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“Each Wise Nymph that Angles for a Heart”

The Politics of Courtship in the Boston “Fishing Lady” Pictures

Andrea Pappas

This essay examines the Boston fishing lady embroideries in light of eighteenth-century courtship practice, depictions of women anglers in prints and on decorative porcelain, and recreational fishing in colonial culture. In representing the fishing lady as a successful independent angler, women needleworkers addressed, and even covertly resisted, male control of courtship, a crucial life transaction. The regular placement of the image of the fishing lady in the narratives created by the complex embroideries asserts the woman’s pivotal, if brief, authority in the courtship process.

Come live with me, and be my love,
And we will some new pleasures prove
Of golden sands, and crystal brooks,
With silken lines, and silver hooks.

... For thee, thou need’st no such deceit,
For thou thyself art thine own bait:
That fish that is not catch’d thereby,
Alas, is wiser far than I.

(John Donne, The Bait, 1633)

So READ the opening and closing verses of John Donne’s 1633 poem, The Bait, a meditation on love and courtship. Cast as a suggestive metaphor, one that imagines women in the role of fisher and figures men as helpless fish, this rhetorical figure was a staple of more than English pastoral poetry. In fact, in the eighteenth century, visual images of the woman angler appeared on both sides of the Atlantic. A century after Donne penned his poem, young women at one or more finishing schools in Boston used “silken lines” to create new versions of this imagery in the renowned fishing lady embroidered pictures, primarily dating from 1740–70. As in Donne’s poem, the image—both textual and visual—of the woman fishing had ties to courtship; fishing functioned as a metaphor for women patiently “luring” men with their looks and feminine accomplishments, the ultimate goal being an advantageous, successful marriage.¹ In the years before women began to make these fishing

¹ Fishing was a staple of pastoral imagery in poetry between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. David McMurray, “A Recreation Which Many Ladies Delight In: Establishing a Tradition of Fisherwomen in Britain and North America Prior to the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” Sport History Review 43, no. 2 (November 2012): 152 nn. 40–41.
lady embroideries, norms for courtship and marriage had been evolving, a companionate model for marriage edging out existing views of it as a social, political, or economic alliance between families. Artifacts such as prints, decorative ceramics, and the fishing lady embroideries register and participate in that change; thus, the fishing woman should be understood within this context. To date, these mid-eighteenth-century embroidered pictures have been discussed primarily for their function as a kind of capstone project in an elite woman’s education or for their role in the family’s presentation of its gentility and fashionable taste. This essay takes a different tack, pulling together several strands of inquiry in order to illuminate the hitherto overlooked significance of the fishing lady embroideries for women: the changing contours of eighteenth-century courtship practice, fishing as one line of recreational pursuit in colonial culture, women anglers as depicted in print and material culture (often accompanied by lines of poetry), and the images of women anglers that women patiently stitched with strands of wool and silk. Pulling threads from print, material, and visual culture allows us to weave a new interpretive frame for these embroideries that illuminates how women, in these needleworks, transformed preexisting images of women fishing, extending our understanding of the politics of courtship in American visual culture.

One such embroidery visualizes this courtship metaphor by isolating the figure of the fishing woman and her suitor. We see a couple, framed by a pair of trees, in the center of this large embroidery stitched by Susan Colesworthy in 1765 (fig. 1). Birds, trees, and flowers populate the lush landscape. The elegantly dressed gentleman gestures to his right while paying court to the woman on his left. She, finely attired and seated with her back to him, turns her head to listen to his address while her body faces the fish on her line and the pond that fills the lower right corner of the picture. Off to the right behind the woman, partially occluded by a tree, a large building sits amid rolling hills, perhaps alluding to domestic life. Colesworthy positioned a basket overflowing with fish at the woman’s feet: is the fishing lady displaying her “bait” or her prowess for him? Below the gentleman several dogs frolic near a reclining stag; does this allude to his “hunt” for a wife? Does this genteel interaction in nature depict a fantasy of courtship practices at mid-eighteenth century, a time when they were under pressure? And what can such iconographical cues reveal about women’s engagement with the politics of courtship among America’s elite in the eighteenth century? In order to answer these questions, we must first look at the social and material backdrops for the making and meaning of these needlework pictures.

Courtship and Matrimony

During the eighteenth century courtship and matrimony were key sources of change, for better or worse, in one’s social and economic status. Marriage created and cemented alliances between families and shifted women, and frequently property, from the houses and families of their birth to those of their husbands. In the seventeenth century the
The marital ideal evolved from one that saw love developing after marriage to one in which men and women expected to find love before it. Although increasingly rooted in the individual desires of the couple, such motives included those concerning social status and economic future as much as those centered on love, companionship, and mutual respect. Men largely controlled the process but, by the middle of the eighteenth century, there were ways women could exercise power, direct and indirect, in the course of courtship and in their choice of husband. Courtship customs affected both sexes: it marked the transition from youth to adulthood and proclaimed that status publicly. Courtship was a transaction, but the stakes, and their meaning, differed somewhat for men and women. Power was unevenly distributed across the gender gap and over the temporal

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duration of the courtship process; thus, women and men approached it with divergent strategies.

Women needed to consider their economic future as well as compatibility when choosing a partner. The stakes for women were high; they were essentially exchanging one keeper on whom they were dependent—their natal family—for another, their husband’s. The abundant advice given to a woman on the topic of courtship in the eighteenth century stressed the need for her restraint—she could not pursue a man nor reveal her feelings or preference too early in the process for fear of being thought immodest or unchaste, yet she needed to attract his attention. Thus, women, though perfectly willing to discuss their feelings in letters to their female interlocutors, remained reticent on such matters when corresponding with potential suitors. This silence left men to initiate the courtship process but also meant that they had to declare themselves before receiving assurance that their offer of marriage would be accepted. In that window between offer and acceptance, women had control; some women kept men dangling for months.

Women could not exercise their privilege of choice unless men had a significant investment in the process also. Even though men initiated the courtship process, and it was largely in male hands, men needed marriage to progress from youth to manhood; they depended on contracting a marriage to advance to the status of head of household. They thus required the cooperation of women to make this social transition from youth to manhood and to avoid the social ridicule associated with involuntary bachelorhood, a circumstance that could not have been lost on women. This raised the stakes for men; needing women’s cooperation to achieve full masculinity, they risked being subject to a “catch and release”—the humiliation of a rejection. Men courting women may have enjoyed legal and social power and freedom denied to women, but the shifting balance of power in the courtship process frequently caused anxiety, as their letters to their friends and family reveal.

Men and women had leverage at different points in the courtship process; men largely controlled it, but once a man declared himself, he was like the fish that had taken the bait. Once she accepted his offer, the woman found herself again without leverage. The disposition of power in courtship ebbed and flowed between men and women, and this fluidity allowed women to drop their lines in the water, so to speak, and to decide whether or not to keep a man who was a good catch.

