

**Political self-expression in mid-seventeenth century
English women's embroideries**

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I. Introduction

This thesis aims to propose how amateur women's embroideries can contribute to our understanding of the seventeenth century. Wide-ranging possibilities are explored, encompassing gender, faith, emotional experience, and political allegiance. The visual, material, and textual aspects of the sources are considered and interpreted alongside contemporary written sources, both through quantitative evaluation and close analysis of individual works. These approaches will be used to explore how mid-seventeenth-century embroideries can be used as a means of accessing female self-expression which was, it will here be argued, inherently political whether concerning wartime loyalties or the interpretation of religious teaching.

Histories of the English 'revolution' of the mid-seventeenth century frequently lack female perspective. Interest in the actors of this period has been inherently gendered, as a fight between 'cavaliers' and 'roundheads'. McElligott and Smith's *Royalists and Royalism during the English Civil Wars* raised the issue that scholars' contentment to define a royalist as 'somebody who took up arms for the king' has failed to accurately encompass the experiences of a great many individuals.¹ Whilst implicit in this is a recognition that the female perspective has been neglected, here, as elsewhere, the focus remains on soldiers, members of parliament and broadly masculine factional court politics. This silence can be attributed to a relative dearth of published writings by women of the period. Whilst the Civil War years resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of female authors, even in the period from 1640 to 1700, 98.8 per cent of published works were written by men.²

¹ J. McElligott and D. Smith, 'Introduction: rethinking royalists and royalism', in J. McElligott and D. Smith (eds.), *Royalists and Royalism During the English Civil Wars* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 12-3.

² P. Crawford, 'Women's published writings 1600-1700', in M. Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society, 1500-1800* (London, 1985), pp. 266-7.

Although women's letters and diaries offer valuable insights into individual lives, a far more substantial source-body has been provided by prescriptive writings for and about women. Biographies and funerary sermons celebrated contemporary female lives of extraordinary and formulaically consistent virtue. These were joined by scripture and biblical exegesis, to offer clearly defined images of exemplary female behaviour. Emphasising expectations regarding female domesticity and subjugation, such texts can create the impression that seventeenth-century women were apolitical and uninformed. Filtering 'real' female thought and behaviour from patriarchal conventions became almost a trope of twentieth-century women's history on the early modern period. However, recent works have acknowledged that gender roles need not have been adhered to entirely to have been both internalised and shaped by women's own beliefs and experiences.³ Yet, beyond gender history, the absence of women from histories of this politically significant period suggests an uncritical acceptance of the model of the exemplary, unopinionated woman.

A telling example of this absence is presented by Kevin Sharpe's work on the significance of visual culture in shaping both contemporary thought and political outcomes, from the failure of English republicanism to the creation of the Protectorate and, ultimately, the Restoration of the Stuart monarchy. Sharpe addresses the images of subversively sexual and dominant women which appeared in works of royalist propaganda to illustrate the dangerously inverted social and political order.⁴ However, women's active role in shaping the visual environment within the home is neglected. Spanning the turbulent decades of the mid-seventeenth century, a flourishing fashion for pictorial embroideries saw women decorate homes with allegorical and often fantastical stylised needlework images. This thesis posits that these images offer both a valuable contribution to histories on the visual culture of the seventeenth century and a possible avenue into female attitudes and beliefs.

³ A. Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution* (London, 2012), pp. 10-11.

⁴ K. Sharpe, *Image Wars: Kings and Commonwealths in England, 1603-1660* (New Haven; London, 2010), p. 331-2.

These ‘curious works’ were widely produced by women of the middling and upper ranks of English society.⁵ This was a progression from the establishment of fine embroidery as a virtuous occupation for elite sixteenth-century noblewomen, including both Queen Elizabeth and Mary Queen of Scots by whom several known works survive.⁶ The materials used in the seventeenth-century pieces, including threads of silver, gold, and richly coloured silk, reflect the rapid expansion of international trade during this period, as well as the growing wealth of the gentry, the professional and the commercial classes.⁷ This prosperity also resulted in changes to the living conditions of these demographics, with a boom in the construction of new and spacious houses in the latter half of James I’s reign.⁸ New luxurious spaces required appropriate furnishing, and women’s skill in producing decorative domestic textiles acquired a new eminence.⁹

A large number of these amateur embroideries have survived in museums and private collections; Ruth Geuter’s 1996 survey of English works listed 770 examples.¹⁰ There was considerable breadth in what these embroideries depicted. Non-figural works typically featured flora and fauna or geometric patterns, such as the distinctive zig-zag of Irish stitch which was fashionable for domestic furnishings. However, of those included in Geuter’s study, 90 per cent feature human figures. Of these, 46 per cent recognisably depict Bible stories, generally taken from the Old Testament. Among the remaining figures, some may also have represented Biblical characters, others were possible family portraits, personifications of the continents or senses, depictions of stories from classical mythology or, most frequently, kings and queens who are more

⁵ M. M. Brooks, ‘Performing curiosity: re-viewing women’s domestic embroidery in seventeenth-century England’, *The Seventeenth Century*, 32/1 (2017), p. 2.

⁶ S. Frye, ‘Sewing Connections: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, Elizabeth Talbot, and Seventeenth-Century Anonymous Needleworkers’ in S. Frye and K. Robertson (eds.), *Maids and mistresses, cousins and queens: women’s alliances in early modern England* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 167-74.

⁷ Arthur, L., *Embroidery 1600-1700 at the Burrell Collection* (London, 1995), p. 31.

⁸ Lubbock, J., *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain 1550-1960* (London, 1995), p.56.

⁹ V. R. Geuter, ‘Women and Embroidery in Seventeenth-Century Britain: the social, religious and political meanings of domestic needlework, Volume I’ (D.Phil. thesis, University of Wales, 1996), p. 7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

or less recognisable as the Stuart monarchs and their consorts.¹¹ Though produced by those within a limited class demographic, documentary evidence suggests that these works were produced by women across the theological and political spectrum.¹²

The Civil War era has been considered as a period in which opportunities for women expanded, with the absence of male family members, religious fragmentation, and the urgency of activism in defence of personal or public interests.¹³ This, however, was perhaps only a temporary shift, inviting the question, akin to Joan Kelly, of whether women had an English Revolution.¹⁴ Despite the diversity of female experience, even at this relatively elite level commonality can be found in women's collective status as a subordinate group.¹⁵ Facing common cultural restrictions and gendered expectations in a society where religious and political power were indivisible and subject to overwhelmingly male authority, female self-expression in the seventeenth century can be considered as an inherently defiant and political act.

Falling out of fashion rapidly after the period of their production and often referred to until recently under the somewhat derogatory term of 'stumpwork', these embroideries have only attracted the attention of academic art history within the last half-century.¹⁶ Within the discipline of history, they remain under-utilised as sources. This neglect might be considered as symptomatic of a wider issue of the failure of academic history to comprehensively integrate visual and material sources, which remain mistrusted as too inherently ambiguous to be valuable. Here, however, it will emerge that much of the uncertainty regarding the meaning of these images is the result of ambiguities inherent in the scriptural texts which they depict, or else in contemporary exegesis.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 276-92.

¹² Ibid. p. 30.

¹³ P. Crawford, *Women and Religion in England 1500-1720* (London, 1993), pp. 209-10.

¹⁴ J. Kelly, *Women, History & Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago; London, 1986), p. 19.

¹⁵ Crawford, *Women and Religion*, p. 75.

¹⁶ Brooks, 'Performing curiosity', p. 2.

Though historians are untrained in the significance of variety within seventeenth-century visual conventions, the concept of ‘visuality’ or culturally conditioned seeing demands that efforts be made to read these embroideries as texts, acknowledging that the process of deciphering would be far less complex for contemporary viewers.¹⁷ This is especially true of a culture which, it has been claimed, was far more visually literate than our own and ‘accustomed to analysing fashions and motifs for their meanings and associations’.¹⁸

Within women’s history, the focus on written sources can also be attributed to biases that have tended to view female writing as intrinsically subversive, whilst dismissing embroidery as the activity of ‘successfully socialised’ women.¹⁹ The inclination towards proto-feminist histories glorifying women writers of the period as rebellious independents has created the false impression of a divide between those who wrote and those who wrought with a needle.²⁰ In fact, a majority of female auto-biographers and diarists of the seventeenth century record the inclusion of needlework within their education, whilst suggestive references imply that a considerable amount of their adult lives were devoted to the practice of embroidery. These literary sources can, therefore, be considered alongside examples of embroidery to explore the role of this practice in female self-expression.

