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## **“As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely”: Samplers as a Religious Material Practice**

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# “As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely”

## Samplers as a Religious Material Practice

### Abstract

Samplers are important sources for exploring the interaction between religion, text, and materiality. For centuries, needlework has been a textile-based skill taught to girls as a possible way to earn an income. By means of stitches and threads, young women learned basic knowledge, patience, and moral judgement. This article explores a unique sampler from southern England in the middle of the 19th century. The author, a young girl called Elizabeth Parker, transformed the practice of embroidering a sampler by stitching a text that challenged social and religious conventions. The document offers deep insight into the life, knowledge and religious belief of a working-class girl who could not ‘write’ but could articulate herself through an ancient textile technique.

### Keywords

Sampler, Religion and Textile, Materiality, Education, Gender, Materiality of Text, Study of Religion

### Biography

Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati is professor of the study of religion and the history of religion at the Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich. The interaction between religion and media as well as the role of religion in the public sphere are her principal research interests. She also works on space-critical and gender-critical approaches to religion and on methods and theories in the study of religion, with a focus on European traditions.

## Introduction

This exploration of the materiality of texts and the performance of writing within religious traditions focuses on a striking connection between text and textile. Artefacts made with letters and with threads are defined with terms that derive from the same Latin verb, *textus*, a past participle of *texo*,

to weave, to braid.<sup>1</sup> The object which is at the core of this article joins letters and threads in a unique way: it is a sampler from southern England, embroidered by Elisabeth Parker in the middle of the first half of the 19th century. It belongs to the textile collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London (fig. 1). In the last decades, this unique object has attracted scholarly attention. Among others, the British art historian Nigel Llewellyn and the North American cultural studies scholar Maureen Daly Goggin have reconstructed in detail the historical context in which the embroidered sampler was made.<sup>2</sup>

Inspired by their scholarly work, this article focuses on the relationship between text, materiality, and religion. More specifically, I am interested in the way the materiality of writing influences both meaning-making processes within a particular cultural setting and the reconstruction of religious practices within the study of religion, the discipline I work in.

In the last decades, materiality has become a key concept of cultural and religious studies, found at the core of theoretical and methodological debates as well as in historical and contemporary case studies.<sup>3</sup> While it is not possible to offer an overview of this debate here, as we tackle a material analysis of Parker's sampler, I would like to highlight that materiality has to be considered more as a process than as an element of a mere material object or thing. Anne V. Golden summarises the significance of the analysis of materiality in reconstructing religious practices as follows: "In the intersection of religion, media, and communication, the term *material culture* implies a strong relationship between religious artefacts and human behaviour in a spiritual, communicative, and cultural context. The term causes researchers to analyse the multiple interactions that take place between religious object, the creator and/or consumer of the religious items, and the culture."<sup>4</sup>

Following this approach to material culture, a material thing is always related to an object but also to the practices of production and reception that are linked to it.<sup>5</sup> In the case of our sampler, the object is a piece of embroidered linen fabric and at the same time a text. According to Jan Assmann, a

1 For the transformation of *textus* from a metaphor to a common word to indicate written texts see Assmann 2007.

2 Goggin 2002 and 2009; Llewellyn 1999.

3 See e.g. King 2010; Morgan 2010; Berger 2010; Promey 2014; Plate 2015; Kalthoff/Cress/Röhl 2016; Chidester 2018.

4 Golden 2010, 234.

5 For the different connotation of terms such as "thing", "object", and "matter" see e.g. Morgan 2011; Hahn/Eggert/Samida 2014 and Barad 2003.

text is a speech act in the context of a widely extended situation.<sup>6</sup> As a storage medium, a text can involve a speaker and a listener who do not share a time and space. Storage is a necessary condition if a text is to cross temporal and spatial distances; nevertheless, materiality is only one aspect of the dislocated communication allowed by the text. For Assmann a text is a message that can be resumed despite a space-time distance.<sup>7</sup>

When these general considerations about the text are linked with the idea of an object as a focal point of cultural practices, the significance of embroidering a text assumes particular significance. What is the impact of a material practice on the meaning-making processes linked to Elizabeth Parker's text? What is the relationship between the textile medium and the stored message in the specific case of embroidering a sampler? The analysis of the sampler highlights the impact of the materiality of this particular writing technique and the significance of religious practice for both the materiality of the sampler and the text as a "resumed message". Furthermore, this study highlights how studying objects and practice can help in the reconstruction of religious piety and ideas beyond religious elites and institutions. The writing, made of silky cross-stitches, gives insight into a compilation of prayers, hymns, and biblical texts that built the intimate religious worldview of working-class women in the 19th century. Following the materiality of this text, we discover a religious space in which dominant values and behaviours are reflected and challenged. A sampler, with its particular combination of materiality and text, is a crucial source, for it gives a voice to religious thinking and practices that have often been overlooked in academic histories of religions.<sup>8</sup>

The sampler is analysed according to the following steps. First, a close reading of the text is provided, with particular attention to the structure of the arguments. Second, the analysis is complemented with intertextual references to religious writings and hymns. Third, the link between text and socio-historical context is presented in light of the autobiographical character of Parker's narrative. Fourth, the materiality of this writing is addressed by discussing embroidery as a practice. In conclusion, the various aspects of the analysis are discussed in light of their religious significance.

6 "Texte sind Sprechakte im Kontext zerdehnter Situationen", Assmann 2007, 126–127.

7 Assmann 2007, 130: "Text, so hatten wir definiert, ist die wiederaufgenommene Mitteilung, der Rückgriff auf eine sprachliche Äußerung über den Hiat einer räumlichen und/oder zeitlichen Distanz hinweg." See also Eggert 2014.

