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Woven Together: Women Creating Stories Through Textiles

Jamie Eason
jeason@skidmore.edu

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James Eason
Class of 2023
(230) 216-7229

Faculty Advisors:
Gregory Spinner
Jordana Dym

Woven Together: Women Creating Stories Through Textiles

Self-Determined Major Capstone

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There is no limit to the forms stories can take; in addition to oral or written modes of storytelling, narratives can also be depicted in textiles. The added material quality of crafted stories, and the increased labor that they require, bring to light new concerns that a story may be registering. Through practical application, I explore the relationship between textiles and storytelling and the role they play in the lives of women. Although many modern conceptions of the historical lives of women place them in a purely subsidiary role where women remain invisible and inside the home, myths and legends can reveal a less recognized account. The stories of Philomela, Xochiquetzal, the Valkyries, and the Lady of *Lanval* illustrate ways in which textiles signify various types of feminine power. I intend to both tell and interrogate their stories, connecting them to my own practice of making textiles.

Key Stories and Figures

Each of my four textiles represent a central female figure. These women all originate from different cultures and different stories. While they are each unique, they each add a new complication to the themes in question. Knowing their stories is imperative to understanding the role that each play in the collection. A zip file has been submitted alongside this document containing pictures of each textile piece.

Philomela the Weaver

The first textile piece on which I worked, and thus the first to be told, is that of Philomela. Though there are many sources which document her struggle, I relied upon Ovid's telling "The Story of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela" in his *Metamorphoses*. Ovid begins the story by explaining that Procne, princesses of Athens and older sister to Philomela, married King Tereus of Thrace on a day haunted by ill-omens. After their marriage she moved to her

husband's homeland. After 5 years, Procne told her husband she missed her sister and that she wished to visit with her. Tereus kindly agreed and set off for Athens immediately. When he arrived and explained her sister's wish, Philomela eagerly agreed to return with him as she had experienced the same loneliness without the close companionship of her sister that motivated Procne's request (Ovid 144). However, she was unaware of the lust that was sparked in Tereus when he laid eyes upon her. When they arrived on the shores of Thrace she was not greeted by her sister, rather Tereus dragged her deep into the dark and wild woods to a derelict, windowless hut (Ovid 146). There he raped her and subsequently cut out her tongue to prevent her from talking about his violation. When returning to palace, Tereus, sorrowful and weeping, informed Procne that Philomela died.

Procne grieved for her sister, unaware that she resided in the country, yet remained trapped and mute. Tereus constructed a stonewall around Philomela's cabin but allowed servants in to keep her alive. To stave off insanity, she was allowed a loom, as it was considered only natural that a woman be set to weave while confined indoors. Though, she did not spend her time merely weaving fabrics, instead, she spent the year after her initial capture executing a plan. Using purple yarns on a white background, Philomela wove her story together. She created a masterpiece telling all about the horrors Tereus inflicted on her (Ovid 148). When she finally finished, she sent an old woman with the tapestry to her sister. Upon unravelling the textile, Procne understood the transgression which had occurred, but also, that her sister was alive. Under the cover of a festival for Bacchus, Procne dressed up in pelts and vines like a maenad, the female devotees to Bacchus, and found the cabin which housed her sister. With the frenzied cry of the wild women, Procne broke down the door to reveal her sister, irrefutably alive. Procne dressed Philomela up in the same disguise and sprung her from her prison (Ovid 149). Hiding in

the palace, the two properly reunited before devising a plan for retribution to fall upon Tereus. Though against her maternal instincts and genuine love for her son, Procne decided that to properly get vengeance, Tereus must be disgraced in return and have his legacy ruined. Procne killed her and Tereus' son and with Philomela's help, prepared his body to become a feast (Ovid 150). When served to Tereus, he was unaware of what the food was made of and ate his fill. After he asks for his son to join him, Philomela entered the room carrying his bloody head. Enraged by the sight and sickened by the realization that he cannibalized his own son, he grabbed a sword and chased after the sisters. As they ran from him Philomela and Procne transformed into the red-bellied birds, the nightingale and the swallow respectively, while Tereus turned into the war-like hoopoe (Ovid 151).

The Valkyries, the Fortune Tellers

Valkyries are featured in many stories in Norse mythology due to their semi-divine status and connection to Odin. They are frequently depicted as shield maidens who preside over battlefields and choose worthy warriors from the fallen to spend their afterlife residing in Valhalla, preparing to join Odin's army. In the Darraðarljóð poem found in *Njal's Saga*, they are not free from their military association.