The niche subset of historical writing concerned with early-modern embroidery has expanded in recent years, suggesting a growing recognition of the possibilities that these sources exhibit. A number of published case studies have begun to establish methodologies for approaching needlework images and have provided valuable analysis of the contemporary interpretations of specific biblical episodes. However, these studies have tended towards an

¹⁷ T. Hamling and C. Richardson, ‘Introduction’, in T. Hamling and Richardson, C. (eds.), *Everyday Objects: medieval and early modern material culture and its meanings* (London, 2016), pp. 11-2.

¹⁸ P. Hunneyball, *Architecture and Image-Building in Seventeenth-Century Hertfordshire* (Oxford, 2004), p. 8.

¹⁹ Crawford, *Women and Religion*, p. 4.

²⁰ S. Frye, *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2010), pp. 9-13.

antiquarian approach; there remains space for a broader evaluation attempting to integrate the insights that embroideries might offer into the core historical discussions of this period concerning religion and politics. Technological developments which have vastly enhanced the ease of accessing both embroidered and written source material within digitised collections and databases offer new possibilities. These have here been explored to examine issues such as why some themes proved more popular than others in embroidered works, and what this might tell us about the women who produced them.

The following thesis will therefore address some of the unexplored avenues for examining female experiences of faith and political upheaval as expressed through the medium of embroidery. Chapter II will introduce a single example from the collection of the Ashmolean Museum which will offer a framework for analysing individual works as well as raising issues of wider significance. The limitations of embroidered sources and concerns surrounding their interpretation as works of artistic self-expression will also here be considered. The following chapter is concerned with the role of religion in female lives and education. As images of female piety formed a powerful social construct, setting an impossibly high and ever-increasing standard for lay devotion, religion conversely formed both a restrictive element and a sphere of opportunity in women's lives.²¹ To examine how the practice of embroidery interacted with this, the analysis of text and imagery has necessarily been combined with consideration of the material practices of making, gifting, and displaying embroidered objects within the home. Chapter IV undertakes a quantified analysis of the popularity of female Biblical exemplars. The emergence of an apparent female departure from male-authored prescriptions is supplemented with a discussion of the possible consequences and causes of this. The final chapter considers these results to posit their underlying political implications, with an analysis of the widespread use of royalist imagery in embroidered works.

²¹ Crawford, *Women and Religion*, pp. 83-92.

II. 'A domestic art': visual style and self-expression



Figure 1.

The Ashmolean collection houses a seventeenth-century embroidery which is in many ways typical of its genre [Fig. 1]. Contemporary painting, transformed by the Renaissance and exemplified by the portraiture of Van Dyck, aspired to proportionate realism and correct perspective. In embroideries, however, as seen here, various vignettes from a narrative were compressed together, surrounded by a profusion of plants, animals, architectural structures, and mythical creatures. This piece depicts key episodes from the Old Testament story of Esther. Most prominently, in the foreground is Esther's approach to her husband, King Ahasuerus. Defying the law by coming unbidden, she reveals her Jewish faith and begs for mercy for her people. The result of her bravery is the hanging of the conspirer Haman, seen in the top left of the panel. Though faded, the densely packed fine silks and metallic threads entirely conceal the linen backing fabric and would once

have been a riot of colour. The tent stitch used is common, allowing for very fine detail and creating a neat reverse side that displays the proficiency and skill of the needleworker. In style and form, therefore, this piece resembles many of its period.

The embroidery is also typical in lacking an attribution. From the seventeenth century, there was a growing trend for the inclusion of biographical information such as name and age on samplers.²² These typically non-figurative collections of stitches and decorative motifs were produced as part of female education and served as memorial aides for particular patterns and techniques. The pictorial embroideries, however, rarely include any mark of the embroiderer. The Ashmolean panel features initials, AH, which suggest that this was the work of a non-professional embroiderer, and a date, 1654 [Fig. 2].²³ The inclusion of the arms of the Dyers' Company provides a further clue to the embroiderer's identity [Fig. 3]. We can assume that the embroiderer had some family connection to the guild, and this enables us to geographically locate the embroiderer in London. However, further exploration of this avenue to establishing an attribution was hampered by the fact that the guild's records were destroyed in the 1666 Great Fire of London and not recommenced until the early eighteenth century.²⁴

This lack of association with a known individual, coupled with their distinct and consistent style as described above, has perhaps contributed to the exclusion of these works from art historical attention until recently. The value of embroideries to contemporaries is evidenced by the cost of the materials used, their preservation, and contemporary praise of skilled women.²⁵ Long excluded from the lauded category of 'works of art' and instead categorised as 'crafts', this implies

²² S. Cope, 'Women in the sea of time: Domestic dated objects in seventeenth-century England', in M. Wiesner (ed.), *Gendered Temporalities in the Early Modern World* (Amsterdam, 2018), p. 61.

²³ K. Reed-Basham and M. Watt, 'The Bible, The Book of Psalms ca. 1649' <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/228994> (8 Feb. 2022).

²⁴ 'Livery List to 1900' <https://www.dyerscompany.co.uk/history/livery-list-to-1900/> (23 Feb. 2022).

²⁵ C. Canavan and H. Smith, 'The needle may convert more than the pen': women and the work of conversion in early modern England', in S. Ditchfield and H. Smith (eds.), *Conversions: gender and religious change in early modern Europe*, (Manchester, 2017), pp. 119-21.

an assumption that embroideries do not embody the emotions and imagination of the creator.²⁶ If this is accurate, then embroideries could not serve as a means of accessing female self-expression. So, it must be established that works such as this one do in fact reflect the artistic choices of the needlewoman.



Figures 2 & 3.

Before a piece was embroidered, patterns were generally drawn onto the backing fabric. This could be achieved through the process of ‘pricking’, in which charcoal was dusted over a piece of paper featuring an image or design that had been perforated with pinpricks.²⁷ Another method saw the employment of a pattern drawer. Little is known of these journeymen and shopkeepers, but various unfinished examples reveal the designs which were sketched onto the backing fabric for the embroiderer to follow. Limited surviving written sources mean that little is

²⁶ Cope, ‘Women in the sea of time’, p.163.

²⁷ Frye, *Pens and Needles*, p. 137.

known of the processes by which professionally drawn patterns were designed, and it remains unclear whether they sold their own designs or worked more collaboratively to commission.

In researching John Nelham, mentioned as a designer of textiles in the letters of Lady Brilliana Harley, Margaret Swain suggested that Nelham used a distinctive style that could be found in numerous pieces.²⁸ If male pattern designers had distinct and personal styles, this would serve to diminish the strength of the embroideries as evidence of female self-expression. These claims are not, however, well-substantiated as only one embroidery can confidently be attributed to Nelham.²⁹ Instead the variation within designs, with none conforming exactly to another, might be seen to favour the view that women were involved in a more bespoke design process. The repeated mentions of Nelham in Lady Harley's letters evoke an ongoing working relationship, potentially offering support for this view.³⁰ Regardless of the role of the pattern drawer, further evidence of women's ability to shape the embroideries to their own vision comes from examples where the embroidered design can be seen to deviate from that which is marked on the backing fabric. In an embroidery of the story of Esther at the Victoria & Albert Museum, creativity and ingenuity can be found among these departures, such as in the addition of three-dimensional silk and wire hands [Figs. 4 & 5]. This, evidently, was the embroiderer's rather than the pattern drawer's initiative.

²⁸ M. Swain, 'John Nelham's Needlework Panel', *The Bulletin of the Needle and Bobbin Club*, 65 (1982), pp. 3-7.

²⁹ I. Rosner, 'The Stitcher at Suger Lofe: John Nelham, Professional Designer and Embroiderer' <https://costumesociety.org.uk/blog/post/the-stitcher-at-suger-lofe-john-nelham-professional-designer-and-embroiderer> (22 Dec. 2021).

³⁰ M. Swain, 'Stitching Triumphant', *Country Life*, 185/12 (1991), pp. 124-5.



Figures 4 & 5.

Historians have attempted to trace many embroideries back to printed source material. There has been little success in finding designs taken directly from pattern books, although the surviving examples of these texts often show signs of use, such as pricked holes or cut out pages.³¹ Gerard de Jode's 1585 *Thesaurus Sacrarum*, a book of biblical engravings, does appear to have been a popular resource. In the below example depicting Hagar and her son being cast out of the house of Abraham, the arrangement of the figures and their poses evidently owes a great deal to de Jode's engraving [Figs. 6 & 7]. There are, however, relatively few such examples that so clearly demonstrate the influence of a single published source.³² On the contrary, the designs, including that of the Ashmolean embroidery, often show marked differences to contemporary depictions of the Bible narratives. As will be discussed, even small changes could have great significance in communicating the individual's personal theological interpretation of a Biblical episode.

