Ophelia:
A Psychological Portrait

Xena Fitzgerald
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The tragic image of Ophelia, a young noblewoman who drowns during the play Hamlet, has haunted Britain since Shakespeare wrote her into existence around the year 1600. Ophelia reached the peak of her popularity around the mid-nineteenth century. In the realm of painting, she was a popular subject for Pre-Raphaelite painters who were concerned with tropes of Victorian femininity as well as with the psychology of their subjects. In this paper I will consider how the artist Anna Lea Merritt (1844-1930), who was influenced by the Pre-Raphaelite movement, leapt beyond popular tropes to visually portray Ophelia in her 1880 painting with emotional and psychological depth more successfully than her contemporaries (fig. 1).

Born in Pennsylvania, Merritt, like Mary Cassatt, pursued an artistic career in Europe. Instead of following the Impressionists in Paris, Merritt chose to settle in London in 1870 and work under the influence of the late Pre-Raphaelites. There, she met painters such as Whistler, Burne-Jones, Holman Hunt, and her eventual husband Henry Merritt.[1] Henry died only three months after their wedding, and Merritt never remarried. Instead, she dedicated her life to painting and supported herself mainly on portrait commissions. Outside of portraiture, she occasionally painted religious, floral, and literary subjects. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, Merritt painted illustrations inspired by British literary heroes Tennyson and Shakespeare.

The Pre-Raphaelites were by no means the first artistic group interested in Shakespeare. Illustrations of Shakespearean scenes became immensely popular about a century earlier with the formation of John Boydell's Shakespeare Gallery, which was dedicated to exhibiting paintings of Shakespearean subjects and published engraved reproductions and smaller Shakespearean illustrations.[2] Of course, these publications included illustrations of Ophelia such as the illustration by Richard Westall (fig. 2). Over the next hundred years and beyond, Ophelia's popularity never fell. Her large representation in art contributed to a variety of popular interpretations of her character.

Ophelia as a character is frequently represented as various forms of femininity. Art historian Kimberly Rhodes explains that during the Victorian era Ophelia represented a range of female typologies from the "dutiful daughter" to the "madwoman."[3] Because Ophelia has very few lines within the play and her most significant action, her death, does not even appear on stage, Rhodes describes her as "a blank page on which patriarchy can inscribe and project its desires."[4] Along with other Shakespearean heroines, Ophelia was taken up as an exemplar for femininity.[5] Moral guides such as Anna Jameson's Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical, and Historical instructed women and girls to emulate Ophelia's "modesty, grace, and tenderness."[6] Furthermore, many scholars even note a parallel between Ophelia and the Virgin Mary.[7] The similarity is particularly apparent during Act III when Hamlet walks in while Ophelia kneels alone holding a book much like customary Annunciation scenes as evident in the comparison of a fifteenth-century annunciation scene (fig. 3) and a Pre-Raphaelite depiction of Hamlet and Ophelia by the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti (fig. 4).[8]

Scholar Georgianna Ziegler argues that Victorians idealized Ophelia as "more than human" and fetishized both her innocence and purity. Ziegler attributes Ophelia's popularity as a painting subject to Victorian men's fascination with "the idea of capturing that moment right before a young girl opens into full womanhood and the death of innocence."[9] However, in addition to her symbolism of feminine innocence and grace, Ophelia also played another role in Victorian culture: becoming a trope of the 'madwoman.' Ophelia's extreme melancholy, vulgar songs, disheveled appearance, and accidental/suicidal death account for the interpretation of Ophelia as a subcategory of the 'madwoman' trope.[10] In her article "The Feminization of Madness," art historian Jane Kromm describes how

Ophelia's madness is sexualized through various stages of undress and close connection with flowers, which associate her with the fertility goddess Flora (fig. 5 and 6).[11] Additionally, Kromm argues that Ophelia is represented as the "least passive, most unruly among the lovelorn madwoman prototypes."[12] Kromm identifies these madwoman Ophelia-type figures in various illustrations of insane asylums such as the "sprawling Ophelia-type" central figure in Bonaventura Genelli's Glance in an Asylum (1850) (fig. 7) and the woman dropping wilted flowers in the bottom right hand corner of Amand Gautier's Madwomen of the Salpêtrière: Courtyard of Agitated Inmates (1855) (fig. 8).[13] These figures in illustrations of psychiatric hospitals indicate that while 'the Ophelia type' became a subcategory of 'the madwoman,' depicting Ophelia as a 'madwoman' was far less popular than depicting her as tragically beautiful and slightly melancholic.

