

**The University of Kent  
School of European Culture and Languages**

**Comparative Literature Research Study  
MPhil. Thesis - 2015**

**Textiles in Texts:  
Literary Representations of Women's Textile Crafts**

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## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my thanks to my supervisors Dr. Anna Schaffner and Dr. Paul March Russell for their encouragement and assistance in the completion of this thesis.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
A Distinctly Female Tradition.....	1
The Organisation of the Study.....	2
The Importance of Textiles to Human Existence.....	6
Mythological Archetypes.....	9
Text and Textile Connections.....	13
<b>Chapter One - Texts and Textiles Convergences.....</b>	<b>16</b>
Texts and Textiles Shared Feature .....	16
Textile Tradition and the Female Greek Poets.....	22
Women’s Weaving in the Homeric Epic.....	27
‘Talk and Tell’ – Textiles and Storytelling.....	37
Commonalities in the Process of Construction.....	46
Volatility and Style in Texts and Textiles.....	51
Reading Textiles.....	54
<b>Chapter Two - The Nineteenth-Century Politics of Women’s Textiles in Brontë and Phelps .....</b>	<b>56</b>
The Organisation and Industrialisation of Textile Production.....	56
The Woman Question.....	58
Textile Representations in Charlotte Brontë’s <i>Shirley</i> .....	62
Textiles and the Inculcation of Femininity.....	64
Patterns of Femininity.....	68
The ‘Jew-basket’.....	72
The Victorian Myths of Womanhood.....	78
Challenging Gender Stereotypes.....	85
Poverty and Women’s Textiles.....	91
<i>The Silent Partner</i> .....	96
Women’s Textiles and Industrial Change.....	106
<b>Chapter Three – The Making of Female Space: Twentieth-Century Representations of Women’s Textiles in Lawrence and Walker.....</b>	<b>110</b>
The Creative Processes.....	110
Textiles and Modernist Myth in D.H.Lawrence’s <i>The Ladybird</i> .....	112
The Thimble.....	118
The Representation of Isis.....	127
Women’s Needlework in Alice Walker’s <i>The Color Purple</i> .....	132
Postmodernist Elements of the Text.....	136
A Female Space.....	141
The History of Quilting.....	146
The Intervention of Shug Avery.....	151
A Needle not a Razor.....	155
Textiles and Female Creativity.....	158

<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>162</b>
The Text and Textile Relationship.....	162
Text and Textiles Convergences.....	163
The Politics of Nineteenth-Century Textiles.....	168
The Making of Female Space.....	171
Women’s Textiles in Texts.....	175
Women’s Textiles the Contemporary Perspective.....	177
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>181</b>

## Introduction

### **A Distinctly Female Tradition**

Throughout long periods of time the story of women has remained hidden. Accounts of the past are primarily male-authored, their focus directed towards the recording of masculine achievements and activities. Before the nineteenth century women had few opportunities to participate in the process of chronicling their lives as for generations the majority of women were excluded from literary culture due to limited access to education. It is for this reason that the traditional handicrafts of women, their spinning, weaving, knitting, sewing and embroidery, have fulfilled a special need. These crafts offered women a means of communication and of self-expression that defied expectations of the passive role of women in society.

The textile tradition of women may, however, be considered in a broader context than one of personal expression. The production of textiles is an important signifying practice, one that pre-dated texts as a means of preserving and transferring information. To the present day, in cultures throughout the world, it is accepted that textiles possess and convey meaning. Indeed, in many early civilisations significant events were recorded in textile form. Women have always been substantially involved in this activity. Writing of the 20,000 year-old history of women's textiles Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1995) catalogues the ancient remains of tools and of fragments of cloth that confirm the practice of textile making for millennia before the first texts were created. Sources of evidence, including archaeological and ethnological studies, conclude that the main responsibility for this work fell to women. Regrettably, textiles are susceptible to decay so few stand the test of time. As a consequence, as with so much of the work and experience of women, material evidence of the part played by women in establishing the origins of cultural

communication is lost. It is for this reason that the contribution of women and their handiwork to systems for the exchange of information, and subsequently to the development of civilisation remains substantially unacknowledged.

It is largely through written texts that it is possible to identify and to define the communicative aspects of women's textile making. Therefore, the foremost objective of this study is to use literary representations from different periods to attempt to show the scope, function and influence of women's textiles. The study explores two main strands of investigation. The first is to determine the nature and the extent of the relationship between women's textile crafts and texts. The second is to establish the capacity of textual representations of women and their textiles to reflect hidden aspects of female history and culture, and how these relate to critical moments and crucial themes of textile history. Through this dual focus it is proposed to evaluate the contribution of women's textile crafts to both cultural and literary advancement and to the illustration of female experience over time.

### **The Organisation of the Study**

This investigation of the connections between textiles and texts and assessment of the signifying capacity of women's textiles is organised into three chapters: 'Texts and Textiles Convergences'; 'The Nineteenth-Century Politics of Women's Textiles in Brontë and Phelps'; and 'The Making of Female Space: Twentieth-Century Representations of Women's Textiles in Lawrence and Walker'. This structure allows the study to progress chronologically through time from antiquity until the late twentieth century. The limited space in this study and long and complex history of women's textiles means that it is not possible to provide a complete picture of the literary representations of the female preoccupation with textiles from antiquity to the present day. Instead, the study concentrates on detailed close-readings of

paradigmatic case studies. The chapters are specifically themed to reflect the most significant periods and themes in the literary representation of the history of textiles.

The focus of chapter one is the identification of the characteristics that are shared by texts and textiles, and the exploration of the qualities and continuity of these connections in texts of the ancient world. In the chapter questions are posed as to whether or not the shared etymology of the crafts has led to a linkage that is merely metaphoric, or if the existence of commonalities in terminology and process are indicators of a more substantive connection, and that textile making has influenced the production of texts. Two intertwined constituents are investigated in this part of the study. The first of these is the exploration of analogies between women's textiles and texts. The second is the connection between women's textile work and the oral tradition of storytelling. These issues are explored via close readings of a number of ancient literary texts including fragments of the poems of the female Greek poets, Sappho, Erinna and Nossis, and the poems of Homer and Ovid. These texts allow access to early literary representations of women's textile by both female and male authors, providing confirmation of the antiquity of textile practices and insight into aspects of female culture at this time. Examples of the identifiable links between textiles and texts in these works are examined in order to explore the nature and extent of textile and text connections, and to assess their significance for the lives of women of the ancient world and the reality of the present.

Chapter two examines the representation of women's textiles in the nineteenth century, the most critical period in the history of textiles as the industrialisation of textile production resulted in the transformation of the social, economic and geographic map of the world. The introduction of industrial processes in this era brought about economic and political change of mammoth proportions.

The domestic production of textiles ceased to have any substantial economic value. Instead textiles were produced on a large scale in a factory environment. In this phase of the study an examination of the political impact of industrialisation on the lives of women of this time through the perspective of textile making is undertaken. The novels selected for this task are *Shirley* (1849) by Charlotte Brontë and *The Silent Partner* (1871) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps. These texts have been selected from an abundance of female-authored novel from this period that feature women and their textiles for the contrasting approach of the authors to the representation of the effects of textile industrialisation on women. The novels reflect the reality of class and gender politics of the time against a background of domestic and international policy making from an English and American viewpoint. They do so in different forms. The expressive realism of Brontë's novel differs from Phelps' use of a sentimental mode. However, in combination, the textile representations present in these novels provide a broad perspective of female pre-occupations and values in the nineteenth century, and illustrate the relationship of women to the society they occupy.

Chapter three assesses the relevance of physical aspects of textile processes for literary depictions of women of the twentieth century, a time that brought about improved opportunities for women in terms of education and the freedom to vote. It also saw a renewed interest in the creative aspects of textile making. The purpose of this chapter of the study is to obtain a more detailed understanding of the influence of the physical elements of textile processes on the maker. The ability of women's textile making to generate an environment that encourages female expression is analysed through textile representations in twentieth-century literature. The texts selected for this part of the study are *The Ladybird* (1923) by



D.H.Lawrence and *The Color Purple* (1983) by Alice Walker. From both a male and female perspective, and from different time spans and continents, the novels demonstrate the continuity of female engagement with textiles. Further, the authors make use of the rhythm of textile processes and the flexibility and the pliability of fabric to show the potential of needlework to shape identity and to offer opportunities for personal and collective transformation.

Surprisingly, no single study exists so far that analyses literary representations of handicrafts systematically over such a broad time period. This study aims to fill this gap. There is growing critical interest in women's textiles. Authors such as Elizabeth Wayland Barber (1995) and Roszika Parker (1984) have addressed historical aspects of textiles in their work. Other writers have chosen to write of revelatory characteristics of textiles. Ann Bergren (2008) establishes connections between weaving and the spoken arts in the ancient world, Elaine Showalter (1986; 1992) and Elaine Hedges (1991) have contributed essays on the interpretation of literary representations of women's textiles but, as in the work of Sandra M. Gilbert (1979; 2011) and Susan Gubar (1979), their attention is directed to the textiles of women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin (2009) explore rhetorical aspects of literary representations of women's textiles, but their research is confined to the two hundred years leading to 1950. Jessica Hemming (2011) is alone in identifying the undervaluing of textile scholarship in her introduction to a collection of essays from the last decade that relate to concepts of textile making, including touch and use.

The curious lack of critical studies on literary representations of textile practices means that, as yet, there is no established academic route for the assessment of the relevance of textiles to texts. As a result, a multi-disciplinary

approach to textual analysis is required. For this reason the methodology of the study involves a combination of historical and anthropological research, a study of relevant literary and feminist criticism and scholarly explorations of material culture. These factors are combined with close readings of the selected literary texts. The diversity of this methodology is designed to make accessible the considerable degree of historical, cultural and literary information that may be obtained from analysing even the most minor literary representation of women's textile making.

### **The Importance of Textiles to Human Existence**

Textiles impact upon every aspect of human existence. There is a relationship between textiles and human survival. They are physically important at every stage of human life from birth until death. A new-born child is enfolded in a blanket or cloth, and, at the final stage of life, a body is wrapped in a burial garment. Textiles are part of everyday life. The human body is encased in garments that are woven, stitched or knitted. Homes are decorated and draped with textiles. They provide warmth, comfort and protection from external forces. Textile clothing signals both class and individual identity through characteristics of design, fabric and logo. In the form of flags woven cloth defines national identity. As a result of this life-long significance - both practical and symbolic - textiles form part of human consciousness. They are imbued with historical, political, economic, personal, social, aesthetic and spiritual importance. As a consequence, they contribute to the language and to the imagery of the world's cultures.

The significance of textiles to human life has accumulated throughout the course of a long history. Barber (1995) draws attention to archaeological finds of needle working tools and beadwork that are ascribed to the middle of the Upper Palaeolithic period some twenty to thirty thousand years ago. She describes a small

Palaeolithic figure, carved in bone found in Lespugue, France. Dating from around twenty thousand years B.C., the figure wears a skirt made of twisted strings, hung from a waistband (1995: 44). The perishable nature of cloth means that finds of ancient fragments of cloth are rare. As Barber points out, 'Cloth itself, for example, seldom makes it through the millennia except in tiny, hardly recognizable, shreds. Until recently excavators tended to throw even those away, assuming they were of no value' (1995: 287). The growth of archaeology as a science and the development of the current interest in material culture as a means of exploring the past have reversed this attitude.

The connection between women and textile making is supported by anthropological studies. This area of research supports the premise that women were responsible for the production of textiles as they could conveniently combine textile making with child rearing. Barber (1995: 30) draws attention to a model developed by Judith Brown, published in *The American Anthropological Review* in 1970, in which she examines the division of labour in pre-industrial communities. Brown concludes that whether or not the community relied upon women as the chief providers of a specific type of labour depended upon 'the compatibility of this work with the demands of childcare' (1970:72). For this reason textile making became the prime responsibility of women. It was their foremost contribution to society for many thousands of years.

Tangible sources exist that demonstrate the longevity of the relationship between women and textiles. In museums across the world there are artefacts that record women's textile activities in pictorial form. These comprise tomb goods, cylinder seals, decorative friezes, vase paintings, mosaics and figurines that date back as far as 2000 years B.C. Further evidence may be found in engravings and in

dedications. Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Frant (1982) describe an inscription on a black-figured vase dating from the fifth century B.C. The dedication reads 'I am Melosa's prize. She won a victory in the girls' carding contest' (1982: 22). The process of carding is a precursor of the spinning of wool. Despite these historic connections until recent times women's textile work was designated as a craft activity rather than an art form. The low status of women promoted a perception that the practical skills of women employed in the production of textiles were separated from, and lesser than, the skills necessary to materialise ideas in a creative way.

Representations of women engaged in textile production abound in literary works from numerous different cultures and periods. The personal connection between textiles and those who make them has intrigued and inspired writers from ancient times until the present day. The result is a rich archive of texts that include images of women exercising their handicraft skills in diverse, often subversive, ways. Details of the visual effects of textile work and the manner of its performance are frequently employed to contribute authenticity, atmosphere and background interest to a text. Writers also offer a new dimension to the text by portraying images of women and their handiwork from the perspective of an onlooker.

In life, the intimacy of the relationship that exists between women and their textiles ensure that a woman's textile work becomes identified with the woman herself. As a consequence of this association, literary descriptions of women and their textile activities serve to articulate elements of the psychology and the emotions of women undertaking these tasks. Representations of this nature offer a degree of insight into both the external and internal life of women that reflects and accentuates patterns of feminine characteristics and behaviour. Such patterns ensure that

depictions of women's handiwork in literary works have the ability to contribute to the construction of a narrative.

### **Mythological Archetypes**

The value of women's handiwork as a mode of signification is intensified by a number of recurring literary motifs. Myths of many different cultures associate weaving with female deities. Much is owed to Greek mythology for substantiating the range and status of the topic through a number of influential archetypes. These include the iconic weavers, Penelope and Helen. A number of these myths reveal subversive, even dangerous, concepts.

A primary example is the myth of the encounter between the goddess Athena and Arachne. Arachne is a young girl, renowned for her skill in weaving. The many who gathered to watch her at work regard her as so gifted they assume her teacher is Athena, patron of spinning, weaving and needlework. Arachne rejects this supposition. Confident that the work of a skilled mortal could match that of a divine being, she rashly issues a challenge to the goddess to prove her greater expertise in a weaving contest. Athena takes up this challenge, and is enraged to find that she can find no fault in Arachne's wonderful work. Ruthless in her revenge, Athena's response is to transform Arachne into a spider, destined to weave her web for all eternity.

Ovid displays considerable familiarity with the process of weaving in his account of the encounter between Arachne and Athena in *Metamorphoses* (8 A.D.). He writes of the skill and grace of Arachne 'forming the raw wool first into a ball, or fingering the flock and drawing out again and yet again the fleecy cloud in long soft threads' (1986: 121). He depicts the contestants setting up warp-weighted looms: 'the warp is tied to the wide cross beam: a cane divides the threads; the pointed

shuttles carry the woof through, sped by their fingers' (122). Details of the complex designs adopted by the weavers are described. Ovid writes 'and on the loom an ancient tale was traced' (123). The weaving of Athena is employed to illustrate the immense power of the gods and the fate of those mortals foolish enough to challenge this power. Arachne's weaving, in contrast, tells of the sexual adventures of the gods. Irreverently, she depicts the metamorphic forms they assume in pursuit of the mortals they covet. Nancy K. Miller (1986) suggests that 'Arachne, the spider artist, began as a woman weaver of texts' (1986: 272).

The tale of Arachne and Athena is of ancient origin. Barber draws attention to a representation of the weaving contest in a design on a small Greek perfume bottle from Corinth, from around 600 B.C. (1995: 241). The importance of the myth is that it establishes an association between needlework and a beautiful but predatory object, a spider's web. The weaving of a spider's web is synonymous with the characteristics of intrigue and guile, a trap for the unwary. The connection between Athena and handicrafts adds an additional dimension. Camille Paglia suggests that the goddess 'symbolises the adaptive mind, the ability to invent, plan, conspire, cope and survive' (1991: 85). In numerous literary works these are qualities that women often reveal through their textile work.

Such resourcefulness forms the central element of the myth of Tereus, Prochne and Philomena. In *Metamorphoses* Ovid describes how Philomena is subject to dual violation by her brother-in-law, Tereus. He rapes her and then ensures her silence by cutting out her tongue. Deprived of speech Philomena finds a voice through her needlework. She conveys her story to her sister Prochne through her weaving. Ovid relates how 'on a clumsy native loom she wove a clever fabric, working words in red upon white to tell the tale of wickedness' (1998: 39). In

Ovid's depiction of the colours of the threads used by Philomena symbolism is apparent. White is a recognised signifier of purity; red of danger and blood.

Geoffrey H. Hartman refers to the phrase 'the voice of the shuttle' in relation to this myth in his well known essay 'The Voice of the Shuttle: Language from the Point of View of Literature' (1971). Aristotle in *Poetics* (400 B.C.) first used the phrase in regard to Tereus, a play by Sophocles that has since been lost. The question raised by Hartman is:

What gives these words the power to speak to us even without the play? No doubt the story of Tereus and Philomela has a universally affecting element: the double violation, the alliance of craft (cunning) and craft (art), and what the metaphor specifically refers to: that truth will out, that human consciousness will triumph' (197: 337).

In the course of his analysis Hartman celebrates the phrase as a metaphor for regained speech, pointing out that the two words 'voice and shuttle' demonstrate a double metonymy of both 'cause and effect' (338). However, Patricia Klindienst Joplin argues that Hartman's focus is not sufficiently directed towards the means through which the voice of Philomela is restored. Responding to Hartman in her essay 'The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours' (1991) Joplin states her reason for challenging Hartman's interpretation:

He celebrates Language and not the violated woman's emergence from silence. He celebrates Literature and the male poet's trope. Not the woman's elevation of her safe, feminine, domestic craft – weaving – into art as a new means of resistance. (1991: 36)

As Joplin points out the myth demonstrates that the loom is 'an instrument that binds and connects' (53). In her endeavours to be heard by her sister Philomela finds not only her voice but also her power. In addition to demonstrating the female capacity for revenge, the myth illustrates the potential for handicrafts to supplant language

and act as a compelling means of revelation. By means of cunning Philomela subverts the use of her loom and employs a simple domestic tool as an implement of empowerment and retribution.

Other mythical figures have potent links with textiles. Three terrible and powerful women, known as the Furies or Fates, illustrate darker aspects of Greek mythology. The Furies are depicted as the harbingers of destiny, implementing the decisions of Zeus in regard to the length of human life. The women, Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, spin, measure and cut the thread of life. They are depicted as employing the tools of women, distaff, thread and scissors. The alignment established by the myth between women's handiwork and human fate places emphasis on the elemental aspects that attaches to the crafts of women. The mythical image of the Furies affirms the significance of the role of women in giving and sustaining life, and, through association, to destiny and death. These themes are replicated in many literary works. The grotesque representation of the Furies in Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon* (458 B.C.) is perhaps indicative of a male fear of these aspects of femininity. The connection in the myth between textile work, the everyday activity of women, and those who control the span of life implies that women present a potential danger. It suggests the women are in possession of a mysterious knowledge and power in relation to the life force that is beyond the experience and therefore the control of men. In *The Tale of Two Cities* (1860) Charles Dickens employs such an association in his creation of the revolutionary fanatic, Madame Defarge, who holds the fate of many in her hands through the woollen threads of her knitting.

The properties of women's needlework that relate to the mysterious and uncanny also extend to tales of magic and enchantment. The generative



characteristics of textile work, its ability to transform flimsy components into creations of substance, establish links to magic making. Folk and fairy tales abound with stories of spinning, weaving and sewing that feature the conjuring of spells. The *Kinder-und Hausmächen* (1857) collection by the brothers Grimm includes several such tales. Among them are the tales of 'Brier Rose', 'The Three Spinners' and 'The Six Swans'. The latter tale is reminiscent of the myth of Ariadne and Theseus in that it introduces a ball of yarn with magical way-finding powers. It also incorporates the weaving of six shirts by a loving sister. The shirts overcome the spell of a wicked stepmother to transform her brothers from swans to human form.

In medieval literature there are copious examples of needlework utilised to invoke magic or protection in the form of talismans or amulets. For example, in the twelfth century, in his story *Cligés*, Chrétien de Troyes depicts the girl Soredamors literally sewing herself into a garment when she uses one of her long golden hairs as thread to sew a white silk shirt that is given to her lover Alexander. In another of the works of Chrétien de Troyes, *The Story of the Grail*, the hero, Sir Gwain, is given a long, wide sleeve of 'red samite' (2004: 244), to wear as a banner in a tournament. In accepting the sleeve from a young girl as a token of her love, he becomes her knight, her champion for the duration of the tournament. The sleeve takes on a new purpose, one that is instantly recognisable in the context in which it is employed, and in the environment created by the text.

### **Text and Textile Connections**

In the preface to *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) Sandra M Gilbert and Susan Gubar define their methodology for the study of female literary history, explaining that they have 'sought to describe the experience that generates metaphor and the metaphor that creates experience' (1984: xiii). The potential for such an exchange of

experience is relevant to the discussion on the influence of women's textiles. As myths and folk tales make evident, textiles possess qualities and characteristics that lend themselves to metaphor and associations. These metaphors subsequently transform into a wide range of experiences.

Beverly Gordon (2011) identifies specific sets of metaphors that derive from the physical task of textile making. She attributes the source of these metaphors to certain textile properties. These include the thread as a line, a pathway; the paradox of the dual textile characteristics of connectedness and separateness; the 'living' qualities of textiles and their power to take on the essence of those who make or use them; and the concept of the textile as a wrapper, enfolder and framer. Above all, she places emphasis on the symbolic link between the act of textile making and generative activities, expansion, birth and growth (2011: 23).

These metaphoric associations are not restricted to the sphere of textiles. Many have identifiable links to the process of writing and of the construction of texts. J. Hillis Miller deploys the metaphor of the textile as a line or pathway in his use of the myth of the textile maker Ariadne (1992) as a component of critical analysis. In his discussion on the symbolism of the thread and the labyrinth in relation to the narrative line adopted by Henry James, Miller points out:

The image of the line, it is easy to see, cannot be detached from the problem of repetition. Repetition might be defined as anything that happens to the line to trouble its straightforward linearity: returnings, knottings, recrossings, crinklins to and fro, suspensions, interruptions. (1992: 17)

The fact that characteristics shared by texts and textiles extend beyond that of metaphor is reflected in this quotation. The complexity of the creative process described by Miller corresponds to that employed in the crafting of textiles. Additionally, the terminology used accords with the language of textiles. Linearity,

repetition, returnings, knottings, and so forth, are terms that are equally relevant to textile making. Miller gives further credence to the shared properties of textiles and texts through his reference to a book as 'made of gatherings or folds bringing the divided back together' (6), and his observations on the physical aspects of writing, relating a text to a textile:

The paradox is that the paper is already thought of as a tissue, a woven surface of crisscross lines or filaments. The word *line* comes from a root *lino*, meaning linen, flax. The text is scratched cut, stamped, poured out, imprinted, or embroidered on a blank integument that is itself already a woven fabric. *Text* comes from *texere*, to weave. Writing lays fabric on fabric in a hymeneal stitching, joining, or breaking, transgressing a line or frontier, tracing on the woven pattern another pattern coarse or fine. (7-8)

In this extract it is noticeable that in his metaphoric interpretation of the craft of writing, Miller blurs the distinctions between the components of metaphor and those of process, terminology and etymology. In this manner he reveals characteristics common to both texts and textiles.

The analysis of literary representations of female engagement with textiles offers the opportunity to explore the scale and significance of such connections between textiles and texts. Moreover, the texts selected for the study demonstrate how women's textiles have pervaded literature through time, and show the ability of textile activity to reveal aspects of the story of women that is largely excluded from cultural history.

## Chapter One - Text and Textiles Convergences

### **Texts and Textiles – Shared Features**

The purpose of this chapter is to use ancient texts to illustrate features common to both texts and textiles and to determine the nature of this relationship. Shared characteristics may be observed in the process of the construction of texts and textiles and in three conjoining areas. These comprise terminology; the ability to convey meaning; and associations to textual art, resulting from potential connections to oral storytelling. It is conceivable that commonalities between the crafts stem from the long history of the art and craft of textile making and recognition of the signifying power of textiles. Textiles, like texts, are important as a communicative vehicle. Both textile products and the process of textile making have the ability to convey complex personal, social and political messages in material or metaphoric form. The process of textile making also introduces possibilities of links between women, their textiles and oral tales. In the majority of ancient cultures women have been responsible for textile making. This task created an appropriate context for song and storytelling, as shown in the fictional representations of the telling of oral tales in the texts analysed in this section of the study. Probing the nature of this association offers insights into the potential for women and their textiles to influence the forming and shaping of texts through their contribution to an oral tradition of women's song and storytelling.

Overt convergences between texts and textiles are made apparent through shared language, terms used to describe the sewing and weaving of both words and fabric. Terminology derived from the making of textiles have been absorbed into contemporary language and frequently applied in metaphorical form, but the origins of these connections are ancient. The definition of the word *rhapsōidós*, a term used

to describe the singers of the Homeric poems, is 'he who sews songs together' and stems from archaic Greek tradition. As Gregory Nagy points out, the rhapsodic performance 'is equated with a *process* of sewing the disintegrated parts together' (2005: 86). Nagy distinguishes between this metaphoric association, the joining of songs, and another, that of the weaving of individual songs 'with the song being visualized as a web, a fabric, a textile' (86). He relates the concept of the weaving of single songs to the Latin word '*textere*', meaning to weave, the common root of both *text* and *textile*. These links are the first of many parallels between the two crafts that occur in both material and metaphoric form. Writing of women's roles in Greek culture, Ann Bergren demonstrates the connections between women's textiles and verbal art. She examines the verb '*textere*' in relation to ancient Greek culture and suggests:

Greek culture inherits from Indo-European a metaphor by which poets and prophets define themselves as "weaving" or "sewing words", that is they describe their activity in terms of what is originally woman's work *par excellence*. They call their product, in effect, a "metaphorical web". But which, then, is the original and which is the metaphorical process? Is weaving a figurative speech or is poetry a figurative web? The question cannot be decided. Weaving as the sign-making activity of women is both literal and metaphorical, both original and derived. (2008:16)

In this comment Bergren exposes the ambiguity of analogies between the weaving of fabric and of poetic language. Her questioning of which is the original and which is the metaphorical process reveals the intricacies of the literal and figurative associations connecting these activities. As Bergren makes apparent the common factor that links them is that they are both objects of the verb 'to weave', but in this instance she overlooks the influence of other similarities between the two crafts that contribute to defining their relationship. These may occur in relation to the form of the finished product, a text or textile, or in the process of the creation of these

products. This being so, in questioning the existence of convergences between texts and textiles, it is necessary to identify these associations and determine whether the nature of their characteristics are material or metaphoric. One of these weaving activities is defined by Bergren as verbal art, the other a silent substitute for the perceived lack of verbal art in women of the ancient world. And yet, the weaving of words, 'the metaphoric web', takes on elements of materiality when it is transferred to written form. And the weaving of fabric, the substitute for speech, is not silent for it has the ability to produce signs, a material and metaphorical representation of language.

The ability of the products of textile crafts to encode and to convey messages has existed throughout history. According to anthropologist Elizabeth Wayland Barber 'Clothing, right from our first direct evidence twenty thousand years ago, has been the handiest solution to conveying social messages visually, silently, continuously' (1994:148). Compared to the centuries of textile production, the production of written texts may be classed as a modern invention. Writing was not invented until some fifty-five hundred years ago. As Barber argues, the complexities of early scripts ensured that very few, highly privileged, individuals could read or write:

It wasn't until a script as simple as the Greek alphabet was invented and became widespread, a good three thousand years later, during the 'golden age' of Athens in the late fifth century B.C., that the message senders could assume some literacy in the general population. The Classical Greek and Roman urban citizens could read and write, even (!) women and slaves in many cases. But all this was lost in the barbarian wars that followed. [...] Widening literacy, born with the printing press, and the Renaissance is but a few centuries old. (149)

The capacity of textiles to fulfil the role subsequently taken up by texts, to be the precursor of literacy, is given prominence by Barber. She asserts that 'Cloth like

clothing is a fine place for social messages. Patterned cloth in particular is infinitely variable and, like language, can encode arbitrarily any message whatsoever' (149). Textiles were frequently used to record historical and mythological events from the earliest times. Designed for ritual purposes, they preserved the memories of an individual or a clan. Anthropologists have determined that it is for this reason that many ancient cultures placed a high value on their store of textiles, considering them to possess great political as well as mystical significance.

The imagery and symbolic associations attached to textile products extends to the process of textile making. The individual processes related to producing textiles have considerable semiotic value. In the introduction to this study reference was made to some of the values of textile metaphors identified by Beverley Gordon. These relate to the physical properties of textile components and the process of textile making. They include linear aspects of the thread as a line or pathway; the paradox of the dual values of connectedness and separation engendered by thread and cloth; the 'living' qualities of a textile, the ability to absorb the spirit of the wearer or maker; and the making of textiles as an expansive, generative activity, symbolic of birth and growth (2011: 23). The ability of textiles to generate powerful metaphoric associations is based upon our reliance on textiles. They are a central element of human experience and are essential to human survival. Since the beginnings of civilisation, the spinning and weaving of fibres, the intertwining, entangling and joining of threads, and the embellishment of cloth are activities that have interacted with and promoted human life. The degree to which everyday language incorporates textile expressions and metaphors illustrates this concept. We refer to the 'fabric of society', to the 'distaff' side of a family, to 'embroidering' the truth, to life 'hanging by a thread'. The extent of the metaphorical connotations related to textiles varies from

basic elements of communication to significant cultural ideas. In early civilisations textile metaphors were employed as an analogy for creation, for the generation of life. As a result powerful deities and mythic heroines have associations to textiles, including the Fates of ancient Greece and the Spider Woman of Native American culture, thought to be responsible for spinning and controlling the thread of life.

Writing of the psychological basis of the development of metaphors, James Olney suggests that a requirement of this process is 'to grasp the unknown through the known, or to let the known stand for the unknown and thereby fit into an organized, patterned body of experiential knowledge' (1981: 31). Over time, the metaphorical power of textiles has been recognised, has become familiar, and through known textile properties and processes it is possible grasp the unknown, to construct alternative meanings and experiences that may be formulated in the mind and absorbed into knowledge.

The association between women's textile crafts and texts extends beyond shared elements of language and the signifying systems of textile processes and products to the context of textile making. Long before written texts, women spun threads, worked their looms, and plied their needles, and, as they did so, songs were sung and stories were told. Joanne Turvey observes:

The history of textiles is interwoven with narratives and stories. Whilst textiles were made, stories were told, and as objects constructed, so were tales, each seamlessly interconnected. The natural rhythms of textile construction – the clicking of needles – mirror the lilt, representations and gesture of storytelling, each offering the articulation and expression of the body and mind in harmony. (2009: 136)

There are no preserved records that support the contention of the intertwining of the processes of textiles and texts in the manner described by Turvey. It is necessary to explore a variety of sources in the search for confirmation of the lived reality of



women of the ancient world for, in most instances, the female voices of this time are filtered through the authorship of men. Nevertheless, representations of women in artefacts, myths and classical texts provide a perception of female activities and suggest that in most ancient cultures a connection may be made between women and telling stories through the literary vernacular of the time, the singing of songs. The processes of spinning, weaving or sewing occupy a woman's hands leaving her free to participate in singing or telling tales. For this reason it is possible to speculate that women's textile making contributed to the oral tradition upon which our literary inheritance is founded.

The philosopher Walter Benjamin, in his 1936 essay 'The Storyteller', acknowledges the close relationship between crafts and the oral tradition. He identifies textile crafts as one of the manual skills that are fundamental to the establishment of an appropriate atmosphere for the telling of stories and of the creation of a memory, which preserves oral stories through time:

For storytelling is always the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained. It is lost because there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they are being listened to. (2006: 367)

In Benjamin's view the art of oral storytelling declines without 'a community of listeners'. He believes that the skills of the storyteller flourished in the environment where the listener was engaged in the repetitive rhythms of labour or crafts that promoted 'the gift of listening'. This may be interpreted as a tranquil, meditative state that allowed the natural absorption of the nature of the tale and the wisdom and experience of the storyteller into memory. Women, working communally at their handicrafts, provided the storyteller with a model community of listeners. In his expression of nostalgia for former times, a fact Benjamin does not concede is that in

the case of tales recounted while women worked at their textiles, it is likely that on many occasions the storyteller would have been a woman too.

There is support for the recognition of a relationship between women, their textiles and storytelling. Drawing upon research into ancient folklore tales and their transmission to written texts, William Hansen takes the view that while classical authors represent both adults and children as listeners, and men and women as narrators 'most of the references to tellers are to nurses and to old women' (2002: 12). In substantiating this claim he suggests 'one may speculate that the presence of strong women in Greek mythology is owed in part to the fact that such stories were transmitted by women of little power' (19). Hansen also demonstrates that functions of storytelling are related to female responsibilities. Listing the reasons for oral storytelling as illustrated by ancient sources, the Greek tales, *mythos*, and their Latin equivalent, *fabula*, he includes storytelling as a means of calming and consoling of children and 'to divert time during communal work such as spinning' (12). Hansen's analysis of ancient texts demonstrates that, although the sources he employs are rendered by male authors, they establish a positive connection between women and storytelling. This supports the possibility of a female role in the transmission of oral tales. Moreover, it establishes a correlation between women's storytelling and the making of textiles.