The Material Universe of the Embroideries

The “fishing lady” embroideries comprise a distinct subset of a larger group of embroideries with pastoral themes produced from the 1730s through the 1790s and were first identified as a group on the basis of the fishing woman motif in Helen Bowen’s short article of 1923. Although Boston was the location of the school or schools that produced these embroideries, the students came from a much larger area in New England, testifying to the significance of the fishing lady image across New England culture. The group has grown to include similar pastoral embroideries that omit the fishing lady in favor of shepherdesses, harvest scenes, dancing figures, and so on. The group has now swelled to nearly sixty, but only about a quarter of them contain the image of the fishing woman. While shepherdesses abound in countless colonial samplers and embroideries, the figure of the woman fishing is unusual. Compositional evidence from the embroideries suggests at least two finishing schools and maybe as many as four. Most of these

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7 Barske, “Lover’s Instructor,” 4, 28.
8 Nicole Eustace has analyzed at length how this power dynamic found expression in the divergent rhetorical styles employed by men and women when they wrote letters to each other. The power dynamic shows up again—albeit expressed differently—in the ways men and women discussed love and courtship in letters exchanged with their same-sex friends. My discussion of these letters is indebted to her penetrating study (Eustace, “Cornerstone of a Copious Work,” 519, 527).
9 Ibid., 535.
12 Ibid., 527–28.
13 Ibid., 527. See also Barske, “Lover’s Instructor,” 9–10, and chap. 3, which discusses Benjamin Franklin’s *Reflections on Courtship and Marriage*, published in 1746.
16 Most of the fishing lady figures seem to be derived from a single source. However, in some of them she is reversed, suggesting that patterns were printed and reprinted, thus reversing the figure. Schoolmistresses using differing techniques to transfer the pattern to the fabric—direct transfer of a charcoal trace of a pattern vs. free-hand drawing—could also result in the reversal of the figure. Both of these possibilities point to at least two schoolmistresses either using different versions of the same source or different methods to transfer it to the fabric. There are two embroideries that are
embroidery makers are anonymous, and known ties between them consist of two signed pieces; the best evidence for links between the women who made these is the embroideries themselves. Thus, tracking individual needleworks to specific schools has helped illuminate both existing kinship ties and known or postulated social networks forged by colonial women as they moved around New England to attend school; this approach dominates much of the extant literature. While thinking about these pastoral embroideries in large groupings helps elucidate the broad scale of visual culture in Boston at this time, it obscures the possible significance of the motif of the fishing lady, my objective here.

Shifting the frame of inquiry away from the fabric of finishing schools in order to attend to the needleworks as analogues of paintings allows new insights to come forward. These objects are large, ranging from about 18 inches square to some 20 by 50 inches. Formatted as chimneypieces, the larger ones, in particular, were outfitted with elaborate carved and partially gilded frames (a few original frames still exist), mounted under glass, and hung in parlors and dining rooms. Their treatment, in other words, was much more like paintings than like other needleworks such as bed hangings and wallets, which were put to practical use; these needlework pictures were made to be displayed in prominent places. Worked primarily with tent stitches in wool, or silk and wool, the embroidered pictures exhibit a smaller range of stitches than many samplers. The tent stitches gave the embroidery a more or less flat, even surface, and their tiny size allowed for the rendering of details (such as the folds in stockings or woven basket patterns; fig. 2), not unlike the way small pixels give a digital display a sharper image than do large ones. Further, the glass in the frame contributed to a shiny, smooth surface not unlike a painting. In their original eighteenth-century context they, unlike most needlework, took their place on the walls with mirrors, paintings, prints, and a few items of “fancy work” (such as quillwork or scrollwork decorations with candle sconces), indicating the high regard given to these needlework pictures. Eighteenth-century viewers thus encountered these brightly colored, lavish objects in much the same manner as they encountered paintings.

In terms of materials, embroidery had connections to fishing that went beyond the image of the fishing lady. Anglers’ fly-making and embroideries employed the same materials; an early fishing manual, published in 1694, explicitly urges the novice angler to carry in one’s kit bag, for tying flies, “silks of all sorts, threads, thrums, moccado-ends, and cruels of all sizes, and variety of colors, diversified and stained wool … twisted fine threads of gold and silver.” The description could easily fit a lady’s workbag: these materials were used in pictorial embroideries, and women from well-to-do families would have been familiar with them from late childhood. Further, the first fishing manual, A Treatise of Fishing with an Angle (1496), then attributed to Dame Juliana Berner, has an extensive discussion of the different colors of lines needed for fishing, as well as detailed instructions for dyeing them. Artificial flies were not advertised in the colonies until 1770, so until then anglers had to tie their own. For example, a fly for use in May had a body made of red wool wrapped in blue silk, with wings made from duck feathers. Women with extensive experience in fine sewing would have had the requisite facility in dealing with the assorted fibers, small feathers, beads, and other materials required by both embroidery and by making flies. Indeed, Izaak Walton’s The Compleat Angler, familiar to eighteenth-century readers, describes

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18 On the expense of these frames, see Ring, Girlish Embroidery, 1:57.

19 Richard Franck wrote two treatises on angling; the first, written in 1658, was not published until 1694. A second book “written in America” appeared in 1708. See Charles E. Goodspeed, Angling in America, Its Early History and Literature (Cambridge, MA: Riverside Press, 1939), 22. “Thruns” were the bits of warp thread left on the loom after the fabric has been removed; the term also refers to small lengths of unspun fleecy fiber. “Moccado-ends” refers to worsted woolen yarn. “Cruels” is familiar to us today as “crewel.”

20 Many scholars now believe the attribution is spurious; however, in the eighteenth century this was still believed to be a woman-authored text. The full text of the treatise is available at Renascence Editions: https://scholarbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/686/fishing.pdf?sequence=1.


not just fly-tying but also discusses an artificial minnow "that will catch a trout as well as an artificial fly; and it was made by a handsome woman, that had a fine hand."25 Walton marvels at her skill at some length, describing in detail her use of different colored silks, beads, and a feather to produce a replica "so curiously wrought, and so exactly dissembled, that it would beguile any sharp-sighted Trout in a swift stream." Walton himself here seems rather beguiled by her skill while linking needlework and angling through their common materials. Angling thus had associations with women and the material goods of the domestic sphere well before the fishing lady embroidered pictures began to appear in Boston in the 1740s.

The tools for embroidery and fishing also had a common origin. Eighteenth-century fish hooks


Fig. 2. Detail of Sarah Warren fishing lady embroidery (see fig. 18).
were produced by needle makers in England; fish-hooks and needles often appear on a single invoice issued to a merchant. Goods imported for both embroidery and fishing included silks, beads, needles, and fish hooks—just the kind of merchandise that could be found in small shops, some of them run by women. One such woman, Elizabeth Murray, who also taught embroidery, ran a shop in Boston that carried (among other things) "crewels" and "silver and gold thread." Intriguingly, sewing kits and needle cases sometimes took the form of fish (fig. 3) or fisher folk. Thus, the tools and accessories that women handled in their needlework embodied further links between women, embroidery, and fishing.