Artists contemporary to Merritt, such as Pre-Raphaelite brother John Everett Millais (1829-1896), French Academic painter Alexandre Cabanel (1823-1889), and Pre-Raphaelite follower John William Waterhouse (1849-1917) all represent Ophelia as a beautiful and tragic victim in their depiction of narrative scenes just before Ophelia's death (fig. 9, 10, 11, and 12). Millais and Cabanel both portray a weak and listless Ophelia already fallen into the water, emphasizing the tragedy of her death. Cabanel includes the broken willow bough behind her to increase the narrative understanding of the painting. All three artists accentuate Ophelia's beauty by depicting her with extremely pale skin, long flowing hair, and wearing ornate medieval gowns. Compared to these contemporary painters, Merritt's depictions of Ophelia are more relatable for the viewer and more sensitively portray Ophelia's psychological state.

Although Ophelia was a wildly popular subject for male artists, who usually illustrated her more positive attributes, Ophelia was far less popular among female artists, who preferred to paint Shakespearean heroines such as Juliet, Rosalind, or Celia who provided clearer "source[s] of moral education." In fact, perhaps because of the moral ambiguity surrounding Ophelia's character, Merritt was one of the only female artists at the time to paint Ophelia and one of the only artists not to idealize her portrayal of Ophelia. In her first depiction of Ophelia from 1879 (fig. 13), Merritt directly contradicts Jameson's moral education guide which described Ophelia as "too soft, too good, too fair, to be cast among the briers of this working-day world" without sexualizing her insanity.[14] Using a recognizable model in contemporary garb, an undefined setting, and a reliance on photography, Merritt transports Ophelia to the contemporary 'working-day' world, making her more relatable for both the artist and the viewer.

For the portrait-style etching, Merritt relied on sketches from life and photographs (fig. 14 and 15) of the popular actress Ellen Terry in the role of Ophelia.[15] Merritt attempted to render the likeness of the actress while illustrating the psychology of Ophelia through her facial expression with furrowed brows and woeful upward gaze. Contemporary audiences would have easily recognized the face of the well-known actress in her contemporary hairstyle and fur-collared dress, thereby identifying more strongly with her emotionally. Only her melancholic expression and loose fistful of flowers clutched to her breast identify the actress as Ophelia. Unlike the contemporary paintings described earlier, there are no indications of the setting of the play, since Merritt locates Ophelia in a dark undefined background. The black background deviates from the Pre-Raphaelite trend of situating Hamlet and Ophelia in vaguely medieval settings and instead lends the etching a sense of timelessness that pulls Ophelia into the contemporary day.

While Merritt's reliance on photography further "modernizes" Ophelia, her artistic interpretation produces the emotional quality of the etching.[16] Several photographers at the time, such as Duchenne de Boulogne and Hugh Welch Diamond, were interested in the physiology of human facial expression, including physical expressions of insanity, and photography's ability to document such features. Diamond employed 'the Ophelia type madwoman' trope by photographing a psychiatric patient in the guise of Ophelia (fig. 16).[17] Considering these photographic pursuits, Merritt's writings demonstrate her belief that while photography can assist the artist in accurate portrayals of facial expression, the painter can portray emotions far beyond the ability of the camera. She writes,

> "Photography can fix the features and expression of a face at the given moment, but an artist receives the expression of a face in the sympathetic mirror of his own soul and acquires the skill to reproduce it with paints on canvas... he will convey a sense of character beyond the power of the photograph."[18]

This quote demonstrates that Merritt identified with the subjects that she painted and valued their emotional and psychological state. She considered it her duty as an artist to portray the expression of her subjects' internal state more powerfully than could be done with the camera. Similarly, her interaction backstage with the actress Ellen Terry reveals the importance she placed on Ophelia's emotional significance:

