

THE *distaff* SIDE

SAMPLER

Also by Mary Leader

*Red Signature*

*The Penultimate Suitor*

*Beyond the Fire*

*She Lives There Still*

SAMPLER

THE  
*distaff*

SIDE

SAMPLER  
MARY *leader*

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IN MEMORIAM

Katharine Jo Haddox Privett

*A Writer*

May 29, 1924–January 20, 1995

Sara Adelaide Webb Elsey

*A Stitcher*

January 6, 1892–April 4, 1983

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I. *bookmarks*

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**Distaff.** A cleft staff about 3 feet long, on which, in the ancient mode of spinning, wool or flax was wound. It was held under the left arm, and the fibres of the material were drawn from it through the fingers of the left hand, and twisted spirally by the forefinger and thumb of the right, with the aid of a suspended spindle round which the thread, as it was twisted or spun, was wound.

*To have tow on one's distaff:* to have work in hand or trouble in store (obs.).

As the type of women's occupation; hence symbolically for the female sex, female authority or dominion.

The female branch of a house or family: the 'distaff-side' (*cf* 'spindle-side') as opposed to the 'spear-side' (*cf* 'sword-side'); a female heir.

*Comb. as distaff-business, -right, -race* (reserved for mares or fillies).

St. Distaff's Day, the day after Twelfth Day (Feast of the Epiphany) on which day (Jan. 7) women resumed their spinning and other ordinary work after the holidays.

Distaff cane, a species of reed, the stems or canes of which are used for distaffs, arrows, fishing-rods, etc.

Distaff thistle, a name of *Carthamus Lanatus* from its wooly flowering stems.

# Toile |twäl|

noun

1. an early version of a finished garment made up in cheap material so that the design can be tested and perfected.
  2. a translucent linen or cotton fabric, used for making clothes.
- short for toile de Jouy.

## ORIGIN

late Middle English  
(denoting cloth or canvas  
for painting on): from  
French *toile* 'cloth, web,'  
from Latin *telas* 'web.'

**toile de Jouy** |twäl  
də 'ZHwē|

a type of printed calico  
with a characteristic  
floral, figure, or  
landscape design on  
a light background,  
typically used for  
upholstery or curtains.

## ORIGIN

originally made at Jouy-  
en-Josas, near Paris.

## Toile [1]

*All brought their distaffs, flax, spindles, standards, happles, and all  
the agoubilles useful in their art.*

— *Les Évangiles des quenouilles* [Gospels of the distaffs]  
*Anonymous, fifteenth century*

### PANEL A

My mother couldn't sew a lick.  
But that was a boast to her.  
"I can't even sew on a button,"  
she'd say at family gatherings  
right in front of the females stitching  
away: her mother-in-law, several nieces,  
her daughter, her sisters-in-law.  
Not her mother, although even Granny,  
no button-sewer-opper, was reputed  
to have attempted knitting for the troops.  
Granny's sister Sara, however, excelled at  
needle-point, petit-point, cross-stitch.  
As I was saying, the wives and future  
wives sat in the living room, a majority  
of us with our distaffs, flax, spindles,  
standards, happles, and all  
the agoubilles useful in our art  
while the men and boys watched  
football on television in the den  
(somehow, they knew  
exactly when to whoop and  
exactly when to groan, for they did  
both in unison). Mother would light  
another cigarette (deep drag, inhaled,  
held, then smoke *sinuously* exhaled),  
"I don't see how y'all can make  
all those little bitty stitches!"

PANEL B

My mother could not sew a lick; in fact she disdained needlework. And for some very sound reasons. 1950, 1955, 1960. What girls and women got up to with distaffs flax spindles standards happles *and* agoubilles was not called “their art.” Not remotely. Needlework was no more “creative” than doing the dishes, and trust me, doing the dishes was not marveled at, whether big sister washed and little sister dried or mother washed and big sister dried or the housewife by her lonesome. Needlework was, to many women, onerous, and even if she liked it, was at best “her hobby.” And *my* mother’s hobby morning after morning after morning, every morning, was reading and writing poetry, smoking all the while.

PANEL C

My mother was not only intelligent,  
she was full of mischief and charm.  
As for St. Theresa or Teresa, not the one  
of Ávila, a more-or-less mature mystic,  
but the gentle one, properly spelled Thérèse,  
The Little Flower of Lisieux, my mother  
said to me, “You know, when *her* mother  
said it was time to set the table, Saint  
Theresa would immediately drop  
whatever she was doing and set the table,  
not say ‘Just let me finish this chapter’” —  
that said when the book I was reading  
was probably a children’s biography of that  
very saint. I don’t remember if Momma  
smiled when she coaxed me in that way,  
with stories, but I smile, remember

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PANEL D

Riddle me this: Since “patrimony” means property inherited from one’s father or male ancestor, why doesn’t “matrimony” mean property inherited from one’s mother or female ancestor? I have the typescript of what, in my judgment, should have been my mother’s first published book, *Whose Child?* I have here the cover letter she labored over.

Dear Sirs. Encl: Return Envelope.

She experimented with how to sign herself: “Mrs. Joe Privett”? Obliteration of a married woman’s given name was, I believe, universal in newspapers of the day, was certainly the usage of our weekly newspaper, *The Pawnee Chief*. “Mrs. Katharine Jo Privett?” No, “Mrs. given-name married-surname” was code then for the status of widow.

PANEL E

For the letter covering the typescript  
of *Whose Child?* she settled on  
“Katharine Jo (Mrs. J. H.) Privett.”  
That was her solution at that time.  
The poems reflect a profound engagement  
with Catholicism — they are  
haunting, spare, beautiful, really — and  
Margaret and Susie and Deborah  
agree, encourage me to see whether,  
even now, the work might see print.  
My mother, eventually, chose  
and stayed with, “Katharine H. Privett”  
for her poet’s signature, the H a vestige  
of her maiden name, Haddox.

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