

**Title: Lace Songs and Culture Wars: A Nineteenth-Century Flemish Village Soap Opera**

**Abstract**

Lacemakers sang while working at their pillows; this stereotype is amply confirmed in collections of folksongs made from lacemakers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, not just in England but also in France, Germany and, above all, Belgium. While the habit continued into adult life, lacemakers first contracted the practice in the institutions where lace skills were taught, such as lace schools. In Catholic Europe, lace schools were usually under some kind of ecclesiastical authority, which put them in the front line of the nineteenth-century culture wars. Church and state, liberals and conservatives, battled over the purposes and means of education, and particularly girls' education. Consequently, the repertoire of songs used in lace schools became a fraught political issue. This article considers one attempt to shape young minds through song. Constant Duvillers was the priest of Middelburg in East Flanders, in the newly established kingdom of Belgium, during the crisis years of the 'Hungry Forties'. Like hundreds of other members of the Catholic clergy, his response to growing poverty was to set up a lace school. He also wrote songs for use by the girls, which were taken up by other Flemish lace schools. All of Duvillers' songs were set in and around the Middelburg lace school, and concern recognisable persons and actual events. They read like a soap opera, as an increasingly exasperated Duvillers cajoled, harangued or outright insulted his pupils and their parents. This village drama provides a microcosm of the nineteenth century's culture wars: it illustrates both the successes and the failures of the clergy as they attempted to impose their vision of education, proper gender roles and the social order on their parishioners. One measure of Duvillers' lasting influence is that several of his songs survived in lacemakers' repertoires until the mid-twentieth century.

### Introduction: The Singing Lacemaker

The pillow lacemaker sang while she – and lacemakers were almost always women – worked. This truism had been established as early as the seventeenth century, by Shakespeare (*Twelfth Night*, 1602) and Cervantes (*La ilustre fregona*, 1613). The singing lacemaker would recur as a literary character for as long as domestic lacemaking survived as a cottage industry which, because lace was more complicated than other textiles to mechanize, it did until well into the twentieth century. We find the singing lacemaker in the works of Gérard de Nerval (*Sylvie*, 1854) and Maxim Gorky (*My Childhood*, 1913) to mention just two of her more illustrious celebrants. By the nineteenth century, the association and parallels between lacemaking and folksong had become a literary commonplace. Charles Dickens made the connection in ‘Mugby Junction’ (1866), as did the Belgian writer Georges Rodenbach in *Musée des Béguines* (1894): ‘Do they not have the same origin, these lace motifs which are just simple flowers, as folk songs are but elemental tunes?’<sup>1</sup>

These literary references could be multiplied many times, but there is more tangible evidence of the singing lacemaker in the records made by folksong enthusiasts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her existence in the East Midlands lace districts is documented by the Victorian contributors to *Notes and Queries*, while she was a major contributor to folksong collections made in the Velay region of southern France, in the Erzgebirge mountains of Saxony, and above all for Flemish-speaking Belgium. Of the four substantial nineteenth-century collections of Flemish songs recorded from oral tradition, three were made mostly, or entirely, among lacemakers.<sup>2</sup> In Flanders as in England, lacemakers were associated with the genre most sought after by the early generations of song collectors — the long, narrative ballad.

There are sound reasons why lacemakers, compared with other craftspeople, were reputed singers. Lacemaking could be deleterious to one’s health, but it was not the kind of arduous labour that physically impeded singing; and while the task could be finicky, its repetitive gestures also allowed the mind to engage in other activities. More importantly, lace looms, or pillows, were portable: lacemakers took them to their neighbour’s house or

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<sup>1</sup> Georges Rodenbach, *Musée des Béguines* (Paris: Charpentier, 1894), p. 13. For other literary representations of singing lacemakers see our website [www.laceincontext.com](http://www.laceincontext.com).

