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# “Rare and Curious Covers”: Embroidered Book Bindings in Early Modern England

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# “Rare and Curious Covers”

# Embroidered Book Bindings in Early Modern England

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## ABSTRACT

Protestant devotional books with highly decorative embroidered bindings flourished in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century like no other time in history. Indeed, the number of these objects extant in collections today attest to their importance. Although decorative embroidered book bindings on Protestant devotional works would seem to be a contradiction, it was a natural confluence of religious, economic, and societal factors that enabled women to assert both a private and a public identity. Because the explosion of printers in Europe brought Bibles and other books to a much wider audience at a time when women's education and literacy were impacted by Protestant theologians advocating for direct engagement with scripture, it created a space for women to make a statement of creativity and assert status while being religious, modest, and feminine in a private sphere using decorative needlework.

Treatises from this time emphasize the importance of daily prayer and reading the scripture, even for women. The few extant diaries and letters that women wrote testify to the importance of their relationship to both religious worship and needlework. But the most compelling testament to the importance and overlap of these activities are the extant embroidered book bindings themselves. Material objects are oftentimes the only evidence of the lives of marginalized people; they can supplement scant documentary evidence to illuminate unexamined historical narratives. The needlework on the embroidered devotional books provides a unique insight into English women's public and private daily lives.

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## PREFACE

In the waning sunlight of a late August evening in 1599, Lady Margaret Hoby sat at her table under the window to capture the light. She bent over her diary, writing in her confident, loose italic about the events of her day that were important to her: "In the morninge, after priuat praier, I Reed of the bible, and then wrought till 8: a clock, and then I eate my breakfast: after which done, I walked in to the feeldes tell: 10 a clock, then I praied, and not long after, I went dimer [diner]."[1] Margaret carefully noted her key activities but not her feelings; she was taking a moment to reflect, but only for herself and for God. As a reader of Calvinist doctrine, she believed in the intimate connection between scripture and salvation. In these notes, day after day, she emphasized several consistencies: her private prayer and reading, her meals and movements, and finally, her "work" by which she meant needlework. She noted her time at her embroidery.

Being a woman much dedicated to the reformed religion, Margaret had taken up a habit of recording her activities in a journal in 1599 and continued to do so until 1605. Even though women of her class were often literate and would keep commonplace books with recipes, household reminders, or even quotes from the Bible, writing a diary specifically and expressly for the purpose of self-review was a new practice for her time. Lady Margaret was raised in the household of the Countess of Huntingdon, a very well-connected woman who not only followed the reformed religion, but was an adherent to Calvin's writings; indeed, she has been described as a Puritan. This same religious

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[1] Dorothy M. Meads, *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605* (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD, 1930), p. 67.

philosophy showed up in Lady Margaret's writings and activities. Almost every diary entry for four years began with "After private prayer," and she consistently ended her days the same. She noted when she had a "Lector" or lesson in religion, and wrote when she "examined myself," reflecting on her thoughts and actions in a daily spiritual context.

In addition to this immersion in prayer and reflection, Lady Margaret noted banal routines like eating, waking, visiting, directing the work of her household and, as I mentioned before, doing her needlework (where she uses the word "wrought," the past-tense of work, abbreviated from needle-work). Importantly, she wrote over and over "I wrought, and dispatched some business," and "after diner I wrought,"[2] and later "I wrought a whill and praied priuatly before diner,"[3] on another day "I wrought tell dinner time."[4] Picture her sitting at a window for light, with her embroidery project in her hands. She might have had some of her women about her as she noted in a few entries, possibly directing their work as well. She could have been listening to someone reading aloud during this activity, as she notes in April of 1600 "I wrought and hard [heard] one read of the book of Martyrs."[5] But the reality of her life as a woman was needlework, and her reality as follower of the reformed religion was daily prayer and scripture.

Knowing this combined dedication, it would not be unrealistic to imagine that Lady Margaret owned a devotional book bound with an embroidered cover. She could have worked it herself, maybe with a popular depiction of the female embodiments of Faith and Purity on the front and back or possibly with a flower or a symmetrically

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[2] Meads, p. 64.
[3] Meads, p. 71.
[4] Meads, p. 62.
[5] Meads, p. 111.

abstract design. Conceivably, it could have been a gift from a close female friend or her husband. It was in the duality of the aspects of that embroidered binding on a devotional book, the bringing together of a printed book of psalms for daily contemplation with an elaborate needlework binding, that we can understand the importance of both in Lady Margaret's life.

## INTRODUCTION

Every scholar researching at rare books and manuscripts rooms in libraries has had the same experience: after the bureaucracy of getting the library card and appointment, we walk into the specialized room, quiet and well-lit. Rows and rows of wooden desks with stately lamps are laid out, clearly visible to the librarians' desk so they can ensure the researchers are handling the manuscripts and books with care. We check out a few of the items we requested and walk silently past other researchers with their rare books, manuscripts, portfolios, or collection of papers, to sit back at an assigned table. Gently, even reverently, the scholar opens the custom-built container and gently brings out a seventeenth century book, placing it on the waiting book cradle to prevent damage to the spine. The other scholars are doing the same, their heads bent over yellowed pages filled with faded script ranging from almost illegible to practically modern, or gently read through printed books with a profound relief of not having to use their paleographic skills to tease out meaning from manuscripts. We all have the same goal: to gain an understanding of the lives and thoughts of people who lived before us. Who were the people that wrote the letters or read these books? What did this information mean to them? What does the written content say about their time period or ours? We hope that these documents can provide insight into daily life and political machinations, mundane concerns and genealogical bequests, love, strife, religion, or personal needs.

I have sat in these rooms holding Bibles and books of common prayers, printed in England in mass quantities in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The written content of these books can provide information into the nature of the Reformation

in England and Europe and aspects of personal or public worship; or about the expansion of the print and book trade with moveable type machines and the London book seller's guild; or aspects of expanding education, literacy, and capitalism. When that book also has an embroidered binding, it can tell me so much more.

It is too easy to take for granted how foreign the past is. Historians attempt to leap over the distance by decoding written documents: wills, letter, diaries, inventories, legal proceedings; and by making connections, inferring meaning, placing context. They write eloquently about human lives, motivations, triumphs, and tragedies gleaned from these scant records. And being in such a literate modern age when everyone is constantly writing about their feelings, shopping habits, political interests, and dating travails, we forget that the written evidence of daily life from the past is scant at best. It is in fact only a tiny drop of testimony compared to the ocean of lived experience not captured in writing. Relying on written evidence provides the tiniest sliver of evidence, since, for the vast majority of history, it was a privileged skill limited to the few: mostly the economically affluent and mostly men. Of course, there are exceptions, but those exceptions are definitely the minority and, therefore, documentary evidence is necessarily limited in its ability to elucidate the past.

What is available in far greater quantity are the things that are left behind. Material objects that remain can provide insight into the intimate daily lives of people, and of a much wider range of people. Often, material objects are the only evidence of those lives when the people in question are illiterate, of lower socio-economic classes,

minorities, or women. Physical items can illuminate hidden experiences and open a doorway to unexamined historical narratives. This is a well-known truth in fields dealing with people who lived prior to the development of writing. An object like an embroidered book binding can expand on the information of a book's written text. And in early modern England, the fashion for personal devotional book bindings embellished with needlework reflected a fascinating tension between older Catholic forms of worship and newer Protestant ideas of religion, women's education and piety, and the fluidity of social classes with merchants and gentry who attempted to move into more privileged and powerful strata.

This thesis focuses on the historical origins and impact of embroidered book bindings, examined primarily through a material culture lens; that is, by looking at extant embroidered book bindings. These objects were made in England beginning in mid-sixteenth century and their popularity abruptly ended in the middle of the seventeenth century. They reflected significant social changes occurring at that time including the massive expansion in the print trade which made books cheaper and more accessible, the popularity of embroidered goods such as clothing and home furnishing, the rise of domestic needlework, and increased literacy and reading scripture under the influence of Protestant teachings. As artifacts, these books covered in decorative needlework tell us about the intimate lives of women, the expectations of their behavior, and the impact they made on their families and communities. Embroidered book bindings are a way for us to ask questions about women's daily lives by looking at their own writings in diaries and letters, examining sources for their inspiration in pattern books, herbals, and natural

histories, and finally, by examining the books themselves for insight into the time, material, and skills used to create them.

In England during this time period, booksellers offered popular devotional books like the Bible and the Psalms with a range of binding options. Permanent bindings were primarily animal skins: calf, sheep, goat, and vellum, though heavy paper and pasteboard was also used.[1] Besides these standard options, there was a small number of books bound with embroidered cloth covers. In fact, there is a petition to the Archbishop Laud in 1638 by the milliners and shopkeepers of the Royal Exchange "protesting against a Star Chamber decree which limited the sale of Bibles, testaments, and some books to stationers."[2,3] They asserted that they had a strong trade in offering books of "rare and curious covers of imbrothery and needleworke...wherein Bibles Testaments and Psalm Bookes of the best sort and neatest print have been richly bound up"[4] and that the Star Chamber ruling unfairly subverted this reasonable production and trade. This account proved that the desire to create, sell, buy, and own embroidered book bindings was both popular and lucrative enough for the milliners of the Royal Exchange to assert their right to continue to do so.

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[1] David Pearson, *English Bookbinding Styles, 1450-1800: A Handbook* (London : New Castle, DE: British Library ; Oak Knoll Press, 2005), p. 8.
[2] Howard M. Nixon and Mirjam Foot, *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*, Rev. ed (Oxford [England] ; Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 54.
[3] The Star Chamber, named after the decorative stars on the ceiling of the room in Westminster, was a specialized court that existed in the English legal system between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was intended to ensure an equitable application of the law so that prominent and powerful people could not escape justice. Unfortunately, over time the Star Chamber had such broad-reaching power that it ironically came be to known for its opaque, oppressive, and unfair rulings.
[4] Bodleian Library Oxford, ed., *Textile and Embroidered Bindings*, Bodleian Picture Books Special Series 2 (University Press, Oxford, 1971), p. 7.

In addition to the documentary evidence of the importance of these bindings, we have the artifacts themselves. These devotional books covered in needlework ranged from simple to expert in their embroidery techniques, and exist today in libraries from California to London. There is no denying their importance because they were saved, kept and cared for, used and soiled and worn, passed down from owner to owner through generations of changing hands who noted their names and dates in the front pages of Bible after Bible, Psalm book, or Book of Common Prayer. It is these details that provide insight into their use and their value beyond the text alone.

While many of these bindings must have been created professionally, a great deal of them were also domestic works. The embroideries which were obviously completed by hands of lesser skill are no less valuable for their lack of accomplishment. Indeed, they can tell us as much or more about the daily lives of the girls and women who might have made these objects. The material they selected for the ground cloth, the silk and metal thread, as well as the techniques all point to different skill levels and relative ranges of ability. Additionally, their choice of subject matter: flowers, geometric patterns, symmetrical abstract designs, or biblical or allegorical figures, speak to personal interest, popular motifs, and patterns available to the needleworker. These works also provide insight into the skills expected of a girl, and open up questions of who would have taught her, what other types of projects she would have worked on, and how they would have been valued by her community. These are the material aspects that exist in concert with the written documents to speak to a wider and richer experience of personal worship and devotion.

While there is a large body of work examining sixteenth and seventeenth century embroidery and placing it within a variety of historical contexts, there is very little work focusing solely on embroidered book bindings. Even then, the little historiography that does exist examining these specific objects focuses only on the embroidered book bindings themselves and overlooks the broader discussion of women's daily lives, religious activities, and education.

The first comprehensive writing on this subject is *English Embroidered Book Bindings* published in 1899 by Cyril Davenport, Superintendent of Book Bindings at the British Museum.[5] His expertise was in the technical process of book binding, not in needlework or history; consequently, his overview is limited in scope. Davenport provides a classification schema to categorize the materials of the bindings including types of ground cloth, needlework techniques, and design motifs. Unfortunately, this classification is limited in its scope, overlooking one design style and misnaming another (a concept which will be examined later in this introduction). Although the embellished bindings Davenport discusses were only a small representation of the extant objects in the British or Bodleian Libraries, his attention to this collection provides the first detailed analysis in a historiography of embroidered book bindings.

The next two works focus on the more general topic of English needlework. In 1933, A.F. Kendrick, textile historian and Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum, published the survey *English Needlework.*[6] Only a very brief section of the

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[5] Cyril Davenport, *English Embroidered Book Bindings* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co, ltd., 1899).
[6] A.F. Kendrick, *English Needlework* (London: A&C Black LTD, 1933).

book is devoted to embroidered book bindings, and draws heavily on Davenport in regards to binding detail. Kendrick notes that embroidered book bindings were created both domestically and professionally. He examines socio-cultural influences on the items, including that they first were a result of an increase in wealth and rise of the merchant class and private libraries, but he does not discuss the religious impact of these items. Thirty years later, George Wingfield Digby, also Keeper of Textiles at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, wrote *Elizabethan Embroidery* published in 1963.[7] Wingfield Digby did not comment on the materiality of embroidered book bindings but, like Kendrick, he does assert that most were produced professionally, offering no support for that claim. Likewise, he does not discuss religion as a context for embroidered book bindings.

Nine years later, another book devoted solely to embroidered book bindings was published. This book, written by Bodleian Librarian and book conservation expert Giles Barber, offers only a high-level introduction to this topic and focused entirely on books within the Bodleian's collection.[8] Barber notes the petition mentioned earlier to Archbishop Laud in 1638 from the milliners and shopkeepers of the Royal Exchange discussing professionally produced embroidered book bindings for sale, but gives little insight into the economic or societal impact of this document. He also asserts that most embroidered books were professionally produced, again with no evidentiary support.

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[7] George Wingfield Digby, *Elizabethan Embroidery* (New York, NY: Thomas Yoseloff, n.d.).
[8] Giles Barber, *Textile and Embroidered Bindings* (Oxford: University Press, 1971).

Barber is otherwise silent on the production, ownership, social, or religious impact of these objects.

Taking more of an art history perspective, Lanto Synge, a fine arts and antiquities consultant, published *Antique Needlework* in 1982.[9] He provides another general overview of English needlework with only a small section devoted to embroidered book bindings. Synge expands on the discussion of professional versus domestic production, however, attempting to provide more guidance on what types of books were produced by which groups by size and material of the project and discussing some details about needlework techniques. He does not address the social, economic, or religious context of personal ownership of these decorated devotional books.

In 1992, Howard Nixon and Mirjam Foot published *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*[6]. Nixon, librarian at The British Library, and Foot, professor of Library and Archives Studies at University College, London, are both experts in the history of book bindings. The vast majority of the bindings discussed are animal skins, but a small section discusses embroidered bindings. Nixon and Foot focuses primarily on the question of professional versus amateur production of embroidered bindings and go into more detail about the petition at the Bodleian that Barber mentions to assert that the majority of these bindings were professionally created. Having no expertise in needlework or women's daily lives, they give only passing attention to the material or

[9] Lanto Synge, *Antique Needlework* (Poole, Dorset : New York, N.Y: Blandford Press ; Distributed by Sterling, 1982).

technique of the needlework and do not discuss the impact of ownership or use of these objects.

The most recent significant work on seventeenth century English embroidery is 2008's *English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'Twixt Art and Nature.*[10] This catalogue was edited by Professor of Early Modern Art and Material Culture Andrew Morrall and Melinda Watt, curator of European textiles at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was produced in conjunction with the exhibition at the Bard Graduate Institute and includes a series of in-depth essays discussing Early Modern English embroidery covering social, cultural, economic, political, and material culture's relationships with needlework. This work expands on the question of who was doing these embroideries beyond the simplistic professional/domestic dichotomy briefly examined in the earlier works. While this book, like most other works on this topic, only briefly mentions embroidered book bindings, it does provide more information on the materials and techniques, as well as the general religious context of embroidery in general.

The problem with all of the works to date, however, has been the limited discussion of embroidered book bindings from a socio-religious and material cultural context. These bindings were at the height of their popularity during the first part of the seventeenth century, a time when evangelical Protestantism was the dominant religious, political, and cultural force in England. No authors discuss the actual process of

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[10] Andrew Morrall, Melinda Watt, and Cristina Balloffet Carr, eds., *English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'twixt Art and Nature* (New York : New York : New Haven: The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decortive Arts, Design, and Culture ; The Metropolitan Museum of Art ; Yale University Press, 2008).

embroidery, the physical wear of these books indicating their use, nor does anyone note the inscriptions the owners took care to write with their own names and the names of the people they chose to gift these books to.

To examine these topics, it is important to understand the role of women and religion during the sixteenth and seventeenth century as England embraced evangelicalism. Patrick Collinson addresses this idea in his article "The Role of Women in the English Reformation Illustrated by the Life and Friendships of Anne Locke," published in 1965. A lecturer in ecclesiastical history at King's College London, Collinson asserts that women were seen as more fervent because of their emotional natures and that their "gossipy" tendencies were a way for them to share scripture.[11] While he explores the idea of the development of an increasingly liberal policy towards girl's education, leading them to engage further in Protestantism, he does so almost entirely through the lens of men's opinions about their writing. Collinson was working within the framework of relying on written evidence to discuss historical narratives, illustrating how easy it was, and is, to marginalize important voices by not including non-documentary sources.

Merry Wiesner also discusses women's role in religion in her essay "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," published in 1987.[12] Wiesner notes that scholarship on women in the reformation either assumed their

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[11] Patrick Collinson, "The Role of Women in the English Reformation Illustrated by the Life and Friendships of Anne Locke," *Studies in Church History* 2 (1965): 258–72, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0424208400005271.

[12] Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 3 (1987): 311, https://doi.org/10.2307/2540718.

experience was the same as men's, focused only on a few notable women, or discussed male opinions on gender roles. She argues that women were very engaged in religious activities during the seventeenth century, that lower class women often participated in the iconoclastic riots, and that women of all classes were deeply involved in the contradiction between spiritual equality and wifely obedience. Wiesner opens the door to further discussion of women's experiences in the seventeenth century.

Christopher Hill's 1991 book, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas During the English Revolution*[13], expands on the involvement of women in the reformation movements. This work notes that Bibles were much less expensive than other books during this time period, and therefore, very accessible. Hill's observation is a critical point when considering that almost all embroidered book bindings were devotional books.

Derek Hirst's *England in Conflict, 1603-1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth. London,*[14] published in 1999, expands further on the political and religious conflict in England and the impact on women's lives, education, and familial responsibilities. He demonstrates that women took a more public role and therefore needed to appear morally upright, and that religion became a shield for their activities. He also points out that Laudinism, which reflected a slightly more conservative approach to Protestantism, reintroduced decorative arts in public worship causing tension and dissension in various religious sects, not the least of which was Puritanism. While he

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[13] Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution*, Repr, Penguin History (London: Penguin Books, 1991).
[14] Derek Hirst, *England in Conflict, 1603-1660: Kingdom, Community, Commonwealth* (London : New York: 1, 1999).

does not mention material goods in relationship to women, his omission begs the question: was embroidery a way for women to be seen as moral?

Roszika Parker explores the relationship between social standing, women's needlework, and religious devotion in 2010's *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*[15]. Parker, an art historian and feminist scholar, draws together many ideas noted by the earlier authors, emphasizing that embroidery was a physical manifestation of a Protestant work ethic which also denoted both opulence as well as feminine obedience. She does answer the question that Hirst did not which was that needlework was a way for women to assert their moral standing as a part of a series of behaviors that they used to construct a private, feminine self.

Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson further expands on the connection between women's religiosity, Protestantism, and the material culture of embroidery in *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic life, 1500-1700,*[16] published in 2017. Hamling, a senior lecturer in history, and Richardson, professor of early modern studies, focuses on the daily life of the middling sort, a term they define in the book and roughly analogous to the modern middle class, and use material culture to illuminate this topic. They examine embroidery as objects in the home, noting that "needlework was both practical housekeeping (making and mending) and, increasingly at the middling level, an art form that demonstrated status, wealth and

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[15] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, Reprinted (London New York Oxford Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2019).
[16] Tara Hamling, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

gendered attributes."[17] They write that men sometimes noted their mother's needlework activities with pride, as an indication of her morality and sobriety.

The fascinating thing about embroidery is that there remains a decent number of extant objects from this time period that range from modest learning pieces to extremely accomplished artifacts reflecting the highest levels of technical achievement. And the relatively new field of material culture studies provides a robust methodology to examine these non-documentary sources within a historical context, supplementing written sources to understand the culture and the individuals producing these artifacts.

Henry Glassie used his background in folkloristics and ethnomusicology to examine material objects in *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States* published in 1968. This book was a precursor to the field of material culture studies and argues for the core ideas of exploring artifacts to understand culture. For instance, Glassie looks at different architectural styles to understand folk learning and tradition. Later, in 1999's *Material Culture* he expands on this argument noting that the Western tradition of studying history was woefully limited since it has been based solely on written sources. These types of records were confined to a small, elite group of people and excluded the majority of humanity and the "the history of most people, preserved in unwritten artifacts, escapes into oblivion."[18]

Highly influenced by Glassie's work, anthropologist James Deetz wrote *In Small Things Forgotten* in 1977 in which he asked the question what is material culture and

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[17] Hamling, p. 213.
[18] Henry Glassie, *Material Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 44.

why is it important? He used his field work in colonial American sites to examine what material items can say about a culture. He argues that the same approach used in prehistoric archaeology can and should be applied to historical research. Additionally, Deetz shows how a structured framework to examine artifacts such as pottery, which includes a rigorous methodology of classification, comparison, and context, provides insight into the daily lives of people who were illiterate and not reflected in written record.

In 1985, Thomas Schlereth collected a series of essays in *Material Culture: A Research Guide*, furthering the argument for incorporating the study of material culture into history by claiming that physical objects were less biased records of past human activity since descriptions of events were transcriptions, translations, or condensations of events. And while this assertion might seem to overlook the limitations of objects or artifacts, these essays do attempt to fairly acknowledge methodological difficulties in the field including the vagaries of which objects survive and which are lost or the propensity of scholars to fall into the trap of progressive determinism implying a smooth trajectory of improvement over time. Regardless of these potential pitfalls, this book argues for the importance a material culture approach to historical studies.