> "I called at her room behind the scenes and saw her as she came off the stage, tears on her cheeks, still feeling the reality of Ophelia's sorrows. Her emotion was even more impressive than it had been from the front—my admiration was entirely captured."[19]

Intent on portraying a deep sense of emotional distress and madness, Merritt was dissatisfied with the etching of Terry since she believed that it "sacrificed much of the expression in order to preserve the likeness."[20] Therefore, she decided to return to the subject and make a painting of Ophelia "really mad."[21]

Merritt's oil painting, from the following year, shares a similar black background but the increased detail in Ophelia's bouquet offers an additional clue to understanding this uniquely psychological representation of Ophelia. Her bundle of foliage and flowers is even more haphazard and includes rosemary, daisies, and pansies, which are among the plants mentioned with Ophelia's lines in Act IV, Scene 5. In the scene, Ophelia hands out flowers in a delusional mania and sings lewd songs as she describes their symbolism: "There's rosemary, that's for remembrance... there is pansies, that's for thoughts..."[22] By portraying Ophelia in her 'madness' of scene five Merritt emphasizes Ophelia's psychological state instead of her death, the for a radical change from other contemporary artists' work.

Ophelia's bouquet is also significant because of Merritt's personal passion for flowers. Later in life, Merritt dedicated her time to gardening, painting flowers, and writing about flowers. In her essay My Garden published in 1901, Merritt's extensive personification of flowers in her garden denies their strict association with feminine virtues. Instead, Merritt interpreted them as emotional and psychological beings. She writes: "The care of my flowers became a passion. Their wants and needs I studied as though they were conscious beings, as indeed I believe them to be."[23] Merritt goes on to describe the complex personalities of several flowers. For example she describes the daisy, which typically represented innocence as: "...the most underhand, grasping, selfish, ill-regulated little plant that exists."[24] For Merritt, the rose, generally associated with love, was "the most complex individual. Each rose has its own ideas and whims."[25] Instead of subscribing to the established language that attributed positive feminine symbols to flowers, Merritt gave flowers alternative significance by granting them agency and unique personalities. Through her writing, it is evident that Merritt's subversive interpretation of flowers supports her interest in the psychology of Ophelia, a character intimately bound to nature, who is rarely seen without flowers and dies among them. In her painting and writings, Merritt subverted the symbolic meanings of both flowers and the character of Ophelia, two symbols of femininity, to consider their psychological significance.

Even more obvious than the changes in her bouquet, the figure of Ophelia in Merritt's painting also differs substantially from the figure in her earlier etching. Instead of Ellen Terry's nearly pulled back hairstyle, the Ophelia in the painting has brilliantly orange disheveled hair with wisps seemingly caught in a light breeze. Her hands are not as smooth nor as delicately posed as Ellen Terry's. Turned at a three quarters view toward the left of the composition, the model, noticeably a different person, shares a similar, but slightly more believable, facial expression from the previous etching. Her eyes and lightly parted lips seem to more honestly reveal an internal forlornness and fear.

The evolution from the etching to painting demonstrates Merritt's desire to depict her subject with more psychological depth. To more accurately portray Ophelia's internal psychological state, Merritt visited Bedlam Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in London, to observe the patients for inspiration.[26] There, Merritt met the perfect model. She describes her encounter with a woman in the hospital gardens, a fitting place considering Ophelia's connection with nature:

> "Among them moved a lovely-looking young woman, picking up odds and ends as she slowly walked. Then she dropped on her knees, continuing to move, kneeling and grasping against her breast the bundle she had gathered—faded flowers, torn bits of paper, dead leaves, a reel of cotton! Just in front of us she stopped, looking full in my eyes with an expression questioning, doubtful, full

> of pain. Suddenly she grasped my skirt and said, 'Kiss me.' I kissed her forehead and then hastily turned to be led away. Something of her expression I got into my picture."[27]

Distraught and clutching her pitiful bouquet, the woman from this anecdote shares striking similarities with Ophelia. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the woman who served as Merritt's inspiration was aware that Merritt was going to paint her. Merritt's visit to the hospital, use of a likely non-consensual model, and eventual monetary gain from selling the painting is all somewhat exploitative. However, I believe that the painting does more justice than harm. In Merritt's view: "The great inspiration or impulse for a work of art is to convey thought or emotion from one human mind to another" and her portrait is an exemplary success in this regard.