<sup>2</sup> The three are: Edmond de Coussemaker, *Chants populaires des Flamands de France* (Ghent: F. & E. Gysselynck, 1856); Adolphe Lootens and J.M.E. Feys, *Chants Populaires flamands avec les airs notés et poésies populaires diverses recueillis à Bruges* (Bruges: Desclée, De Brouwer, 1879); and Albert Blyau and Marcellus Tasseel, *Iepersch Oud-Liedboek* 2 vols (Ghent: J. Vuylsteke, 1900). The fourth, which did not draw on lacemakers’ repertoire, is Jan Bols, *Honderd Oude Vlaamsche Liederen* (Namur: Wesmael-Charlier, 1897). On East Midlands lacemakers’ songs see: David Hopkin, ‘Lacemakers and Old Songs, in Olney and Elsewhere’, *The Couper and Newton Journal* 5 (2015): 3-17; on lacemakers’ songs from the Velay see: David Hopkin, ‘The Visionary World of the Vellave Lacemaker’, in *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 210-52; on lacemakers’ songs from the Erzgebirge, see Manfred Blechschmidt, “‘Ich bi e Klippelmaadel...’ Zur Spezifik der erzgebirgischen Klöppellieder”, *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung* 31 (1986): 73-9.

out onto the street, where the company of other women provided an audience for singers and an opportunity to learn what, effectively, became a collective repertoire. As this repertoire was handed on from one generation to another, sitting together under the same tree during the day or around the same lamp in the evening, it became the repository for older material that had fallen out of fashion among the rest of the population.

(Lacemakers' taste for the archaic was already established in Shakespeare's time.) For lacemakers, singing could be a stimulus to work, a petition of complaint, an assertion of a craft identity, an appeal to female solidarity, a relief from drudgery and an escape from poverty, or all of these at the same time.

While lacemakers' adult working patterns enabled singing, the custom of accompanying their work with songs was established in their youth. In general, lacemakers began their training around the age of five or six, and it might continue until their teenage years. Lace merchants, the people who provided lacemakers with their patterns and bought their finished product, claimed that it took six years to fully train a lacemaker. That training could, and in some places such as the Velay usually did, take place around the home, among relatives and neighbours. However, in most other regions, lace was taught to young girls in an institutional setting. There was, for instance, an overlap between the development of a regional lace industry and the institutions associated with the post-medieval 'Great Confinement' of the poor, such as orphanages and workhouses. The poor were shut up and badged both as a form of social control and in order to impart skills that would, in the coercive rationales put forward by the religious and municipal authorities who ran these workshops, save them from poverty.<sup>3</sup> Lacemaking specifically was supposed to deliver poor young women from a life in prostitution.

Lace skills were also taught in 'schools', which girls attended for eight, ten or even more hours a day, packed into benches with a hundred or more to a 'class'. (To modern sensibilities, the language of education obscures what were really workshops, with limited instruction in any other subject, beyond the catechism.) These could be commercial undertakings, though even then the lace mistress was expected to have a reputation for piety which justified her authority over children. In practice, seemingly private institutions were often supported by the same religious and municipal authorities that funded the orphanages and workhouses, and so they came under the control, or at least the oversight, of ecclesiastics and local officials. In Catholic regions the lace mistress might be a lay sister, a *béate* in the Velay or a *béguine* in Flanders. In the nineteenth century, fuelled by the explosion of the female teaching orders (their numbers increased ten-fold in Belgium alone), that position was more often taken by regular sisters.<sup>4</sup> Municipalities in Catholic Europe preferred to employ nuns because they were cheaper than teachers trained in the state sector, and because they provided the instruction that

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'Great Confinement' was originally coined by François Foucault: for an example of the role of lacemaking within these institutions, see Julia Gossard, 'Breaking a Child's Will: Eighteenth-Century Parisian Juvenile Detention Centers', *French Historical Studies* 42:2 (2019): 239-59.

<sup>4</sup> André Tihon, 'Les religieuses en Belgique du XVIIIe au XXe siècle: approche statistique', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* 7 (1976): 1-54.

patriarchal authorities thought was good for girls from the labouring classes, that is lessons in morality and practical skills preparing them for the world of work. Lace did both.

