Women’s Health in the Art and Culture of Victoria England.
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Ophelia floats on the surface of a stream surround by the lush detail of the riverbank covered in flowers (fig.1). Her arms are bent at her sides, as if she embraces the water that acts as death and tomb to her broken heart. Millais’s depiction of her face, her parted lips and staring eyes, is tragic, recalling the overwhelming madness caused by Hamlet’s abuse to her heart and mind. Ophelia is the scorned lover of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark in Shakespeare’s play of the same name, written between 1599 and 1601. After Hamlet has been driven mad by his belief that his uncle killed his father, he murders Ophelia’s father in an act of paranoia, leaving Ophelia to throw herself into the river and commit suicide at the loss of her parent and the betrayal of the man she loves. Her unrequited love and the desperation of her mind cause her to seek solace in death. Millais’s treatment of this subject matter, the devastating suicide of the virgin, in Ophelia (1851-52) embodies the ‘modest maiden’ theme that emerged in nineteenth century England (though Shakespeare hints at a sexual relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet).1 The fully clothed, sexually repressed figure of the maiden is in keeping with the beliefs of Victorian England that women were not burdened with sexual desire, as their male counter parts were, instead their nature makes them mothers and housekeepers without the need to fulfill a sexual role.2

Medical doctor and author, William Acton’s 1857 essay The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations discusses this lack of sexual feeling: “The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind…The best mothers, wives and managers of

households, know little or nothing of sexual indulgences. Love of home, children, and domestic duties, are the only passions they feel.” Acton’s women are free sexual indulgence, “asexual and the absence of sexual desire” which is a “biological phenomenon.” Sexuality is the burden of men alone, which, while it must be strictly monitored, is not considered repulsive or contrary to nature. Pamphleteer, William Cobbet’s 1830 book Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) Young Women recommends that the appearance of modesty and ignorance of indecency is the duty of young women, and young men should avoid women that do not behave in a modest or chaste manner: “Chastity, perfect modesty, in word, deed, and even thought, is so essential, that without it, no female is fit to be a wife. It is not enough that a young woman abstain from everything approaching indecorum in her behaviour [sic] towards men...she ought to appear not to understand it, and to receive from it no more impression than if she were a post.” Cobbet’s ideal woman is completely incapable of sexually charged behavior and must ignore the carnal references imposed on the everyday world, he entreated women to be post-like, impenetrable by sexuality.

Millais’s depiction of Ophelia compares the variable and shifting growth of nature and the frozen beauty of Ophelia, her potential is lost in death, but her youth and beauty is static, unchangeable by the passage of time and thus she is seen through the beauty of “the contrast between the vitality of nature and the suspended animation and suppressed sexuality.” The subject matter of Millais, as a Pre-Raphaelite, was not a portrayal of modern London, but a throwback to the simpler times of medieval England, and in this case a Shakespearean fictionalized

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5 Frank Mort, 60.
6 Humble and Reynolds, 11.
7 Werness, 8.
Denmark rather than England. John Ruskin, the critic that influenced the development of the Pre-Raphaelites, proposed art as “the cure for the ugliness and dehumanization wrought by industrialization,” and thus encouraged the establishment of a method of painting that encouraged moralizing works of art.\(^8\) This focus on the past remained a comment on the present, the contemporary London that was plagued by a female populous that was moving into the public sphere, and threatening the previously male space in the city.\(^9\) Women were no long as easily defined as proper or deviant through their appearance in public, a woman could not be seen as a prostitute for simply walking unaccompanied down a street, though there was always the possibility of being approached as such.\(^10\)

Any appearance of sexual desire in Victorian women was believed to be the result of madness or deviancy and considered unnatural. The overly sexualized prostitute or nymphomaniac was the polar opposite to the respectable asexual figure of the proper woman.\(^11\) There could be no happy balance of sexuality and respectability; the two were separated into entirely different spheres that could not intersect. The medical world, as Acton has already proven in his biological reading of sexuality, was committed to explaining sexual desire in women as deviant behavior and thus a thing to be controlled and treated. The best solution was to institutionalize known prostitutes, placing them in hospitals to be reprogrammed as respectable women with proper sensibilities about sexual behavior.\(^12\) A central concern of this rehabilitation for deviant women was personal hygiene.\(^13\)