³¹ Frye, *Pens and Needles*, p. 130.

³² S. Randles, 'The Pattern of All Patience': Gender, Agency, and Emotions in Embroidery and Pattern Books in Early Modern England', in S. Broomhall (ed.), *Authority, gender and emotions in late medieval and early modern England* (Basingstoke, 2015), p. 154.



Figure 6.



Figure 7.

Many differences between the images by de Jode and the embroiderer of the Hagar scene suggest a translation of the engraving into the visual conventions of contemporary embroideries: blue tents replacing built structures, modern clothing replacing outdated or classically inspired costume, and the distinctively disjointed decorative background of flora and fauna. Arguably, however, it is insufficient to dismiss these choices of decoration and motif as merely aesthetic and unmeaningful; the same high expectations of originality are not generally applied to literary sources. Just as, in text, the historian considers the cultural expectations and conventions through which self-consciously fashioned works are filtered, and the significance of any deviations thereof, the same approach can be extended to works crafted with the needle rather than the pen.

Susan Frye and Mary Brooks have suggested that embroideries were effectively the visual equivalent of a commonplace book or a cabinet of curiosities.³³ These forms were indicative of the growing significance of learning, memory, and curiosity in male culture, seen in the fashion for artistic connoisseurship at Charles I's court and in the growing interest in scientific investigation, from Francis Bacon's empiricism to the founding of the Royal Society in 1660. Women lacked the financial and personal freedoms to acquire and publicly display unusual objects and specimens such as those contained in John Tradescant's famous collection, the 'Ark'. Curiosity in women was also viewed with far greater hostility than in men, considered anathema to femininity, associated with the temptation of Eve and cautioned against in Biblical stories such as Lot's wife, who looked back and so was turned into a pillar of salt.³⁴ To display such curiosity in embroideries, therefore, would have represented a subversive gendered act.

In the Ashmolean embroidery, the forms of flowers and leaves are shown with recognisable accuracy. This precision suggests an education in herbal medicine, the provision of

³³ Frye, *Pens and Needles*, p. 122; Brooks, 'Performing curiosity', pp. 18-9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3-6.

which was a key element of elite female philanthropy.³⁵ Insects of a scale as if to appear magnified by a microscope are reminiscent of Hooke's ground-breaking 'Micrographia'.³⁶ Also included are exotic creatures such as leopards, lions, and even mermaids which were also found also in Tradescant's Ark.³⁷ The materials also suggest novelty and exploration, here with fine silks, and in other embroideries with coral, mica, and glass beads among the integrated imported luxuries. Though the embroideries seem to lack Renaissance art's interest in accurate anatomy, radiographic imaging of another work in the Ashmolean collection has revealed real birds' skulls beneath the embroidered feathers.³⁸

Another parallel to be drawn between embroideries and the male sites of expression for curiosity is in their use for decorating actual cabinets. It is unclear where the Ashmolean embroidery of Esther was once displayed. Many such pieces, however, were made to adorn small wooden cabinets, visible to all from the outside, but internally housing locked compartments and secret drawers which might hide a woman's treasures and thoughts [Fig. 8]. This female expression of curiosity perhaps escaped censure due to embroidery's association with spiritual benefits and a godly life, associations supported by the devotional subject matter which many women chose.

³⁵ L. Pollock, *With Faith and Physic: The Life of a Tudor Gentlewoman: Lady Grace Mildmay 1552-1620* (London, 1993), p. 97.

³⁶ 'Robert Hooke's Micrographia' <https://mhs.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-online#/item/hsm-narrative-12370> (1 Mar. 2022).

³⁷ 'Exhibition: 'Solomon's House in Oxford: New Finds from the First Museum' display label' <https://mhs.web.ox.ac.uk/collections-online#/item/hsm-narrative-11582> (21 Jan. 2022).

³⁸ Brooks, 'Performing curiosity', pp. 15-6.



Figure 8.

III. 'Faithful and submissive': female religion and education

In addition to form and style, the Ashmolean embroidery is typical in its subject matter, depicting scenes from the Old Testament, here from the story of Esther and Ahasuerus. The typicality of Biblical episodes in embroidery, and the relative scarcity of secular portraits, still lifes and mythological scenes, as were popular in contemporary paintings, has led to the perception that embroidery was used as a means of instilling religion and, consequently, obedience in women.³⁹ As the central pillar of early modern thought and learning, particularly in the Protestant world, the Bible provided models of godly behaviour and was an unsurprisingly important resource for explaining and justifying the gender order.⁴⁰ As described by one 1684 treatise on successful marriage:

Let her have continually in her thoughts the Example of these Renowned Wives, which the Church, in the Celebration of her Marriage, has proposed to her for Patterns... She must endeavour to make her self amenable to her Husband, as Rachel, who was even Mildness it self... Faithful and Submissive, as Sarah, who called her Husband ordinarily, her Lord, and her Master.⁴¹

The chaplain Richard Smith's biography of the prominent Catholic, Lady Magdalen Montagu, published in English translation in 1627, stated that Montagu 'often said that she left her will at St. James, which was the place of her marriage.'⁴² Religious teaching across confessional divides, in

³⁹ Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery', pp. 48-58.

⁴⁰ K. Killeen and H. Smith, 'All other Bookes... are but Notes upon this': The Early Modern Bible', in K. Killeen, H. Smith and R. Willie (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early-Modern England, c. 1530-1700* (Oxford, 2015), pp. 1-2.

⁴¹ *A Treatise of Jealousie, or, Means to preserve Peace in Marriage...* (London, 1684), pp. 130-1.

⁴² R. Smith, *An Elizabethan Recusant House: Comprising the Life of the Lady Magdalen, Viscountess Montague (1538-1608)*, tr. C Fursdon (1627), ed. Alfred Collingwood Southern (London, 1954), p. 37.

published sermons and prescriptive conduct literature, was clear on the subordinate role of women, in marriage and in the church.

For a society in which lineage and status were key, marriage was immensely important. For daughters, the objective of education was to prepare them as wives, which meant establishing piety along with the scriptural feminine ideals of industriousness and modesty.⁴³ The focus upon ‘practical’ learning, even amongst the ranks of the nobility, demonstrates how women were raised as ‘Ornaments to their Husband’s House’.⁴⁴ The diary of Lady Anne Clifford records the ‘housewifely accomplishments,’ including needlework, in which she was trained.⁴⁵

Pictorial works such as the Ashmolean embroidery do not typically feature the age of the embroiderer. Contemporaneous samplers, however, such as the embroidered workbag made by ‘IS Age 10 1669’ demonstrate the proficiency which could be attained from an early age [Fig. 9]. Discussion of seventeenth-century embroidered cabinets attributes the creation of these objects to an important final stage in the education of a teenage girl.⁴⁶ Often they feature the Biblical stories which relate to courtship, such as the meeting of Rebecca and Eliezer.⁴⁷ In general, however, accounting for the likelihood of wide variation in interest and talent, the allusions to embroidery ‘work’ which feature throughout women’s diaries and letters suggest that the Biblical pictorial embroideries were produced by women at widely varying stages of the life cycle.⁴⁸

⁴³ A. Pullan, A., ‘Needlework and Moral Instruction in English Seventeenth-Century Households: The Case of Rebecca’, *Studies in Church History*, 50 (2014), pp. 256-7.

⁴⁴ C. Wandesford, *A book of instructions...* (Cambridge, 1777-8), p. 51.

⁴⁵ R. Spence, *Lady Anne Clifford, Countess of Pembroke, Dorset and Montgomery (1590-1676)* (Stroud, 1997), p. 15.

⁴⁶ K. Staples, ‘Embroidered furnishings: questions of production and usage’, in A. Morrall and M. Watt (eds.), *English embroidery from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1580-1700: Twixt art and nature* (New Haven; London, 2008), pp. 23-9.

⁴⁷ Pullan, ‘Needlework and Moral Instruction’, pp. 254-7.

⁴⁸ Geuter, ‘Women and Embroidery’, p. 190.



Figure 9.

