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Margaret Fuller Society Panel
Women at Work: Margaret Fuller and 19th c. Women Writers on Work

"Sent to the sewing room, and compelled to work":
Institutionalized Women's Labor in Nineteenth-Century American Hospitals for the Insane

In *Margaret Fuller: A New American Life*, Megan Marshall writes that when Margaret Fuller was a girl, her mother would often take to her bed for weeks, sometimes months at a time, languishing from illnesses both corporeal and mental. During these episodes, the sum of the "family needlework fell to [young] Margaret alone" (73), Margaret Crane Fuller having taught her daughter sewing and how to manage "household affairs" (14) since she believed her husband's lessons in Virgil and other classics was lacking in domestic instruction.[1] While the Latin lessons were daunting, it was the sheer amount of sewing, mending, and embroidery generated by a household in early-nineteenth century America that seemed even more insurmountable from the girl's perspective. The finger-aching labor of "cutting out and sewing new clothes [for her father and younger brothers], mending and darning [their] old ones" (73) nearly caused the future author of *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* to faint from exhaustion. But even worse than the bodily toll it took on her was the way it affected her most valued asset: her mind. Fuller would later recall of those periods of endlessly sewing for her family that "[m]y fingers [may] have been busy, my eyes wide open but my mind [was] so still . . . I almost believed I should never hope nor fear perhaps never *think* again'" (73). Needlework itself was not the issue; in fact, sewing was more than mere women's work, Fuller argued, for it reflected a woman's place in the home as well as the "social fabric" of the nation (110). It was only when that work moved from a task that a woman *chose* to do of her own volition to something *imposed* upon her that her thoughts were stilled and mind truly manacled.

1. It was Timothy Fuller's belief that his daughter should have an education as rigorous as any boy's.

A generation later, women writers would once again turn to sewing as a symbol of the mental and material labor they put into their roles as wives and mothers, though these women were writing not from the New England environs that birthed Margaret Fuller, but rather from a strikingly different setting: the asylum. From Elizabeth Packard's 1868 memoir *The Prisoners' Hidden Life; Or, Insane Asylums Unveiled* to Sophia Olsen's *Narrative of Her One Year's Imprisonment at the Jacksonville Insane Asylum*, it is in these so-called "madwomen's" narratives that we encounter an even more complex critique of women at work vis-à-vis sewing. It is at this intersection of sewing, writing, and work that I situate my talk today. Packard and Olsen used sewing, or the "sitting-still occupation" (73) as Fuller once phrased it, to analyze the concept of women's work performed within the confines of the asylum—their narratives extending and complicating Fuller's treatise on the subject. Inside hospitals for the insane, as psychiatric institutions were known in the latter part of the nineteenth century, sewing was at once desired by patients forbidden from it and detested by those forced to stitch for hours on end for the asylum's profit.

For the sake of time, I have structured my presentation around three central threads related to women at work within the asylum. First, I trace sewing as a doctor-prescribed "therapy" designed to keep institutionalized women busy. Male asylum superintendents believed that if female patients' hands were occupied rather than idle, they wouldn't have time to worry, to ask questions, to *think*, as Margaret Fuller once exhorted. Second, I examine how it was used as a form of punishment for women who dared to question their diagnosis, these patients soon finding themselves "reassigned" to the sewing room to work for hours on end until their fingers cramped and their eyes stung. Their forced labor formed the cornerstone of an underground "business" from which unscrupulous asylum superintendents like Andrew McFarland profited, even going so far as to declare the most talented patient-seamstresses "hopelessly insane," thereby delaying their release for months, years, even indefinitely in a few cases. Finally, I consider (mad)women sewing in the asylum as a subversive act when that work was done of their own volition. They turned to needlepoint to communicate with the outside world, inscribing messages onto vestimentary vellum of their own design. Turning our scholarly attention to this unique corpus of nineteenth-century women's writing, one which Margaret Fuller's philosophy on sewing helps to shed light on, uncovers a veritable wealth of material in a

place where women were confined as much by lock and key as they were by needle and thread—and where they would use that same needle and thread to ultimately prove their sanity.