### **Textile Tradition and the Female Greek Poets**

Texts showing textiles as an element of the reality of the lives of women in ancient times from a female perspective are elusive. For millennia, the majority of women were confined in an oral culture, denied the opportunity to use the written word to tell their own stories and to preserve the history of female customs and way of life. There are a few important exceptions. These include female authors from antiquity.

The songs of Sappho of Lesbos and other less well-known female Greek poets have survived in the form of fragments. Through this miniscule amount of work, we are able to gain insight into the life experiences of women in antiquity through the eyes of women who lived at that time.

Commenting on the divisions in the world of men and women in ancient Greece, Mary Lefkowitz suggests that 'Many of the poems describe a world that men never saw' (1982: 4). The following three poems relate to activities ascribed to the cultural tradition of women of this time by anthropological sources (for example, Lefkowitz and Frant: 1982, and Lardinois and McClure: 2001). They describe responsibilities for textile making, for participation in religious ritual and in funerary lamentation. Importantly, the poems suggest an association between textile making and women's lyric verse, in these rare instances with written verse. In the poems textiles are employed in both material and metaphoric form to introduce symbolic concepts and comparisons.

Connections between textile making and female emotion are present in the work of the most famous of the female Greek poets, Sappho, who lived around 600 BC. The motifs of the young girl, the mother, weaving and the transition to adulthood may be observed in her short poem, fragment 102, that is preserved in papyrus form. A translation by Anne Klink reads 'Sweet mother, I cannot ply the loom. I'm overcome with desire for a boy, because of slender Aphrodite' (2004: 19). This motif of a lovesick girl explaining her lack of attention to her work to her mother may be traced through the centuries from the ancient to the medieval world. It is replicated in several of the *Chanson de Toile*, women's weaving songs, composed in Northern France in the twelfth century. Indeed, in his analysis of Sappho's poem Aaron Poochiagan suggests that it is one of popular tradition, 'a refined version of a work-

song, such as girls sang over the loom while weaving' (2009: 6). Unquestionably, the poem combines lyrical skills with a reference to textile working.

In the poem the traditional role of women in the making of textiles is given prominence, as is the attachment between mother and daughter. The disruptive factor is love, the results of the intervention of the goddess Aphrodite. The girl's yearning for a young boy distracts her from her work, and will, if she marries, separate her from her mother, but this passion is deemed to be beyond human control, the province of the goddess. The poem introduces a double metaphor. The composition of the poem, the metaphorical weaving of words, combines the task of weaving cloth with a further figurative allusion, the weaving of spells. The state of enchantment imposed by Aphrodite leaves a girl torn between sexual desire and a tradition of responsibility to the mother and to the loom.

The work of the poet Erinna dates from the fourth century BC. She is most famous for her poem 'Distaff'. In its original form the 'Distaff' was thought to be 300 lines long. Only the badly damaged fragments 54 lines of the poem remain intact. Significant words may be deciphered from these fragments that deal with issues specifically related to women. There are allusions to childhood friendship, to the mother figure, to themes of tutelage for womanhood, wool working, loss through marriage and subsequently death. The third section of the poem taken from a translation by I.M. Plant (2004) is replicated below. References to childhood games introduced in the first section of the poem are continued into this section in combination with issues of preparation for adulthood:

Young girls we held our dolls in our bedrooms  
like new wives, hearts unbroken. Near dawn your mother,  
who handed out wool for her workers in attendance,  
came in and called you to help with salted meat. (2004: 50)

Scholarly interpretations of the poem (for example, C.M.Bowra: 1966, Marilyn B. Skinner: 2001, and Eva Stehle: 2001) identify it as a lament, describing the grief of Erinna on the death of her friend Baukis, and her apparent exclusion from the funerary rites mentioned in the final section of the poem.

The combination of the title *Distaff* and the reference in the poem to 'wool-working' has attracted much critical attention. According to Stehle the exact meaning of the word *halipaston* used in the poem in relation to wool working is not known, but she traces its associations to the weaving of purple threaded cloth (2001: 190). Skinner relates the allusions to spinning and weaving to the spinning of fate that 'casts a long shadow of mortality over the realistic scenes of everyday life in the courtyard and women's quarters and its thematic preoccupation with textile/textual art' (2001:214). Stehle also extends her scrutiny of the poem to the emblematic associations of the title of the poem *Distaff*. In her analysis she suggests that Erinna resolves her emotional conflict on the death of her friend by remaining at her loom 'while quietly weaving/composing a text that could go out into the world in her place and speak publically of her love for Baukis' (2001: 199). It is apparent that both critics link textual composition, the weaving of words, to the weaving of cloth, emphasising the strength of the metaphoric association between these activities. In addition, connections are made between the task of domestic spinning and the spinning of fate, the metaphorical thread of life.

The poems of Nossis of Locri, who lived around 300 years B.C., also deal with female concerns, in this instance textile making and religious offerings. I.B. Plant completed a translation of Nossis' epigram 'To Hera' in 2004:

Most reverend Hera, you who often leave heaven  
and watch over your sweet scented Lacinian temple,

receive this linen cloak which, with her noble daughter  
Nossis, Theuphilis daughter of Cleocha wove for you. (2004: 64)

Skinner observes that it is likely that this dedication was made according to Greek custom, on the occasion of the marriage of Nossis. As she points out, in this epigram the metonymic association between weaving and poetry is apparent, with Nossis, the 'weaver-writer', portraying herself 'as a girl who has learned cloth making from her mother' (2001: 215). Nossis' epigram reveals that the robe dedicated to Hera is the product of a tradition of textile skills. It has been made by the application of expertise handed down from mother to daughter through three generations. The robe is made of linen; it is therefore a costly garment that is symbolic of the value attached to the craft skills of women of this time, and of the honour due to the goddess.

Comparing the work of Nossis with the fragments of Erinna's poem 'Distaff', Skinner observes:

This constellation of elements – a bride, her mother, the marking of a transition from childhood to adulthood, and weaving as a reflective emblem of the written text – looks back to the *Distaff*, where each motif had been prominently featured. (2001: 215)

The elements that define the relationship of Nossis and Erinna may equally be applied to Sappho's poem, fragment 102, in which the motifs of textile weaving by a mother and her daughter are also conspicuous. Skinner's comments suggest the influence of the forebears of the weaver/writers. She implies that the poetry of women of previous generations influenced their descendants in regard to the construction of texts with textiles as a representation of this art. The inference of this proposition is the existence of a tradition of poetic and weaving skills handed down

from generation to generation of women. The acknowledgement of the existence of successive generations of female poets supports the concept of a female poetic tradition. That women combined their textile making with the making of songs and stories is likely, a virtual certainty. However, without tangible proof that these activities were complementary they remain unsubstantiated elements of the cultural history of women.

### **Women's Weaving in the Homeric Epics**

In the Homeric poems there is recognition of spinning and weaving as the domain of women. All of the principal female characters, mortal or divine, are involved in the production of textiles. The materials and implements of textile making, the purple dyed wool, the spindles, looms, and shuttles, are used to establish the identity of these protagonists and to define their significance in relation to the conditions that apply at specific points in the narrative. Homer demonstrates the male perception of spinning and weaving as a primary function of women through his male heroes. In *The Odyssey*, Telemachus directs his mother Penelope to 'go to your quarters now, and attend to your own work, to the loom and the spindle' (2003: 12). In the *Iliad*, Hector advises Andromache to 'go home, attend to your own handiwork at loom and spindle, and command the maids to busy themselves too' (1998: 112). Although these representations of female occupations are attributed to a male poet, it is possible to read them from an alternative perspective, to identify in them issues that relate to culture and the concerns of women that extend beyond the fictional boundaries of the text.

In the *Iliad* Homer demonstrates that texts and textiles share multifaceted features, he encompasses the weaving of words with the weaving of cloth and the weaving of magic. Homer tells of the association between textiles and enchantment

in his depiction of the beguilement of Zeus by Hera. Seeking to divert her husband's mind from the Trojan War, Hera anoints herself, arrays herself in 'a wondrous gown, worked by Athena in downy linen with embroideries' (1998: 244). From Aphrodite she asks for a loan of longing and desire. In response Aphrodite unclasps her own girdle:

Now she unfastened from around her breast  
a pierced brocaded girdle. Her enchantments  
came from this: allurements of the eyes,  
hunger of longing, and the touch of lips  
that steals all wisdom from the coolest of men. (245)

The magical embroidered girdle of the goddess is the embodiment of the seductive power of women. Aphrodite assures Hera that 'here are all suavities and charms of love' (245). In this instance the charm is used as a weapon of enticement to oppose a masculine preoccupation with war. The girdle demonstrates the existence of the tension between textile art and craft, between beauty and guile, concepts that are frequently visible in literary representations of textiles.

From the earliest times the belief has existed that objects of power may be created through the weaving of cloth and the weaving of words. Woven or written charms have very frequently been used to invoke or protect against magic or evil. Confidence in the effectiveness of such amulets or curses may be traced to the apparent mystique of the creation of tangible objects from unrelated and insubstantial elements. The process of forming something from virtually nothing links texts and textiles to magic forces. To a naive observer the creation of an entity as if by unexplained means possesses the capacity to amaze and impress. This facet of the signifying power of textiles has proved irresistible to generations of storytellers.



Throughout literary history to the present day, love tokens, amulets, poisoned garments and cloaks of invisibility have been used as narrative elements.

Homer provides further instances of the relationship between textiles and the power of enchantment in *The Odyssey*. The nymph Calypso and the goddess Circe are shown singing as they work at their looms, weaving with golden shuttles. Calypso is occupied in this manner in her cave when the god Hermes arrives as messenger of Zeus, demanding that she release Odysseus (2003: 64). When Odysseus arrives at Circe's palace the goddess is heard:

singing in her beautiful voice as she went to and fro at her great and everlasting loom, on which she was weaving one of those delicate, graceful and dazzling fabrics that goddesses make. (130)

The depiction of the beauty of Circe's voice, her 'everlasting loom', and the 'dazzling fabrics' that she weaves, act as a graphic representation of her immortality and her power as an enchantress. It is possible to interpret her 'great web' as the means of bewitching and captivating her prey, Odysseus. In her analysis of women's weaving in Homer, Kathryn Sullivan Kruger asserts that Homer 'often couples the activities of singing and weaving, word making and cloth making' (2001: 55). But Kruger neglects to point out that Calypso and Circe are the only characters in the poems that are actually represented as singing as they weave. This implies a correlation between enchantment, immortality and the weaving of songs and spells. Weaving is an activity consistent with female tradition, but when depicted by Homer in combination with the singing and the magic of immortals there is an inference that, as in the tradition of oral storytelling, the songs may themselves continue through time.

Homer employs another form of textile making in the *Iliad* through the representation of a storytelling textile. He describes Helen weaving a story cloth during the siege of Troy. Unlike the authentic story cloths of ancient cultures Homer creates Helen's cloth through the weaving of words, not threads. But the introduction of a storytelling textile, a miniature version of the poem, allows for the installation of multiple meanings. In the text the goddess Iris summons Helen from her task of creating an aesthetic depiction of war to stand with Priam upon the walls of Troy and witness the harsh reality of battle in the single combat between Menelaus and Paris:

She found her weaving in the women's hall  
a double violet stuff whereon inwoven  
were many passages of arms by Trojan  
horsemen and Achaeans mailed in bronze –  
trials braved for her sake at the war god's hands. (1998: 46)

In her discussion of the story cloth Kruger observes that Helen is weaving a pictorial representation of the war, and that 'her weaving is analogous to Homer's word-weaving; as her shuttle moves across the loom, so do the warriors battle back and forth across the Trojan plain' (2001: 76-77). Bergren introduces an additional element suggesting that 'it is the art of the tapestry - whether Helen's literal web or the "woven words" of the *Iliad* itself - both represent action and freeze it at a point of completion' (2008: 23). This observation has substantial merit in that it reflects the tapestry's function as a means of perpetually deferring the end of the contest. There are, however, shortcomings in these critical interpretations.

Both critics rightly define the allegorical nature of Helen's weaving in relation to the storyteller, confirming that, in this small section of the poem, control of the narrative has passed to Helen, for her textile takes over the text. Kruger's

assessment of the metaphorical aspects of the weaving process with 'the shuttle' as an ideal symbol of Helen, passed back and forth between two men is also appropriate. Nevertheless, neither critic acknowledges that Helen's weaving is a modified interpretation of the Trojan War. Using her textile tapestry, Helen is creating a representation of a new text, one that appears to seek to legitimise her part in the war. Her weaving depicts exciting and heroic aspects of war, 'passages of arms by Trojan horsemen and Achaeans mailed in bronze' (46). It is divested of the graphic scenes of violence and death portrayed by Homer. The warriors engage in battle 'for her sake at the war god's hands' (46), not as a result of her actions. By the means of Helen's weaving, the Trojan War is reduced to a symbolic exchange between two armies. The figure of Helen becomes a symbol of this exchange, an object of desire, traded between Paris and Menelaus.

The most famous of the women weavers represented in the Homeric poems is Penelope. In *The Odyssey* Penelope is the counterpart of Helen, she is represented as the faithful wife, weaving as she waits, year after year, for the return of Odysseus. There are substantial differences between Penelope's weaving and that of Helen's. While the design of Helen's story cloth appears to be a subtle contribution to the avoidance of blame for her part in the Trojan War, the depiction of Penelope's weaving is an overt example of the use of textile making to achieve a degree of power in adversity. Having failed to disperse her voracious suitors through personal appeals, she seeks to play for time, hoping for the return of Odysseus. Convincing the suitors that before she is free to select another husband it is her duty to weave a shroud in readiness for the death of her father-in-law Laertes. She sets up 'the great web' (2003: 17), and works upon her loom by day 'but every night had torches set beside it and undid the work' (17). As one of her suitors, Antinous,

describes' for three years she took us in by this trick, it was only in the fourth year that one of her women gave her away and she was discovered 'unravelling her beautiful work and she was forced reluctantly to complete it' (18).

Writing of the weaving of women in this culture as a generator of signs, Kruger asserts that in the case of Penelope 'the text she weaves is one that indicates her refusal to speak; it is a blank text, as far as we know, on which she declines to write anything, she weaves a shroud that is silent, on which no tale is told' (2001: 82). Kruger's assessment does not extend to an explanation for the blank textile/text. As she states 'even though Penelope's weaving is representative of oral poetry, of the activity of storytelling Homer gives us no indication that her cloth tells a story important to or analogous with the poem he is creating' (82). And yet, the silence of the textile is unexpected, for as a narrative component the weaving of the shroud demands the application of a degree of complexity that a blank textile cannot provide. Barber confirms this in her assessment of the practical aspects of Penelope's weaving, pointing out that in order to trick the suitors for three years the shroud would of necessity been a story cloth. Her reasoning is that Homer's audience would have known that 'only the weaving of a nonrepetitious pattern such as a story is so very time-consuming' (1995: 154). We may conjecture therefore, that the inference of the silence of Homer on the design of the shroud is that, unlike the weaving of Helen, it is the *process* of the construction of the textile that is important in Penelope's weaving, not the *product*.

In his analysis of the spoken and unspoken in literary texts, Pierre Macherey suggests that 'Speech eventually has nothing more to tell us; we investigate the silence, for that is doing the speaking' (2006: 96). The silence of Penelope's blank

text/textile speaks of her *mêtis*, her intelligence and guile. Homer makes this concept apparent in his reference to Penelope and 'the matchless gifts that she owes to Athene, her skill in fine handicrafts, her excellent brain, and that genius she has for getting her way' (2003: 18). As in the myth of Philomela, who employs a female resource, her textile skills, to find a voice, Penelope uses weaving, as a subversive tool. Unlike the weaving of Philomela, Penelope's textile does not convey a message through the composition of fabric and signs. Penelope makes silence speak by disrupting the normally generative characteristics of making a textile in an endeavour to defer its completion. Her skill in dissimulation demonstrates a degree of enterprise that matches that of her husband, Odysseus, another favourite of Athene. The nightly unravelling of the woven threads of the shroud tells of her attempt to reverse time as a means of preserving her integrity and achieving control of the narrative of her life.

A very different relationship between Homer's text and the making of textiles is made visible in Book 4 of *The Odyssey* in which both Helen and Menelaus relate tales of their individual adventures and their encounters with Odysseus to assist the young Telemachus to gain information on his father. The designation of Helen as a storyteller in this episode is a singular occurrence for a female protagonist in the poems.

On her entry into the hall of Menelaus' palace, Helen immediately demonstrates her narrative authority. She discloses knowledge of Odysseus by exclaiming on the likeness between Telemachus and his father, 'shall I withhold the truth, or speak the truth, I feel that I must speak' (44). Through this statement Helen signals the potentially duplicitous aspects of her character and her capacity to control the narrative. Homer further enhances her power as a storyteller, endowing her with

special status by comparing her to a goddess. Helen greets her guests 'looking like Artemis with her golden distaff' (44). Her attendants who arrange her chair, her footstall and her weaving implements accompany her. Given to Helen as gifts from Egyptian Thebes, the distaff and spindle are gold, the work-basket 'ran on wheels that were made of silver and finished with a rim of gold.' (44). The basket was 'full of fine-spun yarn, and the spindle with its dark wool was laid across it' (44). Helen does not, however, begin to spin, but to weave a story.

The comparison of Helen to Artemis arouses speculation. In myth Artemis is depicted as the virgin goddess and the huntress, adorned, not as Helen with a distaff, but with bow and arrows. The association of Helen to the chaste Artemis appears to signify the moral complexity and potential danger exemplified by the figure of Helen. Writing of the verbal guises of Helen, Nancy Worman suggests that Helen is 'simultaneously the archetypal bride and the most illustrious flouter of the marriage bond' (2001: 19). Worman argues that Homer is responding 'to a pre-existing tradition of conflicting stories, apparent in the tensions between the more forgiving depiction of Helen that he clearly favours and the darker implications that he allows to intrude' (20). Homer's portrayal of Helen in the role of storyteller may be said to support this premise. This role allows the expression of elements of guile in the character that had not been made explicit in previous representations of Helen in the *Iliad*.

The evidence of Helen's preparations for weaving also contributes to the portrayal of a multifaceted figure. It is possible to attribute several interpretations to Homer's depiction of Helen's spinning and weaving implements. The precise description of the wool working tools generates a connection between the weaving of stories and the weaving of textiles in the mind of the listener or reader of the text. In

addition, the richness of the tools enhances Helen's first encounter with her guests. Helen's impressive entry, supported by valuable weaving equipment, appears designed to overwhelm her young guests and reinforce her semi-divine status. It may also be contended that Helen's tools are used, not merely to signal her capacity for oral creativity or her rank, but to reflect her observance of convention. The tasks of spinning and weaving are consistent with custom in regard to female behaviour, and, through their connection to storytelling, give authority to feminine discourse. It is likely that Helen's weaving demonstrates conformance with a traditional female role, ensuring that it is socially acceptable for her to take on the role of narrator to a non-segregated audience.

Helen's tale relates to the part she played in protecting Odysseus when he entered Troy as a spy. The narrative is designed to suit the context of her audience. Simultaneously, she demonstrates the heroism of Odysseus to his son and her own qualities of perception, nurturance and loyalty. She tells of rejoicing in his escape, as she was 'repenting the blindness which Aphrodite sent me when she brought me to Troy' (47). In response Menelaus relates a story that is potentially damaging to his wife's efforts to redeem her reputation. When hidden in the Wooden Horse, the 'pick of the Argive army' were enticed by Helen to reveal their presence. He tells of Helen, still under Aphrodite's spell, walking around the wooden structure imitating the voices of the wives of the Greek captains and calling them in turn. But for the intervention of Odysseus, the men would have responded. Helen's skills as a mimic are further evidence of her abilities as a storyteller, as Worman points out 'Like the Muses, Helen can tell the truth or not; like the rhapsode or choral performer, she can imitate the voices of others to the delight and/or danger of her audience' (2001: 34). The ability of Helen to dissimulate and to take on multiple voices may be construed

as an example of the mutability of the voice of the storyteller. The storytelling voice does not comprise one voice, but many. Homer also makes clear that these storytelling voices include those of women. The depiction of the epic figure of Helen as a storyteller gives substance to the concept of women in the performance of this role.

As evidenced in his description of Helen's lavish weaving implements, in Homer's depictions of storytelling the establishment of the appropriate context for the story is an important element. For instance, prior to the commencement of Odysseus' tales to the Phaeacians, Homer carefully sets the scene. The beauty of the palace of Alcinous and the skills of his subjects are described:

The house kept fifty maids employed. Some grind apple-golden corn in the handmill, some weave at the loom, or sit and twist yarn, their hands fluttering like the leaves of a tall poplar, while soft olive oil drips from the close woven fabric they have finished. For the Phaeacians' extraordinary skill in handling ships at sea is matched by the dexterity of their womenfolk at the loom, for Athene has given them outstanding skill in beautiful crafts and such fine intelligence. (87)

This idealised image of Phaeacian life appears designed to capture the attention of an audience of both genders. As shown in this quotation, equal weight is given to the skills of both men and of women. This may be construed as evidence of the expectation that women are likely to be among the listeners to the performance of the epic. It is also an indication of the economic and political importance of women's textiles in Greek society, due to their high trading value.

Throughout Homer's epic poems there are frequent references to the responsibilities and the concerns of women. Precise details are provided of their household arrangements, their spinning, weaving and sewing, and women's role in prayer ritual and in lamentation. This type of detail contributes to the rich blend of reality and fantasy that is a characteristic aspect of Homeric style. It also introduces



questions as to the source of the oral tales that contributed to the written text. This issue has been raised by a number of scholars including Batya Weinbaum:

Thus I am arguing here that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* may actually be examples of original female creation and secondary male transmission, a pattern that obscures women's participation in the creation of myth and culture. That is men who record and transmit the epics become cultural historians. They later leave women who might have created the project out of their official records. (2001: 21)

Weinbaum's argument is based upon the premise that poets who composed epics relied upon a repertoire of familiar oral formulae. Consciously or unconsciously they drew inspiration from a store of knowledge that is likely to have been influenced by oral folk tradition. In Weinbaum's view the possible source of substantial elements of epic poems is the oral folk tradition of women. In developing her argument Weinbaum draws upon other studies. These include the work of Gregory Nagy, on common sources of Homeric material (1974; 1996), of Ruth Finnegan, on patterns of transmission in oral poetry (1977), and of Judith Okely on female culture in the ancient world (1996). The contrast between the patriarchal values expected from Greek society and the obvious esteem for the affairs of women that is visible in the work of Homer give credence to Weinbaum's premise. The combination of this element of Homer's poems and the recognition of opportunities for women to sing and tell stories make it very probable that her interpretation is correct. Notwithstanding the existence of this strong possibility, as the female contribution to the composition of the poems is improvable, it will remain the subject of conjecture, part of the lost literary history of women.

### **'Talk and Tell' – Textiles and Storytelling**

A tale that depicts women telling stories as they work at their textile crafts may be found in 'The Daughters of Minyas' told by the Latin poet Ovid in *Metamorphoses* (8

A.D.). Minyas' daughters, Alcithoe and her sisters, disregard the orders of the priest to celebrate the feast of the god Bacchus with the customary wild rites. All other Theban women complied with this demand to honour the god:

The women, old and young alike, obeyed.  
Weaving, workboxes, and unfinished work  
They put away, and, burning incense, called  
Upon Bacchus by his many noble names. (1998: 74)

Denying Bacchus as the son of Jove, the sisters choose to continue with their work:

Only Minyas' daughters  
Remain indoors and mar the festival  
By their untimely spinning, as they draw  
The strands of wool and thumb the twisting threads  
Or ply the loom and keep the work girls busy.  
Then one, as her deft fingers drew the thread,  
Suggested, 'While the others have ceased work  
And throng among those spurious rites, let us as well,  
Busy for Pallas now, a better goddess,  
Lighten our useful toil with talk and tell  
Some tale to in turn to while the tedious hours  
Away and give delight to idle ears. (75)

In the poem the sisters express no surprise at the suggestion of the narration of a tale. The practice of easing the labour of work with what Ovid describes as 'talk and tell' appears to be their normal custom as they sat at their work. After careful thought as to the content of their selection, the sisters narrate three stories in turn, the famous tale of 'Pyramus and Thisbe', that of 'The Sun in Love', and the story of 'Salmacis and Hermaphroditus'.

In addition to illustrating how an audience engaged in the pursuit of textile crafts provides the ideal context for storytelling, this extract from Ovid shows the acceptance of the rotation of the role of teller and the role of the listener. Although presented as three separate entities, the stories that are recounted demonstrate underlying connections. In the frame story, the daughters of Minyas are shown to be

reckless in their conflict with the god Bacchus. Through the obstinate pursuit of their work they openly scorn the rites of one god in order to serve the 'better goddess', Pallas Athena, the patron of crafts and handiwork. As a punishment their weaving is overtaken by imagery of Bacchus. Their work turns green, and 'grew ivy, part became a vine' (1998: 86), and what had been threads form tendrils. The sisters themselves are transformed into bats, creatures that 'flit by night' (86).

In the three tales told by the sisters before their transformation the theme of conflict and discord is foreshadowed and reinforced. In addition various aspects of love are revealed forbidden love; unlawful love; sexual love; and unrequited love all play a part. Above all else the power of the gods is demonstrated. In each of the tales a prayer to the gods is made, an entreaty that seeks 'gods to hear' (85). Inevitably, the result is metamorphic, with the gods intervening and transforming humans to form part of the natural world.

The theme of women's textile crafts runs through the tales. The frame story shows the sisters selecting their choice of tale with the same care as they would devote to deciding on the colour and texture of the threads necessary to their work. They name stories well known to them, many related to shape and colour changes, and then discard them, before making a final selection. Between the second and third tale an image of Alcithoe at her loom is provided: 'Running her shuttle through the upright warp' (82), she suggests and discards stories before making her final decision. The description of her actions confirms Turvey's comments on the connection between the construction of tales and the 'natural rhythms of textile construction' (2009: 136). Alcithoe's process of the rejection and selection of tales replicates that of the making of patterns in the cloth she creates. As she plies her

shuttle through the warp she brings forward certain threads and leaves others undisturbed.

The story of Pyramus and Thisbe is an ancient tale of the forbidden love of two young people who achieve unity only in death. The tale forms the basis of many others. Chaucer uses it in his poem *The Legend of Good Women*; it is used by both Boccaccio and Tasso, and by Shakespeare as a basis for *Romeo and Juliet*. One of the most famous interpretations forms a humorous episode in Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer's Night Dream*. The reference to textile crafts is subtle but essential to the plot. The tale depicts two lovers who suffer multiple barriers to the expression of their affection. The lovers are originally separated by 'their fathers' ban' (76). This ban is symbolised by a physical barrier, the common wall between their homes. At first communicating at a distance, through signs, the lovers discover a narrow chink in the wall which provides them with a means of communication 'A pathway for sweet words of lovers true' (76).

The cause of the ultimate fate of the lovers is far less substantial than parental objection or the blocks of a dividing wall. It is brought about by Thisbe's 'delicate wrap' (77), depicted as of 'soft familiar silk' (77). Deciding to run away together, the couple arranges to meet at night at a local tomb. As she makes her way to the meeting place Thisbe is startled by a lioness. She runs to the shelter of a nearby cave, dropping her shawl in her haste to escape. The lioness, her jaws bloodied from a recent kill, seizes and tears the shawl. It is Pyramus' discovery of the tattered and blood stained shawl that brings about the demise of the lovers. He accepts it as proof of Thisbe's death and, overcome by grief, he plunges his sword into his body. When Thisbe discovers him, close to death, she too takes her own life. Their blood spills upon the berries of a mulberry tree, forever staining them from white to purple.

In this tale human conflict is overshadowed by the eternal conflict between nature and culture. The abstract division imposed upon the lovers by familial duty, and the material division imposed by the wall, are shown to be as fragile and insubstantial as a delicate shawl compared to the divisions that exist between man and the natural world that remains outside of his control.

Ovid employs a sequence of repetition in this tale. Metaphors of fire are used to describe the passion between Pyramus and Thisbe. Amongst other references with links to fire, their love is described in the terms 'the mutual flame that fired them both', and 'their fire the more concealed the fiercer raged'(76). At the end of the poem, this fire is extinguished, and 'One urn the ashes holds of lovers true' (79). In addition the theme and colour of blood reverberates through the text. This includes allusion to the 'bloody jaws' of the lioness, 'the bloody ground', and to the blood of Pyramus that 'leaped high' (76). It is the colour of blood that causes previously white 'berries of the tree to assume a sable hue' (77). The pattern that is introduced by the reoccurrence of these elements adds considerable to the continuity of the text and heightens its impact.

'The Sun in Love' demonstrates the complexities of the relationships between the gods and mortals through two love triangles. It is a tale that is related in part in *The Odyssey*, by the bard Demodocus. The initial theme is that of the adulterous love of Venus and Mars, and the revenge of Vulcan. The tale moves on to show Venus' revenge on the Sun, the god who betrayed her to her husband, by exposing him to the pain of love. In turn, the Sun's former lover, Clytie, takes revenge on his new love, Leucothoe, by spreading tales of her seduction.

The first reference to crafts in this tale relates not to the crafts of a woman, but to the blacksmiths crafts of the god Vulcan. He forges a net with which to trap his faithless wife and her lover:

A mesh of thinnest links of bronze, too fine  
For eye to see, a triumph not surpassed  
By finest threads of silk or by the web  
The spider hangs below the rafters' beam.  
He fashioned it to respond to the least touch  
Or slightest movement; then with subtle skill  
Arranged it round the bed. (79)

At their next meeting Venus and Mars become trapped in this net as they embrace, and to exact his revenge Vulcan invites the gods to view them as they lie ensnared, exposing them to the ridicule of the gods.

Ovid's celebration of the art and the craft of a god are followed by a description of female handicrafts, written in a manner that is reminiscent of a fairy tale. Venus punishes the Sun for betraying her faithlessness to Vulcan by ensuring that the Sun should suffer the pangs of love. He falls in love with the young girl Leucothoe, to the degree that the days lengthened because of his desire to gaze upon her, or were left in darkness, through an eclipse of the Sun by the moon, because of his despair that she was not his. Eventually, the Sun, disguised as the mother of Leucothoe, gains entry to the girl's room and finds her at her loom:

In the lamplight there she sat  
Beside her wheel, spinning a slender thread,  
And round the princess her twelve waiting maids. (80)

Dismissing the maids, the Sun sheds his disguise, and, in his splendour, he overcomes the fears of Leucothoe and she submits to him without protest. When her shame becomes known, despite her protestations, the princess cannot convince

her angry father of her innocence. Her punishment is to be buried alive. The Sun endeavours to revive her, but failing, transforms her into a perfumed shrub, frankincense.

One reading of this narrative is that mortal beings will always be the playthings of the gods. What is also made apparent by the trap devised by Vulcan is the close relationship between 'art' and 'craft'. These two aspects of craft skills, the aesthetic and the devious, are frequently explored in literary representations of textile crafts. The tension that exists between these components informs many areas of this study.

There is also a conflict related to gender. Ovid shows an example of male and female oppositions, the victory of the masculine over the feminine that exists in a male dominated order, a patriarchal society. Unless a woman has the powers of a goddess she must suffer under the deceptions or the tyranny imposed upon her, even if the deceiver is a god and the oppressor the father of the victim. Ovid does not overtly praise or condemn this position. He appears to accept the male attitude to the women that he depicts in the poem as the normal code of behaviour.

Given the subject of the poem it is unsurprising that Ovid uses a recurring theme of light throughout the text. There are frequent references to forms and to related aspects of light. The Sun is termed the 'The Lord of Light' (82). Among many other similar citations Ovid alludes to 'his beauties brilliance and his flashing beams' (79). In contrast to the Sun's radiance is set the theme of darkness, 'Where men groped in fear' (79). These opposing factors, the brilliance of the Sun, and the cold, smothering darkness of the earth when it is deprived of his presence, are important components of the poem.

In the final tale Ovid explores the merging of opposing forces. As Camille Paglia argues:

Ovid plunders Greek and Roman legend for magic transformations – man and god to animal and plant, male to female and back. Identity is liquid. Nature is under Dionysian spell; Apollo's contours do not hold. (1991:132)

Sexual transformation is the theme of the tale of 'Salmacis and Hermaphroditus'. It depicts the desire of the nymph Salmacis for Hermaphroditus, son of Hermes and Aphrodite. Seeing him approaching her pool, she is immediately filled with desire for the handsome boy. He vigorously rejects her advances. Salmacis pretends to leave; instead she hides in the undergrowth, watching as Hermaphroditus strips and enters the pool. 'Flamed for his naked beauty' (84), Salmacis plunges into the pool and clings to the boy, begging for his love. He fights against her, but she holds fiercely to him, vowing that they will not be separated, 'Ye Gods ordain no day shall ever dawn to part us twain.' (85). The gods hear her prayer and the two become one, neither man nor woman.

In the depiction of this transformation the intricacy of Ovid's narrative design is shown. Links to the frame story of the weaving sisters and their denial of Bacchus are exposed. The joining of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus allows a comparison to be made between the wild fervour and unrestraint of the Bacchanalian rites and the orderly activity imposed by the goddess, Pallas Athena. The rites of Bacchus demanded that the divisions between nature and culture and between the genders should be challenged. In the course of these rites women frequently donned men's attire and men that of women. In the description of the fusion of genders that occurs between the nymph and the young boy Ovid depicts the ultimate gender transition. Through the embrace of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, both lose their identity. A



single, androgynous, individual is created, resulting in a subversion of the binary roles of male and female.

