

# “Patchwork and Authorship”

## *The Art of Fiction* Workshop 1

3 May, 9.30-18.00

Digital Humanities Lab, University of Exeter, Streatham Campus

Organised by Tricia Zakreski and Alex Gushurst-Moore

9.30-10.00 Coffee, welcome, and introduction to *The Busy Bee*

10:00-11:00 Keynote 1

### **Jennie Batchelor, “Lives in Pieces: or, Writing as/and Patchwork in the Long Eighteenth Century”**

Drawn from a longer project on the relationship between craft and creativity, this paper explores the relationship between patchwork and authorship in writers from Jane Barker (1652-1732) to Catherine Hutton (1756-1846). Arguably more than any other needlecraft, patchwork was intimately associated with writing via the paper templates to which fabric swatches were commonly secured prior to piecing. And yet it is also the needlecraft that has the most difficult relationship to writing. A non-mimetic textile form, made from scraps using a handful of basic stitches in the interests of thrift – was, until the late-twentieth century, often viewed as the poor relation to decorative embroidery and other fibre arts. Such pejorative associations were commonly mobilised by eighteenth-century reviewers who deployed patchwork metaphors to condemn the uneven or shoddy work of (usually female) novelists. Feminist literary scholarship (e.g. Anderson 1999, King 2002) has recently sought to recuperate the patchwork metaphor and its unique affordances. For many, the value of patchwork lies in the non-normativity, incoherence (Swenson 2005), failure and imperfection (McGrath 2019) that the form is seen to represent. Such readings, which run the risk of recapitulating the patchwork as hack-work criticism levelled by reviewers, are difficult to sustain when the complex material realities of planning and executing patchwork are taken into account. This paper begins by exploring the patchwork method via a series of experimental novelists who mobilise the writing-as patching-and-stitching metaphor in particularly ambitious ways to theorise their frame narratives’ composition, form and philosophy. It argues that for writers such as Jane Barker, Jane Collier and Sarah Fielding, patchwork is not only, or even primarily, a metaphor so much as an aesthetic that envisions literary creativity as collaborative and designedly improvisational, and that boldly wears the labour of its production for all to see. The paper concludes with an extended discussion of the patchwork practices of accomplished crafter, 'Female Collector', travel writer, novelist and journalist, Catherine Hutton who inherited the legacies of Barker, Collier and Fielding and developed transformed them into an ambitious method of curating her life and work for posterity.



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**Samantha Matthews, “Scraps on a Woman: recuperating cliché in women's album culture”**

My area of expertise is C19th album poetry and collaborative manuscript albums in relation to anxieties about cultural feminisation. Rather than present a case study of a specific album or linked books created within a coterie, I will sample a selection of the texts, images, objects, page openings and sequences from women's albums 1820s-1880s to present an indicative taxonomy of common verbal, visual and material album tropes and conventions. These miscellaneous motifs were routinely ridiculed in printed discourse as evidence of the sentimentality, imitativeness, inferiority and triviality of women's amateur arts and culture. I consider reasons for the longevity and popularity of such tropes through the C19th despite many women's knowledge of the low cultural credibility of the album aesthetic. I then present close readings of a few examples which demonstrate how groups of women resourcefully and at times reflexively deployed album tropes as part of a shared language, gift exchange, and mutually affirming reciprocal creative practice.

**Luisa Signorelli, “The Polyphonic British Muse: (Close)Reading the Early Modern Literary Anthology”**

By presenting readers with a selection of literary passages by different authors, early modern printed anthologies made, in Barbara Benedict's words, “the modern reader”. According to Benedict and other critics, anthologies shape their readers' critical sensibilities by inviting comparison and contrast among the passages they excerpt. Despite this focus on anthologies as a locus of development of literary taste based on intertextuality, close reading is not an established method in this field. Instead, existing scholarship mostly looks at anthological poetic selections from a quantitative perspective.

This paper will propose a method to investigate the textual and thematic patterns suggested by multi-author literary collections. I will summarise my findings based on evidence gathered from around 10,000 passages anthologised during the eighteenth century, presenting a methodology that anchors database-driven distant reading to textual close reading. I will illustrate this methodology by presenting some examples from my research on Shakespeare's eighteenth-century reception in multi-author anthologies. Rather than merely decontextualising Shakespeare's passages, I will argue that anthologies contextualised Shakespeare within the literary landscape.

I will trace a genealogy from the ‘patchwork poems’ of the first printed commonplace books to the system of rigid attribution and chronological arrangement of the later anthologies, pioneered by *The British Muse* (1738). I will demonstrate that these publications manufactured thematic coherence between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ authors, but also proposed a linear progression of these shared themes by highlighting a chain of textual allusions that finds in Shakespeare the forefather of the thematic preoccupations of the present.