By the seventeenth century, the association was well-established between the devotion of time to needlework and a woman who was admirably pious and domestic, contained indoors and engaged in a quiet and productive pursuit which would allow her to meditate on her faith.⁴⁹ Industriousness with the needle allowed individuals to avoid the accusations of idleness which were frequently levelled at elite women of the period by Puritanical commentators.⁵⁰ The various and conflicting demands upon women, however, are suggested by John Earle's *Micro-cosmographie* (1628), which includes among its comic figures a Puritan woman who 'is so taken up with Faith she has no room for charity and understands no good works but what are wrought on the Sampler.'⁵¹ A wife, daughter or female household member's skill in embroidery was desired as a means of beautifying and enhancing the comfort of the home.⁵² Yet the conspicuous consumption

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 86-7, 116.

⁵⁰ Pullan, 'Needlework and Moral Instruction', pp. 260-1.

⁵¹ J. T. Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry: The Great Puritan Families of Early Stuart England* (London, 1984), p. 122.

⁵² Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery', p. 26.

of richly decorated textiles sat uncomfortably close to the sins of pride and vanity. The uneasy bedfellows of visible prosperity and disdain for worldly goods can be seen in Sir John Oglander's praise of his wife, a woman of Puritan upbringing who 'never wore a silk gown but for her credit when she went abroad.'⁵³ This demonstrates the contradictions inherent in pretension to a Puritan life whilst maintaining seventeenth-century social standing, and the ambiguous role within this of textiles.

In addition to the Bible story represented, the decorative elements of the Ashmolean embroidery offer reminders of virtuous morality. In the lower left-hand corner, a mermaid admires herself in a looking glass [Fig. 10]. This motif has been interpreted as a caution against the dangers of spending too much time before a mirror, and the sins of vanity and idleness.⁵⁴ By the figure of Esther, an enormous snail might also have represented a lesson [Fig. 11]. Complimentary comparisons of women to snails spoke to the desirability of a woman keeping to her house. The preacher and conduct book writer William Gouge described Margaret Ducke in her funeral sermon as being 'so far from the gadding disposition of other talking, walking women, that she was for the most part as a snail, *Domi-porta*, within her own shell and family.'⁵⁵ The mermaid and the snail are both commonly occurring elements in embroideries, suggesting the awareness and acceptance of these morally instructive images.

⁵³ Oglander, J., *A Royalist's Notebook: The Commonplace Book of Sir John Oglander, Kt., of Nunwell, Born 1585, Died 1655*, ed. F. Bamford (London, 1936), p. 241.

⁵⁴ Pullan, 'Needlework and Moral Instruction', pp. 260-1.

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, p. 17.



Figures 10 & 11.

The picture thus far created is of religion as a constraint for seventeenth-century women. Lawrence Stone attributed female religion of the period to negative patriarchal forces, as the consequence of ‘idle and frustrated lives.’⁵⁶ Its teaching, therefore, in which the role of embroidery is well recognised, would suggest a means by which women were limited, prevented from pursuing more academic study and instead forced into the production of superficial decorative works, pious domesticity and subservience.⁵⁷ Yet it is known that the Christian hierarchical domestic harmony of didactic works was not always enacted in reality. Spousal disobedience was found and even supported across the religious spectrum, as in the case of Jane Adams and the Baptist Church, who concluded that ‘the threatenings of a husband’ were ‘not a sufficient cause to keep her from the meetings.’⁵⁸ Due to the contributions of Patricia Crawford and others, piety is now understood to have offered women a space of their own as a legitimate area of activity, a means of personal expression, a source of strength and of consolation.⁵⁹ Analogous assumptions regarding

⁵⁶ L. Stone, *The Crisis of the Aristocracy 1338-1641* (Oxford, 1965), p. 738.

⁵⁷ Geuter, ‘Women and Embroidery’, pp. 55-60.

⁵⁸ A. Hughes, ‘Society and the Roles of Women’, in L. L. Knoppers (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2012), p. 165.

⁵⁹ Crawford, *Women and Religion*, p. 10.

embroidery must also be challenged, and the practice's role within the sphere of female faith acknowledged.

The earnestly committed found that religion, 'far from inducing a sense of gloom, was a source of great happiness.'⁶⁰ Among Puritans it was the conviction of the faithful that thorough practice of religion would assure prosperity whilst on Earth. Even more appealing, for Puritans, Protestants and Catholics alike, was the desire for eternal life with one's loved ones in the kingdom of heaven.⁶¹ On the death of her staunchly Puritanical husband in 1628, Lady Joan Barrington's brother-in-law sent her a letter that, beyond offering consolation, urged her to rejoice in the loss:

Hee lived in honour, dyed in peace, forewent God's heavy judgement...
and shall rise in glory eternall. Oh sister, rejoyce; good madam rejoyce...
rejoyce for his departure.⁶²

It is easy to understand how this assurance proved seductive in the seventeenth-century world of ever-present mortality.⁶³ Lady Joan Barrington purportedly underwent a 'crisis of faith' following the death of her husband, suggesting that religious conviction was not entirely capable of cushioning the heavy blow of grief.⁶⁴ However, such sources suggest the role of faith in managing emotions during difficult times.

Most embroidered sources are highly enigmatic, lacking known authorship or dates that allow them to be related to particular life events. However, certain pieces offer evocative

⁶⁰ Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry*, pp. 61-2.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-22.

⁶² *Barrington Family Letters, 1628-1632*, ed. Arthur Searle, Camden Soc., 4th series, 28 (London, 1983), p. 29.

⁶³ Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry*, pp. 14-5.

⁶⁴ Kelsey, S., 'Barrington [née Williams Or Cromwell], Joan, Lady Barrington (c. 1558–1641)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (online ed.) (Oxford, 2008), doi: 10.1093/ref:odnb/65888.

suggestions of the role of embroidery in the communication and regulation of the embroiderers' emotional lives.⁶⁵ An embroidery-bound Bible features two female figures that can be recognised as personifications of faith by the shield and book that each bears [Figs. 12 & 13]. Differing in their hair and dress, they both nonetheless embody faith, and look towards the words contained in the pages within. The inscription inside reads 'Ann Thirkile, A Treasure for my Dear Jane.'⁶⁶ Ann may have worked this cover herself for Jane, a friend or relation; perhaps the two Faiths even resembled the two women. Embroidered gifts such as this would have served an important role in the maintenance of kinship networks. As physical reminders, they could bridge the geographical dislocation that female relationships often involved, as women were displaced into marital homes. Their tangibility also rendered them long-lasting, being preserved by successive generations of women.⁶⁷



Figures 12 & 13.

⁶⁵ Randles, 'The Pattern of All Patience', pp. 163-4.

⁶⁶ 'Bible with Needlework Cover' <https://emuseum.history.org/objects/22424/bible-with-needlework-cover?ctx=edf32ba5399963fb0cb97a2cbf4925450743fc0a&idx=33> (18 Aug. 2021)

⁶⁷ P. C. Brückmann, "'Without any Letter': Some History Outside the Library", *Recusant History*, 30/1 (2010), pp. 63.

Further possibility of the significance of this gift is suggested by the 1644 publication date of the enclosed Bible edition.⁶⁸ Whilst this is not conclusive evidence for the date of the cover, many embroidery-bound books were intentionally constructed for this purpose with smooth spines rather than the typical protruding cords, to enable the easier application of the cover.⁶⁹ If this embroidery dates to the Civil War period, the depictions of heroic female faith would have been meaningful as an encouragement towards resilience and a reminder of women's shared role in protecting and promoting God's will. The Ashmolean embroidery is also dated to the mid-seventeenth-century years of political turbulence. From this piece similar themes can be drawn. The story of Esther counselled that female faith was powerful, a source of strength and capable of great impact. Works such as these highlight the role of religion as a source of confidence for seventeenth-century women, expressed in a shared language of carefully worked embroidered imagery.

The degree of detailed work required by such pieces is also suggestive of their role in women's often very personal and painstaking relationship with faith. True religion, attested by advice literature of all persuasions, demanded the subordination of worldly interests and commitment to a life of diligently performed religious study and prayer.⁷⁰ Fulfilment of these requirements was most achievable for the wives and widows of the social elites, who had the time and resources to devote to both religion and embroidery. Smith attested that Lady Montagu 'spent a very great part of the day and much of the night in prayer,' and, though Bishop Bayly scornfully remarked that Protestants did not 'need the multiplied and obsessive devotions of the papists', many Protestant women such as Lady Margaret Hoby seem to have sought exactly this.⁷¹

⁶⁸ 'Bible with Needlework Cover'.

⁶⁹ K. Reed-Basham, and M. Watt, 'The Bible, The Book of Psalms ca. 1649'.

⁷⁰ Cliffe, *The Puritan Gentry*, pp. 8-9.