Catherine R Stimpson writes of the complexity of gender:

Cultural laws of gender demand the feminine and masculine must play off against each other in the great drama of binary opposition. They must struggle against each other, or collapse into each other in the momentary relief of the androgynous embrace. In patriarchal cultures, the struggle must end in the victory of the masculine, complementarity must arrange itself hierarchically; androgyny must be a mythic fiction. (1986: 1)

In 'Salmacis and Hermaphroditus', Ovid's use of the 'mythic fiction' of androgyny connects the tale to the frame story in that it reflects the shifting identity of the god Bacchus. In all textual depictions the gender of Bacchus, and his Greek predecessor Dionysus, is shown to be fluid. He uses feminine and masculine behaviour to obtain his objectives. His androgyny is both confusing and seductive to women in that he appears to abolish the rigidity of normal boundaries of behaviour offering opportunities for freedom and excess otherwise denied to them. As the daughters of Minyas discover to their cost, this freedom is an illusion, it has no emphasis on individuality and does not include freedom of choice. When challenged, the god's sense of masculine superiority asserts itself and he exacts retribution.

An association may be made between the issues of gender that are disclosed in this tale and textile crafts. The oppositions that exist between feminine and masculine cultures are relevant to handicrafts. Domestic weaving and needle working are regarded as a predominately feminine occupation and have substantially contributed to the process of female gendering. As the feminist writer Mary Daly states, 'In patriarchal tradition, sewing and spinning are for girls; books are for boys.'(1984: 5). There are other links to textile crafts in 'Salmacis and

Hermaphroditus'. The language used by Ovid to describe the quality of Salmacis' embrace may also be applied to textile crafts. Ovid uses a repetitive pattern of words that have associations with the process of combining separate elements. Clinging to the youth, Salmacis: 'entwined him, like a snake [...] or ivy wrapping round tall forest trees [...] in fast embrace their limbs were knit' (85). These terms are deployed to describe the fusion of the boy and the nymph in one immured form. In this synthesis male and female gender boundaries are transgressed and dissolved. Salmacis and Hermaphroditus become knitted together in a finely woven and intricate tapestry of gender and anatomical patterns.

### **Commonalities in the Process of Construction**

Although preserved in literary form, the tale of 'The Daughters of Minyas' displays all of the characteristics necessary for the successful communication of an oral narrative, for the telling of tales. A model audience of weaving women is established and the roles of teller and listener are clearly defined. There are further connections to the crafts of textiles and texts in that the process of narration can mirror that of the process of weaving. Bergren suggests that 'the most basic constructive features common to weaving and narration are: spatio-temporal reversal, the alternation of direction through space and time' (2008: 2). In relation to the construction of textiles this comparison may be taken as a description of the oscillation of the shuttle through the loom in a repeated sequence with the warp and weft floating over and under each other, creating and joining spaces. This process replicates the shifting patterns, repetitions and reversals that occur in narrative construction. Ovid's tales, for instance, emulate the intricacies employed in the making of textiles. Re-occurring elements may be observed, such as, three sisters, three stories, two lovers, and two love triangles. To a considerable degree such

textual patterns are shared with the production of handicrafts. Both texts and textiles are constructed through a process of rhythmic and repetitious interweaving.

Rhythm and repetition are the basis of the creation of textiles - a foundation they share with all poetry, music and song. The American academic and poet John Frederick Nims writes of the fundamental nature of rhythm in relation to the universe and its role in poetic texts. He describes the universe as a system of rhythms. Our relationship to this system is described in terms of the human body, of the rhythm of the heartbeat, of breathing and of walking. He concludes that we constantly experience rhythms:

We feel rhythms also in the world outside, with its alternations of day and night, its revolving seasons, its pulsing waves on the shore, and its swaying of trees in the wind. There are times when rhythm has a stronger hold on us than our most sacred concerns. Through rhythm, an authority of the dance has said, we unite ourselves with the terror of a moving universe. (1983: 219)

Ovid's recognition of rhythmic power is evident in *Metamorphoses*. The poem demonstrates a preoccupation with recurring patterns of instability and change. The world, as depicted by Ovid, follows two discernable rhythms. The rhythmic cycle determined by the workings of nature, and a pattern of volatility brought about by divine and human behaviour. In the prologue of A.D. Melville's translation of the poem Ovid states that his objective for his tale is to lead it 'In one continuous song from nature's first remote beginnings to our modern times.' (1998: 1). In David Raeburn's more recent translation of the poem Ovid prays to the gods for inspiration and asks them to 'spin me a thread from the world's beginning' (2004: 95). Indeed, as in the construction of a vast tapestry, in *Metamorphoses* Ovid creates a vista of divine and human life that extends from the creation of the world until the rule of Rome. In so doing he demonstrates that historic discourse is itself subject to

merging and to dissolution. Representations of events are joined together to form verbal, visual and aural patterns that overcome the barriers of time.

The range of Ovid's subject is immense, and the events and characters he describes vary enormously in terms of scale and significance. Yet, throughout the poem he achieves a sense of narrative cohesiveness. There is a degree of interconnection between each of the stories. From book to book, as one story ends, a link to the next is made, establishing a smooth transition and drawing the reader into each new tale. The process of interlinking that is applied from story to story is also used in the verses of the poem. Ovid frequently employs a technique inherited from oral discourse, that of enjambment. This involves breaking phrases at the end of lines and continuing the phrase into the next line. In this way, as with the creation of patterns in textiles, the meaning flows throughout the verse, only fully revealed on its completion.

It is possible to observe elements of the poet's technique through the examination of an extract from the narrative of 'Salmacis and Hermaphroditus':

This said she held her peace. A rosy blush  
Dyed the boy's cheeks; he knew not what love was;  
But blushes well became him; like the bloom  
Of rosy apples hanging in the sun,  
Or painted ivory, or when the moon  
Glowes red beneath her pallor and the gongs  
Resound in vain to rescue her eclipse.  
Then the nymph pleaded, begged, besought at least  
A sister's kiss, and made to throw her arms  
Around his ivory neck. (84)

The use of enjambment in this passage is apparent. There is a delay in the completion of the phrases from one line to another, as shown in the end of line one 'A rosy blush' that continues into line two with 'Dyed the boy's cheeks'. This

technique unifies the text and ensures that the reader's attention is held until the phrase is complete and its meaning is revealed.

This sense of unity is strengthened by rhythm. Ovid uses a system of repetitions that shape and organise the poem. In his definition of rhythm in poetry Nims suggests that it is 'a pattern of recurrence: Something that happens with such regularity that we can resonate with it, anticipate its return, and move our body in time with it' (1983: 219). Ovid's use of rhythm begins with the formation of patterns of words. As other epic poets before him he uses the dactylic hexameter as the rhythmic basis of *Metamorphoses*. The repetitive sequence of this meter brings order and symmetry to the poem.

From the lyrical and rhythmic nature of Ovid's verse it is possible to discern the influence of Greek choral discourse. In a discussion on patterns of verse rhythms in Greek drama H.D.F. Kitto reminds us of the triple partnership of poetry, song, and dancing. Kitto writes, 'we have lost both the dance and music, but their rhythms are left – in the poetry, and that is enough' (1971: 10). The poetry of Ovid compensates for the loss of dance and music. It employs rhythm to provide contrasting moods to his verse, expressing a spectrum of emotions that range from passivity to joy, anger and grief. Additionally, musical sound is replaced with the poetic effect of the descriptions of sounds. In the extract above, for example, Ovid writes that, 'the gongs resound in vain' (84). In his account of the contest between Athena and Arachne he describes the sound of weaving 'when it's through the warp the comb's teeth, tapping, press it into place' (122).

Ovid also makes use of recurring patterns. A sequence is established in the above verse through a continuing theme of colour. In this short verse Ovid uses the

words 'rosy' and 'ivory' twice, together with the word 'red'. In the context in which they are placed these words contribute different textures to the poem. The blushes of the boy are compared to 'the bloom of rosy apples hanging in the sun, or painted ivory'. Although both similes have tactile associations, there are distinct variations in the quality of the textures they evoke. The concept of 'apples hanging in the sun' introduces a sense of fragrant warmth. The word 'ivory' conjures a feeling of cool and silky firmness. The words 'when the moon glows red beneath her pallor' continues the theme of contrast. The image of the eclipsing moon makes a connection to a natural phenomenon. This adds a sense of dramatic intensity to the scene. In this manner Ovid combines striking effects of patterns and colours that add material substance and grain to the text.

The structured system of interlinking, rhythms, repetitions, and patterns that are visible in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as in other texts, are also apparent in textiles. Writing of the culture of commodities, William M. Reddy discusses an article relating to the standards required for plain linen cloth, *toile*, in eighteenth century France:

One must make sure, the article recommends, the weave is tight and the weft threads evenly closed up with one another. The threads themselves must be of uniform twist, as tightly spun on the edge of the cloth as they are in the middle. No part of the warp or weft should be stretched or shifted out of alignment with the rest. The cloth must be of the same tightness and fineness at both ends as in the middle. The cloth should have as little finishing applied as possible; that is there should not be so much gum, starch, or chalk applied to it as to conceal irregularities in color, weave or twist. (2007: 265)

Although it is likely that these requirements relate to the large scale manufacture of cloth rather than domestic production they are still relevant as a basis of an assessment of the shared features of texts and textiles.

Just as the process of constructing texts requires the balanced arrangement and interlinking of components and concepts, in textiles it is necessary that each individual thread has stability in their formation and in their means of connection. Every intersection of weft and warp, each knot or stitch must be set in the correct position and adjusted to a consistent and even tension in relation to other constituents. This ensures the smooth progression of the work from beginning to end. As the composition of an elegant text requires the employment of a defined structure enmeshed with re-occurring themes, the fashioning of intricate patterns in fabric depends upon a similar process. Pattern in textiles is the result of the introduction of colour or texture in structured and repetitive sequences. The effects that are produced by the descriptive power of the writer are matched by the richness, tactility and colour of dyed and embroidered cloth. In both texts and textiles attention is paid to the preservation of integrity in the process of production. In both crafts shortcomings in this process are easily detected and difficult to conceal. Flaws or weaknesses in the material employed, in the structure, or in the execution, can result in the damage or disintegration of the product.

### **Volatility and Style in Texts and Textiles**

Regardless of the degree of care invested in the process of construction, both texts and textiles are susceptible to change in substance and in interpretation. This aspect of the shared connections of texts and textiles is given prominence by Roland Barthes. In *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) he uses the etymological connection between texts and textiles to highlight the volatility of texts:

*Text* means *Tissue*; but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is

worked out in a perpetual interweaving; lost in this tissue - this texture - the subject unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web. Were we fond of neologisms, we might define the theory of the text as a *hyphology* (*hyphos* is the tissue and the spider's web). (1975: 64)

In this passage Barthes does not make a distinction between texts and textiles. His focus is directed towards commonalities in product and process. Barthes' concept is based upon the assumption of a metonymic connection between texts and textiles. In an earlier essay 'From Work to Text' he defines the text as 'a woven fabric' and 'a weave of signifiers' (1977: 159). This perception of figurative connections in the process of the production of texts and textiles exposes material links in their characteristics and in their ability to carry meaning.

Both texts and textiles are malleable and potentially fragile. Even the most mundane textile product may alter and adapt over time. In the form of clothing it shapes itself to the wearer and provides a commentary on that individual. In all configurations and manner of use textiles possess or acquire the capacity to disseminate multiple meanings and provoke diverse reactions from the viewer. Texts share this facility. The form and content of the text is subject to a continuous process of deconstruction and reconstruction on the part of the reader. As with textiles, the text has the ability to fragment and decay, to dissolve and disintegrate. As such the meaning, the essence, of the text is never fixed or finished and may undergo a continuous process of production and of dissolution.

Nancy K Miller in her well-known essay 'Arachnologies' suggests that:

In the move from product to production, from work to text, as Barthes puts it in the earlier essay by that name, the emphasis moves also from the image of a centrally strong and unitary subject to a more ambiguous and fragile identity dependent on the indeterminacy of *process*. The subject of this model is not fixed in time or space, but suspended in a continual moment of fabrication. (1986: 271)



Miller's assessment of Barthes' semiotic theory is based upon the acceptance that the representations of the text maker, formerly the author, are subject to continuous interpretation and re-interpretation. The concept of a final meaning is an illusion. Just as Arachne, the archetypal spider-weaver, creates and re-creates a web, the text is woven, unravelled and rewoven. It is unstable, constantly recasting its identity. The implication is that, in all creative activity, the reader, listener or viewer takes over the role of the maker and becomes the weaver of meaning.

A factor that is common to both texts and textiles results from their intrinsic malleability. This is the ability to be designed, shaped, and stylised works, an aptitude that may be exercised in a number of ways. In her observations on style, Susan Sontag traces the foundations of the characteristics of literary form to primitive oral literatures. She associates the origins of the purpose of form with the necessity for oral texts to be structured to create a memory in order to ensure continuance. Sontag considers that this mnemonic function has been retained in relation to style:

Thus, form in its specific idiom, style, is a plan of sensory imprinting, the vehicle for the transaction between immediate sensuous impression and memory (be it individual or cultural). This mnemonic function explains why every style depends on, and can be analyzed in terms of, some form of repetition or redundancy. (1966: 34)

Both texts and textiles possess this capacity to contribute to a process of 'sensory imprinting'. In *Metamorphoses* for example, the senses of the reader are assailed by rapidly changing verbal images of characters and scenes displayed in both abstract and concrete form. These images create repetitive archetypal themes such as good and evil, love and hate, birth, death and suffering, light and dark. This distinct form of imagery has the potential to enter into the subconscious and influence the reader

on a subliminal level. Examples of this facility may be observed in textiles. Although sources of textiles from the ancient world are extremely rare, it is fortunate that, despite the perishable nature of textiles, in museums across the world collections of exquisite textiles dating from medieval to modern times are preserved in recognition of their skilled construction and beauty, and as reminders of the mnemonic characteristics of textiles and their ability to convey individual, social and cultural messages in a powerful format.

### **Reading Textiles**

The focus of this first chapter of the study has been to identify and explore the nature of the connections that exist between texts and textiles, and to seek to determine how these associations came into being. In this process, texts demonstrating the ancient origins of textile crafts have been sought out and the significance of these crafts to the lives of women assessed.

The etymological connection between textiles and texts, the common root *textere*, implies a metaphorical connection. And yet, as has been demonstrated, there are material connections between textiles and texts. Women have used textiles, a material construct, as a means of overcoming restrictions on verbal expression since ancient times.

The scrutiny of literary depictions of women's crafts also suggests the possibility of links between a tradition of women's textile making and a tradition of storytelling. Contemporary textile making activities in communal settings reinforce the concept that from the earliest times, textile making and storytelling were complementary activities. Undoubtedly, stories were told as women spun, wove and

stitched. For the majority of our history all stories were told in oral form, and it is possible to speculate that the processes, patterns, hues and sounds of textile making impacted upon the form, content and language of tales told as women worked. If so, the degree to which this creative association has transferred from oral to written texts will inevitably remain a matter of conjecture. It is a prospect that remains concealed, beyond the long literary silence imposed upon women.

The principal link between textiles, ancient and modern, and texts are that, in different forms, concrete, metaphoric and symbolic images are used to explore issues of identity and to inform, involve, stimulate and enhance the experience of the recipient. Both textile artist and writer have the ability to create a narrative. Representations of textile crafts in literature also possess this quality. It is possible for a reader to interpret a writer's description of textiles and textile work as an element of rhetoric discourse, to 'read' the textile as well as the text. In the following chapters this facility will be explored in greater detail in relation to conditions existing at specific points in time in order to determine the value of textiles as a narrative component and as a means of interpretation of the history of women.

## **Chapter Two - The Nineteenth-Century Politics of Women's Textiles in Brontë and Phelps**

### **The Organisation and Industrialisation of Textile Production**

The history of the relationship between women and textiles is so extensive that it is impossible to provide a complete picture of the female preoccupation with textiles from antiquity to the present day. The scope of this study is therefore restricted to texts illustrating women and their textiles in relation to the most crucial events and themes in textile history. It is for this reason that texts of the nineteenth century are included in the study for it is the period that oversaw the most radical and dramatic change in the history of textiles

The century witnessed the application of industrial processes to the manufacture of textiles resulting in the transfer of the majority of this work from the household to a factory environment, a development that had significant impact on the lives of women. Mechanisation was the ultimate stage in a process of commercialisation that had resulted in the establishment of distinct gender and class hierarchies in the production of textiles. Economic historian John H. Munro points out that from ancient times until the early Middle Ages most textile making had been rural and domestic, in the form of family based crafts. The cloth-manufacturing processes, combing, spinning, weaving, were performed chiefly, often exclusively, by women. As commercial opportunities expanded increasing numbers of men became involved in the production of textiles. Gradually, business activities in society were the subject of organisation. From the twelfth century, guilds were founded in the weaving centres throughout Europe. These secular systems organised and controlled the production of cloth. Women were rarely allowed to become members of craft guilds in their own right, therefore, the hierarchy established by these trade associations marked a lessening of the importance of the role of women in textile

making. A gender change occurred with the control of commercial production being transformed to an almost exclusively male activity (2003: 221-222).

The value that had formerly been attached to the textile work of women diminished as alternative systems for the organisation and manufacture of textiles were developed. Writing from the viewpoint of a nineteenth-century woman in 1898, the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman observes that 'specialization and organisation are the basis of human progress, the organic methods of social life. They have been forbidden to women almost absolutely' (1998: 35). The assertion that men controlled the structures and systems responsible for the advance of human society is confirmed by the history of the male dominated textile industry. In the ancient world it was recognised that women specialised in the making of textiles, but the expansion of this activity from individual to large scale production resulted in the exclusion of women from all but a subordinate role.

Nevertheless, for a Victorian woman, the making of textiles remained an unavoidable occupation. In her discussion of female labour in this period, Patricia Zakreski points out that, 'As both a domestic and an industrial employment, sewing formed one of the most central experiences of work through the nineteenth century for all women regardless of class or economic status, and the needle came to embody a powerful metaphor for female existence' (2006: 21). Proficiency in needlework was an accomplishment expected of all women, and for young girls, especially those of the middle to upper class, it was considered an essential element of their education. The acceptance of the desirability of education for women directed towards intellectual development was very slow to develop. Kathryn Ledbetter draws attention to the lack of equal opportunities for women that existed at this time. She points out that 'society rarely expected intellectual capability in

women beyond that required of their accepted roles of wife, mother, caretaker, and dependent' (2012: 2). The only opportunities for women to progress in society depended upon marriage or inheritance.

### **The Woman Question**

The dissatisfaction of women with the limitations imposed upon them gained considerable momentum in the course of the nineteenth century. The equity divisions that existed between men and women became increasingly obvious at this time. For men, especially middle-class men, growing industrialisation brought about opportunities for amassing wealth and for social mobility. For many women the resulting economic and social change had a negative effect. The mechanisation of what had previously been home based craft skills, meant that many working women were required to combine the long hours, and often poor conditions, of low paid factory work with their domestic duties. The lives of middle-class women also changed. Talia Schaffer explains that women of the middle class became spatially separated from sites of work:

the dominant ideology of the period imagined middle-class women's work as household management in a domestic space coded as a haven, while assuming middle-class men's work to be economic production in the public market place. (2012: 35).

Women's handicrafts became a necessary element in the construction of the 'coded haven' of the middle-class domestic sphere. They contributed to the glorification of the doctrine of separate spheres as they acted as an antidote to the mass produced commodities of the external industrialised world and, in so doing, provided women with an occupation. Handicrafts were also tangible proof of a man's financial status and ability to provide a leisured lifestyle for his wife and daughters. Writing of needlework in the Victorian period, Kathryn Ledbetter concludes that 'a home

crowded with hand-made goods suggested prosperity and a successful domestic life' (2012: 2). Surprisingly, she does not draw attention to the fact that the profusely decorated homes that resulted from handicraft activities are also an illustration of the sequestered lives of the makers of such hand-made goods, the women of the house.

The outlook for unmarried middle-class women without fortune was bleak as they had little prospect of obtaining any degree of financial security. Conventional female education prepared women for marriage, and the social position of dependent middle-class women limited their possibilities of employment. The 'respectable occupations' considered suitable for such women were restricted to the roles of governess, teacher, or that of a paid companion.

Roszika Parker quotes an observation in an article by T.H.Lister in the *Edinburgh Review* of 1841 that demonstrates male awareness of a growing restlessness amongst women:

In all modern civilised communities, and especially in the most refined and cultivated portions of these communities, women are treated by men with peculiar deference, tenderness, and courtesy. Do they owe this treatment to their strength or to their weakness? Undoubtedly to the latter. The deference, the tenderness, the courtesy of man towards the other sex, are founded principally on the feeling that they need his protection, and can never question his power [...] But let the man be made to feel that he must stand on the defensive – and that spirit of chivalry will speedily cease. (1984: 19-20)

At this time chivalric notions were frequently referred to in regard to 'the woman question'. Real concern existed that the domestic cocoon constructed by men to envelop and isolate women would not prevent female resistance to the role allotted to them. For the Victorians a perception of medieval values aligned to chivalry provided a model that justified the exercise of power over those deemed to be weaker. As Parker observes, 'the middle ages *appeared* to provide historical

confirmation for the naturalness and rightness of the doctrine of separate spheres for the sexes' (19):

Not only did chivalry sanction and secure the hierarchical Victorian class structure, but it was also a weapon of cultural resistance in the face of women's growing restlessness and rebellion – an attempt to still the doubts of both the powerful and powerless. (19)

The Victorian interest in medievalism may be characterised as a way of negotiating the changes induced by industrialisation, capitalism and the expansion of the Empire. These changes had brought with them problems of social order, extreme poverty and crises of religious faith. Initially theoretical in character, the medieval revival spread to encompass a range of sociological, architectural and artistic areas, including needlework.

From a Victorian perspective, the medieval society invoked an ideal of unity and order in harmony with nature. In this vision of a simpler, pre-industrialised, world, the clearly defined responsibilities and loyalties of a feudal structure were overlaid with the romantic concept of a code of chivalry for the noble and well born that ensured the protection of the weak. It was also recognised that the medieval guild system protected and valued the work of craftsmen. In the nineteenth century, such creative skills appeared threatened by industrial processes.

The Victorian vision of the idyll of medievalism was not used to promote a greater degree of equality or egalitarianism, but the prospect of stability and order and respect for nationhood. As a model it offered greater social harmony by encouraging the recognition of mutual dependence between classes and between genders. It created conventions of conduct for both men and for women. These conventions included a myth of womanhood. This myth, entitled 'the feminine ideal' in England, and 'the cult of true womanhood' in America, exalted the role of women



in the domestic sphere. It encompassed concepts of the behaviour of women in respect of grace, personal and selflessness, ascribing to women moral standards that exceeded those of men. This principle was used to influence the construction of role models of women throughout the nineteenth century. Elaine Showalter describes this belief in the following terms:

The middle-class ideology of the proper sphere of womanhood, which developed in postindustrial England and America, prescribed a woman should be a Perfect Lady, an Angel in the House, contentedly submissive to men, but strong in her inner purity and religiosity, queen of her own realm in the Home. (2009: 12)

The term 'The Angel in the House' is derived from a poem by Coventry Patmore, (1856), in which he celebrated the male ideal of the perfection of womanhood as a passive, devoted wife. Nina Auerbach suggests that the title of Patmore's poem 'is so much more resonant than its content' (1982: 66). Throughout the nineteenth century, the term 'the Angel in the House' became symbolic of the role of women as paragons of virtue, influencing men towards moral excellence, but seeking no individual identity beyond that of home and family.

Discussing the pre-eminence of sewing within the cult of true womanhood, Elaine Hedges comments on the abundance of nineteenth-century prescriptive literature directed towards the behaviour of women:

A survey of advice literature shows that sewing came to represent such an array of both essential and desirable skills, habits, attitudes, and virtues as eventually to be defined as the quintessentially feminine activity – the one through which a woman most closely identified herself with and accepted her 'sphere' role. [...] Overall, sewing, it was argued, would help a woman cultivate the 'modesty and 'retiring manners' that were seen as her ideal demeanor. (1991: 342)

Expanding on this theme, Hedges draws attention to the view, widely held at this time, that sewing was considered beneficial to women. It encouraged moral qualities, such as selflessness, thrift, industry and patience. Moreover, ornamental

sewing allowed women to fulfil their role as tastemakers and arbiters of culture, ensuring their homes were a 'decorative and soothing retreat from the harsh public world' (342). This ideology confirms the home as the focus of middle-class femininity and exalts the pursuit of domestic sewing as the means of making womanliness visible.

### **Textile Representations in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley***

Women's textile work as point of reference for the condition of women is a central motif of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley*, published in 1849. As the work of a woman author, this text provides insight into the illustration, shaping and interpretation of both male and female conduct from the perspective of a woman of the nineteenth century. Writing of consistency in the canon of feminine literature Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that from the late eighteenth century, 'women were not only writing, they were conceiving fictional worlds in which patriarchal images and conventions were severely, radically revised' (1984: 44). In her novel Brontë creates such a world, and is active in the revision of its principles. In *Shirley*, Brontë's fury and frustration at attitudes towards women is visible through layers of mythical, Biblical, Shakespearian, Romantic and Realist references. The projection of her uncompromising views to the nineteenth-century reader is assisted by the elements of disguise contributed by these fragmented sources and by the humorous associations that frequently accompany them. By this means Brontë illustrates fundamental aspects of the condition of women, most especially the passivity imposed upon women of her own middle-class world.

Linking the narrative elements of the novel is the theme of textile making. The textile work of middle class women is set in contrast to the industrial processes of textile production. It is by this means that the impact of industrial revolution on the

lives of women is exposed. However, surprisingly, in spite of the importance of the textile theme in Brontë's novel, many of the most eminent Brontë critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, Terry Eagleton, Patricia Meyer Spack, David Lodge, Patricia Beer and Heather Glen provide only limited analysis, or indeed, undertake no study of the significance of women's textiles in Brontë's novels.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Gilbert and Gubar pay limited attention to the examples of women's textiles in the novel, despite the interest they express in women and needlework in George Elliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), and in the poems of Emily Dickinson. Their comments are restricted to textiles in relation to Caroline's 'torture by her cousin Hortense as she initiated her into the duties of women' (1984: 377). This torture included 'incessant sewing, and eye-straining stocking-mending' (377). In addition they describe Caroline 'tending the Jew-basket' (378). In *The Female Imagination* (1976), Spack omits all reference to textiles in her analysis of the novel.

The novel is historical in that it is set in the years 1811-12. However, many of the issues that it raises do not belong to the past but extend into the time in which the author is writing. In *Shirley*, Brontë employs two heroines, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone. It is the contrast in the circumstances of these young women that forms the central component of the novel. Shirley is a rich heiress, and Caroline is totally dependent on the benevolence of her uncle, the Rector of Briarfield. The fates of the two heroines are woven into a complex web of interconnected relationships existing in three parishes of a small Yorkshire valley. Brontë explores the opinions and prejudices of the residents of the valley, encompassing the views of men and women of different classes. Overlaying the study of provincial matters there are national and international issues. These are the economic and social

status of women; the economic effects of war against Napoleon; the industrialisation of textile production; Luddite rebellion; the state of the Anglican Church and the nature of religious faith. All of these factors affect the lives of the novel's protagonists.

### **Textiles and the Inculcation of Femininity**

Caroline Helstone is the first of Brontë's heroines to be revealed to the reader. Even before she makes an appearance she is the subject of discussion between her cousins, Hortense Gérard Moore and Robert Gérard Moore. The brother and sister were born and reared in Belgium, although their father had been English. The family of Gérard had once been wealthy merchants, but over time this fortune had diminished. With the coming of the French Revolution it had been entirely lost. Robert moves to England in an endeavour to restore the prosperity of the Gérard Moore family. He has rented a rundown cloth mill, Hollow's Mill, together with a neighbouring cottage. Out of a sense of duty, Hortense has accompanied him to England as his housekeeper.

Caroline Helstone is a frequent visitor to their home. The eighteen year old Caroline is anxious to improve her limited education, and her guardian, her uncle, does not object to her receiving lessons in French and fine needlework from Hortense. Seeking to impose her own standard of behaviour on to her pupil, Hortense responds to her brother's humorous request of an account of Caroline's faults in the following terms:

Caroline, then, is defective; but, with my forming hand and almost motherly care, she may improve. There is about her an occasional something – a reserve, I think – which I do not quite like, because it is not sufficiently girlish and submissive; and there are glimpses of an unsettled hurry in her nature, which puts me out. Yet she is usually most tranquil, too dejected and thoughtful indeed sometimes. In time, I doubt not, I shall make her uniformly sedate and decorous without being unaccountably pensive. I ever disapprove of what is not intelligible. (1978: 95)

Hortense's criticism of Caroline's 'unsettled hurry' is largely based upon Caroline's apparent preference for a poem by Chénier, 'La Jeune Captive', to the works of Racine and Corneille. However, Hortense assures her brother, 'she is fortunate in a pre-ceptress. I will give her a system, a method of thought, a set of opinions; I will give her the perfect control and guidance of her feelings' (96).

One of the principal mechanisms employed by Hortense in her efforts to shape the character of Caroline is needlework:

Every afternoon was devoted to sewing. Mademoiselle, like most Belgian ladies, was specially skilful with her needle. She by no means thought it waste of time to devote unnumbered hours to fine embroidery, sight-destroying lace work, marvellous netting and knitting, and, above all, to most elaborate stocking mending. She would give a day to the mending of two holes in stockings any time, and think her 'mission' nobly fulfilled when she had accomplished it. It was another of Caroline's troubles to be condemned to learn this foreign style of darning, which was done stitch by stitch so as exactly to imitate the fabric of the stocking itself; a wearifu' process, but considered by Hortense Gérard, and by her ancestresses before her for long generations back as one of the first 'duties of woman'. (107)

Caroline is obedient to her cousin's teaching, but finds the regime imposed very trying. Brontë's description of Caroline is of an individual with quick intelligence, but low self-esteem. Hortense believes Caroline's rapid progress in her studies is the result of her own superior skills as a teacher. She 'took Caroline at precisely her own estimate as an irregularly taught, even ignorant, girl' (103). Caroline's uncle provides her with a home, but pays little attention to her education or prospects for the future. Indeed, but for her own anxiety at her lack of knowledge he would have taken no interest. As he advises Caroline, 'stick to the needle – learn shirt-making and gown-making, and pie-crust-making, and you'll be a clever woman some day' (122).

The Rector's comments confirm the nineteenth-century recognition of needlework as an essential element of the affirmation of femininity. It signified

virtues defined as 'womanly'. These qualities combined industry with docility, obedience, and devotion to home and family. All of these attributes were considered to be natural to the character of women, 'the feminine ideal'. Parker writes of the nineteenth-century perception of the connection of women to embroidery, 'women embroidered because they were naturally feminine, and were feminine because they naturally embroidered' (1984: 11). Needlework was seen as contributing to the desired stereotype of feminine gentility and moral standing. The aesthetics of the practice contributed to this perception. Ledbetter draws attention to this fact in her observation that 'men often viewed pretty hands busy with fancy work as naturally beautiful' (2012: 2). Women and their needlework were viewed as an instinctive combination, fused together in the nineteenth-century social and political consciousness.

Brontë demonstrates the synthesis of textile work and femininity in her description of Hortense's instruction to Caroline to take up her embroidery while Robert reads to them as, 'when the gentleman of the family reads, the ladies should also sew' (115). Caroline requests that she be allowed to forego her embroidery when listening as 'I can't see by lamplight; my eyes are tired and I can't do two things at once. If I sew, I cannot listen; if I listen I cannot sew' (115). It is, however, only the intervention of Robert that secures Caroline a reprieve from her labours. As the male head of the household, his rule is law.

The use of textile work in the inculcation of feminine values began early. Brontë describes the six year old Hortense displaying the excellence of her darning skills to her mother's friends. A neighbour, the formidable Mrs Yorke, is also depicted employing textile work as a means of controlling her precocious daughter Rose. Outlining her plans for an adventurous life to Caroline, the twelve year old

asserts that it is 'better to try all things and find them all empty, than to try nothing and leave your life a blank' (385). In response Mrs Yorke observes, 'solid satisfaction is only to be realised by doing one's duty' (385). Ordering her daughter to take up her sampler, after ten minutes of silent work Mrs Yorke asks Rose 'Do you feel oppressed now? A victim?' (386). When Rose answers that she does not, her mother then asks what was the point of the tirade at what she understood to be 'a protest against all womanly and domestic employment' (386). Rose's response is that she would be sorry not to learn to sew, 'you were right to teach me and make me work' (386). 'Even to the mending of your brother's stockings and making of sheets?' (386) queries her mother. Rose's reply is:

Am I to do nothing but that? I will do that and more. Now, mother, I will have my say. I am twelve years old at present, and not till I am sixteen will I speak again about talents: for four years I bind myself an industrious apprentice to all you can teach me. (386)

Rose's rebellion against the narrow confines of the world she occupies and her place in it challenges the accepted definitions of the situation of women of the time. She wishes to travel, 'to see the outside of our own round planet at least' (384). In reality, the opportunities for her to do so would be limited. She would be dependent on attaining a degree of economic security and the authority and companionship of a husband or male member of her family. In any event, it would be necessary for the young Rose to show substantial determination to maintain her adventurous spirit throughout her apprenticeship in domesticity. Long hours spent at needlework could well diminish the determination of the liveliest of individuals.

