Queering Needlework?

Daniel Fountain

Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework, by *Joseph McBrinn*, London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury, 2021, 272 pp., 16 col. and 71 b. & w. illus., paperback, £23.99.

In her influential book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), Rozsika Parker persuasively argues that 'the development of an ideology of femininity coincided historically with the emergence of a clearly defined separation of art and craft'.[1] She suggests that needlework practices (such as embroidery, needlepoint, knitting, quilting, and so on) have often been seen as feminine, particularly because of their ability to be conducted in a domestic environment understood as being outside the sphere of masculine, capitalist production. Parker began her book with a curious reference to an article published in *The Guardian* in 1970 which observed that the general assumption at that time was that '[r]eal men gamble and fill in football coupons; only sissies and women sew and swell congregations'.[2] However, the discussion of the relationship between masculinity and needlework is absent from the remainder

of her text and has largely remained absent from the field of art history ever since. But what of the so-called 'sissies' and the 'few men and boys who practiced the art for the pleasure it provides and the artistic possibilities it offers'?[3]

It is here that Joseph McBrinn makes an urgent intervention in craft scholarship where 'nearly all of the documenting and theorizing around such practices still seems to suggest that this [needlework] is an exclusive realm of women'.[4] McBrinn sensitively acknowledges that while Parker's re-evaluation of crafts historically practised by women continues to be influential (having been reprinted fourteen times since I.B. Tauris first republished it in 2010), there is now a need to counteract the 'complete omission or the covert marginalization of men within the culture of needlework' (xvii). In *Queering the Subversive Stitch: Men and the Culture of Needlework* McBrinn aims to expand upon Parker's text; to 'explore the social construction of masculinity' and demonstrate how such cultural practices have been 'implicated in the making of the masculine […] as much as the feminine' (xviii). This is achieved through McBrinn's self-proclaimed strategy of '*queering*' needlework, which is taken to mean 'disrupting the normative readings of' needlework (xviii). As the first single book-length study of men and the culture of needlework, *Queering the Subversive Stitch* takes readers on an

engaging journey, exploring a range of examples, primarily in a U.K. context, including the use of embroidery among sailors between 1840–1900, its use as an educational tool for orphans and working-class boys in some state schools up until the late nineteenth century, its deployment as a treatment for rehabilitating soldiers after the First and Second World Wars (see plate 1), as well as its endurance in the work of contemporary artists such as Mike Kelley, Grayson Perry, and Nick Cave. Such a multitude of examples demonstrate that needlework has not always been seen as women's work and that masculinity, like femininity, is historically contingent and intertwined with the complex histories of craft.

The most well-researched and persuasive section of the book is Chapter Three, *'Killing the angel in the house': Victorian manliness, domestic handicrafts and homosexual panic*. In it, McBrinn notes several key developments that may have influenced the shifting perceptions of needlework and masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For instance, McBrinn notes it was in the late nineteenth century that the decision to remove needlework from the curriculum for boys emerged, citing material from the 1889 Metropolitan Board Mistresses' Association as a prime example. This was undoubtably central in the division of art as a supposedly masculine activity and craft as a supposedly feminine pastime. Furthermore, McBrinn notes how

after the First World War, needlework was used in occupational therapy for convalescing soldiers, originally used to help strengthen or improve damaged motor skills but later being used to treat war neurosis. Thus, 'the sedentary act of sewing and Victorian women's social subordination meant that needlecrafts were often linked to the concept of invalidism' (52). As needlework became central to the 'Angel in the House' fantasy in the mid and late nineteenth century, it began to function as an 'emblem of effeminacy' more generally (59). In the Chapter, readers also have the delight of exploring the biographies of a range of figures who engaged with needlework at the time, regardless of its gendered associations, including the artist Duncan Grant and the eclectic actor and embroiderer, Ernest Thesiger. McBrinn concludes that we can read the needlework of these men as a kind of 'queer performativity' and suggests that the portrayal of men as 'caregivers, as nurtures and mothers, as subversives and failures in the mechanisms of phallic power' surely had some part to play in exposing the 'Angel in the House' myth (86). This argument is supported through a range of illustrations including a reproduction from Fred Benson's *The Freaks of Mayfair* (1916) where the 'feminine' character 'Aunt Georgie' and is 'daringly visualized' by the American artist George Wolfe Plank, known for

his decadent illustrations that echoed the work of Aubrey Beardsley (60) (see plate 2).

McBrinn's book is not without some shortfalls. Although McBrinn briefly states that there is a need to acknowledge the 'hybridity, fluidity and non-binary' nature of gender, the book remains centred around hegemonic modes of masculinity and is largely limited to in-depth discussions of white, middle-class, cisgendered men (8). There is also a lack of engagement with the prevalence of needlework in contemporary art and contemporary queer art in particular. In the latter section of the book, McBrinn does attempt to open up the discussion to take into account the ways in which many queer artists are using craft to subvert established notions of gender, hierarchy, and labour, and to incorporate a diverse range of artists from various cultural backgrounds, but this seems more like a speculative prompt for future work. Although full-colour plates of work by artists such as Nicholas Hlobo are featured, discussion of their work doesn't go beyond a brief in-text reference. Passing mention is also made to recent major shows of queer textile art, such as *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community*, first shown at the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art in New York in 2014. The exhibition brought the work of a range of LGBTQ+ artists together, including those identifying as non-binary, gender non-conforming and

transgender. However, these artists are misgendered by McBrinn. It seems that there is a missed opportunity to explore and celebrate the range of artists engaging with needlework in contemporary art, and to move beyond cisnormative binaries. McBrinn states that his 'troubling of the history of needlework began as a *query* with regard to the absence of men in *The Subversive Stitch* and has evolved into a *queering* of needlework as a history' (43). Yet, McBrinn makes little attempt to move beyond the archaic heteronormative and cisnormative binaries that Parker's text is steeped in, and which he seems to co-opt. This, combined with a lack of critical exploration around the notoriously knotty term 'queer' itself, leads me to question whether this book can be classified as a queering of the history of needlework.

Nonetheless, *Queering The Subversive Stitch* is certainly a vital inquiry into the history of men and the culture of needlework more broadly and succeeds in its aim to explore 'needlework's function as the emblem of effeminacy' (59). McBrinn's book marks an urgent intervention in the field of craft studies and it will be an essential text for those interested in the history of needlework and masculinity. I hope that it will also become an important starting point for scholars looking to explore much wider, more diverse and inclusive approaches to investigations of queerness and craft in the future.

Notes

[1] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine,* London and New York, 1984, 5.

[2] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 1; John Ezard, 'Victorian Touch to Credit Cold Britain', *The Guardian,* 6 December 1979.

[3] Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 1–23.

[4] Joseph McBrinn, '"Male Trouble": Sewing, amateurism, and gender' in *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts* ed. by Elaine C. Paterson and Susan Surette*,* Bloomsbury, 2015, 27–44 (34).