Fishing in Colonial Culture

Recreational fishing garnered widespread attention in the upper levels of colonial society in the eighteenth century. In the social sphere, 1732 saw the first American fishing club (the Schuylkill Fishing Club) with two more following near Philadelphia alone in the next few years. Although Schuylkill Fishing Club was an all-male preserve, it had ladies' visiting days, and its membership rolls, drawn from the upper reaches of Philadelphia society, stamped recreational fishing as an elite activity. In the political arena, laws aimed at fishing appeared in the early eighteenth century as colonial governments sought to preserve nature's resources for the common good. For example, in 1715 the Connecticut General Assembly began to regulate dam building and water flow on rivers, specifically to safeguard migratory fish, and in 1734 New York passed its first law regulating fishing—restricting it to angling—in the common pond in order to preserve the fish population.

Compared to commercial methods, such as netting or seineing, angling (fishing with a rod and line, rather than a net or spear) is inefficient subsistence fishing, thus the law converted the common pond into a site for leisurely pursuits, at least as far as fish were concerned. The interest in fishing as a recreational activity was formalized in the first American publication on angling, published in Boston in 1743, just as the fishing lady appears in women's embroidered landscapes.

Did real women fish? In spite of few surviving chronicles of their daily lives in this period, women—at least those from the upper echelons of colonial society—were aware of and participated in this fishing culture, and some of their comments on this past-time have been preserved. In August 1737 William Penn's daughter, Margareta Penn Freame, wrote to her brother in London from Philadelphia, relaying that "My chief Amusement this summer has been fishing. I therefore request the favor of you when a Laisure Hour will admit, you will buy for me a four jointed strong fishing Rod and Real with strong good Lines and assortment of hooks of the best sort." Freame speaks with authority; for example, she knows what kind of rod she wants: the four-jointed rod was an improvement over the three-jointed rod and was specifically designed to be easily portable. She wants a "strong" rod, perhaps as a result of her current rod's insufficiency when subject to the thrashing of a good-sized fish. She also knows that she needs different kinds of hooks for different kinds of fish, and the emphasis on "strong good lines" implies that she has had experience with broken lines on more than one occasion.

In England, angling as recreation expanded from the aristocracy to the merchant class in the second quarter of the eighteenth century, leading to the proliferation of tackle shops on both sides of the Atlantic. The increase in tackle shops in the colonies speaks to a growing fishing culture; in the same year Freame wrote to her brother, a

24 Letters and invoices in the Richard Hemming Archive clearly show that he was manufacturing both needles and fish hooks in the eighteenth century. I am grateful to curator Jo-Ann Gogger for providing me with scans of these invoices. Jo-Ann Gogger, correspondence with the author, Richard Hemming Archive, Forge Mill Needle Museum and Bordesley Abbey, Redditch, Worcestershire, United Kingdom.


27 Strother B. Roberts, “Esteeme a Little of Fish”: Fish, Fishponds, and Farming in Eighteenth-Century New England and the

Mid-Atlantic,” Agricultural History 82, no. 2 (Spring 2008):143–63, esp. 150–52. On 157 Roberts notes that the New York law transformed the city’s pond into a purely recreational resource.


30 Popkin and Allen, Gone Fishing, 20–21, reproduces several advertisements and a receipt for General Cadwallader’s angling supplies issued by Edward Pole, held in the collection of the Historical Society of Philadelphia.
Philadelphia merchant, Samuel Neave, advertised fishing gear for sale. Indeed, twenty years after Freame placed her order for tackle, twenty-two-year-old Philadelphia resident Hannah Callender’s laconic diary entry from May 14, 1759, notes that she “rode a mile to Preserve Brown’s where we passed the morning agreeably in seeing his mill and its works, attending to the fall of the water, pleasing discourse, fishing &c. till 2 O’clock.” Real women did fish, and they seem to have done so with some regularity.

Fishing was such a noticeable activity in colonial society that a British traveler, Andrew Burnaby, remarked regarding his travels in 1759–60, about fishing on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia: “There is a society of sixteen ladies, and as many gentlemen, called the fishing company, who meet once a fortnight on the Schuylkill... it is very advantageous to a stranger to be introduced to it, as he hereby gets acquainted with the best and most respectable company in Philadelphia.” Although

the Schuylkill Fishing Company did not admit women. Burnaby notes the presence of women; perhaps he attended on one of the infrequent visiting days for ladies or is referring to one of the other fishing clubs in the area. He commented similarly on the social life of the New York elite, again noting the presence of women: “Their amusements are much the same as in Pennsylvania; viz. balls, and sleighing expeditions in the winter; and, in the summer, going in parties upon the water, and fishing. ... There are several houses pleasantly situated upon East River, near New York, where it is common to have turtle-feasts. These happen once or twice in a week. Thirty or forty gentlemen and ladies meet and dine together, drink tea in the afternoon, fish and amuse themselves until evening, and then return home.”

Fishing remained an important focus for community activity—including women—throughout the century. George Washington recorded four fishing trips during the Constitutional Convention in 1787, one at Mrs. Jane Moore’s farm on July 30, and two on August 3 and 4: “in company with Mr. Robt. Morris and his Lady, and Mr. Gourv. Morris I went up to Trenton on another fishing party ... in the evening fished, not very successfully.”

Eight years later, in 1795, visiting Englishman William Priest recorded that in small towns and among farmers, “twelve or fourteen neighbors form themselves into a sort of club, and agree to fish one day a week during the summer. ... At five the ladies arrive, and the company amuse themselves in catching fish for supper, walking in the woods, swinging, singing, playing on some musical instrument, &c.”

Women could prepare themselves for these fishing outings by reading a housekeeping manual such as Hannah Woolley’s The Accomplish’d Lady’s Delight. Published first in 1755 in London, the second edition (1777) was expanded to include a section on angling in addition to the original texts treating food preservation, household cooking, and beauty secrets. Angling, she declared in the book’s “dedicatory,” was “a recreation which many Ladies delight in, and is not therefore thought altogether improper in a Book of this Nature.” The expanded tenth edition, published in 1795, offers this section to “the female angler, instructing ladies and others, in the various methods of taking all manner of fish, in the fish-pond or river.” Similarly, W. S.’s A Family Jewel: The Woman’s Counsellor ... , first published in 1704, includes a section on angling. Angling’s presence in these books directed to women indicates that they were expected to participate in this activity frequently enough to warrant instruction in it alongside guidance for cooking, child rearing, beauty secrets, and the like. Although fishing was a leisure activity, it, like cooking, also had a practical dimension, as one could eat the result of one’s endeavors; the reader of this book was prepared for both.