Although some scholars argue that portraits of Ophelia in the typology of insanity normalize mental illness as a beautiful and desirable attribute of femininity, Merritt's portrait denies some the common tropes of sexualizing or glorifying mental illness.[28] While the woman portrayed is reasonably attractive she does not have the graceful elegance or sensuality found in other paintings of Ophelia by Millais, Waterhouse, or Cabanel. Rather, Merritt's sensitive attention to the facial expression and intent to accurately depict is more similar to Théodore Géricault's 'Portraits of the Insane' series that included portraits of insane asylum patients against dark backgrounds such as A Woman Suffering from Obsessive Envy (1822) (fig. 17). Merritt uses Géricault's portrait style of a dark background and attention to facial expression but instead of portraying the tropes of Ophelia as a medieval beauty, she reinterprets the character as a real and contemporary psychiatric patient. Therefore, Merritt's portrait transports Ophelia into contemporary reality and depicts an outward expression of mental illness not as she imagined it, but as she witnessed it. While Ophelia has been used by artists to represent shallow tropes of Victorian femininity, Anna Lea Merritt's 1880 portrait transcends all former interpretations to reflect, with diligence and care, the complexity of an individual's emotional suffering.

Figure 1 not included. Merritt, Anna Lea. *Ophelia*, 1880.

Figure 2. Westall, Richard. *Ophelia*, 1805, oil on canvas, University of Tenessee at Chatenooga. Availble from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Westall-Ophelia.jpg

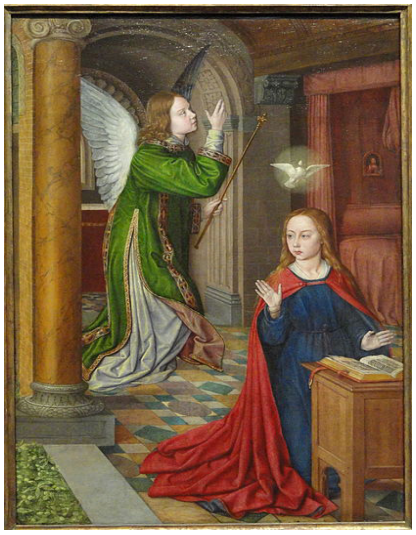

Figure 3. Hey, Jean. *Annunciation*, 1490-95, oil on panel, The Art Institute of Chicago. Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Annunciation,_1490-1495,_by_Jean_Hey_(Master_of_Moulins)_-_Art_Institute_of_Chicago_-_DSC09637.JPG

