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# 'Pattern and Romantic Creativity'

Jane Moore

Their colours and their forms were then to me  
An appetite, a feeling and a love.

(William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles  
Above Tintern Abbey' [1798])<sup>1</sup>

The contemporary patchwork quilt offers the artist a unique  
means of expression which communicates a direct emotional  
response relating to an appreciation of scale, colour, texture and  
pattern.

(Christine Nelson, 'Quilt Art' [1987])<sup>2</sup>

In her 1815 essay 'On Needle-work'<sup>3</sup> Mary Lamb sought to persuade leisured women to surrender their attachment to the needle, because, she soberly maintained, 'Needlework and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare'.<sup>4</sup> My essay takes the occasion of the bicentenary of the publication of

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<sup>1</sup> 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey, On revisiting the banks of the Wye during a tour, July 13, 1798' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798), ll. 80-81, *The Poems of William Wordsworth. Collected Reading Texts from The Cornell Wordsworth*, ed. Jared Curtis, 3 vols, (Penrith: Humanities-Ebooks), vol. 1, 374.

<sup>2</sup> Christine Nelson, 'Quilt Art', Cooper Gallery, Barnsley, 25 April-20 May, *CRAFTS*, 87 (July-August, 1987), 47.

<sup>3</sup> 'On Needlework', written under the pseudonym 'Sempronia', was published in the form of a letter to the editor of the *British Lady's Magazine and Monthly Miscellany* (1 April 1815), reprinted in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, ed. E. V. Lucas, 7 vols (London: Methuen, 1903-05), vol. 1, 'Miscellaneous Prose (1798-1834)', 204-10, 205.

Adriana Craicun suggests that the pseudonym 'Sempronia' refers to the classical figure of that name, who was 'known for criminal activity and radical politics', and that this choice of name reveals on Lamb's part 'a degree of defiance and assertiveness'. Craicun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 32. On Lamb's choice of pseudonym, see also Jane Aaron, who notes: 'Mary Lamb probably took her pseudonym from the name of a fictional character in Mary Hays's *Letters and Essays, Moral and Miscellaneous*. Aaron, *A Double Singleness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 51 2n.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Lamb, 'On Needle-work', *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., 205.

Lamb's jeremiad on needlework to reassess the status of needlecraft in writing of the Romantic period.<sup>5</sup> It offers an analysis of the creative interchange between poetry (historically designated in high Romanticism as the work of the male mind) and needlecraft, such as quilting (characteristically seen as women's work and as the labour of the hand rather than the mind).

Wordsworth's vivid expression of his creative response to the amatory power of nature's colours and forms in 'Tintern Abbey', that great final poem in the first volume of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), cited above, in the first epigraph, is paralleled in the second, taken from Christine Nelson's 1987 commentary on a contemporary exhibition of quilt art, which represents quilting as an expressive art form that 'communicates a direct emotional response relating to an appreciation of scale, colour, texture and pattern'. Written nearly two centuries after Wordsworth's, Nelson's work can be seen as demonstrating the continuing influence of the Romantic ideology on a modern aesthetic that prioritizes affect and individual imaginative response as key to the creative process. In this initial framing of an analogy between poetry and quilting my argument is not, however, that these cultural forms are interchangeable or of equal value. Plainly making a quilt is one thing and making a poem another, and whether or not we favour the literary art of poetry over craftwork such as quilting is often as much a consequence of education or cultural influence as it is a matter of individual

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<sup>5</sup> An earlier paper was presented at the Charles Lamb Society Day Conference, 'Mary Lamb, "On Needle-work": A Bicentenary Celebration', held at the Swedenborg Hall, Bloomsbury, London, in November 2014. As a practitioner of needlework with an academic interest in quilting (I am a member of the British Quilt Study Group (<http://bqsg.quiltersguild.org.uk>) and the Quilters' Guild of the British Isles ([www.quiltersguild.org.uk](http://www.quiltersguild.org.uk)), and as a scholar of Romanticism, I was pleased to participate in the Mary Lamb day conference and I am grateful to its organizer, Felicity James.

aesthetic response. Despite this proviso, there clearly are important if hitherto neglected conceptual and artisanic parallels between the domestic craftwork commonly associated with women and the poetic work of the creative imagination. The contention here is that an attention to those parallels necessitates a more finely developed idea of Romantic creativity. It is in part because Romanticism as a movement has been so sharply gendered that my project acquires significance. Tracing the affinities between craft/women's work and the 'serious' business of high Romantic art involves recalibrating the significance of both needlework and needlecraft in the wider culture of literary Romanticism, an approach which enables a sharper insight into women Romantics' creative imagination as well as a reinterpretation of the importance of craft to Romantic poetry more generally. Situating needlecraft within, rather than separate from, the realm of the traditionally male-dominated arena of Romantic poetry complicates, and potentially disrupts, the binary structures underpinning the ideology of separate spheres. This paper, then, seeks to open up a new cultural and artistic field of enquiry capable of offering an alternative to the dominant narrative in scholarship of the Romantic period of the needle as a tool of female oppression.

In every creative art (from poetry to music to quilting to gardening) there is pattern. Which is to say structures of expression (whether rhythmic sound patterning or visual shape and colour-coding) are part of any aesthetic production and historical period. Both an adherence to and an experimenting with the structural patterning of metre and form in poetry have analogies in the formal patterns followed in needlecraft, most especially in quilting, yet little attention has been given to the relationship between the two art forms in the

Romantic period. With the partial exception of work by Rozsika Parker,<sup>6</sup> Carol Shiner Wilson<sup>7</sup> and Pamela Woof,<sup>8</sup> scholars of Romantic literature have not focused on the interplay between needlecraft and creative acts of poetry (which is in contrast to the burgeoning interest shown by Victorian scholars in the interlinked histories of women's relationship with their books and their needles).<sup>9</sup> Parker's book is exceptional in its study of the construction of positive forms of femininity through needlecraft and in its exciting thesis that the 'processes of creativity – the finding of form for thought – have a transformative impact on the sense of self'.<sup>10</sup> 'The embroiderer holds in her hands a coherent object which exists both outside the world and inside her head', writes Parker.<sup>11</sup> But this argument remains more suggestive than specific in Parker's account.

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<sup>6</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, (1984, reprinted London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Carol Shiner Wilson, 'Lost Needles, Tangled Threads, Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor, and Lamb', in Carol Shiner Wilson and Joel Haefner eds., *Re-Visioning Romanticism: British Women Writers, 1776-1837* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 167-90.

<sup>8</sup> Pamela Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers'. The essay was published under the same title in two parts in separate issues of the *Charles Lamb Bulletin*. The first part was published in *CLB*, n.s. 66 (April 1989), 41-53. Part two appeared in *CLB*, n.s. 67 (July 1989), 82-93.

<sup>9</sup> Talia Schaffer's *Novel Craft: Victorian Domestic Handicraft & Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, published by Oxford University Press in 2011, turns to the now largely forgotten Victorian obsession with imitative domestic handicrafts such as making wax coral, fashioning hair jewelry or rolling and cutting tiny scraps of paper into candle-lighters so as to resemble feathers, to explore the continuities between female literary authorship and questions of self-representation around women's increasingly marginalized role in the newly mechanized economy. *Crafting the Woman Professional in the Long Nineteenth Century: Art and Industry in Britain*, edited by Kyriaki Hadjiafxendi and Patricia Zakreski (Ashgate: 2013) attends to female self-fashioning in textile and text, while Holly Furneaux, in *Military Men of Feeling: Emotion, Touch and Masculinity in the Crimean War* (Oxford University Press, 2016), rewrites representations of nineteenth-century military masculinity in the Crimean War, which includes attending to the patchwork quilts fashioned from army uniforms by convalescent soldiers.

<sup>10</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, op. cit., xx.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

For concrete historical reasons connected with forms of social, intellectual and economic oppression endured by women as a consequence of their association with the needle, Parker's thesis can appear more meaningful as gestural or conceptual hypothesis than as social history. Indeed, it is often the case that the evidence of the needle as an ideological tool of socially approved models of femininity weighs heavier than the alternative hypothesis that stitching as a creative process can have transformative effect on the female sewer. The task remains of demonstrating Parker's radical suggestion that sewing is constitutive in a positive sense, rather than merely destructive, of women's psychological growth.

