'WITHOUT ANY LETTER': SOME HISTORY OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY

by PATRICIA C. BRÜCKMANN

In her recent study of the Bayeux tapestry, Suzanne Lewis argues persuasively that we cannot use only the simple Latin tags on this long embroidery (it is not a tapestry) to come to know its story.[1] The more we attend to the exceptionally detailed images, the more we see ambiguity and complexity. Why does Harold have two hands on reliquaries for oath-taking?[2] Why does he look in one direction while a ship leaves in the other? Why does the Fable of the Fox and the Crow appear three times?

As the complexity of the images becomes clearer, we can look at other questions raised by this document in cloth, the meanings embodied, literally, in the object itself. Why was the tapestry taken out in Bayeux on the Feast of Relics? Did the production of this long storied piece, so carefully made and (ideally) so carefully read; create a sacred relic worth national reverence. Are we, with this embroidered work, in the presence of cultural issues addressed by anthropologists like Annette Weiner and Clifford Geertz[3] and with matters of social history addressed by scholars like Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie,[4] Natalie Davis and Robert Darnton? These argue for the importance of addressing all the objects in and aspects of a location, the smallest episodes in a French village,[5] and for Darnton, the significance of a cat massacre and what can be learned from George Washington's false teeth.[6]

In her *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England*, Alison Shell speaks, as her title suggests, of ways in which orality linked members of a marginalized community.[7] I want to speak of relics, in a wide construction of the term, not just about those located by convention in Catholic churches, as signs of continuity with tradition through the remains of the real physical persons who acted this tradition out, but for other objects which speak without speech, communicate largely without letters, link the present to the past as vividly as bones in an altar. Librarians may not, for obvious reasons, welcome gifts of realia. These objects, of whatever kind, go to museums, this division of institutions signaling in their own way the divisions of culture.

My title, 'Without any Letter', comes from John Lesley, Bishop of Ross, friend to Mary Queen of Scots and implicated in the Ridolfi Plot of 1571. Lesley refers to the receipt of a textile, a cushion cover, sent to the Duke of Norfolk, a possible partner, it was bruited, for Mary. We are told that the material comes marked 'by the Quene's own Armes',

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034193200012632 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and has been worked 'by the Quene's own Hand'. It is beautifully worked,[8] but is even more ambiguous in iconography than the Bayeux tapestry. The motto is *VULNERE VIRESCIT VIRTUS*. The embroidery is graphic. We see a hand with a knife, pruning or cutting vines. There are at least three possible readings: that virtue has grown by being wounded (Mary's sad situation has strengthened her character by trial); that vines are fruitful only when pruned (Mary has a child) or that old vines (Elizabeth I, who was barren) should be pruned or simply cut away, a treasonous message. The trial chose the last interpretation and, on the basis of this and other evidence, the duke was executed in 1572. Not quite so gory a tale, this one, as the story of Philomela, who went home to record her rape at the hands of her brother-in-law in a text/textile to let her sister know; and thus to precipitate the most horrifying dinner party in mythological history.

What is more interesting to me, however, is the allusion to the Queen's 'own' arms and her 'own' hand, with special emphasis on 'own'. The first gives, as it were, her whole person, that history told in that universally recognized pictured form. The second, 'the queen's own hand', is a special identification. As Michael Neill reminds us, the hand was a second self to the Elizabethans.[9] The embroidery is the thing itself, in an absolutely personal way. Penelope, we recall, kept her suitors at bay by unweaving at night what she had worked the day before, personally acting out her resistance with her own hands.

Mary, fortunate enough to have escaped in the Plot that brought down the Duke, did not stop her 'work'. As well as founding the Scots College in Paris, she founded a school of embroidery at Chateaudun before she left France. This establishment in itself should underline the importance of the craft learned there, its ability to make speaking objects. During her long captivity, she continued to embroider. Michael Bath, expert in emblems, has most recently produced a book on *Emblems for a Queen: The Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots*.[10] The Earl of Shrewsbury was Mary's jailer for many years. His wife, the Countess of Shrewsbury, Bess of Hardwick, was her needlework companion. It has been argued, wrongly, that Bess herself had little education. There *is* a Bible, but her rather wider literacy is shown all over Hardwick. My favourites are the large black work figures. These are arts and they are all women.[11] But as Levey's recent catalogue tells us, there are infinite riches at Hardwick, and much 'reading' to do. One of the Hardwick embroideries plays on a variety of elements: the difference between what is said and how it is done and the necessity of knowing a story, in this case, the tale of Actaeon spying on Diana and her maidens. The embroiderer uses the usual stitching conventions in an ironic way: the "important" people are bigger. As is Actaeon. The banner above him reads, in huge letters: ACTAEON EGO SUM. So he may be, but we (and the 'worker') know that the end of the story will find him torn to pieces by Diana's dogs.