8 Matthew-Jones/Jones 2015.

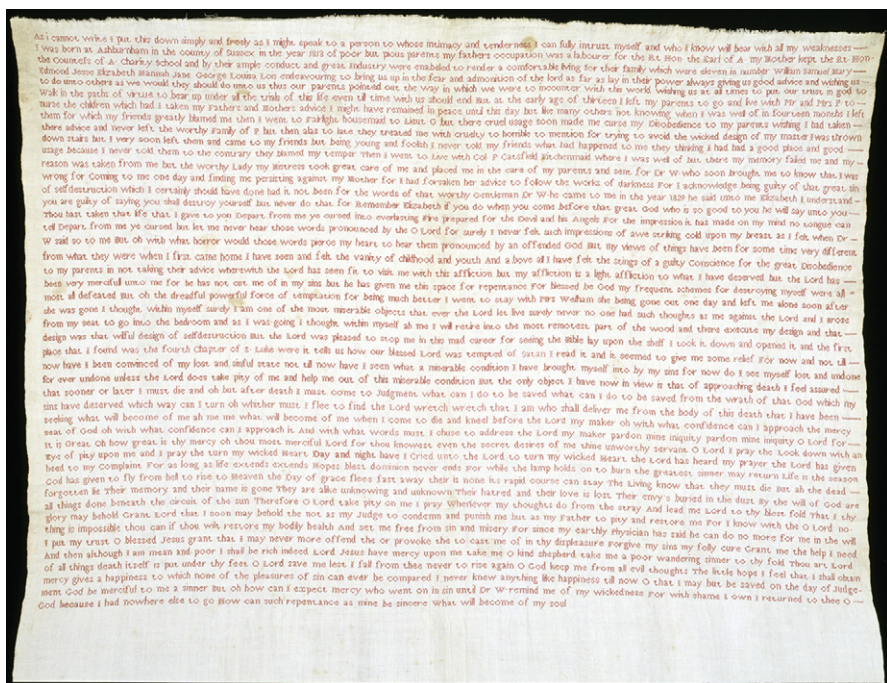


Fig. 1: Elizabeth Parker's sampler, ca. 1830 (?), England, embroidered linen with red silk in cross-stitch, height: 85.8 cm, width 74.4 cm, V&A T.6-1956.<sup>8</sup>  
(© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

## A Collapsing Self-reflexion: A Close Reading of the Sampler

In this sampler, a young woman named Elizabeth Parker materialises her autobiography, in a textile design produced after 1829 this date appears in the text, line 14). The narration is not always straight or linear and as the report progresses, the sentences become urgent and muddled. Towards the end, the style becomes more and more idiosyncratic. Suddenly, the narrative stops.

The composition, consisting of 46 lines, contains almost no punctuation. The capitalisation is not consistent.<sup>10</sup> As I discuss later, at certain points a

9 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/> [accessed 20 April 2020]; Browne/Wearden 1999, 108.

10 The transcription reproduces the graphic of the artefact, including some letters s that are mirror-inversed. The complete text is reproduced below as an appendix.

capital letter introduces a quotation. In the first line, the narrator introduces herself in the first person:

As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses

The use of “writing” in the first line can be interpreted as a reflection by the author of her social position: as Chloe Flower notes, “Parker’s use of the word ‘writing’ could imply polished exposition or literary style; as a working-class girl, she would have been hesitant to claim the skills of writing.”<sup>11</sup>

The lines that follow are presented as a dialogue with a reliable partner with whom the narrator wishes to develop an intimate conversation. It is not clear who the anonymous interlocutor of the “I”-narrator is. It may be the author herself, indicating that the text can be interpreted as a self-reflexion. Flower interprets the “I” in the background of literary genres as linked to autobiography:

Unlike the double “I” structure of forms such as the Bildungsroman, the autobiography, or the confession – where the past, narrated, self converges at the end with the present, narrating, subject – the sampler sewing “I”’s procession into futurity is decidedly less straightforward. Sampler sewing models a circular shape of development in which the young girl painfully revises or “mends” earlier experience; the subject is conceived of as perpetually reworking herself.<sup>12</sup>

In the second part of the text, God and Jesus are addressed in prayers.

In lines 2–6 Elizabeth describes her origins and her family. Born in 1813, she grew up in Ashburnham, a small village in East Sussex, in a “poor but pious” family. Her father “was a labourer” for the local landowning nobleman, and her mother was a teacher in the charity school financially sustained by that nobleman’s family. Elizabeth was the sixth child of eleven. Though they led a modest life, her industrious parents provided Elizabeth and her siblings with a stable living situation, moral guidance and a religious education:

11 Flower 2016, 312, with references to Kortsch 2009. Goggin 2002, 40 suggests, among other possible readings of this phrase, a self-imposed silence.

12 Flower 2016, 302; Goggin 2009, 33.

always giving us good advice and wishing us [5] to do unto others as we would they should do unto us thus our parents pointed out the way in which we were to encounter with this world wishing us at all times to put our trust in god to [6] Walk in the paths of virtue

In lines 6–12 the narrator describes her life in service, which she began when she was 13 years old. First, she was employed by Mr and Mrs P. as a children's nurse. Then she went to the village of Fairlight, on the English Channel, to work in the household of Lieutenant G. After a devastating experience, which I detail below, Elizabeth abandoned this workplace. First supported by her friends, she then found a hospitable place at the home of Colonel P. Here Elizabeth's health issues emerged, causing her to return to her parents in Ashburnham. The narrator interprets her deteriorating health as a consequence of the "cruel usage" she experienced at Lieutenant G.'s house. She describes her experience as follows (line 9):

they treated me with cruelty to horrible to mention for trying to avoid the wicked design of my master I was thrown down stairs

The first sign of her ailment was memory loss. Then, she writes, "my reason was taken from me" (line 12). In lines 12–16 Elizabeth tells about the intervention of Dr W., her "earthly Physician" (line 40), who convinced her not to commit suicide. He said to her:

Elizabeth I understand [15] you are guilty of saying you shall destroy yourself but never do that for Remember Elizabeth if you do when you come before that great God who is so good to you he will say unto you [16] Thou hast taken that life that I gave to you Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels

From line 17 onward the text becomes an inner dialogue between the desperate girl and God. Reflection on her miserable condition and an intense desire to put an end to her life, fears, and prayers are mixed up in an impressive textual composition. Different interpretations of her deep malaise are intertwined. On the one hand there is a strong, recurring desire to end her meaningless, desperate life:

I arose [24] from my seat to go into the bedroom and as I was going I thought within myself ah me I will retire into the most remotest part of the wood

and there execute my design and that [25] design was that wilful design of selfdestruction