In this essay, section one, 'Needlework, women and (creative) death: the case of Mary Lamb', attends to the important caveat that while both poetry and needlecraft are gendered expressions of aesthetic creativity, women writers themselves in the Romantic period did not necessarily promote the latter as such. Mary Lamb argues that needlework is oppressive to all classes of women: for the class of working women, in which she counted herself, it is a poorly paid mode of employment and for the domestic housewife needlework is the 'essential drawback' to family 'comfort' for 'which no remuneration in money is received or expected'.<sup>12</sup> Leisured ladies are not exempt from Lamb's criticism of the needle. Absorbed by the delights of 'the arrangement of her material' or 'fixing upon her happiest pattern' – 'how pleasing an anxiety!' – comments Lamb sarcastically, such a woman has squandered her talents: 'it were pity her energy should not have been directed to some wiser end'.<sup>13</sup> Arguments similar to

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<sup>12</sup> Mary Lamb, 'On Needle-work', p. 205.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Lamb's, which are also considered here, are found in the radical writing of Mary Wollstonecraft and in the conservative chapbooks of Hannah More. Quite simply, the needle does not have a good press in the educational treatises of these Romantic women writers. So the question arises of what it is about the use of the needle by women in the Romantic period that can be creative and transformative.

Section two, 'Female artisanship and Romantic women's writing', gives an answer to the question by considering the positive reception of the needle by women of the Wordsworth circle as a life-affirming and imaginatively engaged activity, one that unites the labour of the hand with artistic self-expression. There is an important distinction, on which Mary Lamb draws, between *needlework*, by which is meant paid work performed outside the home and unpaid domestic sewing within the home, and the activities of the leisured lady, who indulges in *needlecraft*, where the term craft indicates a pleasurable use of the needle. But what is striking in the case of Dorothy Wordsworth, considered here, is that the division between 'work' and 'craft' can be seen to break down. In Dorothy's Alfoxden and Grasmere journals the acts of writing and reading are incorporated into the domestic activities of her daily life, which often included sewing. Stringing together the small details of her life with William at Town End, Dorothy's 'Grasmere' journal entries suggest an equivalence of value uniting walking and reading with sewing or baking or gardening. Here is Dorothy's description of a wet Wednesday in June 1800, Grasmere:

A very rainy day. I made a shoe. Wm and John went to fish in Langdale. In the evening I went above the house, and gathered flowers which I

planted, fox-gloves, etc.<sup>14</sup>

The most apparently mundane of her domestic sewing chores – making a felt shoe – is part of a daily aesthetic at Grasmere based on *making* and *creating* that I argue in Dorothy's journal dissolves the traditional boundary between art and the everyday.

Section three, 'Crafting Romantic poetry: pattern and form', examines the inscription of quilting pattern, specifically the star pattern, as metaphor in Wordsworthian poetry and in the poet's design, of 1806, for his friend and patron Lord Beaumont's winter garden. It also turns, briefly, to the example of Jane Austen, herself a skilled needlewoman and quilter, to start to plot an analogy between the symmetry of design in her quilting and the rhythm of chapter and volume design structuring her fiction. This is not the place to review in detail the relationship between Austen's quilting and her fiction or the links between Wordsworth's views on gardening design and his poetical compositions. Rather, my aim is to highlight the creative capacity of quilting and gardening, via the examples of Austen and Wordsworth. To link the activity of sewing or gardening to the process of poetic creativity is to open up a constructive interchange between the labour of the hand and that of the imagination; it is also, in turn, to challenge the assumption of high Romantic argument that there is an implicit distinction between the things that are thought and the things that are made. First, however, is a consideration of one who says no such thing: namely, Mary Lamb, albeit one whose particular form of nay-saying, perhaps paradoxically, opens up a way of articulating a much more

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<sup>14</sup> *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 30.



positive reading of the work of the hand.

### **Needlework, women and (creative) death: the case of Mary Lamb**

Mary Lamb's position to her subject in the essay 'On Needle-work' is not an enthusiastic one. There is an implicit opposition between needlework that creates something - in the most prosaic sense of stitching things together, giving or resurrecting life - and Lamb's and other Romantic-period women's indictment of needlecraft as marking, emblematically, a kind of female death. On a symbolic level, the needle represents the death of the female creative spirit before it is born in being denied a purpose beyond the merely decorative function of the feminine needle. Metaphorically, in Lamb's essay 'On Needle-work', the needle spells the universal death of female fulfillment. Literally, in Lamb's own life, the needle led to actual death in the murderous impulses it prompted in Lamb towards her mother on whom she inflicted fatal wounds with a carving knife in 1796.

'In early life I passed eleven years in the exercise of my needle for a livelihood', writes Mary Lamb in the opening sentence of 'On Needle-work'.<sup>15</sup> Lamb was only sixteen years old in 1781 when she began her period of domestic servitude as apprentice to a mantua-maker, a maker of the short cloaks commonly worn by the women of the day.<sup>16</sup> Mantua-makers did not command middle-class status but the role was respectable and it offered one of the few

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<sup>15</sup> Mary Lamb, 'On Needle-work', op. cit., 204.

<sup>16</sup> For information on mantua-makers and the type of work Lamb would have undertaken, see Mary B. Balle, *Mary Lamb: An Extraordinary Life of Murder, Madness and Literary Talent* (New York: The Troy Book Makers, 2009), 34.

avenues of paid work open to women with little education.<sup>17</sup> Often considered training for the post of lady's maid, it was a form of work that demanded long hours during which an apprentice was vulnerable to harsh treatment, if not outright violence, by her sewing mistress.<sup>18</sup> By the autumn of 1789 Lamb had completed her apprenticeship and was in full-time employment as a mantua-maker; by 1793 as an unmarried woman in her mid-twenties she was also obliged to take on the task of housekeeper and carer to her ailing parents. Her relationship with her arthritic, bed-ridden, irascible and, it seems, unloving mother affected Mary badly, confining her to the family home and damaging her emotional equilibrium. 'My mother is grown so entirely helpless (not having any use of her limbs) that Mary is necessarily confined from ever sleeping out, she being her bed fellow', writes Charles Lamb to Coleridge in the summer of 1796.<sup>19</sup>

In the following early autumn, on 22 September 1796, Mary Lamb stabbed her paralyzed mother to death with a brutal kind of needle, the point of a carving knife, an event registered in history's chronicle as a family tragedy. Insanity ran in the Lamb family;<sup>20</sup> Mary was particularly susceptible, and it

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth noting that mantua work seemed to Dorothy Wordsworth a suitable occupation for her own maid, Sally Green, who had proved an inadequate nursemaid to William's infant daughter, Catherine. 'Happily', Dorothy noted of her maid, Sally 'has a genius for one thing, namely sewing, and as there is money enough for her we intend to have her apprenticed to a mantua-maker, and this must be done as soon as possible'. *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth (1787-1805)* ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 364.

<sup>18</sup> Witness, most notoriously in the present context, Lamb's uncontrolled rage at her young female apprentice, in the attack of September 1796, whom she chased round the dinner table with a knife before turning assassin on own her mother, Elizabeth Lamb.

<sup>19</sup> The letter is dated 29 June/1 July 1796. *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 1, 34.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Lamb suffered a bout of insanity in the period December 1795 to January 1796, when he voluntarily committed himself to an asylum. See Edwin

appears that her acute bout of madness in 1796 was brought on by a combination of overwork and stress. Lamb was 'worn down to a state of extreme nervous misery by attention to needlework by day, and to her mother by night, until the insanity which had been manifested more than once broke out into frenzy', recorded *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.<sup>21</sup> A contemporary account of the coroner's inquest was given in the *Morning Chronicle* on 26 September 1796:

On Friday afternoon the Coroner and a respectable Jury sat on the body of a Lady in the neighbourhood of Holborn, who died in consequence of a wound from her daughter the preceding day. It appeared by the evidence adduced, that while the family were preparing for dinner, the young lady seized a case knife laying on the table, and in a menacing manner pursued a little girl, her apprentice, round the room; on the eager calls of her helpless infirm mother to forbear, she renounced her first object, and with loud shrieks approached her parent.