Recreational angling for men and women was one of many leisure activities developing and spreading in the eighteenth century. Angling was an acceptable, respectable form of recreation for women in England and in the North American colonies. Fishing parties contributed to the courtship process; they provided regular occasions for socializing, group entertainment, and an occasion for young men and women to interact under the watchful eyes of parents or chaperones. Although the historical record leaves much deeper traces of men’s angling activities than women’s (women do

42 David McMurray, “A Rod of Her Own’: Women and Angling in Victorian North America” (MA thesis, University of Lethbridge, Alberta, 2007); see 19–51 for discussion of the history of angling and women prior to the Victorian era in England and in her North American colonies, and see also McMurray, “‘A Recreation Which Many Ladies Delight In’: Establishing a Tradition of Fishwomen in Britain and North America Prior to the Mid-Nineteenth Century,” 129–58; Smith, “Reel Women.”
not appear to have formed angling clubs, for one), nevertheless the trace can be followed. A taste for angling undoubtedly contributed to the choice of imagery in the fishing lady embroideries. They thus depict an activity that, if not necessarily engaged in by the specific women embroidering them, was part of the recreation of the upper social classes to which these women belonged.

Representations of Angling

In the eighteenth century a variety of material and visual objects, such as prints, porcelain tiles, and decorative china, depicted women anglers; these other media inform how the embroideries can be interpreted. Prints and material objects with angling imagery and treatises on fishing such as Izaak Walton’s *The Compleat Angler*—which included Donne’s poem *The Bait* in its entirety—were consumed in large numbers. Retailers on both sides of the Atlantic distributed fishing manuals as well as mezzotints and engravings.

An engraving by John Simon (fig. 4) is one of several published in this period that expresses the visual link between fishing and relations between men and women. These prints, based on a painting by Jacopo Amigoni, also served as source material for decorations in other media, as seen on this Meissen vase (figs. 5, 6). Although the image on the vase is reversed and features an additional figure, it shares with the prints a key figural grouping: a young female angler and her male companion appear beside a stream. In this and similar views, she sits, holding her rod and flanked by the young man and a basket full of fish. She wears a fine dress, with an embroidered or beribboned stomacher; her full sleeves are pushed up and her apron is somewhat rumpled in her lap, testifying perhaps to the physical requirements of angling in spite of her loose grip on her diminutive rod. She leans back a bit against the rocky outcrop on which she sits, a basket of fish by her side. The young man attending her wears knee breeches, a long coat, and a shirt. A long-poled landing net rests against his shoulder, and with a pleased expression he proffers a large fish.

The vase both celebrates the erotic potential of the fishing metaphor and underscores the vigilance women must exercise in order to maintain their sexual virtue when confronted with male desire. Whereas the source print evenly divides the composition between the man and the woman, on the vase he takes center stage. Here, the eroticism of the image is enhanced by the presence, behind him, of a large, straight, limbless tree crowned with a large bird nest, an unmistakably phallic element that echoes his offering of a sizable fish to the woman wearing a yellow and orange dress. (The putto perched atop the shoulder of the vase similarly resonates with both his posture and his suggestively held fish.)

43 Simon’s plate was published by Thomas Burford as *Water* (an impression in much better condition than the one illustrated here can be seen online at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3339016&partId=1&searchText=2010,7081,3431&page=1 and http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=49432001&objectId=3339016&partId=1). Unfortunately, as the museum would grant only short-term renewable rights for online use of the print in its collection, it could not be reproduced in this essay.

Fig. 4. John Simon after Jacopo Amigoni, *The Element of Water*, London, 1730–42. (© National Trust; photo, Sue James.)
accentuates the gentleman’s wanton intent; she seems to curb his action on behalf of both women. Because both women have rods and are seated more or less side by side, the young man appears to be interrupting them. The angling women do not appear to be fishing for men as Donne’s poem might suggest; rather, they seem virtuously uninterested in his fishy offer.

When Thomas Burford republished Simon’s plate, he added four lines of poetry below the image. The first couplet describes the action in terms that recall Donne’s poem: “While Chloe’s bait the finny race allures / Assisting Strephon with his net secures.”

The couplet attributes power and primacy to the woman: she starts the action; he merely assists with a net once the difficult task of catching the fish has been completed. The position of the fish as a phallic instrument projecting from his body conflates him with one of the “finny race allure[d].” She has hooked a big fish indeed on this lush afternoon; the image visibly ties together angling and courtship—or at least sexuality. He offers her the fish and perhaps himself, although she does not seem to be impressed by either; after all, as the basket testifies, she has caught other fish already. She holds her rod to her left, above her lap, its angle and position suggesting that the destination of his fish is between her slightly spread knees. Yet

44 The impression held in the National Trust has its inscription nearly entirely obscured by the frame. See the impression in the British Museum, reg. no. 2010,7081,605, for a clear view of the inscription.

45 On the association of these postures with fecundity, see Susan E. Klepp, “Revolutionary Bodies: Women and the Fertility Transition in the Mid-Atlantic Region, 1760–1820,” Journal of American
her rod also arrests his approach; it checks the fish before he can put it down. In keeping with these mildly eroticizing elements, he stands near, but not touching her. Her backward-leaning posture creates some distance from him, and her deterring gesture with the rod implies that the future of this encounter hinges on her, not his, choice and that the proper outcome is not dalliance, but marriage. The second couplet in the caption makes this explicit: “Thus each wise Nymph that angles for a heart / Trusts Hymen only with the landing part.”

In contrast to the first couplet, the second one sounds a cautionary note for women; women should not let their “fishing” go so far as to descend to coquetry. Rather, they should rely on marital customs to complete the transaction, as virtuous women do not abuse their power of attraction in casual flirtation. Properly deployed, such power has its limits.

“Chloe” and “Strephon,” staples of English pastoral poetry, and Hymen, the minor Greek god of marriage, would be familiar to educated men and women in the Anglo-American world. As courtship literature of the time cautioned men against giving too much weight to women’s beauty and attractiveness when selecting a wife, they would understand the image as a representation of the tension between sexual attraction and the social and economic goals of marriage. These images of well-dressed figures and their caption cast the potentially divergent agendas of men and women around courtship, sexuality, and marriage in terms of an activity set in nature—angling—alluding to the woman’s agency and power of attraction while at the same time cautioning her against going too far in its exercise.

A few years later another print addresses angling, this time with a different tone; attention to gentility replaces suggestive references to sexuality. Mezzotints, such as Thomas Burford’s new series depicting the months of the year, highlight an aristocratic association between women and angling in the eighteenth century (fig. 8). The later mezzotint has a similar composition, but the rod is now in the woman’s right hand, and her left holds up her line to display a small fish, still on the hook. Behind her, instead of a couple, we see a middle-aged couple lead the viewer to associate fishing with marriage.

A second allegorical image of August, issued in 1767, ties together angling for fish and for men more explicitly than the print of 1747 (fig. 8). The later mezzotint has a similar composition, but the rod is now in the woman’s right hand, and her left holds up her line to display a small fish, still on the hook. Behind her, instead of a couple, we see a lone male fishing on the opposite bank of the river. The length of line she holds up for the viewer’s inspection visually continues the line he has dropped in the water. His fish is hers to take and, by extension, so is he.