\(^11\) Mort, 63.
\(^12\) Mort, 63.
\(^13\) Mort, 63.
Portrayals of prostitution became prominent in the Royal Academy during the 1850s and 1860s. John Rodham Spencer Stanhope relies on subtle hints of a sexual transaction in his 1859 painting, *Thoughts of the Past* (fig. 2). The female figure is fully clothed with only the skin of her foot and lower arms exposed, and certainly not dressed in manner that would instantly identify her as prostitute. Just as women on the street could not be distinguished as respectable or disreputable simply by clothing alone, this figure is ambiguous and this inability to categorize her instantly generates anxiety. She is not dressed for company, at least not polite company, and the whole room including this woman is rather disheveled. The curtain appears worn and the tablecloth is disturbed, crumpled and falling into an open drawer. Accessories of upper class male attire are conspicuously thrown on the floor at her feet, a walking stick and a glove, which, along with the money on the table indicate the client’s presence. Presumably the viewer stands in place of the customer, collecting his things after paying his whore and even watching as she brushes her bedraggled hair. Her eyes appear distant, as if she is thinking of her life before her career as a prostitute, the moralizing regret that might lead her to repent. The river dock spied through the window indicates the location of her room, a room in a brothel or her home it is unclear, in a poor district of the city. The foulness of the river, discussed further below, is equated with her moral degradation and also the source of her potential redemption, “a foregone conclusion to female sin, a leap from a bridge to was a standard feature of contemporary representations of fallen women.” Her moral pollution, is likened to her physical pollution, she is a sinner and thus the disease of her soul has crept into her body.

The cleanliness of the body was directly connected to the cleanliness of the soul and thus an important aspect in purging the prostitute of her immorality, seen

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15 Ribner, 38.
16 Ribner, 38.
as both spiritual and physical disease. The connection between the health of the soul and the health of the body was constructed through the process of medical thought of the time, specifically the development of coinciding ideas of physiology and psychology:

First, the development of physiology as a separate and distinct biological science offered hope that the laws of life could be learned in their relation to human beings. The emphasis in this science was on the wholeness of the body, on what Charles Singer has called a “synthetic study,” with organs being looked at not so much “in and for themselves as in relation to the other organs.” Important work was thus being done in physiological systems, particularly the digestive, respiratory, and neural, leading more and more to a concept of the whole physiological man. Second, the emergence of a physiological psychology, together with a psychological approach to medicine, fostered the conviction that the health of the body and that of the mind were interdependent.

Described here as the conjunction of the development of physiology and physiological psychology, Victorians were concerned with the wholeness of the person, a wholeness of body and spirit that contributed to health and morality. This approach to health meant that the immorality of prostitutes was conflated with their venereal disease ridden bodies. The focus on health and hygiene was particularly loaded in the nineteenth century, as it was an area that of female dominance, at least privately, and as women were moving into the public sphere they brought concerns of public health with them.

Women were responsible for the cleanliness of the home and thus for health throughout the public sphere as middle and upper class women were seen to be the health educators for the lower working-class women. The expanding ability of middle and upper class women to permeate the public world allowed them to take control of public health issues, particularly those that infested the lower class homes which were thought to be the source of filth, as a result of the overcrowding and poor drainage. The ideology of the female role in society was conflated with the position of housekeeper and thus the

18 Haley, 4.
20 Bashford, 1.
21 Bashford, 3.
individual responsible for the cleanliness of the home and society, “women’s special moral sensibility and religiosity were at the core of middle-class femininity as it was constructed and contested through the nineteenth century” specifically through attributes of “domesticity, morality, religiosity, bodily cleanliness, purity and virtue [which] shaped the possibilities of women’s involvement in sanitary reform and public health.”

Through this position of patroness of social change, middle and upper class women worked towards improvements in public health as well as hospital reform, including positions within the medical system as nurses. Through this move women gained more confidence in their power in society, creating associations and organizations that promoted health and education, which included lectures by doctors to all classes of women. Women took a prominent role in enacting health care reform and thus approached moral problems in society as if the two were connected, because they effectively worked to counter the pollution that was a result of industrial advancements. The connection between the health of the spirit and of the body expanded to the understanding that the dirty environment could result in moral degeneration and an immoral or unhealthy body could contaminate a space. This related directly to Friedrich Engels’s belief that conditions of filth were compounded within the city, “dirty habits…do no great harm in the countryside where the population is scattered. On the other hand, the dangerous situation which develops when such habits are practiced among the crowded population of big cities, must arouse feelings of apprehension and disgust.”

Victorian London was plagued by progress; the Industrial Revolution had drastically increased the population in the city and, as a result, the pollution of the Thames River. Sewage and industrial waste from tanneries and mills poured into

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22 Bashford, 8.
23 Bashford, 9.
24 Bashford, 12-14.
25 Bashford, 17.

the river without restriction,\textsuperscript{27} the water was so toxic that within twenty-three years, 1810 and 1833, the Thames became uninhabitable by salmon.\textsuperscript{28} The representation of women and water, at least in the context of Pre-Raphaelite works such as Millais's \textit{Ophelia} and J. W. Waterhouse's \textit{Lady of Shalott}, are portrayals of the past evident in the clean, unpolluted depictions of the river, which contrasted drastically the reality of the rivers in London in the nineteenth century. The corpse of Ophelia's body in depicted by Millais is an idealized vision of the reality of the carcasses that contaminated the river Thames at this time.\textsuperscript{29}