The child by her cries quickly brought up the landlord of the house, but too late—the dreadful scene presented to him the mother lifeless, pierced to the heart, on a chair, her daughter yet wildly standing over her with the fatal knife, and the venerable old man, her father, weeping by her side, himself bleeding at the forehead from the effects of a severe blow he received from one of the forks she had been madly hurling about the room.

[...]

It seems the young Lady had been once before, in her earlier years, deranged, from the harassing fatigues of too much business.—As her carriage towards her mother was ever affectionate in the extreme, it is believed that to the increased attentiveness, which her parents' infirmities called for by day and night, is to be attributed the present insanity of this ill-fated young woman.<sup>22</sup>

Here the needle is both the cause of Mary's derangement (implicitly invoked in the phrase 'too much business') and the weapon of her mother's destruction. In a parodic restaging of the domestic scene of the pupil-daughter seated at her

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W. Marrs's introductory essay to his edition of *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 1, xxxvii.

<sup>21</sup> 'Charles Lamb', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 66 (August 1849), 137.

<sup>22</sup> *Morning Chronicle*, Monday 26 September, 1796; cited in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 1, 45.

teacher-mother's side, Mary's mother is pinned helplessly to her chair by her knife-wielding daughter who stands wildly above her.

It is well known that Lamb escaped incarceration and execution for her crime as the inquest returned a verdict of 'lunacy', enabling her to remain under her brother Charles's care until his death in 1834. It is also a matter of record that Lamb suffered subsequent periodic bouts of madness that confined her for short periods in private asylums, but that she finally found domestic comfort, if not total relief from her condition, by turning author, notably, of educational stories for children in collaboration with her brother Charles. Paradoxically, the woman who murdered her own mother became by virtue of her writing for children a sort of proxy mother, or guardian, of the moral health of the nation's offspring.

There is a connection between needlework, female madness and death in Mary Lamb's life and work, whether literal, as in the case of Lamb's own madness and the murder of her mother, or metaphorical, as in the observation of her essay 'On Needle-work' that girls and women of the bourgeois class waste their time, and in this sense waste their lives, at the needle. In Lamb's words, women have been wont:

to beguile and lose their time—knitting, knotting, netting, carpet working, and the like ingenious pursuits—those so often-praised but tedious works, which are so long in the operation, that purchasing the labour has seldom been thought good economy, yet, by a certain fascination, they have been found to chain down the great to a self-imposed slavery, from which they considerately, or haughtily, excuse the needy.<sup>23</sup>

The 'slavery' metaphor of a woman willingly embracing the shackles of her sewing hoop makes it difficult to see the middle-class feminine pursuit of the

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Lamb, 'On Needle-work', op. cit., 210.

needle, at best, as anything other than a guilty pleasure. At the essay's conclusion, in an envisaged assuaging of that implied guilt, Lamb urges financially comfortable women to 'give the money so saved [from their needle-work] to poor needle-women belonging to those branches of employment from which she has borrowed these shares of pleasurable labour'.<sup>24</sup> Her solemn warning is against the social dangers attached to luxury, the luxury of self-indulgence, and feminine pleasure. Lamb treats equally harshly another stereotypical feminine pleasure, a fondness for dressing up. Her volume *Poetry for Children* (1809), co-authored with Charles Lamb, includes 'Time Spent in Dress', a poem that delivers in its fourth, infelicitous, stanza the reprimand that there is no greater waste of time in a girl's life than the time spent in dressing:

There's not a more productive source  
Of waste of time to the young mind  
Than dress; as it regards our hours  
My view of it is now confin'd.<sup>25</sup>

Lamb can be seen here to be taking the baton from Mary Wollstonecraft, who had written at length on the dangers posed to women's intellectual and moral development by the unequal system of education in society that urged girls to value their appearance above the improvement of their minds. For Lamb, as for Wollstonecraft, the feminine needle whose sole purpose is female adornment and ornamentation is metaphorically a tool of women's intellectual self-destruction. Even writing about needlework, and its exploitative role in many women's lives, caused Lamb a temporary loss of stability. Upon finishing 'On Needle-work' she went into an asylum for a week, exhausted, according to diarist

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Charles and Mary Lamb, *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 3, 'Poetry for Children', 475.

Henry Crabb Robinson, by the difficult labour of writing.<sup>26</sup>

Mary Lamb's view of needlework as damaging to the development of a woman's rational faculties is shared by radical women writers of the period, notably Mary Wollstonecraft. For Wollstonecraft, the death of a woman's intellect, the demise of her self-autonomy (dulled into inactivity by being deprived of the educational stimulation afforded to boys and men), even the loss of her sexual reputation, are the pernicious consequences of women spending too much time with their needles rather than their books. Wollstonecraft writes in her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) that 'needle-work':

contracts their [girls'] faculties more than any other that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their persons. Men order their clothes to be made, and have done with the subject; women make their own clothes, necessary or ornamental, and are continually talking about them; and their thoughts follow their hands. It is not indeed the making of necessaries that weakens the mind; but the frippery of dress.<sup>27</sup>

'Frippery' is a sexually loaded word in Wollstonecraft's libiditized moral economy. Women who allow their 'thoughts [to] follow their hands', a metaphor which approaches the masturbatory, are at the mercy of vanity and sensuality, their minds weakened by an overriding preoccupation with dress and ornamentation.

Radical and Tory polemicists alike dilated on the dangers of female frippery and vanity. In the latter camp, Hannah More's *Cheap Repository Tracts* of the 1790s issued melodramatic warnings to girls and young women from the

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<sup>26</sup> Henry Crabb Robinson recorded in his diary for 11 December 1814 that Lamb 'was not unwell, but she had undergone great fatigue from writing an article about needlework for the new *Ladies' British Magazine*'; cited in Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* (July 1989), op. cit., 87.

<sup>27</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler eds., *The Works of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1989), vol. 5, 144.

lower orders about the moral hazards of aping the dress of the upper classes. The well-known ballad of 'Sinful Sally' is a case in point.<sup>28</sup> It relates the tale of a young country maiden, who, all too conscious of her personal charms, is happy to receive the attentions of the local landowner, Sir William. Her troubles begin with vanity: putting aside her 'cloak of scarlet' (l. 45) and 'simple kersey gown' (l. 12) for London fashion and 'ribbons gay' (l. 50) she becomes 'a mistress to a rake' (l. 56). From there it is but a short step to a life of alcoholism, prostitution and venereal disease, a fate inscribed from the outset in Sal's preoccupation with dress and implied by her scarlet cloak even before her wicked life begins. 'Sal's' 'bold career' (l. 138) pushes her towards the vengeful pain of the pox ('Fierce disease my body seizes,/ Racking pain afflicts my bones', [ll. 141-2]). Her final outcome is moral damnation and death:

Vain, alas, is all my groaning,  
For I fear the die is cast;  
True, thy blood is all atoning,  
But my day of grace is past (ll. 165-8)

For Hannah More, as for Mary Wollstonecraft, there is a metonymic link between colour and moral corruption. 'Pestiferous purple' is Wollstonecraft's colour-coding in the *Vindication* for the corruption of courtly power and religious hierarchy, 'which renders the progress of civilization a curse, and warps the understanding'.<sup>29</sup> While 'Sinful Sally' is not about matters of needle and thread per se, the symbolic coding of the scarlet cloak as an instrument of Sally's sexual downfall is indicative of a mistrust both of colour and of ornate dress that More shares in this case with Wollstonecraft. Both writers associate the *aesthetic* and

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<sup>28</sup> Hannah More, 'The Story of Sinful Sally, Told by Herself' (London, 1796, n. pag.)

<sup>29</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, op. cit., 87.

*sensuous* appeal of colour and fabric – the very stuff that flows from the needle’s point – to illicit female pleasure, which is linked in turn to the sexual appetites of male seducers. In the instance of fashionable dressing, to dwell on colour can be dangerous precisely because it has the ability to *seduce* a woman’s thoughts away from what Wollstonecraft called the rational duties of motherhood towards pleasurable fantasies of self-adornment.