William Woollett’s etching and engraving of 1757 makes explicit the genteel, if not downright aristocratic, association between women and angling in the eighteenth century (fig. 9). It presents a view of the garden of the Duke of Argyle at Whitton (now known as Whitton Park). It depicts the large, rectangular formal canal lined with cedars on both sides and a neo-gothic tower in the distance. This elegant setting encloses equally graceful men and women who singly, in couples, or in small groups, stroll about admiring the scenery. In the lower right foreground stand two ladies with fishing rods accompanied by a gentleman (fig. 10). Just behind this group of three figures, two other elegantly dressed women converse as they stroll up the path. One woman gestures with her fan toward the fishing group they have just passed; angling, like polite

46 Another version of this, reversed, with the same couplet, printed and published by Robert Sayer sometime after 1760, is in the British Museum Collection Online, reg. no. 2010.7081.21124. In this collection see also The Anglers’ Recept, 1789, after George Morland, published by John Raphael Smith.
48 Woolley, The Accomplish’d Lady’s Delight, 195.
50 British Museum Collection Online, object description, reg. no. 1849,0328.31.
Fig. 7. After Thomas Burford, *August*, London, 1745. Mezzotint with hand color; H. 15 1/8", W. 11 ¾". (Museum purchase, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.)
conversation, is an occasion for display of refined manners and skills.

However, as pictured here, those skills have limits. The gentleman companion of the ladies with fishing rods appears to help one to bait her hook; her line is loose and leads the eye to the confluence of their hands. Behind her, to the left, the second woman appears to have caught something; presumably, the gentleman has earlier assisted her as he does now for her companion. The fishing woman’s rod bows as if weighted, and a small fish emerges from the concentric ring of ripples centered on her line. Her dainty posture and extended arm make it clear that she will require assistance in landing the fish. Here, women engage in angling, but it is framed by male agency; women need the assistance
of men before dropping their lines in the water and later, when landing their catch. These aristocratic women appear to be successful in their angling efforts, but, in contrast to other images, their activity is positioned as an extension or subset of male action.

Mezzotints like Burford’s and Woollett’s were widely disseminated, as angling had become a part of transatlantic culture. As noted in the caption, Woollett’s plate was printed for five different sellers in London, and Burford’s images were reprinted and appropriated by other printers, indicating a large demand for this kind of image.

Prints functioned not just as embellishments of domestic spaces but also as source material in the visual culture of colonial high society. For example, portraitists borrowed poses from engravings or mezzotints after English portraits while schoolmistresses and drawing masters used landscape and genre images as springboards for embroidery designs, often borrowing motifs or even entire compositions.51 Schoolmistresses and drawing teachers also sold patterns as commodities in their own right.52 Some of the same printmakers publishing images of women fishing also published designs for needlework as well as pattern books.53 The unknown designer of the fishing lady embroideries may have borrowed the image of the fishing lady

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53 Deutsch, “Needlework Patterns,” 375.
from an English playing card manufactured in the early eighteenth century. She sits, elegantly dressed, on an embankment, with a fish on the line (as indicated by the curved end of her rod), while her gentleman companion, his gaze resting on her, angles awkwardly and futilely from the far side of the stream. The card positions the woman as in command; she, like “Chloe,” has more than one kind of fish on her line.

Images of a woman fishing turn up not just in prints and on vases but also on decorative objects such as porcelain plates and tiles produced both in Europe and in China, the latter incorporating images from Western sources and made for the Western market. For example, the ardent, fish-bearing gentleman from Simon’s *Water* print turns up again, this time on an enameled plate (fig. 11) manufactured in China for the export market. Simon’s couple also appears, reversed, enameled in grisaille on a Chinese export porcelain saucer. The return of these images to the West on porcelain plates produced decades after the initial print was struck indicates the extensive circulation of English prints at this time as well as the popularity of this image. Further, the plate in figure 11 and the reversed version on the saucer suggest that Simon’s or Burford’s print and a copy made their way to China. Both the appropriation of the male figure and reversed grisaille evidence the widespread availability of this and other images in eighteenth-century visual culture.

The plate and its borrowed imagery also tell us something about the depiction of women’s competency in fishing; it pictures an elegantly dressed woman fishing with her gentleman friend standing next to her. A diminutive figure, possibly a child or a servant, accompanies them. The recreational nature of angling registers here in the fine clothing of the man and woman and their relaxed postures. Notably, the woman has a fish dangling from her line, and the small figure appears to reach out toward it, as if to grab it when she swings the pendulant

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54 This is reproduced in A. Hyatt Mayor, “The Hunt for the Fishing Lady,” *Antiques* 112 (July 1977): 113. Mayor’s caption places the card, a seven of diamonds, in the Cary Playing Card Collection at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale. However, the Beinecke library has no catalog entry for this object. I am grateful to the staff for their extended attempts to locate it in response to my request to reproduce it here. A discussion of the significance of the seven of diamonds as a powerful “stopper” card in the eighteenth-century card game called “Pope Joan” is beyond the scope of this essay.

55 This was sold at auction on February 7, 2015, lot 954, Thomaston Place Auction Galleries, Thomaston, ME, http://www.invaluable.com/auCTION-lot/rare-early-chinese-export-saucer-fine-porcelain-954-c-3214345320.
fish ashore. The basket on the other side of the man already holds a few fish, indicating her success. The male figure holds a tiny fish in one hand; this could be her most recent catch, which he is transferring to the basket, or it could be a bait fish that he readies for her hook. This depiction features fishing as a genteel activity and, at first glance, appears to emphasize the woman as the active agent, providing an image of female power and control: she fishes, and the male figure serves merely ancillary functions. However, the presence of the castle-like building behind them, coupled with the servant/child figure, suggests that this is a married couple, maybe even a family, on an afternoon’s pleasant outing. Her agency is thus subtly contained within the frame of domesticity and concomitant subordination to her husband.

Porcelain tiles, used as fireplace surrounds, sometimes featured images of people at work and play. One such tile, manufactured in England, depicts recreational fishing (fig. 12). The tile shows two men and a woman, fashionably dressed, ensconced in a small clearing by a creek or river. The men have rods; the woman sits between them. On her left, one young man stands with an upright fishing rod, line slack, as he inspects (or perhaps baits) the hook. It is possible that, like the gentleman in the Duke of Argyle’s garden, he is assisting the woman with her line, and her upraised right hand and expectant look at him support this supposition. On the other hand, she is not actively fishing here and is just as likely to be a captivated spectator of the men’s activity that literally frames and contains her gaze and actions. The young man to her

Fig. 11. Fishing lady plate, Jingdezhen, China, 1750–75. Enameled porcelain; D. 8⅞”. (Bequest of Henry Francis du Pont, Winterthur; photo, Laszlo Bodo.)
right leans back against the pull on his rod as he hauls in his catch—he nearly appears to be reclining—or perhaps he was reclining and has, like the fish, been caught by surprise. At his right rests a woven basket packed with fish, and several more rest on the ground immediately next to it, testifying to the party’s expertise or, at least, luck. This image, like the others discussed so far, positions fishing as a leisure activity for men and women, but it remains ambiguous as to the woman’s competence and even her participation in this activity.