*History from Things* (1993) edited by Steven Lubar and David Kingery is a collection of essays which argues for the validity of a cross-disciplinary approach for studying history with artifacts as a necessary and important vector of that examination. In the first essay, Jules David Prown contends that “artifacts constitute the only class of

historical events that occurred in the past but survive into the present."[19] These essays cover a range of benefits of studying objects including the benefits of wear in helping to determine how an item was used, as well as the value of re-creating or reproducing an artifact to understand how technical procedures were carried out, an idea leading to the ideas of experimental archaeology and, in the production of worn objects, embodied history.

Despite these works and many others, as well as journal articles, conferences, and classes, the validity of material culture as a field of study has needed ongoing support. As recently as 2015, Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello edited another series of essays, *Writing Material Culture History.* Collectively, this book asserts that material culture has helped historians by complementing other sources, prompting new questions, opening up new themes and areas of study and has been an important part of the shift in focus from the elite few at the top of society to the rest of population. It also examines the types of questions asked of an object when examining it: what is it, what did it represent; who made it, how was it made, and why; who owned it, was it passed down, where it is now, and what is its condition?

These questions were at the center of a material culture approach to history used by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich in her 2001 book *The Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of An American Myth.* Thatcher Ulrich deployed this material culture approach by using objects such as Native American baskets, spinning wheels, and silk

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[19] Steven D. Lubar and W. D. Kingery, eds., *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 3.

embroidery to examine both the lives of colonial Americans and how those lives were understood and interpreted by people living in the early formation of the American republic. These objects provided an alternative path to understanding historical events. Thatcher Ulrich's methodology is the framework that I used to examine the objects and culture in this thesis.

These works on early modern English history depict a consistent framework over the past eighty years which has examined women and Protestantism, and in more recent years has expanded to include the material culture of embroidery in the daily expectations of worship and devotion. Paired with the scholarship on early modern English embroidery in general and embroidered book bindings in specific, these works create a foundation for understanding the importance of needlework in terms of economics, religion, and daily life, as well as a way to use extant objects to gain a deeper understanding of those experiences. Yet, none of these works note the unique place that decorated devotional books had in terms of the personal and public performance of religion in a rapidly changing culture. Nor do these examinations focus on the economic impact and reality of needlework for women. Typically seen as a hobby, embroidery has been framed as a past time instead of a profession which belies the experiences of women like Susan Perwich who taught embroidery, or of Damaris Pearse who used needlework as a means to further her education by selling items she sewed to purchase books, or Lady Margaret Montgomery who was an important factor in the local economy when she employed her neighbor to make sheets and linens for her household.

The corpus of embroidered book bindings are pieces of actual history that exist today. Examined through the lens of religion, class, gender, and economics these material objects provide insight into women's daily lives, expectations, and interests that is otherwise lost due to lack of documentary evidence.

To give context to this discussion each chapter will focus on specific design motifs of embroidered bindings as a framework for discussing the varied and interconnected socio-cultural changes which influenced the development and popularity of these objects. These stylistic classifications are based on my research examining 121 extant book bindings. This is a significant sample size making up over a quarter of the estimated 414 known extant embroidered bindings, though this number continues to grow as more objects are offered for sale.[20] Generally speaking, the designs can be divided roughly into five motifs: Armorial, Floral, Geometric, Pictorial, and Symmetrical.

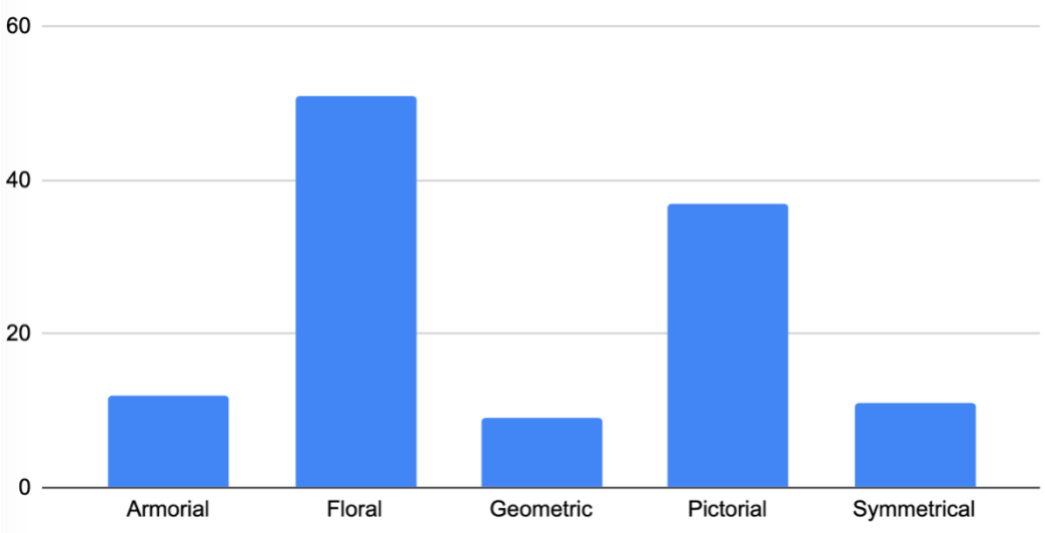


Fig. 1 Sample of embroidered bindings by design motif.

[20] Claire Canavan, "'Various Pleasant Fiction': Embroidering Textiles Vol 1," p.145.

This classification is offered in contrast to or as a step forward from the only other classification schema which was proposed by Davenport in his book, *English Embroidered Book Bindings*, discussed earlier and still used today. Davenport notes four main design categories: heraldic, figural, floral, and arabesque. I propose the term armorial as a slightly more expansive term than heraldic because this category includes not just coats of arms, but also initials, personal badges, and royal symbols such as crowns and was most typically related to a royal or noble ownership of a book. The floral category centers an individual or multiple flowers as the primary design, though often includes other elements such as insects or birds. Geometric designs, entirely overlooked by Davenport, are patterns repeated regularly on a grid such as squares, "s" shapes, or crosses and closely reflect pattern books that were widely available in England during this time. Pictorial designs, an expansion on Davenport's figural category, includes both single figures such as Hope or Faith, as well as images depicting scenes including Jacob wrestling with the Angel, deer in a park, or a sailing ship. Finally, the last category is symmetrical which embraces the Renaissance ideal of balance. This is a replacement of Davenport's arabesque motif description. The arabesque style of intricately curving and interlacing lines does apply to some of the embroidered binding designs, but excludes other layouts with discrete motifs of quatrefoils or stylized leaves.

The first chapter explores the initial development of embroidered bindings by looking at the earliest examples which utilized the armorial style. These bindings grew out of a medieval tradition of adorning special books in precious metals and jewels, or covering them with plain fabric "chemise" bags to protect the text and call attention to

their importance. The armorial designs which feature coats of arms, personal badges, royal symbols like crowns, or initials reflect the elite noble and royal owners of the first wave of embroidered bindings. This chapter also examines how objects like books were used as a part of a tradition of gift-giving at court. In fact, Elizabeth Tudor, first as a princess and later as a queen, both created and later received embroidered book bindings as a part of this exchange.

Chapter two spotlights the floral design motif, the most popular style, as a way to understand the importance of gardens in early modern English culture, as well as the wide spread use of herbals as patterns and design inspiration. This chapter also examines how the gentry class and more affluent merchants sought to grow their status by following in the steps of the nobility through the acquisition of lands, houses, clothing, and material objects like books. Additionally, this discussion examines the daily lives of women, especially in regards to needlework as an indicator of femininity, piety, industry, and morality.

The geometric design motif is the focus of the discussion of chapter three, which looks at the growth of mass-produced books in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This expansion of the book trade dramatically lowered the price of books and made them more accessible than ever before. This new market of devotional tracts, almanacs, reading primers, classics also included needle work patterns, all popular with the growing middling sort who were watching and following the lead of the gentry and nobility in terms of education and book ownership, as well as domestic needlework. Geometric

designs found in pattern books and used on embroidered bindings reflect the growing availability of this type of embellishment and material goods.

Chapter four examines the importance of the rise of Protestantism in England which encouraged direct engagement with scripture through reading and personal reflection. This marked a dramatic change from the Catholic tradition of prayer through the intercession of a priest. The practice of Protestantism contributed to the rise in literacy rates and the spread of education for a wider range of the population and went hand-in-hand with the expansion of the book trade and book ownership. Embellishing book bindings with pictorial images inspired by or directly taken from printed engravings and devotional book frontispieces reflects these religious changes.

The fifth and final chapter considers the symmetrical design motif as a Renaissance goal of balance and beauty, as well as the act of needlework itself and its economic impacts on women. Because it was an expected daily activity for all but the indigent, different types of needlework were a fundamental aspect of almost every girl's education and could range from the simplest hemming to the more elaborate embellishments, as on embroidered book bindings. But needlework was not a past time or hobby, it was a way to signal piety especially when done in community and combined with reading devotional books aloud. Needlework also had a critical economic value for women of different social classes, in having skills to trade for income as well as women hiring other women to perform work like making or marking sheets or constructing clothing. Women were also able to teach girls and other young women needlework skills in a formal or even informal educational setting. All these activities would be classified

as professional, and yet this financial aspect of needlework, especially between women in domestic environments, is often overlooked.

By understanding the religious, economic, educational, and cultural influences on women's lives, we will be able to place the importance of embroidered book bindings in a wider context. And, in turn, use these artifacts to shed light on women's daily lives, their relationship to scripture, and how needlework fit into their worlds and duties as women.

# CHAPTER ONE: THE ARMORIAL MOTIF

Fig.1 *The Castle of Christianitie,* 1568, St. John's College University of Cambridge.

Fig. 2 *Elizabeth I when a Princess*. William Scrots, 1547, Royal Collection.

When she was only thirteen years old, Princess Elizabeth had her portrait painted (fig. 2). In it, this girl looks directly at the viewer, wearing her red brocade court dress as a type of armor; it stands stiffly away from her body enabling her to take space. Her serious, watchful face shows the same dark eyes that her mother, Anne Boleyn, was renowned for as well as the famous red hair of her father, Henry VIII. Behind her on a lectern is an open book and she holds another in her hands, her long, delicate fingers tucked between the pages as if she has, just that moment, been interrupted in the middle of reading. Books were an important part of Elizabeth's life and she used them to craft an image of herself as a modest, industrious, and pious girl which was, in many ways, in

contrast to her mother who had been found a traitor and been unjustly beheaded for being the exact opposite: lively, frivolous, and faithless. For her own safety, Elizabeth had to convince her father the king, the man who beheaded her mother, that she was a loyal and steadfast girl and books, her efforts at learning, as well as at needlework, were an important part of that argument. This portrait with its inclusion of two books captures her efforts.

Elizabeth Tudor's relationship with books, especially those with embroidered bindings, expanded beyond her early years. As a young queen, she continued to favor books as a part of the image of a serious and worthy monarch. And her personal preference for red velvet embroidered book bindings was so marked that it was noted by a foreign visitor to her court.[1] A number of extant books, including the one in this chapter, also attest to that binding preference. These books also asserted her claim to the French throne through the embroidered emblems. Elizabeth Tudor's use of books as a talisman of luck or power was not a unique perspective but reflected a common sense of the force of the printed word, especially in regards to devotional works and the Bible. In fact, books with decorative and embroidered bindings were important enough to be worn on belts and included in portraits as a testament to the owner's piety, wealth, and learning. All of this was reinforced at Elizabeth's court where she purposefully created a culture of gift giving, from her courtiers to her, to bind and cement relationships and obligations. Many of these gifts were embellished with needlework and several were embroidered book

[1] Howard M. Nixon and Mirjam Foot, *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*, Rev. ed (Oxford [England]; Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 41-42.

bindings, which she particularly preferred and looked on favorably. In fact, this was a tactic she used herself as a girl, transcribing books and embroidering their covers as gifts to her father and stepmother as a pledge of her loyalty and industry.

The book in this first chapter is reflective of that social and political environment and remarkable for several reasons, not the least of which was its ownership or purported ownership (fig. 1). That ownership was closely related to the armorial design motif embroidered on it as an explicit claim of property. The use of coats of arms, initials, personal badges, and royal insignia in embroidery (as well as other media) were not simply saying "this is my book," but were a part of an emblematic language to announce status, value, and importance. The book itself is 9 inches by 6 inches (called an "octavo" in printer's book sizing charts), a size that is practical, if not perfect, for reading. It was bound in red velvet with embroidery executed in silver gilt metal thread.[2] The design motif refers directly to Queen Elizabeth I as the reigning monarch when it was created with the initials E and R (Elizabeth Regina) flanking a Tudor rose capped by an imperial crown.

The Tudor rose was a prolific emblem during the reign of the Tudors and was used to assert their right to the English throne by visually combining the Lancastrian red rose with the Yorkist white rose. This entirely allegorical emblem design of the combination of the two individual roses into a double layered rose, smaller white on top of red, was created by the Tudors to signify the triumphant end of the Wars of the Roses

[2] Silver gilt was made by dipping a very thin strip of silver wire in gold and then wrapping it around a silk thread, so it appeared like gold in its application.

with the marriage of the distaff branch of the Lancasters' Henry Tudor (later VII) to the House of York's Princess Elizabeth. It was a powerful symbol intended to shore up the not-so-legitimate Tudor claim to the throne and was used prolifically by the Tudors in architecture, written documents, stonework, woodwork, painting, illumination, printing, and needlework.

The imperial crown embroidered above the Tudor rose argues the English claim to power beyond England's borders with Ireland and France. The political validity of that claim to the French throne was itself spurious, though English monarchs had been asserting it since the fourteenth century. The national symbol of France, the fleur-de-lis in the corners of the book cover, further proclaims that supposed right. The eighteenth-century antiquarian who donated this book to St. John's College at the University of Cambridge noted that it was owned by Queen Elizabeth I. Though there is no documentary proof, the claim was not unreasonable. Queen Elizabeth was known to prefer red velvet bindings on her books and the quality of the materials, as well as the emblems, mark it out as either something owned by her or intended as a gift to her. It would be odd otherwise to make or commission a binding with the Queen's emblem and keep it for one's personal library.

In fact, this book, if given as a gift, would have been part of an important aspect of the gift giving culture of the Tudor courts. Elizabeth cultivated this gift giving tradition to great effect to cement relationships between herself and her courtiers, as well as to furnish her palaces and wardrobes to construct and support her Gloriana image. She was known to prefer embroidered objects and received several embroidered book bindings

during her reign. Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, gifted an elaborately embroidered book to the Queen of his own writing on the history of the English Church, supporting the validity of her preferred brand of Protestantism. The inherent value of a hand-embroidered piece is diminished today because of the access we have to inexpensive mass-produced decorative items. But prior to industrialization, handmade items were precious in and of themselves. A gift like embroidery, especially in regards to the symbols used in the embroidery discussed above, would create an important connection between the giver and the receiver.[3]

Elizabeth I specifically prized embroidered objects as evidenced by the New Year's Rolls which, year after year during her reign, reflected a long list of embroidered objects gifted to the queen. Early in Elizabeth's reign there were only a few gifts of clothing, primarily from the queen's close female friends who knew her taste; otherwise, they were usually coin as recorded in the rolls.[4] But this changed throughout her reign and by the end, there were a significant portion of gifts of clothes with needlework as well as other embroidered objects. When planning her gift to the Queen, Elizabeth Wingfield wrote to her relative Elizabeth, the Countess of Shrewsbury, that she had consulted with Lady Cobham, one of the Queen's ladies in waiting. Lady Cobham advised strongly against giving just gold coin and instead recommended a gift to her majesty of "a fine rare thing" (meaning an embroidered object) and that "if your honor

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[3] Lisa M. Klein, "Your Humble Handmaid: Elizabethan Gifts of Needlework," *Renaissance Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1997): 459–93, https://doi.org/10.2307/3039187, 472-472.
[4] Janet Arnold, ed., *Queen Elizabeth's Wardrobe Unlock'd: The Inventories of the Wardrobe of Robes Prepared in July 1600 Edited from Stowe MS 557 in the British Library, MS LR 2/121 in the Public Record Office, London, and MS V.b.72 in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC* (London New York: Routledge, 2018), 93.

had given money, I fear it would have been ill liked."[5] And, in a separate instance when the Countess of Shrewsbury sent an embroidered gift to the Queen, it received extremely positive feedback. From Elizabeth Wingfield to the Countess documenting the Queen's reaction to the gift:

> We have reaped such recompense as could not desire better, first her majesty never liked anything you gave her so well; the color and strange trimming [the embroidered details] of the garment, with the ready and great cost bestowed upon it hath caused her to give out such good speeches of my lord and your ladyship as I never heard of better. She said that 'good noble couple, they show in all things what love they bear me and surely my lord I will not be found unthankful.' If my lord and your ladyship had given 500 hundred pounds, in my opinion, it would not have been so well taken.[30]

Many forms of needlework become extremely popular and fashionable in the late sixteenth and into the seventeenth century, from lace edgings to surface embellishments on clothing, hats, caps, coifs, gloves, bags, shoes, and home furnishings like cushions, curtains, as well as book bindings. An embroidered object was a way to display both piety and affluence, to show the owner either had the money to pay a professional or that the women in their household had the time and skill to create needle-worked objects, and a display of wealth was a necessary step to assert status within the hierarchical structure of Tudor and Stewart society. An embroidered book binding utilized highly valued needlework as well as drawing attention to the owner's literacy, morality, and piety.

[5] Elizabeth Shrewsbury, "Shrewsbury Letters" (or 1577 1576), X.d.428 (130), Folger Shakespeare Library.

The book which begins this chapter with its armorial design motif, is reflective of the earliest versions of embroidered bindings. In the sixteenth century, before the trend hit its peak in the following century, embroidered bindings tended to be owned by royalty or nobility and had embroidered motifs that suggested such ownership. These early examples of embroidered bindings used velvet ground cloth and the sizes tended towards slightly larger in the folio, quarto, or octavo range. In contrast, later in the seventeenth century, most of the embroidered books were smaller, octavo (9 inches by 6 inches) or below, the ground cloth used was primarily silk satin or linen canvas instead of velvet, and the most popular motifs were not armorial but floral.

| Size Name | Size in Inches |
|---|---|
| Folio | 12x19 |
| Quarto | 9x12 |
| Octavo | 6x9 |
| Duodecimo | 5x7 |
| Sextodecimo | 4x6 |
| Trigesimo-segundo | 3x5 |
| Quadrasegisimo-octavo | 2x4 |
| Sexagesimo-quarto | 2x3 |

Fig. 3 Common Book Sizes.

Except for the small community of scholars who specialize in bindings, examinations of books most frequently focus on the text only. But the physicality of the size, layout, and binding played an important part in the book's service to the reader or owner as well as in its overall value. The chart above gives examples of common book

sizes, though there were many more sizes in between (fig.3). The different sizes would dictate, to a certain extent, how the book owner used them. For instance, when Margaret, Lady Hoby, one of the few women of her time who kept a diary, wrote that she took "som [sic] notes in my testament"[6] it is reasonable to suppose that she used a bible large enough to read easily with wide margins for making notations, likely a quarto or octavo size. Earlier that same day, Lady Hoby wrote that she "instructed Tomson wife in some principles of religion [sic]."[7] For this activity, it is possible that Lady Hoby was using the household Bible which would have been for group activities like household prayers. This Bible might have been a folio size, possibly placed on a lectern or a decorated pillow, to be consulted but not moved around. When Lady Hoby attended church, she might have brought a Bible with her, but this would probably have been one of the smallest sizes, like the trigesimo-segundo (3 inches by 5 inches) or the diminutive sexagesimo-quarto (2 inches by 3 inches). This book would fit easily in her hand and, because the printing at these sizes is so small, was probably not used for serious reading but for reference and a way to follow along or remember the service.

Functionally, bindings are intended to protect the delicate text block and increase the longevity of the book. They can be (and are) replaced when needed and a book might be refurbished several times in its lifecycle. The upper and lower boards, or front and back covers, extend beyond the text block or printed pages to protect the delicate paper, and another stiff piece of material is bound over the spine which is the area of the book

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[6] Margaret Hoby and Joanna Moody, *The Private Life of an Elizabethan Lady: The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605* (Stroud: Sutton, 2001), 3.
[7] Hoby and Moody, 3.

that sees the most stress when it is opened repeatedly. The material used to make protective bindings ranged from cheap paper or cardboard to expensive leather or even wood. Decorative bindings such as embroidered textiles, plain textiles like velvet, or even gold and jewels offer an interesting contrast: those bindings are not primarily a way to protect the text, but rather to draw attention to the book itself. In fact, decorative bindings are often more fragile than cardboard or leather and interfere with the intention of making a text block more durable.

During the medieval period, plain textile covered books represented a small portion of binding material. When used they weren't embroidered but made of cloth of gold, silk, or velvet and embellished with metal clasps and bosses.[8] Sometimes a chemise, or bag-like book cover, of velvet or soft, untanned leather was also used as a secondary cover over a traditional leather binding. This additional layer would loosely enclose the book and was sometimes made with an extra-long flap which could be looped through a belt and carried around. This girdle style of book covering was used to carry devotional books and could signify piety, though when ladies wore these chemise-covered books they sometimes drew criticism as being ostentatious.[9] Interestingly, this same accusation of flamboyance would be made during the early modern period when women wore embroidered books on their waists or carried them to church. The common factor seems to be an opportunity to criticize women being noticed in a public space.

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[8] Nixon and Foot, *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England,* 42-44.
[9] Frederick Bearman, "The Origins and Significance of Two Late Medieval Textile Chemise Bookbindings in the Walters Art Gallery," 2021, 26.