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For a clearer view of what Mary's embroideries were like at Hardwick, consult Michael Bath or Levey for details. I am chiefly struck by the fact that they are, at least in contrast to, say, the 'Virescit' piece, relatively small. A friend has suggested that this was deliberate: she never knew when she was going to be moved again. Rolling up her work, as were banners and tapestries brought for state visits or battlefields, the better to impress or depress the hosts or the enemies was not a method open to her, as it was to those who transported these objects with considerable help.[12]

The resting place of Mary's embroideries opens another subject. They are mounted on green velvet at Oxburgh Hall, a moated house in Norfolk, no bad place for a Catholic dwelling. Of the smaller embroideries, my favourites are her dog, Jupiter, grown portly in the captivities (not in Bath) and a ginger cat (Bath, 111.4.75). Bath disagrees with Margaret Swain. An early student of the Marian handwork, she wanted to identify the cat with Elizabeth, (Bath, 111, citing Swain). He is not persuaded, although he notes that 'the cat was an emblem of liberty since it cannot stand being imprisoned'. This would also be a nice Gesnerian application to the royal prisoner.

The transmission of the roundels and cruciform pieces lends another context to the need for seeking out and saving objects or relics. Although it is often argued that Mary's desire that her execution make her out a martyr (the red petticoat, among other gestures), has only the effect of nullifying the status, it is clear that she was widely regarded as such. And this identification makes relics valuable. Many sources tells us of how blood was taken up with handkerchiefs, how this in itself (as for other martyrs) was interfered with by the authorities precisely because it would help to create and sustain a cult. Mary's textiles would be sought, not only for their status as her properties, i.e. in the technical sense, relics of the second class, but, for some at least (and who knew which), of the first as well. Embroiderers of the sixteenth century and their viewers would know that, given the pressure one must put, it is impossible to do this kind of 'work', without pricking a finger.

Where did the embroideries go and why and what can be drawn from their place and transmission? Michael Bath, following Margaret Swain, addresses the first issue. For a full description, see his account.[13] Although Bess of Hardwick would have had possession of this work just after Mary's death; it is unlikely, as Bath argues, that they remained there. They are at Oxburgh Hall and were 'transmitted through various Catholic families—the Howards, Montagus and Bedingfelds—directly from Mary, and not from Bess of Hardwick' (10).[14] Bath is cautious enough not to call these 'relics,' but I have no hesitation in doing so, even if Mary managed not to prick her finger, even if the recipients did not consider her a martyr. The gift would have been a staggering one, not least when it went as a wedding present when a Montagu of Cowdray married a

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Bedingfeld of Oxburgh—intermarriage solidifying a base, accompanying a present without price. A central part of this 'work' was, of course, the ambiguous piece sent by the Queen's own hand to Norfolk. We should view this transmission, this gift-giving as part of the kinship pattern, a subject Annette H. Weiner considers in her *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping While Giving*. [15] As the work of Marcel Mauss and later commentators like Natalie Davis have shown, gifts of any kind are important in creating obligation and in establishing and strengthening networks.[16] There are, as Weiner says, some 'possessions that are not easy to give away. Ideally these inalienable possessions are kept by their owners from one generation to the next within the closed context of family, descent group or dynasty. The loss of such an inalienable possession diminishes the self, and by extension the group to which the person belongs' (6). She cites Unamuno—that we live in memory and by memory, that memory is fundamental to our social life (7). The possessions of which she speaks are 'symbolic repositories of genealogies and historical events' (33). And 'an individual's role' in social life is fragmentary unless attached to something of permanence. The history of the past, equally fragmentary, is concentrated in an object that, with age, becomes increasingly valuable (64). That it is particularly valuable in affirming literal familial or religious kinship of a nation or a cult will be clear enough.

Oxburgh has other history in an enormous map. Maps are also places of ideology, as well as useful charts for getting from one geographical place to another. Claiming terrain and publishing the results is a powerful statement, notably when mapping is done by groups with particular agendas. More work needs to be done on the Catholic Sheldon family of Worcestershire and Warwickshire, founders of the first carpet and tapestry works in England, preceding the famous Mortlake manufactory.

What is important about these? Richard Helgerson argues that the main matter is that they are county maps, filled with local places, sketches of houses; of whatever is special to the place involved.[17] They assert presence. At the Downside Conference on Archives, Georgina Stonor suggested that the red stitches on some of these maps mark the presence of Catholic houses. This needs to be investigated, like the Sheldon carpets themselves and, more broadly, table carpets.

