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Pens and Needles: Documents and Artifacts in Women's History

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Since we are in New England, I would like to begin with the words of a New England woman, Anne Bradstreet. Bradstreet came to New England in the great Puritan migration of 1630. She was a good woman—an obedient wife, a kind neighbor, a loving mother, a wise mistress, and a devout Christian.[1] She was also a poet. In 1650 her brother-in-law, the Reverend Mr. John Woodbridge, took some of her poems with him to England and arranged to have them published there as *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America.* In the "Prologue" to that work, Bradstreet wrote:

> I am obnoxious to each carping tongue,
> Who sayes, my hand a needle better fits,
> A Poet's Pen, all scorn, I should thus wrong;
> For such despight they cast on female wits:
> If what I doe prove well, it wo'nt advance,
> They'l say its stolne, or else, it was by chance.[2]

If you think that sounds like a feminist argument, you are not far wrong. Anne Bradstreet was educated in an era when popular pamphlets as well as sober treatises were arguing over the Renaissance version of "the woman question."[3] The central argument was over female education. Those who insisted that women were "rational creatures" argued for the study of languages and for training in penmanship. Opponents insisted that needles rather than pens were the appropriate implements of women. In a poem published in 1624, John Taylor was unequivocal: "And for my countries quiet, I should like/ That woman-kinde should use no other Pike." [4] It was in this

context that Anne Bradstreet wrote her famous elegy "In Honour of That High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory":

> Now say, have women worth? or have they none?
> Or had they some, but with our Queen is't gone?
> Nay masculines, you have thus taxed us long,
> But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong.
> Let such as say our sex is void of reason
> Know 'tis a slander now but once was treason.

As Bradstreet looked to Elizabeth, so later generations of New England writers looked to Bradstreet. Her work vindicated theirs.[5]

For textile scholars Bradstreet's example offers a double message. On the one hand, it validates the activities of women everywhere who attempt to do the unexpected. On the other, it invites us to think about the often troubled relationship between pens and needles. As Rozsika Parker has noted, embroidery became so closely associated with femininity in the Renaissance educational debates, that "it was almost axiomatic that a woman wanting to enter a supposedly 'masculine' sphere of activity repudiated femininity in the form of embroidery." [6]

As Elaine Hedges has recently reminded us, even in the nineteenth century female writers struggled to liberate themselves from needlework. For some it was an onerous household duty, for others a means of support. Louisa May Alcott was not the only woman who happily marked the day when she was able to support herself, not by "needle and pen," but by her pen alone.[7] There is a particular irony then in a scholarly gathering devoted to stitchery. Most academic historians, including those of us who admire patchwork quilts, are word people. We were the kind who ran for the library when our grandmothers offered an embroidery hoop. Even textile scholars have been ambivalent about needlework, on the one hand celebrating the masterworks of early American women, and on the other lamenting their bondage to the needle.[8]

My purpose here is to reconnect pens and needles by exploring the period in American history that stood between Anne Bradstreet and the nineteenth-century quilters whose works are so familiar to you. I have two objectives—to provide some background in an un-

familiar period and to suggest the importance of context in understanding any material object. Too often, textile scholars imagine an unchanging "traditional womanhood" projecting eternally backward in time. I would like to show that even the most conventional of objects can take on new meaning when understood in relation to the social structures and values of its time. In eighteenth-century America the women most likely to have left needlework were also those most capable of using pens. By the end of the seventeenth century Puritan piety had joined with English educational reform to create a new definition of proper womanhood. In 1714, no less a Puritan than Cotton Mather resolved in his diary that "My Daughters must live in the daily use of their Pens." In a funeral eulogy for Katharain Willard, Mather made the connection explicit: the godly woman was "hindred not from that use of her Pen, as well as of her Needle."[9] By the end of the century young girls were embroidering the same sentiment on their samplers:

> How blest the maid, whom circling years improve,
> Her God the object of her warmest love,
> Where useful hours successive as they glide,
> The book, the needle, and the pen divide.[10]

To understand the significance of that verse, one needs to know that in early America (as in England) the teaching of writing was quite distinct from the teaching of reading. Although parents and masters were enjoined to teach all children to read, especially to read the Bible, only boys were routinely taught to "write a Ledgable hand & cypher."[11] As a consequence far more males than females could sign their names to wills and other documents. Although estimates vary, probably fewer than half of New England women born before 1730 could write their own names let alone compose poetry.[12]

