
This richly-illustrated and detailed book is about the role of women, via their “pens” and “needles,” in the creation of the multi-textual, multimedia world of early modern England — that is, the ubiquitous layering of texts, images, and symbols found in households at all levels of society, not only in books and manuscripts but in samplers, tapestries, walls, ceilings, beams, and buildings as a whole. Susan Frye skillfully debunks any lingering assumptions that pens, associated with intellect, were for men and needles, associated with drudgery, were for women, arguing that this binary opposition, which proved so useful in the work of second-wave feminists, does a disservice to the instability and nuances of gender distinctions throughout history.

Frye interprets “pens” and “needles” quite broadly to encompass a wide range of female engagements with the visual and textual landscape. Thus, writing is anything from “embroidered alphabets to the 590,000 words of Mary Sidney Wroth’s *Urania*” (12), including inscriptions on textiles and paintings, pictorial depictions of classical and biblical women and narratives, portraiture (in the period, pens and pencils could refer to paintbrushes, and paintings commissioned by women could be thought of as semi-autobiographical), women’s building activities (a form of life-writing in space and time), and textile activities ranging from skilled needlework to laundering, mending, and sewing. This broad scope perhaps accurately represents the nature of women’s education in the period: in a late sixteenth-century letter at the Folger, Anne Higginson writes to Lady Ferrers about a school in Windsor for young ladies that teaches them “to worke [sew], reading, writing, and dancing” (Folger MS L.e.644).

The book consists of an introduction and five chapters. In the introduction, Frye includes a marvelous reading of the 1557 portrait of Alice Barnham, depicting her in the act of writing the words “That we all shall receive,” while standing between two of her sons, one of whom holds open a book labeled “The Proverbs of Solomon,” and usefully explicated a poem by Anne Bradstreet and dedications by Margaret Cavendish that
confront the pen versus needle myth directly. Chapter one explores the political dynasty-building encoded in the visual and textual output of three interconnected, powerful, and trend-setting women: Princess Elizabeth’s portraiture and gifts to her father and stepmother of handwritten translations bound in her own needlework; Mary, Queen of Scot’s poetry, commissioned portraits, and needlework; and Bess of Hardwick’s monumental tapestry series *Noble Women of the Ancient World*, other textile productions, and her building of New Hardwick Hall. Chapter two addresses the motives behind the artistic and calligraphic feats of three of England’s first female professional artisans, all of whom produced multimedia luxury works for monarchs and others: Levina Teerlinc, Jane Segar, and Esther Inglis. Chapter three looks at the intertwining of visual and verbal textualities in early modern domestic needlework of women from a range of backgrounds, focusing on three particular genres: the spot sampler, the band sampler, and the needlework picture (which could appear on book covers, bed valances, cushions, cabinets, hangings, or mirrors). Through their “work,” women were able to shape, influence, and challenge their environment and the “dominant social order” (116). For example, Frye suggests that the popular choice by women of the biblical Esther and Judith as subjects for needlework pictures was related to the ongoing *querelle des femmes* in print and that even largely uneducated women displayed not only “abecedarian literacy” (131) but also real agency in their selection of verses and proverbs for their samplers. Chapter four examines the conflation of cloth with the female body and sewing with sexuality in *Othello* and *Cymbeline* as well as in other male-authored paintings and writings and considers the disjuncture between sexually-charged fictional textiles and the underlying chastity implied by artifactual ones. Frye provides readings of a number of Dutch paintings alongside the handkerchief, bed sheets, and cloth purse in *Othello* (that lead to marital murder) and the handkerchief, bedchamber tapestries, bloody cloth, and costume disguises of *Cymbeline* (that lead to marital consummation). Frye focuses on text and textiles in Mary Wroth’s *Urania* in her final chapter, discussing *dilatio* as it relates to romance writing and the female body, the Sidney women’s ownership and gifting of luxury cloth, Wroth’s use of color, clothing, and disguise as forms of rhetorical amplification, and Wroth’s depiction of a
multimedia, enciphered landscape, connecting pastoral texts, tapestries, and landscapes.

Perhaps surprisingly, the book does not address non-decorative manuscript production by women, most likely because the overriding focus is on textiles and visual narratives. Frye does, however, discuss the flourishing italic majuscules in a letter by Elizabeth Tudor (6) and describes letters by Brilliana Harley that require a custom version of a Cardano grille to read the hidden message within the innocuous one (56). I was hoping she might mention the largely female aristocratic practice of using colored silk floss to close letters to intimate friends and family, thus creating multimedia documents with textual and textiled narratives, a technique used strategically by Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I, and Mary Wroth alike. And I was slightly confused by her explication of Elizabeth’s embroidered binding for her translation of *Institution Chrétienne* (1545) for Katherine Parr, which she states has an “R” for Regina at the top and bottom, reshaped from an “H” which she used in the matching binding for her father — to me, it looks like a “K,” for Katherine (39).

*Pens and Needles* is full of wonderful interconnections and discoveries. Frye is able to determine the content and the probable binding of one of Elizabeth’s translations for Henry VIII that she created in 1544, now lost: a translation of a work by Erasmus, most likely bound in a cover matching her gift to Parr (39), mentioned in the letters of three foreign visitors. Frye is also the first scholar to identify a textile portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots in her white mourning clothes as Chastity, originally produced for Bess of Hardwick’s Chatsworth home in the 1570s and later moved to New Hardwick Hall (68). This is a true contribution to scholarship, with many threads woven into a complex narrative that helpfully blurs familiar distinctions between political and personal, public and private, and texts and textiles and reminds us that what we think of as early modern “decorative art” or “women’s busy work” was laden with meaningful texts and subtexts.

Heather Wolfe
Folger Shakespeare Library