On the other hand, she knows well that suicide is considered a capital sin, and thus a great offense to God her creator:

not till now have I seen what a miserable condition I have brought myself into by my sins for now do I see myself lost and undone [28] for ever undone unless the Lord does take pity of me and help me out of this miserable condition But the only object I have now in view is that of approaching death I feel assured [29] that sooner or later I must die and oh but after death I must come to Judgment what can I do to be saved what can I do to be saved from the wrath of that God which my [30] sins have deserved which way can I turn oh whither must I flee to find the Lord wretch wretch that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death that I have been [31] seeking what will become of me ah me me what will become of me when I come to die and kneel before the Lord my maker oh with what confidence can I approach the mercy [32] seat of God oh with what confidence can I approach it And with what words must I chuse to address the Lord my maker pardon mine iniquity pardon mine iniquity O Lord for [33] It is Great Oh how great is thy mercy oh thou most merciful Lord for thou knowest even the secret desires of me thine unworthy servant

In her clouded inner dialogue, Elizabeth interprets her failure as a consequence of disobeying her parents. This motif appears from the beginning (line 7):

had I taken my Fathers and Mothers advice I might have remained in peace until this day

In line 25 Elizabeth describes a turning point in the swirl of negative thoughts that haunt her:

But the Lord was pleased to stop me in this mad career for seeing the Bible lay upon the shelf I took it down and opened it and the first [26] place that I found was the fourth Chapter of S. Luke were it tells us how our blessed Lord was tempted of Satan I read it and it seemed to give me some relief

Reading the Bible, in this case Luke 4:1–11, allows her a direct relationship with God. Elizabeth receives a divine message that enlightens her. Comparing



herself with the tempted Jesus, she understands her desire for suicide as an ordeal she must endure. In this text, the narrator describes a multifaceted image of God, as both strong judge and merciful father:

I pray whenever my thoughts do from the stray And lead me Lord to thy blest fold  
That I thy [39] glory may behold Grant Lord that I soon may behold the  
not as my Judge to condemn and punish me but as my Father to pity and  
restore me For I know with the O Lord no- [40] thing is impossible thou can  
if thou wilt restore my bodily health And set me free from sin and misery

In line 41, Elizabeth addresses Jesus for the first time:

I put my trust O blessed Jesus grant that I may never more offend the or  
provoke the to cast me of in thy displeasure

All these thoughts are interlaced and not always easy to follow. The text breaks off in the middle of line 46 with a desperate sentence:

For with shame I own I returned to thee O God because I had nowhere else  
to go How can such repentance as mine be sincere What will become of my  
soul

## Intertextual References

Alongside the composition are several references to devotion characteristic of the Victorian revival within British Protestantism. The embroidery contains a compilation of quotations from biblical books and hymns and possibly from educational books as well. For example, the golden rule is echoed across lines 4–5:

wishing us to do unto others as we would they should do unto us

Furthermore, line 16 contains a quote from Matthew 25:41, inserted into the direct speech of Dr W.

Depart from me ye cursed into everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and  
his Angels

In lines 16–17 “no tongue can tell” may be a reference to the hymn *The worth of thruth no tongue can tell*;<sup>13</sup> while the phrase “the Lord has been very merciful unto me” (lines 20–21) recalls a recurrent verse in the book of Psalms (e.g. 57:1; 86:3). Line 30 contains a quotation from Romans 7:24: “O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this dead?”, while in line 33, “thou knowest even the secrets desires” may allude to *Thou knowest Lord*, a funeral anthem from the *Book of Common Prayer*.<sup>14</sup>

Lines 35–38 contain part of a quote from the hymn *As long as life its term extends*, verses 1–4, which evokes Ecclesiastes 9:4–6, 10.<sup>15</sup> While Elizabeth’s writing does not follow the hymn exactly, sometimes breaking the rhythm and the rhyme, the capitals often correspond to the beginning of the line in Isaac Watts’ very popular text. For these reasons, it is possible that Elizabeth quoted the text from memory.<sup>16</sup> On the left, Elizabeth Parker’s stitched text is rewritten according to the lines of the hymn in the version of 1800, given on the right. The variations in the textile work are printed in *italics*.

as long as life extends <i>extends</i>	As long as life its term extends
<i>Hopes</i> blest dominion never ends	Hope’s blest dominion never ends
For while the lamp holds on to burn	For while the lamp holds on to burn
the greatest sinner may return	The greatest sinner may return
Life is the season [36] God has given	Life is the season God both giv’n
to fly from hell to rise to Heaven	To fly from hell to rise to Heaven
the Day of grace flees fast away	That Day of grace flees fast away
their is none its rapid course can stay	And none its rapid course can stay

13 [https://hymnary.org/text/the\\_worth\\_of\\_truth\\_no\\_tongue\\_can\\_tell](https://hymnary.org/text/the_worth_of_truth_no_tongue_can_tell) [accessed 15 May 2020].

14 The *Book of Common Prayer* is a liturgical text introduced in the Church of England in 1549. After various revisions, since 1662 it has been the standard liturgy book for most Anglican churches in the British Commonwealth. Worldwide, variations of the English *Book of Common Prayer* are used throughout the Anglican Communion, and it has influenced liturgical language in many English-speaking Protestant churches. See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Book-of-Common-Prayer> [accessed 15 May 2020].

15 This hymn belongs to the influential production of Isaac Watts (1674–1748). The hymn appears in several variants in different collections. As far I could reconstruct, this version best matches Elisabeth Parker’s text. For more details see [https://hymnary.org/text/how\\_long\\_eternal\\_god\\_how\\_long](https://hymnary.org/text/how_long_eternal_god_how_long) [accessed 27 April 2020].

16 On the widespread influence of Isaac Watts on embroidery motifs during centuries see Parker 2019, 132–134.

The Living know that they must die But <i>ah</i> the dead [37] forgotten lie Their <i>memory</i> and their name is gone <i>They are</i> alike unknowing and un- known	The Living know that they must die But all the dead forgotten lie Their mem'ry and their name is gone Alike unknowing and unknown
-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------	--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

Their hatred and their love is lost Their <i>envy's</i> buried in the dust <i>By the will of God are</i> [38] <i>all things done</i> beneath the cir- cuit of the sun.	Their hatred and their love is lost Their envie buried in the dust They have no share in all that's done Beneath the circuit of the sun.
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Some phrases (e.g. line 19) evoke titles of volumes such as Daniel Williams' *The vanity of childhood & youth wherein the depraved nature of young people is represented and means for their reformation proposed*, which is a book of 136 unnumbered pages containing sermons for young men.<sup>17</sup> By meditating on her relationship with God and praying, Elizabeth describes her condition as one that results from the traumatic experience with Lieutenant G., which she interprets as a consequence of disobeying her parents.

