husband and church.

Moreover, in researching this paper I also discovered that the anatomical term "urethral sponge", which refers to the cushion of tissue that sits against the pubic bone and vaginal wall and surrounds the urethra, first appeared in 1981, in a book entitled *A New View of A Woman's Body*, published by the Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers. Importantly, the term was coined and attention drawn to that part of the female anatomy in an effort to explain the G spot and to heighten women's pleasure in sexual relations. So the term urethral sponge, far from being a label foisted on women based on some sort of premodern magical sympathy between the female body and the sponge perceived by and imposed on women by men, turns out to be quite the reverse.

Seen in this light, this voyeuristic image by Louis Leopold Boilly of a women sponging herself on a bidet featuring a broken vessel – a convention signifying a violent loss of virginity in the 18th century – takes on added significance. [7] This is to say that Boilly has intruded on a young woman, or imagined intruding on a young woman consoling herself after what her expression suggests was the regretted loss of her virginity, taking solace in an intimate bathing ritual with a sponge.

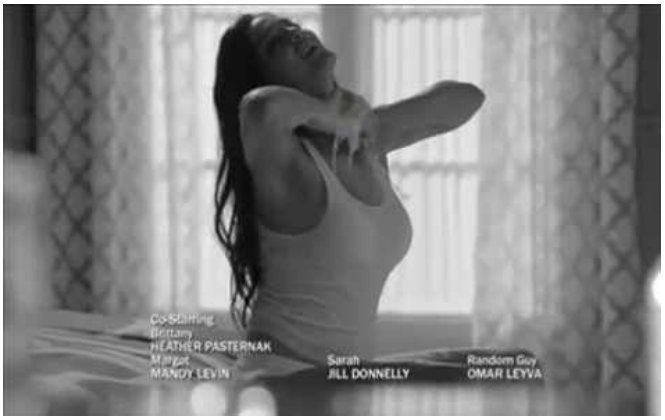
Figure 14: Louis Leopold Boilly, *La Toilette intime ou la Rose effeuillée*, 1790.

In this regard, I am tempted to see a kinship between Boilly's painting of a deflowered Rose, painted by a male voyeur who is – given the pun in the title – amused by what has just befallen this young woman, Degas' sponge bathing prostitutes, and Zanele Muholi's "Ordeal". In other words, these are images of a women taking comfort in a sponge bath, and, in the case of Boilly and Muholi, the bath occurs seemingly in the aftermath of rape. Notably, while all of the other examples of female bathers and sponge bathers I have cited in this essay are the creations of male artists, female artist Muholi's subject is not arrested by the penetrating of gaze of a male voyeur, and not represented for erotic titillation, as only the subject's hands are visible in the image to the exclusion of exposed erogenous zones.

Perhaps then, it is through a chain of intuited inferences that the "Sponge" episode of *Seinfeld* was produced, which follows the character Elaine Benes in a desperate search through every drug store in New York for the last available Today contraceptive sponges. The sponges were discontinued in 1994 after problems were found at the production facility related to their deionized water system and Elaine is forced to scour the city in the hopes of finding what remains in stock of her favourite contraceptive. In keeping with my suggestion that women, like those in The Federation of Feminist Women's Health Centers, find a source of comfort and pleasure in the sponge, and have even named a part of the female anatomy for the sponge, hoarding sponges ultimately leads to Elaine's empowerment.

With the Today sponge off the market, Elaine metes out her sexual favours only after aggressive interviews with potential partners in which they plead their case as she determines their "sponge worthiness". In other words, the shortage of sponge contraceptives, favoured because of their malleability and imperceptibility during intercourse, ultimately empowers Elaine to aggressively pick and choose – to call the shots – in her own sexual politics.

Likewise, in season 4 episode 3 of *New Girl*, male character Schmidt is trying to land a sponge ad campaign, and practises by pitching a sponge to his roommates whom he is using as his focus group. When he asks his male friends to free associate with the word "sponge", their response is invariably "sponge", which suggests, as I have been arguing, that sponges are, for various reasons, most often gendered as female, hence the word sparks nothing in the male imagination. The result of this exercise is a sponge commercial in black and white, with a bright yellow sponge and a woman squeezing water over her breasts, which she then tosses to a man standing in the room who, with a suggestive look, begins to wash a wall. In voice-over we hear, "the man sponge", following which the woman says, "because the dirtiest thing in your room should be me". Again the resulting sponge commercial suggests female empowerment through the reversal of stereotypical roles – he is washing the wall – with an implement specially labeled "the man sponge", which suggests that sponges are most commonly gendered as female. And finally, the commercial makes the erotic connection between women and sponges for which I have been arguing throughout this essay abundantly clear.



Conclusion

Writing on "thing theory", Bill Brown suggests that we "could imagine things, […] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects – their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems" (5). In fine, this is precisely what I have attempted to accomplish in my essay, and to uncover the some of the unexpected magic whereby the common sponge is revealed as an unlikely fetish endowed with a surprising sensuous presence. What is more, I set out fully expecting to find yet another account of misogyny and male dominance and the forceful patriarchal policing of the female body. What I found instead was the intimate history of an object in which women take deep, perhaps magical, private comfort, and from which women derive solace and even erotic pleasure.

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NOTES

1. See: Lydia Willgress, "Woman, 23, eats up to 20 SPONGES a day after soaking them in apple-flavoured Fairy liquid". *MailOnline*, 16 October 2015.

2. Degas also produced at least one bronze entitled *Woman Rubbing Her Back with a Sponge*, modeled ca. 1888–92, cast 1920.