Judith Butler seeks to define the inherent complexities of subjection in her observation:

Subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced. Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally *acts on* a given individual as a form of domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject. (1997: 84)

The attempts of Mrs Yorke to contain Rose's rebellious tendencies are an example of 'the making of a subject'. Just as Hortense Moore seeks to form the behaviour of Caroline, Mrs Yorke is endeavouring to shape Rose and make her adhere to an established pattern of femininity. In so doing Mrs Yorke reveals that she is herself the result of a process of subjection. Described as 'a woman of dark and dreary duties' (167), it is shown that she is prone to fits of hysteria if provoked by disobedience, such as her daughter Jessie's tardiness in undertaking her knitting (523). Mrs Yorke's actions in regard to the control of Rose reflect the continuous process of acceptance and re-enforcement of patriarchal practice in respect of the division of gender roles. Needlework was essential to the training of young girls in the formulation and perpetuation of these divisions. Its practice was designed to both engender the attributes considered to be essential in a woman, and to provide evidence of their attainment. In the case of Rose, she appears to have been selected by Brontë as a character that is destined to sustain her youthful hopes. In a glimpse through a 'magic mirror' into the future, Rose is shown in an environment that is far from England (168). In her comment 'not till I am sixteen will I speak again about talents', Rose is demonstrating that she is prepared to comply with her mother's values, but for a limited period only. She will not consent to subjection. Her intention is to preserve and protect her individuality.

### **Patterns of Femininity**

Rose's resolve to escape the role allotted to her and to broaden her horizons results from her observations of the monotony of the lives of the women around her,



especially the woman closest to her in age, Caroline. In *Shirley*, Brontë depicts many different patterns of femininity. They include the ladies of the parish. Through her characterisations of these women, Brontë portrays wives, sisters, mothers, daughters, nieces and spinsters. What is made apparent through these descriptions is the narrow confines of the lives of these women when compared to the male characters with whom their lives intersect. Skill in textile work is an essential part of this pattern of female behaviour. It is the common factor that links all of the women portrayed by Brontë in the novel. Young or old, and regardless of their marital status or disposition, they are shown to be active in the pursuit of their textile work. As with other women of their class, they conform to a convention of productivity. In their appearances in the novel, workbags, thimbles, needles and thread accompany them. Their hands are rarely still.

For these women their textiles demonstrate acceptance of notions of femininity, identify their social status and assist in defining their degree of social interaction. Brontë demonstrates how women may exploit their textiles to advertise aspects of womanhood, and attract male approval, but may also use them as an alternative means of expression, often designed to disguise their true feelings and opinions. Caroline, for example, is shown using her knitting to protect herself from a form of 'brain lethargy' (141) brought about by the ceaseless gossip and chatter of the company in her uncle's drawing room. When she drops her knitting to her lap she is overwhelmed with a sense of weariness and boredom.

Precepts in regard to feminine behaviour, such as those advocated by Mrs Yorke and Hortense Moore, influence the conduct of the younger women portrayed in the novel. These young women, who include the three Miss Sykes as well as Caroline, need to acquire social status and financial security through marriage and

so avoid the application of the derogatory title of 'old maid'. The inability of women to exercise control over their own destiny is a topic to which Brontë returns again and again. She is sympathetic in her depiction of Caroline's endeavours to shape her own life. It is made apparent that, like other girls in her neighbourhood, Caroline's options are very limited. In an interior soliloquy addressed to the 'Men of Yorkshire' Caroline observes:

The brothers of these girls are every one in business or professions; they have something to do: their sisters have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health: they are never well; and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. The great wish – the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don't want them; they hold them very cheap: they say – I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time – the matrimonial market is overstocked. Fathers say so likewise, and are angry with their daughters when they observe their manoeuvres: they order them to stay at home. What do they expect them to do at home? If you ask, - they would answer, sew and cook. (377)

The frustration that Caroline feels about the limitations placed upon women and the male disparagement that results from the observation of its effects is evident from this extract. In the degree of mockery that is demonstrated there is no evidence of the popular concept of male chivalry towards women. The inequalities in opportunity between men and woman are also emphasised. At this time, few women were equipped for any other future apart from marriage, and their accomplishments, manners and demeanour were directed towards enhancing their opportunities for the achievement of this objective. Even Caroline, brought up under her uncle's rather indifferent guardianship, does not escape. It is apparent that, at least from an external perspective, she has been shaped to conform to the prescribed pattern of womanly virtue.

In the course of her exhortation on the aridity of the lives of women Caroline draws upon two patterns of idealised womanhood, Lucretia, and the ‘virtuous woman’ described in *Proverbs 31* in *The Bible*. Both of these figures have connections to textile making. The legendary Roman woman Lucretia is associated with purity and wifely virtue through her decision to choose death after she is dishonoured by rape. In the story that appears in Livy’s *History of Rome* (c. 29 B.C: Book 1.57) Lucretia is depicted as spinning with her maidens at midnight, fulfilling her husband’s prediction that whenever he returns to his home she is to be found productively employed. The ‘virtuous woman’ is also connected to integrity and industriousness. The Biblical hymn of praise to her honour extols her skills in weaving and in the management of her household. Brontë uses satire in the description of these legendary women. The household management styles of Hortense and of Mrs Sykes are humorously related to these idealised examples of womanhood (378). Nevertheless, the inclusion of these models reveals serious intent.

The two archetypal women possess special qualities. Lucretia is used as an emblem of the standards of industry, virtue and chastity associated with, and expected from, nineteenth-century women of the middle class. However, her death resulted in a change from a monarchy to a republic, and therefore envisions female political influence. The Biblical ‘virtuous woman’ is also employed to demonstrate the epitome of nineteenth-century womanhood. Yet, the description of her lifestyle is one of considerable activity and responsibility. As Caroline states of the ‘virtuous woman’, ‘but *she* had something more to do than spin and give out portions: she was a manufacturer – she made fine linen and sold it: she was an agriculturist – she bought estates and planted vineyards. *That woman was a manager*’ (378). Utilising

the voice of Caroline in this passage, Brontë renews her argument on the question of women. She returns to the issue of the tedious nature of the lives of women and their economic dependence. The 'virtuous woman' is depicted as possessing a degree of financial freedom as she is engaged in commerce on her own account. It is established that she does not to suffer the frustration of women of Brontë's era who spend their days in the production of textiles that have limited domestic value and bring no financial reward.

### **The 'Jew-basket'**

One particular textile resource establishes a physical connection between all of the ladies of the three parishes. This resource is the 'Jew-basket'. Brontë provides a detailed account of this object:

It ought to be explained in passing, for the benefit of those who are not 'au fait' to the mysteries of the 'Jew-basket' and 'Missionary-basket,' that these 'meubles' are willow-repositories, of the capacity of a good-sized family clothes-basket, dedicated to the purpose of conveying from house to house a monster collection of pin-cushions, needle-books, card-racks, work-bags, articles of infant-wear, &c. &c. &c., made by the willing or reluctant hands of the Christian ladies of a parish, and sold per force to the heathenish gentlemen thereof, at prices unblushingly exorbitant. The proceeds of such compulsory sales are applied to the conversion of the Jews, the seeking of the ten missing tribes, or to the regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe. Each lady-contributor takes it in her turn to keep the basket a month, to sew for it, and to foist off on a shrinking male public. An exciting time is had when that turn comes round: some active-minded women, with a good trading spirit, like it, and enjoy exceedingly the fun of making hard-handed worsted spinners cash up, to the tune of four or five hundred per cent. above cost price, for articles useless to them; other-feeblers objects to it, and would rather see the prince of darkness himself at their door any morning, than that phantom-basket, brought with 'Mrs Rouse's compliments, and please, ma'am, she says it's your turn now'. (135)

Caroline falls into the category of those who dreads the arrival of this 'awful incubus' (135). Her opinion on the basket is shared with Robert Moore, who is disparaging of the basket, its contents and its prices (101). The level of detail provided by Brontë

on the purpose of the basket and the nature of its contents are significant as they are a source of information on aspects of womanhood at this time.

Brontë's comments on the attraction of the 'Jew-basket' for some women with 'trading spirit' illustrates the capacity of women to engage in business related activities. They do not engage in trade for personal gain, but for various, rather dubious, religious and charitable causes. Nevertheless, the basket provides an opportunity for women to employ persuasive skills to sell trivial items of their own making at inflated prices. What is more, many of those to whom they sell are merchant weavers, men whose business activities are based upon the products of weaving produced in an industrial setting. That women might share the male facility to exercise commercial competence opposed the image of compliant domesticity that was applied to femininity at this time.

The 'Jew-basket' was a minor example of the sale of fancy work to benefit charitable causes that flourished in the nineteenth century. Talia Schaffer describes the popularity of large bazaars held for this purpose in London and other cities. As she states 'bazaars were very big business' (2012: 11). The organisation of them was complex, and 'since bazaars could host thousands of customers over several days, this was a major undertaking that certainly showcased women's organizational abilities and business acumen' (11). The scale of the 'Jew-basket' is miniscule in comparison with such large events. Nevertheless, in common with bazaars, the goods it contains are set at artificial prices far above their commercial value. It is equally effective in demonstrating the capacity of some women to participate in an area of activity that was not considered natural to women of this time, the field of trade.

Caroline's distaste of the 'Jew-basket' is based upon the premise that she would rather be a purchaser than a supplier. She 'was obliged to be a purchaser, though she was but a slack contributor; and if she had plenty of money, [...] she would rather have purchased the whole stock, than contributed a single pincushion' (134). The mechanics of supply and demand are frequently referenced throughout the novel in regard to the business of textile weaving. In the context of the 'Jew-basket' a supplementary meaning may be discerned. Caroline's preference for buying, compared to the talent for selling possessed by other ladies of the parish, may be read as an allusion to the economics of the marriage market.

Unlike other structures of commercial exchange, women were taught an understanding of the operation of this market from childhood. It was a market to which the woman brought a dower of attractive appearance and accomplishments of reserve, gentility, domestic and needle-working skills. Ideally, she also brought a degree of wealth. The modest and sensitive Caroline shies away from any overt demonstration of interest in marriage, and she has no money. In her view she lacks the necessary attributes, 'I am poverty and incapacity; Shirley is wealth and power' (262). Brontë's acceptance of this concept of marriage as a business arrangement is shown in the comments of Shirley's long-lost mother, Mrs Pryor, on her unhappy marriage. She uses financial terms when she speaks of the cancellation of 'terrible debt' (412) and urges Caroline not to think ill of her father, but to 'leave, between him and me, the settlement of our mutual account' (412).

In an exchange between Mr Yorke and Robert Moore the existence of a marriage market is confirmed. This conversation reveals that in the perception of certain men, including Mr Yorke, marriage is regarded as a trading venture. As with the production and sale of cloth, marriage is directed to the achievement of

commercial advantage. Mr Yorke steers a discussion on Robert Moore's need for business capital to the merits of obtaining capital through marriage. Women are discussed as an article of trade, a commodity, with men in the position of purchasers in the market. Robert Moore claims that he could not marry merely for money, he could not marry an old or an ugly woman as 'his taste must have satisfaction' (181). Responding indignantly to Mr Yorke's assertion that he was a romantic, he links his thoughts on marriage to the business of the cloth mill, 'I am not a romantic. I am stript of romance as the white tenters in that field of cloth' (181). This view is substantiated by his subsequent proposal to Shirley. Brontë describes Robert Moore's pre-occupation with trade in the following terms, he 'haunted his mill, his mill-yard, his dye-house and his warehouse' (90). Marriage to Shirley would have satisfied his desire for youth and beauty in a wife and also offered the potential of financial gain. His eventual proposal to her is based upon the wealth Shirley would bring to a marriage rather than love for her.

The insignificance of the objects inside the 'Jew-basket' is in complete contrast to the magnificence of the domestic textile work of women of previous ages. In comparison to the descriptions of women's textile work in Greek and Roman poems, and in the medieval courtly romances, the making of 'children's socks' for the 'Jew-basket' (101) appears symbolic of the loss of value of the textile work of women. Until the spread of industrial processes the domestic textile work of women had significant trading value. Mary Harris writes of the negative connection between the social and commercial values attached to women. She asserts that 'the first differentiations of male and female work with cloth were economic, and as economies developed, so the work of women began the long process of being less visible to contemporary eyes' (1997: 3). Brontë's description of the 'Jew-basket'

graphically illustrates the consequences of these economic differences. As evidenced by the inconsequential nature of its contents, an effect of industrialisation was that the textiles produced by women in the home had very limited monetary value. In a material society the diminishment of the commercial value of their handiwork meant that women too became less visible and less valued.

The contents of the 'Jew-basket' are, in themselves, an affirmation of gentility. The items it contains are worked by women who have time to spare for moral and charitable concerns. Objects such as 'pin-cushions, needle-books, card-racks, and work bags' could only have been produced by women who enjoyed some degree of financial privilege. No working women had the time for the production of frivolous goods for such ill-defined causes as 'the seeking of the ten missing tribes'. Missionary zeal was a luxury that the poor could not afford. Of necessity, the priorities of the working class had to be the maintenance of their families and themselves.

The obvious obscurity of the Christian purpose of the Jew-basket is a reminder of the diminishment of the role of women in religious observance, and the triviality of its contents demonstrate the degree to which this role had reduced and become marginal. Writing of the folly of labouring incessantly at 'fancy work', Charlotte Perkins Gilman issues a reminder to women that 'in dim early days she was sharer in the mysteries and rites; but as religion developed her place receded, until Paul commanded her to be silent in the churches. And she has been silent until today' (1998: 35). There is documentary evidence to support the fact that women once played an active role in religious rites. The source material of Mary R. Lefkowitz and Maureen B. Frant include translations of fragmentary documents that record everyday life in ancient Greece. Among them is an account of the rules of ritual of the



city of Miletus in around the third century B.C. It contains guidelines for the celebration of the rites of Dionysus, and the role of priestess who 'performs the holy rites on behalf of the city' (1982: 113). In addition, a translation of a description of a girl's puberty ritual in Sparta in the seventh century B.C. includes the offering of a robe to 'the Goddess of Dawn' (119). The goddess is thought to be Helen, who was worshiped in Sparta at this time. In ancient literary texts women and their textiles are depicted as playing a prominent role in religious ritual. Impressive textiles are employed as the means of honouring the gods. In the *Iliad*, Homer replicates an example of female religious practice, describing Hecuba making an offering to the goddess Athena of 'her loveliest robe, most ample, most luxurious in brocade, and glittering with starlight under all' (1998: 106). By the nineteenth century the standards of the textile skills of women had not deteriorated from those of former times. On the contrary, the High-Church Oxford Movement saw a revival in the production of elaborate ecclesiastical garments of outstanding quality, made by women. It is the relationship between women, textiles and religious observance that had altered beyond recognition. Roszika Parker writes that 'embroidering for the church combined domesticity and piety, making it a highly acceptable activity for ladies' (1984: 21). Compared to the textile work of women in the ancient world the textiles of women in the time of Brontë had become an adjunct to religious ritual, not an essential element. In parallel, the role of women in Christian rites had become that of an appendage rather than a necessity to religious observance.

In her novel Brontë introduces a feminised concept of religious belief expressed by Shirley through her vision of a female goddess, a Titan-Eve. The image Shirley perceives in the shadows of a hillside is the figure of "Nature at her evening prayer' (315). Nature is envisaged as a dominant mythical woman, a mix of

paganism and Christianity. In her description of this figure, 'a woman-Titan' (315), Brontë mocks the domesticated Eve portrayed by Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667). Instead she looks to pre-history using Hesiod's representation of Gaia in *Theogony* (c. 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C) in reference to Eve, and subsequently Eve to Mary, mother of God. She suggests they are, 'sisters to immortality, which, after millenniums of crimes, struggles, and woes, could bring forth a Messiah' (315). Shirley's observations on the Titan-Eve associate women with generative power and with ancient religion. By exalting the creative energy of women in pre-history and a female connection to natural forces, Brontë succeeds in demonstrating the lost influence of women while moderating criticism of the Anglican Church. For Brontë, the daughter of a clergyman, this degree of restraint was essential.

### **The Victorian Myths of Womanhood**

Brontë's rejection of the myth of womanhood as a constituent of the Victorian medieval ideal is made evident in her use of romantic elements of the past to demonstrate their contribution to the subjugation of women. Susan Zlotnick confirms this suggesting that Brontë:

openly repudiates the implicit nostalgia in the medievalists' condition - of - England discourse because for her, history offers no golden age; unromantic and unappealing, the past is seen as brutal and barbaric; a time of mind-numbing labour and painful social inequalities. (1991: 283)

Brontë's obvious process of rejection of the medieval past is enacted through Caroline. In the novel she appears to take on the role of a character of myth or fairy tale, genres so prized by the Victorians. At times, Caroline invokes the timeless image of an incarcerated maiden, as represented in Tennyson's *Lady of Shalott* (1833). In the poem the mythical Lady spends her days imprisoned in a grey towered building. Her view of the outside world is reflected through a mirror, and

'there she weaves by night and day' (unknown: 17). Brontë encourages a similar perception of the ethereal in her depiction of Caroline. She is portrayed gazing into a mirror, 'combing her hair, long as a mermaid's' (123). Her home, 'Briarfield Rectory' is described by Rose Yorke as 'a place that always reminds me of a windowed grave' (384). When Caroline is asked by Rose what she does there her response is 'I sew, I read, I learn lessons' (384). Caroline's life, according to Rose, is not one that she would adopt. Rose 'is resolved that her life will be a life: not a black trance like a toad's buried in marble: nor a long slow death' (384). Caroline is advised by the young girl to travel, 'even if you only went on and on, like some enchanted lady in a fairy tale' (385). In a subsequent lecture she receives from Mrs Yorke, Caroline is told that she had managed to train her features 'into an habitually lackadaisical expression, better suited to a novel-heroine than to a real woman who has to make her way in the real world, by a dint of common sense' (386). Mrs Yorke is mistaken in her assessment of Caroline's physiology. The differences between Caroline and an entranced mythical or fairy tale heroine is that Caroline is fully awake to the disadvantages imposed by her lack of fortune and opportunities for attaining financial independence. She is conscious of her confinement in a restricted world, but sees no means of escape.

Deprived of contact with the Moore family through a political quarrel between her uncle and Robert, Caroline spends much time alone and 'closeted there, silent and solitary, what could she do but think?' (189). Very often, Caroline's thoughts are engaged with the differences between the world of a man of business and the narrowness of her own. She considers her future and asks 'how am I to occupy it? What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?' (190). She comes to believe that the destiny she had envisaged, a husband, home

and children will never be hers. She is convinced that she will never marry. Her sewing becomes symbolic of the barrenness of her life. The housemaid, Fanny, finds Caroline 'always bent industrially over a piece of work' (191). For Caroline the days seem endless and she wonders 'How am I to get through this day? [...] She tried to read – her thoughts wandered; she tried to sew - every stitch she put in was an ennui, the occupation was tedious' (130). The reduction of Caroline's sewing to single stitches emphasises the dreariness of Caroline's days. Every tiny stitch may be interpreted as a measure of the endless time that stretched before her.

Caroline's uncle provides for her physical care, but has little concern for any other aspect of her life. He does not understand her need for tenderness and affection and for a sense of purpose in her life. 'Slight topics alone might be discussed between them; for with a woman - a girl - Mr Helstone would touch no other' (124). In response to her questions on marriage, a state that he considered to be folly, his response was that they were 'stupid and babyish' (125). Throughout the narrative there are frequent references to the misogyny of Mr Helstone. Mr Helstone does not like women:

At heart he liked to see them as silly, a light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible; because they were then in reality what he held them to be, and wished them to be, - inferior: toys to play with, to amuse a vacant hour and to be thrown away. (138)

For Mr Helstone it is apparent that women are the 'Other', a separate, inferior species, with limited potential and resources. It is possible to interpret the portrayal of these negative aspects of the character of the Rector as a criticism of the attitude of the Church towards women. The Rector's advice to Caroline to 'stick to the needle' (122) is evidence of the view that the identity of women is defined by the

scope of their activities. The 'needle', as 'the distaff and the spindle', was emblematic of the world of women. These terms have frequently been used to illustrate the sexual divide between the world of men and of women. In the Rector's opinion, and in the opinion of the majority of men through the generations, the domestic sphere was considered sufficient to satisfy the resources, energies and the needs of women.

Brontë graphically illustrates the limited life choices available to women of her time in her conjecture on the Rector's momentary consideration of a second marriage to the young Miss Sykes. At times, when she is sufficiently flattered, Hannah Sykes is so very silly that the Rector considers this possibility. In Brontë's view, it is the recollection 'of the ennui of his first marriage' (138) that restrain him. If the Rector had proposed, it is likely that, regardless of his age, he would have been accepted:

her parents, I say, would have delivered Hannah over to his loving kindness and his tender mercies without one scruple; and the second Mrs Helstone, inverting the natural order of insect existence, would have fluttered through the days of the honeymoon a bright admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled worm. (139).

The comparison of the married life of a young girl to that of the inverted lifespan of an insect is disturbing. It is a cogent warning of the unnatural characteristics of an incompatible marriage brought about by social and familial pressure. The Rector's late wife, Mary Cave, is described as 'a girl with a face like a Madonna; a girl of living marble; stillness personified' (81). She is rumoured to have faded and died, after only five years of marriage as a result of Mr Helstone's indifference towards her. The memory of this beautiful woman is kept alive through her portrait and through the gossip of servants. Living in the same degree of solitude and in the same house,

Caroline is troubled by this memory. It plays upon her imagination. The premature death of Mary Cave, the unhappiness experienced by her own mother, and the lectures of Mrs Yorke on the difficulties of the married state, all conspire to demonstrate to her the risks of incompatibility in marriage. Yet, Caroline's observations on the lives of those who do not marry, the spinsters, Miss Mann and Miss Ainsley, fails to reassure her that to remain unmarried is a viable alternative.

Brontë's portrayal of these two ladies conforms to the Victorian stereotype of the 'old maid'. They are stigmatised as poor, old and ugly, the object of derision in the community. They have both been unfailing in their duty. Miss Mann had sacrificed much of her life to the care of a succession of largely unappreciative relatives. Miss Ainsley is religious, dedicating her life to good works. Caroline admires their serenity and lack of self-pity. She endeavours to find a sense of purpose by modelling her own life upon these ladies. Under the direction of Miss Ainsley, she too undertakes knitting and sewing for the poor, seeking to set aside her own needs through consideration for the needs of others.

Such selflessness is unavailing. Caroline's spirits remain low and she begins to shut herself in her room. She frequently uses her sewing as an excuse for missing meals:

She did sew: she plied her needle continuously, ceaselessly; but her brain worked faster than her fingers. Again, and more intensely than ever, she desired a fixed occupation, - no matter how onerous, how irksome. [...] Her head laboured to frame projects as diligently as her hands to plait and stitch the thin texture of the muslin summer dress spread on the little white couch at the foot of which she sat. Now and then, while thus doubly occupied, a tear would fill her eyes and fall on her busy hands; but this sign of emotion was rare, and quickly effaced: the sharp pang passed, the dimness cleared from her vision; she would re-thread her needle, re-arrange tuck and trimming and work on. (244)

The image of Caroline, bent over her sewing, locked in silent misery, yet endeavouring to use her sewing as a distraction, is an example of what is described by Gilbert and Gubar in their analysis of the novel as depicting 'the pain of human confinement' (1984: 373). This concept of 'confinement' is validated by Jeffrey Wollack, who proposes:

The book is in essence a vindication of the worth of the human being, the individual personality, and the need to safeguard its inner values against erosion and annihilation. The Rectory thus becomes symbolic of the prison as is the matrimonial market that sets status, wealth and social position above the hearts inclination and needs. At the center stands the woman, and that is only natural, for she is the 'natural victim' and 'prisoner' in Victorian society. (2007: 316)

Caroline is such a 'natural victim' and 'prisoner' and her persistence in endeavouring to attain personal and financial freedom as a solution to her unhappiness meets with no success. Her prison, the Rectory is a male gendered space, emblematic of the power of men and of the Church. Caroline's sewing is a flimsy and inadequate defence against this oppression.

She begs her uncle to allow her to seek a situation with a family. He refuses absolutely, 'while I live, you shall not turn out as a governess, Caroline. I will not have it said that my niece is a governess' (204). Instead he offers to send her to a watering place to recover her health. He could see that, 'without him being aware of it, the rose had dwindled and faded to a mere snowdrop: bloom had vanished, flesh wasted; she sat before him drooping, colourless and thin' (203).

Anna Krugovay Silver's interpretation of Caroline's fasting is that 'Caroline's self starvation can thus be read as a denial of adulthood that robs women of the freedom of speech that girls like Rose still enjoy' (2003: 93). This assessment is correct in that silence was imposed upon Caroline, and upon all women that her

character represented. As Brontë states, 'A lover masculine, can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing' (130). The silence imposed upon Caroline is a further example of female impotence. This degree of submission and passivity forms part of the social stereotype of acceptable feminine behaviour.

Gilbert and Gubar have an alternative interpretation. In their view, the heroine's fasting in *Shirley* is linked to the expression of rage and rebellion against exploitation, especially 'for those women famished for a sense of purpose in their life' (1984: 374). Caroline is one of these women. She cannot express her love for Robert, or successfully convey her frustration at her lack of a meaningful existence. The only occupation available to her is to busy herself with her sewing. Arranging the 'tuck and trimmings' of the garment she sews gives her an opportunity for self-expression. Her delicate needlework is symbolic of the fragility of her power over her life. It is the one element in her life that she may shape and control to suit her own inclination. As she sits in her room, her fingers busy with her stitching, in her mind she is vainly endeavouring to join together the fragments of her life.

The mythical Lady of Shalott left her loom, her 'magic web' and her enclosing tower when she was awakened from her passivity by sexual desire. Caroline suffers a similar enchantment. Unlike the fate of Lady of Shalott, however, there is no immediate and dramatic resolution to her problems. Caroline does not die, but remains confined, her health and spirits deteriorating, little by little, 'winter seemed conquering her spring: the mind's soil and its treasures were freezing gradually to barren stagnation' (199). Nevertheless, she constantly endeavours to cultivate a sense of resignation to her powerlessness to change the course of her life. As in Brontë's reference to 'inversing of the natural order of insect existence' (139),



Caroline is both spider and victim. She has become entangled and entrapped in the web of her own knitting and sewing. A web that is the consequence of conformance to the values prescribed for female behaviour.

### **Challenging Gender Stereotypes**

The arrival of Shirley at the midpoint of the novel brings substantial change to the paradigms of femininity constructed by Brontë in the early chapters. Shirley is the counterpart of Caroline. Both girls are young, unmarried, intelligent, but from their own assessment, the recipients of an inadequate degree of education. Both have lost parents at an early age. Like Caroline, Shirley has been brought up in her uncle's household. They share similar tastes and aversions. There the similarities end and substantial differences occur. The contrast in their appearance is significant. Compared to Shirley, the quiet and delicate Caroline is likened to 'a graceful pencil-sketch compared with a vivid painting' (252). Shirley's dress denotes her wealth. Caroline dresses in a 'modest, muslin dress' (252). Shirley is described as wearing 'an attire simply fashioned, but almost splendid from the shifting brightness of its dye, warp and woof' (252). Differences in the behaviour of the girls are also apparent. Caroline is nervous and reserved, while Shirley is outgoing and sociable. These variances may be traced to one source, Shirley is rich, very rich. Wealth endows Shirley with the degree of self-confidence that eludes Caroline. It also releases her from many of the conventions of female behaviour. She is her own mistress, and takes her place as the owner of the manor of Fieldhead with assurance, conversing with her male neighbours on equal terms.

Although depicted as graceful and feminine in her dress and in her manner towards others, Shirley's behaviour differs from that of the other women portrayed by

Brontë. She does not conform to expectations of female conduct in that she spends little time sewing. Unlike other women, she never sews after tea, 'after tea Shirley reads, and she is just about as tenacious of her book as she is lax of her needle' (373). Her ease and self-possession in communicating with others is often demonstrated through the playful assumption of male characteristics. She refers to the necessity for her to attend to business matters in the following terms:

Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman and something more. I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood [...]. (213)

Her companion and ex-governess, Mrs Pryor rebukes her for the 'habit of alluding to yourself as a gentleman' (217). On occasions, Shirley entitles herself as 'Captain Keeldar'. She has learned to whistle, and is described as 'sauntering' past a window. It appears that Brontë finds it necessary to allow Shirley to distort the system of rules and conventions that prescribe male and female behaviour. In order to reconcile the possession of economic power with the secondary status of her gender she is required to employ masculine practices. To be a young and appealing woman is not sufficient. As Gilbert and Gubar rightly suggest, 'there is something not a little foreboding about the fact that independence is so closely associated with men that it confines Shirley to a kind of male mimicry' (1984: 382).

The teasing degree of masculinity that Shirley cultivates in the exercise of her business affairs is largely directed towards the running of the textile mill. The character of Shirley brings another perspective to the topic of women's textiles. Often negligent with her own sewing, she is, nevertheless, involved in the production of textiles. Half of her income comes from this source. Shirley terms herself

‘clothier, mill-owner, as I am, besides farmer’ (322). She owns the mill, with Robert Moore as her tenant.

Brontë’s casting of Shirley as a mill owner is more than an illustration of the difference made to the life of one woman by the endowment of power and money. It is a reminder of the technological advances sweeping through the nineteenth century and the impact of these changes on the lives of all women. Even women enclosed by middle class convention. In the opinion of Susan Zlotnick, ‘Brontë embraces – and even celebrates - the industrial present in *Shirley*, ardently (if somewhat misguidedly) believing in capitalism’s power to transcend patriarchal structures and to loosen the ties that bind all women’ (1991: 283). It is true that Caroline is depicted as constantly seeking an occupation, envying the mill girls their freedom in this respect. Shirley also expresses a favourable opinion on commerce in an exchange with the Rector. She claims that ‘The counting-house is better than my bloom-coloured drawing room: I adore the counting-house’. In response to his riposte ‘And the trade? The cloth - the greasy wool - the polluting dye vats?’ Shirley’s response is, ‘The trade is to be thoroughly respected’ (215). Brontë makes it evident, however, that she does not anticipate a swift end to patriarchal controls. Gilbert and Gubar are undoubtedly correct in their assertion that ‘Brontë deliberately seeks to illustrate the inextricable link between sexual discrimination and mercantile capitalism’ (1984: 375)’.

The mill overlooker, Joe Scott, overtly expresses this form of discrimination. Joe considers Shirley’s ownership of the mill as an aberration, and considers that she concerns herself with affairs that are beyond the province of women. He resents the fact of ‘his master, and his master’s mill being, in a manner, under petticoat

government' (321). Definitions of the spheres of activities permitted to women find voice through Joe Scott. He has very firm opinions on the encroachment of women upon what he considers to be male spaces. He disapproves of the visits of Shirley and Caroline to the 'counting-house', the area of the mill where business is conducted. In addition, he would place restrictions on the voices of women. In his view women are not qualified to have opinions as to politics or religion, but should follow those of their husbands. Susan Zlotnick comments on the disparity between Shirley's wealth and inability to assume a masculine degree of power in the following terms:

Although Shirley's wealth gives her an extraordinary degree of autonomy in her own life, it does not lend her any political power to intervene in public events. Mill owner or not, Shirley is treated like a woman and expected to behave like a woman [...] The local elites even keep the impending confrontation at Hollow's End mill a secret from her, though if anyone had a right to that information, it is Shirley, who owns the mill property. (1991: 293)

Zlotnick is correct in her assessment of the limitations placed upon Shirley. Throughout the novel, Robert refers to the mill as 'his mill', even though Shirley is his landlord, and the continued operation of the mill in the face of Luddite attacks and in a depressed economy is the result of a substantial loan that she has provided. Unlike her biblical ancestress, 'the virtuous woman', Shirley can have no involvement in the manufacture and sale of cloth, and of the contentious issues that relate to it. As Talia Schaffer observes, 'the factory was a place that strictly precluded middle-class females. For the first time, the economic life of the nation occurred in places middle-class women were not supposed to visit or understand' (2012: 35). Despite her ownership of a commercial property, as a middle-class woman, Shirley is subject to this spatial separation. Brontë employs Shirley's financial independence to demonstrate that it allows her greater freedom than that accorded to other women to

challenge patterns of femininity. Nevertheless, Shirley's conduct in areas of activity considered to be the province of men remains circumscribed.

Shirley takes open pride in her strangeness, her difference from other women, and in her ability to manipulate the male dominated world. After the attack on the mill for example, she asks Robert if he thinks her to be 'a dangerous specimen of my sex' (352). He responds, 'a peculiar one, at least' (352). In regard of the choice of a marriage partner Shirley will not compromise. Surprisingly, she does not seek a husband who is her equal, but one 'who sincerely makes me feel that he is my superior' (226).

The concept of Shirley seeking domination through marriage appears at variance with her pride in her position as 'landed-proprietor and lord of the manor' (266). She believes, however, that she herself will be exalted by marrying one who possesses qualities greater than her own in terms of integrity, intellectual knowledge and experience. It is apparent that she considers marriage to the individual who possesses these merits would enhance, not diminish her.