[19] from what they were when I first came home I have seen and felt the vanity of childhood and youth And above all I have felt the stings of a guilty Conscience for the great Disobedience [20] to my parents in not taking their advice

The topics of conscience and disobedience/obedience of parents are crucial in Daniel Williams' book. Here are some excerpts from the book's introductory sermon:

Let me then acquaint thee, oh young Man! that  
God addresseth himself to thee, as by Name. Thou  
by nature art brutish and devilish, and as long as  
thou followest the imaginations of thy vain mind, thy  
case becomes more desperate, thy Lusts by indulgence  
grow more violent, and Conscience still less concern | ed  
to vindicate the Affronts thou offerest to Gods Do | minion,  
or to represent the injury thou dost to thy own Soul;

17 Williams 1691.

yet be assured, whether thou mindest it or not,  
there is a God, whose right it is to govern thee, and will  
be sure to judge thee: Thou art born his Subject,  
thô unwilling to obey, and forward to rebell against  
him; thou hast an immortal Soul, how little soever  
thou providest for its future [...]  
It's true, there is a way of Salvation  
for lost man published in the Gospel; but that can be | nefit  
one who continues to reject Christ, and refuse  
the terms of Peace. Thou art the dedicated Child  
of believing Parents, but their Faith cannot save  
thee now that thou art capable of consenting to the  
Covenant, and refusest it;<sup>18</sup>

I am not arguing that the sources I have referenced here were the sources Elizabeth Parker used, since biblical verses and citations recur in many hymns and prayers. Common phrases cannot be traced to a specific book. The parallels to the Bible and other foundational texts I have listed here are only indicative, based on textual comparison.<sup>19</sup> Still, these resonances provide insight into the general religious context within which the narrator, in search of guidance in a deep life crisis, is embedded. She seems to be familiar with a set of hymns, prayers and edifying literature.

## Materialised Biography: From Text to Context

This biographic needlework text(ile) describes Elizabeth's life as a tragic anticlimax. Once she lived peacefully as a child, but she shifts to a stage marked by confusion and desire for death. Her belief functions as a frame that allows her to interpret her fears, guilty feelings, and wishes. On the one hand, she understands her destiny as the result of her sins, while on the other hand, she asks God as creator and Jesus as saviour for both mercy and redemption. The text gives insight into the intimate religious thoughts of a narrator who is very articulate, despite her statement that she "cannot write".

<sup>18</sup> Williams 1691.

<sup>19</sup> I wish to thank Prof. Christopher Rowland, University of Oxford, who helped me to find quotations and references for biblical and other sources.

Indeed, Elizabeth Parker did not *write* this text. She embroidered the 6,530 letters in cross-stitch with red silk on piece of linen fabric measuring 85.8 cm by 74.4 cm. As noted above, the needlework is incomplete and the writing covers only about 60 percent of the cloth. The project may be incomplete, but the embroidery skills are outstanding: the stitches are regular and the letters well-designed. This sampler expresses Elizabeth's fears and hopes in a tragic phase of her life but is also more generally an exceptional biographical document that provides evidence of the religious knowledge and devotion of a young working-class woman in a village in 19th-century England.<sup>20</sup>

Elizabeth Parker's birth year (1813) stitched in the sampler is historically correct, as are the names of her 10 siblings, and the information pertaining to her family, and the places she was employed as a servant. She did not in fact commit suicide while a young woman, but instead spent the remainder of her life in the village where she was born, dying on 10 April 1889, aged 76. Her father, William Parker (1780–1852), served as an agricultural labourer for different generations of a noble family in the village of Ashburnham. The earl mentioned in the sampler was George Ashburnham (1797–1878). In this small village in East Sussex, there were two day schools: a public school that charged fees and a charity school sustained financially by the earl's family. Elizabeth's mother, Jane (née Winchester, 1784–1856), worked as a teacher in the latter school, where needlework was taught alongside subjects such as reading, writing, geography,<sup>21</sup> mathematics, history, and music. Goggin notes: "According to a school report written by Jane Parker, students of all ages, from infancy up through their teens, were taught a variety of subjects including geography, math, history, reading, writing, music, and needlework. Jane separated out for special notice music and needlework, saying that these 'are [especially] well taught'".<sup>22</sup>

Needlework was crucial for girls, who were expected to use their skills for marking clothing and sheets for the households in which they worked. Elizabeth, like her mother, became a teacher, and lived as a single woman in a

20 Browne/Wearden, 1999, 11; Goggin 2002, 39.

21 See Tyner 2018, 18. "Map samplers became popular at about the same time as dissected maps; they were not designed for amusement, but for instruction in both needlework and geography. However, map samplers undoubtedly arose for some of the same reasons as puzzles and games, especially as a way of combining geography instruction with other activities." The increasing interest in geography that also led to the practice of embroidering map samplers mirrored the increasing interest in travel and discovery in modern Europe.

22 Goggin 2002, 43; she refers to the archive document East Sussex Records Office, Lewes, East Sussex ASH 1809.

house next to the charity school. Later, she raised her niece, Elizabeth French, the daughter of her deceased sister Louisa.<sup>23</sup>

Most of the people mentioned in the embroidery have been identified. The traumatic experience Elizabeth refers to happened in the house of Lieutenant G., who was employed in the newly established coastguard. In her intimate text, Elizabeth did not record what happened to her, nor had she dared explain her situation to her friends who supported her after she left Fairlight:

but I very soon left them and came to my friends but being young and foolish I never told my friends what had happened to me they thinking I had had a good place and good [11] usage because I never told them to the contrary they blamed my temper

Besides being thrown down the stairs, we do not know what other abuse Elizabeth endured. It is difficult not to assume that she was sexually abused.<sup>24</sup> In any case, she describes the destructive and long-lasting impact of this experience in her vivid autobiographical textile, which is currently the only known document to have been produced by her.

Why did Elizabeth embroider her autobiographical narrative? Why did she choose such a demanding and steady textile technique? Was it a form of “self-imposed penance”?<sup>25</sup>

## Embroidering as an Educational and Religious Practice

“As i cannot write I put I down simply and freely [...]” suggests a spontaneous form of expression, which seems to contradict such neat and time-consuming needlework. Samplers are specimens of embroidery techniques stitched into a piece of fabric. They were used to practice stitches and motifs and collections of patterns, and were employed to reproduce, design, and inspire ornaments and letters in clothing and home linen. Samplers are examples – from the Latin *exemplum* or old French *essamplaire*<sup>26</sup> – which are widespread throughout different cultures and times.<sup>27</sup>

23 See Goggin 2002, 47.

24 See Goggin 2002, 40 alludes to sexual violation and physical abuse.

25 Goggin 2002, 39 quotes a note by Lili Griffith, who sold the sampler to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1956.