3. See: "Soak it up! The Story of Degas' Sponge".

4. See: "Soak it up! The Story of Degas' Sponge". This is a somewhat odd claim given that the images are created with pastels rather that paint. That said however, this conjecture somewhat obliquely leads us back to ancient Greece and the story of Protogenes who was unable to capture the foam in the nostrils of a horse he was painting and threw his sponge at his work in frustration, only to instantly achieve the effect he was looking for.

5. On this point see Cunningham: https://slideplayer.com/slide/10349142/

6. Text taken from the exhibit of Muholi's work on display at The Tate Modern, Liverpool.

7. Similarly, images of girls with dead birds, such as Jean-Baptiste Greuze's *Young Girl Weeping over Her Dead Bird*, 1765 (Paris, Louvre), signified a loss of virginity in the 18th century. This is why Diderot wrote of the girl in the painting: "…see how beautiful she is! How enticing! It would not be entirely distasteful to me to be the cause of her pain " ["… voyez donc qu'elle est belle! qu'elle est intéressante! […] cela il ne me déplairoit pas trop d'être la cause de sa peine."]

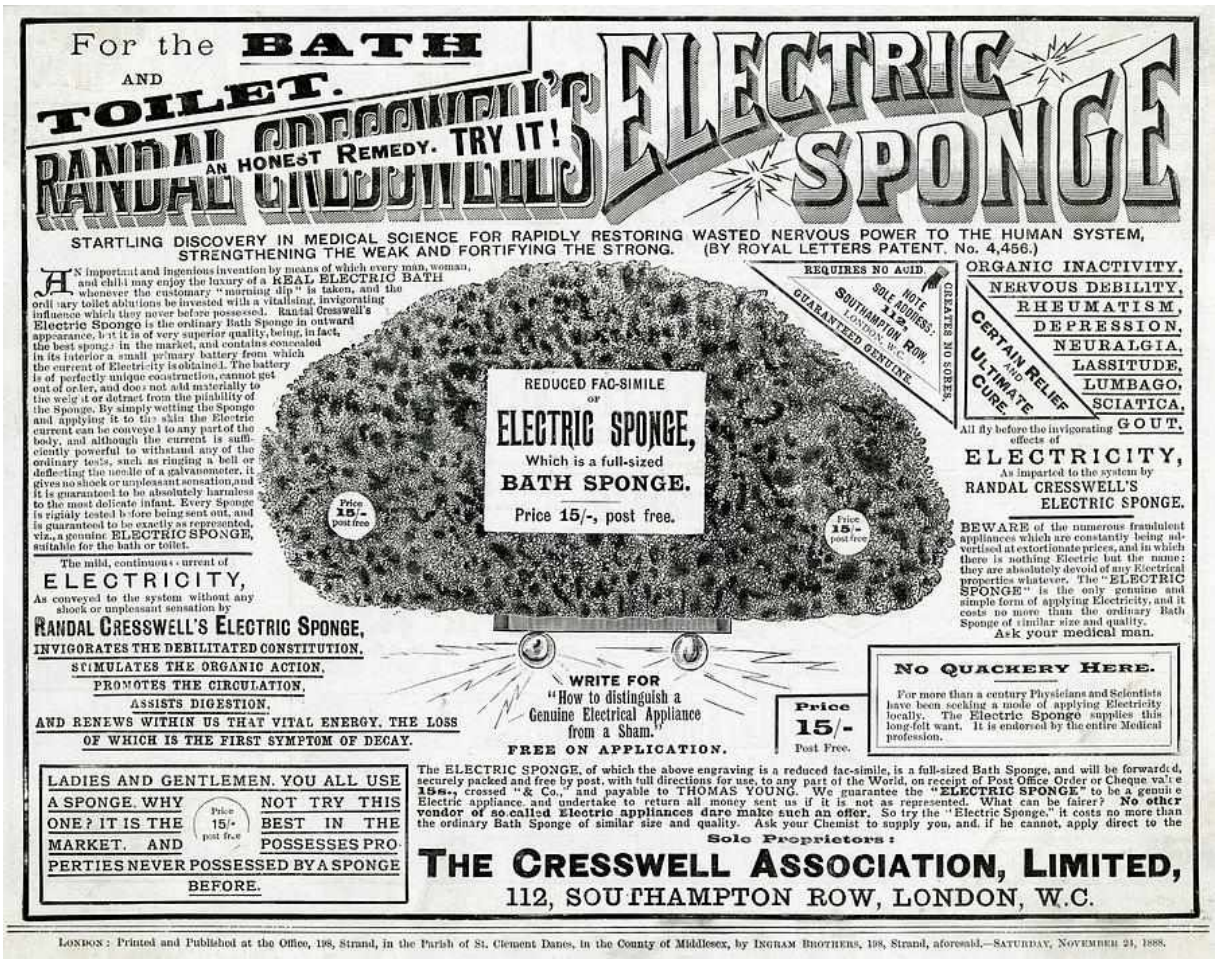

Figure: "For the bath and toilet. **Randal Cresswell's Electric Sponge**…. An honest remedy – Try it! …Startling discovery in medical science for rapidly restoring wasted nervous power to the human system, strengthening the weak and fortifying the strong. By Royal Letters Patent No.4,456... No quackery here… Ladies and gentlemen. You all use a sponge. Why not try this one. It is the best in the market, and possesses properties never possessed by a sponge before. Price 15/- Post free." Advertisement, *The Illustrated London News*, 28 July 1888.