At the start of the poem, a man saw twelve hooded riders arrive at a cottage. After they entered, he snuck around to a window where he witnessed the women set up a very strange loom. These women, which he identified as Valkyries, used men's intestines to string the warp and weave the weft (*Njal's Saga* 303). Instead of stone weights, the warp was held in tension by the severed heads of men who presumably died in battle. The gruesome replacements for textiles were paired with equally anomalous tools, for a sword acted as the loom beater while arrows functioned as the shuttles and a spear as the heddle. And as they wove, they chanted together.

They foretold the bloodshed to come in the battle of Clontarf, predicting that both a King and an Earl would die (*Njal's Saga* 305-306). After their chanting ended, the Valkyries ripped their woven work from the loom and tore it into pieces. With each keeping their shred of the gory textile, they got back onto their horses and rode from the cabin; six left to the north and six headed south (*Njal's Saga* 307).

Xochiquetzal, the Flower Goddess

Xochiquetzal was a major goddess in Aztec society. She is commonly recognized as a flower goddess in post-colonial documents, as “Xochi” means flowers, but in practice she had a very broad domain. As she was a married young woman, she was known to be a goddess of fertility and vegetation, but she also “presided over the crafts of spinning, weaving, and embroidery” (Quiñones Keber 187). In fact, her connection to handicrafts is not just a passing association as she is thought to have invented the practice. Moreover, she is the patroness of all artisans and makers of luxury goods, particularly silversmiths, painters, and sculptors. These types of crafts were classified as her domain alongside textile production, because “Xochiquetzal was the essential creative force” and consequently, “those who participated in creative arts—transforming nature into art—paid homage to her” (Granziera 89). In visual renderings, like the *Codex Telleriano Remenis*, her domain is “symbolized by the batten, which recalls the household weaving that were traditionally performed by females in Mesoamerica. It also alludes to the capacity of women as creators, of life as well as cloth” (Quiñones Keber 187). Between the gendered connection made between textile creation and children and her status as a goddess of organic growth, people often made offerings to her for help with childbirth.

In addition to Xochiquetzal’s association with birth, she is documented to have committed the first act of adultery, cheating on her husband Tlaloc with Tezcatlipoca. In turn,

“she epitomized young feminine sexual power and was associated with licentiousness” (Granziera 88). Growing her domain even more, as a result of her adulterous appearance in myth, “Xochiquetzal was associated with both *ahuianimes/ahuiateteos* (‘prostitutes’) and *maqui* (‘ritual priestesses’) who accompanied unmarried young warriors” (Granziera 89). Similarly, girls born on her patron day were considered to become either good embroiderers or prostitutes.

The Fae Lady of “Lanval”

The story of Sir Lanval and his faerie lover has been told by many authors in the medieval period. Marie de France, one of the few acclaimed female poets at the time, authored one of the first written accounts of the couple. She wrote her version in French, titled *the Lais of Lanval*, but it was quickly translated into many languages as she set a standard for the story.

The Lady, an unnamed but powerful fae noblewoman, enters the story when she sent two handmaids, dressed in rich, dark purple tunics, to retrieve Lanval as he rested in a field. Because of his well-mannered nature and dedication to the chivalric code, he went with the servants to meet the Lady. The maids brought him to a large tent made from luxurious fabrics. She greeted him dressed in a white, ermine cloak decorated with purple alexandrine (de France 97-106). Upon laying eyes on the beautiful woman, Lanval fell in love with her. In turn, the Lady professed that she had fallen in love with him when she spotted him in the field and that she would like for them to be together, but if he agrees he must never tell anyone about her or he will never see her again (de France 163-170). He eagerly agreed to these conditions, and they formed both a physical and economic union.

Later, when Lanval returned to the court of King Arthur, newly wealthy and flaunting his generosity, he became very popular with the other knights. Queen Guinevere took note of this and approached him seeking to start an affair. He initially refused her on the basis that he could

not betray his King. Insulted by his rejection, Guinevere insulted him and implied that if he is not attracted to her than he must be a pedophile. In his anger, Lanval issued his own insult and declared that his lover is more beautiful and mannered than she (de France 291-307). The Queen turned tail and fled to Arthur, claiming that Lanval had dishonored her by trying to convince her to start an affair, and that when she refused, he insulted her and claimed to have a lover more beautiful and fair than her. This angered Arthur, and in a rage the King called for Lanval to be put on trial (de France 363-366). Meanwhile, after Guinevere left him, Lanval realized his mistake and that he had broken his oath to his Lady. He called for her, but she refused to appear before him; he asks for her mercy, and she refuses him.