26 See Browne/Wearden 1999, 7: “any kind of work to be copied or imitated.”.

27 An interesting collection of samplers can be found in a virtual exhibition on the website

Elizabeth Parker's sampler also belongs to an old European textile tradition. Samplers are important documents for exploring the techniques and styles of a domestic practice and the transmission of knowledge within this particular craft. Over the centuries, the techniques of embroidering as well as stitching and pattern-making changed. With the dissemination of printing in the early 16th century, books slowly took over the traditional function of samplers as a model for copying or inspiring patterns for embroidery.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, samplers did not disappear. Rather, their function and significance were transformed. "By the nineteenth century," Llewellyn writes, "samplers have become universally identified with social acceptability, domestic values, female discipline and modest piety."<sup>29</sup>

Samplers were used to prove working-class girls' skills to potential employers and thus this textile technique ultimately helped them secure jobs and earn an income. Furthermore, needlework was understood as a means of teaching girls patience, endurance, and obedience. For these reasons, in the 19th century needlework was taught to girls at school along with other basic subjects.

In the *Manual of the system of the British and Foreign School Society of London for teaching reading, writing, arithmetic, and needle-work in the elementary schools*, a teaching book widespread in non-conformist religious institutions, needlework is presented as the discipline that marks gender difference:<sup>30</sup>

Schools for girls are fitted up on the same plan as those for boys [...] The system by which reading, writing, and arithmetic are taught in the boy's school is applicable in all its parts to girls as well as to boys. – The method by which needlework is taught, is all that will therefore be necessary to detail respecting the system of education for girls.<sup>31</sup>

The girls were allowed to bring "work" – which means needlework – from home. Additionally, in some cases the schools allowed for the sale of the girls' work:

of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge: <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/samplers/what/index.html> [accessed 20 April 2020]. For the collection of the V&A museum see Browne/Wearden 1999.

28 According to Browne/Wearden 1999, 7 the first such book was printed by Johann Schönsperger in Augsburg, Germany in 1524.

29 Llewellyn 1999, 64. Samplers continued to be an integral part of the education of girls in many European countries until the early 21st century.

30 I am quoting from an edition printed in London in 1816.

31 Manual 1816, 34.



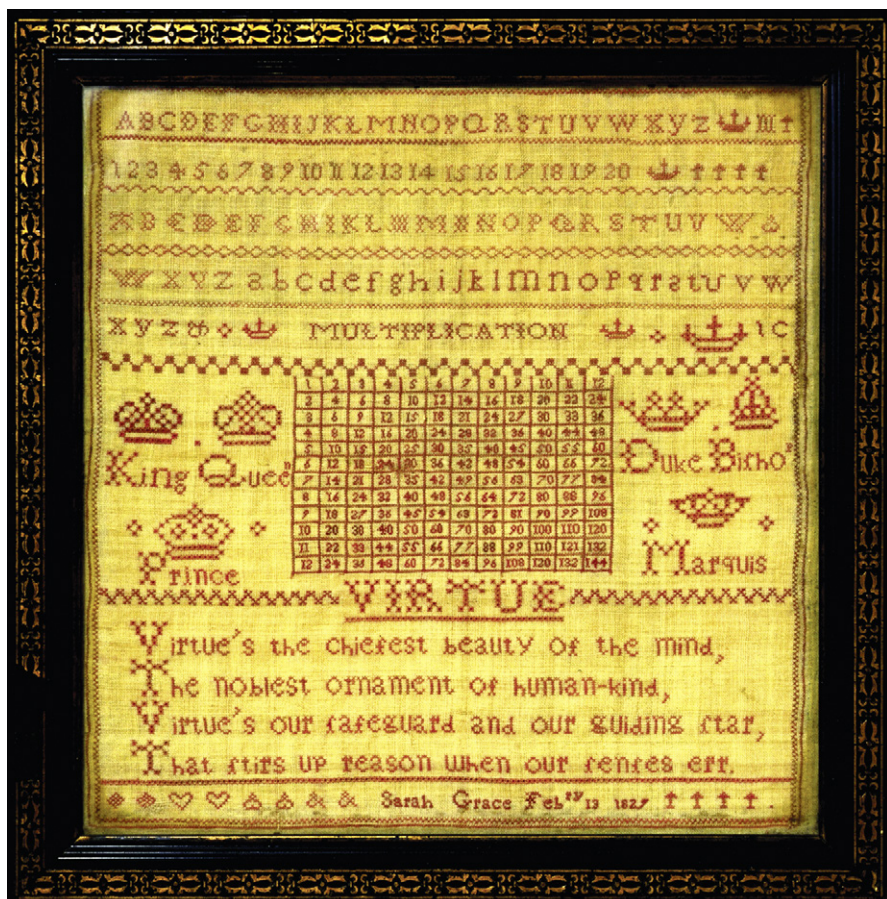


Fig. 2: Sampler, Sarah Grace, 13.02.1827, England, embroidered wool with silk, height 31.7 cm, width 30.5 cm, V&A T.133-1961.<sup>32</sup> The sampler contains different sets of alphabets, figures, a table for multiplication, various ranks with the appropriate attributes, and the following text: “VIRTUE / Virtue’s the chiefest beauty of the mind, / The noblest ornament of human-kind, / Virtue’s our safeguard and our guiding star, / That stirs up reason when our senses err.” (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

If work could be procured from persons in the middling and lower class in life without any other pay than is sufficient to defray the expense of needles and thread: or if a little fund could be raised to purchase goods at a wholesale price, and after making clothes of them, sell them without

32 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70504/sampler-grace-sarah/> [20.04.2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 107.





Fig. 3: Elizabeth Smith's sampler, 1803, England, embroidered linen with silk in cross stitch, V&A 942-1897.<sup>33</sup> This sampler is composed of various ornaments and texts. The words "When greedy worms / My Body eat, / Here you may read / my Name complete" allude to the sampler as a material memory surviving Elizabeth, who completed this work when she was 11 years old. "Religion, and good learning, / They I hope will save / The Soul from pain & sorrow / When beyond the grave" sums up in a few lines the ideals of female education in the 19th century. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

charging much for the work, it might afford employment for the children and benefit the poor.<sup>34</sup>

33 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70491/sampler-smith-elizabeth/> [20.04.2020]; Browne/Wearden 1999, 102.