I. Sewing in the Guise of "Therapy"

For Fuller, a woman being forced to sew against her will was tantamount to cloth confinement, so it is only fitting that late-nineteenth century "madwomen" like Elizabeth Packard, Sophia Olsen, and their contemporaries aligned sewing with straitjackets and fabric restraints. These women were institutionalized at the Jacksonville Insane Asylum here in Illinois, during the 1860s, a time when sewing was "prescribed" to female inmates as a dubious form of "therapy." The idea behind the treatment was that it would replicate the domestic chores women would perform in the home as well as to keep their hands occupied, their bodies sitting still, and their minds from questioning why they had been declared insane by their husbands and the county judges who ordered their confinement. Eerily echoing Margaret Fuller, patients like Packard and Olsen observed that "sewing does not employ one's mind" (84), though if they did not follow that "prescription," it was noted in their chart, the threat of being demoted to a "worse" ward a very real consequence of refusing to submit to the doctor's orders to mend, darn, and embroider, as in the case of Miss Hodson, another patient at the Jacksonville Insane Asylum.

When Olsen and Packard first encounter Miss Hodson, both remark on how "neatly dressed" the young woman was and note that she was intently "stitching on a very fine shirt bosom" (56–7). Based on her mien and her actions, the authors indicate that Miss Hodson was an adept seamstress. But unfortunately for her, this meant that she was exploited even more so than most, Dr. McFarland singling Miss Hodson out for excessive amounts of "sewing therapy." The young woman was "forced to 'stitch, stitch, stitch, from weary morn till night,' never allowed the respite of a walk on the grounds or even to rest on the Sabbath" (57). She was even rushed through her meals so that she could take up her needle once more. Olsen observed that by "sewing rapidly and incessantly, she accomplished an almost incredible amount of work for the Institution" (57). But Miss Hodson gladly accepted the excessive hours of work because she was told that her garments were needed for patients who did not possess adequate clothing. This seemed like a charitable arrangement to

the kind-hearted woman, but it was merely a lie told to placate her. Miss Hodson was under the erroneous impression that if she sewed enough shirts—following the treatment the good doctor gave her—she would someday earn her release from the Asylum.

When the authors encounter Miss Hodson some months hence, the once-fashionable, skilled seamstress is transformed. She has become one of Dr. McFarland's "incurables," her clothing torn asunder and her body bruised from regular beatings that she and the other patients in the Fifth Ward received in order to keep them subdued. Eventually, Miss Hodson is tied into a straitjacket and locked alone in solitary confinement, no longer even trusted with a sewing needle by her taskmaster-doctor. This is the last glimpse Packard and Olsen have of her, Miss Hodson's ultimate fate unknown.

II. Sewing and the Asylum Workroom as a Sweatshop

This is not to say that other women were exempt from McFarland's questionable "therapy." Take the case of Sophia Olsen, whose narrative is instrumental to the larger project my paper today borrows from. During her first weeks in the asylum, Olsen tried to "obtain some yarn, which I wished to [sew] for myself" (15). She trusts Dr. McFarland's wife, the Matron of the Asylum, will be an ally in procuring sewing materials as a fellow woman and wife, but she quickly realizes her mistake: Mrs. McFarland reports this "odd" request to her husband. Dr. McFarland notes Olsen's request for some needle, thread, and "a small quantity of yarn" (25) as "evidence" of her insanity, though of course when he prescribed sewing to his female patients it was supremely rational.[2]

Rebutting that diagnosis, the author argues that she is "'fully clothed in her right mind'" (100). But it is to no avail; the superintendent's mind is made up: she is reassigned to a different ward and with it, "sent to the sewing-room and compelled to work" (128). Upon entering the sewing room, or "work room" as the patients call it, Olsen meets one young woman who is wearing nothing but a pink calico dress more suitable

2. Olsen further explains how "the ladies of the ward (patients "insane" of course) . . . gave me many little pieces of their own garments, also needle and thread, with which to busy myself for amusement as I thought proper. The kind and amiable Mrs. Minard was the first in these acts of kindness and sympathy. With these remnants, I carefully constructed many articles for my own and my husband's comfort" (25–6).

for summer than the coming cold weather, who was daily forced to "[sew] for the [asylum]" (40). The young woman, whom Olsen learns is Mrs. Gleason from Chicago, is too cowed to ask Dr. McFarland to write to her husband for warmer clothes or even to be allowed a chair to sit in while she does her needlework, lest she incur his wrath. Olsen attempts to rectify this and tell one of the attendants, but she is met with the rebuke that she should mind her own business and not stick her nose into the affairs of other patients (42). The workroom reveals to Olsen and the other women forced to labor there the Asylum's truth as a prison as Michel Foucault would later theorize, the space not a room but a "charnel house" (46) where women enter as sane beings but inside were transformed into insane creatures from endless hours of forced sewing.[3]

Olsen concludes that this must be how patients are "manufactured into incurables" like poor Miss Hodson (102), the machinery of madness churning out such products as regularly as the factory churns out garments. Whether treatment or punishment, at least the women were being compensated for their work, Olsen thinks—but she is gravely mistaken. Finding the courage to speak up to the attendant who appears to be in charge of the sewing room, Olsen naively inquires whether the ladies were being paid per item or per hour. The attendant snaps that their "pay" is being kept busy and out of mischief (18). Olsen then tries another tactic, asking Dr. McFarland if a few of the garments she makes might be designated for herself or her family provided she meet her sewing quota for the asylum. She is told no. Dr. McFarland seems more like a malevolent factory manager in the sewing patients' minds than a physician looking out for their best interests.