When the king's men came for him, he went unresistingly. In front of the King and his judiciary body, as well as an audience of other knights and nobleman, Lanval argued against the accusations, but since he could not prove that his lover exists, his argument was doubted. However, before the barons could come to a final judgement, two young women on horseback approached the court. They were beautifully dressed in purple taffeta and their appearance stopped the proceedings (de France 471-476). They asked the King for proper lodgings for their Lady who was on her way. He granted this of them. After this, the council reconvened to announce their decision. But before they did, two more beautiful maidens arrived on Spanish mules and dressed in Phrygian silks (de France 509-513). When they greeted King Arthur, they came with the same message, that their lady was on her way and requesting lodging. The King granted this request and brought the two new women to the previous pair. And again, the court reconvened to dictate their judgement, when the council is interrupted for the final time.

They watched a last, unaccompanied, woman approach. Her beauty stunned the court into silence, Lanval most of all. She rode atop a well-bred horse and was accompanied by a

greyhound while a sparrowhawk rested on her wrist. The court eagerly consumed the vision of her white linen shift dress, which was laced up the sides, revealing her fair skin. She also donned a dark purple cloak, and her curly blonde hair shone golden in the sun (de France 559-574). The whole of the court was enchanted by her beauty. Sir Lanval exclaimed his love for her and repentance for his broken oath. When she reached the King, she dismounted and let the cloak fall in order to be better seen by the gathered crowd (de France 605-605). She explained the truth of the situation, that Guinevere was lying and that she was Sir Lanval's famed lover. None could refute Lanval's claim that she was the most beautiful woman in the world, even more so than Guinevere. Having successfully proven himself, Sir Lanval was cleared of the charges. Remounting her steed, the Lady left the court of King Arthur, not even using the room that had been prepared for her. Lanval followed after his love and leapt onto the horse behind her, and she spirited him away to Avalon (de France 638-641).

Why Textiles?

Inspired by Skidmore's history of promoting "Creative Thought Matters," I wanted to utilize my capstone experience as an opportunity to exercise both my creative and analytical skills. I have engaged in many different types of creative projects throughout my academic career, and I hoped to reflect this, as well as my appreciation for the unique learning opportunities Skidmore provides in my capstone. The seeds of this project were planted in a class in which we briefly discussed the correlation between textiles and fiction. Common poetics and metaphors relate the two; for example, the popular phrase "weaving a story" brings to mind an image of someone weaving sentences as if they were yarn. Moreover, the English words for "text," as in a written work, and "textile" both come from the Latin root *texere* which means "to weave." As I have a personal love for textile arts, the connection between my subject of study

and my hobby bloomed into this senior capstone. When considering my different options for a creative approach, it was important to me that the format allowed for me to fully realize the concerns of the stories through the act of doing, rather than just another retelling. This is supported by a common belief among practitioners that “crafting crafts the practitioner, that what we make, makes us... In this case, crafting, as a social experience, shapes the crafters – what they make, makes them” (Cartwright 161). There is much to learn through form, both about the structure and the subject. By acting out the type of work I represent, I am able to gain a more nuanced understanding about the experiences I am studying. As textile production is a very labor-intensive process, I have formed a deep connection to the figures that I study, as well as women throughout history.

Just as what I make, makes me, so too does crafting act on its participants. Spanning across many cultures, textile production and storytelling were turned into a communal process. Whenever possible, craftsmen would turn production into “social events,” which was a key factor in community building, especially for smaller villages (Cartwright 162). As a way to pass time and entertain themselves during the long and laborious process, people would take the opportunity to share stories, whether they be gossip or myth. In doing so, they transformed and were transformed by the stories they told, “textile production at large functioned within and contributed to the reproduction of wider cosmologies, setting up contexts where knowledge could be modified and transferred. These craft-related contexts would have valued, and given weight to, knowledge that was acquired and reborn in the practice of weaving and spinning” (Cartwright 162-163). Women were not passive vehicles or receptacles for the preservation of narratives. They had an influential role in the vernacular interpretations and values imparted by the stories, particularly to children as they often shared the same spaces during these activities.