34 Manual 1816, 41.



Fig. 4: Ann Seaton's sampler, 1790, England, embroidered wool with polychrome wool in cross, double back and satin stitch, height 52 cm, width 47.75 cm, Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge T.166-1928.<sup>35</sup> This sampler belongs to the production made at Quaker schools in England and America in the 18th and 19th centuries. (© Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

Though the embroidering of samplers was widespread in all classes, it was considered a privileged “language” for teaching girls lessons such as basic arithmetic, reading, and writing (fig. 2). For this purpose, Bible quotations and moral or pious texts were often stitched (fig. 3).

35 <https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/sampled/lives/quakergirls/quakersamplers> [accessed 3 May 2020].



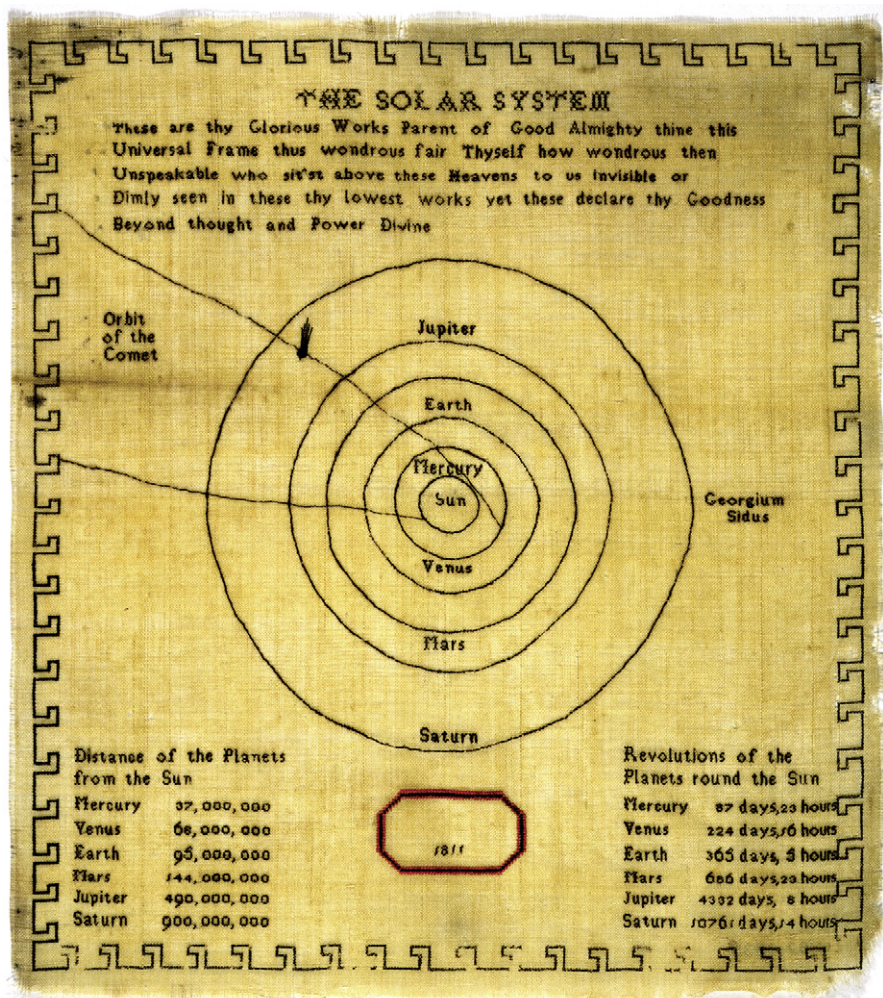


Fig. 5: Sampler, 1811, England, embroidered wool with silk in running-stitch and cross-stitch, V&A T.92-1939.<sup>36</sup> The solar system is introduced by this text: "These are thy Glorious Works Parent of Good Almighty thine this / Universal Frame thus wondrous fair Thyself how wondrous then / Unspeakable who sit'st above these Heavens to us invisible or / Dimly seen in these thy lowest works yet these declare thy Goodness / Beyond though and Power Divine." (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

36 <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70501/the-solar-system-sampler-unknown/> [accessed 20 April 2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 10.

Flower records: “Across classes the sampler would be a testament to religious learning, discipline, and moral character, as well as a display of basic literacy and fluency with the needle. It was also closely tied up with a girl’s economic future, whether that future rested on her capacity to maintain employment, or the securing of domestic stability through marriage.”<sup>37</sup> From the 18th century onwards students also used samplers to learn geography, by reproducing maps or depictions of the solar system through their stitch work (fig. 4 and 5).

Nineteenth-century samplers often combined ornamental patterns, decorative motifs, and figures and letters. For women who were in service, letters on their samplers could demonstrate their ability to mark lingerie or linens with the initials of members of the family who employed them.<sup>38</sup>

The genre of the sampler and its embroidery skills, so crucial in the education of girls of many classes in 19th-century Britain and also in other countries, was also associated with femininity, humility, and an attitude of submission.<sup>39</sup> Embroidering was understood as an indispensable skill and a milestone in female education, as a practice that helped temper the character and inculcate the attitude young women from all social classes were expected to assume.<sup>40</sup>

To stitch two letters would take about 45 minutes.<sup>41</sup> If a character was deemed not satisfactory, the girl would have to undo it and repeat it, doing so as many times as was necessary to achieve a neat result.<sup>42</sup> According to this formula, it would have taken Parker eight hours a day for 306 days to stitch her sampler, although as a skilled embroiderer, she may have been faster. She would not have been able to dedicate the necessary hours in one block to the sampler and we can assume that she spent some years writing her autobiographical notes with the red silk thread. When the sampler was made is therefore difficult to establish. While the Victoria and Albert Museum indi-

37 Flower 2016, 304.

38 Goggin 2002, 39.

39 See Flower 2016. The author highlights the tendency in the first half of the 19th century to focus on cross-stitches and repetitive patterns rather than on a capacity to invent new visual motifs (307). See also Browne/Wearden 1999, 11: embroidering samplers “was becoming increasingly a standardised form of unambitious exercise in the early nineteenth century”.