The truth was that the McFarlands did not want their patients most proficient in the fabric arts to create projects of their own because it would prevent her from working as unpaid laborers for the asylum. Moreover, they were rarely permitted breaks during their hours in the workroom. There was no time for Olsen to "put aside her needlework" (75) as Margaret Fuller advised, to turn to intellectual pursuits. Such pursuits were in fact banned by McFarland for most of his patients, with women receiving swift punishment if they were caught reading or writing. The unscrupulous doctor had no qualms about exploiting the skills of

3. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* for further comparisons between the total institutions of the prison and the asylum.

his female patients, forcing the women in his care to mend, sew, and knit handmade garments that he and his wife would then sell for profit. Initially pleased to be invited to join the community of women who meet daily in the sewing room, to be accepted into their sewing circle as Margaret Fuller might term it, Olsen is quick to assess that this "was no [source] of amusement, but one of toil" (17). That toil involved the McFarlands taking a distinctly feminine form of labor and using it to exploit patients, the seemingly endless cycle of work that young Margaret Fuller once articulated an inescapable ouroboros of making and mending in the workroom and then washing and ironing in the laundry, only to return to the workroom to do it all over again.[4] Olsen is rightfully angry that Dr. McFarland would expect "an insane or sane patient, to labor for a Superintendent without pay, while he already receives an enormous salary [from the State]" (18)! The day following this discovery, she vociferously declines to take part in this sweatshop labor, Olsen's refusal resulting in her demotion to the "incurables" ward, populated by other women who refused to work.

III. Sewing as a Subversive Form of Communication

Finally, let us complicate sewing-as-women's-work within the asylum setting. It was not only toil under the pretense of therapy—it was also a lifeline tethering patients like Sophia Olsen and Elizabeth Packard to their former selves. The act of a woman sewing or knitting for *herself* became a form of resistance in a place where that was nearly impossible. It might seem counterintuitive that a woman who was forced to sew in the guise of therapy or as unpaid labor in the name of the asylum would turn around and do just that with what little free time she had to herself. However, in creating clothing for *herself*, this act became a form of rebellion against the otherwise overwhelming authority of the McFarlands.

Elizabeth Packard was one such woman who used sewing as a form of resistance, who "seize[d] the . . . needle" as Margaret Fuller might have put it (Matteson 7). In her 1868 memoir *The Prisoner's Hidden Life; Or, Insane Asylums Unveiled*, she writes that because

4. Fashion theorist and author of *The Fashioned Body* Joan Entwistle would likely compare the asylum's sewing room to a sweatshop, particularly where Olsen critiques how the women were directed to sew for hours on end, without any breaks or wages (62).

> all communication with my children was cut off by the authority of Dr. McFarland, I was led to resort to strategy….Therefore I procured some nicely dressed bleached cotton, and embroidered my daughter some double underwaists, on which I could easily and legibly pencil a long communication. (116)

A noteworthy part of her "strategy" was embroidering these underwaists.[5] She not only added a reinforcing layer of fabric to transform the single waist into a double, but adorned the material with an intricate pattern of needlework, even though the underwaists were not intended to be seen by their very nature as foundation garments. Nineteenth-century etiquette manualist and friend of Margaret Fuller Eliza Farrar applauded women like Packard who were versed in such "plain sewing" skills as making underwaists, though she criticized such "frivolous and distracting fancy needlework [as] embroidery" (qtd. in Strasser 132). However, Packard's embroidery was not "frivolous" by any stretch of the imagination. Given that Dr. McFarland's constant "checks" would have made him well aware of Packard's sewing project, taking too long to baste together plain, double-layered underwaists would likely be met with suspicion. By intentionally prolonging the project through the addition of meticulous embroidery work, Packard was able to write a letter to her children unimpeded.[6]

Consisting of multiple paragraphs stretched across multiple underwaists, we can only imagine the effort Packard put into writing her letter. It would have involved painstakingly pressing her "stub" of a pencil into the fabric, hard enough that her letters were visible yet not so hard as to break the precious lead tip, since the illicit writing tool was the only one she had after Dr. McFarland had seized (what he thought was) her entire cache of paper and pencils. The literary and legislative implications of the "letter . . . sent to the wash-tub" were manifold. Initially, Elizabeth Packard had as little recourse to regain her freedom as she did to regain custody of her beloved children due to the concept of Coverture, where, upon marriage, a woman's