The individual to whom Shirley attaches these virtues is Louis Gérard Moore. In this choice she demonstrates a reversal of the roles of governess and master employed in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Louis Moore, brother of Robert and Hortense, is her former tutor. He remains the tutor of her young cousin. As with Jane Eyre and Rochester, the difference between Shirley and Louis is wealth. Poor but proud, Louis loves Shirley, but considers her wealth as a barrier between them. Undaunted by these scruples, Shirley seeks to remind him of his intellectual superiority and her need for his advice and control. She sets aside her habit of assuming masculine manners and displays the feminine aspects of her character. Crucially, she does this by resorting to her needlework. Recovering from the physical and psychological

effects of a dog bite, she sits by the fireside plying her needle, demonstrating 'a quiet domestic character' (473). As the pattern of a wreath of Parmese violets grows on the silk canvas so too does Louis' appreciation of vulnerable facets of Shirley's temperament. Eventually, he sets aside his pride in his poverty and declares his love for her.

Initially, Brontë's depiction of Shirley's use of silk and thread to captivate Louis appears to be conduct that is contradictory to that expected from her spirited, independent heroine. Shirley is depicted as a woman who, through her wealth and beauty, is able to challenge conventional female behaviour and compete with men on equal terms. And yet, when it comes to marriage she finds it necessary to resort to tools associated with femininity to obtain her objective. It may be argued that this revision in her actions is designed to satisfy the expectations of nineteenth-century readers for customary standards and order in a male dominated culture. In view of the earlier content of the novel however, it is likely that Brontë is employing the use of needlework as a subversive device. As this study seeks to demonstrate, literary history has frequently shown that needlework, although symbolic of the subjugation of women, may also be employed as an implement of female power, enabling women to surmount constraints placed upon them. New meaning is added to the designation of women's textiles as both art and craft when guile is a factor in their making.

In her depiction of Shirley's conduct in regard to Louis, Brontë shows her heroine in a role that is alien to most women of her time. She seeks marriage on her own terms. Her needlework is a means of obtaining her objective. Her sudden interest in embroidery, coupled with her capricious behaviour in the course of her engagement, demonstrates that although she appears to have relinquished dominance to Louis, she nevertheless retains the degree of influence and

effectiveness that she wishes for in their relationship. Shirley enters into a union that offers the degree of subordination that she desires, and that she craftily manipulates.

### **Poverty and Women's Textiles**

The theme of textiles in *Shirley* provides a thread of continuity that illustrates the world of nineteenth-century women. Not all women, however, as it deals primarily with those of the middle-class. Limited attention is given to women of the working classes. Domestic servants are depicted as living in relative comfort. The poverty brought about by the decline in demand for textiles and the introduction of industrial working practices is given consideration, but mainly in respect of the charitable assistance that is provided to those in need. The extent of the poverty that is experienced by those unable to work is not explored as a major element of the plot. Indeed, the description of the entry of little children to the mill before dawn is accompanied by the hope that 'they have enough to eat' (90). In fairness to Brontë, she sets her novel in the early era of industrialisation. She also makes it clear that she has not undertaken to handle degraded or infamous characters, responsible for acts of cruelty to others. She maintains that the novelist may be excused from 'sully[ing] his pages with the record of their deeds' (90).

Other authors of the time did not apply such constraints to their work. Brontë's friend and biographer Elizabeth Gaskell published several novels from that deal with the problems of class divisions in an industrial society. In America a number of women novelists also used their work to expose the suffering resulting from the rapid expansion of industrial processes one of them being Elizabeth Stuart Phelps.

In her novels, particularly *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), Gaskell examines the relationship between employers and employees in the textile

industries of Manchester from a liberal and sympathetic viewpoint. Her personal experience of working amongst the poor is visible throughout the novels. The descriptions of the suffering and the degree of poverty endured by many of her characters are compelling. Phelps in *The Silent Partner* (1871) discloses similar scenes of misery and distress in a textile mill based in mid-America. Both novels are especially sympathetic to the plight of women. In *Shirley*, Brontë reveals how myths of womanhood frustrate women's independence, and how industrial processes depreciate the value of the domestic textile work of women. As a consequence, the role of women in society is diminished and devalued. Yet Gaskell and Phelps illustrate an even greater threat to women, the risk of the degradation of women through poverty.

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps earned a place among a group of women authors that enjoyed immense popularity in the nineteenth century. These women included Harriet Beecher Stowe, Rebecca Harding Davis and Louisa May Alcott. *The Silent Partner* may be classified as sentimental fiction, designed to arouse the awareness of the reader to the cultural evils of society. Novels of this type have frequently been criticised for their lack of subtlety and for their emotionality. Jane P. Tomkins refutes this view suggesting 'that the popular domestic novel of the nineteenth century represents a monumental effort to re-organize culture from a woman's point of view; that this body of work is remarkable for its intellectual complexity, ambition and resourcefulness' (1992: 83). It is apparent throughout her novel that Phelps, like Brontë, is endeavouring to expose aspects of the lives of women. In the case of Phelps, however, her message is conveyed in a form that is far more transparent and direct than the complex and intricately woven narrative of Brontë. She adopts a moral tone in her depiction of social inequalities.



Laura A. Smith comments on a review of the novel published in *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* (1871: 301):

A contemporary review of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps' 1871 novel, *The Silent Partner*, warns, 'It ravel[s] out, and leaves a ragged unfinished edge,' perhaps because its investigations of textile mill conditions and reforms seem inconclusive. The novel's lack of neat closure, of a strengthened bound selvage (no marriage plot! no transformative strike, suggests the difficulties in weaving new configurations of womanhood with existing theories of political economy and domesticity in an industrialized society of which the protagonist is a part). Even so, Phelps' use of textile metaphors and images proposes a pattern of womanhood as changeable, flexible, and durable as textiles themselves. (2009: 185)

Smith's assessment is an accurate reflection of Phelps' focus on conveying her message of the challenges of reconciling humanitarian concerns with the political impetus of industrial change. It is apparent that Phelps' uncompromising appeal to her readers for social and political reform does not allow for a conventional ending to her novel. Phelps' use of textile metaphors and images is an important element of this appeal. Characteristics that possess associations to textile making that date from antiquity may be observed in the use of these representations, elements of craftiness, of guile. Phelps manipulates the reader through the frequent use of these components, for they specifically relate to women, the likely readers of her work. The use of textile references demonstrates an awareness of the close relationship between women and textiles in their capacity of both domestic producers and consumers. This consciousness extends to an apparent confidence in the ability of women to respond to representations of inequality and hardship by influencing social change. The metaphors and images also serve to highlight the prominent part played by women in the industrial production of textiles.

At the time Phelps published her novel some 40,000 women were employed in the textile mills of New England. Substantial variations existed in the working

condition in these mills. Describing the early era of industrialisation Laurel Thatcher Ulrich writes of tiny spinning factories, 'that produced soft cotton warp and soft "candle-wicking" that supplemented home-grown fibers' (2002: 38). Rural women carried the values of 'homespun', i.e. domestic textile making, into the factory environment. As Ulrich describes, 'the first women to enter the textile mills thought of their work in much the same way as the women who had stayed home, but they soon learned that factory owners and machines were neither as flexible or forgiving as the housewives who had once managed their labor' (390). In her 2009 essay on the textile mills Laura A. Smith includes a quotation from Harriet H Robinson's text *The Loom and the Spindle or Life Among the Early Mill Girls* (1898). Robinson claimed that women saw their work as similar in some stages to their pre-industrial home tasks:

The conscientious among them took as much pride in spinning a smooth thread, drawing in a perfect web, or in making in making a good cloth, as they would have done if the material had been for their own wearing. And thus was practiced, long before it was preached, that principle of true political economy, - the just relation, of the mutual interest, that ought to exist between employers and employed. (2009: 188).

In the *Silent Partner* Phelps depicts very different aspects of mill life from those of this early era. She reveals the impact of the rapid pace of technological change and greater competition on mill employees. The demands of machines dramatically increased workload. Competitive markets brought about shifts to a cheaper workforce of recent immigrant labour. As a result, working conditions became exploitative, environmental conditions squalid, and the workforce alienated.

The speed by which tiny factories were replaced by huge industrial buildings along the major rivers was swift. Ulrich recounts how 'the growth of factories that integrated all aspects of cloth making under one roof created cities out of fields and

farms' (2002: 390). She describes how a small town of two hundred residents in Massachusetts had increased in size to twenty five hundred residents the six years from 1820. At this time it merged with the town of Lowell, forming a city of eighteen thousand residents by 1836. As cheap labour, women formed the majority of the workforce in the mills of Lowell, outnumbering male employees by six to one.

In her illustration of the human cost of industrialisation it is apparent that Phelps took Elizabeth Gaskell as a literary model. In her essay comparing *A Silent Partner* with Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855), Jill Bergman draws attention to similarities between the two novels:

Scholars to date have overlooked the striking similarities between Phelps' novel and Elizabeth Gaskell's 1855 novel, *North and South*; nevertheless, Phelps' novel borrows from Gaskell's in its basic plot as well as in specific scenes – notably, the troubling strike scene. If we assume an intentional borrowing (and indeed I do not know how we cannot), an examination of the way Phelps rewrites Gaskell illuminates her goals in the novel and explains her treatment (or neglect) of class tensions. (2005: 148)

Bergman's comparison ends with the conclusion that 'the two novels are far from identical' (162). She includes the reminder that Gaskell's novel is more developed and includes several subplots. This conclusion reflects the opinions of Jane P. Tomkins on the lack of stylistic and psychological subtlety in sentimental novels, and the need to recognise them as 'a political enterprise, halfway between sermon and social theory, that both codifies and attempts to mould the values of the time' (1986: 84-5). As with Elizabeth Gaskell, the ethical message that Phelps seeks to impart is based upon her own observations. Susan S. Williams writes of Phelps' brand of realism, suggesting 'Realism was for her a matter of heart and soul as much as mimetic accuracy' (2006: 174). Williams refers to the meticulous research undertaken by the young Phelps for an article 'The Tenth of January' published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1860. Williams describes the article as 'the most overtly

realistic texts of the 1860's' (163). Its focus was 'the January 10, 1860 collapse and fire of the Pembroke cotton mills in Lawrence, Massachusetts, three and a half miles from Phelps' home in Andover, in which 750 workers were injured and 88 died' (163). It is apparent that Phelps' knowledge of this disaster contributes to the political intent of *The Silent Partner*, as does its uncompromising appeal to the sentiments of the reader.

### **The Silent Partner**

In *The Silent Partner* Phelps exposes the divisions between the conditions of workers involved in industrial textile production and those of nineteenth-century consumers, sited in the domestic haven, the home. She calls into question the values of middle-class domesticity that separates women from public world and its realities, yet celebrates this spatial exclusion as an element of 'true womanhood'. In the course of the novel Phelps describes a fictional mill town in New England and the friendship between a mill girl, Sip Garth and the daughter of a mill owner, Perley Kelso. As in the relationship between Gaskell's protagonists, Margaret Hale and Bessy Higgins in *North and South* (1855), despite social and financial differences, a connection is established between the two girls. For Perley, as with Margaret Hale, the friendship is the start of an educative process.

Perley is depicted as the twenty-three year old daughter of a Boston manufacturer, enjoying a luxurious and languid lifestyle in her father's handsome home. Almost nothing of the outside world penetrates her consciousness, and little is required of her than that she should act as a decorative figure in the narrow social sphere that she inhabits. She moves from the protective comfort of her home to that of her carriage, newly cushioned and scented to suit her discriminating taste. It is apparent that the silken cocoon that Perley occupies reflects the insulation of middle

class women in the domestic environment, and brings into question the relationship between the high moral qualities assigned to women at this time and the ignorance imposed by the constriction of their lives. In this manner, Phelps reveals the contradictions between a typically nineteenth-century focus on the home as a sanctified haven, created by women, and the plight of those who contribute to the comfort and embellishment of such homes through their labour. Phelps employs Perley, the embodiment of 'true womanhood', as her agent in this endeavour.

Perley's chance encounter with the young mill worker, Sip Garth changes her life. From the comfort of her carriage Perley observes an undersized girl in a thin, wet, plaid shawl, 'she had no gloves, and her straw hat hang around her neck, by the strings, she must have been very cold, for her lips were blue, but she did not shiver' (20). Meeting Perley's gaze Sip responds angrily when Perley beckons to her. Her anger is explained that she does not wish to be stared at or pitied by 'carriage-folks' (23). Their discussion, which takes place as Sip perches on her carriage steps, is of short duration, but it serves to illustrate to Perley the profound differences that exist between her own cosseted lifestyle and the lives of others.

Perley is portrayed as an avid consumer. She values her possessions, expensive Axminster carpets and damask curtains that provide her with defence against the incursion of the external world. Her brief encounter with Sip shows her a glimpse of another, harsher world, and for the first time Perley doubts the value and the legitimacy of her luxurious acquisitions.

Following the death of her father Perley moves to what had previously been her summer home, in the area of Five Falls, Massachusetts. Her father's mills are located in the town, and the sounds of the mills dominate the town. The move from Boston had been a factor in the process of Perley's mourning for her father, and, in

part, to an unconscious desire for activity and change. As yet unacknowledged by Perley, it had been the meeting with Sip that had stimulated her restlessness. When questioned by her fiancé Maverick as to how she felt following the changes in her life, Perley's response is 'I feel like a large damask curtain taken down for the first time off its cornice, [...] All in a heap, you know, and surprised. [...] And I am not used, you know Maverick, to feeling at all; it's never been asked of me before' (39).

Laura A. Smith suggests that Perley:

associates herself in a type of metonymy with the very sort of textiles that her Massachusetts mill may produce. She too is a product of the mills, yet another man-made object comparable to a damask curtain, designed to exclude – to refine the home and guard it against foreign or lower class aspirants. (2009: 190)

This assessment affirms that textiles are integral to Perley's expensive lifestyle and symbolise her role as a consumer. In addition Perley fulfils the image of a product of the mill, for it is the source of her inherited wealth and consequently of her identity as a 'man-made' construct, a middle-class woman. It is this wealth that both advertises the prosperity of the mill and shields and separates her from the realities of mechanical manufacturing.

Smith's comments are an illustration of the significant degrees of meaning that may be derived from textile representations in both material and metaphorical form. Beverley Gordon writes of the capacity of textiles to enfold and enclose, to act 'as a wrapper, container or framer' (2011: 26). This aspect of textiles may be protective and reassuring. Gordon draws attention to the comfort of blankets and the use of 'swaddling clothes' for babies (26). She also points out that:

There are enveloping atmospheric conditions that we liken to enveloping textiles – we may be 'cloaked in darkness', or 'cloaked in fear'. Cloth can provide a visual block or barrier; it can block off unwanted light, as in a World War II blackout curtain, or nineteenth century photographer hiding his camera under a dark tent of fabric. It can provide privacy, as in a voting booth, or completely envelop and 'cover up', what someone wished to hide, such as a deformity or imperfection, a too-alluring body

part, or a particularized identity. Partially wrapped or draped cloth may be an effective framing device. Stage and window draperies help frame their respective views and make them more dramatic. Dramatic moments occur when cloth is pulled aside, revealing the person, object, or unexpected scene that lay behind it. (28-29)

The meaning arising from these particular metaphorical components of textiles is used by Phelps in her description of Perley's response to her new life. The 'enveloping atmospheric conditions' experienced by Perley relate to her protected, spatially enclosed life as a middle-class woman in nineteenth-century America. The self-description she applies, that of a large curtain 'taken down for the first time', is emblematic of the unexpected disarray of her life, but also of the sudden incursion of the external world. An alternative, unexpected vista, one that is outside of her existing knowledge is revealed to her.

Sip also employs a textile metaphor as an image of self; she likens herself to a patchwork quilt:

'Sometimes', added Sip with a working of the face 'it comes over me as if I was like – a patchwork bed quilt. I'd like to have been made of one piece of cloth. It seems as if your kind of folks got made first, and we down here was put together out of what was left'. 'Sometimes though' continued the girl, 'I wonder how there came to be so much of me as there is.' (201)

There is considerable disparity between the luxury of the damask used by Perley to describe her feelings and the patchwork of waste fabric employed as a self-description by Sip. As in the construction of a woman such as Perley, the making of damask is a complex time consuming process. The design depends upon obtaining different surface textures through the weaving process, and may be very subtle. In contrast, Sip's self metaphor, the patchwork quilt, implies that she considers that she is of less worth, is made from discarded, leftover material.

The psychological basis of metaphorical depictions is described by James Olney who writes 'To a wholly new sensational or emotional experience, one can

give sufficient organisation only by relating it to the already known, only by perceiving a relation between this experience and another experience already placed, ordered, and experienced' (1981: 31). Phelps' use of metaphor reinforces this view in that it appears to be a deliberate attempt on her part to stimulate the emotions of her readers by accessing their known experience. The association of Perley to an expensive damask curtain would have relevance to the everyday lives of most middle-class women, and in the hands of Phelps' becomes symbolic of their comfortable lives within the domestic sphere. The patchwork quilt has associations to the social intercourse that is achieved between women working together at their sewing. It is therefore a reminder of the value attached to handcrafted products compared to those produced through industrial processes. Importantly, quilting is an important element of American culture, symbolic of the important contribution of the handicrafts of women to the settling and making of an independent nation. For this reason the American quilt is emblematic of resilience and survival. Phelps' use of this metaphor demonstrates a consciousness that her readers would recognise and respond to this association, and as a consequence, to the character of Sip.

Following her move to the mill town Perley abandons the protection of her carriage, a gesture that appears symbolic of her desire to learn of the external world, While out walking she once again encounters her chance acquaintance, Sip, and learns that she is a worker in one of her father's mills. Through Sip, Perley is gradually awakened to the knowledge of the inadequacy of the living conditions, and the moral and physical dangers experienced by the mill workers. Until this time, Perley had never seriously considered the people or the processes that contributed to manufacture of the textiles that she bought so readily. Details of the business from which her income derived had been 'withheld from her comprehension' (41-



42). Her father had been fond of saying ‘that you could not have a better or healthier occupation than mill work. You get so much exercise and air’ (51). Perley’s conversations with Sip caused her to doubt this statement, arousing her interest in playing a part in the running of the mills.

On the death of her father Perley had inherited his share of the mill-owning partnership. She therefore requests the other two partners her fiancé, Maverick Hale and his father, that she be allowed to participate in the management of the mills. The response of the two men is that of amused incredulity that she should even consider such a prospect. Her fiancé questions why she is suddenly reluctant to entrust her property to his management. Her response is that her reluctance does not relate to property, but to ‘My people – the people. Perhaps I have thought of them suddenly. But it may be better to remember a thing suddenly than never to remember it at all’ (64). Maverick’s response is to assure Perley:

A little quixotic fancy there. Yes I understand now; and very pretty and feminine it is too. My dear Perley, you may set your kind heart at rest about the mill-people – a well paid, well cared for happier set of labouring people as you could ask to see. You can go down into our mission school and take a class if that is what you are troubled about. (64).

Disqualified from an active role in the business on the grounds of her gender and inexperience, it is suggested to Perley that she remains the silent partner.

Perley’s frustration at the rejection of her offer of involvement is very great, ‘for the first time in her life she is inclined to feel ashamed of being a woman’ (59). Nevertheless, she takes on the role of silent partner, initially employing her growing friendship with Sip to gain an understanding of the lives of the mill workers. She becomes appalled by the harsh demands placed upon them by their employers and the sordid conditions in which they live. Phelps makes use of Perley’s process of social education to convey her message of the realities of the nineteenth-century

market economy. Perley learns that the mill hands, 'the fingers of world' (71), are subservient to the needs of the market. The market prescribes the hours they work, and if a worker cannot meet these demands the only choice available to them is to leave their employment. This information on the callous exploitation of workers is conveyed to Perley by Sip at an early stage in their acquaintance. She also tells Perley of the problems of her beloved sister Catty. Catty is deaf and dumb, and is also losing her sight, due to the cotton residue in the mills. Catty is an onerous charge for Sip, she drinks 'and worse' (84). Sip attributes Catty's initial degree of handicap to machine noise in the mills, as the wheels of the mills is the only sound that she hears. Her mother had worked at the looms until the day before her birth. The shocked Perley has no concept of such need for money. She has some idea that those less fortunate circumstances must economise, but the realities of the implementation of this practice are beyond her imagination.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson discusses Catty's disability in her essay on physically disabled figures. In Thomson's view the disabled characters in the novels of Beecher Stowe, Davis Harding and Phelps are used to reveal:

both a material and ideological disjunction between a value system – claimed as feminine in these novels – that allocates resources and assigns privileges according to needs and a market system – associated in the novels with masculinity – that grants benefits based on individual advantages and effort. (1996: 559)

The character of Catty illustrates the marginalisation of those who are not equipped to fully contribute to, and benefit from the market economy. Her need for care and support is greater than her ability to earn. In her novels of liberal sympathy, Gaskell uses figures disabled through textile working to illustrate this concept. For example, it is visible in the depictions of the seamstress Margaret in *Mary Barton* (1848) and of mill worker Bessy Higgins in *North and South* (1855). Such characters also signify

the plight of many able-bodied women in the nineteenth century. As Phelps shows through Perley's vain attempt to participate in the running of the mill, and as Brontë reveals in *Shirley*, the imposition of myths of femininity, such as the ideology of 'the Angel in the House', and the cult of 'true womanhood', render a degree of disability upon middle-class women. Their performance of activities in the external world, in the economic sphere, are restricted and made invalid by the spatial separation imposed upon them.

Perley is distressed by her first visit to the home of Sip and Catty. It is a dingy room in a damp tenement house, 'a low room with cellar smells and river smells about it, and with gutter smells and drain smells and with unclassified smells of years settling and settling in its walls and ceiling' (70). Sip's appearance in the room is of equal concern, 'there was dust about Sip and oil about her and a consciousness of both about that gave her a more miserable aspect than either' (81). The girl is weary after eleven and a half hours standing at the loom. She is coughing, 'a peculiar, dry, rasping cough, which Perley learned afterwards to recognise as the 'cotton-cough' (82). Perley stays for tea with Sip and Catty. It is a poor meal of tea and toast, with black molasses.

Perley's concern for the mill workers increases as she continues to broaden her knowledge of their circumstances. In her wanderings Perley feels like 'a stranger setting footing a strange land' (98). The order and self-containment that characterised her life until this point are overwhelmed by the inequities that unfold before her. The streets that Perley walks are filled with, what to her, are bizarre sights. Perley sees a very small girl sleeping in the street. The child is too weary to continue her journey home, after walking for between thirty to forty miles in a day,

working the looms. She also observes the moral dangers that threaten young girls in an itinerant mill community. This increases her sense of turmoil. A sense of shame is added to Perley's distress at the obvious poverty and the sordid living conditions of one family when she learns that the slum tenement they occupy is owned by her fiancé Maverick.

In addition to the depiction of the lives of mill workers through the eyes of Perley, Phelps includes an account of a day working at the looms. As with Gaskell, who uses her knowledge of the mills and slums of Manchester in her novels, Phelps' observations result from personal experience. She had visited textile mills close to her home in Andover, Massachusetts. In her description of the mills, she employs the motif of 'hands', one that is employed throughout the novel. A contrast is frequently drawn between the elegance of Perley's soft white hands and the 'work worn fingers' (85) of Catty. In Phelps' description of mill life the generic term 'hand' is applied to the mill workers. This makes evident the de-personalisation of the workforce as a commodity, employed to feed the great machines. The hand rises to the sound of the mill bell in the cold of dawn, wrapping a thin shawl around her shoulders and hurrying, shivering, to her work. It soon becomes warm:

The engines respire into the weaving-room; with every throb of their huge lungs you swallow their breath. The weaving-room stifles with steam. The window-sills of this room are guttered to prevent the condensed steam from running in streams along the floor; sometimes they overflow, and water stands under the looms; the walls perspire profusely; on a damp day, drops will fall from the roof. The windows of the weaving-room are closed; a stir in the air will break your threads. There is no air to stir. You inhale a substitute motionless, hot moisture. (73-74)

Phelps' attribution of personal characteristics to the machines intensifies the concept of the transforming forces of mechanisation. The homely domestic loom has been changed into a monster, throbbing with noise and expelling hot stifling breath over its

army of attendants. Invoking a utopian ideal of domestic weaving, the attendants, 'the hands', seek distraction from their toil. Singing alleviates the heat, damp, pain, monotony and exhaustion of 'the hands', who breathe 'air thick with sticky lint' for hour after hour. They sing above the noise of the machines, just as in times past women sang songs as they worked at the loom. Phelps describes the effectiveness of this diversion; the machine 'bends its impotent black head, always, at last, without fail, and your song sweeps triumphant, like an angel, over it!' (76). The singing of the young girls may be interpreted as symbolic of the battle of the individual spirit against objectification, a consequence of the tide of industrialisation.

*The Silent Partner* demonstrates that, despite their endeavours to find a diversion, there is little to celebrate in the lives of the women involved in cloth production in this era. Phelps provides a graphic picture of the risks that exist in a mill environment. These include industrial disease and the dangers of mill machinery, especially to children. The death of the ten year old Bub Mell, crushed by the machines, is described in vivid detail. It is these factors that promote the reforming zeal of Perley Kelso. Unable to bring about immediate change to the management of the mills, she sets out to gradually improve the lives of the workers.

Unlike Brontë, Phelps does not meet any expectations of a neat ending in her novel. There is no immediate resolution to the tensions between management and their workers, merely the hope that recognition of their mutual dependency will be achieved. Neither is there provision for the marriage of either Perley or Sip. Perley has no time for love and marriage, asserting 'That is a business, a trade, in itself for women. I have too much else to do' (260). Sip also refuses an offer of marriage. Her reason is simple; she will not bring a child into the world to work in the mills. Phelps' rejection of marriage for her protagonists indicates her uncompromising

attitude to conveying a moral message. It appears that social realism takes priority over the satisfaction of her readers through the provision of the conventional happy ending common to most nineteenth-century novels.

### **Women, Textiles and Industrial Change**

In the novels *Shirley* and *The Silent Partner*, women and textile motifs and metaphors are employed to articulate the changes brought about by the advent of industrialisation in the nineteenth century. Throughout these works the social and political significance of the market economy and its impact on the lives of women are the subject of examination. This scrutiny reveals the requirement of upper-class women to defer to ideologies of femininity determined by a male dominated society and the cost to working women of the mechanisation of textile processes. The two authors approach these issues in substantially different ways.

Brontë's narrative is dense and frequently obscure. It is described by Patricia Meyer Spacks as 'an interminable, often boring novel, artificial in structure, stilted in manner; but in the treatment of the feminine situation, truly compelling' (1976: 60). There is little to argue against in this assessment, but, as Spacks makes clear, any faults in the novel's construction are fully redeemed by the message it contains. Brontë's rage at the condition of women imbues the novel and demands the attention of the reader. Criticism of the structure of the novel is not uncommon. In her discussion of Brontë's work, Heather Glen quotes the comments of George Henry Lewis made in *The Edinburgh Review* at the time of its publication, 'In *Shirley* all unity...is wanting. It is not a picture; but a portfolio of random sketches'. (2006: 152). The appearance of structural disunity may be considered a consequence of the author's vision of the disunity and disorder of the world of which she writes. In

the course of writing the novel she witnessed the decline and death of her siblings, Branwell, Emma and Anne.

In my view there is an additional possibility. It is conceivable that Brontë's familiarity with textiles is related to the use of apparently dislocated, overlapping themes that contribute to the form the novel. In conformance with the requirements of her time, Brontë was an accomplished needlewoman. In her observations on a display of handiwork at the Haworth Parsonage Museum, Kathryn Ledbetter comments:

Biographers fail to mention Charlotte's fondness for ornamental fancy work. She exchanged handmade gifts with friends, [...] She also created her own patterns, if the original designs for embroidered and lace collars found in her writing desk after her death were from Charlotte's hand. The museum also contains an unfinished patchwork top reputedly made by the Brontë sisters. It is a multicolored, medallion frame-style design featuring hexagon and diamond shapes, with striking, kite-shaped cornerstones in the hexagon borders. (2012: 126)

This description of the construction of intricate textiles makes it conceivable that Brontë's handicraft skills were compatible with the formation of her texts. Ledbetter reminds us of the fact that Brontë sewed and wrote for part of every day. In a letter to a friend, Ellen Nussey, in July 1832, the young Brontë writes 'after dinner I sew till teatime, after tea I either read, write, do a little fancywork or draw, as I please' (127). The juxtaposition of needlework and of writing in Brontë's everyday life encourages the belief in the possibility of the merging of the artistic skills required in both crafts.

Feminist critics have frequently commented on the continuity between writing and sewing. Kathryn R King argues:

Literary creation – a woman's textual work – is troped as a handiwork, a craft, a form of fabrication analogous to the textile work long considered proper for her: authorship becomes the work of women, women's work. (1995: 87)

It may be contended that such analogies between textile and textual work are visible in *Shirley*. The ubiquity of examples of needlework in the content of the novel and the interplay of disassociated elements in its form, introduce the potential of connections between Brontë's textile skills and the construction of her text. I suggest that textiles and textile making are the unifying components of both content and form of the novel. In addition to passages relating to the condition of women, socio-political snapshots of the nineteenth-century world are incorporated into the text. These encompass the subjects of international and domestic politics, the state of the Anglican Church and Luddite rebellion. The depictions of these issues are linked through references to textiles in various forms. For example, the portrayal of the greedy curates in the first chapter is interrupted by a call for the curates to protect the textile mill from attack (46-50). Caroline's internal soliloquy addressed to 'The Men of Yorkshire' (376) is sited between a description of sewing for the poor and allusions to other texts. These texts have textile associations, for example the references to Lucretia and the Biblical 'virtuous woman' (378). Viewed from the perspective of textiles, the perception of critics of the randomness and lack of structural unity in the novel prove unfounded. In Brontë's hands the choice and arrangement of pattern, shape, and texture, results in a complex patterned whole.

The narrative of *The Silent Partner* is far more straightforward than that of *Shirley*. Phelps' novel is not multi-layered, there are no diverting subplots, and it is not necessary to identify and interpret references to other texts. Associations to Brontë are apparent, however, in the observations on middle-class womanhood. The narrowness of the lives prescribed for these women are made clear, as are the consequences of this restriction in terms of poverty of experience. This deficiency



includes a lack of knowledge and understanding of the circumstances of the working classes.

Ties to Gaskell may be seen in the depictions of the living and working conditions of textile workers in rapidly expanding industrial areas. The degradation brought about by financial hardship and the difficulties in breaking free from a cycle of deprivation is made evident. Establishing a bridge between the classes in order to assist in breaking this pattern is the objective of Phelps' middle-class heroine. As the conclusion of the novel shows, this aspiration becomes her life work.

The message contained in Phelps' novel resonates with present day concerns regarding textile manufacturing practices in the third world. She exposes the ignorance of the human cost of industrial textile production demonstrated by the nineteenth-century consumer. Clearly and concisely, Phelps makes the argument for mutually beneficial relationships to be established between employee and employer, and for consumers to develop a sense of responsibility in regard to the provenance of the goods they purchase. She demonstrates the necessity of the application of moral values on the social and political connections that exist between these participants in the market economy.

Phelps' message of reform is conveyed through textile imagery and the use of explicit textile metaphors. If, however, a textile metaphor were to be applied to the form of the novel it would differ greatly from the elaborately embellished patchwork of Brontë. It would be an uncomplicated fabric such as a length of calico, plain and durable. It would also be unfinished, just as the story of Perley Kelso remains unresolved, an indication perhaps of Phelps' recognition of moral responsibility as a continuing process.

## **Chapter Three - The Making of Female Space: Twentieth - Century Representations of Women's Textiles in Lawrence and Walker**

### **The Creative Processes**

Significant changes in the lives of women and in their relationship to textiles occurred in the twentieth century. Female reliance on textile making as an occupation diminished as the women's movements in both Britain and America achieved female suffrage and greater freedom for women through the introduction of new educational and employment opportunities. As a consequence, the concept of needlework as a cultural model of femininity articulated in the nineteenth century lost significance. Despite the rejection of Victorian values, textile work remained a material element of the lives of most women, particularly through the period of clothing restrictions imposed during the Second World War and in the years of recovery that followed. However, the need for hand-made textile products diminished in response to the post-war surge of technological production. A similar shift away from domestic textile crafts occurred through the influence of the Second Wave feminist movement in the 1960's, which resulted in a diminishment of women's interest in needlework due to its past associations with female subordination. At around the same time the growth in the importation of cheap textile products from the third world lessened the interest in homemade products still further.

Since the 1970's, however, there has been a complete reversal in these attitudes. The negative values attaching to these crafts have been rejected and the image of textile making is revitalized. This, now fashionable, activity is enjoying immense popularity and is viewed as a positive aspect of female culture, a celebration of women and their artistic and craft skills. The unrestricted availability of manufactured textile products means that women are no longer obliged to weave,

sew or knit. Nevertheless, textile work is pursued for pleasure, as a means of artistic expression and as a visual element in a broad spectrum of campaigns such as the opposition to mass consumerism and of the resistance to female genital mutilation.