⁷¹ Smith, *An Elizabethan Recusant House*, p. 47; F. Heal and C. Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales, 1500-1700* (Basingstoke, 1994), p. 364.

Though neither of these women left known embroidered works, they each left some evidence of their needlework practice. Smith noted that Montagu's 'sight so continued as in her last days... with spectacles [she] could cut even the finest linen cloth by a thread,' a task suggestive of her engagement with embroidery.⁷² Hoby's diary describes a seemingly endless round of reading the Bible and religious texts, attending sermons, examining her conscience and 'work'.⁷³ The words 'work' and 'wrought', which feature so consistently in the diary, were how contemporaries referred to needlework.⁷⁴ Though no linguistic distinction was made between fine embroidery and practical needlework such as performing repairs and sewing shirts, it is notable that Hoby so consistently chose to record her 'work' in a diary intended as a self-conscious exercise in piety.⁷⁵ At the very least, we might conclude that she felt that needlework was a godly and worthy activity. From entrances such as 'I went to dinner: after, I wrought and hard Mr Rhodes reed of the testement and other good books,' we might speculate that the work being produced was itself part of Hoby's engagement with scripture and meditation on her faith.⁷⁶ The quantities in which religiously-themed embroideries survive and the painstaking detail of the minute stitches are testaments to the amount of women's time and energy that went into their production.

Beyond our understanding of the individuals who produced the embroideries, insight into female faith has consequences which expand into their communities. Status as a wife was associated with a responsibility towards the religious commitment of the entire household, with Puritans seeing household holiness as a 'prime witness to elite status'.⁷⁷ Hoby's diary, though primarily an exercise in personal piety, includes instances of her reading to her 'workwemen' and instructing 'in som principles of reigion', suggesting that sharing her faith with the household was

⁷² Smith, *An Elizabethan Recusant House*, p. 63.

⁷³ Lady Margaret Hoby, *The private life of an Elizabethan lady: The Diary of Lady Margaret Hoby, 1599-1605*, ed. J. Moody (Stroud, 1998), p. 63.

⁷⁴ Randles, 'The Pattern of All Patience', p. 156.

⁷⁵ Heal and Holmes, *The Gentry in England and Wales*, p. 366.

⁷⁶ Hoby, *The private life of an Elizabethan lady*, p. 85.

⁷⁷ Killeen and Smith, 'All other Bookes', p. 13.

central to her own religious commitment.⁷⁸ As well as encouraging the piety of servants and tenants, women also had a role in shaping the religious outlooks of their children, often providing daughters' and female wards' entire education and taking responsibility for sons' early years.⁷⁹

Embroideries featuring religious messages appear to have been employed for these social and didactic purposes. Religious imagery in the household could be used as teaching materials; act as aide memoires of the exemplars of godly lives and familial relationships; and be used as 'props to stimulate pious conversation'.⁸⁰ Though it appears contradictory given the emphasis upon the Word, from the earliest days of the Reformation, Protestant Reformers advocated for such household imagery whilst declaring images and sculptures used for worship as idolatrous.⁸¹ Luther suggested that it 'would be Christian work' for 'the whole Bible to be painted on houses, on the outside and inside, so that all can see it'.⁸² This attitude appears to have been readily adopted; the iconoclasm which the following century saw in churches was coupled with a flowering visual religious culture in the homes of the merchant and gentry classes, from tableware and carved furniture to the embroideries which adorned cushions, furniture and walls.⁸³

These sanctioned displays were for learning and, by becoming imprinted in an individual's memory, were hoped to fundamentally shape the viewers' moral identities. Their efficacy is clear from accounts such as that of the Congregationalist minister, Philip Doddridge, who described his childhood experiences of being taught Bible stories from the Dutch tiles that surrounded their

⁷⁸ J. Crawford, 'Reconsidering Early Modern Women's Reading, or, How Margaret Hoby Read Her de Mornay', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 73/2 (2010), p. 200.

⁷⁹ C. Bowden, 'Female education in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England and Wales: a study of attitudes and practice' (D.Phil. thesis, University of London, 1996), p. 125.

⁸⁰ A. Morrall, 'Domestic Decoration and the Bible in the Early Modern Home', in K. Killeen, H. Smith and R. Willie (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early-Modern England, c. 1530-1700* (Oxford, 2015), p. 585.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 577.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 578.

⁸³ T. Hamling, 'Reconciling Image and Object: Religious Imagery in Protestant Interior Decoration', in T. Hamling and Richardson, C. (eds.), *Everyday Objects: medieval and early modern material culture and its meanings* (London, 2016), p. 323; Morrall, 'Domestic Decoration', p. 577.

hearth. Doddridge recalled that these images had been ‘the means of making some good impressions upon his heart, which never wore out’.⁸⁴

The creation of embroidered images, however, might be seen to violate the Protestant terms of idolatry. Hoby’s integration of needlework into the routines of spiritual meditation suggests that, for such women, embroidering was a means of worship. Pre-Reformation female piety is understood to have had a particular emphasis on religious statues, which women offered gifts to and carefully maintained.⁸⁵ With the official suppression of this, Biblical embroideries such as the Ashmolean panel can perhaps be understood as their successors. Laboriously and lovingly crafted, the choice of religious subjects makes it difficult to dismiss embroideries as sites of subversive haptic learning and tactile worship. Whilst theologians were attempting to define the role of religious imagery in Protestant culture, it appears that women were able to continue finding material and visual sources of spiritual guidance through the practice of needlework.⁸⁶ Embroidered works thus provide evidence as to how doctrinal positions on imagery were received and transformed by women.⁸⁷ Given the role of these images in education and household life, the content chosen for them and the exegetical interpretations which they communicate must also now be considered.

⁸⁴ Morrall, ‘Domestic Decoration’, p. 583.

⁸⁵ E. Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation & Rebellion in an English Village* (New Haven; London, 2001), pp. 75-6.

⁸⁶ Hamling, ‘Reconciling Image and Object’, p. 334.

⁸⁷ Morrall, ‘Domestic Decoration’, p. 577.

IV. 'That righteous woman': the cultural significance of the choice of Esther

Ruth Geuter's 1996 survey of seventeenth-century embroideries found that the most popular Bible story recognisably depicted in surviving examples was that of Esther and Ahasuerus.⁸⁸ The Ashmolean collection alone holds three such examples of embroidered images of the Esther story, including the panel which has here been discussed.⁸⁹ To date, however, no clear analysis has been made of how this popularity of Esther in the sphere of embroidery translates to that of the printed word.

The Early English Books Online database has catalogued 212,000 publications, thus providing a powerful tool for establishing the relative frequency with which the names of the women of the Old Testament appeared in published texts. The searches here were limited to the years from 1630 to 1685, spanning the popularity of the Old Testament pictorial embroideries. The findings of this investigation were that Esther and Sheba, though popular, were not the most frequently mentioned [Table 1]. To narrow the search to works whose intended audience included women, it was further assessed how frequently the names appeared in texts including the words 'treatise', 'homily', 'duty' or 'example'. These were chosen as typical of conduct literature concerning women and sermons intended for mixed-gender congregations and readers. This search returned the same pattern. Finally, a particularly popular book that addressed female and wifely conduct was analysed, the famous preacher William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties* which was in its third edition by 1632, 12 years after first publication.⁹⁰ Once again, this text returned the same trend; whilst Esther and Sheba were featured, they were not the Biblical women who received the greatest attention.

⁸⁸ Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery', p. 285.

⁸⁹ Ashmolean accession numbers: WA2014.71.11, WA2014.71.21, WA1947.191.309.

⁹⁰ K. Harvey, 'Love and Order: William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622)', in C. Cuttica and G. Mahlberg (eds.), *Patriarchal Moments: Reading Patriarchal Texts* (London, 2016), pp. 57-8.

