

The Role of Embroidery in Victorian Culture and the Pre-Raphaelite Circle

I

For many in the nineteenth century, embroidery was indissolubly linked to an idealized view of the past. In 1848, C.H. Hartshorne published an extremely influential book entitled *English Medieval Embroidery*.¹ Interest in medieval forms of needlecraft rapidly spread, encouraged by educational organisations devoted to its propagation. One was the school of the sisters of St. Catherine in Bloomsbury. The image of the medieval embroideress became one of the most popular Victorian icons. It is perhaps most familiar to us from the work of Tennyson. In his *Idylls of the King*, for example, the Lady Elaine is portrayed sitting alone at her embroidery, sick with love for Sir Lancelot:

*Elaine, the lily maid of Astolat,
High in her chamber up a tower to the
east
Guarded the sacred shield of Lancelot;
. . . fearing rust or soilure fashion'd for it
A case of silk, and braided thereupon
All the devices blazon'd on the shield
In their own tinct, and added, of her wit,
A border fantasy of branch and flower,
And yellow-throated nestling in the nest.*²

The Victorians' view enshrined a nostalgia for a mythical era of pre-capitalist production. Embroidery's evocation of medieval practice made it attractive to William Morris and the other members of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The Holy Grail series of tapestries, executed by Morris and Company between 1890 and 1895, reflects such idealization of the Middle Ages. The seven tapestries of this series contain the all-important themes of love, war, death, and "the spiritual life." But their chief significance lies in their demonstration of the skills of individual workmen. In an interview for *Studio* in 1894, Morris said that in the Grail tapestries

a considerable latitude in the choice and

*arrangement of tints in shading etc. was allowed to the executants themselves, who were in fact by nature and training, artists, not mere animated machines.*³

Barbara Morris, author of *Victorian Embroidery*, attributes much of the popularity of needlework to the desire of the rising middle classes to share in what were the traditional pursuits of the leisured classes.⁴ The promise made in an 1889 handbook is illuminating. The reader is assured that the book will cover

*a range of subjects extending from the simplest towel-making to the making of various decorative adjuncts which impart an air of refinement, and without which the most sumptuously furnished apartment is never quite satisfying.*⁵

As an important signifier of status, embroidery was implicated in the social mobility of the modern age. However, its particular value for the middle classes was its ability to evoke a "timeless" era of chivalry and honour, which disguised the relative newness of their acquisition of power and social status.

As well as evoking a medieval ideal, needlework played also a crucial part in the Victorian definition of femininity. Throughout the period, embroidery was used to suggest an ideal of female purity and docility. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, in his painting *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin*, shows the young Mary obediently embroidering under the watchful eye of her mother. Rossetti said of his painting, "That picture of mine was a symbol of female excellence."⁶

The image of the woman seated at her embroidery and surrounded by her family provided a powerful stereotype of domestic femininity. In the following passage from *Church Embroidery, Ancient and Modern* A. Dolby portrays a needlewoman as the