Fig 4. Unknown Artist, Lady Philippa Speke, née Rosewell, 1592, Private Collection.

In a very real way, the coverings or accoutrement to bindings which both protected the binding and allowed them to be worn reinforced the concept of books as a talisman, a way to carry around a small item of sanctified protection and ward off possible evils. In the seventeenth century, English Bibles were revered beyond their text and used in a variety of talismanic ways to cure illness or sleeplessness, to swear oaths, make decisions, predict the future, and ward off evil or the devil.[10] After the English reformation, when Protestants no longer abided by the idea of carrying around a rosary

[10] David Cressy, "Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England," *The Journal of Library History (1974-1987)* 21, no. 1 (Winter 1986): 94.

(another type of talisman) as a signifier of their religiosity, elaborately embroidered books worn on a person's body could be both talisman and announcement of privilege and status, functioning in both a sacred and profane manner (fig.4).

Fig 5. Adam de Colone. Portrait of Lady Cowdray. 1621.

Fig. 6 Portrait of Bennet Sherard, 2nd Baron Sherard of Leitram. Gilbert Jackson. 1629.

Embroidered bindings were important enough to be included in portraits and there are, during this time period, examples where women were depicted wearing or holding a small, personal, and (most likely) embroidered book (fig. 5). And not just women were portrayed with these diminutive embroidered books. When Bennet Sherard was eight years old, his parents commissioned a portrait of him holding what is very clearly an embroidered book with polychrome silk, on white silk satin. The book features the very common salmon-colored silk ribbons which were wound around the book when not in use. In this portrait, the loose ribbons invoke the idea that Bennet was just reading his book (fig. 6).

Bennet's father was the first Baron Sherard, newly risen to the nobility from a

lineage of important community leaders including sheriffs. This portrait was an important step in the buttressing of their social position. Baron Sherard was obviously interested in building on his legacy and a critical step in joining the nobility was asserting status through housing, clothing, possessions, and portraiture to capture and display all of those markers. Bennet, as the future second Baron, was an essential part of this hierarchical claim. He was portrayed inside of a house surrounded by the familiar trappings of a well-appointed home of the day including a paned window, woven flooring, and red hangings. The luxury of this family is displayed on Bennet himself with both his doublet and skirt completely covered in embroidery, his shirt collar and cuffs with whitework embroidery, as well as the generous scarf hanging from his waist. And the embroidered book binding that Bennet holds was an important part of this image of status and piety or education.


Fig. 7 Artist Unknown. Queen Elizabeth I, c.1560, Private Collection.

There are a number of portraits of Elizabeth Tudor, both as princess and a young queen, which include books as important items in the composition. Books were a way for the young Elizabeth to build an image of herself as studious and moral, in contrast to the lingering reputation of her mother, Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII's second wife executed for allegedly immoral behavior. This portrait (fig. 7) shows the young queen holding a small book which could be interpreted as covered in red velvet and embroidered in silver gilt thread, similar to the book which began this chapter.[11]

Embroidered book bindings were important enough to be included in these thoughtfully composed portraits, along with other essential indicators of status like embroidered clothes, gloves, hats, shoes, and household furnishings. Embroidered book bindings were valued as a part of the presentation of a pious, educated, and even influential person. Bennet Sherard's portrait was painted in 1629, at the height of popularity for embroidered book bindings. Queen Elizabeth's portrait, like her red velvet book, was made approximately seventy years earlier, at the beginning of the era of embroidered bindings. In fact, there are several embroidered book bindings belonging to Henry VIII, Queen Katherine Parr, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I in collections today, attesting to the beginnings of the trend.

The earliest extant embroidered covers specifically made for binding books were created for monarchs. Of course, royal books or any object associated with royalty are

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[11] Interestingly, after Queen Elizabeth I was established on the throne, her portraits turned away from an image of industrious education and piety towards a sense of magnificence and grandeur, with books dropping out of later compositions. This can be an argument for her focusing more on creating an image of glorious queenship and less on trying to live down the clinging reputation of frivolity inherited from her mother.

deemed more precious and more likely to be preserved in collections or archives. The earliest examples date from the 1540s an owned by Henry VIII and his last queen, Katherine Parr. They were professionally made velvet embroidered or appliquéd in gold and silk thread. Additionally, are two examples of embroidered bindings from this time, both made by Princess Elizabeth in her youth and gifted to her stepmother and father in 1543 and 1544.

These books were not the first needlework gifts that the princess Elizabeth deployed when she was young and her status was insecure in her father's court. When she was six, the Princess embroidered a shirt and gave it to her young brother Edward: "on the second anniversary of Edward's birth, when the nobles of England presented gifts of silver and gold and jewels to the infant heir of the realm, the Lady Elizabeth's grace gave the simple offering of a shirt of cambric worked by her own hands."[12] This gift was a message from Elizabeth and her guardians of her industry and accomplishments, even at this young age, to her father to secure his favor and continuing support.

[12] Agnes Strickland, *Lives of the Queens of England: From the Norman Conquest; with Anecdotes of Their Courts* (Lea and Blanchard, 1850).

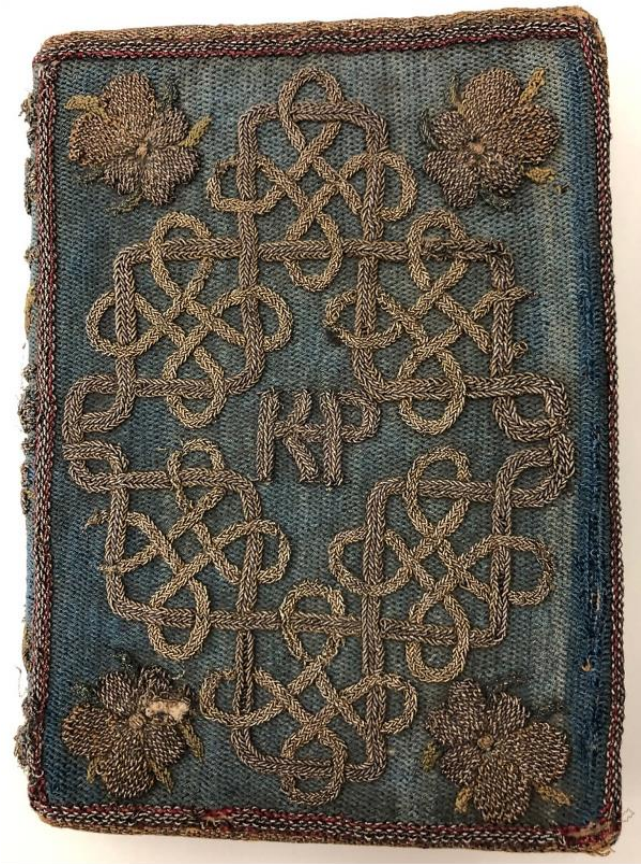


Fig. 8. MS Cherry 36. British Library.

When she was 11, Princess Elizabeth translated a favorite Protestant poem of her stepmother Katherine Parr's, the *Mirror or the Glass of the Sinful Soul*, from French into English. Elizabeth wrote it out in a careful and beautiful hand, had it bound, and then embroidered a cover for the book (fig. 8). The binding she created was not the usual velvet ground cloth with gold or silver metal thread or silk applique. Rather, Elizabeth Tudor used a canvas linen ground cloth and completely covered it with a hand twisted silk thread in encroaching (also called interlocking or slanted) Gobelin stitch. Using silver gilt metal thread, intricate design details of pansies in the corners (Elizabeth's

favorite flower[13]) an intertwined cross and square, knotwork, as well as the initials KP for her stepmother were worked on top of that blue silk base layer. The metal thread used on this binding was a fine gauge gilded silver wire wrapped around a silk core. The wire was either wrapped so tightly that the silk core is not visible, or wrapped in various tensions to allow the silk core to show through. The silk core, when visible, is either yellow, blue, or red and used purposefully on green petals, yellow flowers, blue flowers, the spine, or the red edging. The red silk core silver gilt thread was the same color used on the book Elizabeth produced a year later and gifted to her father. These gifts carried a weighty message of filial duty, religious devotion, love, and respect, as well as proof of Elizabeth's accomplishments both in learning as well as with needlework.

The effort and skill required to complete this work was significant and reflected hours of time as well as a higher level of technical expertise, particularly for an 11-year-old. In fact, the tension of the Gobelin stitch is so even and regular that it is still mistaken for a single piece of fabric and has been confused with a woven or knitted fabric.[14] Adding to that perception is the uniqueness of the manipulation of the pale blue silk used prior to each individual stitch. Silk embroidery floss or thread was, at that time period, flat filament but the silk on this piece is twisted, which is extremely unusual. Elizabeth chose to add an additional step into the creation process to either twist the silk filament herself or have another person produce this twisted thread for her. It created a notable and

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[13] "Letter from Anthony Wingfield, the Court, to Elizabeth Wingfield," accessed May 30, 2023, https://luna.folger.edu/luna/servlet/detail/FOLGERCM1~6~6~330822~127162:Letter-from-Anthony-Wingfield,-the-. This letter from Anthony Wingfield to his wife references an item "imbroyderyd with pansys." Later in this same letter he notes that the "quene lekes byst off that flower."

[14] Tracy Borman, *Elizabeth's Women: Friends, Rivals, and Foes Who Shaped the Virgin Queen*, 1st ed (New York: Bantam Books, 2009), p. 100.

textured surface and would have been unlike anything else at the time. Of course, twisting threads together is not, in and of itself, unusual; spinning threads together is common in cloth making in general. But it was not a technique used on silk embroidery threads, which makes this application remarkable. It remains a distinctive object.

Interestingly, there is relatively little wear on the book. Most of the needlework remains intact with only a moderate amount of tarnishing of the silver gilt, indicating a higher quantity of gold used during the gilding process. The corners and edges show only a small amount of wear. The back shows a little more wear than the front which is reasonable if the book was kept flat on a stand or a cushion. The ground cover technique in the blue silk has lost very few stitches, but what is remarkable is the color degradation. The blue twisted silk has noticeably distinct fading in stitch runs which indicates that different dye lots with varying qualities of color-fastness were used for the threads, not at all unusual for hand-dyed threads. Other than the slightly more worn back, the book overall shows little indication of wear from excessive handling or use. This is not to say that Katherine Parr did not appreciate this gift, rather that once it was no longer in her possession it was not regifted, passed down, and handled for several generations. Any owners would have recognized how precious this object was and kept it as safe and as intact as possible. Indeed, the Bodleian library considers it one of their and England's most precious objects, which makes it all the more frustrating that when it was originally given to the collection, the number "36" was painted on the embroidery of the spine to indicate the accession number.

As a design motif, these types of armorial bindings with images coats of arms,

personal badges or symbols, or crowns denoting rank can be identified as the earliest style of embroidered book bindings. But the initial popularity of this style would be replaced by other patterns and images as embroidered bindings became more prominent during the seventeenth century with the increased accessibility of books and other material goods, as well as the expansion of needlework objects of many different kinds.

This important book, along with the first book in this chapter, embodies the early development of embroidered bindings in that their designs incorporate personal and armorial emblems and badges. This motif asserts both a personal and political identity. Additionally, these books were explicitly a part of Elizabeth I's relationship with embroidered objects in a gift giving context as a way to forge bonds and curry favor. And they were both bindings on texts of a devotional nature. As the printing presses began to churn out more and more religious texts at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries, the fashion for embroidered bindings continued to expand beyond the nobility into the gentry and middling classes and several new design motifs emerged.

# CHAPTER TWO: THE FLORAL MOTIF

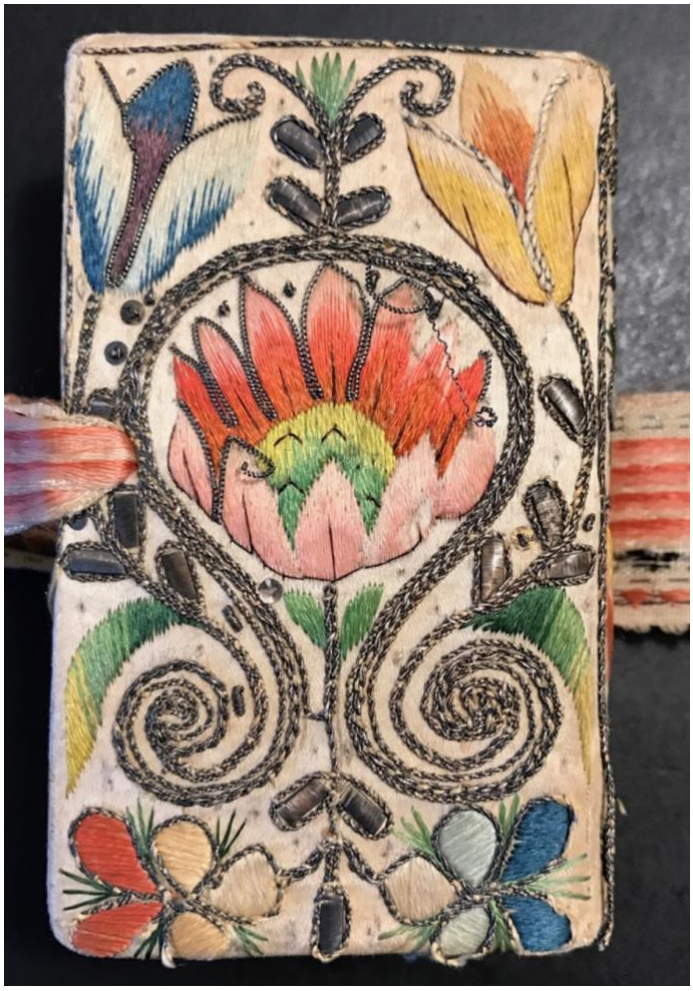

Fig. 1 *The Whole Book of Psalms,* 1634. Houghton Rare Books Library, Harvard University.

About an hour outside of London, up the Thames Rivers or, more modernly, via train, is Hampton Court Palace, one of the historic houses most closely associated with Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. The gardens at Hampton Court are magnificent in their variety and Englishness. If you walk through them on a mild summer morning you can visit “rooms” of cultivated beauty: knotwork gardens with fragrant herbs, walled off sunken gardens with waterworks and rows of pansies, rooms made of tall hedgerows with

wide walkways laid out among beds of roses, colonnades for covered walks, arbors of grapes, trailing vines of wisteria. These are just the pleasure gardens and do not even encompass the expansive kitchen gardens supplying foodstuffs, medicinal gardens, or laundry gardens. English culture was, and is, intimately tied with gardening. During the early modern era, this relationship with nature was reflected in the popular floral motif executed on a variety of objects including embroidered on caps and coifs, clothing, pictorials, casket and cabinets, cushions, and curtains, as well as book bindings.

Even today, what Americans call backyards, the English term their gardens no matter the size or landscaping. From the most opulent landowners to humble peasants, gardens were used and appreciated for beauty, food, and medicine, and books of the time reflected that value. Herbals with information on the cultivation and various applications of plants were popular books which also served as patterns for embroidery. These books, as well the gardens the referred to, were an important part of the life of the gentry class, a new socio-economic group that developed in the late Middle Ages. The gentry were part of a new movement of regional leadership outside the nobility and they strove to mark their status and power through their education, with book ownership as a part of that image. Education, an important goal of the gentry, also extended to their daughters, though their curriculum was gendered and focused on industry, morality, and piety with needlework taking a significant part. Working on an object like an embroidered book binding for a devotional text as in the book for this chapter could bring all of these ideals of womanhood together.

The colors of the embroidered binding of the book in this chapter's floral motif are remarkable for their vibrancy (fig. 1). The majority of existing or surviving embroidered book bindings have suffered a significant and impactful amount of deterioration due to soiling, light damage, handling wear, and material degradation like tarnishing. However, in this binding the greens, yellows, pinks, oranges, and blues have retained their brightness and provide a true glimpse into the fashionable color palette that dominated needlework in the late sixteenth and seventeenth century. Surprisingly, the equally luminous silk ribbon remains intact, an uncommon occurrence for these types of books. Many books with embroidered bindings show evidence of having had one or two ribbons that no longer remain, with discernable holes in the covers and the tails of the ribbons visible under the pasted down end pages of the inside covers. This book benefitted from being stored away from light, moisture, and handling early in its lifespan.

Fig. 2 Detail of *The Whole Book of Psalms,* 1634. Houghton Rare Books Library, Harvard University.

The text is the *Whole Booke of Psalms,* printed in 1633. The color palette, stitch techniques, materials, and design motif of the embroidery are all typical of the time

period. The typical palette for embroidery from this period includes colors and combinations like the light blue/mid blue/dark blue on the bottom right and upper left of this book (fig. 1), and the pinks and peachy oranges of the flower itself. The various metal threads couched around the edge of the design, the flower petals, and composing the scrolling curves are extremely typical, as are the spangles. This object also includes an interesting technique where metal wire is wrapped around stiff paper or card stock and appliqued onto the ground cloth to create textured and raised elements. Here, that card stock is visible due to wear (fig 2).

Interestingly, there is an inscription but it is dated almost two hundred years after the printing and, presumably, the embroidery: "Stephen Poyntz/given to him /the 6th of October/1823/as a birthday/Present/by the Dowager/Lady Floyd." The note continues with Lady Floyd's address (presumably in London), as well as the location and date of Stephen Poyntz's birth. This amount of identifying detail is unusual in inscriptions on these types of books and bears further research to identify these two people and their relationship to each other. It is remarkable that this book was held in such good condition that it was still deemed appropriate to be given as a meaningful gift approximately two centuries after its creation, and it is a sign of how much the Dowager Lady Floyd valued this object.

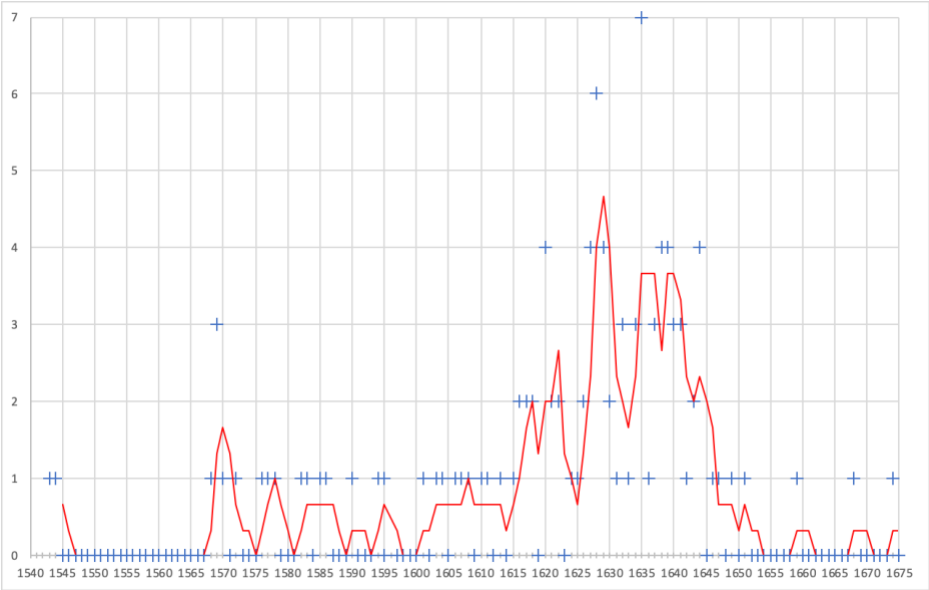


Fig. 3 Embroidered Bindings by Year of Publishing Date.
Blue Markers indicate number of books attributed to each year. The red line is a moving average.

While embroidered book bindings had been produced as early as the mid-sixteenth century in England, the start of the fashion came at the very end of that century with the real height of popularity and production from the 1620s to the 1640s (fig. 3). The date of the production of the needlework is, and must always, remain an estimate because the vast majority of embroidered bindings are not dated or signed. The publishing date is a *terminus post quem*, or the earliest possible date the binding could be, since the designs were made to fit specifically to the text's cover. Other indicators such as color palette, materials, stitch techniques, and design motifs also help to place a timeframe on the embroidery.

This timeframe, both the longer period of general creation from the 1560s through the 1660s, and the height of fashion from the 1620s through the 1640s speaks to broader trends in needlework during that period. Embellished clothing gained in popularity from the mid-sixteenth century through to the seventeenth century as needlework became more

decorative and widely practiced, both domestically and professionally. The mid-seventeenth century saw a dramatic expansion in the application of needlework beyond clothing and accessories to home furnishings including curtains and cushions, bed and wall hangings, embellished caskets and frames. The fashion for adding needlework to book covers simply follows that trend. Of course, in order to follow that fashion, more people needed to be able to own books; and book ownership, as well as the expansion of items embellished with needlework, was driven in part by the social and economic stability that had grown and flourished in the prior one hundred years, since the end of the War of the Roses.