In the case of Shakespeare, the anthology opposes existing narratives of his solitary rise to the canon to correlate his fame to a general re-evaluation of vernacular literature. But in the case of other authors and contexts, anthologies remain an underestimated source of evidence of past attitudes towards literary culture.



12.10-12.20 Coffee

12:20-1:20 Panel 2

### **Pragya Sharma, “Learning Needlecraft Skills: Collaborative Making in Victorian India”**

The skills of domestic craft making—including knitting, crochet, lace-making and needlework—were a direct colonial influence, mostly learned by the natives under the aegis of missionary education or through close contact with the British women and their families. The only way to trace these finer points of learning and practising the skill is the memoirs, travelogues, letters, journals and other forms of testimonials, written by British women who happened to be in India as travellers or residents, as early as the eighteenth century. The practice developed strongly during the Victorian period in India, during the nineteenth century with British women themselves actively engaging in these pursuits, mostly out of boredom rather than out of necessity, as much of the literature reveals.

The paper will look at a selection of these writings by British women (as mentioned in the Bibliography) to uncover pieces of evidence of women’s collaborative making. The paper will thus draw connections between women’s writing and the decorative arts, specifically in the second half of the nineteenth century. The research will particularly focus on the spatiality and materiality of these crafts – undertaken in varied kinds of environments, in groups or in isolation, in public or private spaces, using varied types of materials and tools and how and from where these were obtained. Also discussed will be products of making—what were women making and what purpose did that serve? While what is being written is significant, what is also interesting is the way natives have been viewed in contrast to the practice of the British women themselves. This ‘colonial gaze’ is inherent in much of the writings from the nineteenth century. Albeit to a smaller extent, the paper will also draw light on this aspect of the writing

### **Rosalind Wyatt, “The Stitch Lives of London”**

Writing with a needle

A simple idea lands into the mind of this young textile student: I wonder if you can write with a needle?

Thus it was, that during that two year postgraduate study, I spent months in the company of books and archives, sensing potential in this source. It became a visual dialogue between my keen curious eyes and the marks left by those who expressed their humanity in handwritten script. I pick up a needle and thread and begin to stitch, drawing almost – yet in thread into the cloth – the letter one side the cloth the other until I am stitching like its written.

I take it out – out to the public – embroidering in public, on trains, at festivals, showing others what I’m doing and what I am dreaming of and the stories flow...

At a quiet point of retraction, another idea lands: let’s make a tapestry for London.

It’s to be a modern day Bayeux tapestry in garment and embroidery in the voices of Londoners. Each garment is a skin that was worn and loved by somebody. That somebody



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told me their story – sometimes they gave me the garment too. The weight and gesture of that was not lost on me.

It urged me on – story by story – stitch by stitch.

Now there are twenty-five garments. They are all deeply personal because that's all we have – our person and this moment.

Some have been commissioned by big heritage brands, locked away in airless vaults, some are on view. They are the work of many hands, minds, eyes, voices and hearts and one day they will join together to become The Stitch Lives of London.

I look at the handwriting because that's the voice of the person – pressure, slant, speed, impression, ink-flow – all in the detail of that moment when speech arose and was committed to paper.

Not print, but the movement of hand across space. Not glass or screen, but paper or skin which accepts the mark and holds it in message for the next heart, mind and eye to receive.

And that document, holds a remnant of that person – so carefully thought, imagined and then revealed onto a porous surface, which is folded, tucked away, pored over, reread and absorbed, sent across oceans and landed centuries later under my gaze.

