



Ophelia

John Everett Millais

1851-52. Oil on canvas.

Only Ophelia

Kat Kiernan



Emily Peacock (Ophelia)
Julia Margaret Cameron. Courtesy
1875
The J. Paul Getty Museum,
Los Angeles

Ophelia embodies tragic beauty. Her drowning is quiet, demure as she floats away to her watery demise. Even if one has not read Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the character of Ophelia has become a part of our cultural vernacular. She has been immortalized as a beautiful but pitiful woman, remembered for going mad and picking flowers before drowning. While her death is not seen on stage, it is announced by Queen Gertrude, who describes how Ophelia fell into the river and drowned slowly by the weight of water on her clothes, too mad to save herself.

Perhaps because the scene is never played, artists have used this description to interpret Ophelia's tragic end. Sir John Everett Millais, a Pre-Raphaelite painter, completed in 1852 what is perhaps the most famous depictions of Ophelia. Millais' Ophelia was a 19-year-old woman named Elizabeth Siddall. To create the effect of drowning, she posed in a silver embroidered dress in a bath of water inside his London studio. His painting, now endlessly reproduced on posters,

coffee mugs, and other items, has become the archetypal death of Ophelia. Other artists have taken their visual direction more from Millais than from the text of the play.

About 25 years later, Julia Margaret Cameron made a small series of Ophelia photographs. Photography was invented twelve years before Millais painted Ophelia but lacked color and the detail that painters could produce. Cameron's portraits embrace the soft, ethereal quality of the medium. Her Ophelia was Emily Peacock, photographed not in the water, but in the studio. She pulls distractedly at her hair, with a cautiously wild look into the camera. Her simple gesture and withered flowers allude to her dissent into madness and inevitable drowning.

In contemporary photography, Ophelia has become a popular figure—reimagined in rivers and lakes but also oceans, swimming pools, ponds, and bathtubs. Photographers who see in themselves the sweet yet sorrowful characteristics of Ophelia are compelled to go to the water and relive her last moments either through models or as self-portraits.

We are fascinated with female death, and in particular female self-destruction. Edgar Allen Poe, another Victorian luminary, wrote, "the death... of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world." Although Ophelia vanishes from the play, she is revived through artistic renderings. As cultural histories of gender, mental illness, and beauty have shifted, so too has Ophelia's. We loved her in Millais' time for her beauty, in Cameron's for her suffering, and we love her now as a patron saint—a betrayed woman who was traumatized into madness and who was too beautiful for this world.

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After Ophelia
Claire Rosen
2008



*0415-1844 Ahu Lani
River*
Bootsy Holler
2018-19



*Maude Branscombe
as Ophelia.*

José Maria Mora

c. 1876, Cabinet card detail

Courtesy of Harvard

Theater Collection



Galaxy

Traert Scott

2006



Above:
Found Flowers
Natalie Grono
2019

Left:
Lauren in the Stream
Jack Montgomery
2012.



*Ophelia After Millais, from the
series Old Father Thames*
Julia Fullerton-Batten
2018.