That does not mean women were excluded from the mostly oral discourse of their small communities. As I have tried to demonstrate in my earlier work, ordinary women were outspoken, assertive, and vigorous in the pursuit of their own ends and of justice as they understood it. They bartered and traded with neighbors, turned gossip into legal testimony, and among the dissenting sects even preached and prophesied in public. But few left even rudimentary specimens

of writing. Except on needlework. Between 1700 and 1800 women stitched their names and their identities onto thousands of sheets, towels, blankets, coverlets, bed rugs, petticoats, pockets, and samplers that survive today in museums or private collections. The privileged girls who profited from the educational reforms promoted by Cotton Mather and others learned to stitch—and write—more than their names.

Here the most revealing artifacts are samplers. These little embroideries are usually interpreted as charming relics, rudimentary exercises in needle art. They are much more. One of the very best ways to learn about female education—and by extension female consciousness—is to look at what young girls, under the direction of their teachers, created with their needles. As Betty Ring has demonstrated, embroidered samplers and needlework pictures from early America were not spontaneous creations of naive embroiderers. They were schoolwork, in Ring's words, "the most delightful schoolwork to survive from any era."[13]

One would not expect to find a fully developed feminist consciousness in works created by little girls under the tutelage of godly teachers. Samplers were instruments of socialization. As such they demonstrate values central to the propertied families who sent their daughters to schools like those of Sarah Osborne of Newport or Mary Oliver of Boston, women known for piety more often than poetry. Yet those values were more complex than is sometimes imagined, and they formed the base for the middle-class domesticity reflected in many nineteenth-century quilts. Many years ago, in her influential essay "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter defined the central values of nineteenth-century prescriptive literature as "piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness."[14] Eighteenth-century samplers offer a slightly different cluster, which I would call "piety, parity, literacy, and memory."

All of these ideals are evident in a sampler made in 1748 by Sarah Silsbe of Boston. The composition is dominated by a rendition of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, complete with striped serpent, a romping rabbit, and butterflies as large as deer. Despite the presence of the serpent, this is a tellingly cheerful rendition of the primal drama, and it is surprisingly egalitarian. Adam and Eve *both*

clutch forbidden fruit. Thus, protestant piety is combined with what one Puritan minister called "parity." "Of all the orders which are unequals," Samuel Willard wrote, a husband and wife "come nearest to an Equality, and in several respects they stand upon even ground. These do make a Pair, which infers so far a Parity."[15] Willard's notion of "parity" is not equivalent to our concept of equality. Spiritual equality did not translate into social equality. But Willard recognized the authority of women in the family, and authority symbolized in every schoolgirl embroidery by the presence of the marking stitch used on household linens. Textiles were among the most valued possessions in early American households. When a young women placed her name on those linens she claimed an identity as mistress of a household, a joint partner in an economic enterprise.

The concept of parity also captured the Christian notion of the equal worth of every soul before God. Although the notion that Eve was first in transgression gave religious force to misogyny, even in Protestant New England ministers reminded their congregations that women were also first in redemption. Mary was the mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene was first to witness the resurrection. Such ideas were not lost on Jane Colman Turrell, who wrote a poem in celebration of the writing of a pious English woman, "Mrs. Singer":

> Surpriz'd I view, wrote by a Female Pen,
> Such a grave warning to the Sons of Men. . . . .
> Dauntless you undertake th' unequal strife,
> And raise dead Virtue by your Verse to life.
> A Woman's Pen strikes the Curs'd Serpents Head,
> And lays the Monster gasping, if not dead.[16]

Turrell's poem offers a new way to read apparently naive embroideries like that of Sarah Silsbe. Teachers like Sarah's could not have been indifferent to the multiple meanings attached to the imagery of Eden, nor can they have been unaware of the close relationship between piety and literacy in the ministerial literature of their time. Fully forty percent of the surface of Sarah's sampler is covered with words. In this it is typical. Young embroiders were learning more than marking. They were preparing to become mistresses of their pens. The imperfect spacing, the mixing of upper- and lower-case

letters, and erratic division of words shows their struggles to master the world of words. As the century progressed, more and more samplers included cursive as well as roman alphabets, good evidence that genteel education was introducing handwriting at an earlier age.