One of my primary concerns was analyzing the relationship between storytelling and femininity. Textiles provided an apt forum as they have been considered “woman’s work” across much of the world. Ben Cartwright explains that in early Viking age textual and archeological evidence “suggest[s] textile production was a key element in essentialized notions of being female” (Cartwright 162). This association between women and weaving is not limited to old Norse societies, as archeologists have recovered decorative spindle whorls and other tools meant for ceremonial rather than practical use. Regardless of their specific cultural contexts, “Texts, like textiles, are intricately connected to the process of creation and their creators, while texts’ life extends far beyond them” (Karanika 5). Whether the result be a legacy that spans centuries or a direct impact on the growing generation, textile production provides a space for the establishment and reinforcement of community through shared labor and additive storytelling. Women, textiles, and storytelling are deeply linked through their histories and development, and as such, my capstone explores these interwoven concepts.

As alluded to previously, textile crafts are embedded within my personal history. For thirteen years I have been needlepointing, sewing for seven, and embroidering for six. Although weaving is a new skill for me, I felt it was crucial to the project because many of my stories are concerned with weaving specifically. Studying the relationship between textiles and stories must be done through creative processes, because, as Cartwright explains, “By investigating skill sets, as learnt histories of body movement, handed down over the generations, we can study how people were both influenced by and, at the same time, influencing the social and material worlds they lived in” (162). My grandmother, Sandra Eason, is the one who introduced me to fabric crafts, needlepoint in particular. It felt thematically appropriate to me to complete a project exploring the communal and often intergenerational legacies of stories and feminine labor

through a skill I learned through my own experience. By leaning into my personal history, I discovered more about the intensive labor required and the deeply feminine history of textile production.

Process and Interpretation

Philomela was the piece I worked on first, with which I decided to use needlepoint as her technique, which is a wide grid canvas that is filled with a basketweave stitch (image 1). The bulky stitch fills the canvas from one end to the other making it a plush, traditional tapestry. Needlepoint was the best choice for Philomela given that she is weaving a tapestry, thus needlepointing visually matches her own textile production. Moreover, this project is deeply grounded in my personal history, because needlepoint was the first textile production skill I learned. As both my first and oldest story, it felt preordained that it would be the best pairing. Additionally, my first technique, needlepointing, also represents the command over textiles and my own passion that I gained as a child.

In this tapestry, Philomela is mid-weave in a windowless room with just a loom to depict her experience of regaining her voice through textiles. Even though she experienced a major violation and loss of bodily autonomy at the hands of Tereus, she is able to regain that control through her weaving anticipating how she and Procne will seek retribution. As Andromache Karanika explains in her book *Voices at Work*, the textile functions as substitute voice for Philomela, “The theme of work ‘authorizes,’ as I argue, the female voice in early Greek epic. As we follow the emergence of the female voice in the epic world, we continue to explore the context of work as an important performance background” (Karanika 5). As she is literally unable to speak, weaving functions as an accessible means of reopening communication. In my

collection, Philomela demonstrates autonomy as a mode of power. Her production of textiles facilitates her reclamation of her own bodily and narrative autonomy.

Just as her tapestry carries its own message, so too does my visual interpretation. The design of her tapestry was crucial to the effectiveness of the piece, as “Textiles not only have a voice of their own through their patterns, but also, at the production stage, were the audience and recipients of many unrecorded voices” (Karanika 5). When designing the image, I chose to diverge from Ovid’s scene by having Philomela weaving the three birds that she, Procne, and Tereus turn into. In doing so, I sought to represent her story and reclaiming of autonomy holistically rather than just depict one scene. I included the colors Ovid specifies by using only purples for the birds on a white background, rather than their natural colors (image 1b). Additionally, this harkens back to the scholarly theory that what Philomela actually weaves words into her tapestry, rather than visual representations, and thus the fabric would look like mottled bruises, as a physical representation of the bodily and sexual violence (Curley 195).

My next piece was the *Darraðarljóð*, the story of the Valkyries. As this story also revolves around the act of weaving, I had to choose between the Valkyries and Philomela as to who would be assigned weaving. I ultimately decided to weave the Valkyries as there is a greater focus on the loom in their poem. Subsequently, I chose to have the piece remain on the loom to re-emphasize physicality and the importance of the structure in the design (image 2). When creating my design, I decided to change the sword from a beater to a longer shuttle as I thought the image would be clearer, as well as include the presence of the sword-as-tapestry-beater without overcrowding the space with too many elements. Another key aspect to the designing of the image was deciding how I would depict the Valkyries tapestry, which was finalized as a

bloody sword to represent the war (image 2c). The simplicity of the image promotes further attention to the loom and tools used to create it.

