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Book Review

Frye, Susan. *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern*

England. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 344
pp. \$65.00.

Susan Frye's *Pens and Needles: Women's Textualities in Early Modern England* reveals the many ways that early modern women employed visual and verbal texts—often in tandem—to materialize their identities within “familial, intellectual, religious, and historical traditions” while, at the same time, using those traditions to “redefine themselves” (xv). At first glance, the subject of this beautiful book (it includes twenty-one full-color plates) would seem most attractive to historically-oriented readers: its opening chapters, including the introduction, present specific examples of works by individual women. Though Frye is careful to acknowledge the ways that the objects of her study (a large array that includes calligraphy, miniatures, and embroidered samplers) are “torn from their original contexts,” she argues that nonetheless they offer “evidence of early modern relations between subject and object, between textual and everyday practice, that may help in recovering the significance of

multiple kinds of texts in women's everyday lives—evidence that, in turn, offers ways to reread early modern literature by both men and women" (27-28). The latter part of this statement deserves emphasis: Frye's impressively researched account of women's textualities has far-reaching implications for the study of early modern literature and culture in general; indeed, it seeks to redefine our very concept of "text" (9). This study provides new reasons to appreciate the work of early modern women of different classes—a major achievement—and it will interest and assist early modern scholars engaged in a number of current critical discourses, not least of which is the ongoing conversation about materialist approaches to the period, including the history of the book. Significantly, *Pens and Needles* shows us that the textualities of early modern women are central to such discourses.

Chapter one, "Political Designs: Elizabeth Tudor, Mary Stuart, and Bess of Hardwick," draws lines of connection via "inalienable possessions" (Frye adopts Annette Weiner's term) between three (in)famous noblewomen. Frye's persuasive account of Bess of Hardwick as a "textile artist" is particularly engaging (60); readers will also enjoy her interpretation of the princess Elizabeth's savvy presentation of New Year's gifts to her stepmother, Katharine Parr. Frye's description of the way these women represented themselves and each other did make me want to know more about the larger network of artisans who assisted their efforts—Elizabeth's caregivers, for example, or Bess of Hardwick's male employees. Yet even as I wondered about these figures, I had the uncanny sensation, not for the last time while reading *Pens and Needles*, that the book was in fact teaching me to ask such questions.

The fascinating textile and textual products of three women of the artisan class—Levina Teerlinc, Jane Segar, and Esther Inglis—are the subjects of chapter two. The range of skills demonstrated by these professionals (Teerlinc and Inglis were employed by monarchs)

in their production of manuscripts, tiny books, cramp rings, and other objects demonstrates that “a space existed for skilled women to make a career by combining transcriptions of court ritual, translation, dedications, poetry, calligraphy, drawing, painting, self-portraiture, and embroidery,” as Frye asserts (xvii-xviii). Their products also, I would argue, challenge our conception of the status of the codex in Tudor England; indeed, this chapter illustrates how closer study of what we might call early modern mixed media can productively upend some of our most basic assumptions about early modern book culture.

Frye’s attention to women’s “increasing engagement with print culture” continues in chapter three, which explores three needlework genres—the spot sampler, band sampler, and needlework picture (159). Feminist critics have long debated the ambiguous role of women’s needlework as both expressive tool and symbol of patriarchal subjugation; this chapter offers a new approach through its interrogation of women’s decisions to represent historical Jewish women such as Esther and Susanna in their samplers. In their representations of Biblical stories of rape, voyeurism, false witness, and sexual harassment, Frye argues, women adapted and revised familiar narratives from masculine print traditions.

The final two chapters of *Pens and Needles* continue to investigate women’s historical relation to textiles, but as represented in canonical literary works, beginning with Shakespearean drama. As Frye explains, early modern drama “acknowledges and tends to eroticize” women’s engagements with cloth; both *Othello* and *Cymbeline*, the subjects of chapter four, “demonstrate that the key difference between staged and historical textiles can be the extent to which they are interpreted and possessed by men” (163). Frye’s reading of *Cymbeline* is one of the most convincing in print: her account of Imogen’s “translation” is particularly insightful (185). Yet if the argument has a weakness, it is Frye’s lack of attention

to the drama's staging. For example, she acknowledges that Giacomo's description of Imogen's bedchamber is "contaminated," but it is possible that the chamber as described is entirely his invention, or at least never actually visible to playgoers (183). Acknowledging this possibility would not unravel the reading, but would provide Frye further opportunity to explain why the tradition of female textile self-representation she describes matters to a playgoer's understanding of the complex scene(s), whether or not one accepts the villain's account as truth.

In chapter five, the book's most suggestive and in some ways speculative chapter, Frye argues that Mary Sidney Wroth used "luxurious textiles and rhetorical practices associated with cloth to dilate [*Urania*]" (xix). Here, in one of the book's most exciting moves, Frye demonstrates the ways that the tradition of women's textile work can underpin early modern literature—and romance in particular—even when the representation of such work is virtually absent in its narratives. Her explanation of Wroth's rhetoric of colors, which she identifies as a Sidney characteristic, is particularly illuminating; as she explains, "Wroth's constant evocation of color, especially the color of textiles throughout *Urania*, playfully literalizes the rhetorical language of amplification, while using color and cloth to encode her characters' social and ethical status also furthers their stories" (209). Frye's account of the ways Wroth combined both verbal and visual media thus presents *Urania* as another example of the tradition of women's textualities described in early chapters.

As a longtime admirer of Frye's work, I looked forward to the publication of *Pens and Needles* but expected some of its arguments, especially those previously published, to feel familiar. Instead, it was quickly apparent that even this material had been "translated"—not only revised, but also given new energy and significance in the rich context of the

monograph. This is a book you could certainly dip into for specific ends—for Frye's excellent research on *Mary, Queen of Scots*, for example, or her refreshing reading of *Othello*—but there is much to learn, both about the early modern period and the value of interdisciplinary scholarship, from closely attending to the way she brings together her lucid and sometimes deceptively straightforward readings.

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