In contrast to Ophelia, the Lady of Shalott floats down the river in a boat, dressed in white, a symbol of her virginity (fig. 3). She gazes out of the frame, possibly aware of the viewer, her chin raised as she slowly approaches her death. The tapestry of her labor hangs over the side of the small boat to enable the spectator to indentify her. Two of the candles have been blown out and the third’s flame wavers precariously in the breeze, foreshadowing the death of the Lady. Waterhouse, a third generation Pre-Raphaelite, depicts the doomed woman of Lord Tennyson’s poem of the same name, which was published in 1832 and reworked in 1842. Tennyson drew on the history Arthurian Legend of a cursed young woman who is permitted to see the world only through a mirror and the act of tapestry weaving is the singular distraction from her dismal existence. Reflected through the mirror she glimpses the knight Lancelot and instantly falls in love with him, and turns to look through the window, breaking the regulations of the curse. Waterhouse focuses on the moment of her punishment for his image, the Lady floating down the river to her death.

Despite the delicate handling of the Lady to portray her in an appealing way, the story behind the image is one of punishment for the transgressing female. The lady of Shalott is condemned for her desire of Lancelot and sent to her death. Perhaps this image is meant as a warning to women who have intentions of breaking social norms of courting behavior. Women are not meant to have passionate feelings for men, only for motherhood and spousal duties, and thus the end that awaits them if they trip down this

\textsuperscript{27} Wohl, 233.
\textsuperscript{28} Ribner, 38.
\textsuperscript{29} Wohl, 234.
path of desire is no a pleasant one. As the prostitute in Stanhope’s work appears to be contemplating a redemptive plunge from a bridge, so too is this work a cautionary tale for women to behave morally and within their proper roles.

Waterhouse and other Pre-Raphaelites produced art works that actively fought against the reality of pollution that was undeniable in the city. The river the boat floats down is dark but still maintains the ability to support the growth of foliage. The filth and sewage of the Thames was only one manifestation of the horror that afflicted London. Disease transmission theory in the nineteenth century believed that the presence bad smells and poor air, also known as miasmas, that caused illness. Miasmatic theories of health conflated physical and moral health through an understanding of disease as the result of “decomposing, putrefying matter in the surrounding environment [such as] human waste, accumulation of dirt, stagnant water, [and] foul air.” The odor of the Thames was overwhelming particularly in the summer heat, and this belief in disease transmission through miasmas. The Thames was indicated as an agent of contagion; which was of course the case in reality but not simply because of an intolerable smell. The Thames was the source of drinking water as well as the dump for sewage, resulting in the infection of the London populous with Cholera, Typhus, and further epidemics of devastating diseases. The increasing population inundated the existing sewage system, causing it contains to seep into the river. Similarly the pumps were not reliable and there were not enough of them for the growing need and thus families might be forced to reuse water for more than a few weeks, thus exposing themselves to contagion through a lack of fresh water. Despite the awareness of the connection between disease epidemics and related death the mortality rates were dropping, thus making the clean up a lower priority than necessary. However, Parliament contracted Joseph Bazalgette to redesign to sewers to direct sewage away from the river Thames and make use of engineering

30 Ribner, 38.  
31 Brashford, 5.  
32 Ribner, 39.  
33 Ribner, 40.  
34 Haley, 6.  
35 Haley, 9.  
36 Haley, 9.  
37 Wohl, 239.
advancements with pumps to achieve this feat.\textsuperscript{38} Bazalgette’s completed design did not take into account the growth of the city and thus even with his vision of cleansing the Thames of sewage it continued to be dumped into river at the sites of Barking and Crossness, 150,000,000 gallons a day which equated to “one-sixth of the total volume of the river water.”\textsuperscript{39}

Depictions of women and water during the Great Stink of London were bound up with moral and medical fears of the mid to late nineteenth century. The movement of respectable women into the public sphere meant that they became less controllable and also less distinguishable from disreputable women, specifically prostitutes. As a result there was a rising anxiety about the actions of women, which became shackled to fears of health and hygiene in relation to communicable diseases and their relationship to the degeneration of the soul. The popular and medical belief that maladies of the body infected the spirit and vice versa meant that the Victorians were extremely conscious about policing healthy behavior for the soul and body. Hygiene and public health were concerns of middle and upper class women when educating working-class women and advocating change in the city. The pollution of the public through the prostitutes was not the only concern of the time, the river Thames was also horribly contaminated by disease and human refuse. The conflation of prostitutes and the river was based in their danger to society that must be controlled and cleansed. Artists were immersed in this language of impurity and contagion and produced works that could be read through the lens of pollution.

\textsuperscript{39} Wohl, 234.
Bibliography