Table 1. Most frequently occurring named women of the Old Testament

All published works	With 'treatise', 'homily', 'duty' or 'example'	Gouge's <i>Domesticall Duties</i>	Geuter's catalogue of embroideries ⁹¹	1996 of
Eve (4,574)	Eve (4,202)	Sarah (34)	Esther (45)	
Sarah (2,064)	Sarah (1,819)	Rebecca (21)	Sheba (32)	
Ruth (1,683)	Ruth (1,572)	Ruth (14)	Rebecca (31)	
Rachel (1,579)	Rachel (1,492)	Abigail (14)	Sarah & Hagar (28)	
Esther (1,302)	Esther (1,240)	Rachel (13)	Bathsheba (18)	
Sheba (1,172)	Sheba (1,125)	Esther (12)	Susanna (16)	
Hagar (1,103)	Hagar (1,054)	Hagar (9)	Eve (15)	
Hannah (988)	Hannah (889)	Deborah (6)	Judith (13)	
Rebecca (762)	Rebecca (707)	Sheba (5)	Abigail (10)	
Abigail (731)	Bathsheba (705)	Hannah (2)	Jael (8)	

This keyword search approach does not provide entirely conclusive results, failing, for example, to account for the relative popularity of texts, the commonality of these given names, and omitting the unpublished sermons to which women were exposed every week. It also fails to exclude neutral or negative mentions, as the apparent popularity of Eve attests. However, the findings do suggest a dissonance between the Biblical female exemplars most widely promoted in written works and those which were most popular in being selected for representation in embroidery. With published writing overwhelmingly by men and the embroideries by women, the significance of these findings lies in the fact that they offer a rare means of accessing female views on theology. Such views are often absent even from private texts such as the diary of Lady Margaret Hoby. The discrepancy between the popularity of exemplars in embroidery and published text provides evidence of women of the middling and upper ranks selectively forming their own religious and personal identities, rather than uncritically accepting the prescriptive ideals presented to them.

⁹¹ Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery', p. 285.

It must therefore be considered what prioritisation of Esther over the other, more endorsed, female figures might have meant. Outside of the embroideries, three of the women of the Old Testament who appear to have been most consistently promoted are Sarah, Ruth and Rachel.⁹² The discussions of these women in contemporary texts often focus upon their loyalty and passivity, attributes that were lauded in seventeenth-century women.⁹³ However, the stories are also tinged with ambiguity and their actors attracted occasional criticism. In the case of Rachel, according to a 1658 sermon by the prominent clergyman John Preston, ‘the desire of Children was a lawful thing; but when she came to be so importunate, and so unreasonable, so excessive in her desire that either she must have Children or else she must die, then it was a warring lust.’⁹⁴ In a 1684 text, Sarah was praised for her reasonableness, as she ‘would give [Abraham, her husband] her Handmaid, to divide his Embraces between them, that thereby he might be comforted against the Barrenness of her Womb.’⁹⁵ Through such references to prolonged infertility, though later followed by happy births, these stories could have provided comfort to women but might equally have presented unappealing prospects, with their use in furnishings creating ominous talismans or simply sad reminders within the home.

Though the story of Sarah casting out the handmaid Hagar and her child is among the most popular subjects of the embroideries, we might have expected to find Sarah, Abraham’s legitimate wife and mother to the typologically Christ-like Isaac, at the centre of these works.⁹⁶ In addition to the familial relationships, the complex allegorical readings of the story found in contemporary exegesis similarly suggest that Sarah would be the more obvious character with whom women ought to identify and sympathise. In these readings, Hagar represents the

⁹² Ruth’s association with the Book of Ruth distorts the findings from the larger searches. This has been accounted for in the figure for Gouge, where 13 further references to the Book of Ruth have been omitted.

⁹³ W. Gouge, *Of domesticall duties...* (London, 1622), Image 6 (unnumbered page).

⁹⁴ J. Preston, *Riches of Mercy to men in misery...* (London, 1658), pp. 354-5.

⁹⁵ *A Treatise of Jealousie*, p. 131.

⁹⁶ Morrall, ‘Domestic Decoration’, pp. 579-80.

personification of justification by law while Rachel represents the superior justification by faith.⁹⁷ And yet, in the embroideries, Hagar is centred. Sarah is consistently side-lined, small, and relatively un-detailed. A possible explanation is that the embroiderers identified more easily with the figure of the spurned lover than that of the influential wife.⁹⁸

The figures of Esther and the Queen of Sheba also do not appear to conform to the feminine ideals of silence and subjection. Despite this, they less frequently invite criticism in seventeenth-century commentary. Rather than passivity, the female characters in these stories drive events through their agency, action, and intellect. But by acting in the interests of the ‘true faith’ they are above rebuke for their boldness. Esther was courageous, showing a willingness to subject herself to martyrdom by declaring her faith in the hope of saving her people. She defied both law and household hierarchies by speaking unbidden to her husband, the King. After travelling a long distance in command of her retinue, the Queen of Sheba does not accept the word of King Solomon uncritically. Instead, she poses challenging questions and riddles to the monarch, suggesting her astute intelligence. Her wealth, power, and intellect evidently command respect from the wisest of kings, who grants her an audience and responds to all her challenges. These stories, therefore, offered scriptural acknowledgement of women’s capacity for bravery and intelligence. As biblically endorsed precedents for female intervention into male spaces, into the spheres of power and politics when righteousness demanded it, they were potentially useful.

That such usefulness as female role models did not go unnoticed by contemporaries is suggested by the frequency with which Esther featured in texts defending women and in the words of female petitioners to Parliament. One published response to Joseph Swetnam’s 1615 polemic condemning women as ‘Lewd, Idle, Forward and Unconstant’ was titled *Esther bath bang’d Haman*.

⁹⁷ Mayne, Z., *St. Paul's travailing pangs... or, A treatise of justification...* (London, 1662), pp. 14-6.

⁹⁸ Frye, *Pens and Needles*, pp. 142-4.

The point here was further emphasised by the author's adopted pseudonym, Ester Sowernam.⁹⁹ Similarly, a 1653 petition to Parliament in defence of the prominent Leveller John Lilburne, and probably written by his wife, Elizabeth, drew heavily on the example of Esther:¹⁰⁰

Esther that righteous woman being encouraged by the justness of the Cause (as we at this time are, through the justness of Mr. *Lilburn's* Cause, and the common Cause of the whole Nation) did adventure her life to petition against so unrighteous Acts... we hope that your Honours, upon mature consideration, will have the less regard unto our Petition, although women; judging that you will not be worse unto us, then that Heathen King was to *Esther*, who did not onely hear her Petition, but reversed that Decree or Act gone forth against the Iewes, and did severely punish the obtainer thereof...¹⁰¹

This petition, 'The humble Representation of divers afflicted Women-Petitioners,' clearly demonstrates how the story could be invoked to justify outspokenness which the women concerned viewed as righteous, as well as beseeching a response in their favour by reminding the members of Parliament of the wisdom exercised in the story by the King.

We cannot know whether the embroiderers of images of Esther knew of such uses of the story. In the diary of Lady Anne Clifford, however, we find an example of one woman who recorded the fact of her embroidery practice (though rarely describing the content of her works) and for whom it seems impossible that personal experiences did not inspire reflection on the parallels between her own struggle and that of Esther. Clifford's drawn-out struggle to regain her family property, counter to the efforts of male relatives and her own husband, resulted in a confrontation with King James. In 1617, she knelt before the King to demand that the entailed

⁹⁹ Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, pp. 15-6.

¹⁰⁰ Frye, *Pens and Needles*, p. 151.

¹⁰¹ *Unto every individual member of Parliament...* (London, 1653), p. 1.

property be returned to her and protested the King's attempts to dismiss the matter.¹⁰² Clifford's diary and surviving letters span the years 1603 to 1676; in them we see a woman pursuing peace and security, with the solace provided by prayer and embroidery apparent.¹⁰³

Depictions of Esther are often strikingly hard to distinguish from those of the Queen of Sheba, with many having been incorrectly labelled by museums and auction houses since the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁴ These similarities support the possibility that women were aware of the 'uses' of Esther. The Greek and Catholic Bibles describe Esther as falling in a faint before the King, inspiring his pity rather than his respect. This interpretation is also suggested in some images from Protestant Europe.¹⁰⁵ By contrast, in the English embroideries, Esther is generally standing proudly at eye level with the King, smiling confidently. Ann Jones, writing on the Queen of Sheba, has drawn comparisons with contemporary literary and artistic interpretations of the story to similarly demonstrate that English women favoured a reading which positioned the Queen as King Solomon's equal both in wealth and intellect.¹⁰⁶ She is frequently depicted with a tent held above her as a kind of portable throne canopy and often holds a sceptre to emphasise the equality between the King and his guest. Again, the Queen meets the King at eye level, rather than bowing at his feet. These subtle features would have been readily apparent to scripturally literate early-modern embroiders and viewers, who would have been aware of their controversial theological implications.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Spence, *Lady Anne Clifford*, p. 56.

¹⁰³ H. Wilcox, 'Civil War Letters and Diaries and the Rhetoric of Experience', in L. L. Knoppers (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 247-9.

¹⁰⁴ Geuter, 'Women and Embroidery', p. 267.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 301-4.