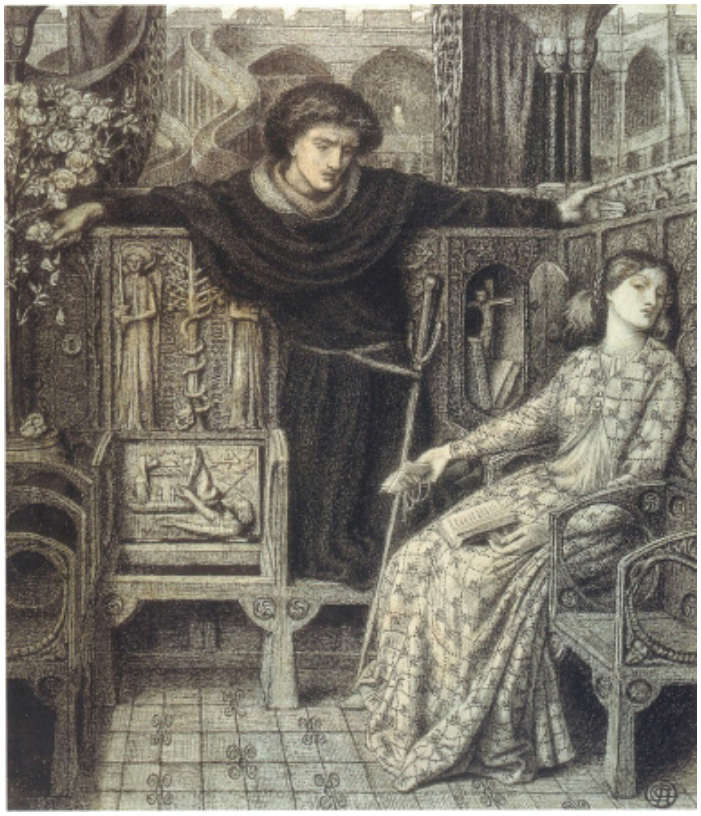

Figure 4. Rossetti, Dante Gabriel. *Hamlet and Ophelia*, 1858, drawing on paper, The British Museum, London. Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dante_Gabriel_Rossetti_-_Hamlet_and_Ophelia.JPG

Figure 5 not included. Cignani, Carlo. *Flora*, 17th century, oil on canvas, Estense Gallery, Modena.

Figure 6 not included. Böcklin, Arnold. *Flora*, 1875, tempera on panel, Museuem de Bildenden Kunste, Leipzeg.

Figure 7 not included. Genelli, Bonaventura. *Glance in an Asylum*, 1868, Kunsthalle Hamburg.

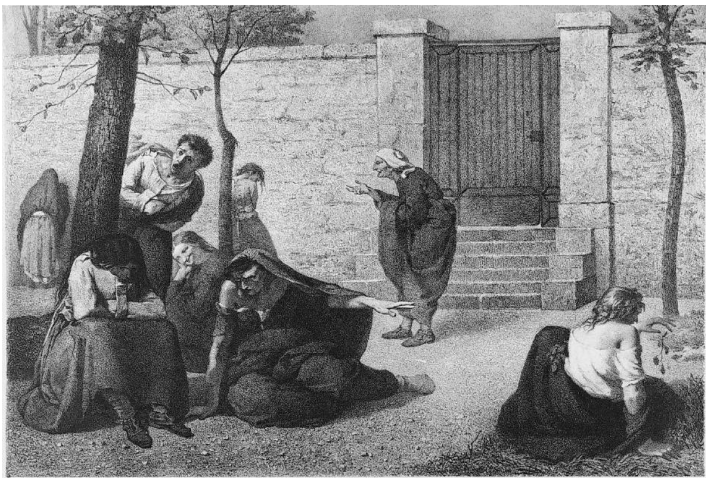

Figure 8. Gautier, Amand. *Madwomen of the Salpêtrière: Courtyard of Agitated Inmates,* 1855. Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gautier_-_Salpetriere.JPG

Figure 9. Millais, John Everett. *Ophelia*, 1851-52, oil on canvas, © Tate, London. Image released under Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0. Available from http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/millais-ophelia-n01506.

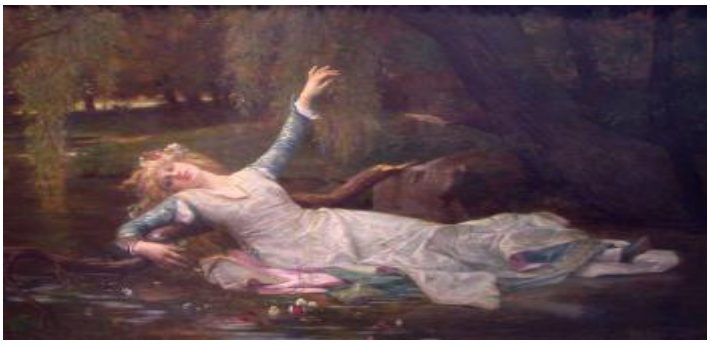

Figure 10. Cabanel, Alexandre. *Ophelia,* 1881, oil on canvas, private collection. Availble from http://www.the-athenaeum.org/art/detail.php?ID=7693.

Figure 11. Waterhouse, John William. Ophelia, 1894, oil on canvas, private collection. Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ophelia_1894.jpg.