Behind the protests of Wollstonecraft and More lay a contemporary print subculture much taken with feminine apparel; a phalanx of women’s magazines deployed vivid descriptions of colour and dress to stir the imaginative aspirations of their readers. Consider, for example, the ‘Account of the Ladies Dresses on his Majesty’s Birth-Day’ published in the *Lady’s Magazine* for June 1790:

There was something finely picturesque in her [the queen’s] dress, her petticoat being very beautifully embroidered in imitation of clouds with shades of green foil.<sup>30</sup>

The queen’s petticoat of embroidered imitation clouds and shades of green foil is a manufactured pastoral pressed into the service of fashionable dress and is as far away from real nature, so to speak, as it is possible to be. It is precisely this ability of colour to stimulate the imagination, to provoke individualized feelings and moods, to create fantasies, including sexual fantasies even, which explains Wollstonecraft’s distrust of the fashionable needle, as opposed to the utilitarian needle of the good mother and her ‘making of necessities’. The business of the mind, rather than the work of the hand, is Wollstonecraft’s chief concern. The long shadow cast over Romantic women’s writing by such outbursts as

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Account of the Ladies Dresses on his Majesty’s Birth-Day’, *The Lady’s Magazine*, vol. 21 (June 1790), 315.



Wollstonecraft's against the seduction of colour, of fabric, and fine dress, and by Lamb's vituperative essay has clouded the ability of contemporary critics, whose responses are examined below, to appreciate the importance the needle played in the creative lives of women in the Romantic period.

### **Female artisanship and Romantic women's writing**

Contemporary accounts of women's sewing in the Romantic period are beset, with few exceptions, by an inability to disassociate the needle from women's historical oppression. 'For all classes, the needle was an instrument of social control that kept girls and women sedentary for hours', writes Carol Shiner Wilson.<sup>31</sup> Shiner Wilson's reminder that sewing could be a mode of oppression for some Romantic women is salutary. Even so, this does not invalidate the possibility of viewing needlework in the Romantic period as a creative process involving the imaginative impulses of individual women as well as their labour. All the women in the Wordsworth circle sewed, among them Mary Lamb, Dorothy Wordsworth, and also Mary Wordsworth and Sarah Coleridge. The second generation of Romantic women, including the poets' daughters Sara Coleridge, Dora Wordsworth, Edith May Southey and the poet and author Maria Jane Jewsbury also deployed the needle.

Pamela Woof observes that for the second generation of Romantic women, the poet's sisters, daughters and their friends, 'sewing was a habit'.<sup>32</sup> It was a necessary household duty constituting 'work', but it could also be a source

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<sup>31</sup> Shiner Wilson, 'Lost Needles, Tangled Threads, Stitchery, Domesticity, and the Artistic Enterprise in Barbauld, Edgeworth, Taylor, and Lamb', *op. cit.*, 168.

<sup>32</sup> Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* (July 1989), *op. cit.*, 90.

of pleasure and, on occasion, the subject of poetry. During a visit to the Wordsworth family at Rydal Mount in 1827 Dora's friend, the writer Maria Jane Jewsbury (1800-1833), penned a sparkling mock-heroic paean to domestic needlework entitled 'The Lay of Thrift; or, The Progress of a Shift'.<sup>33</sup> An admirer of the poet Wordsworth (to whom she dedicated her collection of poems and prose *Phantasmagoria*, published in two volumes in 1825), Jewsbury wanted to be a writer from a young age and planned later in life to update Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* for a contemporary audience.<sup>34</sup>

'The Lay of Thrift' is a witty salute to the domestic needle, 'Inscribed to Mrs Wordsworth' and dated 'June 1819, Rydal Mount'. The salutation 'Mrs Wordsworth' suggests Mary Wordsworth, who often sewed with Dorothy, (although of the two it is Dorothy who was 'looked upon as the family seamstress').<sup>35</sup> Hence Jewsbury's address:

Oh Lady of the needle & the shears,  
Thou very peerless one among thy peers,  
I'd rather sit by thee in the green light  
Made by the laurel in the noonday bright,  
Watching thy implements & work maternal,  
Touched into beauty by the influence vernal,  
Than be with a fair idler who rehearses  
In the same sunshine, Mr Moore's best verses (ll. 41-8)<sup>36</sup>

The versifier Mr Moore is of course the astoundingly successful nineteenth-century Irish poet Thomas Moore, who had a reputation as the author of

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<sup>33</sup> WLMS A/ Jewsbury, Maria Jane/ 49.

<sup>34</sup> Joanne Wilkes, 'Jewsbury, Maria Jane (1800-1833)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004  
[<http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/14816>, accessed 16 Sept 2015].

<sup>35</sup> Pamela Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, (July 1989), op. cit., 89.

<sup>36</sup> Maria Jane Jewsbury, 'The Lay of Thrift; or, The Progress of a Shift', ll. 41-8. The poem is held at the Wordsworth Trust Museum, Grasmere. WLMSA/ Jewsbury, Maria Jane/ 49.

charming seductive poetry. Jewsbury's ironic contrast of the productive use of a woman's time to sew a shift with the profligate wasting of time by the loitering auditor of Moore's 'best verses' mounts a humorous case in defence of the domestic needle.

William Wordsworth was so taken with a sewing case in the shape of a harp with needles serving for strings, (figure 1),<sup>37</sup> owned by the Poet Laureate Robert Southey's daughter, Edith May Southey, that he wrote a mock dedicatory poem, in ten stanzas, 'On Seeing a Needlecase in the Form of a Harp, the work of E. M. S.' (1827).<sup>38</sup>



Figure 1: 'Wordsworth's Needle Case', The Wordsworth Trust, gift of Helen Muir in memory of her mother, 2001. Reproduced courtesy of The Wordsworth Trust.

The argument of the poem voiced by an irate 'Bard' (Wordsworth) is that the faux harp is an affront to the 'noble instrument' of the classical Muses and to their mortal representative, the Laureate Southey:

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<sup>37</sup> Edith May Southey's (uncatalogued) needle case in the shape of a harp is held at the Wordsworth Trust Museum, Grasmere, in a box marked 'Wordsworth's Needle Case'.

<sup>38</sup> The poem is republished in *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol 3, 607-8.

Frowns are on every Muse's face,  
 Reproaches from their lips are sent,  
 That mimickry should thus disgrace  
 The noble Instrument (ll. 1-4)

[...]

And this, too, from the Laureate's Child,  
 A living Lord of melody!  
 How will her Sire be reconciled  
 To the refined indignity? (ll. 13-16)

The 'Bard's' mock tirade is interrupted at stanza five by a female sprite who pleads with 'low voice': 'Bard! Moderate your ire;/ Spirits of all degrees rejoice/ In presence of the Lyre' (ll. 18-20). She whispers to him of an enchanted faery world where love-sick maids embroider to the music of gossamer lutes that have sunbeams for chords, 'made vocal' by the 'brushing wings' of 'Gay Sylphs':

Some, still more delicate of ear ,  
 Have lutes (believe my words)  
 Whose framework is of gossamer,  
 While sunbeams are the chords.

Gay Sylphs this Miniature will court,  
 Made vocal by their brushing wings,  
 And sullen Gnomes will learn to sport  
 Around its polished strings;

Whence strains to love-sick Maiden dear,  
 While in her lonely Bower she tries  
 To cheat the thought she cannot cheer,  
 By fanciful embroideries.

Trust, angry Bard! a knowing Sprite,  
 Nor think the Harp her lot deploras;  
 Though mid the stars the Lyre shines bright,  
 Love stoops as fondly as he soars.' (ll. 25-40)

These lightly mocking tetrameters nonetheless authorize the association of femininity with needlework. Wordsworth here endorses what had become by the 1820s a general recognition of needlework as a cultural signifier of the

feminine and of heterosexual love, as demonstrated in the Keatsian romance 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil' (1818), with its iconic depiction of Isabella embroidering while day-dreaming of her lover Lorenzo, and which in women's writing of the period demonstrates a softer attitude towards female activity with the needle than that of Lamb or Wollstonecraft.<sup>39</sup>

Sewing was a means of securing bonds of friendship and family attachments between the women of the Wordsworth circle. In the summer of 1832 Dora Wordsworth (1804-1847) wrote to Rotha Quillinan (1822-1876), who became her stepdaughter following Dora's marriage to Edward Quillinan in May 1841, that she had made her a needlecase to remind her of Mary (Wordsworth):

I have made you a needle-case like Mary's: not that I supposed it would please you for its beauty, because it is as ugly as needs be, - but it would serve to remind you of her and Rydal & therefore I fancied  
[page break (crossed writing)]  
it would please you.<sup>40</sup>

When Dora herself was just sixteen years of age, and her parents were on a Continental tour, in Paris, she was desperate that her mother bring back supplies for her workbox, as recorded in a letter from Sara Hutchinson to Mary Wordsworth, dated 11 September 1820:

You must not fail to provide for Doro's work Box – It is all that she is anxious about – winders, bodkins, skillets, measure &c &c of ivory or mother of pearl – scissors [*sic*] & knife I tell her are far better in Eng.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Roszika Parker points to the insistence by proponents of femininity in the mid nineteenth century that 'it was a woman's duty to embroider for love', *The Subversive Stitch*, op cit., 156.