Throughout this volatile period of the story of women's textile making, one aspect has remained unchanged. Historically, women have used the physicality of the textile process as a creative vehicle to construct a degree personal space and subvert the cultural constraints imposed upon them. This constructed space may be defined as an area of female consciousness that encourages self-realisation and enables the expression of information, ideas, experiences or emotions in an overt or covert manner. From early in the twentieth century, linguistic and literary freedom has meant that, for the majority of women, it is no longer necessary to employ textile making as an alternative means of discourse. However, the ability of the processes of textile making to engender mental as well as physical creativity remains integral to the activity.

In this context, the finished product, the particular piece of work, is almost incidental to the processes of textile production. The relationship that exists between the touch of the maker and the materials and the implements used in the making of the product are the influencing factors. The physical sensations of textile making, the tactile pleasure of handling textile materials in combination with the repetitive, rhythmic elements of the process encourage a state of mental tranquillity which, in turn, creates an appropriate context for individual fulfilment, a sense of self. Textile production also extends beyond an individual activity to one that is communal, providing opportunities for gossip and chat, for telling stories and exchanging experiences. By this means the physical and psychological benefits of textile activities are promoted and shared.

This chapter of the study explores the creative properties of textile making in relation to twentieth-century texts, *The Ladybird* by D.H. Lawrence (1923) and *The Color Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker. The texts differ in terms of the gender of the author, and both culturally and temporarily. They are both set in the early part of the twentieth century, one in England, the other in America, but reflect very different worlds. *The Ladybird* presents a male perspective of society in the years following the First World War. *The Color Purple* reflects the views of a female author writing in the latter part of the twentieth century on the lives of Afro-American women living in the 1930's. The authors also use different approaches to the construction of their texts, Lawrence employing modernist and Walker post modernist techniques in their approach to narrative construction. Both texts, however, offer perceptions of the relationship between women and textiles and illustrate the processes of textile making as a source of survival and rejuvenation.

### **Textiles and Modernist Myth in D.H.Lawrence's *The Ladybird***

The concept of the use of textiles as a transformative and connective element is visible in D.H. Lawrence's *The Ladybird*, published in 1923. The practice of needlework is a central element in the novella. The work is based upon a short story of a war marriage entitled *The Thimble* completed by Lawrence in 1915. In 1921 Lawrence subjected this story to major alteration. The resulting novella, *The Ladybird*, is set in the years 1917-1918, and reflects a sense of the chaos and despair that were a consequence of the First World War. It embraces Lawrence's own feelings regarding the futility of war, and his ambivalence towards aspects of social change, including the growth in female emancipation.

Lawrence's disillusionment with the culture and social values prevalent in Europe in the early part of the twentieth century is expressed in the foreword to his non-fiction text, *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922). In this work Lawrence articulates the view that 'Our vision, our belief, our metaphysic is wearing woefully thin, and our art is wearing absolutely threadbare. We have no future; neither for our hopes, nor our aims, nor our art. It has all gone grey and opaque' (2008: 19). His proposal for moving forward underlines his perception of the fragility of contemporary reality. In *Fantasia* Lawrence reveals concerns on numerous concepts including the promotion of the move towards intellectual rather than craft based activities in schools, especially in the case of girls, and the negative effects of female emancipation on male consciousness.

In an expression of his dissatisfaction with the modern world Lawrence suggests that for society to progress it is necessary 'to rip the veil of the old vision across, and walk through the rent' (2008: 19). He does not base his ideology of collective revitalisation on new discoveries in science or art, but upon his philosophy that life emanated from life itself and periodically required renewal from this same source. Lawrence entertained the belief that progress was not to be achieved through new innovations, divorced from those of the past, but by the reinforcement of the lessons of past civilisations. His conviction was that previous worlds had possessed memories of old wisdoms 'more or less forgotten as knowledge: remembered as ritual, gesture, and myth story. The great pagan world which preceded our own era once, had a vast and perfect science of its own, a science in terms of life' (2008: 9). The ideology of drawing upon pre-history as a source of re-animation and affirmation of life is not unique to Lawrence. Other Modernist writers of the post-war period employed this strategy, including T.S. Eliot in *The Waste*

*Land*, and James Joyce in *Ulysses*, both published in 1922. In his essay *Ulysses, Order and Myth* (1923) Eliot writes an appreciation of Joyce for this innovation:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who is using the discoveries of Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. (1975: 177)

Nanette Norris adds support to the premise of myth as a means of negotiating the disorder of the immediate past, pointing out that Modernist writers 'believing that they were facing problems which had no precedent, they envisioned beyond the known and discovered discourses from the past flexible enough to articulate transformative futures' (2010: 5). Their experiments in the employment of elements of myth and mythic characters in contemporary settings allowed these writers to establish a conscious break with the traditional literary forms and articulate their rejection of the values of the recent past in a definitive manner.

However, Lawrence distances himself from other writers in the use of this structural model, applying an individual interpretation to its use. Fiona Becket summarises the difference of poetic vision between Lawrence's use of myth and that of other modernist writers, writing that 'he institutes a personal mythopoeic (myth-making style)' (2002: 51). Becket suggests that Lawrence uses myth to illustrate 'models, modes or images of human consciousness' (51). This premise is supported in *The Ladybird* through Lawrence's uses mythical references to reinforce many of the psychological concepts and beliefs that he held at the time of writing *Fantasia*. In the course of the narrative he examines the issues of blood connections, the role of women and the nature of their education, and the tension in opposites, the

polarities that occur between, men and women, life and death, the sun and the moon, light and dark, nature and culture and the conscious and the unconscious self.

The novella depicts the complex triangular relationship between a married couple, Lady Daphne Apsley, her husband Basil, and a pre-war friend of Daphne's family, the Count Johann Dionys Psanek. Count Dionys is now close to death in a prison hospital for the enemy sick and wounded, and, persuaded by her philanthropic mother, Daphne begins to visit him. Daphne is ill herself, her soldier husband is reported as missing, her baby born dead, and her two brothers killed. As the Count and Daphne renew their acquaintance they both regain their health through the healing power of textile making. At the end of the war Daphne's husband returns to her, greatly changed by his experiences. Daphne and the Count eventually consummate their relationship, but he is obliged to leave for his homeland without her. Nevertheless, she remains tied to him by a spiritual bond for the rest of her life, becoming as a sister to her husband.

Sandra M. Gilbert suggests that initially the novella appears to be yet another Lawrencian revision 'of the Pluto-Persephone marriage of darkness, with its mystification of phallic power' (2011: 286). She concludes that the exposition of female power in the narrative is equally important to the novella as the use of motifs of male energy. The gender politics of Lawrence's work has attracted interest from feminist literary critics including Kate Millet (1969) and Simone de Beauvoir (1988). The hostility to elements of Lawrence's writing expressed by these influential writers is based upon depictions of female submission to male supremacy in his novels. Carol Dix (1980) attempts to counter this position in her argument on the many positive representations of women and of female power to be found in Lawrence's work. Despite the portrayal of female submission in *The Ladybird*, it is possible to

support Gilbert's assessment on the exposition of the potency of female power, for in the novella considerable emphasis is placed upon the strength of the maternal power of women in opposition to, and, at times, threatening the phallic power of men.

The means employed by Lawrence for framing and communicating the source of female power is women's needlework. Daphne's sewing is employed as a restorative agency that rejuvenates all three of the main protagonists. The complex mesh of mythical allusions and images employed by Lawrence makes it apparent that Daphne's needlework is viewed as a creative, regenerating force. In Gilbert's view Daphne is characterised as 'the mother goddess' (2011: 291). The comparisons that occur in the narrative between Daphne and immortal women with transformative powers support this reading.

Lawrence's depiction of Daphne is of one imprisoned by sorrow and death. Her celebrated beauty and form are such that Lawrence compares her to 'Artemis or Atlanta rather than Daphne' (161). Yet her beauty is threatened by ill health, an illness caused by emotional tension. In her life she strives to follow her mother's doctrine of goodness and philanthropy, but in reality she has inherited her father's reckless blood. As Lawrence writes 'this was what ailed her: her own wild energy' (161). This mental conflict reflects Lawrence's views expressed in *Fantasia* on dynamic blood connections and the struggle of the individual to establish selfhood by breaking free from the 'immediate blood-bonds' (2008: 57) of the mother and father.

The tension in the relationship between Daphne and the Count is apparent from her first visit to him in a hospital for enemy prisoners. He seems to shrink from her in fear. She is so blond and tall, he so dark, small and delicate. She appears to loom over him as if, like Persephone, she represents encroaching death. F.R. Leavis suggests that the differences in their appearance, and, 'the accompanying surface



antagonism cover some deep understanding between them - the significance of which is symbolized by the scarab and the snake of the thimble, his gift to her that she preserves from her girlhood' (1962: 62). Leavis defines Count Dionys as:

Representing, in his dark unknownness, the profound energies and potentialities of life that the conscious mind can only serve or thwart, he represents, not the absence of 'consciousness', but rather the necessary vital intelligence that serving the whole life, can detect and expose the usurpation of will and 'idea'. (1962: 62)

Leavis' description of Count Dionys reflects Lawrence's use of the character as an illustration of the reliance of the individual on the natural forces of impulse and imagination, as opposed to the possession of cognition shaped by the prescriptive force of social compliance. This premise is fostered by the obvious connections between the name Dionys and that of Dionysus, the Greek god associated with wine, fertility and a wild cult of dark mysteries of great secrecy. The contrast presented by the primitive elements contributing to Dionys' 'dark unknownness' and the description of Daphne reflects Lawrence's preoccupation with polarisation.

Daphne represents the image of polished urbane femininity. This state is achieved through submission to the conscious mind. Her efforts to conform to what appears to be an appropriate mind-set are made apparent, as are the consequences. Not only is Daphne's health damaged by her endeavours to imitate the benevolent ideals of her mother, she is depicted as unsure of her identity. A conflict may be observed between her exterior being as a woman famed for her beauty, and the sense of emptiness within her.

As a consequence of the portrayal of differing perceptions of her beauty and character, her personality appears fragmented. In the course of their conversations the Count informs her 'that you are not a dove. You are a wild-cat with open eyes, half dreaming on a bough, in a lonely place' (177). Lawrence also borrows from

mythical stories to depict Daphne in various guises that reference multifaceted symbolic meanings. She first appears as the personification of Persephone, but is also representative of the mother goddesses, Demeter and Isis. The application of many different aspects to the character of Daphne appears to be Lawrence's recognition of the nature of female power. It may be argued that Daphne is his representation of a particular species of twentieth-century womanhood, one that is uncertain of her individuality and her place in a world that has changed beyond her recognition. Her self-knowledge is precarious, and seems to be shaped by the perceptions of others.

### **The Thimble**

Lawrence's description of the thimble, the symbol of the spiritual and physical connection between Count Dionys and Daphne, is rich in imagery. The Count had given the thimble to Daphne on her seventeenth birthday. It is an important motif in the novella, the thimble is a needlework tool, and as such it contributes to the theme of needlework as a transformative activity. It also demonstrates the ancient lineage of the Count. It is decorated with the Psanek family crest of a ladybird and a snake.

Lawrence describes the object in the terms, 'It was gold outside and silver inside, and was too heavy. A snake curled round the base, and at the top, for pressing the needle, was inset a semi-translucent apple-green stone, perhaps jade, carved like a scarab, with little dots' (183). The shape of the thimble has dual connotations, those of the male and female. In its form it is priapic, and yet it encloses a void, a cavity, representative of a female space. The gold and silver metals used in the construction of the outside and the inside of the thimble reflect the Count's preoccupation with the internal and the external worlds. The colours of the metal also reflect those of the sun and the moon. This concept resonates with views

expressed by Lawrence in *Fantasia*. In this work he suggests that, 'Woman is really polarised downwards, towards the centre of the earth. Her deep positivity is in the downward flow, the moon-pull. And man is polarised upwards, towards the sun and the day's activity' (2008: 142). Lawrence employs the motif of the sun and the moon on several occasions. Count Dionys wishes to heal his hands by wrapping them in Daphne's hair. Hair that is described as the colour of 'hermetic gold – but so much water in it, of the moon' (171). He states of himself, 'I am the subject of the sun. I belong to the fire worshippers' (170).

The decoration of the thimble is also significant. It contains a mix of Pagan and Christian symbols. The snake has connections to the goddess Persephone and to the temptation of Eve. In *The Greek Myths* (1992), Robert Graves recounts the myth of the mother of Dionysus, Semele, who is the subject of various other names, including that of Persephone. According to myth, Zeus coupled with her in the form of a serpent (1992: 56) and she gave birth to the god Dionysus. The apple green colour of the stone is a reminder of the temptation of Eve. This combination, the serpent and the apple, are used by Lawrence in *Fantasia* (142) to illustrate the concept of the serpent's revenge on humanity for their possession of mental consciousness. The inset stone is carved in the form of a 'Mary-beetle', the ladybird, which has connections to the Virgin Mary. This is manifested through the scarlet colour of the beetle, the colour of the Virgin's cloak in many paintings, and its seven spots, thought to symbolise the seven sorrows and seven joys of the Virgin. The reference to a scarab is a reminder of the Egyptian goddess Isis, protector of the dead.

The Count reminds Daphne of his gift of the thimble when he appeals to her to sew a shirt for him. Until his imprisonment he has never worn a shirt from a shop,

'it is distasteful to him' (173). Daphne's concern at her lack of skill, as she rarely sews, is brushed aside. The Count is adamant in his request that she alone must sew the shirt, and use the Psanek thimble in the task. As the Count explains, formerly his mother has sewed for him, or his mother's sister, who 'was the head of his house' (174). When he married he had 'had sixty shirts, and many other things, sewn by my mother and my aunt, all with my initial and ladybird, which is the Psanek crest' (174).

There are elements of ritual in the precise instructions for the making of the shirts. The Count wishes to revive the traditions of his family. As he describes his shirts were previously made and washed by a woman of his own blood. He excludes his apparently indifferent wife from this category. As he explains, 'She would have been insulted. She was never more than a guest in my house' (174). Simone de Beauvoir, in a discussion of Lawrence's concept of phallic pride, supports the contention of the necessity of a blood connection in marriage. As she states 'Marriage is no marriage that is not a correspondence of blood. For the blood is the substance of the soul' (2011: 237-8). This comment reflects Lawrence's philosophical thoughts on blood connections and what he terms 'the life force'. Lawrence does not offer a definitive explanation of this force in any of his writings on the unconscious, but from the information he provides it is possible to interpret it as a vibrant magnetic circuit existing between individual beings, nature and the universe.

On occasions, Lawrence wrote of this force in terms solely in terms of 'blood'. As Becket explains 'By 'blood' Lawrence is not referring to racial criteria but to 'life-blood', a quality of the life force that has preoccupied him throughout' (2002: 226). In *Fantasia* he frequently reiterates his belief in the significance of familial blood connections. However, Lawrence does not appear to view a correspondence in

blood solely in familial or sexual terms. It is apparent that he views 'blood correspondence' as a form of consanguinity, a relationship through blood, but not necessarily by blood. It is therefore possible to construe Lawrence's depiction of the Count's request to Daphne to sew him a shirt as an admission that they possess a vital dynamic bond, a blood connection.

Becket suggests that Lawrence was perhaps alone among his modernist contemporaries in that 'he locates the birth of consciousness not in thought and language, but in the blood, and advocates the values of 'blood consciousness' as a non-deliberate, non-cerebral feature of human being, so that, in books of the unconscious, the narrative returns to the sensual body' (226). Becket's comments on the focus on the physical and sensual aspects of human nature, elements prominent in Lawrence's work, are relevant to the *Ladybird*. The task of sewing the shirts occupies the body as distinct from the mind, but the physical and sensual effects of the process on the body promotes a degree of co-ordination, of unity with the unconscious mind.

The Count's request for the sewing of a shirt is initially disturbing to Daphne. It is a curiously intimate request to make. The shirt required by the Count is a very individual and personal garment; it must be shaped to fit his body, incorporate his insignia and be sewn by hand by Daphne. It is this combination of factors that reveal the ability of this task to bind the two protagonists together. Beverley Gordon affirms this concept in her statement that 'threads serve as connectors that literally and figuratively tie things and people together' (2011: 25). She supports her assertion with the reminder that life itself is based upon the thread that joins a mother and child, the umbilical cord. She also references the mythological connotations of threads as a pathway, as in the thread of Ariadne.

Eventually, Daphne sets aside her resistance to the Count's request and selects fine white flannel as appropriate material for making two shirts. The selection of the 'fine' textile has communicative value. Gordon writes:

A new textile, like a new life, is clean and fresh, and unused cloth often functions as a symbol of purity as well as wholeness. Unsoiled fabric represents promise and possibility. In contrast, worn cloth represents the end of wholeness and, like a worn out life, has little future (2011: 25)

Daphne's choice of fabric underlines the restorative aspect of her relationship to the Count. Flannel is a warm and soft material, associated children and invalids, with care and healing. The selection of white flannel by Daphne may be interpreted as a wish to enfold, swaddle and protect the Count.

Lawrence depicts Daphne's action in sewing the shirts as 'an enormous labour, even though her maid had come to her assistance forty times' (183). The intervention of her maid is subject to the criticism of Daphne's sister-in-law, who marvels that the maid knows how to sew. She wonders 'And how did *she* know? She's no business to know how to sew shirts: nor cushions nor sheets either. Do let me look. – Why how perfectly marvellous you are! – every bit by hand too. [...] Your business is to be beautiful not sew shirts' (184). This observation demonstrates how far the modern woman had departed from the traditional skills of her forebears. The Count does not welcome this departure. In the opinion of Mark Kinkead-Weekes, the Count refused to idealise women, 'to him the modern woman is a decadent lily ignoring her roots in the mud. He calls for an older womanhood, as the women of his blood, who sewed shirts for him with the sign of the ladybird upon them' (1996: 694). Daphne's sewing accords with Lawrence's opinion, expressed in *Fantasia*, on needlework as a natural female occupation. It demonstrates his negative reaction to the changing role of women, which in his view appeared to threaten the balance of

the natural order, the physical and psychological differences between men and women, 'the dynamic polarity' (2008: 89) that exists between them.

The protection of the essentials of gender in order to maintain the unconsciousness, the essential source of the individual, is an important element of Lawrence's philosophy. It is apparent that the Count's request to Daphne is an attempt to return her to 'make her yield to her own real unconscious self' (144) the pre-emancipated ideal of womanhood Lawrence envisages in *Fantasia*. The preoccupation with women's sewing in the text suggests that Lawrence considers textile making exemplifies and is intrinsic to the female role in this gender divide, a concept that from a contemporary perspective is viewed as misogynistic. Nevertheless, it concurs with his views on the revitalisation of the present by drawing upon models of the pagan past. The belief of the necessity for separate male and female spheres is a replication of the spatial separation between genders that was embraced by Victorian society, but extends back in time to the values of the ancient world. The physical aspects of the processes of textile making, the relationship between the touch of the maker and the textile material and textile tools, also contribute to Lawrence's mythopoeia. They accord with his perception of the significance of responding to the natural impulses of the sensual body as opposed to the adoption of formally constructed consciousness.

The act of sewing of the shirts is shown by Lawrence to be a transformative activity. It restores both Daphne and the Count. Lawrence implies that the direction of Daphne's wild energies to her sewing serves to calm and focus them. When she visits the Count to deliver the second of the shirts in response to his enquiry as to her health she states that 'My ladyship is rather better' (178). He observes that she

looks 'much better indeed' (178). In regard to the regenerative abilities of sewing Gordon observes:

Textile making has a magical quality – it is a creative or generative process, associated with the life force - and the process can be comforting. It is an almost hypnotic, healing activity; engaging with the repetitive, rhythmic steps of sewing, knitting, weaving, and similar techniques create a sense of peace or calm. The action itself engenders this quality, but it is strengthened by the sensual pleasure of handling the thread or yarn, and watching the new form grow beneath one's hands. (2011: 248)

This description of the magic engendered by rhythmic, tactile characteristics of textile making emphasises the capacity of the process to create an individual space, a sense of self. The connections made by Gordon between the process of textile making, the life force and the establishment of a sense of peace demonstrate the creative energies of this craft. Lawrence establishes an association between these energies and his belief in an elemental life force in his depiction of the change in Daphne. The physical act of sewing endows her with a degree of tranquillity. Her introduction to needlework allows her access to a contemplative space that offers her a degree of stability and healing that soothes and restores her troubled spirit. She is portrayed as overcoming the mental turmoil that had debilitated her, so establishing a sense of independent selfhood, in accord with the forces of the universe. Her needlework also provides her with the opportunity to exercise her creative authority. This authority extends beyond the shaping of fabric to the shaping of lives, including her own life.

As the recipient of the completed shirts, the healing process extends to the Count; he too is regaining his health. He is soon well enough to be moved from the hospital to join other enemy officers. The Count expresses his sense of honour at Daphne's gift, while, in turn, she is concerned that the shirts are 'more honourable



than useful' (178). She is concerned that the first did not fit. In response, the Count declares that 'it fitted the spirit, if not the flesh' (178). He would not wish it 'one stitch different' (178). This exchange reveals the symbolic meaning of the making of the shirts. The Count's words imply that the sewing of the shirts represents the accomplishment of a spiritual rather than a practical mission. The quality of nurturance provided by Daphne's act of sewing assists in his recovery from near death, and reconciles him to the extinguishment of the life that he had previously known.

The regenerative qualities of textiles are well documented. Gordon provides examples of many cultures where textiles, in the main women's textiles, are thought to promote spiritual energy. This includes the textiles of the women of Ladakh and of the Osage people of North America. Writing of the spiritual qualities of cloth C.A. Bayley points out:

In Islamic societies the turbans of great teachers could transmit spirit; in medieval Christendom, cloth relics such as the Shroud of Turin were particularly venerated, while even in today's agnostic Western societies a dead man's clothes are often considered inauspicious. (1986: 288)

The ritual element accorded to the task of sewing the shirts in the novel endows this occupation with spiritual qualities. These resonate with the use of textiles in religious rites. In many religions of the world there is a long tradition of the use of fabrics in religious rites, including marriage rites and acts of spiritual and physical healing. Textiles imbued with meaning include prayer cloths and consecrated cloths that may be used in acts of healing. In regard to beliefs in the sacred nature of textiles Gordon points out that, 'In addition to offering protection and blessing, cloth is used to heal the physical body and the spirit' (266). The textile ritual that Lawrence

invokes through his description of the ceremonious nature of the making of the shirts reaffirms the role of women in the process of healing and endows the task with religious meaning.

The fabric that Daphne selects to sew into shirts for her husband is in complete contrast to that she had chosen for the Count's shirts. For her husband she chooses silk, a luxurious, sensuous fabric. Lawrence's depiction of Daphne's thoughts as she sews the opulent fabric demonstrates the power of sewing to influence the senses. Like a latter day Penelope, as she sews she focuses her mind on her husband. She envisions the man she knew before he left for war:

an adorable, tall, well-bred Englishman, so easy and simple, with the amused look in his blue eyes. She thought of the cultured, casual trail of his voice. It set her nerves on fire. She thought of his strong easy body – beautiful, white-fleshed with the fine sprinkling of warm brown hair like tiny flames. *He* was the Dionysus, full of sap, milk and honey and northern golden wine: he, he husband. Not that little unreal Count. (182)

As she sews the Psanek thimble, the reminder of the impudent Count, is heavy on her hand. She 'sews so slowly. And she liked to feel her hand heavy, weighted' (183). Her sewing seems to infuse her with the 'sensual pleasure' described by Gordon (2011: 248) 'as she sewed she thought about her husband and felt herself in love with him' (183). With conscious symbolism, Lawrence shows Daphne slipping the thimble from her finger and mislaying it. Despite her frantic searching, it cannot be found. At this point in the narrative it seems that the hypnotic power of sewing has directed Daphne's mind away from the Count towards her husband. The combination of silk and thread has invoked recollections of the early days of her marriage and her former happiness. Lawrence's depiction of Daphne in the pose of the patient, waiting wife, employed with her sewing, echoes literary representations

of idealised women through time. Just as she is Penelope, she is Andromache, and all other female casualties of war preserved in textual form.

### **The Representation of Isis**

As Daphne sews, her husband is making his way back to her on an appropriately named ship *The Ariadne*. Their first meeting is a moment of harsh recognition for Daphne. Basil is much changed:

In his eyes was that hard, white, focused light that fascinated her and was terrible to her. He was different. He was like death: like risen death. She felt she dared not touch him. White death was still upon him. She could tell that he shrank with a kind of agony from contact [...] Yet for contact he had come. Something, someone seemed to be looking over his shoulder. His own young ghost looking over his shoulder. (192)

Her husband does not offer Daphne the tender passion of marital love that she had envisaged; he could not, for the man she had married no longer exists. Instead, the Basil who has returned worships her beauty with a religious fervour. Daphne's attempt to sew together her silken dream of marriage has ended in failure. She has been piecing together memories. Leavis writes:

She realizes, not only that her mother's ideal love which in her mind she has adopted, violates her nature, but that her husband's love-worship ('adoration-lust'), with which is associated her own worship of her own mirrored and photographed beauty, can produce only worn nerves and intolerable life-exhausting dissatisfaction. She needs, not a 'spiritually intense' adoring husband, but one who stands for something other than love as a *raison d'être*. (1962: 62)

Leavis' comments illustrate the mental conflict that Daphne is experiencing and her need to achieve a balance between her constructed conscious self and her unconscious, instinctive image of selfhood. The husband who has returned to her is a man physically and mentally scarred. The experience of war has robbed him of all his youthful joy and enthusiasm; he is a stranger to her. The man that Lawrence

depicts is as much a prisoner of his wartime experiences as the captured enemy, the Count.

The influence of Nietzsche, a proto-modernist thinker, is shown in the development of the characters of the male protagonists in the novella. Lawrence employs Nietzsche's concept of the Apollonian-Dionysian duality expressed in *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The 'white intensity' (200) of Basil is matched against the dark mystery of the Count. Gilbert describes Daphne's husband as 'a lucid young man whose way of thinking is purely Apollonian – rational, spiritual, transcendent – so that her identification of him with Dionysus seems ironically mistaken' (2011: 287). The strange friendship that develops between Basil and the Count originates and is sustained by Daphne's textile work.

It is Basil who is responsible for finding the lost thimble, and it is its curious design that arouses his interest in the Count. Basil is excited by Daphne's newfound interest in sewing. The shirts she has sewn for him contribute to what is described by Leavis as Basil's expression of 'adoration lust' (1962: 62) for Daphne. The knowledge of the part she has played in the making of the shirts, coupled with the silky luxury of the material, arouse in him a degree of sensuality that mirrors that experienced by Daphne as she sewed for him. He revels in the prospect of wearing a shirt sewn by her hands. His anticipation of the sensations the garment will provoke are expressed in the words, 'to think that I should have it next to my skin! I shall feel you all around me, all over me' (194). He compares her hands to those of the goddesses of rejuvenation, Proserpine and Isis. He calls her 'you long-limber Isis with sacred hands' (195). Lawrence's representation of female transformative power is enhanced by the comparison of Daphne to the redemptive goddess Isis.

The association of Daphne's sewing to the myth of Isis and Osiris introduces a mystical element that revises the significance of women's textile work to the novella and introduces new associations. In the legend Isis collected and pieced together the scattered parts of the body of her husband, Osiris, and restored him to life.

Gilbert makes the connection between Daphne, her regenerative actions, and the mythical stories embedded in the text:

in fact, this English Isis is not only a revisionary Daphne but also, just as importantly, a version of Ariadne, the bride of Dionysos who spins and guards the sacred thread, the clue to the passage of blood that is the labyrinth of birth and death. Only as Lawrence characterizes her, despite (or perhaps because of) his anxiety about the mother goddess, this Ariadne does not merely rescue the Apollonian Theseus (to whom Basil bears some likeness), she also rescues Dionysos rather than being rescued by him. Thus, in their helpless dependence on her maternal stitchery, both the dark husband and the light husband, the ruler of the day and the night king, are brothers under the skin. (2011: 291)

It may be contended that Lawrence's focus on the power of the mother goddess and the 'maternal stitchery' of Daphne reflects his own concept of the nature of the potency of women. Gilbert argues that Daphne's creative authority may be traced to women's ultimate control of the 'thread' of life and questions whether Lawrence's revelations of dependency are personal, expressed in his work through 'the creative energies of symbolic mothers such as Daphne Apsley' (294). She suggests that in respect of his relationship to women Lawrence was haunted by female primacy and 'saw himself as, like all men, dependent, for life and limb' (2011: 293). In a similar vein, Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes between Lawrence's depiction of the purity of genuine maternal devotion in his work and his response to 'the egotistical lover who tries to bring man back to his childhood' (2011: 241). The arguments of Gilbert and Beauvoir draw attention to Lawrence's fear of female domination, it is inevitable that the presence of anxiety pre-supposes the recognition of the existence of female

power. However, the observations made by Gilbert and Beauvoir fails to give credit to the full extent of female power in relation to creative endeavour. In the case of Daphne, the 'symbolic mother', the act of sewing, the manipulation of the 'symbolic thread', reveals that the exercise of productive and transformative powers are as relevant to female salvation as they are to that of the male protagonists depicted by Lawrence. The effects of Daphne's stitching extend beyond the rescue of her husband and lover; it is also the means of her own recovery.

The symbolic stitching of Daphne is apparent in the depiction of the relationship between Count Dionys and Basil. The final days of the Count's time in England are spent at Daphne's childhood home. The three spend their days peacefully, while 'stitch by stitch Daphne went on with a big embroidered bed-cover that she might finish one day – if she lived long enough' (212). Gilbert argues that the relationship between the two men is reliant upon Daphne. In Gilbert's view Daphne's presence and her 'maternal stitchery' are the factors that unite them:

Without her neither has power. With her to 'close the circuit' of their brotherhood, they are energetic companions. For like Demeter [...] Daphne rules both realms and enables her consorts to see that, in the creative embrace of the mother, death and eternity might well become, as Basil says, 'the same thing'. (2011: 291)

Lawrence's representation of Daphne's role in joining what is described by Leavis as the 'dark potency' of Count Dionys with the 'spiritually intense' Basil (1962: 62) does not necessarily relate to female power and creativity in regard to life and death. It may be argued that it reflects Lawrence's recognition of the part played by women in the reconciliation of contradictory aspects of the human psyche.

The close of the novella brings to the fore Lawrence's concept of the blurring of reality and unreality in regard to day and night, the spiritual and material world, and life and death. An element of enchantment is introduced. The consummation of

the relationship of Daphne and the Count occurs when Daphne is drawn to him in the night. She is bewitched by the spell of his strange singing 'it was like a thread that she followed out of the world: out of the world' (213). His song is one of metamorphosis. It is a folktale telling of a woman who was once a swan, but marries a human, a hunter. Eventually on the orders of the king of the swans she leaves husband and family to return to the forest and to her own kind. The 'swan' motif brings to mind the many fairy tales that combine swans and human transformations through the act of weaving. These include an ancient Russian tale, *The Swan Maiden*, and *The Six Swans* told by the brothers Grimm (1857). In Leavis' view this tale 'tells us to what order of reality the scene in the Count's room belongs' (1962: 64). He suggests that the tale, 'must affect us as something like an attempt to conjure the actual world, with its tests and problems, away' (1962: 64). This view is confirmed by the very obvious sense of unreality captured by Lawrence pervades the final elements of the novella. Indeed, it seems that it is his intention to show that part of the price of war is that all sense of what is real will remain forever distorted in the minds of those who survive.

*The Ladybird* seeks to explore the potential of its three participants to overcome the trauma of war. In so doing it reveals both the duality of human nature and the role of women in reconciling of these differences. The creative force that achieves this resolution is defined by women's needlework, in the novella women's textiles act as a reference point for female influence. As an accepted symbol of femininity, the inclusion in the novella of the persistent, patient sewing of Daphne establishes the potential of women to bring together and restore fragmented aspects of life. The making of these textiles also delineates a degree of personal space that enables women to achieve recognition of their individuality and ability to exercise

control over their lives. Lawrence's depiction of Daphne's use of this space demonstrates its effects on the nurturance of self and of others. Her needlework is a key element in the achievement of the transformation of her personality. Her restlessness and insecurity set aside, she attains a new perception of her identity, one in which her beauty is no longer the defining factor.

### **Women's Needlework in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

The needlework of women also forms a central theme in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*. In this postmodern text from post-war America, representations of sewing and quilting are essential components in the story of the preservation of one woman's spirit and creative energies against overwhelming odds. They are employed as the means of psychic survival, of empowerment and of laying claim to the future. As in the work of Lawrence, aspects of myth are central to the novel, but, in contrast to Lawrence, it is not concerned with the distant mythologies of ancient people. Walker's pre-occupation is with the mythologies that influence, and frequently define, the lives of twentieth-century American people with connections to the African diaspora, the people who are the descendants of slaves.

Writing on the issues of feminism and female representation in modern American texts Malcolm Bradbury puts forward the view that 'black fiction, in the work of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, became a means for the mythic recovery of the hidden, un-narrated history of black suppression' (1992: 266). In *The Color Purple* Walker reclaims this concealed past as she explores the history of a previous generation of black women. She tells of the experiences of a group of Southern black women, living in rural Georgia, in the years between the two World Wars. By revealing the story of these women over a period of three decades, Walker exposes the magnitude of the legacy of slavery. In addition to white racism, the scars of this



legacy include significant black oppression, black poverty and a culture of violence. This violence extends to the physical and sexual abuse of black women by black men.