My work on Maria Clementina Sobieska, consort of James III, has been conducted in large part through objects and the disposed scenes that were part of a variety of campaigns to thrust her into the public eye, as part of the larger and unsuccessful campaign to reassert the Stuart claim. The image on the obverse of one of the coins is particularly striking: a Roman woman is driving a biga, with the Sobieski arms on the side, an image of Rome in back, the figure of St. Peter atop a pillar, a replacement, for the emperor, made in 1588, the year of the Armada. The Jacobites often used medals; they were easy to carry and to distribute. The motto

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on the one of the teenaged Clementina rendered as Roman charioteer, struck in 1719, appears embroidered on a table napkin in Scotland in the same year.[18] The best advertisement for legitimacy is canonization. We know that there was the beginning of a cause for James II.[19]

The marriage between Clementina and James was arranged for dynastic purposes. The Catholic Stuarts were poor and needed friends. The pope's goddaughter fitted every need. A devout Catholic, she was connected to nearly all the crowned heads of Europe, wealthy and young enough for molding. I have told her story (and the way it figures in one of Samuel Richardson's novels) elsewhere.[20] The marriage was unhappy, but Clementina was exceptionally pious, as one would want a future queen to be. When she died at the age of thirty-three, she was the subject of spectacular funerals with striking imagery and eventually had a statue in St. Peter's, across from the Fontana stature for the Stuart kings and not very far from Queen Christina and Matilda of Canossa, two other women distinguished, among other things, for their support of the papacy.[21]

Although the spectacles for the funerals, ephemeral events, are no longer available, they were carefully recorded, precisely as potential propaganda. One of the accounts, the *Parentalia*, was clearly designed as a souvenir book. Any Jacobite would want to have it in his collection.[22] Certainly her portrait was done many times. It is central in a display of Stuart portraits at Traquair House. In the Stonyhurst Stuart Parlor (that there is such a parlor is itself a material gesture), she has two portraits; the others only one.

Stonyhurst also has other evidence for an interest in a cause. They have a piece of a dress and a lock of her hair—not so grand, these, as worked pieces, but rather better as objects for promotion. I found a late eighteenth-century document in the British Library, claiming a cure after an invocation of the Venerable Clementina, but there is no record in Rome of any formal start for a cause.[23]

I began my own interest in the importance of material objects in historical and literary study during a visit to Stanbrook some years ago. When two groups of Benedictine nuns were made to leave France; one, now at Colwich Abbey, got a large number of books. Those who settled finally at Stanbrook were able to take a few objects, like a habit which belonged to one of the Carmelites in the next cell, those who were executed and later memorialized by Poulenc. The piece which most drew my attention was a cutwork, an embroidery worked with scissors. This one was an image of the British lion. I am sure that there is a smirk on his face. I do not, of course, know who worked the device, but it speaks to a spirit and to a measure of wit, in very difficult circumstances.

All these pieces, objects, works, are, I would argue, a wholly legitimate necessary part of the historical periods from which they come. They are not all relics, as we used to understand the term, the remains of saints. These tell different stories, but other objects with historical pedigree, tell

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tales too. That they can be seen, in a different way, and touched, gives them a special reality, of a different kind than books and other documents found in libraries. Ian Dickie, former archivist of Westminster, told me a story about his other life, as a parish priest. The children in his charge knew hymns and the appropriate responses, but it became clear to him that they were completely unknowing about the furnishings and fabric of the church. He gave them tours and explained. As it turned out, their parents were just as unknowing as they were. The physicality of the church, a church insistent on, say, the Incarnation and Resurrection, can be lost in our concentration on what we hear, what we say, what we read. This is a great loss. The tale of Mary's work, of Jacobite propaganda, nuns' work in captivity as well as a story of a modern church, emphasize this. The forceful statements of the twenty-fifth session of the Council of Trent on the absolute importance of the holy relics of the saints might be extended, to include the importance of other instructive relics, not least in an age which often seems to want to have everything new.

Giuseppe di Lampedusa's novel, *Il Gattopardo* (Milano, 1958) records the decline of a noble Italian family, at about the time of the Risorgimento. The prince has a much loved dog, Bendico, so when the beast dies, the prince has him stuffed. In the final chapters of decline, the furnishings of the house, its relics (and its relics) slowly leave the premises. Our last view is of the stuffed dog, tossed out of the window. Half way down he assumes the shape of the leopard. The title of the final chapter, from which this scene is taken, is 'De reliquiae,' concerning the relics, and the final comment: 'Fino de reliquiae; fine di tutto,' the end of the relics (remains, whatever we choose to call speaking objects from our history) is the end of everything. If we have read the prince and his story, however, we do not need this gloss: the rejection of the old, the thing itself, speaks for itself.