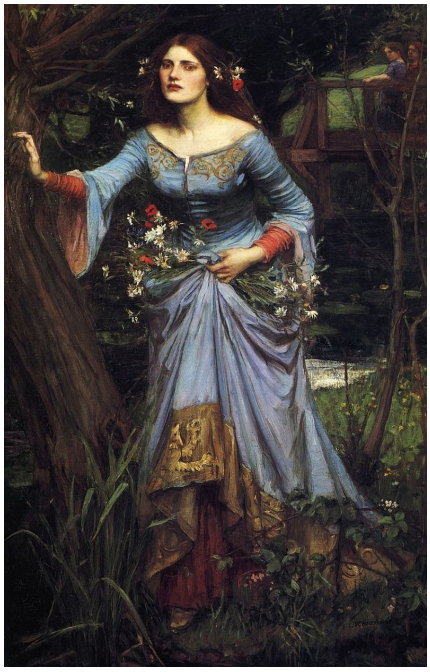

Figure 12. Waterhouse, John William. *Ophelia,* 1910, oil on canvas, private collection. Available from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ophelia_1910.jpg.

Figure 13 not included. Merritt, Anna Lea. *Ophelia*, 1879, etching, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Figure 14 not included. Window & Grove, Miss Ellen Terry as "Ophelia", 1878.

Figure 15 not inclued.. Window & Grove, Miss Ellen Terry as "Ophelia", 1878.

Figure 16 not included.. Diamond, Hugh Welch. Ophelia (Patient from the Surrey Country Lunatic Asylum), c. 1850.

Figure 17 not included. Géricault, Théodore. *A Woman Suffering from Obsessive Envy*, 1822. Oil on canvas, Musee de beaux arts de Lyon.

Notes

1. Jason Stieber, "Guide to the Anna Lea Merritt Papers 1863-1922," Archives and Special Collections Library and Research Center (National Museum of Women in the Arts, 2006): 1.
2. Anne Leonard, "Boydell Shakespeare Gallery," in The Tragic Muse: Art and Emotion, 1700-1900, ed. Anne Leonard (Chicago: Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, 2011), 54.
3. Kimberly Rhodes, Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006): 8.
4. Ibid., 4.
5. Pamela Gerrish Nunn, "Between Strong-Mindedness and Sentimentality: Women's Literary Painting," Victorian Poetry 33, no. ¾ (1995): 428.
6. Georgianna Ziegler, "Sweet Rose of May: Ophelia Through Victorian Eyes," in The Myth and Madness of Ophelia, ed. Carol Solomon Kiefer (Amherst: Mead Art Museum, 2001), 42.
7. Bridget Gellert Lyons, "The Iconography of Ophelia ," English Literary History 44, no. 1 (1977): 61.
8. Ziegler, "Sweet Rose of May," 45.
9. Ibid., 50.
10. Jane Kromm, "The Feminization of Madness in Visual Representation ," Feminist Studies 20, no. 3 (1994): 523.
11. Ibid., 513.
12. Ibid., 511.
13. Ibid., 521.
14. Zeigler, "Sweet Rose of May," 42.
15. S. R. Koehler, "The Works of the American Etchers: VII. Anna Lea Merritt," The American Art Review 1, no. 6 (1880): 230.
16. Rhodes, Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture, 155.
17. For more on Diamond's photograph of Ophelia see Carol Solomon Kiefer "The Myth and Madness of Ophelia" in The Myth and Madness of Ophelia and Kimberly Rhode's "From Life: Ophelia and Photography" from Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture. For more on the relationship between photography and physiognomy, see "Capturing Insanity: The Wedding of Photography and Physiognomy in the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Medical Journal Article" in Patient Tales Case Histories and the Uses of Narrative in Psychiatry by Carol Berkenkotter.
18. Anna Lea Merritt, Love Locked Out: The Memoirs of Anna Lea Merritt with a checklist of her works (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 1982), 202.
19. Ibid., 129.
20. Ibid., 130.
21. Ibid.,
22. William Shakespeare, Hamlet, prince of Denmark, ed. K. Deighton (London: Macmillan, 1919): IV. 5. 55-58.
23. Anna Lea Merritt, "My Garden," The Century Magazine LXII, no. 3 (1901): 344.
24. Ibid., 344.
25. Ibid., 348.
26. Other artists such as William Hogarth have depicted scenes of Bedlam Hospital.
27. Merritt, Loved Locked Out, 130.
28. Rhodes, Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture, 12.

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