In the novel, elements of the author's personal, political, sociological and philosophical beliefs, frequently expressed in her essays and interviews, are made evident through the activities of her protagonists. A central theme is the celebration of womanhood. Walker employs the novel to pay tribute to the creativity and resilience of Afro-American women, especially in regard to their ability to transcend horrific suffering to achieve what Bradbury describes as 'a vivid female identity' (280). *The Color Purple* is a story of marginalisation, of survival and the re-claiming of self.

The novel is based upon a tri-angular love affair between Celie, a poor, barely literate, black woman, her lover Shug Avery, a glamorous blues singer, and Albert, Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, the abusive husband of Celie. From childhood Celie has been repeatedly raped and beaten by the man she believed to be her father. She bears him two children who are taken from her. She is then forced into marriage with Albert, who continues the pattern of abuse, using Celie as a domestic slave and sexual convenience. Before her marriage Celie had been forced to protect her beloved sister Nettie from the sexual attentions of Pa, the man they knew as their father, she finds herself in the same position with Albert. She helps Nettie to run away and seek refuge with Samuel and Corrine, the childless couple who had unknowingly adopted Celie's children. Nettie becomes a servant to the family and accompanies them when they travel to Africa as missionaries.

Walker's exploration of the reality of racial and gender conflict is voiced in explicit and affecting terms. Nevertheless, the novel differs greatly from the

expressive realism of the novels of the nineteenth century. *The Color Purple* is set in an historical timeframe, and it borrows from the literary past in that it is constructed in epistolary form. And yet, it challenges the conventions normally associated with this type of narrative structure. The novel is comprised of the letters of Celie and those of her sister Nettie. Contrary to normal practice in an epistolary novel there is no reciprocal element to these letters, and more than half of Celie's letters are addressed to God and are unsigned.

Molly Hite comments on the unease of many reviewers of the novel in relation to the violation of realist conventions in the construction of the novel:

in the last third of the book the narrator-protagonist Celie and her friends are propelled to a fairy-tale happy ending with more velocity than credibility; that the letters from Nettie, with their disconcertingly literate descriptions of life in an African village, intrude into the middle of the main action with little apparent motivation or warrant; and the device of the letters to God is especially unrealistic inasmuch as it foregoes the concretizing details that have traditionally given the epistolary form its peculiar verisimilitude: the secret writing place, the cache, the ruses to enable posting letters, and especially the letters received in return. (1989: 103-4)

The infringement of realist conventions in the novel demonstrated by Hite is a clear indicator of links to other modes of writing than Anglo-American realism. Hite draws attention to the position taken by Henry Louis Gates Jr. on the structure of the novel. Gates contends that Celie's letters to God relate to African and Afro-American signifying myths and vernacular tradition deriving from slave narratives. Several aspects of black literacy are considered by Gates to be 'double voiced' (1988: xxv). Relating this perception to *The Color Purple* he suggests the novel 'manifests itself as a literal representation of a protagonist creating herself by finding her voice, but finding this voice in the act of writing' (131). As a response to Barthes' concept of 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts, originally expounded in *S/Z* in 1970, Gates applies the terms 'the speakerly text' (xxv) to describe this concept.

Both critics are united in their acceptance of Western literature as the antecedent of black writing. The white patriarchal influence on the novel's construction is evident both in the form and in the withholding of the name of Celie's husband/abuser. As Hite observes, 'Celie's husband Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, whose unarticulated name, in the manner of epistolary fictions since Richardson's *Pamela*, suggests fearful effacement of an identity too dangerous to reveal and whose transformation is signalled by a renaming that at once diminished and humanizes' (1989: 111). In seeking to define the nature of the novel's departure from literary conventions Hite takes into account critical reviews of both *The Color Purple* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). She concludes that in these novels 'certain ostensible violations may be calculated subversions of conventions that the authors regarded as permeated with white masculinist values, or that the authors were writing not realism, but romance' (1989: 107). In support of this argument Hite makes the comparison between narrative structure employed in *The Color Purple* and the pastoral settings and the tragicomic plots of the Shakespearean romances.

Gates traces the revision of white canonical literature at the hands of black writers to African tradition. He claims that 'free of the white person's gaze, black people created their own unique vernacular structures and relished in the double play that these forms bore to white forms' (xxiv). The infusion of black experience and black tradition undermine the literary practice established in white texts. As Gates points out:

the black Africans who survived the dreaded "Middle Passage" from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilisations, these Africans nevertheless carried with them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated. (1988: 3)

In his definition of the content of this forced cultural transfer Gates includes the music, myths and forms of performance of African people.

The views of both Hite and Gates are relevant to any analysis of the narrative construction of *The Color Purple*. In the novel Walker overthrows the established rules of white literary practice in combination with, and often through, the inclusion of black narrative tradition. This fusion of white and black culture demonstrates her recognition of the dual heritage of the Afro-American people.

### **Postmodernist Elements of the Text**

The story of Celie is conveyed in a naïve linguistic style in an apparently simple form. However, this seeming simplicity is deceptive, for it conceals a narrative structure that is both complex and sophisticated. The novel opens with a single, threatening statement followed by a series of letters, in total ninety-two. Some letters are embedded with others, resulting in disruptions to the chronological sequence. In the first part of the novel Celie's letters are directed only to God, and remain unsigned. After forty-nine letters addressed to God, the previously unread cache of Nettie's letters to Celie is inserted into the text. From this point, Celie's letters begin to be directed to Nettie, although these letters are interspersed with further letters to God. Celie continues to write to Nettie even after she is told that Nettie is dead. The combination of the resistance to customary literary form in the structure and the powerful feminist theme of the novel are indicators of Walker's purposeful use of postmodernist elements in the text.

This strategy is reinforced by the deliberate vagueness in the historical progression of the text and through the use of a powerful postmodernism device, subsumed from modernism, that of fragmentation. In the course of the narrative Walker depicts psychological and bodily fragmentation through fragments of writing

and fragments of cloth. In the construction of the text a range of diverse materials is employed, Walker assembles classical elements and folk culture in a form of collage. Martha J. Cutter writes of Walker's revisioning of the myth of Philomela in the rape and silencing of Celie (2008). In support of this argument Cutter cites Walker's depiction of the use of sewing as an alternative text, coupled with the references to the desire for revenge, to blood and to birds. Celie writes of being 'crazy for Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ blood' (103). Towards the end of the novel Albert tells Celie how she used to remind him of a bird 'and the least little thing happen, you looked about to fly away' (214). In addition to this mythical archetype Walker makes use of the narrative technique and motifs of early novels, such as those of Samuel Richardson, in conjunction with stylistic elements of the oral vernacular of Afro-American people. These aspects of the narrative are combined with themes that relate to ancient texts, to folk and fairy tales.

In *The Color Purple* the remnants of classical and folk cultures are pieced together and integrated by Walker into the structural form of the novel and replicated in the content of the narrative. The degree of fragmentation that is employed reflects resistance to the concept of a central patriarchal figure, God, who is described as 'an old white man' (167). Instead, new values are expressed through the perception of God as part of everything and everyone. It may also be contended that the lack of textual unity is employed as a reference to the discontinuity of female experience over time. Female subjection to an inherited tradition of subordination, or, as in the case of many black women, harsh oppression, results in the damage, even destruction, of female identity. Walker demonstrates how this identity may be restored through the joining of scattered literary references retrieved from the past. The reconstruction of these sources reveals the existence of continuity in the story of

women and of their abilities in adversity that has long been excluded from cultural history.

The effects of the intertwining of white oral and literary tradition with a black tradition of oral and folk transmission in the novel may be taken in an even wider context, the struggle for cultural recognition experienced by the Afro-American people. Lauren Berlant examines the novel in relation to black America's efforts to clarify its national identity:

Celie's narrative radically resituates the subject's national identity within a mode of aesthetic, not political representation. These discursive modes are not naturally separate, but *The Color Purple* deliberately fashions such a separation in its attempt to represent a national culture that operates according to "womanist" values rather than patriarchal forms. (2008: 211-2)

As Berlant identifies, throughout the narrative Walker's quest for the restoration of individual and national identity is apparent through the representation of the principles of a female aesthetic she terms 'womanist'. In her 'womanist prose' work *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1967) Walker defines this philosophy as a form of feminism, a woman's culture that appreciates the strength, ingenuity and inventiveness of Afro-American women. It is an inclusive concept in that it demonstrates a love of life and a love of all women, sexually and non-sexually and is committed to the 'survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female' (1983: xi). *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* demonstrates this belief through Walker's depiction of the traditions of creativity that accompanied captured African women to America and enabled them to survive the generations of oppression and restriction imposed through slavery. This includes the tradition of textile making which is a central theme in *The Color Purple*. The narrative is augmented by the recurring theme of women's sewing.

Elaine Hedges suggests that the novel is Walker's 'fullest acknowledgement of her creative connection to earlier black women' (1991: 354), pointing out that:

The quilting and sewing that are essential to the plot and themes, the moral and esthetic schema, of *Purple* emerge as actual work, out of the realities of the lives of southern, and particularly rural, black women, for whom such sewing activity has existed in an unbroken continuum since the time of slavery. (1991: 354)

*In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* reveals Walker's appreciation of this legacy. In this collection of essays and articles she recalls the continuity of what she terms 'a heritage of love and hate' (1983: 20). She stresses the inherited responsibility of black writers to 'give voice not only to centuries of silent bitterness and hate, but also of neighbourly kindness and sustaining love' (21). The inspiration provided by the past experiences of strong black women is apparent throughout Walker's work. As an example, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* contains an account of the life of her own mother who ran away from home to marry at seventeen:

She made all the clothes we wore, even my brother's overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. She spent the summers canning vegetables and fruits. She spent the winter evenings making quilts enough to cover all our beds. During 'the working day', she labored beside - not behind - my father in the fields. There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; free from interruption - by work or the noisy inquires of her many children. And yet, it is to my mother - and all our mothers who were not famous - that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day. (238-9)

It is clear that Walker concurs with Virginia Woolf's statement made in *A Room of One's Own* (1928) that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers' (1993: 158). The influence of Walker's mother is made apparent in Walker's explanation of her approach to writing. She establishes a connection between her own writing and the spoken arts, telling of her mother's repertoire of stories:

Unlike Ma Rainey's songs, which retained their creator's name even while blasting forth from Bessie Smith's mouth, no song or poem will bear my mother's name. Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I realize this: that through the years of listening to my mother's stories of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the manner in which she spoke, something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories – like her life – must be recorded. (1991: 240)

Walker's admission of the impact of her mother's skills as a storyteller on her own writing is confirmed in *The Color Purple*. It may be observed in the novel's distinctive narrative style and in elements of its structure. For example, the composition of Nettie's letters provides evidence of Walker's recognition of the importance of the oral folk art tradition to black women. One of Nettie's letters to Celie telling of her life in Africa contains an explanation of their dysfunctional family history, and even begins with the magic words 'once upon a time' (1992: 148). The introduction of features originating from traditional storytelling has a purpose in that it separates the past from the present, but also provides an explanation for the aspects of the novel that have been criticised as unrealistic and reminiscent of a fairy tale.

As shown in the early representations of women and their textiles discussed in the first part of this study, a tradition of oral narrative is closely aligned with the tradition of textile crafts. In her exploration of the cultural heritage of black women in *The Color Purple*, Walker makes full use of this association. In her description of the preparation for writing the novel Walker tells of her move to a small town in California, chosen because it reminded her of rural Georgia, the setting of her story. She took with her a quilt pattern her 'mama swore was easy' (358) and 'bought some beautiful blue-and-red-and-purple fabric' (358). As Walker states, 'my quilt began to grow' (358) as her characters made their entry, or in her words, 're-entry' (358) into the world.



The metaphorical aspect of this association between quilting and writing in Walker's work attracted the attention of numerous literary critics, including Elaine Showalter, Elaine Hedges, and Martha J. Cutter, but the material connections between these crafts are also apparent. A clear relationship between the craft of quilting and the craft of writing may be seen in the structure of the novel. Letter by letter, Walker allows the tale of her heroine Celie and her family to unfold. In the making of a quilt, fabric scraps are pieced together to form a unified whole, frequently using paper, including old letters or envelopes, as a template or backing. In *The Color Purple*, the letters are the substance of a patchwork that comes together to recount the renovation and re-visioning of the fragmented lives of a group of black women.

### **A Female Space**

A connection may be made between the creative processes of textile making visible in the novel and the concept of female space, the 'wild zone', advanced by Elaine Showalter in 1981 that is based upon the cultural studies of Edwin Ardener and his wife Shirley. Utilising a model of intersecting spheres representing the lives of men and women Ardener argues that throughout the history of female experience women have formed what is termed a 'muted group' within the 'dominant (male) group', in that the dominant group controls the forms or structures through which consciousness can be articulated through language.

In assessing the implications of this concept as a model for feminist literary criticism, Showalter entitles the area that is outside the dominant boundary as the 'wild', suggesting 'We can think of the "wild zone" of women's culture spatially, experientially and metaphysically' (262). Showalter defines the zone spatially as an area that is 'off limits' to men, experientially, as aspects of the life of women that are

outside the knowledge and experience of men, and metaphysically, as the source of distinctly female consciousness. As Showalter points out 'In this sense the 'wild' is always imaginary; from the male point of view, it may simply be a projection of the unconscious' (262). It is this covert element that allows the 'wild zone' to enable female realisation outside the knowledge and control of the dominant order. The limitations of Showalter's theoretical observations as models for feminist literary criticism have been highlighted by other writers, notably, Toril Moi (1985: 74-76), but the 'wild zone' has ongoing relevance through its broader context of a woman's culture model, for as Showalter points out 'it shows how the female tradition can be a positive source of strength and solidarity as well as a negative source of powerlessness; it can generate its own experience and symbols that are not simply the obverse of the male tradition' (265). In this sense a correlation is established between the 'wild zone' and the process of textile making. Women's needlework is a recognised element of female tradition that possesses the ability to transform negative associations attaching to the craft into positive examples of strength, ingenuity and solidarity. The contemporary interest in textile making suggests that this is a consistent feature of the craft. In *The Color Purple* it is the sewing of Walker's protagonist Celie that is her 'wild zone', it is the element of woman's culture that allows her to access the 'womanish' experience of vibrant female creativity.

Celie is the archetypal representation of the 'muted group'. In contrast to the trope explored by Gates of the black writer's 'double voice', Celie is doubly silenced. She is silenced by illiteracy and by fear as a subjugated black woman in a male dominated society. Theodore O. Mason compares the marginalising and domination of Celie to a series of enclosures. He observes, 'In *The Color Purple* Celie finds herself enclosed within a series of related imprisoning structures – her illiteracy; the

sexist role that Mr. constructs for her as his wife (and all that role encompasses); and the entire racist political, economic, and social structure of the South, among others' (1993: 126). In the novel Celie's letters chart her survival, but it is her needlework that is the source of her rejuvenation, it is her 'wild zone'. As a conventional female activity, her sewing does not present an obvious challenge to male control, but the subversive power of its processes combine to free her from the enclosures that imprison her and enable her to claim her space in the world.

The first recoded instance of Celie's sewing occurs after her marriage to Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. On a visit to the town a woman passes Celie as she sits in the wagon waiting for her husband. A little girl, who Celie immediately recognises as her own daughter, accompanies the woman. Celie describes the encounter in the words, 'I seen my baby girl' (1992: 14):

I think she mine. My heart says she mine. But I don't know she mine. If she mine, her name Olivia. I embroder Olivia on the seat of all of her daidies. I embrody lot of little stars and flowers too. He took the daidies when he took her. She was bout two month old. Now she bout six. (14)

Celie's act of embroidering her child's nappies, a child that is the product of rape, resonates with examples of the use of textiles as child identity markers portrayed in texts from the earliest times. For instance, it references another subject of rape, the young girl Creusa, depicted in Euripides' play *Ion* (412 B.C.). Unlike Creusa, Celie, in her innocence, did not anticipate giving up her child. Despite the shame she endures as a victim of rape, and the abuse and social rejection that accompanies her pregnancy, the embellishment of the child's clothing with the name she has chosen demonstrates maternal love for her daughter. The embroidered name also functions as an indicator of an association between sewing and written language. Martha J. Cutter points out that 'the needle is quite literally a pen, stitching a name that fits the

child, that connects mother and daughter, that is both linguistic (written in letters) and sewn (embroidered)' (2008: 155). It is apparent that Walker's use of Celie's embroidery is a conscious demonstration of sewing as an alternative means of communication.

Celie's encounter with her daughter is bitter sweet in that it intensifies her sense of isolation. She learns that her child is alive, but her hope that this means that someone other than her knows the true identity of the child's father proves fleeting. The Reverend M. \_\_\_\_\_, the man named by the woman as the little girl's daddy, is a stranger to Celie. She realises that the silence enforced by her rapist in the words 'never tell no one but god' (3) is to continue. This imposition reflects the paradigm of rape and silencing frequently present in literary texts. The myth of Philomela is the primary example. Philomela is violated then mutilated to ensure her continued silence, but, nevertheless, she weaves her story. Celie does not experience this degree of physical mutilation, but she is psychologically scarred by her experience of rape. Shame and fear control her actions and make her silence complete.

Celie's letters reveal that life is one of hardship and brutality. Shunned by the women of her church, who remember her un-married pregnancies, she is sexually and physically abused by her husband, and is the subject of rudeness and ill treatment at the hands of his children. Running from home, her sister Nettie spends a short time with Celie and urges her take control, 'You got to fight. You got to fight.' (17). As she confides to God, Celie's response is, 'But I don't know how to fight. All I know is to stay alive' (17). This mantra sustains Celie through years of toil in the home and in the fields, and through the frequent beatings she receives from her husband. For almost thirty years she hears nothing from Nettie, and presumes she

is dead. It is not until Harpo, her eldest stepson marries that any change occurs in her life.

Harpo asks Celie to make curtains for the little creek house that he has made into a home for his wife Sofia. Sofia presents a complete contrast to the small, skinny Celie, she is big, strong, and confident of her worth, her 'clear medium brown skin gleam on it like good furniture' (30). Celie likes Sofia, but is in awe of her self-possession. In response to Harpo's request Celie makes the curtains from flour sack material. As a source of fabric, flour, feed or grain sacks provided poor and frugal women such as Celie with the means to create household items, rugs, quilts, even clothes. Ironically, vintage items made from these formerly worthless materials now possess considerable value. The Smithsonian Museum in Washington D.C. includes flour sack quilts in their textile collection.

The flour sack curtains play a central role in the story of Celie. They mark the first stage of her progress towards the reclaiming of self. The curtains are torn to pieces in a fight between Harpo and Sofia. Celie is instrumental in their quarrel. Its initial cause is the lack of deference Sofia shows towards Harpo and his father. This degree of independence in a woman troubles Harpo, for when Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ calls to Celie, she responds instantly. Sofia's reaction to this display of submission to male domination is described by Celie in the words 'she look surprise. And like she pity me' (34). When Harpo applies to Celie for her opinion on how to control Sofia, Celie's consciousness of this look of pity drives her to confirm the advice of Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, and beat Sofia. Celie suffers greatly for this betrayal. She cannot sleep, and prays that Sofia will never learn the truth, that ' I sin against Sofia's spirit' (36).

Sofia confronts Celie on her action bringing with her the remains of the torn curtains, the thread, and a dollar for their use. She listens to Celie's trembling

admission that she was motivated by jealousy caused by her own inability to fight. Sofia listens, no longer angry, but sad. The stance she adopts as she listens indicates Sofia's own strength, as Celie describes, 'She put her hand on her hip. I used to hunt game with bow and arrow, she say' (38). Sofia explains to Celie that all her life she had to fight, 'a girl child not safe in a family of men' (38). Reconciled, the two women agree to use the 'messed up curtains' (39) for quilt pieces.

The quilting activities of Celie and Sofia are the physical representation of the bonding of the two women, and, as Hedges points out, 'Quilting ritualistically marks Celie's first steps out of victimisation' (1999: 355). The quilting of Celie and Sofia follows the tradition of generations of poor women of making something from nothing. The symbolic meaning in this activity is very marked. The women are making use of torn scraps of twice recycled material. The fabric has no value, but through their needlework skills they transform the fragments into a whole and serviceable object. There is a parallel between this process and the restoration of the fragments of Celie's life. At the beginning of the novel, she has been brought to believe that she has no value. As her rapist/father claims 'She spoiled. Twice.' (9). Celie may be compared to Walker's description of past generations of black women who 'considered themselves unworthy even of hope' (1983: 232). The social aspect of quilting is the initial stage of Celie's rejuvenation. For the first time her letters record that she is no longer subject to a silenced, marginalised existence, but is sitting sewing, in the company of another woman. It is the beginning of the end of her social isolation.

### **The History of Quilting**

The craft of quilting has a long history. The British Museum has preserved a section of a patchwork silk robe, possibly a monastic robe, from China, the Tang Dynasty

8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Clare Browne traces the history of quilts, referencing an inventory of the possessions of Henry VIII, taken in the Tower of London in 1547, Included in the list of items is 'a Counterpointe of tawny (yellow/brown) and redde Taphata (taffeta) paned together quilted Lozenged all over with a cordaunte (outlining thread) of veanice (Venetian) golde bordered round abowte with and embraudery of yellowe satten with rooses and Lettres in it' (2010: 24). More functional quilts are included in the inventory such as 'v (five) quiltes of holland clothe filled with wool' (24).

The origins of the craft are unclear, but it is generally accepted that the practice of quilting fabric began in the East and spread to the West through trade and through war. For example, from the Middle Ages, Crusader knights wore quilted garments under their armour. The functionality of quilting is the most likely explanation of the widespread adoption of the practice. Quilted bedding and quilted clothing meet the most basic human need for textiles, that of warmth and comfort.

Showalter acknowledges the long European tradition of quilting, but points out that the history of quilting has a close association with the recording of American female experience: Quilting was an economic necessity in a society where readymade bedding could not be easily obtained before the 1890's, and where in the cold New England or prairie winters each family member might need five quilts' (1986: 224). Showalter also stresses unifying aspects of the quilting experience suggesting 'Quilting was an art that crossed racial, regional, and class boundaries, produced by slave women in the south as well as by pioneer housewives on the trek west and by New England matrons in their homes' (224).

Showalter omits to point out that the prominence given to the tradition of quilting in American has a political foundation. It developed as an important

domestic activity in response to the protectionist Navigation Acts imposed by Britain in the 1660s. This legislation forbade the colonists to grow wool or cotton. The colonists later rebelled against this imposition, but the high price of wool and cotton made the recycling of old cloth a major domestic activity for women. The blockades and shortages imposed through The War of Independence (1775-1782) and the American Civil War (1861-1865) ensured the continuation of the activity. Quilting is now recognised as one of the primary symbols of American culture.

Creative freedom is accepted as a feature of the design of quilts. Designs vary from culture to culture, and between individuals. Walker describes her search for 'the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day' (1983: 239). She discovers one answer to this quest in a hundred year old quilt that hangs in the Smithsonian. Considered 'rare, beyond price' (239), it is a quilt that 'follows no pattern of quilt-making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling' (239). An anonymous black woman from Alabama made the quilt.

The portrayal of the flour sack quilting of Celie and Sofia is likely to be inspired by this tradition of frugal creativity. The artistry of African-American women has been expressed through quilt making for generations. The quilts of the women of the small community of Gee's Bend Alabama provide confirmation of this practice. The quilts of Gees Bend have achieved prominence in recent years following an exhibition of quilts from this community. The first exhibition was held in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 2002, and subsequently to twelve major museums nationwide. These quilts are now celebrated as a remarkable artistic phenomenon.



Made from scraps of recycled fabric, including work clothes, the quilts are compared to modern works of art because of their use of colour and simplistic, innovative style. Created by women, who in the main are the descendants of slaves, the quilts serve as a visible reminder of the lives of the creativity and resilience of the black women of the rural South who led this tradition. One of the quilters of Gee's Bend, the elderly Arlonzia Pettway, has memories of her great-grandmother Dinah, who came from Africa aged fourteen, as a slave on an illegal slaving voyage in 1859. Amei Wallach has recorded Arlonzia's recollections and tells of her listening to her great-grandmother's harrowing tales as a child:

She learned her history against the background of that desultory hum of women's voices when their hands are occupied. The stories and patterns were inseparable then. And no matter how much lives and history have changed fragments from these stories continue to be sewn into the extraordinary quilts that are the living legacy of five generations of Dinah's descendants. (2006: 143)

This description of quilt making highlights the value of needlework as a means of female social interaction. The practice encourages recollections and the sharing of information and of skills. For generation after generation, women working together at their needlework, speak, listen, and learn from one another. The timelessness of this communal pursuit supports the premise that a synergy exists between narrative practices and the making of textiles. Needlework provides women with a performative social space, a space that might otherwise be denied them.

The exhibition of the Gee's Bend quilts was titled the 'Architecture of the Quilt'. It was so named because of the recurring motif of architectural themes in the design of the quilts and the structured process of quilt construction. A quilt is built; geometric 'blocks' of fabric are arranged into a pattern and then stitched together. A backing is then applied to the patchwork and it is 'quilted', sewn or embroidered over

to hold the layers in place. The intricacy of the process of assembling, arranging and joining the individual components of a quilt invokes comparisons to the building of cultural, social and personal connections.

Houston A. Baker Jr. and Charlotte Pierce Baker agree with this idea:

A patch is a fragment. It is a vestige of wholeness that stands as a sign of loss and a challenge to creative design. As a remainder or remnant, a patch may symbolize rupture or impoverishment; it may be defined by the faded glory of the already gone. But as a fragment, it is also rife with the explosive potential of the yet to be discovered. (1993: 309)

The capacity for survival signified through the joining of scattered fragments applies both individually and collectively. Baker and Baker observe, 'A patchwork quilt, laboriously and affectionately crafted from bits of worn overalls, shredded uniforms, tattered petticoats, and outgrown dresses stands as a signal instance of a patterned wholeness in the African diaspora' (309). In this context, Walker's use of quilting conveys more than the restoration of the fragmented Celie. Her story of survival is employed as a symbol of the strength and cohesiveness of the Afro-American people. The story of the endurance and rejuvenation of Celie mirrors the story of black Americans who suffered generations of subjugation. The juxtaposition of Celie's story with Nettie's descriptions of the lives of black people in the African homeland suggests the search for a national identity, an Afro-American identity. In the text Celie confirms the beginnings of a collective self-confidence in her comments at the end of the novel. Of the Independence Day reunion with her family, including her new African daughter-in-law Tashi, she writes 'white people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4<sup>th</sup>, say Harpo, so black folks don't have to work. Us can spend the day celebrating each other' (243).

## **The Intervention of Shug Avery**

The most effective interventionist in the regeneration of Celie as an individual is Shug Avery. The sick, possibly dying, Shug Avery is brought to the house by Mr. \_\_\_\_\_. Shug is the love of his life, and her image has fascinated Celie since she was young. She once possessed a photograph of Shug, who she describes as unlike any woman she has ever seen, 'the most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty than my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier than me' (8). When she arrives Celie wants to cry out, 'To shout. Come on in. With God help, Celie going to make you well. But I don't say nothing. It not my house. Also I ain't been told nothing' (42). This lack of 'house' illustrates Celie's lack of ownership of space; she has nothing, and therefore considers that she is nothing. She believes, however, that she can assist Shug, and, little by little, Celie restores Shug to health. In return, like some form of spirited, at times, spiteful, fairy godmother, Shug transforms Celie's life.

Shug captivates Celie. As she cares for Shug, bathes her and gazes on her beauty, Celie experiences sexual desire for the first time. Her husband, who, as Shug reminds Celie, is called Albert, shares in this enchantment. For once they are united in their endeavours, for they share a passion for Shug. This degree of unity, fragile as it is, is displayed through Celie's sewing. She describes sitting on the porch with Albert and his brother, 'piecing another quilt together' (51) when Shug appears wearing a 'little flowery shift I made for her' (51). Shug picks up a square of fabric from Celie's basket of scraps asking, 'how you sew this damn thing?' (51). With Celie's help, she sits and sews with 'long crooked stitches' (51). As Hedges points out, by this means, Shug becomes one of Celie's female enablers:

Shug is still perceived by Celie as 'halfway between good and evil' and her smile is threatening, 'like a razor opening'. Whether she will become Celie's friend or not is moot. When she agrees to sew a square for another quilt that Celie and Sofia are making, she symbolically aligns herself with the women. Shug's crooked stitches remind Celie of the 'little crooked tune' that Shug sings, and as Shug thus incorporates her voice into the quilt, that voice becomes available to Celie, who through it will find her own. (1991: 355)

The involvement of Shug Avery into the process of quilt making is significant in that it illustrates the communal properties of the activity, the bringing together of different women. It is also a demonstration of the creative, transformative properties of the craft. Walker underscores the importance of this occasion. Celie recounts working at her quilting, sitting between Shug Avery and Mr.\_\_\_\_\_, and comments, 'For the first time in my life I feel just right' (52). The restorative power of needlework assists Shug's recovery, and aids Celie in the process of claiming her place in the world. Celie's sewing is contributing to her psychological healing and also allowing her to develop social connections to other women. Through her needlework Celie is drawing together her female enablers, Sofia and Shug, and is in turn supporting and enabling them. She is bonding together a community of women.

The new quilt that Celie and Sofia are making is based upon a pattern called 'Sister's Choice'. Judy Elsey attaches multiple meaning to the selection of this pattern. In addition to the implied connection to Celie's beloved sister Nettie, Elsey places emphasis on the ability of women's sewing to act as a process of self-reclamation, 'because it represents, more than other activities traditionally associated with women, a powerful and elemental symbol of connection' (1994: 74). She writes of the beginning of Celie's journey of self-discovery:

The quilt pattern Celie selects - "Sister's Choice" - gives name to her particular journey. By simultaneously asserting her right to choose as well as affirming her community with other women, Celie takes the first step toward living autonomously and integrally.

Elsley draws attention to the ability of Celie and Sofia to use the pattern in any way they think fit, 'stitching their fragments together in a pattern to suit themselves' (74). The choice of pattern provides an outline, a guide. The process of interpretation, the arrangement of shapes and colours of fragments of fabric allows for the imposition of individual identity. As Elsley points out 'Tearing fabric apart has the effect of creating space between the pieces. This place of liminality, the undefined space, becomes a place of creative freedom for the quilter, for it allows her to arrange her pieces of fabric and thus create her pattern' (74).

For Celie, quilt making generates a necessary space. A space that enables the healing of her damaged spirit, and inspires the re-creation of her identity. In 'The Laugh of the Medusa' Hélène Cixous (1975) argues that 'women must write herself' (2007: 414). She proposes, 'By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her', which has been turned into an uncanny stranger on display - the ailing or dead figure' (418). In her halting and fragmented manner, Celie endeavours to write herself into the world. She also makes use of an alternative communicative form for the expression of self, her sewing.

Shug is included in the sisterhood of quilt making. She contributes a yellow dress to be incorporated into the design. By this input Shug is physically imprinting herself into the quilt. She will have worn the dress and its fabric will contain memories of her. Just as Shug embellishes Celie's life, the dress is used to ornament the quilt; Celie cuts the dress into star shaped pieces.

When Sofia decides to leave Harpo, Celie makes her a gift of the quilt. This gift is in the tradition of 'friendship quilts', a custom that has existed for generations. Women have frequently used quilts to incorporate associations personal to themselves and friends or family members. Walker touches upon the bonding and

unifying aspects of this practice in her description of Nettie's efforts to achieve reconciliation with the dying Corrine. In order to reassure Corrine that Celie, not Nettie, is the mother of Olivia, Nettie brings out one of Corrine's quilts. It includes pieces of the material that Corrine bought when she met Celie in town so many years before. As she fingers the fabric, the memory of the woman who was so like Olivia she 'was afraid she'd want her back' (160) returns to Corrine, and her suspicions of Nettie are dispelled.

The offer of the quilt to Sofia may be interpreted as significant to Celie in that she is, at last, in the position of making a gift. Celie, who has always been considered worthless, is for the first time in the position of offering something of worth to a friend. If the quilt had not 'turned out perfect' (53), her intention was to keep it for herself. The quilt has been made from scraps, but the completed object, the whole, has value. It is very special to Celie, as she has worked with other women in its making, contributing her own skills, but also drawing from their strength and creativity. Her hope that the quilt will keep Sofia and the children warm extends beyond a desire for their physical comfort. In Hedges view Celie's decision to give Sofia the quilt is 'a gesture of support for Sophia's assertion of independence, which Celie herself will later emulate' (1991: 355). There is also an element of sorrow attached to the gift. Celie regrets the loss of Sofia and envies her, not only for her independent spirit, but also for the family support she possesses. Sofia has sisters, who provide a home for her to go to. When she thinks of these sisters Celie thinks of Nettie, 'Thought so sharp it go through me like a pain. Somebody to run to. It seem too sweet to bear' (58). The loss of Nettie, the one person that she loves, apart from Shug, is a constant source of grief for Celie.