Lace pupils sang in their schools, both as a form of instruction and as a relief from tedium. In addition, lace schools employed a specific genre of songs – counting rhymes called ‘tells’ in the English Midlands ‘tellingen’ in Flanders and ‘Zählgeschichten’ [counting stories] or ‘Klöppelmärschen’ [bobbin marches] in the Saxon Erzgebirge – that were more intimately connected to the production process. A pin was inserted into the pattern on their pillow for each line the pupils chanted. In a related genre, known as ‘telseltjes’ in Flanders, groups of pupils competed to place the most pins in a time determined by the verses of a song. Tells were, therefore, both playful and disciplining, simultaneously speeding the rhythm of production while cultivating a work ethos in the pupils. Although any song could serve as a lace tell by the simple addition of a number at the beginning of each line, the best known tells, which could run to dozens or even hundreds of lines, were unique to the lace schools. Unlike most of the other songs that lacemakers sang, lace tells commented directly both on the making of lace and the conditions pupils experienced. However, they did so in an elliptical manner, with references hidden in a maze of apparent nonsense, constructed out of borrowed rhymes from other songs, games, prayers and other verbal genres. Elements in these rhymes were common to all three regions, which suggests they were already present at the foundation of the industry in the sixteenth century and spread by migrant lace mistresses. Yet, while the texts were surprisingly stable, they feel extemporized, and there must have been some room for improvisation in order to explain the local and temporal references.<sup>5</sup>

Tells could be ludic, and they were often extravagant, offering the pupils a fantasy of escape from their present monotony. They might also voice subversive thoughts, a form of catharsis for the pent-up resentments that the pupils felt towards the people – their parents as well as the lace mistress – who kept them chained to their pillows. Occasionally such currents of dissent surfaced in actual protest, though in a licensed form

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<sup>5</sup> On English lace tells see: Gerald Porter, “‘Work the Old Lady out of the Ditch’: Singing at Work by English Lacemakers’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 31 (1994): 35-55; Mary-Ann Constantine and Gerald Porter, *Fragment and Meaning in Traditional Song: From the Blues to the Baltic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 63-74; and Emma Robertson, Michael Pickering & Marek Korczynski (2008) “‘And Spinning So With Voices Meet, Like Nightingales They Sung Full Sweet’: Unravelling Representations of Singing in Pre-Industrial Textile Production’, *Cultural and Social History*, 5:1 (2008): 11-31. On Flemish ‘tellingen’ see Isabelle Peere, ‘Comptines de dentelières brugeoises (1730-1850): entre travail, école et jeu, colère et prière’, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 47 (2002): 111-26; Marguerite Coppens, ‘Chants des dentelières des Flandres; quelle équation entre musique et technique?’, in M. Coppens (ed.), *La dentelle hier et aujourd’hui* (Enghien-les-Bains: Musées royaux d’art et d’histoire, 2007), pp. 93-110; and David Hopkin, ‘Working, Singing, and Telling in the 19th-Century Flemish Pillow-Lace Industry’, *Textile* 18 (2019): 53-68. German lace counting rhymes have not attracted the same attention but, for an account of how they were performed, see Paul Brückner, *Die Spitzenklöppelei des Erzgebirges* (Leipzig: Alfred Michaelis, 1890), pp. 12-27.

(such as ‘barring out’ the mistress until the pupils were granted their traditional holidays). At the same time, the songs were a form of time-keeping meant to increase the value of the girls’ labour. Through their songs the pupils internalized the norms of capitalist production; they also learnt the docility expected of those at the bottom of the social, gender and age hierarchies.

Lace tells are, therefore, examples of the genre of folksong termed ‘work song’ with its inherent paradoxes, both enabling and resisting the work process. But for the historian, they have an additional utility, because they are sources for the voices of the people caught up in one of the major battlegrounds of nineteenth-century politics, the schoolroom. As primary education expanded in almost every European country in the nineteenth century, so it became the main source of friction in the era’s culture wars. What were schools for: to prepare children for their lives in this world or in the next? To keep people in their place or encourage social mobility? To inculcate obedience to the existing social and political order, or to enable new forms of citizenship? Who set the curriculum, who trained the teachers, who inspected the classroom? And who should pay for all this – ratepayers, philanthropists, parents? Such debates were especially heated when it came to girls’ education, because even proponents of a progressive curriculum for boys balked at doing the same for women. Towards the end of the century, the European ‘School Wars’ (‘guerres des manuels’ in France [1882-3, 1907-9], ‘schoolstrijd’ in Belgium [1878-1884], the ‘Kulturkampf’ in Germany [1872-8]...) would pit the state against the churches (and above all the Catholic Church), liberals against conservatives, and all of them against socialists.<sup>6</sup> The lace schools would be in the front line of these conflicts as they were the particular target of liberal and anticlerical campaigns.<sup>7</sup> Who determined what pupils sang in the lace schools was, therefore, a contentious issue.