¹⁰⁶ A. Jones, 'Needle, Scepter, Sovereignty: The Queen of Sheba in Englishwomen's Amateur Needlework', *Early Modern Culture: An Electronic Seminar*, 1/3 (2003) [with thanks to the author, no longer available online].

¹⁰⁷ A. Pullan, 'Informed Seeing': Reading the Seventeenth-Century Embroidered Cabinet at Milton Manor House through its Historical and Social Contexts', *Textile History*, 47/1 (2016), p. 49, 57.

IV. 'Polite war': embroidery as a political statement

Ruth Geuter has suggested that Esther's story held a particularly powerful resonance during the Civil Wars and Interregnum, across political, religious and gender divides, as the embodied voice of the marginalised and the godly.¹⁰⁸ The reasons why this might be true are readily apparent. Though female experiences of this period varied drastically, women's exclusion from the battlefield and the halls of politics did not prevent trauma. For many this time saw painfully divided families, grievous losses and physical danger whether used as pawns in warfare, being actively involved in besieged defence or facing the unease of armed strangers lodging in their homes under the compulsory practice of free-quarter. The absence of male family members saw women facing many of these circumstances alone. When the fighting ended, many stepped up to petition on behalf of their royalist families who were punished with confiscations, fines and ejections from office.¹⁰⁹ Courage and confidence in the cause which had resulted in these new experiences and responsibilities would have been emotionally vital, with the story of Esther providing an ideal role model.

This theory of Esther's popularity reflecting her position as an exemplar of female independence is, however, difficult to support with the evidence. The limited number of dated examples prevent assessment of whether Esther was more popular during this period of unrest, relative to the decades preceding the war and post-Restoration. The argument, moreover, is far stronger for Queen Esther than it is for the Queen of Sheba, the next woman of the Old Testament most frequently depicted. As discussed above, this second queen provided a powerful alternative view of women's capacity for intelligence. However, there is little in this story which appears as directly relevant to the political circumstances which dominated the period in which embroideries

¹⁰⁸ Geuter, R., 'Reconstructing the context of seventeenth-century English figurative embroideries', in M. Donald & L. Hurcombe (eds.), *Gender and Material Culture in Historical Perspective* (London, 2000), p. 102.

¹⁰⁹ Hughes, 'Society and the Roles of Women', pp. 155-8.

of this genre were most popular. The Queen of Sheba does not face danger, does not defend anyone, and does not even begin the story practising the 'correct' faith, though she is ultimately convinced in its favour. Instead of personal parallels between the embroiderers and the figures that they embroidered, therefore, we might look to another clear link between the two stories, the centrality of monarchy within them. This raises the possibility that these embroideries are political statements, perhaps even indicative of royalist allegiances.

In the embroideries, Kings Ahasuerus and Solomon occupy a position in the frame at least as significant as that of the heroines of the stories. Typically, they lie at the centre of the piece, framed under a royal canopy for further emphasis. Considering the Ashmolean embroidery, it is, undeniably, interesting to reflect on a woman's depiction of kingship in 1654, five years after Charles I was beheaded, and after five years of an unoccupied British throne. This becomes even more interesting when considered alongside other embroideries; to varying though often striking degrees, embroiderers depicted the Old Testament monarchs in the image of the Stuart king. Waved brown hair, a small, pointed beard and an upturned moustache were distinctive visual characteristics of Charles I. These were shown in official portraits of the monarch as well as woodcut illustrations in books and broadsides that were more widely accessible [Fig. 14]. The same characteristics can be found in embroideries known to explicitly portray Charles, as well as those which depicted Biblical kings [Figs. 15 & 16].



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.

Another key aspect of this visual similarity comes from clothing. Contemporary history paintings, such as Jan Steen's 'The Wrath of Ahasuerus' (ca. 1671), typically displayed figures in historic, often classical, or exotically foreign clothing.¹¹⁰ By contrast, seventeenth-century embroideries such as the Ashmolean panel frequently deployed modern British fashions. This effectively transplanted the events of the Old Testament into a modern setting, granting them a sense of immediacy and relevance to the current social and political climate. That this decision was an active choice, rather than the result of women's lack of knowledge about costumes remote from their own, is clear from an examination of the sources already discussed as being frequently deployed source materials. De Jode's engraving of the scene of Esther before the King is replete with sandals and toga-like draping [Fig. 17]. Moreover, the expansion of print during this period saw a new profusion of richly illustrated travel literature, cartography and costume books.¹¹¹ Female engagement with these depictions of foreign costume is, in fact, demonstrated by another popular genre of seventeenth-century embroideries, personifications of the continents.¹¹² These demonstrate female awareness of ethnographic illustrations and a willingness to use them in embroidery, suggesting that the use of contemporary dress in the Biblical pieces was a choice with purpose.

¹¹⁰ 'The Wrath of Ahasuerus' <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/the-wrath-of-ahasuerus-33163> (13 Feb. 2022).

¹¹¹ Hughes, H., 'The Four Continents in Seventeenth-Century Embroidery and the Making of English Femininity', in W. Melion and B. Ramakers (eds.), *Personification: embodying meaning and emotion*, (Leiden & Boston, 2016), pp. 719-20.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 726-7.



Figure 17.

It might be considered whether interpreting this as the consequence of profound and political reasons is the assumption of an over-eager historian. From the mid-seventeenth century, wealthy women were increasingly accused of extravagant indulgence, and of having lost the obedient domestic piety of women in a loosely defined past golden age.¹¹³ Such criticisms extended to the production of ‘curious works’ of embroidery, the richly decorated pieces that lacked a practical function.¹¹⁴ Women perhaps sought to minimise such criticism by choosing to embroider pieces with a religious subject matter. The Biblical stories of kings and queens conceivably provided the richest opportunities for crafting the lavish and elaborate little dolls of raised-work embroidery, with their fine clothes, jewels, and crowns. Such a reading, however, is to accept early modern anti-female rhetoric as truth and to deny the fact of women’s engagement with politics.

¹¹³ Geuter, ‘Women and Embroidery’, pp. 195-6.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 210-1.

Evidence for the use of embroidery as a means of political expression comes from surviving works of an explicitly political theme.¹¹⁵ These can offer immediate insight into the political outlook of their creator. One such example is heavily derived from the frontispiece of the *Eikon Basilike*, an immensely influential text published in the wake of the regicide and purportedly in the King's own words [Figs. 18 & 19]. In the image, Charles clutches the crown of thorns, his earthly crown at his feet, as he beholds the heavenly crown above him. The message of royal martyrdom is clear. The figure of Charles II on the left side of this piece is an addition by the embroiderer. The source of this image of the prince is unknown. However, his youthful, armoured appearance and the crown hovering just out of reach suggest that this embroidery predated the Restoration. The embroiderer has here crafted an image of overt royalist sentiment, its production an act of loyal devotion, and the possibility that it was gifted or displayed of great significance in our understanding of post-regicide royalist experience.

Embroidered pieces suggestive of such unconcealed political intentions are rare, though contemporary letters and diaries demonstrate that women were far from insulated from events beyond the home.¹¹⁶ Whilst individual works cannot be viewed as indicative of a shared female political engagement or of a particular perspective, they can be seen to offer evidence that women recognised the possibilities of embroidery as a means of political expression. Furthermore, they demonstrate that the emblematic and allegorical meanings utilised in Biblical images were similarly deployed for other ideological purposes. Consequently, we might read the embroideries as we would a text, conscious of the possibility of euphemism and metaphor. The frequency of representations of monarchy and kingship, therefore, might justifiably be read as expressive of the relative popularity of royalist sympathies.

¹¹⁵ A work depicting the execution of Charles I (mentioned in Nevinson, 1965) was traced to Somerset Museum, but the collection owner did not grant permissions in time for thesis submission.

¹¹⁶ See letters to Lady Barrington, *Barrington Family Letters*.



Figure 18.



Figure 19.

Jennifer Novotny has written about the material culture of ‘polite war’ in relation to the Jacobite era in eighteenth-century Scotland. This approach to looking at contemporary material culture acknowledges that, in a protracted political conflict, war extends beyond the battlefield to be waged ‘at hearthside and in the home.’¹¹⁷ Artefacts of domestic material culture in these circumstances could ‘offer material rallying points for unified political identities and shared social values.’¹¹⁸ It can be argued that the conditions which led to the politicisation of domestic items in eighteenth-century Scotland were paralleled in mid-seventeenth-century England. In the later period, textiles were a key part of these campaigns of ‘polite war’, from pin cushions adorned with Jacobite messages such as ‘GOD PRESERVE P.C. AND DOWN WITH THE RUMP’ to embroidered hangings incorporating the sunflower, the floral symbol of James Stuart.¹¹⁹ Similarly, a century earlier, domestic production of embroideries would have offered women an opportunity, otherwise limited, to express their political sentiments. The lengthy process of creating a piece such as the Ashmolean work could represent a private act of sustained loyalty for frustrated royalists living under an oppositional regime. The seventeenth-century home comprised spaces of varying degrees of public accessibility, and so the display of politically expressive objects could range from defiant statements to discreet personal reminders. Indirect and permissible representations of Biblical kingship perhaps offered a less dangerous means of weaving royalist sympathies into the fabric of the home.