## **A Needle not a Razor**

Shug's revelation that Albert, Celie's husband, has been hiding Nettie's letters ignites an intense rage in Celie, a degree of fury that she has never previously experienced. Until this time she has used passivity and silence as a survival strategy. As with most victims, her anger had always been carefully hidden in order to avoid further punishment. This is no longer the case. Now, a distraught Celie stands behind her husband clasp an open razor in her hand, and it is only Shug's intervention that prevents her from cutting his throat. The activity devised by Shug to divert Celie's sorrow and anger is consciously ironic in that it trespasses into a traditionally male domain. Shug suggests that Celie make pants:

She say, times like this, lulls, us ought to be doing something different. Like what? I ast. Well, she say, looking me up and down, lets make you some pants. What do I need pants for? I say. I ain't no man. Don't get uppity she say. But you don't have a dress do nothing for you. You not made like no dress pattern, neither. I don't know, I say. Mr\_\_\_\_\_ not going to let his wife wear pants. Why not? say Shug. You do all of the work around here. It scanless, the way you look out there plowing in a dress. How you keep from falling over it or getting the plow caught in it is beyond me. (124)

Shug's comment that Celie's form does not follow that of a 'dress pattern' illustrates Celie's failure to recognise and value her own distinctiveness. Throughout her life she has been made to feel a sense of discontinuity, a sense that she does not 'fit'. She accepts personal responsibility for the negative assessments of her looks, morals and abilities that are made by others. Unlike Shug and Sofia, Celie lacks the courage to pursue an individual course in her life and challenge exploitation. Shug changes this. She not only preserves Albert's life by removing the razor from Celie's hand, she saves Celie's life by turning her energies in a new direction, a new enterprise that eventually brings her spiritual, physical and economic freedom.

Referring to Walker's essay 'Saving the Life That is Your Own' (1983) Felipe Smith suggests that 'The saving of lives is central to Alice Walker's art. This redemptive quality in her work goes beyond the thematic to the very heart of Walker's aesthetics' (1992: 437). This pattern of redemption is visible in *The Color Purple*. Celie saves the dying Shug, and, in return, Shug saves Celie and, as a consequence, Albert. Walker's reliance on the redeeming power of needlework is woven into the text. Following the recovery of Nettie's letters, Shug and Celie spend some time everyday reading the letters and sewing. The sewing provides an effective outlet for Celie's newfound rage, as she comments to Shug, 'a needle and not a razor in my hand, I think' (125). Her needle becomes her weapon and her means of deliverance.

The material for the first pair of pants that Celie sews signifies the level of control that she is beginning to exercise on her life. On the advice of Shug, she even uses a fabric that is symbolic of an assault on the arena of patriarchal domination. The pants are made from an old army uniform. Mari McCarty argues:

On the boundary of the male world, women can only overcome their Otherness by becoming consciously marginal. Mere "equity" with men within the phallic construct would mean an acceptance of patriarchal space; but by entering the boundary zone voluntarily women can cast off Otherness. In so doing, women become aware that this "boundary" is in fact an infinitely-expanding space. (1981: 367)

McCarty's comments renew the concept of the existence of a female space a 'wild zone' within a male structured society. Celie begins to overthrow the boundaries between the male and female space when she begins sewing and wearing pants. She confirms this breach in gender structures when she rejects social conformity and leaves Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ to go with Shug to live in Memphis. Shug is the instigator of the move. Through her independent life as a singer, she has always been marginalised,



living on the fringe of society, and not defined by an attachment to a husband and the attendant responsibilities. By the act of separating from her husband, Celie also moves across defined female boundaries to 'an infinitely-expanding space'. In this space she finds the confidence to build her own business, 'FolksPants, Unlimited' (182). Celie's move was fuelled by her ongoing rage, a rage that allowed her, at last, to find a voice. When an angry Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ goads her, she responds in the words 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly, and I can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here' (176).

Much of Celie's time in Memphis is spent sewing pants, describing this pre-occupation in the terms:

Since I started making pants down home, I ain't been able to stop. I change the print. I change the waist, I change the pocket, I change the hem, I change the fullness of the leg. I make so many pairs of pants Shug tease me. (180)

She finally makes the perfect pair of pants, 'For my sugar, naturally' (180). The pants are very different material from that of the stiff army uniform she started her first pants with. This potent emblem of masculinity is transformed into a representation of femininity freed from patriarchal control. The pants she makes are soft and flowing, and so attractive that she is soon inundated with orders for more. Encouraged by Shug, she hires help and makes her hobby her living. Celie's preoccupation with making pants is unceasing. She dreams of them and of the practical and symbolic freedom they bring. She makes pants for Sofia, one leg purple, one red. She dreams of Sofia, wearing these pants, 'one day she was jumping over the moon' (184). Each pair of Celie's pants is created with the wearer in mind, and colour, as the title of the novel implies, is integral to the narrative. The purple and red colours of Sofia's pants are symbolic of the suffering she has endured

in her life, and of her drive and her ability to overcome the years of misery imposed upon her. The physical damage from the beating Sofia endured for 'sassing the mayor's wife' (75), left her 'just about the color of a eggplant' (77). One shade of the colour purple, lavender, is associated with lesbianism and the emotional and physical connection between women. Colours also represent Celie's view of what God loves in the world. She adopts Shug's belief system that God is everywhere and is visible in everything, including colour. As Shug states 'I think it pisses God off if you walk past the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it' (167).

By the conclusion of the novel the supportive community that Celie has established through her sewing has expanded to include men. The fairy tale ending depicts an independent Celie, reconciled in friendship with her husband and reunited with her sister and her children. She has learned that her rapist was not her father but her stepfather; she has a house, a store and loving relationships. With the help of her friends, her female enablers, she has discovered the strength to sew and quilt the fragments of her life together. Through her sewing she has bonded her friends and family together to form a mutually beneficial group, demonstrating the strength that is to be found through unity. She is still, 'so much in the habit of sewing something, that I stitch up a bunch of scraps try to see what I can make' (242). It is apparent that what she is able to make from 'a bunch of scraps' is an individual and confident woman. Through her writing and sewing she has made her world, she has become her own creation.

### **Textiles and Female Creativity**

The theme of women's textiles is paramount in *The Ladybird* and *The Color Purple*, but there are significant dissimilarities in the manner of their portrayal. The novels differ in their style of construction through the use of modernist techniques by

Lawrence and post modernist by Walker. However, both novels relate the physical processes of textile making to the generation of individual and collective transformation. In so doing, they exhibit nostalgia for a time when textiles acted as an essential element of female culture. This nostalgia takes on different forms. In *The Ladybird* Lawrence demonstrates a longing for a previous time, for a more ordered world in which the role of men and of women are carefully delineated. There is melancholy in his nostalgia, a desire to turn back time. In contrast, the textile recollections in *The Color Purple* are positive indicators. Textile representations are used to signify the history of strong and creative black women and their ability to survive and surmount unendurable poverty and oppression. They are employed as a celebration of these women and of their future.

A common factor to both works is that women's textile making is employed with political intent. In *The Ladybird* Lawrence deploys textile representations to illustrate his ideal of an alternative framework for society. They are used to support his concept of the attribution of central power to an ideology based upon a more primitive life force sourced from the ancient world. In line with his ideologies of the need for women to adopt their true selves, it appears that he perceives women's textiles as signifier of the role of women in maintaining female values of this renewed society.

Lawrence makes obvious his concern at the loss of the traditional textile skills of women. He writes of individuals of a particular degree of refinement and class that now deems such skills as unnecessary, even inappropriate in a modern world. In his rejection of this view Lawrence ascribes power to both men and women, but seeks to differentiate between the characteristics of this power. As is made apparent in *Fantasia*, his pre-occupation with oppositions, including the polarisation of gender,

is generated by a fear that the merging of male and female roles will neutralise both genders. Lawrence demonstrates the ability of textiles to empower the women who employ them. He draws upon mythical figures to show the extent of this authority and employs textile making to illustrate the ability of women to heal and transform, to bring together the disparate threads of life.

The representations of textile making in *The Color Purple* also have political content. They support the premise of the existence of an element of woman's culture, the 'wild zone', a space that allows for female expression outside the knowledge and control of the dominant male order. In the novel it is the processes of textile making that combine to generate a creative space that allows the projection of Walker's beliefs of a 'womanist', female aesthetic. This perspective reinforces the potential for the rejection of a central patriarchal figure, God, who is described as 'an old white man' (167). Instead, Walker embraces the perception of God as part of everything and everyone. Through this pluralistic approach she envisions opportunities for equality and justice. Walker reflects this concept in the form and content of the novel. In the form, she represents the discontinuity of the history of women through a collage of textual references, and in the content she employs women's sewing, especially quilting, as a signifier of the resolution of fragmentation. Through her depictions of the joining together and the embellishment of remnants of fabric, Walker illustrates the potential for the restoration of completeness and unity to both the individual subject and a nation.

Walker's concern is with a group of women who, at the time of which she writes, were considered an underclass of society. Despite the ending of slavery, black people in large parts of America were victims of racism and had no political or economic power. The status of black women was even lower than that of black men.

Marginalised, silenced and exploited, they formed the lowest social class in society. Black women had no public voice, but, as Walker demonstrates, in many instances, they used the female space, 'the wild zone', created and fostered through their textiles to find their voice. Through the process of making textiles they communicated their ancestral and personal narratives to the world. In the novel Walker employs these activities as a reflection of a wider perspective, the struggle of the Afro-American nation to achieve racial dignity through equality of opportunity.

## Conclusion

### **The Text and Textile Relationship**

This study has examined aspects of female experience over time as reflected in representations of women's textile making in literary texts, revealing the intricate, intertwined elements of the text/textile relationship. The premise that analogies exist between the two crafts is supported by prolific representations of women and their textiles in texts from ancient to modern times - what is less obvious is the nature of these connections. In the course of the study it has been possible to address this question and to explore the significance of literary representations of women's textile making as a reflection of both the history of women and of textile practices. Through a process of textual analysis has been possible to confirm women's textiles as a vital force in cultural and literary history, extending into physical, emotional and spiritual realms.

In an article written in 2008, A.S. Byatt substantiates this premise. Reflecting the interface between texts and textiles, she argues that 'we think of our lives – and of stories – as spun threads, extended and knitted or interwoven with others into the fabric of communities, or history, or texts' (2008: 1). Byatt extends her observations to encompass words related to textiles that have been incorporated into everyday language 'text, texture and textile, the fabric of society, words for disintegration – fraying, frazzling, unravelling, wool gathering, loose ends' (1). She states that 'the processes of cloth-making are knitted and knotted into our brains, though our houses no longer have spindles and looms' (1).

Byatt's comments provide a succinct illustration of characteristics of textile making that have influenced the outcomes of this study, the cultural fascination with textiles and their significance to human existence. She describes the application of

textile terminology in relation to the life force and demonstrates the inheritance of a memory of textile processes, despite our post-industrial separation from the main sites of production. As this study has sought to illustrate, textiles form part of the fabric of human existence, they are central to human survival and human consciousness. Importantly, as a generative activity textiles are equated to acts of creation and of transformation, this includes elements of magic. Beverley Gordon emphasises this connection:

We have long used textile ideas to describe ourselves, our societies, and even our place in the universe. The very quality of textiles, such as their ability to absorb, enfold and contain, expand and tie together, make them important symbols; they have strong associations and stand for many of our organising concepts. (2011: 18)

As Byatt and Gordon point out, we often visualise our reality in textile terms, using expressions and metaphors referring to textile processes. This connection between textiles and core cultural ideas is one explanation for the abundance of texts that include textile references in both overt and implicit form. Textile terms and expressions are used on a daily basis in spoken and written language to the degree that we are largely unconscious of the influence of their application and of their connection to textiles. Their usage is seldom questioned or defined in relation to their textile origins. This study has endeavoured to redress some of these shortcomings.

### **Texts and Textiles - Convergences**

The focus of the first chapter of the study has been the identification of convergences that occur between texts and textiles as observed in texts from the ancient world and to determine the nature of these connections. In this context, shared features were observed in the process of the construction of texts and textiles, and in addition other discernable links have been identified and explored. These comprise commonalities in terminology; the shared ability to communicate

meaning; and creative associations established through the context of textile production, an environment that enables verbal art.

The texts analysed have shown that material and metaphorical depictions of textile making may be deployed to convey interior, psychological meanings. Among the ancient texts employed are the fragmentary work of the female Greek poets Sappho, Erinna and Nossis. These poems show women as 'weavers of words', using poetry to reflect the concerns of women. Textile making is depicted as a major female pre-occupation and consequently as a symbol of femininity. The literal descriptions of the pursuit of this activity are subsequently extended by the poets to encompass metaphoric components with affinities to textile crafts. The values that may be discerned from these fragmentary works are that they shed light on the lives of women of antiquity and introduce the possibility of the existence of connections between a tradition of textile crafts and a poetic tradition. The rarity of the poems also exposes the silence of the majority of voices of women from past times and the politics of gender that has excluded women from much of literary history.

The analysis of the epic poems of Homer has also revealed that the poet employs material and metaphoric elements of textile representations in many complex ways. The poems depict women's textile making as an everyday activity, a means of the establishment of identity, a component of enchantment, and as a destabilising element of the narrative. The numerous references to women and their interests in the poems has led to a number of conclusions that have developed into various theories in regard to authorship and authorial intent that include the possibility of the embedding of female authored tales in the text. A more certain conclusion is that the prolific use of textile references in Homer is an indicator of the



recognition of the status of women's textiles in the ancient world. The making of textiles is depicted as a gender specific, but nevertheless, highly valued product, and, in some instances, an art form. Homer's representations of textile practices illustrate a major outcome of the study, the political connotations attaching to women's textiles throughout history. In the course of the study the analysis of depictions of the practice of textile making drawn from texts of different centuries has raised awareness of the significance of women's textiles in relation to the definition of gender roles and to economic power.

Furthermore, in both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, depictions of women's textiles confirm the dual nature of textile representations. In the poems the references to textiles act as signifiers of aspects femininity, but also demonstrate the subversion of expectations of female silence and submission in a male dominated society. Homer depicts all of his principal female characters occupied in textile making, often outwardly compliant, but at times deploying their spinning and weaving as a means of defiance and of attaining a measure of power. Both divine and mortal women are portrayed using their textiles to consolidate or to alter their circumstances and to define their identity. These representations demonstrate the relationship between textile making and female discourse. In a culture that denied women linguistic freedom, the ability of textile making to make signs, a material representation of language, offered women an alternative means of expression.

Paradoxically, Homer does not provide a description of the content of work of the weaving of Penelope. The web of this iconic weaver is deprived of signs and remains blank, silent, used only as a narrative element portraying her survival strategy. It is for this reason that Penelope's weaving may be viewed as an

archetypal example of the dual characteristics of women's textile making, its capacity for double voiced discourse. In the weaving of Laertes' shroud Penelope complies with a cultural model of femininity, expectations of carefully defined female customs and duties. In the unravelling of her work she subverts these paradigms in an endeavour to control her fate. As the study has shown, this subversive element of women's textile making, its use as a means of rebellion, manipulation and self-expression is a characteristic of the craft that defies time. As contemporary textile making demonstrates, the potential of textiles to be used as a source of self-determination is as relevant today as it was in past ages.

Homer's *Odyssey* provides a demonstration of the association between the weaving of fabric and the weaving of words in his depiction of Helen as a storyteller to a pre-dominantly male audience. Helen's manipulative ability is brought to the fore in this passage. The implicit association between Helen's dubious storytelling and textile making provides an exceptional example of female engagement in the masculine sphere of public discourse. The references to textile implements are a reminder of Helen's femininity, but her incursion into the male arena of rhetoric is an indicator of the relationship between art and craft, creativity and cunning, concepts that are shown by the study to have persistent connections to women's textiles.

Ovid also illustrates the association between textile making and storytelling in his tale of 'The Daughters of Minyas'. In this tale the social context of textile making is revealed as a situation that encourages speech activity. The story of the textile making of the three daughters of Minyas provides a frame for three separate tales, but on the conclusion of each tale the narrative returns to the frame story and the weaving of the sisters. By this means, links between the weaving of cloth and the

weaving of stories are established. As is confirmed by contemporary textile activity, the pursuit of textile making may be both a solitary and a communal activity. In the latter instance, textile work establishes a setting that encourages the exchange of gossip, anecdotes, autobiographical and other narratives. Ovid's depiction of the conjunction of textile making and storytelling may be interpreted as a reflection of the capacity of women's textiles to provide an appropriate context for oral creativity that may possibly have contributed to the advance of the tradition of oral storytelling.

Clearly, the exclusion of women from much of cultural history makes confirmation of this supposition problematic. As Peter Burke observes the female contribution to culture is 'virtually invisible, in the grand narrative' (2008: 48). It remains uncertain as to how much historically revealing information may be drawn from the representations of female activities such as those of Ovid due to their foundation in myth, an ancient system of ideals. In the case of Ovid however, there is a factor that contributes to the validity of his depictions. In another of his tales, that of the contest between Athena and Arachne, Ovid reveals an intimate knowledge of the process of weaving. He describes in precise terms the spinning of wool, the setting up of a warp weighted loom and the movement of the shuttle through the warp threads (1986: 121-122). The poet's demonstration of familiarity with the craft of weaving strengthens connections between the supernatural content of his interpretation of the mythical world and historical reality, the everyday world of men and women of his time. The glimpses into the commonplace pursuits of the ancient world provided by Ovid add support to conjectures concerning the role of women in textual activity. It is a virtual certainty that women told tales as they spun and wove. The question that arises from this is assumption is whether or not the

rhythm and pattern of women's work also helped to shape and influence the patterns and the resonance of oral art and consequently of written texts.

In a comparison between the construction of the poems of Ovid and the production of textiles, and parallels have been observed in the dependence of both crafts on structure, form, rhythm, repetition and style. The combination of these similarities coupled with the recognition of textile making as a fertile context for the encouragement of narrative activity make it possible to speculate that the production of textiles shares characteristics with the construction of texts. If so, the contribution of women to literary culture, and indeed to the construction of culture, would have been historically significant. As it is, this fascinating concept is unproven and is likely to remain so.

### **The Politics of Nineteenth-Century Textiles**

The second phase of the study moves forward through many centuries to a period of crucial historic importance. The nineteenth-century texts examined in this chapter reflect the issues of women and their relationship with textiles in the period of the most tumultuous change in textile history, that of the industrialisation of textile processes and the consequent introduction of mass production. The texts selected for this chapter of the study, Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* and *The Silent Partner* by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, reflect the social and political turmoil of this time. They do so in contrasting ways in terms of both form and content, although they both preserve a contemporary profile of their time through the depiction of the impact of industrialisation of textile processes on the lives of women.

Brontë and Phelps use textile representations as a component of social criticism to illustrate the ultimate stage of the transformation of textile production into a male dominated industry, a process that resulted in the increasing marginalisation

of women from textile activities. More than ever, textiles became essential to the wealth of nations, but the role of women in textile production diminished to that of a domestic occupation, emblematic of femininity, and, for working women, a potential source of exploitation. Both novelists represent the divide between the home and the work place as impassable for women of the middle-class, even for their protagonists Shirley Keeldar and Perley Kelso, rich owners of textile mills.

The profuse depictions of textiles and textile making in Brontë's novel are employed to illustrate the inculcation of the cultural model of female domestic virtue prescribed in the nineteenth century and the tedium of maintaining this role. This model advocated a mythical ideal of femininity that constrained middle-class women within the domestic sphere. Textile making, deemed women's work, was an essential element of this cultural paradigm as it was considered a suitable, and indeed, a natural female activity. Through her descriptions of women's unceasing needlework and through the activities and the voices of her protagonists, Brontë's own rage against genteel poverty and the lack of opportunities for women resound throughout the novel.

It is apparent that, like Homer, Brontë deploys depictions of textile making as a subversive element of the narrative. She uses subtle, layered, meanings in the descriptions of the triviality of the articles produced through women's domestic textile activities to articulate the conformance of women to a pattern of social convention that results in the marginalisation and impoverishment of middle-class women. She also demonstrates the use of textile making as a manipulative tool, consciously used to support the concept of a feminine ideal from a masculine perception. It appears that Brontë too manipulates her readers, for the hidden meanings that may be

deciphered from her textile depictions serve to diffuse and disguise many of the potent political messages she conveys in her novel.

It may be contended that Brontë's use of textile making extends beyond the content of the novel to its form. The textile representations and references in the novel unite and embellish seemingly disparate elements of the structure of the text. As previously demonstrated in the analysis of the work of Ovid, similarities may be observed between this authorial technique and the construction of a textile.

Phelps' novel is also concerned with the exploration of the spatial separation of middle-class women in the domestic sphere, isolated from the negative effects of industrialisation that are apparent in the public sphere. In *The Silent Partner* Phelps reveals the conflict between the disconnection of women from the external public world and their role as the guardians of moral excellence, a responsibility assigned to middle-class women under the nineteenth-century convention of the ideal of femininity. In her illustration of this tension Phelps also relies upon textiles as an agency between the text and the reader. She imbues her novel with textile themes. Her protagonists Perley Kelso and Sip Garth are themselves made the subject of textile metaphors, textiles becoming the means of a description of self. However, Phelps' exploration of class differences diverges significantly from the message of the plight of middle-class women without fortune or marriage prospects promoted by Brontë. Phelps makes unashamed use of sentimentality to draw a vivid picture of the exploitation of textile workers in an attempt to promote the moral responsibility of the consumer.

In combination, the novels make visible elements of the economic, class and gender politics of the nineteenth century. Insight into the realities of the radical changes introduced by the mechanisation of textile processes and the

consequences of these changes on the lives of women are disclosed. What is made evident is the continued existence of separate spheres of activity for men and for women. Divisions in male and female domains that were present in the ancient world are shown to have survived more than two thousand years of history into the mid-nineteenth century. As a result, women remained the subject of varying degrees of subjection and imposed silence. Domestic textile making is shown as a pursuit that for middle-class women signified female oppression. In a market economy, the recognition of value that attached to the handwork of ancient women through its economic worth is shown to be lost. In consequence, women are shown to have become less important, valued only for their contribution to the domestic sphere. Commercial textile making is depicted as the means of the exploitation of both women and children. As the human implements of mass production these textile workers are shown to be disposable assets, merely the means of satisfying market demand. This is a concept that has resonance with instances of contemporary manufacturing practice.

### **The Making of Female Space**

The final chapter of the study has examined a crucial characteristic of textiles from a twentieth-century perspective. The topic studied was the ability of the tactile and sensory properties of textile processes to engender mental as well as physical creativity. The processes of textile formation, the handling of material and thread, promote a degree of accord between body and mind, minimising the separation between the spheres of action and thought. This physical and mental harmony promotes a degree of tranquillity that encourages a sense of self, a personal space that, in turn, may engender transformation and empowerment. This is an attribute

that has remained integral to the activity of textile making throughout its history to the present day.

By the twentieth century most women were no longer reliant on their textile skills as an alternative means of expression. But, as the texts analysed in this chapter reflect, in the early part of the twentieth century a view of textile making as a natural and necessary female task is still evident. The process of the transition of domestic textile production to its contemporary position as a pleasurable activity of choice is incomplete. The selected texts, *The Ladybird* by D.H.Lawrence and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, reflect this situation. In the texts women's textile making is shown as an instinctive feminine activity, but the focus of both authors is the physical and mental responses engendered by the craft. The texts offer very different perspectives of the lives of twentieth-century women and their relationship to textile making. They are united, however, in their recognition of the metaphysical properties of textile making, the intangible, spiritual qualities that emanate from a process that allows that engages the hands but allows the mind to run free. As with Brontë's *Shirley* and Phelps' *Silent Partner*, it is impossible to discount the presence of the author in these texts. Both novelists employ the experiences of their characters to project their personal philosophies and beliefs articulated through their non-fiction works and essays.

Representations of women's textile making are important to the expression of Lawrence's personal mythopoeia in his novella. They illustrate Lawrence's negative views on social change, particularly in relation to education and the emancipation of women. In this context he depicts women's needlework as an innate element of female culture, to be protected, not discarded as an out-dated practice in a modern world. This interpretation supports the view that Lawrence considered women's



needlework as a means of rescue from the socially constructed self-consciousness that he deplored in modern society. Lawrence confirms this stance by depicting close associations between women and needlework, but he simultaneously elevates the status of the craft by attaching additional meaning to the depictions of textile making. He connects sewing to physical, elemental aspects of life through representations of powerful mythical women associated with the restoration of life, including Isis and Demeter. In this way, Lawrence establishes the significance of the processes of women's needlework as an element of his modernist concept of a new social framework that has a basis in heroic models drawn from the ancient world.

The capacity of needlework to heal and reconcile is also given emphasis. Lawrence introduces the perception of women's sewing as a restorative and a connective force, extending the sphere of influence of the activity beyond the needlewoman, Daphne Apsley, to encompass her husband and her lover.

Through his depictions of individual and collective recovery other elements of Lawrence's personal ideology are made apparent. This includes his perception of the primacy of the instinctive, sensual body over the focus of cerebral forces of the mind, a belief central to his studies of the unconscious. The physical, tactile sensations of textile processes and materials are shown to engender mental and bodily reconciliation. However, the degree of tranquillity that is established in the fragmented lives of his three protagonists appears unreal and insubstantial, for their newly found serenity emerges from a background of myth and fairy tale constructed by Lawrence. In this manner, he introduces a sense of the fragility of the hopes for the restoration of the spirit of a fragmented and damaged post-war society.

Depictions of women's needlework are also a central element of *The Color Purple*. Women's sewing, especially quilting, is shown to influence both the form

and content of the novel. In contrast to the subtle approach adopted by Brontë in *Shirley*, Walker demonstrates an overt use of textile making as a structural element and the means of conveying visual and verbal images. As in Lawrence's novella, women's textile making is deployed as a component of restoration and reconciliation. Walker also employs her own ideology in the exploration of the lives of her protagonists, a belief based upon a vibrant feminine spirit of survival and creativity, characteristics that allowed black women to endure the oppression of slavery. In the novel these philosophies are applied through a pattern of construction that combines a postmodern awareness of discourse and language with a perception of the existence of individual and cultural discontinuity.

Marginalised by gender, race and class, made speechless by physical and sexual abuse and illiteracy, Walker's protagonist Celie is depicted as an exemplar of silenced and subjugated black women. It is through her sewing that she creates a personal space that allows her to reject her muted status and transform her life. As for so many women through time, Celie's needle becomes a weapon of resistance, and, for her, a practical means of independence. Her sewing is a creative act that allows her a freedom of expression that is not available to her through language. This means of escape is inclusive in that it is the source of bringing together a community of women.

As in Lawrence's portrayal of reconciliation through stitching it is apparent that Walker employs depictions of personal transformation to illustrate a broader perspective, in her case it is of hopes for the healing of cultural and national differences. Like Lawrence, she illustrates the tenuousness of these expectations by the addition of a sense of unreality, achieved by the unforeseen family reunion, which introduces a sense of the fairy tale to the ending of her novel.

The texts of Lawrence and Walker are shown to resonate with the works of Brontë and Phelps in that a female activity, sewing, is employed as a vehicle for the expression of political aspirations. However, the objectives that may be interpreted from the works of the two twentieth-century writers extend beyond a desire for cultural and social change. It is apparent that they seek to further a new world vision as a means of the restoration of fragmented and damaged societies. Their seemingly innocuous depictions of textile making are used as a conceptual tool to engender a visual image of physical and mental healing, introducing possibilities of reconciliation on a universal scale.

### **Women's Textiles In Texts**

This study has revealed commonalities in texts and textiles, most notably in their process of construction and in their capacity as expressive forms, the ability to formulate and express meaning and stimulate oral narrative activity. These connections provoke speculation on the potential of women's textile making to have influenced oral storytelling, and, ultimately, the construction of texts. Texts have supplanted textiles as a primary medium of communication in relatively recent times as measured in terms of human history. Nevertheless, textiles remain essential to human existence, physically, emotionally and spiritually, as a consequence they fulfil an unassailable role in communicating human experience. This analysis of the characteristics and qualities of the literary depictions of women's textile practices has supported this view, for such descriptions assist in reflecting the experience of women through time, and the culture, society and conditions they represent. In this study it has been made apparent that images of women's textile practices are not isolated additions to literary texts. They bring with them additional components in the form of rich associations that have accrued through the ubiquity of the

relationship of textiles to humankind and the long history that exists between women and textiles. Literary depictions of women's textile making expose material, metaphorical and metaphysical components that attach to the textile process. Descriptions of the interweaving of threads, the piecing and joining of separate layers of fabric and the handling of differing textures of fabric, all contribute meaning. They access a collective memory that, although largely unrecognised, exists within us all. This associative material allows insight into female culture in different centuries and reflects the changes that have impacted upon the lives of women over time. In so doing, the timelessness of the relationship between women and textiles is confirmed.

The study has also demonstrated textile making as a signifier of femininity and as a means of ensuring female compliance with male constructed paradigms of behaviour. In so doing, it has exposed the dual characteristics of women's textile making. Historically, women's textile making has been the means of the constraint of women, and, at the same time, provided women with a means of expression and of linguistic performance, and, as such, has served as a covert weapon of resistance. These apparently contradictory features have revealed the political connotations that attach to women's textile making. The study has confirmed that from the earliest times to the present day the gender and economic politics of women's textile making have impacted on the lives of both women and men. A direct correlation may be observed between the economic importance of textiles and the degree of esteem held for the textile making of women. With the onset of industrial production the value of domestic textile making diminished as women became non-contributors or minor contributors to national wealth.

A gradual change in the position of women is reflected in the depictions of textile making in the twentieth century. In the texts analysed from this period it is noticeable that women's textile practices are employed as a conceptual tool used to reflect desire for political change on an unprecedented scale. By this means, the beginnings of the restoration of the values attributed to women's textiles in the classical texts of the ancient world are made evident.

### **Women's Textiles – The Contemporary Perspective**

In recent years any remaining negative images attaching to needlework have been dispelled and women's textile making is now viewed as a celebration of women and their artistic and craft skills. The immense popularity of this activity has led to the establishment of countless needlework and knitting groups, magazines, websites and blogs devoted to the sharing of textile skills, the handing on of the textile tradition to a new generation of women. The motivation for this interest may be traced to the sheer enjoyment of the creative elements of textile crafts and of the social aspects of this activity. There is also a campaigning element attached to these pursuits that reflects the political aspects of textile making. Textile groups, such as the London based Shoreditch Sisters, employ their needles as components of activism, to illustrate environmental issues such as anti-consumerism and pro-thrift, and a variety of women's issues.

The new perception of textile making extends to the dissolution of the hierarchical divisions between art and craft, the cause of the historic designation of women's textile work as a craft activity rather than an art form, based upon the view that women lacked the skills and ingenuity necessary to materialise complex ideas creatively. This position has now reversed and the artistic contribution of women's textile making is now fully recognised. For example, the production of storytelling

textiles is enjoying a modern revival. The practice of recording information through storytelling cloths was a custom that was ancient when Homer depicted such a cloth in the *Iliad*. In recent years storytelling tapestries have been created in the form of the 'Great Tapestry of Scotland' (2012) and 'The Battle of Lewes Tapestry' (2014).

Notable artists also employ textile making as a form of artistic expression including Tracey Emin in her concept *To Meet My Past* (2003). In this work it is apparent that Emin uses the traditional needlework skills of women, including embroidery, appliqué, and patchwork, to decorate an element of personal space, a marriage bed. Using intricate stitching, and including elements of text, Emin explores the heritage of women through a demonstration of the craft skills that throughout history have served as both a means of restraint and of freedom for women. The connection to the past is emphasised by the stylistic connection between the Emin bed and a historic form of bed, a four-poster. The bed hangings transform the bed into a cage-like structure that appears to symbolise confinement and the physical and psychological controls that have been brought to bear on women.

Created in conjunction with a television series, Grayson Perry's 'The Vanity of Small Differences' (2011) is a series of six vibrant tapestries that literally weaves together characters, incidents and experiences in a modern day version of Hogarth's *A Rakes Progress* (1733). Each woven story embodies representative elements and individuals of a supposed class, depicted in a humorous, yet poignant form. By means of a traditional craft form Perry challenges the divisions of the British class system and the aspirations and insecurities it generates (Douglas, Moore, Perry: 2013).

A prominent feature of the exhibition 'Experiments With Truth – Gandhi and Images of Nonviolence' (October 2014 – February 2015), staged in the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, is the video installation of the contemporary artist Kimsooja entitled 'The Needlewoman' (2005). Currently artist in residence at Cornell University, in a discussion of her work at the gallery, Kimsooja explained how she explores forms of connection, healing, and awakening, through the inspiration of horizontal and vertical structures of fabric and the energy generated by the needle and thread. In the video she does so on a global scale, standing motionless on crowded streets in different parts of the world as people weave past her, some seeing her, some ignoring her. In this way she conceptualises the separation and the joining of diverse cultures, and the visibility and invisibility of the needlewoman through time and space.

Parallels may be drawn between the work of these artists and the issues that have been raised in this study. Emin and Perry make evident the continuity of the tradition of textile skills and show the allusive and narrative power of textiles through the concepts that may be elicited from their work. The performance art of Kimsooja moves beyond material representations of the craft to encapsulate elemental aspects of women's textile crafts, their ubiquity, timelessness, flexibility and capacity for self-affirmation.

The vibrant state of textile making at the present time shows that not only have boundaries defining and separating art and craft have been overcome, but that gender differences have been surmounted, and men as well as women are involved in making textiles. Nevertheless, textile practices remain a primarily female occupation. Women have been involved in this activity from the beginnings of societies and, as this study reveals, the representation of women and their textile

making in literary texts from ancient to modern are reminders of the significance and the continuity of this heritage. Textual images of the spinning, weaving and stitching of women contribute to piecing together the muted narrative of the history of women and illustrate the resilience of the complex web that connects contemporary women to their forebears, women of the distant past. The present status of the activity and its apparently addictive quality makes it possible to visualise that this connection will survive in perpetuity.



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