<sup>40</sup> The letter is held at The Wordsworth Museum. WLL/ Wordsworth, Dora/ I/ 42.

<sup>41</sup> The letter is held at The Wordsworth Museum: WLL/ Hutchinson, Sara/ 1/ 68.

Then as now France seems to have cornered the market in pretty things: mother-of-pearl rulers and the like. England, on the other hand, is better for plain and also sharp objects: scissors, knives, and needles.

Among the older generation of Romantic women, Dorothy Wordsworth dedicated much of her time to sewing, which was necessary household 'work' but it is work that might also be seen, simultaneously, as an outlet for her creativity. Dorothy was a prolific sewer: at Alfoxden, in the course of March 1797 to April 1798, she made ten shirts for her lawyer brother Richard and then remade with them with significant alternations to the neck and cuffs (due to Richard's having given her faulty measurements).<sup>42</sup> In addition, she made shifts and shoes<sup>43</sup> for herself, waistcoats for Wordsworth,<sup>44</sup> babies' linen jackets edged in lace,<sup>45</sup> and cuffs – or 'wrists'<sup>46</sup> as she calls them – for Sara Coleridge. She helped her neighbor Aggie Flemming quilt petticoats,<sup>47</sup> and she also made

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<sup>42</sup> See Dorothy's correspondence with her brother Richard between March 1797 and April 1798, in *The Early Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, op. cit., 163, 166-8, 173, 191.

<sup>43</sup> Dorothy's entry for 2 August 1800, in her 'Grasmere Journal', records: 'after tea worked at my shifts in the orchard' (*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman, op. cit., 32). See also her journal entry for 25 June 1800: 'I sate with W. in the orchard all morning and made my shoes' (ibid., 30).

<sup>44</sup> Dorothy records a domestic scene at Dove Cottage, in November 1801, of reading and sewing by the fireside: 'We sate by the fire without work for some time then Mary read a poem of Daniell upon Learning. After tea Wm read Spenser now and then a little aloud to us. We were making his waistcoat' (*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman, op. cit., 62).

<sup>45</sup> One such jacket made by Dorothy is held in the Wordsworth Trust Museum. GRMDE.E7: 'Baby's jacket in white made from oblong panels of linen joined by bands of lace. Front opening without fastenings, collar and sleeves edged with lace'.

<sup>46</sup> See Dorothy's entry in her 'Grasmere Journal' for 10 January 1803: 'I lay in bed to have a Drench of sleep till one o'clock. Worked all Day petticoats—Mrs C's wrists. Ran Wm's woollen stockings for he put them on today for the first time' (*Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman, op. cit., 165).

<sup>47</sup> See Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers', *Charles Lamb Bulletin* (July 1989), op. cit., 86.

quilted bedcovers and curtains for the Wordsworth household. Making things, no less than writing about them, shaped Dorothy's identity.

It is not insignificant that Romantic poetry, specifically the poetry of William Wordsworth, sets great store by the nobility of labour and the work of the hand. Wordsworth writes in *The Prelude* of the 'mental Power/ And genuine virtue they possess who live/ By bodily toil'.<sup>48</sup> His relocation of poetry from the metropolitan centre to the rural provinces, his telling of the lives of simple folk, rooted in the local community, his use of the popular ballad form and democratizing blank verse, and his recasting of the poetic aesthetic as expressive, with an emphasis on individual experience and, in particular, the individual experience of the poet, has a parallel, I argue, in the artisanal creativity of the poet's sister Dorothy. Dorothy's creativity, like William's, is based in the provinces, on the outskirts of metropolitan life, and is centred on the self. Hers is predominantly a utilitarian and artisanal aesthetic that values the labour of the individual hand; she gives as much attention in her Alfoxden and Grasmere journals to things she makes (from shifts to shoes and cakes to bread) as she does to the conventionally weightier business of reading and writing. Sewing in Dorothy's journals carries positive associations of self-affirmation and productive labour with none of the negative connotations of women's mental impoverishment found in the writings of Mary Lamb or Mary Wollstonecraft. In this respect, Dorothy's knitting a sock, quilting a bed cover or sewing a shirt is part of the spectrum of creativity that includes the expressive individual (stereotypically male) poetic imagination.

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<sup>48</sup> William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, XIII (1824-1829), ll. 95-7, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 3, 329.

The argument requires some qualification even so. Dorothy's domestic needlework activity, recorded in her letters and journals, although clearly of significance to her everyday life is not accorded any aesthetic value by her. Neither does the use of fabric and needle prompt her towards the kind of imaginative flight of fancy that stimulates Charles Lamb in his 'Elia' essay 'Oxford in the Vacation' (1820), an essay which opens with the author contemplating the patterns and fabrics of the textiles traded in by the East India Company for whom he worked as company accountant.<sup>49</sup> 'I confess it is my humour', writes Lamb ('Elia'), 'to while away some good hours of my time in the contemplation of indigos, cottons, raw silks, piece-goods, flowered or otherwise'.<sup>50</sup> While Lamb is released by his imagination from the tedium of his day job of balancing the books, Dorothy's journal writing is anchored to the real world by her down-to-earth eye for the practical details of everyday things.

It is in its particularity and local detail, rather than in an Elia imaginative flight of fancy, that Dorothy's journal communicates authorial emotion and feeling. Pamela Woof puts the case well in her observation that 'Dorothy's joy, sympathy, anxiety, constantly enrich the particularity of reading, writing, talking, walking, baking, planting, mending. The briefest observation can carry feeling', Woof remarks.<sup>51</sup> Consider, for example, the following entry in the Grasmere journal, dated Monday 23 November, 1801:

A beautiful frosty morning. Mary was making William's woollen waistcoat. Wm unwell and did not walk. Mary and I sate in our cloaks

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<sup>49</sup> Charles Lamb, 'Oxford in the Vacation', *The London Magazine* (1820), republished in *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 2 'Elia and the Last Essays of Elia', 8-13.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> Woof, 'Dorothy Wordsworth and Mary Lamb, Writers', *The Charles Lamb Bulletin*, (April 1989), op. cit., 49.



upon the Bench in the Orchard. After dinner I went to bed unwell—Mary had a head-ach at night. We all went to bed soon.<sup>52</sup>

The beauty of a frosty morning, orchard benches: these are the pared back descriptions of a domestic lifestyle that is defined through acts of making -and being - which shape Dorothy's record of everyday existence – sewing a waistcoat or wearing a warm coat. There is a palpable 'thingness' in the observational style of writing used throughout the journal, which defines Dorothy's artisanal creativity. She sometimes remarks that sewing prevented her from having the time to read<sup>53</sup> and she always had more than enough work for her needle – on one occasion William describes her as being 'absolutely buried in it' <sup>54</sup> - but she is insistent throughout her writing on the central role the needle played in the domestic life of the Wordsworth household. Sewing for Dorothy Wordsworth is precisely not a waste of time (as per the charge of radical women Romantic writers). Rather, it represents an investment in the creative energy of hand labour, from making shoes and shifts to binding books and quilting bed covers.

Binding books in quilted covers and old gowns was a habit of women in the Wordsworth circle. The Wordsworth Trust Museum holds quilted book covers belonging to Dora.<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth reputedly bound

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<sup>52</sup> *Journals of Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. Mary Moorman, op. cit., 60.

<sup>53</sup> Dorothy writes to her brother William, on 23 April 1812: 'sewing has hitherto prevented my reading myself, but Sara often reads aloud' *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, op. cit., 5.

<sup>54</sup> Wordsworth sends Coleridge a picture of Dorothy on the eve of her 28<sup>th</sup> birthday, which was Christmas Eve, 1799, on their arrival at Dove Cottage: 'D. is now sitting by me racked with the tooth-ach. This is a grievous misfortune as she has so much for work for her needle among the bedcurtains &c that she is absolutely buried in it' (*Letters of William Wordsworth. A Selection*, ed. Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 33.