NOTES

[1] Suzanne Lewis, *The Rhetoric of Power in the Bayeux Tapestry* (Cambridge, 1999).
[2] The Latin label above is SACRAMENTUM. The critical part of the coronation ceremony is, of course, the oath-taking; at this time, when the number of the sacraments was not fixed, the coronation was a sacrament.
[3] Annette Weiner, *Cloth and Human Experience* (London, 1989); Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973).
[4] Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan de 1294 à 1324* (New York, 1975).
[5] Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA., 1983).
[6] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French History* (New York, 1983); *George Washington's False Teeth: An Unconventional Guide to the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2003).
[7] Alison Shell, *Oral Culture and Catholicism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2007).
[8] Michael Bath, *Emblems for a Queen: the Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 2009).
[9] Michael Neill, '"Amphitheaters in the Body": Playing with Hands on the Shakespearian Stage', *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995): 23–49.

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[10] Michael Bath, *Emblems for a Queen: the Needlework of Mary Queen of Scots* (London, 2009).
[11] See Santina Levey, *An Elizabethan Inheritance: The Hardwick Hall Textiles* (London, 1998), and *Embroideries at Hardwick Hall: A Catalogue* (London, 2007).
[12] These hangings have their own significance. See Thomas P. Campbell *et alia*, *Tapestries in the Renaissance: Art and Magnificence* (New York, 2002), but see my review in *Textile History* 22 (1991), 67–82. These tapestries, rich in iconography, could be as much of a teaching tool as stained glass windows. But there are some mistakes in the Latin and the commentary on the iconography is sometimes defective. Dr. Campbell, director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, told me some time ago that Henry VIII ordered new tapestries during the Reformation, with Protestant subjects. See Thomas Campbell, *Henry VIII and the Art of Majesty: Tapestries at the Tudor Court* (New Haven and London, 2007).
[13] Bath, *Emblems*, 'The surviving corpus: what and where?' 9–17.
[14] There are early descriptions of embroidery for Mary's Bed of State.
[15] Annette H. Weiner, *Inalienable Possessions: The Paradox of Keeping While Giving* (Berkeley, 1992).
[16] *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Halls (London, 1990); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Gift in Sixteenth Century France* (Oxford, 2000).
[17] Richard Helgerson, 'The Land Speaks: Cartography, Chorography and Subversion in Renaissance England', *Representations* 16 (1986): 51–82; 'Nation or Estate? Ideological Conflict in the Early Modern Mapping of England', *Cartographica* 30 (1992); See also C. Grant Head, 'The Map as Natural Language: A Paradigm for Understanding', in Christopher Board (ed.) 'New Insights in Cartographic Communications', *Cartographica* 21 (1984), Matthew H. Edney, 'Mapping the Early Modern State: The Intellectual Nexus of Late Tudor and Early Stuart Cartography', *Cartographica* 29 (1992): 89–93.
[18] See Ebenezer Henderson, *Annals of Dumferline* (Glasgow, 1879): 401–2.
[19] See Geoffrey Scott, '"Sacredness of Majesty": The English Benedictines and the Cult of James II', *Royal Stuart Papers* 12 (1998); Bernard et Monique Cottret, 'La Sainteté de Jacques II out Les Miracles du'un Roi Défunt (vers 1702)', *Revue de la Bibliothèque Nationale* 46 (1992): 22–31. See also Gabor Klaniczay, *Holy Rulers and Blessed Princesses: Dynastic Cults in Medieval Central Europe*, translated Eva Palmai (Cambridge, 2002).
[20] Patricia Brückmann, '"Men, Women and Poles": Samuel Richardson and the Romance of a Stuart Princess', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 27 (2003): 31–52. See also my 'Desdemona's Strawberries and Clementina's Ark', in *Eighteenth Century Historical Essays Presented to Phillip Harth* (Madison, Wisconsin, 2001), 207–30. The heroine is sent out to get a book, but she returns with a half-finished textile, the image of Noah and the Ark. Wanting to be married to the Protestant hero, she opts, the scene seems to tell us, for the faith of Noah, in all its iconographical meanings.
[21] This grouping (and the larger question of choice of statuary) needs further work.
[22] See my 'The Triumphs of Clementina', in Peter Davidson and Jill Bepler, eds., *The Triumphs of the Defeated: Early Modern Festivals and Messages of Legitimacy* (Wiesbaden, 2007): 149–172.
[23] MSS Add. 34638 f 247.

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