The prints, plates, and tiles picturing women fishing, and their overlapping circulation, show the availability of images depicting angling as a refined activity for women in the mid-eighteenth century. In these visions, women have a range of relationships to angling—as accomplished solo fishers, fishing with assistance, or merely looking on while men fish. Yet, men, not women, designed and manufactured these prints and other objects. They generally depict the woman as the central figure and agent but subtly place her activity as framed by or subordinate to men. When the woman is depicted as an expert, independent angler, she functions not as a representation of women per se but, rather, as removed from the present to the ideal world of pastoral poetry populated by “Chloe” and “Strephon,” or she figures as a stand-in for an abstract concept, such as one of the elements or a month of the year. These images advertise women’s activities as anglers and, by extension, their skill in attracting suitors. Yet, by including admonishing captions, rendering the woman angler as a static icon, or predicating her efforts on those of men, they also carefully contain women and their skills within the wider arena of male agency and power.
The Fishing Lady Embroideries

Although the prints and ceramics—along with contemporary fishing practices—contextualize the image of the fishing lady that women incorporated into their embroidered pictures, the popularity of these images does not exhaust the possible meaning of the fishing lady image for women. Women appropriated many elements from prints for their needlework; some of them, such as scenes of harvest, are centuries old. The artificiality or theatricality of their presentation does not render them meaningless. On the contrary, the communal origin of these images testifies to the significance of these images to the women and the wider culture. Hence, secondary figures often found in the foreground of the fishing lady embroideries—the hunter, stag, dogs, and others (fig. 13)—appear in English embroideries as well as those produced in New England. 56 Other shared motifs that contribute to the setting/context for the figures frequently include a brick house with smoking chimney, windmill, domestic and wild animals, and fruits such as strawberries and pears. 57 These shared motifs speak to common, widely circulated sources as well as link these needlework masterpieces with the samplers women made in childhood; for example, sampler borders frequently featured strawberries. Women rendered these ancillary figures at a smaller scale than those comprising the main image. The difference sets up a hierarchy; those smaller figures are less important and become a kind of commentary on the design expressed in the larger register.

The fishing lady sometimes turns up as an isolated motif. One undated example (fig. 14), its vertical format consistent with a fire screen, features the typical fishing woman and gentleman attendant. Here the stitcher has omitted the usual small foreground figures while retaining the built structures (house, windmill) in the background. The landscape here is lush and dense, the surface crowded with vegetation, a compositional feature resembling English embroideries more than the other fishing lady works. Likewise, the representation of space is much more consistent with perspectival norms for painting than the schematic, hierarchical arrangement that typifies the other fishing lady pictures. Still, the single figural grouping follows the pattern of a woman fishing in the company of a well-dressed man.

Even embroideries that depart markedly from the format and, to a lesser extent, the style of other fishing lady pictures still retain the key figure of the woman fishing in the center. The unknown maker of a unique, original composition (fig. 15) retains the stylization of features such as the brick house in the background and the trees; however, the landscape is rendered as a more or less flat, continuous surface, rather than as overlapping rows of small undulating hillocks. Here the fishing lady’s male counterpart sits in the foreground, playing a flute, while she fishes on the far side of the pond that links them. She, like other fishing ladies, has a basket at her feet for her fish. Her seated posture differs from the other fishing ladies; she sits closer to the ground, and her skirts spread out around her, rather like the woman fishing from a boat in the background of figure 7. Although a man appears in the image, their activities are conducted separately from one another; it seems she only fishes for fish, not men.

Her short rod suggests that she might be bait fishing (dropping a line and waiting for fish to bite) rather than fly fishing (actively manipulating the bait in the water). Angling manuals of the time did not draw a strong distinction between the two modes. Rather, the species of fish one seeks determines how the line is manipulated. Walton, for example, describes several methods of fishing, depending on whether one wants the bait on the surface of the water (this is aided by a cork on the line just above the bait) or on the bottom, or somewhere in between. 58 Because of the crude nature of eighteenth-century equipment, especially fishing lines (which were made of horsehair), there was not as much difference between bait fishing and fly fishing as there is today. 59 (Not until the early nineteenth century would line quality improve enough to allow for extended line casting as we think of it.) Although Hannah Woolley describes a 16-foot rod with a winder, the embroidered fishing ladies’ rods have no reels, which indicates they are not casting with dozens of feet of line. This is in

56 Goggins, “An Essamplaire Essai’ on the Rhetoricity of Needlework Sampler-Making,” sees embroidery as a discursive practice; this approach can be expanded to include the repeated use of these motifs as visual vocabulary elements with a range of significations. However, such an investigation is beyond the scope of this essay.

57 Fishing and pear picking are both associated with the late summer or fall season, as is the harvest. Future inquiry into the imagery on these embroideries might include the significance of such seasonal imagery.

58 Walton addresses this throughout the text in his discussions on bait and on the character of each species of fish. See, for example, Walton, The Compleat Angler, 54 (“on top of the water”), 136 (“in the midst of the water”), 179 (“with your hook always touching the ground”).

59 Goodspeed, Angling in America, 119.
keeping with the imagery of both men and women fishing in the prints and ceramics shown. But, as Margaretta Penn Freame’s letter indicates, she was quite familiar with the use of a reel and therefore also with much longer lines than those in the pictures. Either the source material or composition of the embroideries might have led to the depiction of a short rod; the 11- to 13-foot rods pictured in the prints by Burford and Woollett would, if rendered to scale in the embroideries, intersect the frame of the image, visually dividing line from rod. In the case of the multifigure compositions discussed below, the rod would noticeably intrude into the space of the adjoining figure groups; either way, the composition would be less legible. Whatsoever the determinant of this short rod was, its effect is to position the fishing woman as less aggressive in seeking her fish than she would appear were she holding a very long rod equipped with a reel. Thus, the shorter rod undercuts the possible interpretation of the fishing lady as a coquette and narrows the focus to the moment of her choice.

The composition of large chimneypieces allowed for several groups of figures; the relationships between them can be telling. Eunice Bourne, the daughter of a wealthy Boston merchant, produced a large needlework chimneypiece featuring a fishing lady sometime between 1745 and 1750. It has three scenes; each depicts a couple (fig. 16). On the left, a modestly dressed woman sitting on a small hillock deploys an old-fashioned drop spindle while receiving attentions from a man carrying a pack on his back. In the center, a woman in a red dress sits on a similar small mound. She wields a fishing rod successfully; she has caught a fish. The contrast between the baskets at the feet of the two women is also telling; the spinner’s basket, partly covered, holds spun yarn wound on nostepines, discreetly displaying the product of her old-fashioned, usually indoor, labor, while the fishing lady’s uncovered basket holds fish, proudly declaring her expertise in this modern, outdoor activity. The man next to her, wearing a blue frock coat, gestures with his hat to the right, toward the third couple, although she does not seem entirely interested in what he is offering. This latter couple walks toward a house on the far right of the picture; she carries a small basket and takes his offered arm—although she does so modestly, with an outstretched arm and a good deal of space between them. Unlike the men who produced images of women fishing in prints and on decorative objects, women tended to embed the image of the female angler in a sequence of depictions of couples.