It is a facile statement that the medieval era in England was one of almost constant warfare, economic hardship, political upheaval, plague, and instability punctuated by periods of short-lived peace. This is well-trodden ground, but an important backdrop for the context of the late medieval and early modern era in terms of the massive changes in the lives of the population that would eventually lead to a growing book-owning population. In fact, it was the constant warfare that led to the expansion of a socio-economic class that supported the book trade with their commerce: the gentry. As the civil war, which is modernly referred to as the War of the Roses, ground on during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the nobility leading the conflict needed to access a wider source of fighting men. To achieve this, the crown implemented the category of "esquire" to increase military recruitment from landowners without having to expand the ranks of knights.[1] These warriors were granted the right to use heraldry, which mimicked

[1] Peter R. Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry*, 1st pbk. ed, Past and Present Publications (Cambridge,

the nobility, and created a new socio-economic class termed "gentry." The word itself denotes a person with nobility of character or manners, or of gentle birth: a gentleman. These gentry became responsible for the governance of their immediate areas, particularly in the country. And, over time, a new group of learned, professional men and their families were also included in the gentry: lawyers and administrators.[2]

Around the same time as this class was expanding, Henry Tudor came to the throne. When he won the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485 and became king, it marked the end of an approximately 150-year period during which time English politics and economics were broadly focused on war, whether on home soil or in France. Henry Tudor became Henry VII and he and his heirs created a relatively stable socio-political structure in which the population and the economy grew and flourished. Henry VII recognized the value in these educated, untitled men and utilized them to run his government; these gentry class men had more financial and managerial knowledge than the nobility who had previously governed England. These were "new men," as they were termed at the time, men who had relied on books during their education, who valued books and bought them, supported the book trade and brought books into their homes, modeling the value of literacy and education for their families, dependents, and the people in their communities who were influenced by their behavior. The Honorable Christopher Leigh, son of the first Baron Leigh, was a product of this class expansion and demonstrated the gentry value on book ownership. When the inventory of his goods was

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UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 242-243.
[2] Coss, 248.

documented in May of 1673 it included in his study "his books, a desk, a stand, a box, etc" worth 50 pounds.[3]

Of course, in many ways, the gentry were not only buying books because it was a reflection of their own education and religious interests, but they were also mirroring the behavior of their social betters, the nobility. Collecting books in the upper echelons was somewhat different than it was in the gentry, merchant, and lower classes, as dictated by income. Often, the very wealthiest book buyers would participate in a subscription, with guaranteed buyers pledging their purchases prior to printing. It is the wills of the wealthiest that explicitly document the ownership of books. Lettice Knollys, Countess of Leicester, had an inventory taken in 1634-35 which noted a number of books, including "2 testaments imbroyderd."[4] This rare indication in an inventory of the binding of a book, especially being embroidered, reflects the value of both the book and that binding.

Book ownership (as well as book production) focused primarily on religious works but that was not all encompassing, especially as the wealthy, gentry, and even the more affluent among the middling sort, expanded their libraries with a variety of books including herbals which were detailed compendiums of the cultivation and uses of plants. An important aspect of maintaining status in the gentry class was to own a large and impressive house with expansive grounds, including a variety of cultivated gardens. Tending these gardens with their variety of purposes required specialized knowledge

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[3] N. W. Alcock, *People at Home: Living in a Warwickshire Village, 1500-1800* (Chichester, Sussex: Phillimore, 1993), 73.
[4] J. O. H. Orchard, ed., *Ancient Inventories of Furniture, Pictures, Tapestry. Plate, Etc. Illustrative of the Domestic Manner of the English in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries. Selected from Inedited Manuscripts*, 1854, 10.,

which could be found in herbals. These books were quite common, frequently reprinted, and served the needs of both small gardeners as well as larger householders. Consequently, herbals became part of the publishing boom to fill the needs of newly affluent book owners. Crispijn van de Passes, John Gerard, and Nicholas Culpeper were among the many artists who produced extremely popular seventeenth century herbals which included detailed drawings of plants as well as descriptions of their growing cycle, medicinal and culinary uses, and botanical information.

Fig. 4a *Jardin Des Fleurs*, 1615. Crispijn van de Passe, Folger Shakespeare Library.

Fig. 4b. Reverse with visible holes indicating use with prick and pounce image transfer method.

The images in these herbals also served as inspiration and patterns for embroidery, as well as other decorative arts. Similar to needlework and emblem books, the pages of herbals sometimes show evidence of being used as a pattern. A common pattern transfer technique was the prick and pounce method, where the outline of the design was pricked with a stylus and then laid on the fabric and a fine dusting of charcoal was rubbed through the holes to leave a dot-to-dot design on the fabric. There are extant

books from the early modern period which show this tell-tale sign of pattern inspiration (fig. 4a, 4b).

The embroideries produced in this time period were strongly inspired by gardens and the flora, fauna, birds, and insects in them and herbals served as a resource for these designs. The embroidered binding example in this chapter owes its composition to this interest in gardens which is typical for this time period. Even a cursory examination of embroidered smocks and shirts, caps and coifs, sleeves and partlets, jackets and doublets and dresses, bed hangings and cushions, from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (and even later in some cases) show a predominance of floral motifs. And while many of these pieces were embroidered in studios by professionals, there were also a vast number of needlework pieces done in a domestic setting by the women of these affluent classes, particularly the gentry, who learned and practiced needlework as a function of femininity.

In her memoirs and religious reflections from the early seventeenth century, Lady Grace Mildmay writes that her governess was a model of womanhood: "religious, wise, and chaste, and all good virtues."[5] This woman directed Grace's education and when she saw that Grace was idle, she would assign her activities like writing, math, reading, "and other times set me to sing Psalms & sometimes set me to some curious work for she was an excellent workwoman in all kinds of needle work, & most curiously she would perform."[6] The term "curious work" refers specifically to decorative embroidery. The

[5] Randall Martin, "Lady Grace Mildmay," *Renaissance and Reformation* 18, no. 1 (1994): 45.
[6] Randall Martin, 47.

combination of religion and needlework that was central to Lady Mildmay's upbringing was the foundation of womanhood in the early modern era in England. Needlework was a part of life that almost no woman could escape across almost all socio-economic groups. As soon as they could hold a needle, girls were set to work on simple hems, moving up to clothing, and depending on their class and the needs of their family, samplers, cushions, and eventually works of art, specifically for the affluent and the elite like the nobility and the gentry classes. Indeed, the overlap of religious devotion, piety, womanliness, industry, and needlework is emphasized in many contemporary writings and images.

Even when they had ultimate control over their lives, which very few women did, they still performed needlework as proof of their value as women. Elizabeth I, the pinnacle of her society and government, unmarried and with no children, continued to do embroidery even after she ascended to the throne. The few women who wrote during this time period mentioned needlework as an important activity of their lives: Lady Anne Clifford, Lady Margaret Hoby, Lady Grace Mildmay, Elizabeth Isham, all noble or gentry class ladies, discussed their needlework as a foundational part of their education as well as a daily activity.

It should be noted that needlework was a broad term and could encompass utilitarian sewing such as simple seaming for clothes creation, mending and darning, patching, and the functional marking of sheets and other linens for tracking and inventory, as well as the highly decorative and performative objects like embellished clothing including caps and coifs, jackets, petticoats, gloves, pictorials and caskets, and book bindings. Interestingly, while utilitarian embroidery was performed primarily by the

lower classes, the middling and laboring women, decorative embroidery spanned class differences, as will be discussed in chapter five.

Some modern researchers have attempted to define how these terms were used in this period. They argue that "needlework" referred to canvas work (stitching done on a piece of linen canvas with a relatively open weave using tent stitch or cross stitch, like the geometric design from chapter two), and "embroidery" referred to surface work (stitching done on a ground cloth with a tight weave, like silk satin or velvet like the book in this chapter). But there is also a general consensus that in the documentary record, especially in terms of women talking about their own activities, the act of stitching, no matter the ground cloth or stitch technique, is referred to as "work," the shortening of the term "needlework," with the past tense form as "wrought."[7]

Popular literature also uses this term: from Shakespeare's King John "I knit my handkercher about your brows (the best I had, a Princesse wrought it me").[8] From a travelogue published in 1687 "They wear this Cap with a Handkerchief of fine stuff, wrought with flowers of Gold and Silk."[9] In inventories, wills, and letters, objects are referred to as being "imbroidered" or described as "wrought with silk" or "wrought with gold" or "cleverly wrought." These examples from written documents indicate that the

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[7] Kathleen Staples, "Embroidered Furnishings: Questions Of Production and Usage," in *English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'twixt Art and Nature*, ed. Andrew Morall and Melinda Watt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 22-23.
[8] William Shakespeare, *The Life and Death of King John* (Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), Act 4, Scene 1.
[9] Jean de Thevenot, *The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant. In Three Parts Viz. Into. I. Turkey. II. Persia. III. The East-Indies / Newly Done out of French*, trans. Archibald Lovell (London: H. Clark, for H. Faithorne, J. Adamson, C. Skegnes, and T. Newborough, 1687), https://wellcomecollection.org/works/uxny8k3e, 168.

technique and ground cloth was less important than the existence of the stitching, no matter the technique. Indeed, this archaic term of "work" also applied to various forms of textile arts including spinning and weaving as well as sewing (which encompasses needlework and embroidery).

Fig.5 The Young Virgin, 1632-33. Francisco de Zurbarán. The Met Museum.

Working with a needle in a domestic sphere was an indicator of femininity, piety, industry, and morality. This painting of the Virgin Mary as a child (fig. 5) is an illustration of a medieval legend which held that, as a girl, she demonstrated her devotion through praying and sewing vestments. She is shown here at her needlework, wearing a shirt embellished with needlework, with a small book on the table next to her which would presumably be a bible. These objects all associate embroidery with piety, holiness,

and femininity. In this painting, the Virgin is seated on a low stool with her work basket nearby. This was the typical way women were depicted doing needlework by male artists and illustrators, so much so that simply showing a work basket or low stool in an image would imply that a woman was nearby, and that she was industrious, moral, and pious.

Fig. 6 St. Joseph and the Christ child. Claudio Coello, 1666. Toledo Museum of Art.

Even as a mother, the Virgin Mary was unable to escape the needle, as we see in this depiction of the Holy Family, with Mary relegated to the background at work (fig. 6). Again, Mary is seated low to the ground with a workbasket nearby.[10]

[10] Women seated on low stools working with their needle, especially in doing construction work like seaming but also more decorative embroidery, is relatively common and can be seen in medieval

Needlework was so integral to a woman's life and identity that the term "housewife" became synonymous with a small pouch or rolled case for storing needles, thread, and other tools. This did not mean that all women loved doing this type of work, but it did mean that almost all women did some form of it at some point in their lives. Mary Stewart, Queen of Scots, was an industrious needleworker, first as a princess in France, then as Queen of Scotland, and finally during her captivity in England. Nicholas White, a representative of Lord Burghley, Queen Elizabeth's chief councilor, visited Mary Stewart during her first year of incarceration. White reported that Mary told him that "all day she wrought with her needle and that the diversity of the colors made the work seem less tedious."[11] She designed, oversaw production of, and directly embroidered a vast number of pieces while in Lord Shrewsbury's custody and he wrote to the council that Mary daily "resorts to my wife's chamber, where with Lady Leviston and Mistress Seton, she sits devising work."[12] These very popular anecdotes about Mary Stewart could speak to her industry, her innocence (or the appearance thereof), and her femininity. As noted above, Mary Stewart's needlework was entirely decorative. Any utilitarian sewing of sheets or simple clothing would have been done by the women and girls of the household, lower down the socio-economic scale.

Because needlework was so important to the concept of femininity, it was a key aspect of a girl's education. In her memoir, Ann, Lady Fanshawe wrote that "now it is necessary to say something of my mother's education of me, which was with all the

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illustrations as well as early modern images.

[11] Susan Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England*, Material Texts (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 55.

[12] Frye, 58.

advantages that time afforded, both for working all sorts of fine works with my needle, and learning French, singing, [the] lute, the virginals, and dancing."[13] As mentioned earlier, Lady Grace Mildmay similarly wrote about her education with needlework as a key component of it, which inspired Grace for the rest of her life. She wrote that "Also every daye I spent some time in works of mine own invention without sample of drawing or pattern before me for carpet or Cushion work."[14]

In the historiography dealing with early modern needlework, there is either a lack of discussion of the type of needlework done at different classes or a generalized statement that needlework was only executed by the wealthy and privileged: "To be able to afford the materials and to have the *leisure* to use them was the privilege of women from the upper, wealthier echelons of society: a tiny minority of the population."[15] But this is simply not true. In one court case from 1614, Katherine Furlonger, a laborer's wife, was accused of stealing bone lace at a fair, even though Katherine insisted she lawfully bought the lace to trim some linen clothes for her child and herself. This illustrates that even someone classified as "rural poor," or laborer, would have had access to a measure of lace for decoration, even if she did nott make it herself.[16] More recent work has been done on women and their work in seventeenth century London, demonstrating that girls were apprenticed to learn fine sewing skills beyond simple seams

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[13] Ann, Lady Fanshawe, "The Memoirs of Ann, Lady Fanshawe, Wife of Sir Richard Fanshawe, Bart., 1600-72, Reprinted from the Original MS. in the Possession of Mr. Evelyn John Fanshawe of Parsloes : Fanshawe, Anne Harrison, Lady, 1625-1680, 22.
[14] Randall Martin, "Lady Grace Mildmay," 45-47.
[15] Carol Humphrey, "The Story of a Collection," in *Common Thread/Common Ground* (Wisconsin, USA: The Scarlet Letter, 2001), 6.
[16] Danae Tankard, "'A Pair of Grass-Green Woollen Stockings': The Clothing of the Rural Poor in Seventeenth-Century Sussex," *Textile History* 43, no. 1 (May 2012): 11.

and hems, including skilled techniques with stitches like white work, black work, and needle lace. Girls and women in these lower classes learned these skills with the goal of economic remuneration.[17]

In the late seventeenth century, when Quaker schools were established in and around London and taught a curriculum of needlework, it became much easier to identify work coming out of those environments because similar patterns and designs were used. Additionally, when discussing samplers, those are primarily done domestically as a part of an educational experience. But other than those specific instances, it can be difficult to determine whether an embroidery was done professionally or domestically, or at what socio-economic level if not done professionally. The difficulty comes when assessing smaller works like caps and coifs, pictorials, cushions, and book bindings because the scale of these objects make domestic production likely. Even larger scale objects like bed coverings were not outside of domestic production. The only feasible way to make a guess at who did the needlework is by assessing the quality of the work itself. Even then, it is only the most extreme ends of lowest and highest quality that lend themselves to making a supposition of the skill of the worker and, possibly, their situation. Some embroidered bindings (and other types of needlework) can exhibit such a profusion of high-quality metal thread and an extremely accomplished level of execution of needlework that assuming professional production may be the most realistic option.

[17] Laura Gowing, *Ingenious Trade: Women and Work in Seventeenth-Century London* (Cambridge (GB): Cambridge University Press, 2022), 161.

Alternatively, some embroidered bindings can be so simple in their design, and their technique so inexpert as to point to an early-stage domestic embroiderer. This is not to shame anyone or value one level or accomplishment over another. Rather, being able to make at least an estimate of high or low quality allows the humanity of the maker to be added back into the overall evaluation of embroidery in general, bindings in particular. Many scholars in the field of book binding write that "the great majority of the embroidered bindings of this period, however, were undoubtedly professional work."[18] This is an interesting supposition based solely on the evaluation of the needlework because there are almost no extant documentary records about the creation and sale of embroidered bindings. And yet, domestic embroiderers can and did hone their skills to create extremely accomplished work. To assume that the majority of embroidered bindings were not done by "amateur" women working in their homes is to dismiss their skill, time, and efforts. And while some professional embroiderers were women, the studios, the businesses, and the Broderers' Guild were run and dominated by men. Undoubtedly some of the embroidered bindings were professional, some domestic, and how to categorize that is extremely difficult.

The book binding in this chapter is one such situation. The stitching is extremely accomplished, the long-and-short stitches blending the colors on the flower's leaves is precise, controlled, and even. The silk threads are, as stated at the beginning, bright and vibrant and of such a good quality that they have remained that way with very little

[18] Howard M. Nixon and Mirjam Foot, *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*, Rev. ed (Oxford [England]; Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1992), 54-55.

fading over time. These elements could just as easily point to a very adept and practiced domestic stitcher as a professional one. There is no simple way to determine with complete accuracy.

Whether or not any specific embroidered binding was professional or domestic, it still reflected a girl's education and the expectations of a woman's behavior in early modern England, particularly of the upper classes, the nobility and the gentry, who did not have to work outside the home for an income. And this became an ideal and standard for those who were upwardly mobile to emulate as they gained wealth and vied for more status.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE GEOMETRIC MOTIF

Fig. 1 *The Sanctuarie of a Troubled Soule*, 1601, Huntington Library.

Fig. 2 *The Perfect Pathway to Salvation,* 1603, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

In Oxford University's Bodleian library is a seventeenth century Bible with an embroidered cover owned by Lady Finch. She inscribed her name in her book to denote her ownership and mark this book's importance to her, as many of us still do today. As a member of the nobility, Lady Finch was undoubtedly part of the elite and owning a book, especially an embroidered book, was a part of presenting her personal image as a woman of importance.

At the Houghton Rare Books Library at Harvard University is an English bible owned by Mistress Dorothy Slingsby. She wrote not only her name but, later, inscribed another note that she gifted this book to Mistress Frances Coke in 1654. Both of these

women use the honorific “mistress,” a term meaning a woman who was in charge of a household, who directed the work of other people, and was a counterpart to the male “master,” meaning householder. A “mistress” might have been part of the gentry or even part of the middling sort who were more affluent, but by no means in noble circles.

In the British Library is a seventeenth century Book of Common Prayer where a young woman wrote on the front and back pages, “Sarah Annison her Book given me by Mis Anne Wite Manclarks,” to claim her possession. Sarah does not give herself an honorific but applies “miss” to Anne Manclarks. “Miss” was just beginning to be used in the seventeenth century to signify an unmarried woman with no higher title. Neither Sarah nor Anne had claims to the nobility but were part of this new category of young, unmarried women. They might have been from the middling sort who looked to the elite classes for guidance on how to behave respectably. In this case, this meant reading and gifting devotional books with distinctive embroidered bindings.

These books were all owned and claimed proudly by women who, regardless of class, would most likely have had no access to their own books a scant one hundred years prior. These books were mass produced and, because of that, can be viewed as somewhat generic. Their embroidered bindings mark them out as special since very few of those exist today, but they are even more unique because they were claimed and are no longer an anonymously owned text. Importantly, two of these examples were owned by women who were not part of the nobility, but came from more modest backgrounds.

England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the widespread dissemination of mass-produced books, chapbooks, and even single printed sheets which

drove down prices and allowed a far greater range of people along the socio-economic scale to access these texts. Though the majority of books were religious in nature, presses also printed a wide range of texts including almanacs, classics, histories, educational texts with ABCs, and needle work pattern books. This new market reflected an increasing desire by the middling sort who were interested in rising in the world, bettering their status, and following the example of the gentry and nobility. This desire was reflected in their interest in book ownership and domestic needlework. Repeating patterns of geometric designs, found in pattern books, were relatively simple techniques to learn and practice in a domestic setting, as seen in the two books in this chapter. These embroidered motifs attest to the diffuse distribution and popularity of these patterns as well as the availability and utilization of this type of needlework beyond just the elite classes.

The two books also include inscriptions which mark them out as different from most other books with embroidered bindings. They have several commonalities: they are both devotional writings but not the Bible, Book of Common Prayer, or the Psalms; they are both about the same physical size, trigesimo-segundo, at 5 inches by 3 inches; they were both executed in a geometric, repeating pattern in a counted work technique; and they both have hand written notes on their front cover or page. But the first book's (fig. 1) inscription is a personal note with an endearing sentiment signifying an important relationship between two women, while the second book's (fig. 2) information is an addition by a later owner who was not trying to assert ownership or record a personal relationship but was attempting, incorrectly, to attest to a creator. That difference in their

inscription offers a unique insight into what varied places these embroidered bindings occupied in terms of personal and historical ownership.

The first book to examine is *The Sanctuarie of a Troubled Soule*, published in 1601. Though most books with embroidered bindings were the Bible or the Psalms, this was a meditation on the nature of sin and the sacrifice of Jesus to combat that sin. Devotional writings other than the Bible, Psalms, or Book of Common Prayer, which expanded the readers' options of reading material while staying within the popular topic of religion, were also embellished with decorative needlework bindings. The size of this book represents the tendency to print devotionals in smaller and smaller sizes throughout the first part of the seventeenth century until they became so small as to be almost illegible. The size of this book is still practical for reading but small enough to be easily portable and hand-held, as well as being less expensive than the large display copies meant for use in the home.

The needlework was done in a style called canvas work or counted work since it was executed on an even-weave linen canvas ground cloth. The diagonal, winding red and blue lines are executed by counting so many threads over, and so many threads down, following a printed pattern on a reference sheet or chart instead of having the design painted on the surface of the material being embroidered. The technique is cross stitch, one of the simplest and oldest decorative stitches, dating from as early as the thirteenth century CE, with evidence of use in places as widespread as Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the Americas. In fact, it is such an easily taught and learned stitch (one thread laid down diagonally with another diagonal thread at right angle to the first), that

it is still extremely popular today and included in a variety of kits sold from the easiest beginner level to the most elaborate requiring advanced skills in design, counting, and thread management.

Even though cross stitch is a relatively easy technique to learn and execute, this design would have required attention and skill, as well as a significant amount of time (although the time varies depending on the skill and practice of the stitcher). The embroiderer not only worked alternating rows of the sinuous lines in red and blue and the background in yellow, but also included additional cross details in green and outlined the sinuous red and blue lines in black, taking additional time with her work to add additional visual details. It represents hours spent by a girl or woman sitting in a room with enough light to see, with silk threads, ground cloth, and a needle to work, and a book already owned to dictate dimensions. This embroiderer chose to spend their time stitching instead of at other work because it was a valuable and (hopefully) an enjoyable experience. They would have been praised for their industry and, by extended relationship to the religious book, their piety. This girl or woman working at this needlework would likely have been doing her work in company with other girls or women of her household doing similar projects, talking, or perhaps being read to.

Lady Ann Clifford wrote in her diary that while she was at her work, the Bible and Ovid's Metamorphosis were read to her.[1] Working on these embroidered bindings represented hours of industry as well as individual piety, and the very real possibility of a

[1] Anne Clifford Herbert Pembroke and D. J. H. Clifford, *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub, 2003), 52, 82.

group activity with a shared experience of hearing religious or humanist works read aloud. The cover bears witness to an experience beyond the relatively simple mechanics of the embroidery to the community of women, the transferring of knowledge and skill through generations, and the education and expansion of ideas.