The creation process was one of exploration and problem solving. As I was least familiar with weaving out of all the techniques, I encountered many new problems and difficulties. At the most complex point, about two thirds of the way up the tapestry, I was working with nineteen different strands in about eight colors. The repeating colors and complex shapes made the process slow as it also involved unraveling sections and re-weaving them, the largest of which was eight lines, or half an inch. It was then that I felt a little like Penelope, the wife of Odysseus who spent three years weaving a bridal veil every day and unwinding it every night. After I had finished the weaving portion, I went back and, with a needle, added in smaller details which could not be woven in, like the feathers on the arrows or the blood dripping off the heads (images 2e and 2f).

In analyzing the power of textiles, the Valkyries represent the mode of violence. While Valkyries are considered shield maidens, they are not acting as such in this story. Rather, violence is registered through “the metaphor of weaving as the vehicle for representing that valkyries’ task of deciding warriors’ fates in battle, a change that significantly domesticated and feminized the earlier masculine image. Although no longer present at the scene, the valkyries were still in charge, as they wove men’s destinies” (Jochens 137). While fairly exceptional due to the semi-divine status of the figures in question, the Valkyries redefine power and the limits of what is possible for textile production. The violence needs not to be physically present in order for women to achieve an avenue of control over it. The Valkyries also challenge the gender roles through this associated with violence, “Although the valkyries’ role of deciding men’s fate in war is feminized by the metaphor of the loom, the expression ‘web of war’ (*vefr darraðar*)

retains the ambiance of battle” (Jochens 137-8). Returning to the poetic and linguistic connection between textiles and texts, the *Darraðarljóð* explores the same connection. The “web of war” allows women to apply feminine powers to masculine spaces. Other stories of the Valkyries masculinize them in order to permit entrance to the male battlefield, yet the *Darraðarljóð* reinserts an unquestionably feminine power, the loom, and as such, the Valkyries do not have to relinquish their femininity in order to participate. Furthermore, textile production functions as a “venue for the exchanging of gossip and stories that shaped their social worlds” (Cartwright 173). In the case of the *Darraðarljóð* Valkyries, their telling of stories shapes not only their own social world, but the physical world of men. They demonstrate a substantial and unique power, as they use a masculine force against men without compromising their femininity or endangering themselves. The Valkyries also demonstrate what communal labor may look like. While Norse women were not prophesizing the deaths of warriors or the outcomes of battles, they did tell stories which shaped the world around them, and possibly dictate or encourage violence in response.

Xochiquetzal is my most unique figure as she is not associated with just one story, nor does she have a famous appearance in which she demonstrates her power over her domain. While also associated with weaving like other figures in the project, Xochiquetzal is also known as the goddess of spinning and embroidery. Because of this, I chose to use embroidery as my technique for her (image 3). For her design, I had more creative freedom to create something more abstract. While we only see the bottom of her face, her flirtatious personality and signature butterfly nose plug identifies her as the Goddess (image 3b). Behind her hang drop spindles; the threads being spun are formed into to resemble suggestive silhouettes (image 3a). Drop spindles were not a common type of spindle, as drawn references depict supported-spindles which were

used while seated. However, there are many archaeological artifacts of decorated spindle whorls, a semi-spherical cap at one end of the spindle which is used to maintain speed and tension.

Archaeologist Elizabeth M. Brumfiel shows that “spindle whorls are readily identifiable and almost imperishable. Their frequencies in archaeological contexts provide a good gauge of the intensity of cloth production in ancient Mexico” (230). In my design, the whorls are positioned at the bottom of the spindle, as that allows for the spindle to spin slower but for a longer time. As the feminine figures being spun are meant to be on display to passersby, it was most logical for the whorls to be on the bottom of the spindle. Additionally, I adapted a decorative design from a spindle whorl for her earring.¹ In order to represent and emphasize the goddesses’ association with life and growth, the whorl decoration I chose is of a flower (image 3b).