### **Constant Duvillers and the Parish of Middelburg, East Flanders**

These battles were brewing all over Europe, and everywhere had some effect on the repertoire of women’s work songs. In this article, however, I will concentrate on just one attempt to mould youthful minds through song; what follows is a micro-study of one community caught up in the nineteenth-century’s culture wars. The experiment I want to examine took place in Middelburg, a small, rather damp parish on the border that came to separate Belgian East Flanders from the Dutch province of Zeeland after the 1830 Revolution created the new Kingdom of Belgium.

Lace is one of the most characteristic products of Flanders, the northern, Dutch-speaking half of Belgium. The lacemaker and her product have become symbols of both the country and the region, ubiquitous in both visual and textural invocations. But

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<sup>6</sup> On the school wars, particularly in France and Belgium, see Jean-François Condette, *Éducation, religion, laïcité (XVIe-XXe siècles. Continuités, tensions et ruptures dans la formation des élèves et des enseignants* (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Institut de Recherches Historiques du Septentrion, 2010). On the wider liberal/clerical ‘culture wars’, see Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> For an example of anticlerical polemic against the lace schools, see: Guillaume De Greef, *L’ouvrière dentellière en Belgique* (Brussels: Engelen, 1872).

although Middelburg is close to the lace centre of Bruges, the village did not have a long tradition of lacemaking. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the female population was largely involved in flax-spinning, historically the most important source of employment for Flemish women. Then in the 1840s, competition from British machine-made thread and cloth effectively wiped out the Flemish hand-spinning and weaving industries. This collapse in paid employment coincided with the onset of potato blight and other agricultural disasters. By 1846 a quarter of the population of Middelburg were dependent on poor relief, and this was by no means the worst affected village in Flanders.<sup>8</sup>

The resultant hunger and misery threatened the stability of the fledgling Belgian state, born out of revolution little more than a decade previously. One remedy was to convert flax-spinners into lacemakers. To an extent this was a revival of a traditional response to such a crisis; since the sixteenth century, religious and municipal authorities had set up lace schools to alleviate the poverty brought on by women's under-employment. However, the Flemish linen crisis was on a different scale. Within a decade over 800 lace-schools had been established in the two provinces of West and East Flanders, catering to more than 40,000 girls. Some of the initial money came from the central government, and municipal authorities also provided funds.<sup>9</sup> But the initiative was led by the Catholic Church: it was the parish priests who co-opted a building, cajoled landowners into becoming patrons, and recruited nuns to run the school. For these foot-soldiers in the culture wars of the nineteenth century, the purpose of lace-schools was not just to relieve poverty, they offered a chance to win souls for God.

This was certainly the case in Middelburg where it was the local priest, Constant Duvillers, who led the response. He had already founded a parish school for girls in 1841; he also owned the building in which it was located (a source of future problems). Although the school initially offered lessons in a variety of academic and practical subjects, by the mid 1840s, and in response to the linen crisis, lace lessons absorbed the girls' time. The day-to-day running was in the hands of a female teaching order – De Zusters van het Christelijk Onderwijs [The Sisters of Christian Education] – as well as a lay lace mistress, but Duvillers was a regular visitor and at first taught some classes, such as French, himself.<sup>10</sup>

In nineteenth-century Flanders, priests were community leaders who wielded considerable power – political and economic as well as spiritual – but even by the standards of the time Duvillers was a dominating presence in Middelburg, where he served from 1836 to 1852. According to the Commissioner of Eekloo (the local representative of the national government), the village mayor and his councillors lived in

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<sup>8</sup> Éliane Gubin and Peter Scholliers, 'La crise linière des Flandres: ouvriers à domicile et prolétariat urbain (1840-1900)', *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 74 (1996): 365-401.

<sup>9</sup> Esther Beeckaert, 'Subsidies to the Rescue: The Funding of Poor Relief in Flemish Village Communities during the Crisis of the 1840s, a Comparative Analysis', *The Low Countries Journal of Social and Economic History* 15(4) (2019): 5-32.