<sup>55</sup> GRMDC.E77-80-MRRS D/8/4.

Wordsworth's poems in her old gowns,<sup>56</sup> while Dora together with her mother Mary made 'Cottonian' bindings, which is the practice of covering books in remnants of dress fabric and such like.<sup>57</sup> Dora Wordsworth, Sara Coleridge and Edith May Southey are said to have bound in cotton fabric 'from 1200 to 1400 volumes', collected in Robert Southey's 'Cottonian Library'.<sup>58</sup> The Cottonian bindings made by women in the Wordsworth circle gesture towards the ornate book coverings used at William Morris's Kelmscott Press at the height of the later nineteenth-century Arts and Crafts movement. The hand-crafted decorative aesthetic that distinguished the Kelmscott press is evidenced beautifully on the embroidered cover of the anonymous Middle English poem (c. 1470), *The floure and the leafe, & the boke of Cupide, God of love, or the cuckow and the nightingale*, published at the Kelmscott Press in 1896 (figure 2), which is a poem that Wordsworth also modernized in his translations from Chaucer.<sup>59</sup> The embroidery design of flowers and leaves references the title of the poem in a self-conscious design that refocuses attention from the content of the text to its mode of production, to its very materiality.

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<sup>56</sup> See Maggs Bros Ltd, *Bookbinding in the British Isles: Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century* (London: Maggs Bros, 1996), 132.

<sup>57</sup> The British Library 'Database of Bookbindings' includes an example of a 'Cottonian' binding by 'Mrs Wordsworth', belonging to Robert Southey. See the British Library 'Database of Bookbindings' (accessed on 16 September 2015), <http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/Results.aspx?SearchType=AlphabeticSearch&ListType=CoverMaterial&Value=117>

<sup>58</sup> See C. C. Southey's *Life and Correspondence of the Late Robert Southey* (1850), cited in Howard M. Nixon, *Five Centuries of English Bookbinding* (London: Scolar Press, 1978), 194.

<sup>59</sup> F. S. Ellis, ed., *The floure and the leafe, & the boke of Cupide, God of love, or the cuckow and the nightingale* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1896). Octavo; Troy type; edition of 300 paper copies and 10 vellum. The first bound copy of this work arrived at Kelmscott hours before William Morris died on 3rd October 1896 and is held in Cardiff University's Special Collections and Archives. Wordsworth's 'The Cuckoo and the Nightingale', composed around 1815-19, is found in *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 2, 642-54.

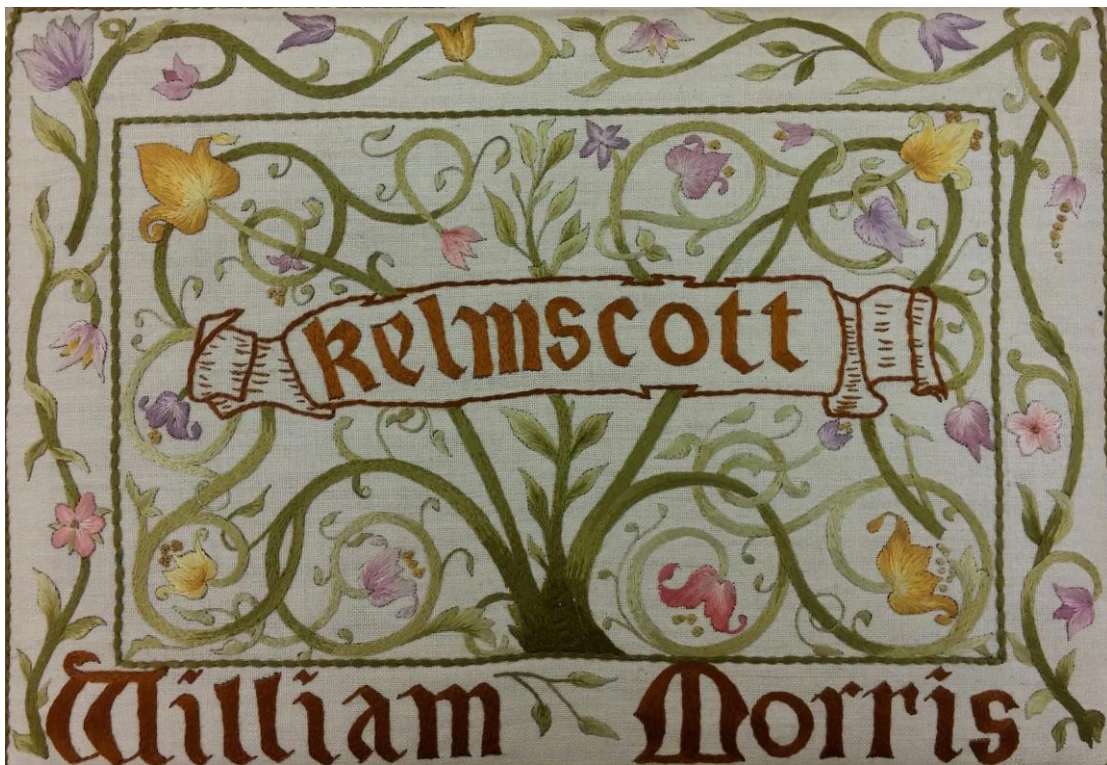


Figure 2: *The floure and the leafe, & the boke of Cupide, God of love, or the cuckow and the nightingale*, published at the Klemcott Press in 1896. Reproduced courtesy of Cardiff University Rare Books and Archives.

The emphasis placed by the Arts and Crafts movement on artisanal craftsmanship and the importance of local tradition – on the practice of *making* things by an individual at a particular moment in time and place – fits well retrospectively with Dorothy's artisanal creativity and also, indeed, with the emphasis on the local and the traditional in the poetic practices of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it might be recalled, was printed in the provinces, in Bristol, well outside the metropolitan mainstream of contemporary eighteenth-century book production. This collection of lyrics,

tales, and other poems, composed in a vivid and straightforward idiom, self-consciously looks back to an earlier ballad tradition for its inspiration in terms of poetic pattern and form.

Textile historians have drawn attention to the close association between quilting and the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement.<sup>60</sup> As with William Morris's woven textiles, embroideries and book covers, quilting designs have a pattern that can be appreciated by people of all classes. 'Textiles could convey a narrative even to the illiterate', writes Morris's biographer Fiona MacCarthy.<sup>61</sup> A quilt made by Dorothy Wordsworth from a gown bequeathed to her by 'Old Molly', the Wordsworth family servant for many years, tells its own story.<sup>62</sup> In spring 1811 Dorothy wrote to Mary Clarkson that she and her sister-in-law Mary were taking advantage of Joanna Hutchinson's 'services in nursing' Mary's toddler Catherine in order:

to piece up some old gowns and other things which we had no value for into bed quilts, amongst these is old Molly's legacy to me—her best gown, and during the last ten days Mary and I have with our own hands without any help quilted two of them.<sup>63</sup>

The piece of fabric from 'Old Molly's legacy' represents family history of a sort

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<sup>60</sup> Susan Marks observes: 'The wholecloth quilting of Durham and South Wales fitted the principles of the Arts and Crafts movement, with its regional traditions, while still maintaining the mark of the individual as each quilter used her patterns in her own peculiar way', 'Changing Perceptions of the Quilt in Twentieth Century Britain: A Personal Polemic', *Quilt Studies. The Journal of the British Quilt Study Group*, 2 (2000), 31-66, 42. A 'wholecloth' quilt, as the name implies, is a quilt made from one piece of material, in a single colour (as opposed to a quilt pieced from several blocks of different coloured patterned and plain fabrics).

<sup>61</sup> Fiona MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty: William Morris and his Legacy 1860-1960* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2014), 75.

<sup>62</sup> Molly is Mary Fisher (1741-1808), the Wordsworth's servant at Dove Cottage who had passed away a couple of years earlier.

<sup>63</sup> *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years*, op. cit., 446.

that Molly herself might have recognized more readily in the memories invoked by the fabrics used in Dorothy's quilt than in any written account.

