WARNING CONCERNING COPYRIGHT RESTRICTIONS

The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproduction of copyrighted material.

Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship or research. If an electronic transmission of reserve material is used for purposes in excess of what constitutes “fair use”, that user may be liable for copyright infringement.

Course: ENG 305
Instructor: Leila S. May
Managing Women's Minds

Looking at Diamond's photographs, we seem at first to be voyeurs of the inner world of madness. The women have lank, dirty curls, or strange knots and twists of hair, or bald patches. They do not wear flowing white gowns but dark bunchy dresses, too large or too tight, obviously from the hospital store. Even in "mania" they look gloomy and still, sad rather than mad.

Yet of course these photographic representations were no more objective or scientific than Morison's sketches, but simply made use of another set of visual and psychiatric conventions. Diamond's subjects, for example, are shown in chiaroscuro, posed against draperies; in some plates, they are sitting in front of windows, which ironically emphasize the viewer's sense of their confinement. The calotype process that he used for asylum work required a long sitting, and produced a rough, shadowy, and painterly print rather than the sharp, clear image of the daguerreotype. Some of the younger women, with their heavy hair and distracted gaze, resemble the well-known studies of women artistically photographed by Diamond's contemporaries, especially Julia Margaret Cameron or Henry Peach Robinson.

Literary and aesthetic models of femininity influenced Diamond's choice of subjects and affected the way he asked them to pose. Women were given props that symbolized, often with pathetic futility, the asylum superintendent's hope of making them conform to Victorian ideals of feminine decorum. Even the craziest women have some small emblem of respectable attire—a kerchief, a battered bonnet, a huddled shawl, even a blanket draped around the shoulders. The cretin sits next to a table with books on it (fig. 13); the alcoholic and the depressive have clasped their hands as if in prayer. The woman going through four stages of puerperal mania, from dementia to recovery, Victorianizes Hogarthian conventions of the "progress." Her madness is represented by untidy hair; her return to sanity, primarily by appropriate feminine costume—a matronly bonnet and a nice paisley shawl (fig. 14).

In choosing his subjects, moreover, Diamond was drawn to those women who seemed to be acting out the very fantasies that their society recommended as appropriate for them. He was struck, for example, by the great number of female lunatics who claimed to be queens, and attempted to photograph all of them together as a mad court. In Victoria's reign, the delusion of being a queen was perhaps an obvious one; it is easy to see why Lewis Carroll, a good friend of Diamond's, picked
Figure 13. A cretin in Surrey Asylum, photographed by Hugh W. Diamond.
Figure 14. Four stages of puerperal mania.

it for *Through the Looking-Glass*, where the White Queen is also a madwoman whose clothes are twisted, whose shawl is awry, and whose brush is tangled in her hair. The metamorphosis of madwoman into queen had a kind of female logic as well. In his famous lecture “Of Queens’ Gardens” (1864), Ruskin rapturously addressed all the women in his audience as “queens” and implored them to seek the womanly
power "to heal, to redeem, to guide and to guard." Coveting this power rather than the coarse economic leverage or intellectual prowess of men, they would become "no more housewives, but queens." Diamond’s regal inmates—many of them the worn-out wives of poor clerks—took this invitation to transcend their powerless lives to heart.

But an even more popular image than the queen for women in Victorian asylums was that of Ophelia. For a variety of reasons, Ophelia was a compelling figure for many Victorian artists, writers, and doctors seeking to represent the madwoman. The English Pre-Raphaelites returned again and again to the subject of the drowning Ophelia. In the Royal Academy show of 1852, Arthur Hughes’s entry shows a tiny waiflike creature—a sort of Tinker-Bell Ophelia—in a filmy white gown, perched on a tree trunk by a stream. The over-all effect is softened, sexless, and hazy, although the straw in her hair resembles a crown of thorns (fig. 15). Hughes’s juxtaposition of childlike femininity and Christian martyrdom, however, was overpowered by John Everett Millais’s strong painting of Ophelia in the same show (fig. 16). Millais’s Ophelia is a sensuous siren as well as a victim.