13.20-14.00 Lunch

14.00-15.00 Panel 3

### **Catherine Sloan, “The manuscript school magazine: friendship, copying, and the creation of children’s cultures”**

This paper aims at understanding the fruitful connections between schools, manuscript culture, copying, and friendship. The school is an important but neglected space of collective literary production as the nineteenth century saw growing numbers of children spending the majority of their day in schools, sharpening their literacy skills, and engaging in collective activities. Unsurprisingly, this saw a rich culture of amateur magazine making emerge in schools. Children have been acknowledged as particularly avid makers of manuscript magazines, although the emphasis to date has been on home and family (Gleadle & Rodgers, 2022; Burke, 2019). This paper focuses on the *Friends’ School Manuscript Magazine* (1875), one title from a collection of school magazines circulated by children at the Croydon Friends’ School, a small school run by the Religious Society of Friends for boys and girls aged 7 to 14. Produced by a group of four boys, and weaving together stories and anecdotes from adult-authored books and periodicals, the *Friends’ School Manuscript Magazine* illuminates how non-elite children in schools could drive a grassroots literary culture. My paper will first use the magazine to argue that friendship and the collective activities of schoolchildren were an important driver behind the rise and popularity of age-specific books and periodicals at this time, as they helped to identify and shape a set of shared interests (Moruzi, 2012). I will then discuss the role of copying. While literary scholars often dismiss children’s copying as derivative, a developmental stage, or evidence of childhood dependency (Sánchez-Eppler, 2005), this paper draws on the work of children’s sociologists who highlight copying as the way in which children remake, and intervene in, the culture around them (Katz, 2004; Corsaro, 1992). I argue that the *Friends’ School Manuscript Magazine* evidences the creativity of



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children's copying through rich examples of how they adopted and adapted adult-authored literature. Finally, I argue that the porousness and accessibility of manuscript was particularly suited to this grassroots and collective form of children's literary culture.

**Rachel Carroll, "Woman! . . . Your world!" The making and unmaking of women's material worlds in Mary Webb's *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920)"**

Recognition of the relationship between patchwork and qualities of "continuity, stability and tradition" (Hedges, 2014) has played an important role in the feminist recovery of women's textile traditions, with the design, production and preservation of the quilt understood as serving communicative and commemorative needs across generations (Mainardi, 1973; Floyd, 2008; Higgins and Radosh, 2012). Indeed, patchwork has been described as a "major discursive genre" (Mulholland, 1996), through which women, both individually and collectively, are able to "speak." This paper turns to the more ambivalent uses to which patchwork is put in fiction by women writers, focusing on moments of resistance and rupture. To this end, it brings particular attention to the sonic world of material culture and the different ways in which textile artefacts "speak" in women's writing, with rending, tearing and ripping testifying both to acts of gender-based violence and to assertions of women's power and agency. In Mary Webb's *The House in Dormer Forest* (1920), an overlooked work by an often disparaged woman writer, the circulation of textile artefacts – whether through accumulation or divestment, inheritance or donation, appropriation or gift – has particular significance for women and the economies of exchange to which they are subject. This paper will examine how, in the late nineteenth century world of Webb's narrative, women's patchwork practices act to challenge the oppressive effects of "continuity, stability and tradition", especially in relation to institutions of marriage and motherhood. In a novel thickly populated by the decorative arts of leisured women (from fern silhouettes and feather fans to shell grottos and wax wreaths), it is a working woman, Sarah, who most vividly embodies the figure of the artist: moreover, her agency is expressed in acts of destruction as well as creation. Patchwork is arguably a practice premised on the 'unmaking' of textile artefacts, reliant as it is either on the fragments which survive the attrition of wear in contexts of thrift or hardship, or on the unused fabrics set aside or cut out for the purpose in contexts of affluence and leisure. In this context, the paper seeks to foreground the paradoxical properties, and potentially subversive energies, of 'unmaking' in women's patchwork practice.

15.10-16.10 Keynote 2

**Mathelinda Nabugodi, "Masks and Alter Egos: Searching for Bodies in the Literary Archive"**

16.10-16.30 Coffee

16.30-18.00 Collaborative object making (embodied research)

**Harriet Truscott, "Folding, fanning, fumbling: an embodied-research activity through artists' book making"**

The 19th-century *The Busy Bee* brought together writers, from amateurs to best-sellers, in a series of handmade "little magazines," each on a different theme. Each issue was circulated among the contributors for enjoyment, comment and criticism. At the moment of writing, contributors had no way of knowing what others would be creating and had no way of



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editing their work once it was posted to the editor. Over 100 years later, The Bookness Collective is a contemporary group of eight artists and writers who work at the intersection of writing, printing and art, through the collaborative production of artists' books. Like *The Busy Bee*, our works are circulated by post, allowing each member to shape and re-make them in turn.

Drawing on my own experience as a poet and member of The Bookness Collective, I reflect on how artistic collaborations like *The Busy Bee* can demand risk-taking and self-exposure, resulting perhaps in a fruitful re-contextualisation of contributions, or perhaps in the embarrassment of seeing a work 'fail' in comparison with another.

In this embodied research activity, attendees will learn to make a number of simple book forms, discussing their haptic properties and cultural connotations. They will then build on these forms to make and present a small artist's book which responds to the themes of the day. Following Craddock 2020, attendees will reflect as they fold and fan their paper, fumbling with the unaccustomed movements, and experiencing an uncertainty, perhaps, which parallels that of *The Busy Bee's* contributors.



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