The juxtaposition of these images harvested from Anglo-American visual culture is not random; reading from left to right in the Bourne embroidery, the sequence of three scenes provides a loose narrative. It seems to be the familiar story of boy meets girl, boy works to get girl’s favorable attention, boy gets girl. But if we take the point of view of the young woman making this object, we see a more complicated, nuanced story. Girl meets boy

60 Rods for salmon and trout were wielded with two hands and were 18 and 15 feet long, respectively. Shorter models ranging from 11 to 13 feet were one-handed and used for smaller fish. A. J. Campbell, Classic and Antique Fly-Fishing Tackle: A Guide for Collectors and Anglers (Guilford, CT: Lyons, 1997), 5.


Fig. 14. Fishing lady embroidery, mid-eighteenth century. Silk and wool on linen; H. 33 3/4", W. 22 3/4" (framed). (Historic Deerfield; photo, Penny Leveritt.)
Fig. 15. Fishing lady embroidery, ca. 1760. Silk and wool on linen; H. 16¾”, W. 24¾”. (Photo, Stephen and Carol Huber, Old Saybrook, CT.)

Fig. 16. Eunice Bourne, embroidered fishing lady overmantel with original frame, Boston, 1745–50. Wool, silk, metal-wrapped thread, glass beads on linen; H. 24¼”, W. 50¼” (framed). (Seth K. Sweetser Fund, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; photo © 2015.)
and displays her traditional qualifications for marriage (spinning); girl decides what to do with the man-fish who has taken her “bait”; girl accepts boy after he shows himself to be worthy of her. Either way, we see respectable, gender-normative genteel courtship. However, the insistent placement of the image of the spinner, the fishing lady, and the happy couple—in that order—in most of the embroideries that incorporate more than one image asserts the woman’s pivotal, if brief, authority in the courtship process. These images thus engage the unstable power dynamic of the marriage market; Bourne’s embroidery centers on the moment in the courtship process in which the woman actively exercises choice.63

Fishing was not just a way for young women to be out in public in fashionable clothes so as to be seen by potential suitors. Rather, fishing was a real activity that, as with other polite acquired skills evidencing her industry, virtue, and patience, contributed to her status as a desirable candidate for marriage. The more overt courtship motifs—the young shepherd and young man attending to the women on either side of the fishing lady and her suitor—register the end function of these excursions. The fishing lady and her related shepherdesses and spinning ladies turn up in embroideries when patriarchal norms for marriage had been giving way to unions initially contracted by the particular couple. The contrast between the two pole-like objects held by the shepherdess and the lady angler, seen in the Bourne embroidery, underscores this difference between the old-fashioned spindle (long since replaced by the spinning wheel) and the modern fishing rod. The temporal gap between spindle and rod, along with differences between the two transactions engaging the spinner and the fishing lady, narratively moves women from the old form of courtship as economic transaction to a new model framed in terms of love.64 Under this pattern, women participated more actively, if covertly, in the courtship process leading up to marriage.65 It is no wonder that social rituals surrounding the critical life events of courtship and marriage appear in these images produced by young women. Although women’s power in courtship was limited and somewhat precarious, Bourne’s deployment of the fishing lady does not depict this; rather, it underscores female agency.

Bourne was not alone in organizing her work in this way. A similar narrative sequence structures a chimneypiece by an unknown woman (fig. 17). Here, however, a scene of harvesting wheat—like fishing, associated with fall—takes the place of the spinner in Bourne’s work. The image of the fishing woman and her polite companion again sit in the center of the image. He gestures with his hat toward the viewer’s right, where a couple—she with a basket, he with a bundle on a pole—stroll arm in arm toward a house with a fenced garden. The center and right sections of this embroidery obviously derive from the same source as Bourne’s, although the two women have personalized the basic skeleton of the design, partly by reconfiguring the standard elements. For example, the details of the buildings in the background differ, a windmill taking the place of the house on the left of Bourne’s work; the locations of the staffage figures of the hunter, hound dogs, and man with a pole are rearranged; and the embroidery by the unknown woman includes more birds, flowers, and trees. If the sequence of images did not matter, we would expect to see the fishing woman appear in any position (left, center, right), but in these needleworks she remains the central figure. The narratives in these fishing lady embroideries can be read as allegories of young women’s lives; she acquires skills needed for domestic life, makes her choice of partners, and then moves on to that domestic, married future.

As we have seen, the images of women fishing available for use as source material for these needleworks linked women and fishing to courtship. The young women stitching these embroideries fashioned themselves as refined women suitable for marriage by virtue of the high level of skill and discipline demonstrated in producing an embroidered picture of this size and complexity. Likewise, the conspicuous display of time devoted to completing such a large project displayed her social status, and that of her family, because only wealthy families could afford the years of education that such an embroidery represented—it could cost three times as much as sending a son to Yale or Harvard.66 These

63 Laurel Thatcher Ulrich argues that “Eunice Bourne’s embroidery is meaningful precisely because it evades its own time and place” (ibid., 144–45). While this evasion is one dimension of its meaning, the motif of the fishing lady, I argue here, is deeply engaged in its own time.

64 For the replacement of drop spindles with spinning wheels in the late Middle Ages and an overview of spinning technology, see Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, “Two Spinning Wheels in an Old Log House,” in The Age of Homespun, 86–92.


66 Lynne Templeton Brickley, “Sarah Pierce’s Litchfield Female Academy,” in Theodore Sizer, Nancy Sizer, Sally Schwager, Lynne Templeton Brickey, and Glee Kruger, To Ornament Their
young women, then, at an age when marriage (or lack thereof) was about to become a pressing issue, spent weeks in painstaking labor over images that both idealized and embodied the very process they were about to undergo. Faced with a changing social landscape for courtship, one in which women exercised a relatively new, if limited, power, these women depicted with needle and thread a world that put that power at its center. The fishing lady, then, alludes to the potential exercise of female choice in a high-stakes transaction.

Although these women customized their projects with different combinations and arrangements of figures and motifs, the fishing lady occupies center stage. The fishing lady is a figure of competence that emphasizes the moment of women’s choice in courtship. She fishes, successfully and therefore skillfully, without help. Although she turns her head away from her activity to acknowledge her suitor’s presence, her body remains facing the pond, with her back to him. His hat courteously doffed, he has piqued her attention but not commanded it; she considers, but does not (yet) accept, his invitation. Notably, although built structures appear in the background behind all three women in the large embroideries, the tamed and captured domestic garden appears, on the right, only once the woman has given her consent to accompany the man toward that particular future. The fishing lady’s utility in these pastoral embroideries lay in its explicit references to courtship coupled with its visual emphasis on women’s agency.

Variations in the figure groupings to the right of the fishing lady imply variations in the outcome of the narrative constructed by the sequence. One such variant, at least partly derived from the same source used by Bourne and the unknown maker of figure 17, appears in the 1748 work of Sarah Warren (fig. 18). Warren replaced the domestic couple on the right with a couple picking pears, associated—like fishing—with autumn. He stands in the tree and places fruit in the basket she holds up for him. Warren also includes a seated woman with a basket of spun yarn and the man with a pole, found in Bourne’s embroidery, on the left. These needleworks construct a loose narrative of genteel courtship from these stock images. Suggestively, Warren’s final image is ambiguous; there is no house with a fenced garden behind the pear-picking couple, nor is the duck pond present below them.67 Instead, open countryside stretches behind them, and at their feet a pair of hunters with a pack of dogs give chase to a running stag. The upraised whip of one of the hunters suggests the intensity of the pursuit; Warren’s narrative of courtship thus remains open-ended, prolonging the moment of maximum female self-determination.68 Thus multiple outcomes to the narrative of courtship and marriage were possible, if only in the fantasies and dreams of young women.