There is very little overall wear, soiling, or color degradation, though a significant portion of the black threads that outline the red and blue lines have worn away. This is typical for black threads in this period because a common mordant for black thread was iron which, over time, makes the silk thread brittle and causes it to shatter.

Fig. 3 Detail of cover with black thread worn away.

Embroidered book bindings were almost always custom made for each book as evidenced by the stitching which stopped just inside the front and back cover, and this book is an example of that. The only place where the design wraps around the cover to

the inside is on the bottom left corner of the back page. This was obviously a slight miscalculation of the exact measurements which is only visible because the end page that would have been pasted down to cover the ground cloth wrapped over the edge is missing. The simpler design and the slight misalignment of the embroidery over the cover points to this most likely being a domestically stitched and applied binding cover (fig. 4).

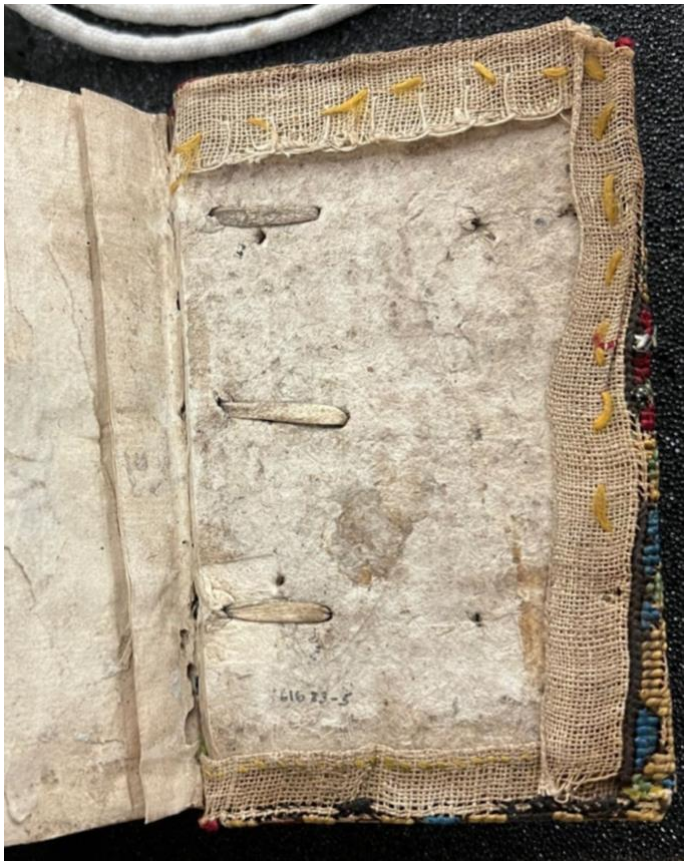

Fig. 4 Interior back cover.

The most personal component of this book is the inscription “Elizabeth Denny/her Booke given her/by her Deare Mother/the 1st Janu: 1695”. This type of inscription is not rare and, like the other inscriptions discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it asserts ownership and a relationship of gifting. This inscription is the only one included in this

book, but other inscribed books sometimes include a list of owners with the dates indicating different generations over time. The book owned by Dorothy Slingsby and then gifted to Frances Coke mentioned at the beginning of this chapter has additional inscriptions on the following page starting with just a single name Phillipa Pole, followed by the next line "To Edward Beresford," then "To Parker Beresford," and finally the last notation "To Judith Beresford/AD 1840."

All these lines were written in different hands, some with dates and some without. They track the ownership of this book through several different families without explicit clues to their relationships (friends? cousins?), which leaves a mystery about these owners. But, without a doubt, the inscriptions attest that these types of books were valued enough to claim ownership, to be preserved, and passed on. Each owner would have looked back at the previous inscriptions and either have known that earlier writer and been reminded of them, or, like us, find the name a mystery. Either way, the immediacy of prior generations and the books' longevity was reinforced through those markings.

It is interesting that this inscription is dated almost a hundred years after the publishing date of the book in 1601. Because embroidered book bindings were at the height of their fashion in the early seventeenth century, 1620s through 1640s, it is possible that the binding was done concurrently with the book's publish date, or at least within a few years. It might then have been passed down and it was only once it reached Elizabeth Denny that the owner felt motivated to write their name. It is also possible that the embroidered binding could have been added to the book years after it was printed. The bindings and the book have their own lives which, at some point, come together to

create an enhanced object but those individual journeys are not documented. Without that provenance, it is impossible to determine when and how these parts come together.

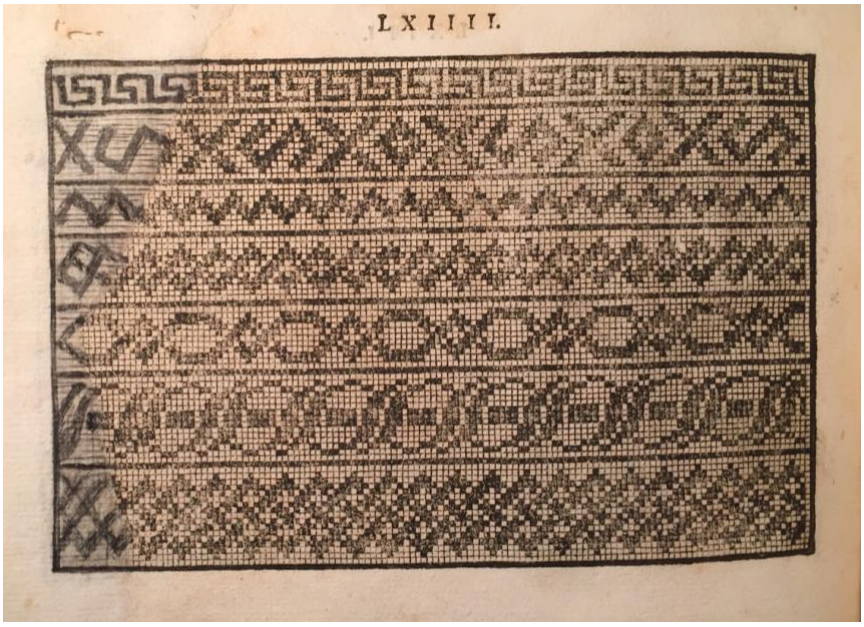


Fig. 5 Counted work pattern from La Vera Perfettione, 1591.

There are many extant needlework pattern books which depict these types of counted work patterns, with the Metropolitan Museum in New York holding an extensive collection. Many of these pattern books were initially printed in Italy, Germany, France, and the Netherlands, and imported into England.[2] *La Vera Perfettione Del DiSegno di Varie Forti di Ricami,* translated as *The True Design Perfection of Various Styles of Embroidery*, (fig.5) is a perfect example of a pattern book consisting of needlework designs for a variety of techniques including surface work, strapwork, narrative designs,

[2] Femke Speelberg, *"Fashion & Virtue: Textile Patterns and the Print Revolution, 1520–1620" The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, v. 73, No. 2 (Fall, 2015)* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 20.

alphabets, reticella whitework, and counted work with variations of the “s” or sinuously winding lines design.

These various designs represented a range of possible applications which could be followed exactly or used as inspiration, with the needleworker using their individual creativity to modify elements, change scale, combine different motifs from various patterns, and select the ground cloth, type of thread, and color used to express both their technical expertise (or lack thereof), as well their individual creativity.

Fig. 6 Ein neue kunstlich modelbuech. Peter Quentel, 1544.

Many pattern books were often reprinted with the same cover illustration depicting women working textiles in the language of the country in which they were being reproduced (fig. 6). This demonstrates that even though some professional embroiderers were men, needlework was considered a highly gendered activity. In fact, the English embroidery pattern book by Richard Taylor, *The Needle’s Excellency*, begins with an extensive poem extolling the virtues of needlework, giving examples of the women who practiced this art including Catherine of Aragon, her daughter Mary Tudor, Queen Elizabeth I, and Lady Mary, Countess of Pembroke.

This list of famous and powerful women who are praised for their needlework excludes one very important woman, Mary Queen of Scots. This was an interesting choice since *The Needle's Excellency* was published in England in 1631, well within the reign of Charles II, whose grandmother was Mary Stewart, Queen of Scots. Since she had a rivalry with Queen Elizabeth I, and a distant and somewhat adversarial relationship with her son, James VI of Scotland and I of England, is it possible that her problematic relationship with the monarchs of England led to being written out of this history of great needlewomen? This suggests that needlework could be quite political.

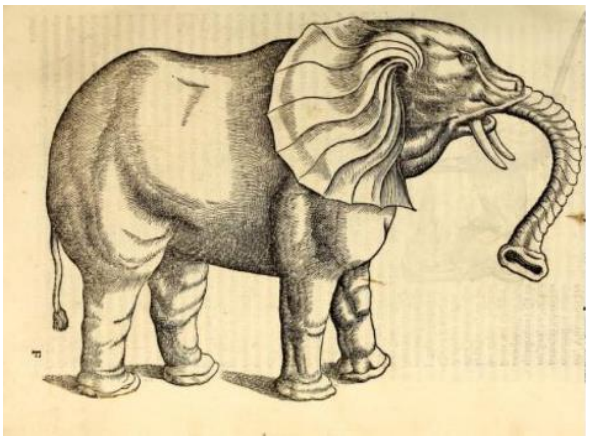

Fig. 7a Elephant. *Historiae Animalium 1551-1558.* Conrad Gessner.

Fig.7b. Elephant, Marian Hangings. Approx. 1570. Victoria and Albert Museum.

Regardless of that exclusion, Mary Queen of Scots was a famous needleworker and utilized a variety of books for her patterns, not just those with geometric patterns. Based on the collection of existing needlework attributed to her, she especially used natural history books for her inspiration, taking designs directly from the illustrations in Conrad Gessner's *Historiae Animalium*, published in four volumes between 1551 and 1558. Gessner's elephant (fig. 7a) was replicated in canvas work by Mary Stewart and her companions during her incarceration in England (fig.7b). In fact, Mary Stewart and

her jailer's wife, Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury, produced a significant number of embroideries during their time together (1569-1571) as discussed in chapter two, with most of the patterns from Gessner. This natural history was so popular that it was subsequently used by English author Edward Topsell in the early seventeenth century for his natural history publication.

Fig. 8a *Minerva Britanna*, Henry Peacham, 1612.

Fig. 8b Detail from 17c Cabinet, Fitzwilliam Museum.


Fig. 9a A Collection of Emblems, Ancient and Moderne. George Withers, 1635.

Fig. 9b Detail from 17th century Cabinet, Fitzwilliam Museum.

The embroidery aesthetic of the early modern era in England did not emphasize novelty, rather it relied heavily on a vocabulary of emblematic images intended to communicate clearly with the reader. This was understandable given the reliance on well-known emblems in illustrations, and even personal devices. Emblem books such as George Wither's 1635 *A Collection of Emblemes, Ancient and Moderne,* or Henry Peacham's 1612 *Minerva Britanna: A Garden of Heroical Devices,* show common images that were reproduced in a variety of mediums and represented well-known meanings. Images could be worked in embroidery either exactly and literally, as in the example of the deer in the illustration and in the needlework (fig.8a and b) or provide an inspiration, as with the image of the salamander withstanding fire on both the emblem and embroidery (fig. 9a and b).

The fact that these books spread so widely was only possible because of the expanding ownership of books of all types. Books were no longer only accessible to the wealthy, the upper classes, or even just the gentry. The middling sort, merchants, and successful yeoman and farmers were able to live a more affluent lifestyle and buy their own books because they were being produced in greater numbers and became far more affordable after the 1500s.[3]

Book ownership expanded to even include humbler families in rural villages.[4] Surviving sixteenth century wills and inventories give a glimpse of the possessions of yeoman, husbandmen, and tradesmen in the early modern era. Many of these documents

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[3] Gregory Clark, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous: Living Costs of the Rich versus the Poor in England, 1209-1869," n.d., 45-46.
[4] David Pearson, *English Bookbinding Styles, 1450-1800: A Handbook* (London : New Castle, DE: British Library ; Oak Knoll Press, 2005), 51.

attested to prosperous households of the middling sort and laborers with valuable goods like silver candlesticks, beds, farms, and chattel, and noted the bequeathing of large sums of money in the tens or hundreds of pounds. Furniture, clothes, and household goods dominated the inventories, but when books were included in these wills, they are religious in nature, most frequently the Bible and other devotional works.[5] George Driver's will, dated August 1620, noted among sums of money, horses and cows, bed steads and other household items, to "son George Drive, a bible and gun." Widow Alice Berrie bequeathed to her kinswoman Agnes her "best red petticoat, mortar and pestle, & little bible" as might be appropriate for a woman. Alice then gave to Thomas Rose "the Book of Acts and Monuments of Mr. Fox," a very popular Protestant book of history and martyrs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[6] One copy of a devotional called *A Soules Examination* was owned by a member of a rural laboring family and was inscribed with several owner's names within the book, as we saw with Lady Finch and Sarah Annison. Book ownership, by the seventeenth century, was not a rarity but became a widespread fact benefitting from technical, economic, religious, social, and political changes.

One of the reasons more people were buying books was because literacy rates were rising and the gentry, merchant, tradesmen, and affluent laboring classes all benefited from this change. Prior to this point in history, literacy was a rare and often an

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[5] It is possible that other printed materials would have been owned by the deceased but were of such insignificant value like small chapbooks or cheap single pages and other ephemera they wouldn't have been important enough to list in the will. These types of cheaper prints would have eventually ended up as waste. Of course, this type of downcycling would never have happened to religious texts.

[6] Marion E. Allen, *Wills of the Archdeaconry of Suffolk, 1620-1624*, Suffolk Records Society, v. 31 (Woodbridge, Suffolk ; Wolfeboro, N.H: Boydell Press, 1989), 86, 87, 88.

unnecessary skill. In Europe during the medieval period, it was only exercised by a small number of clergy and an even smaller number of the nobility. The introduction of the printing press into England flooded the market with books, pamphlets, chapbooks, and single pages that were intended to be read. Therefore, people needed to learn how to read to access this new source of information. The expectations of education changed and added an entirely new skill set into the history of humanity: literacy.

Of course, literacy is a learned skill and in the seventeenth century it was not universal. Evaluating the literacy rates in England in this time period is a subject of a great deal of work. Indeed, it is acknowledged that there is no direct way to determine cultural literacy rates and only reasonable suppositions can be made.[7] Several different strategies have been proposed and evaluated, including tracking signatures or marks on legal attestations. While a real consideration of literacy rates is outside the scope of this discussion, a rough estimate can be helpful. Unsurprisingly, clergy and professionals had a very high rate of literacy given their vocations, the gentry class were up to 98% literate, yeoman may have been 65% literate, and tradesmen and craftsmen 56% literate.[8] These estimates also range by gender as well as proximity to urban centers.

What is most important for this discussion was the ability to read fluently and understand texts like the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer, given the primacy of Protestantism as the state religion in England during the late sixteenth and early

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[7] David Cressy, "Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530–1730," *The Historical Journal* 20, no. 1 (March 1977): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00010918, 2.

[8] Cressy, 5. It is interesting to note that within the tradesmen group, according to Cressy the most literate were merchants, grocers, and haberdashers. And it was haberdashers who were one of the first groups to get involved in the printing trade in the fifteenth century, eventually causing friction with the Stationer's Guild and being inducted into the Guild as a way to alleviate questions of right to printing.

seventeenth centuries. This level of literacy was more concentrated at the affluent end of society, for both men and women. Of course, people of the middling sort, merchants and even yeomen's children, were being educated in greater degrees than before with the goal of working with, and sometimes eventually joining, the gentry class. These were the people who would have regular contact with books and were expected to write, if not letters, then receipt books and household accounts. Literacy was a sign of good education and upward social mobility, just as embroidery was a skill reflective of womanly modesty and piety as we will explore in chapter five.

Another reason for the increased the accessibility of books was due to the expansion of the printing trade in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which put more books on the market and drove prices down dramatically. According to one study tracking living costs and comparing rich versus poor from 1209 to 1869, "the estimated price of a standard page of text in the Middle Ages was 50 times the price in 1700-59."[9] Prior to the mechanization of production with the moveable type printing press, books were hand copied, and the cost of that labor was reflected in the price of the text. The decline in book production costs was also impacted by switching to paper from parchment and vellum, the main materials used in book production prior to the printing press. The moveable type printing press, using paper instead of costly parchment made from animal skins, increased the sheer number of books produced at one time, further driving down the per unit cost.

[9] Clark, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous: Living Costs of the Rich versus the Poor in England, 1209-1869." 8.

Finally, books were offered in a variety of sizes which assisted in their accessibility. Standards sizes, discussed in chapter one, ranged from folio, to the more common octavo, and down to the diminutive sexagesimo-quarto, as well as many other sizes in between.[10] It was these smaller sizes that were the most common for embroidered bindings. Some book sellers' inventories, including John Foster from York, noted the various sizes in their stock. When William Corbett, a stationer from Newcastle, died in 1626, a complete inventory was taken of his shop which included over a thousand books.[11] Following the standard of the time, Corbett's inventory included a significant number of religious books and included prices and some sizes. For instance, one entry included "Item: Book of psalmes" for 2 shillings, but with no size, and another entry for "Item: Nine bookes in decimo sexto" for 4 shillings, 6 pence. The size "deco sexto" referred to 4 inches by 6 inches, a common size for the smaller books with embroidered bindings. Other entries only noted "little" instead of a specific size. Could those be the even smaller sizes of 3 inches by 5 inches, or even 2 inches by 3 inches, quite common sizes of the extant embroidered bindings in collections today?

[10] "Book Sizes," accessed November 29, 2022, https://www.trussel.com/books/booksize.htm.
[11] Claire Boreham, "The Will and Inventory · William Corbett's Bookshop," accessed November 29, 2022, https://corbettsbookshop.omeka.net/collections/show/7.

Fig. 2 *The Perfect Pathway to Salvation,* 1603, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

The second book example in this chapter, *The Perfect Pathway to Salvation*, published in 1603, is another example of a devotional book of instructions on religious guidance. The frontispiece even notes that it "contains sundry prayers, very profitable for the godlie reader" and includes a quote from Psalm 77. This book is 4 inches by 3 inches and embroidered in a very typical geometric design of counted work on a linen canvas background. The design pattern is quite simple and consists of a series of small squares of four different colors of green, white, silver, and silver gilt in diagonal rows. The fourth row of silver gilt would have originally been contrasted with the silver-only squares, but because the gold has worn away and the base silver thread is so tarnished it is now difficult to distinguish except under magnification.

The silver and silver gilt squares were stitched in a zig zag pattern created by cutting small pieces of bullion (wire that was tightly coiled) and stitching those down piece by piece. The technique used in the white and green squares is modernly termed rice stitch, and executed in flat silk thread.[12] There is very little information about the names of the stitches used in the early modern period with the primary sources being John Taylor's poem in his pattern book *The Needle's Excellency* and Randle Holme's *Academy of Armory*.

It is understandable and perhaps even expected that Taylor would have included some information or names of stitches in a preamble poem included in his book of needlework patterns. But the information in the *Academy of Armory* is a little more remarkable. Randle Holme came from a family that was, for generations, genealogists and heralds and he wrote the *Academy of Armory* as a resource to help blazon coats of arms. This book documented a vast range of occupations and trades, as well as the tools and common terms used in those trades. Holme's efforts were extremely thorough and, possibly inadvertently, became an invaluable source for details of everyday life. For instance, in the case of the school-mistress, a humble occupation, Holme noted upwards of thirty-five specific stitches as well as a disclaimer that many other variations "cannot be described."[13]

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[12] This is a variation on the extremely common cross stitch which is simply two threads worked in short diagonal lines at right angles to each other. The rice stitch then adds even shorter stitches at right angles to the main cross stitch at the four corners.

[13] Randle Holme, *A Reprint of a Part of Book III of The Academy of Armory by Randle Holme ... Concerning the Art of Printing and Typefounding, 1688* (Menston, York: Scolar Press, 1972), 98.

Both Taylor's and Holme's books listed stitches but gave no description of how those stitches were made or any diagrams. Embroidery was not taught from books, rather it was taught from person to person with samplers or actual pieces of needlework as exemplars. It is only in the modern era that authors have attempted to draw diagrams of stitches. An exceedingly few women noted in their own writing what stitches they used on their projects. Elizabeth Isham writes in her diary: ""I did work of breadstich" (modernly called braid stitch) and "I wrot flowers in ten[s]tech" (tent stitch).[14] Lady Ann Clifford also writes in her diary "I made an end of my cushion of Irish Stitch."[15]

These stitches, breadstitch/braid stitch, tent stitch, and Irish stitch, were all mentioned in both Taylor and Holme, and are also associated with techniques that modern practitioners use. But there is no reference in Taylor, Holme, or other writing to rice stitch, a term which was first used in the twentieth century. Consequently, it is not possible at this time to identify what this stitch was called in the earlier eras. In fact, there were many stitches referenced by both Holme and Taylor that had names that are not in use today. For instance, both reference a "new stitch" as well as a "rosemary stitch" which are not in the lexicon of modern stitchers. This is not to say that these stitches do not exist; most likely they do and are referred to by a different name. Because needlework education was not formalized until later eras, these stitch techniques could conceivably have had a variety of names depending on situational differences including regional variations, domestic or professional settings, or local school curricula.

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[14] Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, "Isham Browser - 1609," accessed December 29, 2020, http://web.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/yr_Y1609.htm, 1625, 1633.
[15] Pembroke and Clifford, *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford*, 43.