40 Newell 2009, 56.

41 Flower 2016, 308.

42 Flower 2016, 308–309.

cates a probable date around 1830, Goggin proposes that it was made around 1839.<sup>43</sup>

This description of the main aspects of the embroidering of samplers as a cultural material practice has sought to emphasise the significance of needlework in the education of girls and the role of religious references in this practice. In the nineteenth century, embroidering became a means of inculcating ideals of femininity and of what it meant to be a woman. As Rozsika Parker demonstrated in her study *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), the teaching of needlework in schools and families naturalised values linked to women. She explains:

In this book I examine the historical processes by which embroidery became identified with a particular set of characteristics, and consigned to women's hand. By mapping the relationship between the history of embroidery and changing notions of what constituted feminine behaviour from the Middle Age to the twentieth century, we can see how the art became implicated in the creation of femininity across classes, and that the development of ideals and feminine behaviour determined the style and iconography of needlework. To know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women.<sup>44</sup>

Another sampler from the V&A collection expresses very well the ideals linked to women and embroidery at the time Elizabeth Parker stitched her autobiography (fig. 6). The sampler text reads:

Seek to be good but aim not to be great,  
A womans noblest station is retreat,  
Her fairest virtues fly from public sight,  
Domestic worth still shuns too strong a light.<sup>45</sup>

The text praising modesty and reservation as female virtues is associated with the Tree of Life, Adam, Eve, and the tempting snake, who offered Eve the famous fruit.

Elizabeth Parker's sampler reproduces the virtues of modesty and reservation, while it simultaneously subverts them by clearly expressing her fights

43 See <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/> [accessed 20 April 2020] and Browne/Wearden 1999, 108; Goggin 2002.

44 Parker 2019, ix.

45 <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O355537/sampler-bailey-jane/> [accessed 20 April 2020]; Parker 2019, 165.





Fig. 6: Jane Bailey's sampler, 1830, England, embroidered wollen canvas with coloured silks, backed with crêpe, height 37.15 cm, width 31.70 cm, V&A T.321-1960. (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London)

against temptation and her desire for death and self-destruction. In other words, her sampler does not evince a time-consuming exercise meant to engender female virtues. Instead, it reflects her poor condition and mirrors her inner suffering. Elizabeth did not deny the attractions of temptation. Rather, she used needlework as a strategy to gain ground in her life. Her narration seems distinct from 19th-century embroidery ornamentation, texts, and be-

haviours in that it consists of a plain cross-stitch without any decoration. Her text, as she states at the beginning, is free and intimate. What does this text mean in terms of its materiality? What might be the meaning of such a textile performance? Nigel Llewellyn interprets this needlework as penitential and as “a tool of therapy, a thing made of words shaped by cloth and thread to keep Elizabeth memories alive for her, to encourage reflection on her past folly and be a weapon against her fits of shame and depression to help her gain salvation and lead a virtuous life.”<sup>46</sup> According to him, the sampler was made not to demonstrate needlework skills, but rather to elaborate Elizabeth’s condition. It was not intended to be presented to others, for it was an intimate embroidery.<sup>47</sup> Llewellyn assumes that it was not designed by Elizabeth herself, but made under the supervision of a person caring for her, maybe the wife of Dr W. This suggestion is a hypothesis worth considering, even though the stitched text, particularly in the second part, appears as a very personal compilation composed from memory rather than as a text suggested by somebody else. In any case, the conventions linked to the sampler as a textile genre are broken by the intimate character of this material source: modesty and religious devotion clash with the description of inner conflicts and a desire to die.

## Concluding Remarks

The textile nature of this autobiographical narration is crucial for interpreting it both as a storage medium and as a practice of writing.<sup>48</sup> As a material thing it has specific characteristics – a cloth of linen with silk cross-stitches – and has been preserved through generations. The sampler, as an object, stores not only a succession of letters conveying a meaning, but also the practices of producing this very text, through accurate and neat needlework. It is a very slow process of writing, reflecting, and praying. By engaging with the object, the reader gains insight into the life, fears, religious worldview, devotion, and living context of a young working-class woman from Ashburnham, East Sussex. This case study demonstrates the crucial significance of material culture for studying everyday practices not accessible through intellectually and theologically sophisticated literary production. In the case of Elizabeth Parker’s

46 Llewellyn 1999, 66.

47 See e.g. Newell 2009, 55.

48 Goggin 2009, 33.

sampler there are at least two levels of material meaning-making to address. The first level to consider includes the production of the sampler after 1829. This level highlights the meaning the text conveys and the implication of needlework and embroidery as a privileged practice used for educating girls and shaping the skills, behaviours, and thoughts of women in the early 19th-century English historical context.

The second level of material meaning-making includes considerations of the sampler as a piece exhibited in the textile collection of the V&A museum. This piece of needlework attracted my attention during a visit to the collection in 2009. On this second level, meaning-making arises out of the encounter between the material object and a scholarly interpretation that aims to fill a gap within the European history of religion and, more generally, the study of religion.

The analysis of the sampler opens a window on the religious practices and worldviews of women who did not have access to more formal forms of storing their ideas, thoughts, sufferings, and hopes, such as printed books or personal, well-written journals. Embedded in a Victorian ideal of girls' education, the sampler highlights the adaption to mainstream values and behaviours as well as the opening of a space in which to express "simply and freely" an intimate desire to resist self-destruction through the expression of forbidden plans. The ambiguity of this female space is mirrored in the function of the Bible: on the one hand the sacred text legitimises gender differences that relegate women to a domestic role, while on the other hand it functions as a source of hope and resilience for a young woman facing violence, depression, and the temptation of suicide. This *exemplum* highlights the effects that neglected sources may have on what we define as the history of religion, which, in fact, should always be pluralised. There are many histories about people, communities, belief systems, and traditional processes that have yet to be told in a way which takes seriously material objects and the practices related to them.

## Appendix

- 1 As i cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself and who I know will bear with all my weaknesses
- 2 I was born at Ashburnham in the county of Sussex in the year 1813 of poor but pious parents my fathers occupation was a labourer for the Rt Hon. the Earl of A. my Mother kept the Rt. Hon.