68 Warren would not marry for another seven years.
A final example (fig. 19) goes even further than Warren’s. This unknown woman deviated from the compositional formula of the other fishing lady pictures by placing her fishing lady on the far left, at the opening of the narrative. The center image depicts a group of men and women dancing—a potent metaphor for social transactions—she dances with two men while a third plays a tambourine. Although this is an old, conventional element of pastoral imagery, it also calls to mind the conversational “dancing” women did in parlors, gardens, and at actual dances as they negotiated the complex maneuvers of courtship in the presence of potential suitors. In the far right we see a woman
carrying a long garland draped across the upper part of her body; perhaps she is a figure of spring. A man with a basket on his head and another on his arm walks near, but not next to, her. His position, a bit behind her and separated from her visually by a flowering bush, along with his gaze at her and her seeming obliviousness to his presence, indicate that he is not her companion. She remains an independent figure moving through the landscape by her own volition. Reading from left to right, the vista widens, as does the woman’s sphere of action. The stock hunting scenes and ancillary male figures found in the foreground of the other fishing lady embroideries are missing; instead, we find small dogs romping beneath the dancing couples and a pair of peaceful sheep in front of the garlanded woman and the basket-toting man. Here marriage does not seem to be the end goal of these activities in nature; rather, this woman has produced a picture in which women chose to enjoy nature—and perhaps life—on an equal footing with, and maybe even independently of, men.

By the 1780s, anxiety about the exercise of power by women in the courtship process surfaced in prints with a satirical edge, such as publisher Robert Sayer and John Bennett’s *The Angelic Angler*, depicting an elaborately dressed woman angler.69 The caption comes from a poem by early eighteenth-century poet William Pattison that cautions women about flirtation.70 The poem and its currency some sixty years after its first publication testifies to the persistence of the metaphor of courtship as fishing. The caption reads, “At once Victorious with your hands and eyes / You make the fishes and the Men your prize. / And while pleasing slavery we Court / I fear you Captivate us both for Sport.”71 The angler fishes alone, heedless of the presence of the gentleman positioned a few yards away, behind her. Presumably he is her next victim, as he is visually positioned between the two lengths of her fishing line as she draws in her fish. The caption explicitly speaks to fears that women would attract men, ensnaring them in nets of their own desire, merely for the pleasure that the exercise of such power brings. Once women began to play a significant part in the decision to conclude a courtship with marriage, men had to take the bait, so to speak; they needed women’s cooperation in order to advance to full, married manhood. The image of the woman angler, in images made by women, resonated with the promise of autonomy, however brief; in images made by men that potential was a threat.

Angling, which created a social space in which women and men could engage in an activity side by side, functioned as a metaphor for that very brief period in a woman’s life wherein she might enjoy something approaching the upper hand in a key life transaction. The images of women fishing available for use as source material for these needleworks offered a wide range of relationships between women and fishing, from single expert angler to mere onlooker of male activity. These depicted women fishing alone or in the company of others; yet, the fishing lady embroideries (with one exception) always deploy the same figure. This could be explained by the origin of this motif in a single source, but that does not explain why this particular image to represent angling, and not another—for example, of a couple fishing—was compelling enough to be used, and used exclusively. The embroidered images of women fishing always show her as a successful solo angler; she never has help, and she also never merely watches others fish. The embroideries declare women, not men, to be the expert anglers, emphasizing their proficiency and independence. The narratives constructed by the fishing lady chimneypieces read both as normative images of courtship and as celebrations of female participation and power—but fleeting— in that ritual process. The fishing lady pictures, then, subtly resist the patriarchal order that, on many fronts, hemmed in these women.

In light of the above discussions, Sarah Colesworthy’s embroidered fishing lady (see fig. 1), introduced at the beginning of this essay, no longer appears to be merely a lady’s accomplishment but rather an object that resonated deeply with several areas of colonial life.72 The embroidered fishing lady participated in a transatlantic discourse—

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69 Published in London by Sayer & Bennett, 1781. There are at least three known states of this print. British Museum Online, reg. no. 2010,7091,808.

70 Pattison lifted and slightly altered the first two lines from an earlier poem, “On St. James’s Park,” by Edmund Waller, published in 1661. The original lines read “At once victorious with their lines and eyes, They [ladies fishing] make the fishes and the men their prize.” Edmund Waller, *A Poem on St. James’ Park as Lately Improved by His Majesty* (London: Gabriel Bedel and Thomas Collins, 1661), 5.

71 A print published by Carington Bowles with a similar subject has a caption reading “To be decoy’d is Men and Fishes [sic] fate, with Cupid’s line when Beauty is the Bait” (London, April 12, 1780), British Museum Collection Online, reg. no. 1874,0613,2606.

textual, visual, and material—around angling both as actual fishing practice and as a loaded metaphor for courtship. Angling, while contributing to class distinctions, provided occasions for courtship behaviors and gave women access to the outdoors and an opportunity to interact with nature from a position of mastery. Some of these outings had more at stake than mere recreation—these mixed-company events provided occasions for men and women to mingle socially, with marriage as a goal. The differential social power between men and women shaped these outings, just as it shaped many aspects of colonial life.

Representations of fishing made by men embodied the widespread metaphor that cast women as anglers and men as fish, vulnerable to the bait of beauty. These images typically represented women's angling expertise as limited by depicting the female figure as allegorical or as dependent on male assistance in fishing or by the use of captions cautioning women about flirtation. Yet a current of anxiety ran under these images, anxiety made explicit in The Angelic Angler. These representations addressed the uncertainty real men experienced during courtship, particularly once they had declared themselves—in other words, they had been hooked. The image of the woman angler and her suitor thus neatly captured the real social and material practices of fishing and courtship.

The fishing lady embroideries, however, emphasize the woman's potential agency by underscoring her expertise at angling and, by extension, her management and partial control of courtship transactions. Hanging in the family parlor, they presided over courtship rituals or, if the embroidery went with the woman after marriage, as did Sarah Warren's, perhaps functioned as a nostalgic reminder of her moment of agency. When an embroidered picture stayed behind in her father's house, it was visually available to a woman's younger sisters, silently suggesting that they too were modern women with some influence over their own future. More than just a fashionable fad, the embroidered pictures of fishing ladies register real material practices and changing courtship norms in women's lives. Into scenes that look conventional in both content and form, in an era which gave women few civil or human rights, women embedded a figure of female agency, however fleeting.

73 McMurray, "A Recreation Which Many Ladies Delight In': Establishing a Tradition of Fisherwomen," 143.