To represent Xochiquetzal’s domain over female sexuality, she stands in a doorway to a brothel. Her smirk invites the viewer, or perhaps a client, into the brothel. As both an environmental and a domestic goddess, she is in transition between the two spaces, bridging the gap between the public and private aspects of her domain. Publicly, a woman’s career may be defined as weaving, but privately, she may also be a prostitute. Or the opposite may be true: that in the home a woman may make textiles for profit, while in public she may be inaccurately labelled a prostitute due to the strong connotation between the two careers. Xochiquetzal represents the role of sexuality as a form of power, “Women who worked outside the control of male kin were viewed with some suspicion; the embroiderers, presumably full-time professionals working for particular cults, the court, or directly for the market, were thought to run the risk of becoming ‘very great whores’ by Sahagún's noble informants. But disapproval did not translate

¹ Though it is anachronistic, the whorl design I chose was from a contiguous culture, that being the Maya, but due to the sketch presented in the journal and the shapes in the design itself, it was well suited to adapt to embroidery.

into control” (Clendinn 163). Through their own sexuality, women are able to gain financial and social independence. In turn, textile production works as metaphor for establishing one’s sexual skill.

The Lady from the *Lais of Lanval* focuses not on the creation of textiles, but their post-production use. I decided to use a style heavily focused on fabrics, as her story is more focused on the possession and utilization of garments and household textiles, rather than their production. For her technique I chose to applique the quilt as a way to keep my lines as crisp as possible. I also chose a lace trim in order to finish the back and give it the feeling of a framed portrait (image 4). The Lady uses fabrics as a display of her wealth and aristocratic status. As such I decided to present a snapshot of her riding into the city to save Lanval. In my fabrics I chose patterns to match the natural details, like brown stripes and green blotches to make trees. For the Lady’s hair, I used a golden flower pattern to give the appearance of her curls while evoking an ethereal and otherworldly quality (image 4d). Through the close up I was able to depict her dress and cloak in more detail. I sewed folds into her cloak to give dimension and texture (image 4b). For the lacing on her dress, I braided three threads together and crisscrossed them up her side to add a three-dimensional aspect and bring further attention to the glimpse of skin that is revealed (image 4a).

The Lady demonstrates the political power that textiles can have. In a feudal society like that of King Arthur, power was determined by status, as such, in the *Lais* “the fairies embody economic and social independence” (Leet 2). In medieval Europe, wealth and social standing constituted power. There are countless ways in which wealth could be signified, “Descriptions of each fairy’s physical appearance and her luxurious garments, as well as the animals surrounding her, lend texture, depth, and meaning to her body... and allude to her wealth and courtly

mannerisms. Instead of focusing solely on her sexual body, the gaze also scans the animals she brings to emphasize wealth, autonomy, courtliness, and nobility” (Leet 2). Beauty could be achieved through material objects and tools, but they were expensive. One such method was the ability to abstain from physical labor, which required the staff and means to delegate such tasks. By sending servants ahead of her, dressing in expensive fabrics, and being accompanied by high pedigreed animals, the Lady was able to establish herself in the upper echelons of the political hierarchy before she even introduced herself. To represent this aspect of her power, I included the sparrow hawk on her arm; even the repeated specification of purple dyed fabrics is an indicator of her wealth and status (image 4c). Additionally, analysis of the original French poetics demonstrates the connection between the language and textiles, specifically as it relates to politics. Gilmore-Hunt points to “The word *senglement*, meaning "signaling" as well as "only," [which] tells us, the readers, that the textiles are again acting as special signals. What the textiles signal or highlight to the barons of the court is the beauty of the maiden's flesh or bodies” (187). Through poetic and physical indications, Marie de France deliberately and thoroughly establishes the power and status that the Lady enjoys.

This type of poetic signaling is not unique to this scene. Even when she did not need to perform her status for the public, the Lady was able to afford intricate fabrics to decorate her sleeping quarters; the casual manner of which situates the Lady above Lanval. He accepts her advances, not the other way around, flipping the typical gender hierarchy. She utilizes the politics of this power to become not his equal but his better, and subsequently, a superior to the council of Lords. When she enters court, “She is objectified and powerful, consumed by voyeurs in her diegetic environment in order to accomplish her goal of freeing Lanval. In addition to Spearing's argument that she desires power, I suggest she desires Lanval and uses her political,

economic, sartorial, and visual power to rescue him” (Leet 3). Textiles, as a sign of her wealth and status, facilitate her success in her conquest and freeing of Lanval. She becomes his knight in shining armor, or rather, his knight in revealing dresses.