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5. Moreover, as Linda V. Carlisle theorizes, cotton would not be easy to come by in the asylum, not only because of its unblemished, "bleached" white surface, but for the fact that the selection of fabrics Packard would have had to choose from without access to a textile store or even a general store would likely be of a much coarser quality.
6. Mary Elene Wood suggests that Packard took great pride in sewing clothing for her children, her continuation of that domestic pursuit yet another indication she was in her right mind.

rights, property, children, everything she had to her name—belonged to her husband by law.[7] Refusing to give up in the face of this injustice, Packard appealed to the Kankakee County court. The trial of *Packard v. Packard* created a sensation that rippled across the state, according to Jennifer Levison.[8] Packard used the underwaists as evidence, presenting them the court alongside her own and other witness testimonies. The jury took only a few minutes to deliberate, their verdict: Elizabeth Packard was sane and could not be re-committed. Even more importantly, Packard regained custody of her children.[9]

Freed from her husband's and Dr. McFarland's tyranny at last, Packard became a tireless advocate on behalf of other married women who had been adjudged insane and committed for specious reasons by *their* husbands. She did so by establishing the Anti-Insane Asylum Society and speaking before local women's groups on the subjects of women's work and asylum reform. Later, as Barbara Sapinsley has documented, she went on a speaking tour throughout the State of Illinois, and eventually, the Greater Midwest.[10] Packard's reform and advocacy work also manifested through a prolific writing career.[11]

Packard once again present her sewn work as testimony before the Illinois State Legislature's Investigative Committee after her memoir came out. The outcome of this Springfield-based hearing was more than she could have hoped, as the Legislators passed a Bill for the Protection of Personal Liberty, which became known as "Packard's Law." This law guaranteed adult Illinois citizens accused of insanity—particularly married women—the right to a fair trial. After the passage of her eponymous law, Packard continued to promote asylum reform at the national level.[12] Packard also kept writing well into her later years, her book *The Mystic Key; Or, the Asylum Secret Unlocked* published in 1886, when she was seventy years old.

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7. Theophilus Packard had taken his children and fled to Massachusetts, where he and his wife originally came from. Both states had well-entrenched statutes on Coverture at the time, which Theophilus used to his advantage.
8. For further reading on the case *Packard v. Packard*, see "Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard: An Advocate for Cultural, Religious, and Legal Change," in the *Alabama Law Review* (2003, Vol. 54:3).
9. Packard, p. 58. Her husband never did divorce her (divorce being against his religious beliefs even though falsely committing his wife was apparently not), though the two would never again live under the same roof for the remainder of their lives.
10. *The Private War of Mrs. Packard*, p. 220.
11. Packard not only wrote pamphlets and memoirs, but she also authored letters to the editor of prominent newspapers and to legislators in other Midwestern states.
12. See Packard's 1882 piece, "Emancipation of Married Women! An Argument of Providential Events in Support of the Identity Act" from *The Colorado Antelope* for an example of her reform work outside of Illinois.

IV. Conclusions

Packard's epistolary embroidery saw her literally communicating through clothing, using the cotton underwaists to correspond with her daughter and argue her sanity. She made deliberate design decisions in constructing the undergarments, the waists not only launching her mid-life career as a writer, speaker, and tireless proponent of the value of women's work and of asylum reform, but, even more significantly, establishing legal precedent—transforming Illinois and other states' laws concerning the rights of married women. Sophia Olsen, too, created change in writing about women's work in the asylum. Her narrative exposed the sweatshop-like conditions of the "work room" and the women who were assigned to the "sewing circle" inside, its falsely benign name belying the truth of what went on behind closed doors.

Ultimately, Sophia Olsen's and Elizabeth Parsons Ware Packard's treatises on sewing and women's work within the asylum setting were not only the first of their kind recorded in "madwomen's" narratives of the nineteenth century, but their unique fusion of the epistolary with embroidery presented and continues to present scholars with a new site of inquiry within material studies, psychiatric history, and literary and textile studies. And their legacy—like Margaret Fuller's—would live on as institutionalized women after them turned to sewing, and writing about sewing, in order to fashion their own narratives. Their philosophies on sewing, like Fuller's, were thus indelibly woven into the fabric of women's writing during the nineteenth century, its possibilities resonating far into the twentieth century and beyond. Thank you.

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