A local woman with little apparent knowledge of the wider world, Molly resembles one of the disenfranchised class of the very old, the very young and the barely literate who populate *Lyrical Ballads*. William Hazlitt recalls 'our laughing [in the summer of 1803] a good deal at W's old Molly, who had never heard of the French Revolution, ten years after it happened. Oh worse than Gothic ignorance!'<sup>64</sup> Coleridge caricatured her as 'Wordsworth's old Molly with her washing Tub'.<sup>65</sup> Mary Lamb, on the other hand, closes a letter to Dorothy of October 1804 with a respectful postscript: 'Compliments to old Molly'.<sup>66</sup> The piece of fabric from 'Old Molly's legacy' stands metonymically for the social and familial history of Dove Cottage and even of the different histories of country folk rooted in the local environment in contrast to the events of the world stage (witness Hazlitt's humorous jibe at Molly's 'Gothic ignorance' of the French Revolution). In the domestic and artisanal context of Grasmere, making things is life affirming; Dorothy's quilting stitches piece together layers of memory that mark different significant events and persons creating a metaphorical, visual representation of history in which the individual is connected to a wider whole in ways that gesture to subjectivity itself as a textual construct.

The 'memory quilt' is an expression of mourning associated particularly with women during the nineteenth century in which the quilt incorporates

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<sup>64</sup> William Hazlitt, 'On the Character of the Country People', *The Examiner*, July 1819; cited in Pamela Woof ed., *The Grasmere Journals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 148-9.

<sup>65</sup> *Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. E. L. Griggs, 6 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956-71), vol. 2, 768.

<sup>66</sup> *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb*, op. cit., vol. 2, 148.

fabrics from the deceased's clothing in the manner that Dorothy used pieces from 'Old Molly's gown.'<sup>67</sup> Dorothy's quilts, which were intended for use as 'bed quilts', as well as providing physical warmth, might also have given emotional comfort to her and to the Wordsworth family who could still be wrapped metaphorically in Molly's memory so to speak. If a quilt can be conceptualized as an artifact of memory and family history, it is perhaps not surprising that one of the foremost psychoanalytical theorists of the twentieth century, Jacques Lacan, had recourse to the metaphoricity of the quilting needle in explaining how human subject positions come to be stabilized in language. Lacan's notion of the '*point de capiton*,'<sup>68</sup> quilting or anchoring point in English, uses the attachment of buttons as a metaphor to indicate the points along the linguistic chain of signification where the signifier is attached to the signified. A certain number of these points are necessary to the construction of the 'normal' subject—their absence is in fact a symptom of psychosis. Without such quilting points the subject would be incapable of navigating their everyday life. Memory conceived as integral to the formation of individual subject identity serves as a link between the high art of the Romantic poem produced by a creative imagination stimulated by memory and self-reflection and popular material objects and artifacts such as quilts that may also be closely connected to the inner life of memory. As with Romantic poetry, quilts also require an appreciation of the harmonies of pattern and form.

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<sup>67</sup> See the entries on 'Mourning Quilts in America' and 'Quilts as Memorials' in the *Encyclopedia of Death and the Human Experience*, 2 vols, eds. Clifton D. Byrant and Dennis L. Peck (California: Sage, 2009), vol. 1, 721-3.

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), 303.

### Crafting Romantic poetry: pattern and form

Of the 'formal patterns' used by Wordsworth to poeticize harmony in the natural world one pattern of imagery shines transcendent, which is that of the star.<sup>69</sup> The metaphysical power of star imagery is seen particularly in the poet's early experimental works, in the avant-gardist 'Lucy' poems of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) for instance, where the poet's memory of the dead girl Lucy, and the joy she inspires in him, is figured in the image of the 'stars of midnight', which, in harmony with the dancing 'rivulets' on earth below, foster Lucy's eternal ethereal presence:

The stars of midnight shall be dear  
To her, and she shall lean her ear  
In many a secret place  
Where rivulets dance their wayward round,  
And beauty born of murmuring sound  
Shall pass into her face.<sup>70</sup>

Star imagery appears still earlier in Wordsworth's psychologically charged verse tragedy *The Borderers* (composed 1796-7) in which the failed assassin Mortimer, motivated by jealousy and an apparently rational desire to reset a wrong, is prevented from executing his heinous crime by the sight of a solitary star shining through a crevice above his head:

I cast my eyes up-wards, and  
through a crevice in the roof I beheld a star twinkling over my  
head, and by the living God, I could not do it—<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> 'Formal patterns' is Geoffrey Durrant's phrase, in chapter 3 of his study *Wordsworth and the Great System: A Study of Wordsworth's Poetic Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 32-43.

<sup>70</sup> William Wordsworth, 'Three years she grew in sun and shower', ll. 25-30, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 1, 437.

<sup>71</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Borderers', Act II, sc. iii, 289-91, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 1, 200.

No human eye can defy God's superior and omniscient presence, symbolized by the solitary star twinkling overhead. Henceforth a murder is prevented. The star, with its attendant Biblical references, represents the pantheistic sense of harmony that is at the genesis of Wordsworthian Romanticism.

God-like attributes of transcendence and immanence are mirrored again in the power of a solitary star in the famous skating passage from the first book of the *Two-Part Prelude* (1799) where the boy Wordsworth skates on frozen Esthwaite in meditative solitude under the shadowy pattern of a star:

Not seldom from the uproar I retired  
Into a silent bay, or sportively  
Glanced sideways leaving the tumultuous throng  
To cut across the shadow of a star  
That gleamed upon the ice.<sup>72</sup>

Under Esthwaite's starry light Wordsworth pauses and feels himself to be at the still centre of a pantheistic universe in which God is everywhere present, in all of nature's forms. 'Stopped short' (l. 180), he experiences the 'solitary cliffs' (l. 180) wheel by him:

even as if the earth had rolled  
With visible motion her diurnal round<sup>73</sup>

The power of the star pattern in Wordsworth's poetry is shared by the long history of star patterns in traditional quilting design.

Geometric shapes, specifically the triangles and half squares that form the diamonds used to make the star pattern in quilting, are among the oldest and most widespread in the history of patchwork in Britain. As well as being used to

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<sup>72</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Prelude (1798-1799)', ll. 170-74, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 1, 535.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, ll. 181-2.



piece a patchwork design of stars and other geometric shapes, the diamond pattern is a popular, probably the most popular, design, used to stitch (to quilt) together the three layers of fabric that make up a quilt, namely the top fabric or coverlet, the middle filling or wadding, and the backing fabric. Formed by a series of diagonally crossed straight lines, diamonds are an easier pattern to quilt than other designs used for decorative quilt stitching such as the fans, cables or wreaths (the last two being used mainly for corners or borders). This important practical consideration apart, the diamond shape possesses symbolic, often magical, and also Biblical connotations that have endured across the centuries. The Harlequin figure of ribald sexuality, for example, familiar in Western culture from the early modern period onwards, is instantly recognizable by a costume pieced from brightly coloured diamond shapes and it is argued that 'the concept that patches turn away evil . . . speaks[s] for the use of patchwork textiles in religious festivals'.<sup>74</sup> 'Especially powerful', writes the early modern historian and quilter, Linda Woodbridge, are what she calls 'special patterns' of squares, formed into triangles and diamonds to make star and checkerboard designs.<sup>75</sup> The eight-point star appears in numerous quilting patterns like the 'Star of David', the 'Sunburst' pattern and the still more popular 'Star of Bethlehem' (figure 3).

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<sup>74</sup> On the idea that patches turn away evil, see Schnuppe Von Gwinner, *The History of the Patchwork Quilt: Origins, Traditions and Symbols of a Textile Art*, trans. Edward Force (Westchester, Penn., 1988), 52; cited in Linda Woodbridge, 'Patchwork: Piecing the Early Modern Mind in England's First Century of Print Culture', *English Literary Renaissance*, 23. 1 (1993), 5-46, 27.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.



Figure 3: 'Star of Bethlehem Quilt', *c.* 1835, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.

Reproduced courtesy of the American Museum in Bath, (Bath, UK).