In terms of wear on the binding on *The Path to Perfection Salvation*, there are several dark stains and soiling along the fore edges. There are also two holes in the cover where ribbons would have been but are now missing. But the most interesting aspect of this embroidered cover is how poorly bound it is on this particular book. The vast majority of other embroidered book bindings have a purposefully drawn design which were sized carefully to the measurements of the upper and lower boards (or the front and back cover). In these instances, the design and embroidery stop at the edge of the cover. Of course, there were occasional minor miscalculations or, in the case of re-bindings, the needlework was cut off the original binding and pasted on the new boards and no longer fits precisely. But in this instance the needlework does not end at the edge of the boards, rather the actual embroidery wraps around from the front cover to the interior. It is as if the embroiderer created one large piece of embroidery done with either another, differently sized book in mind and then fitted it to the smaller book, or completed the embroidery without any careful consideration of the precise measurement of this book. It would be easy to suppose that this embroidery was done for another purpose and then used on this book, except that the edges of the needlework end cleanly and do not show any sign of cutting or the unraveling that would cause. These details point to a very inexpert binder and possibly a domestic application.

This book also has an inscription, but it is not at all personal in nature. While other inscriptions indicate ownership or lines of gifting, this inscription states that it was "Bound by the Nuns of Little Gidding Huntingdonshire." This was most likely not a note that an owner would choose to write in their book, nor was it even likely that the "nuns"

or women at the religious community of Little Gidding would have worked on this at all. Yet, this remains a persistent concept that has been perpetuated about many embroidered bindings.

Little Gidding is a village where a small Anglican community was established in 1626 by Nicholas Ferrar, along with two of his siblings, and their extended families. It lasted until 1656 when the last of the original group passed away. One of the activities that the women of the group were known for was creating their "Great Harmonies." These were collages made from texts and engravings taken from printed Bibles, which the women then arranged to bring the four gospels into a single narrative structure. They reassembled the books and finished the text block with decorative bindings of tooled leather the women learned from a Cambridge woman who learned bookbinding from her father.

The community of women at Little Gidding produced a number of these creatively reassembled and bound gospels but there is no evidence of them having produced any embroidered book bindings. Yet, a handful of extant books with embroidered bindings have notations similar to this book claiming their origin with the "nuns" at Little Gidding.[16] It is possible this connection was made by antiquarians who were influenced by the timing of production (both the heyday of embroidered books and the Little Gidding community existed in the mid-seventeenth century), and associated the female-gendered activity of embroidery with the far less female activity of book binding.

[16] Whitney Anne Trettien, "Cut/Copy/Paste: Composing Devotion at Little Gidding" (Duke University, 2015), 89.

And while this attributional inscription is incorrect, it reflects the fact that an antiquarian, historian, or other researcher held this book, knew about the religious community, understood their unique qualities and made a connection, however erroneous. Unfortunately, this later notation gives credit to the wrong person, or generic group of (female) persons referred to as "nuns," and ignores the real effort of the original embroiderer.

The geometric motif of the books in this chapter speak to the widespread dissemination of pattern books and their popularity, as well as the expanding role of needlework and book ownership down the socio-economic scale. The stitching techniques used in these designs executed on the grid-like canvas ground cloth are some of the simplest, like the single up-down of tent stitch which builds to the cross stitch and then the rice stitch. Ultimately, these types of designs could be worked by beginners as well as experts and reflect a range of potential creators from the humble 8-year-old girl learning from her mother to an accomplished needlewoman like Mary, Queen of Scots. Whether or not these example books in this geometric design were from the middling sort, this simpler motif recognizes that this type of embroidery could be accomplished by a wider range of women and that needlework, even decorative needlework, was being executed by women lower down the socio-economic scale.

# CHAPTER FOUR: THE PICTORIAL MOTIF

Fig. 1 *Whole Book of Psalms*, 1634. Front and Back. Artist Unknown. British Library.

The walls of the medieval Pickering Church in Yorkshire are elaborately painted with murals of St. George and the Dragon (an emblem of England), the coronation of the Virgin Mary, the martyrdom of St. Thomas a Becket, and a particularly gruesome image of the Mouth of Hell, a flaming red dragon-like monster with a wide-open maw gobbling up the naked bodies of sinners; and these are just a few examples. Most, if not all, medieval English churches had similar paintings adorning their walls as a means of educating a largely illiterate population about bible stories, particularly useful when the Catholic mass was held in Latin, a language almost none of the laity understood. During the Reformation, churches all over England had their murals whitewashed or destroyed in a flurry of iconoclasm, along with other symbols of "high church" worship being stripped away like altars, relics, and even ornamented priests' vestments. With the rise of the

Protestant liturgy, the service was now held in English and the parishioners were encouraged to focus on the scripture. Some churches even painted Bible passages on the walls where the complicated, illustrative murals used to be.

Luckily for Pickering Church, later restoration efforts were able to remove the whitewashing and allow the medieval murals to grace the walls of the church once again, a process repeated in many churches throughout England. But imagine the massive transformation for the early modern church-goers who might have lived through the shocking change from densely painted walls telling the stories of the Old and New Testament to starkly plain white walls. Yet these images remained important to the populace, finding their way into illustrations in mass-produced Bibles which included images of King David or Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, as well as individual sheets illustrating scenes such as Susanna and the Elders or Christ Speaking to shepherds.

A vast amount of the material goods that adorned and enriched these churches taken away during this period of iconoclasm, were sold and ended up in the homes of wealthy people. The holdings of the church were extensive and the influx of these objects into domestic settings influenced the aesthetic for richly furnished interiors for the wealthy who could afford these objects. Elaborate plate, candlesticks, tables, chairs, caskets, and embroidered textiles with bold colors, silk, and metal thread were used in their original forms or melted down and recast, or cut down and remade into cushions and hangings. Going to church would have been an experience of an austere aesthetic contrasted with the increasingly elaborate home environment of the affluent elite.

Needleworkers, both professional and domestic, found inspiration in these repurposed church goods, as well as in printed engravings and book frontispieces for a variety of embroideries including book bindings. Biblical images found their way back to church on the covers of some books of common prayer, psalms, and other devotional books that would be carried to services. The convergence of significant cultural and social changes created an environment in which these embroidered bindings were made and used. Books were printed in mass quantities, making them widely available and affordable, and Protestantism encouraged book ownership and reading in order to connect directly to the scriptures instead of through an intercessor like a priest. These changes contributed to the rise in literacy rates as well as the spread of education. And these dramatic developments within England, across socio-economic classes, are reflected in the physical reality of embroidered book bindings.

Pictorial motifs on embroidered book bindings were intended to be the most representational of the actual content of the text. For instance, many copies of the Book of Psalms have embroidered images of King David. In a more secular example, Bacon's essays have a portrait of the Duke of Buckingham on the cover, who was a patron of Bacon's work and to whom the work was dedicated. Though that close relationship between the image and the text was not always so literal. Many devotional books may have allegorical characters like Faith, Hope, Plenty, or figures like Angels or unidentified queens and kings, or simply women and men on bindings covering these devotional texts.

The book highlighted in this chapter (fig. 1) is an interesting example of a religious image that does not quite fit the content. The text is the *Whole Booke of Davids Psalmes* published in 1634, but the images on the front and back covers are not from the Psalms, rather they are from the book of Genesis. The front (or upper) cover shows a scene of Jacob wrestling the Angel, and the back (or lower) cover shows Jacob dreaming of the ladder to Heaven. Both stories are from Genesis in the Old Testament, a popular theme in embroidered images in the seventeenth century.

This book is typical of the smaller sized books intended for carrying and personal use. The ground cloth is white silk satin, which was a common ground cloth for pictorial embroideries, and common for embroidered book bindings. The needlework is executed in polychrome flat silk with contrasting silk cord used to outline specific figures. The primary technique used are satin stitches which are threads laid next to each other to create fields of color. A variation on this stitch, called "long and short," is used to blend colors and is particularly noticeable in the hillocks at the bottom of the scene on both the front and back covers. There are also a few other stitches like stem stitch, couching, and knots. The skill used in this embroidery is of a moderate level, which could indicate domestic work. Any professional work produced at this level would point to a quickly produced, possibly less expensive object but this is questionable since, in the early modern economy, the materials, not the labor, tended to be the larger proportion of the expense of production of most material goods. This is a situation where documentary evidence such as detailed workshop inventories would help shed light on this domestic versus professional production but, to date, no information has been found.

Fig. 2 Detail of wear on the front cover

Overall, the needlework is in good condition though there are a few areas where the silk threads have worn away: one specific spot on the angel's dress on the upper board (or front cover) shows a single spot of deterioration where, when held, a thumb could have held the book when it was closed (fig. 2). Another area are Jacob's shoes which appear to have been black, a color more likely to shatter than other shades of thread as discussed in chapter three. The satin ground cloth does show areas of wear and disintegration where the warp threads (up and down directions) are worn away leaving only the weft threads (left and right direction) remaining. This is especially visible along the spine edges as well as a few areas on the front where, again, a hand might have held the book. The worn edges have been inexpertly reinforced with pink ribbon at some point in this object's lifecycle, though it is impossible to determine when. This repair indicates

that the owner was invested enough in this book to ensure that it did not degrade any further.

The fact that this binding is a figural representation, as opposed to the earlier floral, geometric, or armorial design motifs, highlights one of the key factors which contributed to the social context which made book ownership and, therefore, embroidered bindings possible and even popular: the relationship between the technical innovation of the printing press and the expansion of Protestantism. Even before William Caxton introduced the first printing press into England in 1476, the market for books was growing due to the expanding gentry class and their interest in purchasing manuscripts in the vernacular. This market was fed by efforts of studios where countless scriveners and limners hand copied and illustrated manuscripts.[1] But it was the technological innovation of the printing press, along with the expansion of Protestantism, which encouraged literacy and reading the Bible, that introduced a new opportunity for the book market to grow exponentially by making books more available and affordable.

Initially centered around St. Paul's Cathedral in London and publishing books focusing on the law and theology, by 1500 the book trade expanded to meet the interests of not only the gentry but also the growing middling sort (as discussed in chapter three).[2] After the printing press was established, printed offerings included not just books but also small, cheap options like ABCs and school texts for students, chapbooks and pamphlets with fiction and politics for the gentry, merchants, and the upwardly mobile, and

[1] James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 13.
[2] Raven, p. 15.

almanacs for landowners and farmers. But a full half of the print production was religious in nature: the Bible, Psalms, devotional works, and, when it was introduced in the mid-sixteenth century, the book of Common Prayer. The popularity of these texts, both secular instructional as well as religious, was due, at least in part, to the drive in Protestantism to be able to read scripture, rising literacy rates, and expanded schooling.[3]

The spread and dominance of Protestantism in England started in the mid-sixteenth century and, through a turbulent and often violent process, became the state religion by the end of that century. It was the rise of this reformed religion, along with the availability of printed materials, and the rise of literacy rates, that encouraged book reading and ownership. One of the primary tenets of Protestantism was the ability to read scripture, which necessitated literacy and book ownership. Martin Luther advocated for this direct relationship to scripture and translated the Bible into vernacular German so that "the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace" could understand the text.[4] Luther's message was clear to his contemporaries: one engraver in Germany depicted Luther holding a book which clearly reads "Scrutamini Scripturas," meaning let us read scripture, while being attacked by a griffin wearing the pope's tiara as a representation of the Catholic Church's negative and

[3] These devotional books, the Bible or just the New Testament, the Psalms, or the Book of Common Prayer, were so popular that they were handled by multiple printers as controlled by the Stationer's Guild. From dominant printers like Christopher Barker, and later his son Robert, who were printers to Queen Elizabeth I and her successor, King James VI and I, along with other notables including Bonham Norton and John Bill, to printers who were not even indicated on the frontispiece only including the noted "Printed for the Company of Stationer."

[4] Martin Luther, *Works of Martin Luther with Introduction and Notes*, vol 35, (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Company and Castle Press, 1915) p. 189.

violent response to Luther's ideas.[5] This provocative image illustrated the contrast between the Catholic tradition of the mass being held in Latin, limiting the Bible to the clergy, with the priest providing the only conduit between the people and God, versus the newly reformed ideas of the people themselves reading the Bible and accessing God directly through scripture.[6]

Fig 4. Dream of Jacob about a ladder. Lucas Cranach, 1523. Rijksmuseum.

Fig. 1 *Whole Book of Psalms*, 1634. Front and Back. Artist Unknown. British Library.

Luther's Bible, *Das Allte Testament deutsch*, included a woodcut by Lucas Cranach illustrating Jacob dreaming of the ladder to heaven (fig.4) which inspired an embroidered binding for the book in this chapter, printed over a hundred years later (fig

[5] Brian Cummings, "Luther and the Book: The Iconography of the 95 Theses," in *The Church and the Book: Papers Read at the 2000 Summer Meeting and the 2001 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*, Studies in Church History 38 (Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, N.Y, 2004), 222–32.
[6] Needless to say, this image in specific, and Luther's ideas in general were highly unpopular with the Catholic Church leadership, which lead to Luther's excommunication.

1).[7] Following Luther's idea of a vernacular bible, Henry VIII, in his break from the Catholic Church, ordered an English translation to be printed and distributed in 1539. In 1560, English Protestant scholars who had fled persecution from the English Catholic monarch Mary I, embarked on an English translation of the Bible. This version, the Geneva Bible,[8] became the primary bible of the sixteenth century English protestants before it was eventually replaced by the King James Bible, first published in 1611.

Of course, the relationship between the dissemination of religious ideas and an increase in literacy went hand in hand with the invention and spread of the moveable type printing press. All of these forces, Protestantism, printing presses, and the expansion of the book trade worked together to flood towns and villages with books in general, and most specifically religious books, especially the Bible. Protestantism, uniquely, strongly encouraged direct engagement with the scripture on a personal basis, making the physical objects of books themselves important and valuable to individuals and, in some cases, worthy of embellishment including embroidery.

According to the 1616 inventory of York bookbinder and book seller John Foster, religious and devotional books constituted the largest category of his total stock at 29%, with school books as the next largest group at 20%.[9] Between 1614 and 1618, London

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[7] As discussed in chapter two, needlework patterns and inspiration were drawn from many sources, including the religious texts themselves as in this case of the Cranach illustration of Jacob and the Ladder. Another example is a frontispiece to a Bible printed in 1638 by the printer Robert Barker, includes an image of King David kneeling holding a harp. The exact same design is executed on an embroidered binding on *From the Imitation of Christ* from the St. John's College, University of Cambridge.

[8] This version is called the Geneva Bible because it was translated into English and printed in Geneva, a republic in Switzerland which was a Protestant stronghold, by Protestant exiles fleeing the Counter Reformation then taking place in England under Mary I who was reinstituting Catholicism.

[9] John Barnard and Maureen Bell, *The Early Seventeenth-Century York Book Trade and John Foster's Inventory of 1616*, Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, Literary and Historical Section, vol. 24, pt. 2 (Leeds: Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, 1994), p. 25.

printers produced "356 distinct editions per year," (unique texts), and "a little over half of that output was religious material."[10] Publishing in the early part of the seventeenth century was "characterized by the production of huge quantities of officially approved editions such as the Bible, the Book of Common Prayer, and the metrical Psalms associated with Sternhold and Hopkins. But in the 1640s, owing to jealousies within the print trade and political turbulence, this production was either severely curtailed or brought to an abrupt end."[11]

While the Company of Stationers had a monopoly on printing and had kept a tight hold on the number of legal presses, books produced, and book sellers since the mid-sixteenth century[12] there is evidence that other enterprising merchants saw the value of combining needlework and text and pushed back on this monopoly, giving another documentary source for embroidered bindings. Mentioned in the first chapter, in 1638 Archbishop Laud received a petition protesting against a government decree which supported the Company of Stationers stating that only they could sell Bibles. The milliners and shopkeepers of the Royal Exchange submitted a petition to the Archbishop protesting this limitation and asserting their custom of selling "rare and curious covers of imbrothery and needleworke...wherein Bibles Testaments and Psalm Bookes of the best

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[10] David L. Gants, "A Quantitative Analysis of the London Book Trade 1614-1618," *Studies in Bibliography* 55, no. 1 (2002): 185–213, https://doi.org/10.1353/sib.2005.0004, p. 186-187.
[11] Ian Green and Kate Peters, "Religous Publishing in England 1640-1695," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p 67. Interestingly, there is a dramatic decline in the number of extant embroidered book bindings created after the 1640s. Could it be due, in part, to this decrease in printed materials? Of course, this was also concurrent with the English Civil War, the rise and dominance of Puritanism, as well as social, political, and economic upheaval, all of which leave less time for embroidery and fashion becomes focused in a different direction.
[12] Richard Gameson et al., eds., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 9.

sort and neatest print have been richly bound up for ye Nobility and gentry of this kingdome."[13]

There must have been a significant amount of crossover between the book sellers and professional embroiderers: the existence of so many needle-worked bindings attest to the production. There is, unfortunately, no way at present to elucidate this relationship in more detail given the lack of documentary sources. This could be due in no small part to the fact that the Broderers' Guild documents from this time period were destroyed in the Great Fire of London of 1666, which took place after embroidered book bindings went out of fashion. Of course, these bindings were only possible in a market which produced a vast number of texts priced at relatively little expense.

The most compelling intersection between piety and the industriousness of needlework was the embroidered book bindings themselves, which are found almost exclusively on devotional texts. These objects capture the importance of daily engagement with scripture, the performance of religious observance, the elevation of devotional works with carefully constructed and conspicuously decorated bindings, and the assertion of moral validity by women who were always under suspicion of being weaker, more corrupt, and easier to sin.

Who was educated and how that education was implemented changed dramatically in the early modern era in Europe, due in no small part to the Protestant movement. In Germany, Martin Luther advocated for the education of both men and

[13] Howard M. Nixon and Mirjam Foot, *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*, Rev. ed (Oxford [England] ; Oxford ; New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 7.

women, and of a wider range of social classes than had ever been proposed, solely for the purpose of reading scripture. While this more liberal thinking greatly impacted schools in Germany, the question of English education, and education for girls, was a subject of serious and extensive discussion, almost always by men. Schooling in England did expand in the early modern era beyond the medieval educational concepts of learning the occupation for the station to which you were born. Especially given the Protestant push to have most people engage directly with the scripture, petty schools for both boys and girls, and grammar schools (exclusively for boys) were established and supported making education accessible to those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale.[14]

Unfortunately, women were excluded from higher education, as well as the discussion about access to education, given the prevalent patriarchal and misogynistic bias. In fact, the question about whether women were good or bad, moral or immoral, rational or irrational, more inclined to piety or sin was widely debated by male humanists and theologians in the early modern period.[15] In the sixteenth century the Aristotelian concept that women were imperfect versions of men impacted the concepts around whether or not to educate women.[16] The biblical story of Adam and Eve only reinforced the idea that women were lesser than men, morally corrupt, responsible for the downfall of mankind, and therefore "reasonably" shut out of higher education concepts of

[14] Hirst, *England in Conflict, 1603-1660*.
[15] Merry E. Wiesner, "Beyond Women and the Family: Towards a Gender Analysis of the Reformation," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 18, no. 3 (1987): 311, https://doi.org/10.2307/2540718, p.311.
[16] Sharon Deborah Michalove, "O Chyldren! Geue Eare Your Duties to Learne: The Education of Upper-Class Englishwomen in Late Medieval and Early Modern England" (University of Illinois at Champagne-Urbana, 1996).

philosophy, mathematics, as well as public spaces and gatherings to discuss those things.[17]

Yet many male writers of the early modern period, including Juan Luis Vives, Thomas More, Erasmus, and Richard Braithwaite, advocated for some form of women's education. This was not due to any idea that women were the equal of men or deserving of the same education as men. The concept around educating women was that they needed *more* moral guidance rather than less since they were so corruptible, with the end goal of creating a pious, submissive, and industrious household manager who would raise religious and moral children.

The key aspects of this educational guidance for girls and women were reading, specifically religious and moral teachings as supported by the goals of Protestantism, and industrious activities like needlework. In fact, girls and women were encouraged to read devotional and religious works and to stay away from frivolous poems, fictions, and topics such as love. Writing in 1641, Richard Braithwaite advises in his guide *The English Gentlewoman*, that women should read texts "powerful to stir up devotion and fervour to prayer; others she reads, and those useful for direction of her household affairs. Herbals she peruseth, which she seconds with conference: and by degrees so improves her knowledge."[18]

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[17] Sara Heller Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[18] Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentleman; ; and The English Gentlewoman: : Both in One Volume Couched, and in One Modell Portrayed: To the Living Glory of Their Sexe, the Lasting Story of Their Worth. Being Presented to Present Times for Ornaments; Commended to Posterity for Presidents. With A Ladies Love-Lecture and a Supplement Lately Annexed, and Entituled The Turtles Triumph ...* (London, : Printed by Iohn Dawson., 1641), http://archive.org/details/englishgentleman00brat, 398. It is important to note that herbals, books which discussed botanical, medical, and culinary aspects of plants were

Women's education was not solely for her own moral edification, but was intended for her to instruct her children and the other female members of her household.[19] Juan Luis Vives wrote his own educational instructional manual to his patron, Queen Catherine of Aragon, and intended it to guide the education of her daughter, Mary Tudor, and declared "that a woman should not talk freely (or perhaps at all) in the company of men. Learning was for her own edification, for her young children, or for other women."[20] This decree is even more interesting when you consider that Vives was writing to a queen about a princess who would one day, undoubtedly, either be a queen through marriage or hold some other very exalted position in a future political family.[21]

The ownership of books, especially devotional or religious books, directly supported this goal in women's education. Mothers were expected to be their children's first educators and introduce them to the Bible and the Psalms even before reading or formal education began.[22] And group reading and catechising, the practice of teaching Christian doctrine through systematic questions and answers, was a regular practice in many households. Lady Margaret Hoby, Lady Anne Clifford, and other women wrote about how they would gather with other members of their household or visitors,

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encouraged for girls and women. These books provided information about areas of women's responsibilities which included food preparation as well as medical management. Additionally, herbals were a frequent source for embroidery patterns as discussed in chapter two.

[19] Sherrin Marshall, ed., *Women in Reformation and Counter-Reformation Europe: Public and Private Worlds* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[20] Gloria Kaufman, "Juan Luis Vives on the Education of Women," *Signs* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1978), p. 896.