Collective Analysis

When choosing my figures, I decided on featuring one mortal, one goddess, and two semi-divine women. In doing so, I aimed to show the broad range of stories that explore gender and labor through textiles. These stories play a direct role in real women’s lives either as representations of their experiences or role models defining how to act. Through studying these stories and myths closely, I realized that each held an example of how textiles hold opportunities for the central female figure. These stories demonstrate to women different ways to achieve power, whether that be utilizing their own autonomy and sexuality or manipulating the violence and politics of others. Moreover, in many cultures, sumptuary laws reserved the color purple for the high aristocracy and royalty, which was due, in part, because the dye was both rare and expensive. As such, purple textiles are frequently used as a status symbol. While the color is only specified in two of the stories, its use across all four pieces provides both a unifying motif and a metaphor for each woman obtaining power.

Furthermore, through the collection of four pieces, I explore dynamics of publicity and privacy. Philomela is completely alone in her cabin; the Lady is completely outdoors and incredibly visible to a large crowd; the Valkyries begin and end their story traveling to and from the house and spend their time indoors in a community environment; and last but not least, Xochiquetzal is in a transitional space, a doorway, between in and outside and is visible to a presumable client. This complex relationship between privacy and publicity is not found only in

stories, as “the products of women’s labor circulated beyond the household” (Brumfiel 226). Even though they were made inside, they were not supposed to be hidden there. Textiles are central to each location; as such, they play a role in both public and private life.

As modern notions of history frequently, and falsely, dismiss women as merely subjugated by patriarchal societies, I intended to refute those ideas. These misconceptions are not arbitrary. Misogyny is irrefutably a present and aggressive force acting against each of the four figures I chose, which was precisely why they made apt subjects. The modes of control they demonstrate do not destroy this system of oppression. It is by working within the patriarchy that women can gain these types of power. As Leet explains about *the Lais of Lanval*, “despite [the Lady’s] agency as her beloved’s benefactor and savior, each fairy’s body becomes the physical evidence of the veracity of her lover’s claims. Her objectification, therefore, is inextricably linked with her autonomy” (2-3). The patriarchy encourages the male members of court to objectify the Lady, which she consequently uses as a weapon against them. Though members within a society may consider it to be a challenge to the system, this power functions by taking advantage of structures already in place. As individuals living in oppressive communities, women were unable to revolutionize the social order. Yet, this did not mean textiles could not provide a solace or a tool to benefit the lives of women.

Culmination of Cultural Stories

As the name suggests, my Self-Determined Major, “Cultural Stories,” focuses on the study of stories from various cultures that explore the human condition through the natural and supernatural. To put it in more direct terms, I study mythology, folklore, and religious stories. Having completed courses in six departments at Skidmore and two different disciplines while

abroad in Sweden, the interdisciplinary nature of my major easily translates into a creative project. While designing my capstone experience, I used the different areas I have studied as a guiding force. “Cultural Stories” is comprised of four different pillars, each of which is a distinct culture: Classical myth, Norse myth, Aztec myth, and Arthurian legends. Thus, each of these pillars needed to be represented by my capstone. Separately, they each are pictured in their own piece, but together they deepen our understanding of how the human condition is informed by the relationship between women, storytelling, and textiles.

This project is further reflective of my time at Skidmore as the Self-Determined Major is constructed from foundational, methodological, and theoretical courses. In designing my major and writing the proposal, I had to be intentional in what I chose for each category. As an extension and culmination of my major, my capstone also embodies these structures. My pillars act as the foundation, textile art is my methodology, and I apply the theory I learned through my interpretations. While I have not taken any courses about textiles at Skidmore, I gained this experience in a class I took while abroad, Scandinavian Fashion and Textile Art Workshop. By utilizing a new methodology, I am able to take what I have learned one step further by applying it to a new format.

In weaving together academic and creative modalities, I have gained a deeper understanding of both the labor involved in the production of textiles and the stories themselves. As each story and each design is deeply invested in femininity, the role of women is illuminated through the distinct modes of power—autonomy, violence, sexuality, or politics—that textiles lend to women. Moreover, the narratives reveal a concern with the tension between privacy, publicity, and textiles. Through the creation of textiles, women also facilitate the creation of community as the labor draws people together whenever possible. By building on my own

history with textile art, I am contributing both academically and personally to the perpetuation of the technical skills and the collective memory of world literature.

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