History does not record the patterns chosen by Dorothy for her quilts, but we do have Jane Austen's patchwork coverlet (which is not quilted), made with

her sister Cassandra and their mother circa 1811 (possibly about the same time that Dorothy was quilting bed covers for the Wordsworth household).<sup>76</sup> The Austen patchwork is evidently a planned (rather than random) design, executed with considerable skill and precision (see figure 4 below).<sup>77</sup> At the centerpiece of the patchwork is a diamond square cut from a chintz pattern which is surrounded by evenly spaced smaller diamonds in printed cotton dress fabrics divided at regular intervals by a cream sashing fabric with black dots. A masterpiece of design in its symmetry of form and colour, the coverlet might be seen in the exactitude of its formal design as analogous to the symmetries and rhythms of chapter and volume design that structure Austen's novels.<sup>78</sup> The symmetry of Austen's plots and the formal exactitude of their division into volumes and chapters at the macro level are matched at the micro level of sentence detail, Austen's textual stitches so to speak, paralleling the careful hand-stitching of her patchwork.

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<sup>76</sup> Austen writes to Cassandra: 'Have you collected the pieces for the patchwork? We are at a standstill', cited in Averil Colby, *Patchwork* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1958), 112. The coverlet is kept in the Austen House Museum in Chawton, Hampshire. It should be noted that the date of 1811 given for the composition of the patchwork cover is based entirely on the citation from Austen's letter, which could refer to any piece of patchwork. There is no evidence that the patchwork referred to is that which hangs in the Jane Austen House Museum. Indeed, a number of fabrics included in the pattern suggest a later date of composition than 1811. I am grateful to Sue Dell, volunteer curator at the Jane Austen House Museum, for sharing with me her detailed research into Austen's needlecraft and quilting activities.

<sup>77</sup> The coverlet is on display at the Jane Austen House Museum, Chawton, Hampshire. The museum reference no. is CHWJA:JAH153.

<sup>78</sup> On the formal symmetry of Austen's chapter and volume organization, see Marilyn Butler, 'Disregarded Designs. Jane Austen's Sense of the Volume', *Jane Austen Society Collected Reports, 1976-85*, Jane Austen Society, 1989, 99-114.





Figure 4: 'Jane Austen's quilt'. Reproduced courtesy of Jane Austen's House Museum.

Patchwork, even in its most sophisticated guise, as with the Austen

coverlet, has not historically been accorded an attention equal to that given by scholars of the Romantic period to other forms of non-literary creativity, notably music and painting but also landscape design and gardening. To turn to the latter example of landscape gardening, an activity in which William Wordsworth took an almost professional interest, is to introduce the formal aspects of design that connect non-literary arts with literary creativity. The correlation between the concern with form and metrical patterning in Wordsworth's poetry and his practical plan for the winter garden he designed in collaboration with Dorothy in 1806 for his patron and friend Sir George Beaumont,<sup>79</sup> offers a post-hoc justification for a consideration of the ways in which quilting and needlework might been seen similarly as expressions of creativity that interconnect with the formal concerns, the patterns and metaphors of Romantic poetry.

The winter garden Wordsworth designed for George Beaumont and his wife Lady Margaret at their estate at Coleorton, Leicestershire, is remarkable in the context of this discussion of star patterns not least because it included, in later years, a shell grotto with a pebble floor decorated in a Star of David pattern that is attributed to Dorothy Wordsworth.<sup>80</sup> William Wordsworth described his design for the winter garden thus:

Within and close to the edging of boxwood, I would first plant a row of snowdrops, and behind that a row of crocus; these would succeed each other. Close under the wall I would have a row, or fringe, of white lilies, and in front of this another of daffodils; these also would succeed each other, the daffodils coming first; the middle part of the border, which must be of good width, to be richly tufted, or bedded over with hepatica, jonquils, hyacinths, polyanthus, auriculas, mezereon, and other spring flowers, and shrubs that blossom early.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> See Tony Reavell, 'Poet and Patron: Wordsworth's winter garden design for Lady Beaumont', *Charles Lamb Bulletin*, n.s. 160 (Autumn 2014), 109-24.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

The whiteness of the winter snowdrop is thrown into relief by the coloured crocus just as, later in the year, the fringe of white lily will intensify the yellow of the spring daffodil. In much the way the colours of a patchwork quilt might seem unplanned but yet follow a pattern, so the colour arrangement of Wordsworth's garden offers pleasing contrasts that form an overall pattern but appear bright, rich and even spontaneous in ways that give the eye the freedom to roam visually and contemplatively. Wordsworth achieves, in other words, a visual imagery which combines order with playfulness. The effect is similar to that found in patchwork quilt design and, indeed, to the use of metrical patterns in poetry. In landscape design, as in quilting and also in poetry, the creative practitioner manipulates the formal template (the garden plan, the quilting pattern or the metrical form).

A final return to *Lyrical Ballads* and to that well-known poem 'We are Seven' allows the possibility of thinking about sewing in poetry, which is to think poetically about sewing as a form of creativity and imaginative freedom. The eight-years-old cottage girl, faced with the fact that two of her seven siblings are dead, insists nonetheless that she has seven brothers and sisters in all. The adult questioner in the poem insists that seven minus two equals five:

You run about, my little maid,  
Your limbs they are alive;  
If two are in the church-yard laid,  
Then ye are only five.<sup>82</sup>

In response, the maid replies 'Their graves are green, they may be seen' (l. 37):

My stockings there I often knit,

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<sup>82</sup> William Wordsworth, 'We are Seven' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 1798), ll. 33-6, *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 1, 333.

My 'kerchief there I hem,  
And there upon the ground I sit—  
I sit and sing to them. (ll. 41-4)

The children's green graves are still resonant with life for the little maid who takes her sewing and sings there. Knitting, hemming, singing: these are imaginative responses to the dead siblings, which contrast with the obtuse literalism of the poetic persona of the interrogator. If the child of that great lyric 'The Rainbow' is in Wordsworth's paradoxical phrase, 'Father of the Man',<sup>83</sup> the little maid of 'We Are Seven' is in some way 'mother of the man', a dispenser of wisdom, however unconventional it might be.

Stitching as a literal activity in 'We Are Seven' triggers the release of the little maid's somewhat uncanny other vision, what Jonathan Wordsworth refers to as a 'border vision', that obscure, almost metaphysical, state of being and not quite being, which in its most developed form opens a window onto the poetic imagination.<sup>84</sup> In a larger metaphorical sense, the imaginative response of the little maid's border vision, which keeps her siblings green in her soul, is also that which preserves her own emotional wellbeing. In her slippage between the accepted rationality of adulthood (she after all addresses the interrogator's questions – she has a conversation with him) and her expression of a linguistic and arithmetical understanding that defies conventional adult wisdom she finds a place to be, a spot of time, so to speak, in early childhood. Her knitting and sewing are more than just knitting and sewing: they have a powerful spiritual and metaphorical significance, like the nightingale to Keats or, indeed, the

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<sup>83</sup> William Wordsworth, 'The Rainbow' (*Poems in Two Volumes*, 1807), *The Poems of William Wordsworth*, op. cit., vol. 1, 669.

<sup>84</sup> Jonathan Wordsworth, *William Wordsworth: The Borders of Vision* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

rainbow to William Wordsworth.

In the long history of quilting, women have demonstrated their extraordinary powers of creativity, sometimes to keep themselves and their households alive by the making of ‘necessaries’, and at other times to keep alive the memory of those no longer living or simply (which is not the same as being simplistic) to celebrate life’s colours and forms. This much the creative quilter shares with the poet: both work with pattern and the imagination. Each adopts pattern as a template (for instance the traditional design used by a quilter or the poet’s choice of a particular metrical form) yet both also individualize their art by playing with and adapting the base pattern. Pattern in this sense connotes an adherence to as well as an individualizing of existing forms. To speak of quilting and poetry in the same sentence is to think seriously about the conjunction of art and craft. This is not to propose a mere interchangeability between the work of the hand and that of the mind; rather, it is to open up the possibility of thinking poetically and imaginatively, as well as historically, about sewing and so-called ‘women’s work’. To think creatively about quilting or about garden design is to think about quilting and gardening as forms of engaged imaginative creativity. It is not to confuse either activity with poetry and certainly any such rethinking must take account of historical permeations and realities. Yet the bright star of creativity shines powerfully both in textile and text. Reading these two forms together is to put poetry and craft, and male and female creativity into dialogue in ways that can open a theoretical space for sewing conceived as a transformative, meaningful activity and one that has been too long excluded or marginalized from accounts of Romantic creativity.