[21] It is important to note that Vives was Catholic and did not adhere to the Protestant goal of encouraging people to read scripture, which makes his consideration of educating women at all, even in a limited way, somewhat progressive, though that should not be overstated.

[22] Michael Clancy, "Images of Ladies with Prayer Books: What Do They Signify?," in *The Church and the Book: Papers Read at the 2000 Summer Meeting and the 2001 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2004), p. 106.

oftentimes doing needlework, and have someone read to them. Lady Anne Clifford wrote in her diary "In the afternoon I wrought stitch work, and my Lord sat and read by me." And again "upon the 27th I spent my time in working and hearing Mr. Rose read the Bible."[23] Lady Margaret Hoby regularly instructed her entire household as well as individual members in her care about religion: "Then I meditated of the sermons, and read and spoke to Mrs. Ormstone of the chapter that was read in the morning." On Sunday the 19th, she noted that "til prayer time, I walked and after repetition went to bed." The term repetition referred to the gathering of the household to hear the day's sermon, teaching, and catechizing which was a common practice, especially for Puritans. On another date, she wrote "then I went to supper, after to prayers with the Household." And it was not just the women of her household but also of her neighborhood that Lady Hoby spiritually engaged with: "then I talked and read to some good wives." [24] These would have been women of a similar or lower class that would have come to visit Lady Margaret on a Sunday after church and were, hopefully, glad of both her company and her religious conversation. Lady Margaret also consistently noted that she prayed in the silence of her own room or "closet," as well as in the more public setting of her household. Like so many other activities, the practice of women reading aloud or listening to religious or devotional writings in Protestant households, influenced middle

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[23] D. J. H. Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (The History Press, 2011), p 53. While the more strictly religious lady who kept diaries like Lady Margaret Hoby only noted being read from religious texts, Lady Anne Clifford had a wider range of interests and noted other books being read to her including Ovid's Metamorphosis. So women did read wider than was intended for them by the male moralists at the time.
[24] Dorothy M. Meads, *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605* (London: George Routledge & Sons, LTD, 1930), p. 80, 65, 245, 82, 136.

class households which sought to increase their own social standing by following the lead of the more affluent.[25]

In addition to reading scripture or other religious works and educating their children about these concepts, women were advised to further their practice by following a regular or even daily process of religious contemplation and self-examination in both thought and writing. Of course, that applied to women of a certain social class who had the time in their day beyond physically demanding household tasks. Lady Margaret Hoby's diary is the perfect example of this recommendation. In September 1599, she wrote "After the sermon [at church] I meditated a little, and then I wrote out notes in my bible, and before supper, I prayed, and, after supper and examination, I went to bed." In July 1600, another entry noted that "I wrought and, lastly, I went to private examination and prayer."[26] Lady Hoby's diary attested to her daily and unremitting focus on religious matters, as well as chronicling her frequent time spent at needlework.

Elizabeth Isham was another woman who used her diary to record her most important activities which centered around religion and needlework. In 1618 Elizabeth wrote "I delighted in reading our Saviors' sermon in the mount mat[thew] and in desiring to do after it in some small measure, my God I praise thee…I wrot my f[ather] a hancreche" (meaning I made my father a needlework handkerchief).[27] And in a later entry "the first t[ime] that I aprehended at this time or gave heede to a sermon I thought was

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[25] Patrick Collinson, Arnold Hunt, and Alexandra Walsham, "Religious Publishing in England 1557-1640," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p 61.
[26] Meads, *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605, p. 132*.
[27] Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, "Isham Browser - 1609."

now when I heard this the Lord God Gen[esis] 2 - now lord as thou art over all, God as thou makest and doest all. I apprehended it with comfort or gladness."[28] But Elizabeth was not nearly as much of a purist in religious matters and daily life as Lady Hoby. She often noted that she enjoyed reading Chaucer, dancing and singing, and visiting friends and neighbors. These activities were truly recreational, as opposed to needlework which was industrious or reading scripture which was devotional.

While very few women kept diaries or journals or wrote memoirs during the early modern era, the act of women writing down important notes was growing more frequent as attested to by the existence of commonplace books. These were blank books used by both men and women to record a variety of information including religious quotes, poems, gardening plans, specific events, jokes, recipes, and a variety of other ideas. The commonplace books written by women demonstrate that they could and did record information that was important to them, and many of them include biblical passages or religious quotes from other writers. Lady Margaret Hoby notes "I walked and then came home and write of my Common place book."[29] Women lower down the socio-economic scale who were not able to keep a commonplace book were encouraged to incorporate daily prayer and singing Psalms into their lives.[30]

In fact, the act of engaging in daily religious activities and going so far as to write a commonplace book or record daily activities including religious contemplation, reading, and household employment was a part of the Protestant mindset of being

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[28] Centre for the Study of the Renaissance,.
[29] Meads, *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605*, p. 67.
[30] Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720*.

industrious and productive.[31] Women were urged to be modest and quiet, focus on their inner life and private sphere and at the same time interrogate their religious thoughts and actions. The act of self-examination encouraged women to develop an analytical perspective, to give credit to their own thoughts, and write down those ideas for further review and reflection. This created a tension between being self-effacing and self-assertive[32] and is an idea that Damaris Pearse addressed in her own writing as she lay ill and dying at age 20 in 1679. She noted that her writings were originally intended for private reading only and that she was only sharing her works publicly at the urging of other people. She wrote "This following Collection, which is now exposed to public view, was not at first so intended, but collected and composed for private use, which after a while coming to the view, and passing through so many private hands, not only of Relations and Acquaintance, but also of some that were strangers, who (all of them, as if by one consent) earnestly desired it might be Printed."[33] Damaris felt compelled to clarify from the beginning that her intention was always to remain private as was appropriate for a woman and she only shared her ideas in a public sphere at the insistence of her friends, family, and even strangers (though one wonders how did those strangers get a hold of her

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[31] Effie Botonaki, "Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen's Spiritual Diaries: Self-Examination, Covenanting, and Account Keeping," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30, no. 1 (1999): 3, https://doi.org/10.2307/2544896, p. 15-16.
[32] Botonaki, p. 3.
[33] Damaris Pearse, *A Present for Youth, and Example for the Aged, or, The Remains of Damaris Pearse: Containing Her Speech after She Kept Her Bed, and a Copy of a Written Paper, of Her Own Composing, Which She Left as Her Last Legacy to Her Brothers and Sisters, and Was the Last Thing That Ever She Wrote : And Also Several Pious Expressions, Occasionally Uttered in Her Last Sickness, Worth Minding : Together with Her Funeral-Sermon, Preached by a Reverend Minister of the Gospel.*, 2011, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A91558.0001.001.

writings in the first place). The point is that to have private contemplations about God and religion was admirable for a woman, to make those ideas public was suspect.

The concept of private and public spheres is not always so clear cut, as we see by Damaris's example. Almost all people lived in complex interrelated networks of friends and family, neighbors, and acquaintances. Many people lived under the same roof with households consisting of the husband and wife, their children, oftentimes other relatives especially women, and those serving the household, both laborers as well as higher born people "in service" to the family (people of similar or slightly lower socio-economic status learning how to behave and work in an affluent household in an apprenticeship of sorts). Lady Margaret Hoby often mentioned being "in public" for prayers, meaning within the house but with all the extended members of that group, and marked this as distinct from her own "private prayers," presumably while she was alone.

Fig 5. Ladies in a Garden Embroidering. Gervasius Fabricius (1603-1637).

The wives of these types of households were responsible for overseeing the education and daily tasks of women and girls in their care. This included learning how to run a household, direct servants, manage food, provide health care, needlework, and religious instructions. Oftentimes in larger establishments, children would be placed from related or nearby families of a lower social status to serve the household and learn these skills in a type of patronage relationship or apprenticeship. Girls in this type of service would be overseen by the older girls or women in the group, including the wife of the house, older women like unmarried or widowed aunts or cousins, or even older sisters or older girls also in service. Their relationships were hierarchical based on social status, marital status, and age. This illustration of a group of young women practicing various types of needle work, including a younger girl in the lower right observing their work, while being overseen by the older women dressed in black is an example of such an arrangement (fig. 5).

In this environment, women and girls would work together on tasks like embroidery, both plain and decorative, and often while being read to. Depending on the household, the reading would often be of a religious nature. Lady Margaret Hoby wrote of doing her needlework while being read to: “Then I wrought and h[e]ard Mr. Maude read of a sermon” and again “I wrought, hearing Mr. Rhodes read of a book against some new sprung up heresies.” While it was likely she was accompanied by some of the ladies or “maids” of her household when she was doing needle work, she explicitly mentioned her maids only a few times. “After I wrought and talked with my maids of good things...” In this case “good things,” to the puritan mind of Lady Margaret, meant

religion. And "after private prayers, I went about the house and wrought among my maids and heard one read of the Book of Martyrs."[34] It was Lady Margaret's responsibility to provide education to these girls and women, both needle work and religious readings would fall into that category.

We read earlier about Lady Anne Clifford doing her needlework while her husband read next to her. On another occasion, she also noted that she was read to from the Bible.[35] Women were continuing the work of not just reading and contemplating religious works, but also actively passing those ideas on to the female members of their household: "religious education supplied by private study and church attendance continued to deepen religious understanding" throughout a woman's life, even after any formal education ended.[36] This group activity created a culture of shared contemplation and learning in a private sphere which could easily become semi-private or even semi-public when other girls and women joined the household. When women attended church, prayer became a fully public activity, and when they carried embroidered prayer books with them in their hands or on girdles around their waists, their needlework became public as well.

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[34] Meads, *Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby 1599-1605, p. 88, 98. 140, 174.*
[35] Clifford, *Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford, p. 52.*
[36] Sharon Deborah Michalove, "O Chyldren! Geue Eare Your Duties to Learne: The Education of Upper-Class Englishwomen in Late Medieval and Early Modern England." p. 26.


Fig 6. 'A Good Housewife' 17th c pamphlet taken from Martine Van Elk.

The religious, devotional, and industrious aspect of needlework were all quite performative, especially when we consider that the "private" sphere of a domestic environment would be semi-private, especially in larger households. And for girls and women to be seen at their work would attest to their good moral qualities. In fact, during the interregnum period in England, Lord Cromwell's wife Elizabeth was "said to have maintained at her own expense six daughters of clergymen whom she constantly

employed at needlework."[37] This played out in contemporary iconography with images of the Good Housewife teaching her children to do their needlework (fig. 6).

This begs the question of the spiritual value of embroidery. When embroidery was done for the "correct" reasons, meaning for spiritual, selfless, adornment of the spiritual word, could it have been seen as a covenant with God? As a proof of moral worth and Protestant industry?[38] For some sects of the reformed religion, especially for Calvinists, being saved by God was never a matter of good works or performing moral righteousness, but being elected, or preordained as saved. In daily life, if you felt saved you already felt morally good and righteous and that feeling would inform your actions naturally. Could the act of needlework, especially embroidering devotional books, or choosing biblical scenes for needlework be considered an outward reflection of God's grace? In this way, was needlework both private and public? No matter what the motivation, needlework was an activity that almost every girl and woman, regardless of class, was expected to perform regularly.

Therefore, to perform the activity of embroidery on a design of a scene from the Old Testament, such as Jacob dreaming of the ladder to heaven or wrestling with the Angel as in the book in this chapter, was an act of industry and piety. The devotional text and the devotional embroidery made for a poignant partnership. Embroidered bindings of devotional books were at the intersection of a reformed religion which encouraged a personal relationship with scripture through reading and prayer and the explosion of

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[37] A.F. Kendrick, *English Needlework* (London: A&C Black LTD, 1933), p. 137.
[38] Botonaki, "Seventeenth-Century Englishwomen's Spiritual Diaries." p. 18.

domestic and professional needlework which embellished almost every surface. And the moveable type printing press, the extensive production of books in Europe, and the entire English book trade contributed to the explosion of books available to a wider range of people. This unique time in history when so many more books were accessible to a wider range of people, when those people had the additional resources of time and money to read and to do needlework, when needlework became widely popular, and when the new reformed religion urged all people, including women, to engage directly with scripture and text is the time in which embroidered book bindings flourished.

# CHAPTER FIVE: THE SYMMETRICAL MOTIF

Fig. 1 *A Comfortable Treatise, for the Reliefe of such as are afflicted in Conscience: revised the third time.* R. Linaker, 1620, British Library.

In the north of England, at the top of a promontory overlooking impossibly green and gently rolling hills is Hardwick Hall, a paean to Renaissance ideals of symmetry. This house, with its facade made almost entirely of windows, was built at the end of the sixteenth century by Elizabeth, Countess of Shrewsbury and is one of the earliest examples of the Renaissance style which celebrated balanced proportions, elegant

geometries, and above all, symmetry. Even the gateway leading to Hardwick Hall with its imposing central doorway is symmetrical in its layout and decorative details. Interestingly, this symmetry is complemented by the asymmetrical detail of "ES" for Elizabeth Shrewsbury, placed in the stone tracery at the top of the six towers around the building. That small detail calls attention to the otherwise unbroken balance of the architectural design.

Countess Elizabeth Shrewsbury, known more commonly as Bess of Hardwick after this building, was one of the wealthiest women of her age (second only to Queen Elizabeth I). She was at the very apex of society, undertook massive building projects, was involved in politics and an active and influential landlord, as well as a savvy business woman. She was famously known as an active needlewoman who supported large embroidery projects as well as employed professional draftsmen and needleworkers. Her textile activities created real economic value for her community while demonstrating that needlework was a key component of almost every girl's education. As a function of running a large household, Bess participated in group projects and oversaw the work of the girls and women who lived with her. Needlework was not just for the elite, but was an aspect of almost every girl's education, whether it was the decorative type used to embellish book bindings and caskets, or more functional sewing to create clothing. Additionally, needlework created economic value for women at different socio-economic levels. Women hired women to perform needlework by making household objects like pillowcases, as Lady Anne Clifford did of her neighbor Margaret Montgomery, or by making sewn objects like clothing and then selling those to buy books, as Damaris Pearse

did as a young woman. Studying needle worked objects such as embroidered book bindings is a way to examine these aspects of women's education and economic impact in the early modern era in the midst of the English Renaissance.

It is this quintessential Renaissance goal of balance and symmetry that defines the category of embroidered book design style "symmetrical," which is the focus of this chapter as characterized by the example book, *A Comfortable Treatise*, (fig. 1). Relatively small at 4 ½ by 3 inches, covered in what was once extremely rich materials of green velvet and silver or possibly silver gilt thread, this book demonstrates the harmony and balanced proportions of the design elements.

This final "symmetrical" design category of embroidered book binding is a fascinating and sometimes challenging category because the observer is often trained to look at the individual design elements and not at the entirety of the overall design and so the symmetry is easily overlooked. These designs often include elements that might, at first glance, qualify them to be included in the other categories such as flowers, leaves, or other recognizable figural elements like angel's heads and arches. This style sometimes employs a scrolling vine or other curvilinear designs as a framing technique for various elements. In fact, Davenport, the first and still primary author on this topic employed the term "arabesque" to describe designs that did not fit within his other categories of Heraldic, Figure, or Floral.[1] And yet, arabesque is a specific term of decorative style

[1] These three terms are self-evident, though I argue that Davenport leaves out the geometric category. Is this an oversight, as surely Davenport did not think to include those designs in the other categories or in the graceful arabesque class, or is it because he hadn't seen a geometric design? His work did have the disclaimer that he was writing about a handful of books he had direct access to in his position with the British Library or in other collector's libraries. Either way, it does seem like a failing in his classification system.

which is defined by a graceful pattern of interlacing scrolls; a description that does not apply at all to the cover of *A Comfortable Treatise*. The embroidered design does include some short, graceful scrolls in the tendrils but they are hardly interlacing. There is a central stylized flower which could be considered floral but the overall impression does not convey a sense of gardens and flowers as the other designs in the floral category do. And the design does not fit into the armorial, geometric, or pictorial categories either.

Fig. 2 *Bible,* 1638. British Library.

Fig. 3 *Christian Prayers and Holy Meditations,* 1570. British Library.

It is possible to introduce a new category of "spot motif" which could reasonably be applied to this example. Yet, the sense in looking at this design is not of individual motifs but, rather, of a satisfying concept of symmetry. Indeed, other embroidered books meet with this same design conundrum. Figure 2, a Bible, is an embroidered binding where a flower is a central design element as well as repeating element in the four

corners, yet the composition is of an overwhelming sense of symmetry. Figure 3, *Christian Prayers and Holy Meditations*, is another example which includes an angel's head as well as flowers, leaves, and grapes but is neither floral nor pictorial, rather the composition is again, primarily symmetrical. Consequently, the category of "symmetrical" is most applicable for these types of designs.

The first example, *A Comfortable Treatise*, is deceptively simple in its execution. The center is a single dot with eight leaves in different sizes, alternating between large and small, emanating out from the middle. Each leaf is outlined with a twisted cord, and the largest four leaves at the cardinal points are outlined again by the same cord, then outlined a third time. The final outline arches out and curves around into a small tendril from which two more leaves are attached. Small pieces of bullion are added at intervals to fill out the spaces. In each of the four corners, there is a small tendril with two leaves and a small quatrefoil flower at the end of the tendril. This design could easily have been a simple doodle of shapes built on each other in variations on a theme but is a masterful example of balanced and restrained configuration.

The ground cloth of green velvet was one of the least common for embroidered book bindings. Because of the pile, velvet is luxurious to touch but is prone to crushing and shows wear more easily than the other common ground cloths such as linen canvas or white silk satin. Interestingly, while this book does show some wear in the velvet, it remains relatively intact. And though the silver gilt metal thread shows a significant amount of tarnishing, there is little overall wear or missing sections. Only the center and a few of the leaves' bullions are absent, though that wear does have the benefit of making

the twine padding understructure visible. There are also visible spots on the front cover (or top board) where two ribbons would originally have been attached. Those ribbon tails are also visible on the inside cover.

Fig. 4 *The Whole Booke of Psalms*, 1606, British Library. (31/4 x 2)

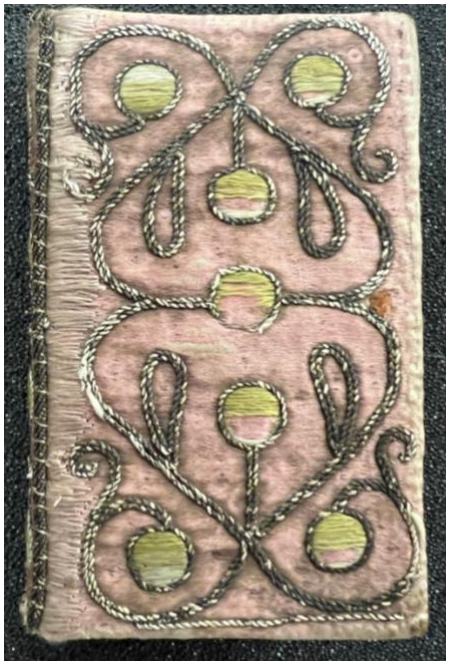

Fig. 5 *The Whole Booke of Psalms*, 1634, Huntington Library. (31/4 x 2)

This type of simple design could easily have been executed by a very competent stitcher in a domestic setting; working with velvet can be challenging but does not require extraordinary technical skills. Alternatively, this is the type of design that could easily be drawn and worked in a relatively short amount of time allowing for either a quick turnaround for a bespoke cover or several to be made at once for sale in a shop. As discussed in chapter three, when the quality is good, it is extremely difficult or even impossible to determine if an embroidered binding is professionally or domestically made without a complete provenance. There are examples that are so simplistic that it is easy to

venture a guess that the work was done domestically by a younger girl still learning her skills (fig. 4, 5).[2]

The question of professional versus domestic is a complicated one, though, because there were economic relationships outside of the formal guild-sanctioned broderers' workshops in London and other large cities that women often participated in and were rarely documented. For instance, the Sandwich Book of Orphans records the upbringing of Miss Thomasina Walters, a ward of the state from 1588, when her parents died, until 1594, when she married. Thomasina was of the middling sort and was left a small but decent income from a housing property rental receiving over £10 a year. Thomasina's expenses detail the cost of her boarding and education with a Mrs. Smythe, and include: "It'm given to her more the 23 of April to buy her some silk to Work her a coif & other such like," meaning to do silk embroidery on a woman's head covering called a coif. Another expense was "It'm first for a sampler bought by her of Mrs. Smythe." This indicates that Mrs. Smythe sold a sampler to Thomasina, indicating that samplers weren't just made for personal practice but were valued as a teaching guide and future reference which included economic value. Thomasina also learned lace making with "It'm for 36 stickes to make lace" and "item for a cushen to make lace upon."[3]

Thomasina, who was most definitely not elite, was doing needlework in a variety of ways and she was accessing imported goods like silk. Her limited income was able to provide for food, board, a skilled education in needlework, and the tools necessary for

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[2] These two books are exactly the same size with the exact same front page, printed by the same printers, their only difference being the printing date of 1606 vs. 1636, though that 1606 date might be incorrect since the "0" is so badly smudged that it could be "3."

[3] Thomas Dorman, "THE Sandwich Book of Orphans," *Archaeologia Cantiana* 16 (1886), p189-190.

that skill. Needlework, whether it was lace making, embroidery, seaming, or more decorative embellishments, was not a hobby or leisure time pursuit but created real, economic value to the teacher, student, the maker, and the buyer. Though, through the Victorian male historian lens, these details were often overlooked because in their industrial age these types of skills were easily replicated by machines. This change impacted the nature and value of needlework which was transformed into a hobby activity by middle class women to prove they had leisure time.