A model for the mad Miss Havisham in Dickens’s Great Expectations, for Tennyson’s “Maud,” for Wilkie Collins’s “Woman in White,” Ophelia became the prototype not only of the deranged woman in Victorian literature and art but also of the young female asylum patient. Victorian psychiatrists and superintendents of lunatic asylums were often enthusiasts of Shakespeare. They turned to his plays for models of mental aberration that could be applied to their clinical practice, and the case of Ophelia was one that seemed particularly apt. As J. C. Bucknill remarked in 1859, “Ophelia is the very type of a class of cases by no means uncommon. Every mental physician of moderately extensive experience must have seen many Ophelias. It is a copy from nature, after the fashion of the Pre-Raphaelite school.” Conolly concurred. In his Study of Hamlet in 1863 he noted that even casual visitors to mental institutions could recognize an Ophelia in the wards: “The same young years, the same faded beauty, the same fantastic dress and interrupted song.” Medical textbooks sometimes illustrated their discussions of female patients with sketches of Ophelia-like maidens; as one historian notes, the descriptions of these “Ophelias whose delicate and refined sensibilities had been wounded . . . and maddened by a disappointment in love” were often “affectingly drawn.” And when
Figure 15. Arthur Hughes, "Ophelia," 1852.

Figure 16. John Everett Millais, "Ophelia," 1852.
young women in lunatic asylums did not willingly throw themselves into Ophelia-like poses, asylum superintendents with cameras imposed the conventional Ophelia costume, gesture, props, and expression upon them. Diamond dressed one young woman in a black shawl and placed a garland of wildflowers in her hair (fig. 17).

The figure of Ophelia eventually set the Victorian style for female insanity. In the 1860s Conolly urged actresses playing Ophelia to come to the asylum and study real madwomen. “It seems to be supposed,” he protested, “that it is an easy task to play the part of a crazy girl, and that it is chiefly composed of singing and prettiness. The habitual courtesy, the partial rudeness of mental disorder, are things to be witnessed. ... An actress, ambitious of something beyond cold imitation, might find the contemplation of such cases a not unprofitable study.” In the 1870s, Ellen Terry took up his challenge. Yet when she visited a London asylum to get ideas for her role, she found the madwomen much "too theatrical" to teach her anything.

Just as they were accustomed to moralizing about the images of women in Academy paintings or the heroines of popular novels, Victorian psychiatrists drew moral lessons from asylum photographs of women. Diamond himself found a comforting message in his series of photographs of the patient with puerperal mania:

I feel that I shall be supported by the Chaplain to our Asylum if I show a moral truth from these portraits, which, if I apprehend it rightly amounts to this—that religion can win its way to hearts barred against every other influence, that it can soften and conquer dispositions which would else remain intractable and savage; and that hereby in addition to all its other and higher merits, it establishes a title to be considered the great humanizer of Mankind.

John Conolly’s essays on the physiognomy of insanity, which appeared in the Medical Times and Gazette in 1858, contained similar passages of emotional projection. Using lithographs made of Diamond’s photographs, Conolly argued that these were “true pictures of what is effected by mental malady.” In fact, the lithographic copies made for the medical journal were even more simplified and conventionalized versions of Diamond’s photographs, often with changes in pose, dress, or gesture; and Conolly’s case studies were speculative, high-

The Female Malady

I feel that I shall be supported by the Chaplain to our Asylum if I show a moral truth from these portraits, which, if I apprehend it rightly amounts to this—that religion can win its way to hearts barred against every other influence, that it can soften and conquer dispositions which would else remain intractable and savage; and that hereby in addition to all its other and higher merits, it establishes a title to be considered the great humanizer of Mankind.

John Conolly’s essays on the physiognomy of insanity, which appeared in the Medical Times and Gazette in 1858, contained similar passages of emotional projection. Using lithographs made of Diamond’s photographs, Conolly argued that these were “true pictures of what is effected by mental malady.” In fact, the lithographic copies made for the medical journal were even more simplified and conventionalized versions of Diamond’s photographs, often with changes in pose, dress, or gesture; and Conolly’s case studies were speculative, high-
Figure 17. A Victorian Ophelia in Surrey Asylum.
ly colored accounts, unlike anything we would recognize as scientific analysis.

In the picture of one elderly woman, Conolly could see the history of a wasted life, a "lamentable tale of long mental vexation . . . when carelessness, unheeded or untended, a giddy mind uneducated, wild manners and irregular habits, unrestrained by any care or protection, opened a wide way to disturbance." In the face of an alcoholic, he detected the signs of inner conflict, "the painful questioning of a woman not forgetful of her former life, nor unconscious of the comfortless change that has come over her . . . we might almost fancy the poor patient breaking out, in this suffering mood, into expressive words . . . relative to her earlier life now gone, and happier thoughts long dispersed, and to remembrances of having once been esteemed and even admired in the modest circle in which she moved." In another alcoholic, however, "the blunted face . . . the large lips . . . the disordered, uncombed, capriciously cut hair [and] the indolent position of the body" told Conolly he was looking at a "woman of low and degraded life, into whose mind, even before madness supervened, no thoughts except gross thoughts were wont to enter." (fig. 18).

