

Ophelia and Victorian Visual Culture: Representing Body Politics in the Nineteenth Century by Kimberly Rhodes. Aldershot, Hants; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. xii, 212 pp. + 49 b/w illus. ISBN 978-0-7546-5876-4. \$99.95; £55.00.

Kimberly Rhodes's feminist account of the proliferation of images of Ophelia in Victorian visual culture identifies the Shakespearean heroine as a rich locus for the discussion of gender, sexuality, nature, artistic convention, and mental illness. The book convincingly demonstrates that representations of Ophelia in paintings at the Royal Academy, Keepsake book engravings, photographs, theatrical performances, and medical texts functioned as multivalent symbols of both ideal femininity and disruptive sexuality. Rhodes's thesis thus contributes to the on-going scholarly challenge to traditional binary constructions of Victorian femininity, and provides a methodological model of the rich possibilities that a targeted cross section of "visual culture" can reveal.

The first two chapters of the book focus on images of Ophelia that operated as models of idealized femininity. Ranging from mass-market Keepsake album engravings to Royal Academy paintings by Daniel Maclise and Richard Redgrave, Rhodes limns the mainstream portrait of Ophelia as innocent, beautiful, and chaste – a type of ideal Victorian adolescent girl. To make her case, she reads these images against theatrical performances and other genres of painting, linking representations of Ophelia to larger cultural notions of femininity, and demonstrating the overlap in viewers' experiences and expectations of different forms. Ranging into very different contextual material in a provocative but largely persuasive comparison of these images to physiognomic illustrations of insane women, she draws out the iconography of feminine mental illness, arguing that the Ophelia type was also a normalization of insanity as a feminine characteristic.

In chapter 3, Rhodes turns to Pre-Raphaelite representations of Ophelia, including J.E. Millais's famous painting of a drowning *Ophelia* (1852) and Dante Gabriel Rossetti's drawings after *Hamlet* from the late 1850s and early 1860s, as well as later images by Arthur Hughes and John William Waterhouse. She argues that Ophelia's status as a symbol of an idealized, national femininity made her particularly amenable to avant-garde appropriation, as the differences between the standard type and Pre-Raphaelite versions embodied the young artists' claims to originality and truth to nature. One basis for this new vision of Ophelia was the Pre-Raphaelites' fidelity to the text of the play rather than the typically edited theatrical versions, a difference that gives new resonance to Pre-Raphaelite claims of authenticity and rejection of Academic convention as "theatrical."