But the sampler guide that Mrs. Smythe sold to Thomasina was simply to aid in a hobby or leisure time pursuit, it was a means to a future business or money earning endeavor. The sticks and cushion to make lace meant economic opportunities for Thomasina. These skills were not only useful in her own home, but also as a means to earn steady income in the future, making her a more viable and attractive marriage partner, which was an economic relationship in and of itself. Additionally, Mrs. Smythe was earning money not just by being a guardian for an orphan or for teaching that person skills, but also for selling her own needlework. The fascinating point about this interaction between Thomasina and Mrs. Smythe is not simply the reality that, even at this lower end of the income scale, both of these women were doing needlework, but that it was an important part of an economic interaction which impacted their community. Interestingly, the fact that Mrs. Smythe was employed by the state and her earnings recorded was a relatively rare testimony to a woman's earned income.

The economic impact of women's needlework was often unseen or took place in a more informal setting. For instance, Lady Anne Clifford brought in a woman from her

neighborhood to work on mundane needlework tasks. From her diary: "This afternoon did Margaret Montgomery, from Penrith, the sempstress, come hither, so I had her into my chamber and kiss'd her and talked with her, and she came to make up twenty pair of sheets and pillow-veres" (pillowcases).[4] Margaret Montgomery was undoubtedly of a lower class than Lady Anne, and was being employed to perform utilitarian work. If Margaret had been referred to as "Mrs. Montgomery," then she would have undoubtedly been a married lady taking in work to provide additional income to her family. But as "Margaret Montgomery, sempstress," she likely was an unmarried lady who was responsible for earning her own, independent income.

As a woman of a higher social class, Lady Anne also spent a large portion of her time at needlework, as accounted in her diary, but of a more decorative form. Though that did not mean that Lady Anne's needlework was valued any less than Margaret Montgomery's. Indeed, decorative needlework like cushions, curtain, caskets/cabinets, mirrors, and clothing including small pieces such as caps and coifs, shoes, cuffs and collars, or larger items like jackets, done domestically or even professionally, were valued as markers of status. Embroidered objects, first adopted by the nobility, then the gentry, and spreading to the more affluent merchant and the middling sort were a way to assert rank: "Display was of paramount importance to them in the affirmation of status, demonstrating that the maintenance of social rank was central to the gentle lifestyle."[5]

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[4] Anne Clifford Herbert Pembroke and D. J. H. Clifford, *The Diaries of Lady Anne Clifford* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Sutton Pub, 2003), p. 276.
[5] Raluca Radulescu and Alison Truelove, eds., *Gentry Culture in Late-Medieval England*, Manchester Medieval Studies (Manchester [u.a.]: Manchester Univ. Press, 2005), p. 14.

Damaris Pearse, whose pious writings were examined in chapter four, also gained economic benefit from her needlework. She noted in her writing that "I have many good books, and I made many shifts… to get them."[6] Her work with the needle was of a very modest kind, simple seaming. Shifts were the most basic form of clothing and were a loose-fitting undergarment made of linen, though cotton or silk were sometimes used, and composed of simple rectangles sewn together. Almost everyone, men and women of various classes, wore a shift. They could be quite rough and plain, or made from finer textiles and embellished with embroidery in either a simple or elaborate design. Pearse could easily have accomplished this task, indeed this type of seaming and construction was a skill taught and practiced by many women, especially lower down the socio-economic scale. Pearse's father was a preacher and they would have been in the middling class. But she was also an accomplished needlework artist and there is a raised work of pictorial embroidery that has been directly attributed to her.[7] Consequently, when she wrote that she "made many shifts," she could have simply sewn them together or added embroidered embellishment. Pearse used her needlework skills to earn money to purchase books, only a possibility in a time where books were readily available, she was educated and literate, and encouraged to read. No doubt at least some of her books were devotionals.

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[6] Damaris Pearse, *A Present for Youth, and Example for the Aged, or, The Remains of Damaris Pearse: Containing Her Speech after She Kept Her Bed, and a Copy of a Written Paper, of Her Own Composing, Which She Left as Her Last Legacy to Her Brothers and Sisters, and Was the Last Thing That Ever She Wrote : And Also Several Pious Expressions, Occasionally Uttered in Her Last Sickness, Worth Minding : Together with Her Funeral-Sermon, Preached by a Reverend Minister of the Gospel.*, 2011, http://name.umdl.umich.edu/A91558.0001.001, p. 18.

[7] Xanthe Brook, "Tales in Thread," *The Antique Collector* 61, no. 11 (October 1990), https://archive.org/details/sim_antique-collector_1990-11_61_11/page/n3/mode/2up?view=theater, p. 18.

Even women who did not need to work could value their own efforts. Elizabeth Isham who we met earlier in chapter four, was one of the few women of her age who kept a diary and she frequently noted her needlework activities. In 1636 she writes "I wrot bonelace which was worth 3 sh[illings] I gave it my S[ister] Judith for a token."[8] Elizabeth's entry places an economic value on her work even though she does not sell the lace nor was there any indication that she ever needed to in her lifetime. Yet, Elizabeth knew the market value of the amount of lace she produced and was unhesitating in placing a sense of worth on her work.

The relationship between Thomasina Walters and Mrs. Smythe, and Lady Anne and Margaret Montgomery, or Damaris Pearse and her clients created tangible economic benefit to the individuals and their communities, both immediately as well as creating future opportunities. While this type of exchange was not often recorded, the activities still occurred, the economies were still impacted, and the needlework was still valued. Additionally, many of these women who were doing their needlework were dependent on the labor and time of other women. Lady Anne would have run a large household and relied on the work of women in her employ to prepare and serve food, clean the house, and care for children. Even the women like Damaris Pearse in more modest households would have needed the efforts of other women to do the harder physical labor required in the seventeenth century like laundry; indeed, all labor was (and remains) interdependent as well as largely invisible.[9]

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[8] Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, "Isham Browser - 1609," accessed December 29, 2020, http://web.warwick.ac.uk/english/perdita/Isham/yr_Y1609.htm, 1636.
[9] A. Shepard, "Crediting Women in the Early Modern English Economy," *History Workshop Journal* 79, no. 1 (April 1, 2015): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbv002, p. 13.

Additionally, household goods were greatly valued by early modern English people, and were a form of savings and credit and "married women received praise for managing and increasing a household's assets as represented by its 'stuff.'"[10] The rising economic prosperity, the interest in acquiring and displaying physical evidence of status through objects, including embroidered objects, was a motivating factor for many households and women could contribute to that valuation through their labor. Small embroidered objects like decorative edgings on shirts, embroidered caps and coifs, needle worked cushions, and embroidered book bindings were finite projects that could be made at home or, if need be, purchased. An embroidered book binding was small and could easily be carried from private spaces like homes, to public spaces like churches. It represented not just piety, but also literacy and education, and industry of both the owner as well as the entire household.

One of the steps in learning embroidery in a domestic setting was creating a sampler. The earliest known extant English sampler is dated 1598, but written references to them occur earlier in the sixteenth century. These projects were, initially, simple cloth, usually linen, on which to learn and practice specific stitches through working discrete spot motifs. Eventually, samplers developed into organized lengths of linen where designs were worked in bands, again to practice specific techniques or compositions, and were termed band samplers. These could be used as a reference for later work, a reminder of how to work a stitch, or an exemplar of color and motif combinations. As demonstrated earlier, Mrs. Smythe created and sold a sampler to Thomasina Walters as a

[10] Shepard, p. 16-17.

teaching guide. Therefore, band samplers could be both personally useful as well as a professional demonstration of skill. Later in the seventeenth century, samplers developed into the more modern rectangular layout as a part of a school's curriculum and a tangible demonstration of a girl's achievement. The history and importance of samplers is a rigorously studied field and interesting in and of itself, but for the purpose of this discussion the remarkable aspect of samplers is the fact that early in their development they were dated and included the name of the girl doing this work. In terms of textile creation, indeed with most fields of object production during this time period, creator's marks or dates are uncommon.

The lack of maker's marks or dates on embroidered book bindings is what makes the binding of one book in the collection of the Museum of London, *The Whole Booke of Psalms*, so unique. At the bottom of the spine is a visible, if worn, date which could reasonably be read as "1645." The printed date of the text is 1641, four years prior to the needlework date. This provides a data point which reinforces the idea that embroidered bindings would have most likely been created and bound within a few years of the printing of the book itself. Of course, there are instances where this does not hold. Indeed, the Museum of London has another embroidered binding in its collection where the embroidery was completed hundreds of years after the text was printed. The provenance of that binding was documented by the needleworker's son and was a part of the "rediscovery" and popularity of medieval and early modern design in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. But that example is outside the norm and does not apply to the majority of embroidered book bindings.

In addition to the lack of markers on the bindings themselves, there are only a few tantalizing documentary sources which hint at the textual evidence for these embroidered books. Mentioned in chapter three is the inventory of the Countess of Leicester, Lettice Knollys, which included an embroidered Bible. There was also a brief mention in a diary from Elizabeth Isham dated 1634 when she was 26. She noted that "my father gave me an imbroidered Bible," which was being acknowledged as a thoughtful and significant gift.[11] Elizabeth's father may have bought the book and taken it to a professional embroiderer to be bound, or might have bought the Bible already embroidered from either a bookseller, needlework studio, or some other supplier. But the fact that this book incorporated Elizabeth's interests in religion and needlework, reflected not only her personal preferences and her father's understanding and support of that, but also the larger social and economic environment where books and this type of specialized binding was accessible.[12]

Wills and inventories were written not by the person whose goods were being accounted, but by secretaries or clerks in wealthier households, or by people outside the household, almost certainly men. Given this, the amount of detail included in these documents can range from exquisitely specific to maddeningly generalized and, undoubtedly, would overlook embellishments like embroidery and needlework. Therefore, we cannot look to documentary sources to provide insight into the importance

[11] "Elizabeth Isham's Autobiographical Writings," accessed December 29, 2020, https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/ren/researchcurrent/isham/texts/.

[12] One wonders if this story and Lettice Knollys' bible are the basis for the statement made by scholars that the vast majority of embroidered book bindings were made professionally since there is no other documentary evidence to support this claim and, as discussed in chapter 2, it is exceedingly difficult to determine if embroidery was done professionally or by a very competent domestic needleworker.

of these objects. Rather, we must look to the embroidered book bindings themselves to be a witness to their own value. The fact that these delicate objects were cared for, passed down, and remain extant today demonstrates their importance. Additionally, the economic impact of needlework is another testament to how these books were regarded. Taking the time to evaluate and understand the effort that was required to create these objects and how they were used can provide insight into the value they provided to a woman, her family, and her community.

# CONCLUSION

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England went through massive cultural and sociological changes which impacted the lives of everyone in the country. Economic stability followed the end of the destabilizing civil wars in the fifteenth century and created an environment in which the technological innovation of the movable type printing press flourished and expanded the book trade. Additionally, the royal family and political ruling class adopted and promoted Protestantism in the sixteenth century, and though this was not a smooth transition and included a counter reformation, that religious change advocated for people to read the Bible and engage with scripture directly. This was accompanied by a fundamental transformation in the educational environment with dramatically increased literacy rates. These changes set the stage for a population ready to engage with, own, gift, and bequeath books and other printed materials.

Into this unique and rapidly evolving environment, the fashion for embroidering a variety of motifs onto book bindings of religious texts flourished for a brief period, approximately seventy years. As artifacts, these books covered in decorative needlework provide insight into the intimate lives of women, their religious experience, the expectations of their behavior, and the impact they made on their families and communities. These objects also highlight the importance of needlework in the everyday lives of women: the value that embroidery had from a cultural perspective, as an indicator of industry and piety, as well as an economic avenue for girls and women to earn their

own money. These objects marry the text with the textile, bringing the world dominated by men together with the highly female-gendered world of needlework.

And, because this was a world in which a wider range of women were learning to read, being encouraged to engage with scripture and interrogate their religious observances, a few women even wrote about their lives. Consequently, we are able to access these few women's thoughts and experiences in their own words. These documents, along with the embroidered bindings, augment our glimpse into the early modern world which otherwise relies on a written record dominated overwhelmingly by wealthy men.

To examine these changes over time and how the embroidered book binding as an object can bring nuance and insight into this situation, we began by looking at the highest levels of society, the world of the Henrician and Elizabethan courts. These monarchs were stepping away from a medieval world and embracing the many political, societal, and technological changes developing on the European continent. Elizabeth I, as a child and then as a monarch, was at the intersection of the religious changes precipitated by Protestantism, as well as the ideas of femininity as reflected through needlework. As a girl, she created two manuscripts to give as gifts to her stepmother, Katherine Parr, and her father, Henry VIII as a sign of filial duty, devotion, industry, and learning. These manuscripts were translations of religious texts and bound in embroidered covers, the handwriting and the needlework all executed by Elizabeth. These embroidered book covers, reflective of some of the earliest examples of this type of binding, presage Queen

Elizabeth I's establishment and reliance on a structure of gift giving at her court, which elevated offerings of needlework to a highly prized status.

It was not just the nobility that engaged in needlework. This time period witnessed an expansion in the gentry class and the middling sort as the economy flourished and people outside of the nobility were able to bolster their personal status and influence. Objects of material culture contributed to building status and announcing that value to the wider society, and needlework played a significant part in that expansion. Embroidered objects like book bindings were both private and public signifiers of access to time, skill, and materials that symbolized the trappings of wealth and power. And it was not just the needlework but also the books themselves that supported this expanding class. Ownership of books including devotional texts, as well as herbals and pattern books, went hand-in-hand with furnishing the household with material objects. Planting and cultivating a variety of gardens also reflected peoples interest in making the interior and exterior spaces of their home reflections of their personal value.

This move to display decorative objects overlapped with ideas of femininity and womanhood when almost all women of every class, except for the truly indigent, were expected to be competent with the needle. Consequently, needle worked goods reinforced ideas of status and industry, and embroidered book bindings complemented those ideas. And because it was so highly valued, needle work was done professionally as well as domestically, and all forms of needle work become extremely popular and fashionable in the late sixteenth and into the seventeenth century. An embroidered object was a way to display both piety and affluence, to show the owner either had the money to pay a

professional or that the women in their household had the time and skill to create needle worked objects, and a display of wealth was a necessary step to assert status within the hierarchical structure of Tudor and Stewart society. The dominant motif for this flourishing of embroideries, including book bindings, was the floral design which also reflected the interest in the other significant domestic activity, gardens.

In contrast, one of the least popular design motifs on embroidered book bindings was of geometric and repeating patterns. This style reflected an easier entry point to creating and owning needle worked objects. These designs were freely accessed in the many pattern books available in the newly expanded book market, and the skills required to work these designs was more achievable by a wider range of people. It is difficult to say why this motif was the least popular, or has the least number of extant examples. Could it be that the simpler production was less valued? Or was is that the embroiderers preferred more challenging designs? Without additional evidence, it is not possible to determine at this point.

What allowed women, as well as lower class men, students, and so many others, to own books was the result of the tremendous growth of the printing and book trade in London, itself an outcome of a fortuitous set of circumstances that began with the introduction of the printing press by William Caxton into England in the fifteenth century. This was only possible because of the expansion of the book trade due to the innovation of the moveable type printing presses that created mass produced printed materials, thereby decreasing the overall cost and lowering the barrier to book ownership. This change created a marketplace that supported a variety of printed materials including

legal, scholarly, and religious works as well as natural histories, herbals, literature, classical writers, dictionaries, almanacs, and chapbooks.[1]

There was also a lively trade in books of designs and patterns, including some specifically for needlework. These books, as well as pamphlets and single page prints, flooded the market from both sanctioned and illicit printers. The first run and secondary markets dramatically drove down the prices, making books far more accessible and affordable to a wide range of people. Concurrently, the spread of Protestantism throughout England dramatically challenged and changed the relationship that people had with religion and religious observances. Catholicism relied on the intercession of the Church between the people and God, with the priest acting as a conduit for spiritual rites and observances. But Protestantism encouraged a direct relationship to scripture which meant, at its heart, understanding God on a personal level by reading the Bible. Various Protestant sects interpreted this in different ways, but the dominant message of literacy impacted society as a whole and education and reading expanded dramatically across socio-economic classes and genders. Women were expected to be religious leaders in their own households, teaching their children and the servants, especially the female servants in their employ, about the Bible and religion. This shift in literacy, change in the goals of education, and the widespread availability of books strongly overlapped with the basic goals of women's education which was to manage their own private households of whatever size. A key component of that involved needlework. So it is no surprise that

[1] Phiroze Randeria, Mirjam Foot, and Bibliographical Society (Great Britain), eds., *Eloquent Witnesses: Bookbindings and Their History* (London : New Castle, Del: Bibliographical Society : British Library ; Oak Knoll Press, 2004), p. 27.

biblical scenes were an inspiration for a variety of embroidered images, including book bindings.

There are a number of documented cases where women employed other women to perform needlework in their households to complete simple seaming and the making of daily objects like pillowcases, sheets, or simple clothing. Women also earned money through their needle by making lace, working in professional embroidery workshops, or teaching needlework to other young women. And even when not done in a formal or even informal capacity, young women and girls in service to a large or prosperous household would learn needlework and perform a variety of projects, including decorative needlework as a part of their education.

With all of this in mind, it is not so surprising that a fashion for embroidered book bindings came into vogue in the early seventeenth century. They were a reflection of a growing market of books for women and men learning to read at dramatically increasing rates, Protestantism encouraging engagement with Scripture through literacy and book ownership, and the expansion of wealth in the gentry and middling classes which was expressed through needlework. In many ways, this was a perfect storm of events contributing to the creation of a unique object of material culture.

Looking at this time period of history through the framework of material objects like embroidered book bindings allows an insight into and understanding of the lives of people who did not leave any documentary records of their experiences. While early modern England was a time of increasing literacy, the concept of writing diaries or journals was in its nascent phase and very few women thought to do so. The few

documents written by women about their lives are invaluable, but in no way do they represent their sex's percentage of the population, much less the many men who were lower down the socio-economic scale. And one wonders if early antiquarians, archivists, or even family members coming across these women's writings would have thought to save them for posterity. That is why we must look to the things that people made as a document of their existence, their lives, and what was important to them. If we rely solely on written evidence, we miss out on the majority of experiences.

These embroidered books attest to the real increase in the number and types of books that were common, as well as how those books were used, and what they meant to the people who owned them. The act of embellishing covers speaks to the value of the text and the fact that many of these books include annotations of ownership and lines of gifting clearly documents women's relationships to each other through generations. The very existence of the needlework also offers insight into the wider world of women's work, and hints at the various ways women created economic opportunities for themselves and each other with their skills.

Understanding the importance of embroidered book bindings is based on the physicality of the bindings themselves as well as examining the cultural and societal conditions that created an environment in which these unique objects flourished. Employing the concepts of embodied history and experimental archaeology could be an effective way of taking this niche subject out of the corners of collections and libraries and bringing it forward into broader attention, as well as expanding our fundamental understanding of the act of their creation.

Because there are a relatively small number of these objects that remain extant today, it is quite difficult to access these books. Institutions such as the Huntington Library in California, and the Houghton Rare Books library at Harvard University have not had the opportunity to digitize and share their collections. And because existing library databases are focused on the content of the books, the details of bindings and other special attributions are often relegated to hard to search and inconsistent notes fields. Thankfully, a few larger collections like the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library have been able to access the resources needed to digitize images of the objects in their collection. And many major institutions like the Victoria and Albert Museum are diligently working on digitizing their collections for public access as well.

Ideally, a database of all known embroidered book bindings could be a centralized resource for future researchers and provide at least partial access to these objects. While this would be an ambitious project and there are many technological, administrative, and financial considerations to a project of this scope, this type of resource would be invaluable to historians working on topics including early modern England, women's history, the book trade, Protestantism, literacy, education, guilds, and needlework. Additionally, the database could be embedded into a website addressing the historical importance of embroidered book bindings and place these objects into a wider context serving as a public history resource.

Another avenue of expanded study in this area would be to re-create one or more styles of embroidered bindings. The concept of embodied history and experimental archaeology have been used in the past decade or more to explore the practical

requirements and limitations of the act of creating a material object. These types of controlled experiments conducted by people with technical expertise as well as access to period-appropriate materials have yielded insight into a variety of fields including blacksmithing, woodworking, architecture, and clothing reconstruction. Oftentimes, this is one of the few avenues available to historians and archaeologists working in pre-historical contexts. The re-creation of an embroidered book binding can provide insight into the number of hours needed to make different types of embroideries, the amount of materials required, or the level of technical skill needed to complete a project.

Why did this fashion end? Of course, we could say that it never really ended. Embroidered bindings continued to be made all the way into the twentieth century, with revivals of interest in needlework and the fashions of previous eras. Yet, the incredible popularity of these decorative objects did drop off dramatically after the 1640s. Was it the English Civil War that refocused a nation's energy? Or was it the ascendance of the Puritans who briefly led the culture. As Ruth Geuter writes in *English Embroideries Twixt Art and Nature* "For Puritan authors of the sixteenth century, 'cunningly to work with the needle' was not as morally beneficial as spinning, carding, and weaving, which were recommended for keeping young maids out of mischief."[2] Or was it simply that needlework was refocused on schoolgirl samplers, pictorials, and cabinets and caskets all of which came and went in their turns? This somewhat precipitous end to this fashion deserves further consideration.

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[2] Ruth Geuter, "Embroidered Biblical Narratives and Their Social Context," in *English Embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: 'twixt Art and Nature*, ed. Andrew Morall and Melinda Watt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 57.

And so we end where we began, with Lady Margaret Hoby sitting at her desk writing the reflections of her religious thoughts and daily activities, importantly noting the industriousness of her efforts at her "work." This woman, and the handful of others like her who attempted to document their lives in writing, consistently included their virtuous activity of embroidery. This intersection of writing and "working" provides a small window into the wider, unwritten world of women at this time, the easily overlooked and undervalued activity of needlework.

We can also envision Elizabeth Isham, another woman of this time period who was a part of this small and unique group documenting her life, testifying to her interest in needlework. She tells us of her many embroidery projects that she did for herself, her father, and others, working alone and with her maids. And Elizabeth also lets us know that she did, indeed, own an embroidered Bible, a gift to her from her father. Just as her words and her works are a gift to us from the past.

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