Most eighteenth-century samplers contain verses as well as alphabets. Sarah Silsbe used two of the most conventional:

> Sarah Silsbe is my name
> I belong to the English Nation
> Boston is my Dwelling Place
> And Christ is My Salvation.
> When I am Dead and Laid in Grave
> And all my Bones are Rotten
> When this you see
> Remember Me
> And Never let me be forgotten

When I first read this verse, I imagined grim sermons in unheated churches and thought of gaunt skulls on early eighteenth-century gravestones. Then a personal experience suggested another interpretation.

As I was beginning research for this essay, my husband and I decided to remodel the upstairs of our house. As we tore out the pine paneling in one room we found several little notes that our children had dropped through knotholes in 1972. With a blue felt-tipped pen our daughter Melinda had written: "I am 9 years old, But when you find this early History I'll probly be dead." Like Sarah Silsbe (and at the very same age) Melinda was learning to place herself in time as well as space. Her little note might have concluded: "When this you see/ Remember Me." The theme of remembrance appears over and over again in early American samplers. I believe it is also one of the dominant themes in nineteenth-century quilts.[17]

The desire to remember and be remembered also motivated the writing of Anne Bradstreet. Having begun with her earliest word, I will close with her last. Toward the end of her life, "in much sickness and weaknes," she composed a short autobiography, which began with this verse:

This Book by Any yet unread,
I leave for you when I am dead,
That being gone, here you may find
What was yr liveing mothers mind.[18]

When *we* are dead and in the grave and all *our* bones are rotten, perhaps some of the things we have begun at this conference will remain. The chain of memory that links one generation of women to another is fragile and must be constantly attended. The particular combination of pens and needles represented by this gathering is a powerful one.

Notes and References

1. For more on Bradstreet and the ordinary women who were her contemporaries see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650–1750* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).
2. *The Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet*, ed. Joseph R. McElrath, Jr. and Allan P. Robb (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 7.
3. For a useful overview of this literature, see Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus,*Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
4. Quoted in Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1984), 86.
5. This began not long after Bradstreet's death. Ann Stanford, *Anne Bradstreet: The Worldly Puritan*, (New York: Burt Franklin, 1974), 74, notes that Bathsua Makin praised the Puritan poet in *An Essay to Revive the Ancient Education of Gentlewomen in Religion, Manners, Art & Tongues*, published in 1673.
6. Parker, 103.
7. Elaine Hedges, "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work," in Florence Howe, ed., *Traditions and Talents of Women* (Champaign: Univ. of Illinois, 1990).
8. See, for example, Susan Burrows Swan, *Plain and Fancy: American Women and Their Needlework, 1700–1850* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977), 13.
9. Cotton Mather, Diary, Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, VIII, 276; Cotton Mather, *El-Shaddai* (Boston, 1725), 22. Also see Mather's *A Family Well-Ordered* (Boston, 1699), 18.

10. E.g. Krueger, 42, fig. 52; Ring, *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee*, 146, fig. 55.
11. *Good Wives*, 44; E. Jennifer Monaghan, "Literacy Instruction and Gender in Colonial New England," *American Quarterly* 15 (1988):18–41.
12. Joel Perlmann and Dennis Shirley, "When Did New England Women Acquire Literacy?" *William & Mary Quarterly* 3d Ser., vol. 48 (1991): 50–67; Gloria L. Main, "An Inquiry Into When and Why Women Learned To Write in Colonial New England," *Journal of Social History* 24: (1990–1991): 579–85.
13. Betty Ring, *Girlhood Embroidery: American Samplers & Pictorial Needlework, 1650–1850* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), I, xvii, xviii. Other important works by Ring include *Let Virtue Be a Guide to Thee: Needlework in the Education of Rhode Island Women, 1730–1830* (Providence, R.I.: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1983); Betty Ring, *American Needlework Treasures* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1987). Also see Glee F. Krueger, *A Gallery of American Samplers* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978) and Mary Jane Edmonds, *Samplers & Samplermakers: An American Schoolgirl Art 1700–1850* (New York: Rizzoli/Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1991).
14. Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820–1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 151–74.
15. Samuel Willard, *A Complete Body of Divinity in Two Hundred and Fifty Expository Lectures* (Boston, 1726), 609.
16. Benjamin Colman, *Reliquiae Turellae* (Boston, 1735), 73.
17. Roderick Kiracofe, *The American Quilt* (New York: Clarkson Potter, 1993), 80, quotes an almost exact version of the verse on Sarah Silsbe's sampler.
18. *Complete Works of Anne Bradstreet*, 215. (I have change "v" to "u" to improve readability for those not familiar with seventeenth-century script.)