The theory that these embroideries of more overtly religious subject matter also contained political subtext is supported by the frequent inclusion of royalist iconography within the decorative details. Beyond the references to monarchy represented by the king’s crown and sceptre, other specific emblematic references to the exiled Charles Stuart are apparent in the Ashmolean

¹¹⁷ J. L. Novotny, ‘Polite War: Material culture of the Jacobite era, 1688-1760’, in A. Macinnes, K. German and L. Graham (eds.), *Living with Jacobitism, 1690-1788: the three kingdoms and beyond*, (London, 2014), p. 153.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 156-9.

embroidery. The sapling of an oak tree recalls the oft-told story of the night following the Battle of Worcester when Charles hid from parliamentary soldiers in the Boscobel Oak before he escaped to France. The degree to which the oak tree was associated with royalist sentiment is apparent from celebrations of the Restoration, the pageantry of which frequently centred around the 'Royal Oke'.¹²⁰ Other flora and fauna featured in the embroidery, including the rose, thistle, peacock, and butterfly, also bore royalist connotations.¹²¹

There is, however, some difficulty in asserting the intention behind the use of particular emblematic images. Whilst they may have been conscious political statements, it is also possible that their widespread inclusion in embroideries testifies to the pervasiveness of monarchical imagery in visual culture. In the Ashmolean work, for example, a lion and leopard are included. These are heraldic animals, commonly featured in coats of arms. Whilst not directly associated with monarchy, therefore, these animals evoke the nobility, an institution that was granted its existence and purpose by and in relation to the monarchy.¹²² The vast majority of seventeenth-century embroideries which feature any flora and fauna include examples that were associated with the Stuart kings or the crown more generally, whether directly or in a more abstract sense. This seeming universality of royalist imagery reflects what Kevin Sharpe has described as 'the failure of republican culture.'¹²³ This theory posits that the republican government failed to offer British people a cultural alternative to the monarchy which was so integral to visual culture, as well as language, ritual, religion, and social hierarchy. This failure prevented republicanism from becoming

¹²⁰ *The several speeches made to the honorable Sir Richard Brown Lord Mayor of the City of London...* (London, 1660), p. 3.

¹²¹ N. Guthrie, *The Material Culture of the Jacobites* (Cambridge, 2013), p. 41; J. Tavares, 'King Charles II and Catherine of Braganza with allegories of the four continents' <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/226421> (23 Dec. 2021).

¹²² Sharpe, K., 'An image dotting rabble': the failure of republican culture in seventeenth-century England' in K. Sharpe and S. Zwicker (eds.), *Refiguring revolutions: aesthetics and politics from the English revolution to the Romantic revolution* (London, 1998), pp. 40-3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

naturalised in England, with the ‘monarchy-like’ Protectorate of Cromwell a significant step towards the Restoration of the Stuart king.¹²⁴



Figure 20.

The extent of this failure makes it difficult to assess what features might have been present in a ‘parliamentarian embroidery’. A piece in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum appears, at first glance, to offer a possibility [Fig. 20]. Though the butterfly and the lion are present, there are relatively few Stuart and royal emblems in comparison to other works. The figure of the king is positioned at the far-right edge, rather than centred, and his clothes are distinctly non-contemporary. The Bible story depicted in this work is that of Samuel. The mother of Samuel, Hannah, appears three times, with the Puritanical modesty of her dress contrasting that of her husband’s other wife. Hannah is shown actively in prayer, her hair covered by a cap. Such features all suggest the possibility of the embroiderer’s anti-monarchical politics and puritanical faith.

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 51-4.

Contemporary political invocations of the story of Samuel, however, render its use here as ambiguous.

In the story, Samuel's birth was a response to Hannah's prayers. A godly man and a prophet, Samuel was convinced to become King of the Israelites, though later deposed. The Bible passages concerning Samuel were used by republicans including John Lilburne and John Milton in defence of their anti-royalist cause. Lilburne argued that the story showed that 'this office of a King, is not in the least of Gods institution; neither is it to be given to any man upon earth'.¹²⁵ Milton referred to the deposition of Samuel to illustrate his interpretation of scripture as suggesting that that the 'right of choosing, yea of changing thir own Government is by the grant of God himself in the People.'¹²⁶

The story, however, was also associated with divinely ordained kingship; the book of Samuel is one of the most quoted in the *Eikon Basilike*, the apparently autobiographical text on the spirituality of Charles I.¹²⁷ It is, perhaps, notable that the panel centres Elkanah, the father of the future leader, beneath the blue canopy generally reserved in such works for kings; his beard is distinctly pointy. As such, this example demonstrates the difficulties in evading royalist messages and imagery, perhaps suggesting the reason why republican or parliamentary embroideries are so hard to find. It is, of course, also possible that such works were destroyed following the Restoration. However, the volume of surviving written works that were hostile to the monarchy suggest that such an approach was unlikely to have been so comprehensively successful.

¹²⁵ J. Lilburne, *Regall tyrannie discovered...* (London, 1646), p. 14.

¹²⁶ J. Milton, 'The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates' in N. Keeble and N. McDowell (eds.), *The Complete Works of John Milton, Volume VI: Vernacular Regicide and Republican Writings* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 159-60.

¹²⁷ N. McDowell, 'General Introduction', in N. Keeble and N. McDowell (eds.), *The Complete Works of John Milton, Volume VI: Vernacular Regicide and Republican Writings* (Oxford, 2013), p. 81.

VI. Conclusion

Early modern embroideries undoubtedly present limitations and challenges as historical materials, frequently lacking attribution and unable to be precisely located in time. Their effective usage demands multi-disciplinary and experimental approaches within a historical field that is profoundly centred on textual sources. Despite this, this thesis has demonstrated how individual embroideries, as well as this body of sources considered as a whole, offer profound possibilities for uncovering female beliefs and experiences. The focus here has been on situating female views within contemporary thought, so far as this was recorded in literature that was overwhelmingly written by men.

This work has established that embroideries offer persuasive evidence of female agency within the middling and upper ranks of English seventeenth-century society. This agency is apparent in the selective curatorial approach that was used to assemble the designs for embroideries, and in the discovery of the divergence between prescribed female role models and those popularly adopted by women. The embroideries thus show how religious and personal identities were discerningly crafted, rather than accepted uncritically from the prescriptive ideals presented to them. An image emerges of women using embroidery silks to engage in the Renaissance practice of self-fashioning.¹²⁸ In studying these sources, therefore, a better understanding of how women interacted with and responded to conduct literature becomes possible.

If it is accepted that many of the embroidered works of religious subject matter can also be interpreted alongside depictions of the Stuart monarchy, this results in a significant expansion

¹²⁸ S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (London, 1980), pp. 1-3.

of the pool of extant sources concerning the image of the king. The consequences of this, through a period of unprecedentedly experimental forms of government, present a significant contribution in support of Sharpe's proposals regarding the overwhelming dominance and power of royal imagery. Under Charles I, the order and harmony of the state had been closely associated with the metaphors of monarchy and matrimony, as exemplified in the monarch's own household and marriage.¹²⁹ The prevalence of depictions of royal marriage in the embroidered works might be further considered as indicative of women's particularly strong investment in this aspect of early modern kingship. Additional opportunities of research are, therefore, presented by the flood of embroideries depicting Charles II and Catherine de Braganza following the Restoration. Many of these works were likely produced by women for whom the reign of the previous king was at best a faint childhood memory. They might be explored as indicative of female appreciation for this function of the crown, with the royal couple representative of the relief at restored order, rather than a purely 'royalist' outpouring of affection for the monarch.

The richness of these sources is suggested by the diverse avenues for continued investigation which have emerged during the process of conducting this study. The later histories of these works, their preservation and patterns of inheritance, offer another suggestive thread, stretching towards the field of emotional history and the traditions of memory.

¹²⁹ Hughes, *Gender and the English Revolution*, pp. 23-6.

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