Conolly was especially fascinated by the photograph of a young woman diagnosed as melancholic who had converted to Catholicism, but then became guilt-ridden and anxious about her beliefs (fig. 19). She was tormented by the sense of her own sins, and had punished herself by fasting. This patient had become weak and emaciated; her menstrual periods had stopped, and she thought often of suicide. Yet Conolly found her wasting despair oddly feminine and attractive; he was moved by her pallor and sensitivity, and noted especially her "womanly figure . . . ample chest and pelvis." In the asylum she was cured with tonics and shower baths; her "mental perplexities . . . gradually died away," but along with them died the meditative and romantic qualities that had made her appealing to Conolly. He saw a second photograph of her after she was cured, and felt disappointed: "The ample forehead, of course, remained, and the deep orbits; but the eyes, when open, were small and inexpressive, and the mouth seemed to have become commonplace. Her whole appearance was, indeed, so simply that of an uneducated Irish girl, that the very neat gown, cloak, and bonnet, in which she was dressed by the kindness of those about her, seemed incongruous and peculiar." She had declined in class status as well as in sexual magnetism.48
Figure 18. An alcoholic, photographed by Hugh W. Diamond.
Figure 19. A melancholic asylum patient.
Managing Women's Minds

Hugh Diamond's photographs of female lunatics were recycled in the twentieth century as authenticating period decor in the asylum set for the film of The French Lieutenant's Woman, and used as models for the way Victorian madwomen "really" looked. In John Fowles's novel about Victorian England, the melancholic heroine—"Tragedy," as she is named by the community—acts out the traditional role of the Ophelia-like madwoman, abandoned by her lover, haunting the farthest point of the sea wall "like a living memorial to the drowned." Writing in 1969, Fowles is fully aware of the way this heroine, like the melancholic subject of Conolly's analysis, is appropriated by men; her "madness" is the accumulated projection of male fantasy and male guilt. For Conolly and his mid-Victorian contemporaries, too, the brooding images of the helpless women they treated in the asylums often evoked their own unconscious erotic reveries, their own displaced melancholia, aggression, and discontent.

That we should have so many remarkable pictures of Victorian madwomen, and so few of their words, reminds us how strongly the power of definition rested with the male observer. In the photographs of Victorian madwomen by Diamond and others, we are made to see the moral management of female insanity, as well as its reduction, in Victorian terms, to visual conventions. The act of photographing itself is a form of appropriation: a capture of the subject. Some of the women looked frightened; others, lost in their own fantasies, seem unaware of the presence of the camera. All sit at the doctor's bidding; they surrender to his lens; they are at his service. Susan Sontag has pointed out that nineteenth-century photography very quickly became a "useful tool of surveillance and control," especially in institutions that needed records to identify inmates, such as prisons and orphan asylums, and in the "typological sciences" of criminology, eugenics, and psychiatry.

Of course, the rhetoric of moral management obscured its power. In his essay about the Christmas Ball at St. Luke's, Dickens praised the progressive Victorian spirit that had brought the asylum out of barbarism and into civilization. The wicked old days when, as he recalled, "nothing was too wildly extravagant, nothing too monstrously cruel to be prescribed by mad-doctors," had been succeeded by an age sympathetic to the sufferings and misfortunes of the mad. "Chains, straw, filthy solitude," the cruel restraints of Bedlam, had been replaced by the patterned steps of a dance and by the colorful costumes of the dancers: "The only chain that made any clatter was Ladies' Chain, and there
was no straiter waistcoat in company than the polka-garment of the old-young woman with the weird gentility. It is a charming image, but Dickens fails to see the irony in his own account. What confined women in the Victorian asylum was precisely the ladies’ chain of feminine propriety and the straitjacket of a weird but mandatory feminine gentility. Dickens could not perceive that both the social circumstances and the social services available to women might be maddening, and that despite its humanitarianism, Victorian psychiatry silenced women as effectively through its ideology as the scold’s bridle had muzzled noisy women in Bedlam before reform.

And yet, one of the most appalling ironies of women’s treatment in the Victorian asylum was that despite its limitations, asylum superintendents thought it offered a more tolerant, comfortable, interesting life than some women could expect outside. Conolly claimed that women patients at Hanwell shed more tears upon leaving the asylum than on entering it, and often returned to visit their former companions and attendants. T. S. Clouston advised medical superintendents not to keep hysterical cases in the asylum too long after convalescence, because “they sometimes get too fond of the place, preferring the dances, amusements, and general liveliness of asylum life... to the humdrum, and hard work of poor homes.” The success of moral management for women may have had less to do with the humanity of the asylum than with the dreariness of life beyond the walls.