3 the countess of A. charity School and by their ample conduct and great Industry were enabeled to render a comfortable living for their family which were eleven in number William Samuel Mary

4 Edmond Jesse Elizabeth Hannah Jane George Louisa Lois endeavouring to bring us up in the fear and admonition of the lord as far as lay in their power always giving us good advice and wishing us

5 to do unto others as we would they should do unto us thus our parents pointed out the way in which we were to incounter with this world wishing us at all times to put our trust in god to

6 Walk in the paths of virtue to bear up under all the trials of this life even till time with us should end But at the early age of thirteen I left my parents to go and live with Mr and Mrs P. to

7 nurse the children which had I taken my Fathers and Mothers advice I might have remained in peace until this day but like many others not knowing when I was well of in fourteen months I left

8 them for which my friends greatly blamed me then I went to Fairlight housemaid to Lieut G but there cruel usage soon made me curse my Disobedience to my parents wishing I had taken

9 there advice and never left the worthy Family of P but then alas to late they treated me with cruelty to horrible to mention for trying to avoid the wicked design of my master I was thrown

10 down stairs but I very soon left them and came to my friends but being young and foolish I never told my friends what had happened to me they thinking I had had a good place and good

11 usage because I never told them to the contrary they blamed my temper Then I went to Live with Col. P Catsfield Kitchenmaid where I was well of but there my memory failed me and my

12 reason was taken from me but the worthy Lady my Mistress took great care of me and placed me in the care of my parents and sent for Dr W. who soon brought me to know that I was

13 wrong for coming to me one day and finding me persisting against my Mother for I had forsaken her advice to follow the works of darkness For I acknowledge being guilty of that great sin

14 of selfdestruction which I certainly should have done had it not been for the words of that worthy Gentleman Dr W. he came to me in the year 1829 he said unto me Elizabeth I understand

15 you are guilty of saying you shall destroy yourself but never do that for Remember Elizabeth if you do when you come before that great God who is so good to you he will say unto you

16 Thou hast taken that life that I gave to you Depart from me ye cursed into  
 everlasting Fire prepared for the Devil and his Angels For the impression it  
 has made on my mind no tongue can  
 17 tell Depart from me ye cursed but let me never hear those words pro-  
 nounced by the O Lord for surely I never felt such impressions of awe strik-  
 ing cold upon my breast as I felt when Dr  
 18 W said so to me But oh with what horror would those words pierce my  
 heart to hear them pronounced by an offended God But my views of things  
 have been for some time very different  
 19 from what they were when I first came home I have seen and felt the van-  
 ity of childhood and youth And above all I have felt the stings of a guilty  
 Conscience for the great Disobedience  
 20 to my parents in not taking their advice wherewith the Lord has seen fit to  
 visit me with this affliction but my affliction is a light affliction to what I  
 have deserved but the Lord has  
 21 been very mercifull unto me for he has not cut me of in my sins but he  
 has given me this space for repentance For blessed be God my frequent  
 schemes for destroying myself were all  
 22 most all defeated But oh the dreadful powerful force of temptation for  
 being much better I went to stay with Mrs Welham she being gone out one  
 day and left me alone soon after  
 23 she was gone I thought within myself surely I am one of the most misera-  
 ble objects that ever the Lord let live surely never no one had such thoughts  
 as me against the Lord and I arose  
 24 from my seat to go into the bedroom and as I was going I thought within  
 myself ah me I will retire into the most remotest part of the wood and  
 there execute my design and that  
 25 design was that wilful design of selfdestruction But the Lord was pleased  
 to stop me in this mad career for seeing the Bible lay upon the shelf I took  
 it down and opened it and the first  
 26 place that I found was the fourth Chapter of S. Luke were it tells us how  
 our blessed Lord was tempted of Satan I read it and it seemed to give me  
 some relief For now and not till  
 27 now have I been convinced of my lost and sinful state not till now have I  
 seen what a miserable condition I have brought myself into by my sins for  
 now do I see myself lost and undone  
 28 for ever undone unless the Lord does take pity of me and help me out of  
 this miserable condition But the only object I have now in view is that of  
 approaching death I feel assured

- 29 that sooner or later I must die and oh but after death I must come to Judgment what can I do to be saved what can I do to be saved from the wrath of that God which my
- 30 sins have deserved which way can I turn oh whither must I flee to find the Lord wretch wretch that I am who shall deliver me from the body of this death that I have been
- 31 seeking what will become of me ah me me what will become of me when I come to die and kneel before the Lord my maker oh with what confidence can I approach the mercy
- 32 seat of God oh with what confidence can I approach it And with what words must I chuse to address the Lord my maker pardon mine iniquity pardon mine iniquity O Lord for
- 33 It is Great Oh how great is thy mercy oh thou most merciful Lord for thou knowest even the secret desires of me thine unworthy servant O Lord I pray the Look down with an
- 34 Eye of pity upon me and I pray the turn my wicked Heart Day and night have I Cried unto the Lord to turn my wicked Heart the Lord has heard my prayer the Lord has given
- 35 heed to my Complaint For as long as life extends extends Hopes blest dominion never ends For while the lamp holds on to burn the greatest sinner may return Life is the season
- 36 God has given to fly from hell to rise to Heaven the Day of grace flees fast away there is none its rapid course can stay The Living know that they must die But ah the dead
- 37 forgotten lie Their memory and their name is gone They are alike unknowing and unknown Their hatred and their love is lost Their envy's buried in the dust By the will of God are
- 38 all things done beneath the circuit of the sun Therefore O Lord take pity on me I pray whenever my thoughts do from the stray And lead me Lord to thy blest fold That I thy
- 39 glory may behold Grant Lord that I soon may behold the not as my Judge to condemn and punish me but as my Father to pity and restore me For I know with the O Lord no-
- 40 thing is impossible thou can if thou wilt restore my bodily health And set me free from sin and misery For since my earthly Physician has said he can do no more for me in the will
- 41 I put my trust O blessed Jesus grant that I may never more offend the or provoke the to cast me of in thy displeasure Forgive my sins my folly cure Grant me the help I need

- 42 And then although I am mean and poor I shall be rich indeed Lord Jesus  
have mercy upon me take me O kind shepherd take me a poor wandering  
sinner to thy fold Thou art Lord
- 43 of all things death itself is put under thy feet O Lord save me lest I fall from  
thee never to rise again O God keep me from all evil thoughts The little  
hope I feel that I shall obtain
- 44 mercy gives a happiness to which none of the pleasures of sin can ever be  
compared I never knew anything like happiness till now O that I may but  
be saved on the day of Judge-
- 45 ment God be merciful to me a sinner But oh how can I expect mercy who  
went on in sin until Dr W. remind me of my wickedness For with shame I  
own I returned to thee O
- 46 God because I had nowhere else to go How can such repentance as mine  
be sincere What will become of my soul

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