<sup>10</sup> Hugo Notteboom, 'De meysjes-school van pastoor Duvillers te Middelburg', *Heemkundige Bijdragen uit het Meetjesland* 12 (1998): 156-63.

terror of him.<sup>11</sup> He was the kind of priest about whom stories were still told decades after his death. Some of these stories are standard migratory legends of clerical folklore, such as his abilities to repel storms, to compel thieves to restore stolen property and to exorcise ghosts. Others seem more related to his personality. For instance, he was noted for the speed of his services: at Easter, when he was supposed to read the annual message from his bishop, he told his congregation ‘Dear parishioners, the message is the same as last year: those of you who can remember it, that is good; those of you who can’t, that’s for the best too.’<sup>12</sup>

As this anecdote suggests, Duvillers was not on good terms with his bishop (Louis-Joseph Delebecque, bishop of Ghent). He was a troublesome priest, for ever in dispute with colleagues, neighbours, the local council and the provincial government. Several of these disputes would end up in court. On one occasion in the winter of 1844, as the ‘Hungry Forties’ started to bite, Duvillers directed a large group of unemployed male labourers to process up and down outside the mayor’s house with flags. Gendarmes had to be sent to Middelburg to restore order.<sup>13</sup> In 1850, in response to this and other provocations, the anticlerical Bruges newspaper *De Brugsche Vrye* described Duvillers as ‘wild, eccentric, mad’.<sup>14</sup>

The priests of Duvillers’ revolutionary generation were, perhaps, less respectful of established hierarchies than their successors. Having grown up in a period when Flanders was ruled first by the anticlerical French and then by the Protestant King of the Netherlands, Duvillers’ form of Catholicism was particularly combative. It was also socially radical, and would influence the Flemish rebels of 1830 in their revolt against the Dutch King. The militancy of nineteenth-century ultramontane Catholicism in reaction to the French Revolution is well known, but its democratic leanings, particularly in Belgium, are a less familiar story. Yet Duvillers had trained for the priesthood in France and had become familiar with the work of the radical French priest Lamennais. Lamennais’s teachings would be condemned by the Pope and Bishop Delebecque, but their influence is apparent in Duvillers’ first literary venture, a play he wrote for his

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<sup>11</sup> Archief Bisdom Gent, Middelburg II, item 106: Letter from the Commissaire de l’arrondissement d’Ecloo to the Gouverneur de la Flandre Orientale, 20 February 1844.

<sup>12</sup> Various folkloric narratives about Duvillers can be found in F. van Es, ‘Pastoor Constant Duvillers (1803-1885): folklorist en folkloristische figuur’, *Oostvlaamsche Zanten* 24:1 (1949): 1-33, here p. 27: ‘Beminde parochianen, 't is 't zelfde zoals verleden jaar; die het onthouden heeft, 't is goed, en voor d'andere ook’; and in Cyriel de Vuyst, *Sagen, legenden en andere vertelsels uit den volksmond te Herzele en het omliggende* (Antwerp: Opdebeek, 1920), pp. 35-41.

<sup>13</sup> Archief Bisdom Gent, Middelburg II, items 104-9.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Bid voor C. Duvillers’ [Pray for C. Duvillers], *Het Brugsche Vrye*, 23 February, 1850, p.3.

students at the minor seminary of Sint-Niklaas, described as a hotbed of clerical republicanism.<sup>15</sup>

Duvillers was also closely aligned with the nascent Flemish Movement which, from the 1840s, campaigned for the protection of the Flemish language in Belgium. French was the official language of the new state, and in practice the only one used in the Belgian parliament, higher education, and the upper echelons of the Church; it also predominated in the courts and the administration. Even in Flanders, it was the preferred means of expression for the aristocracy and the educated middle classes, and so had become a marker of social distinction. In response, and to prevent their language's eradication, the partisans of Flemish sought to demonstrate its historical depth and literary potential. One aspect of this cultural activism was the collection of folksongs, and especially ballads.<sup>16</sup>

For Duvillers, and despite advertising language lessons as a benefit of his girls' school, French was the language of atheism, Jacobinism and anticlericalism. Flemings who abandoned their mother-tongue for French – 'Fransquiljons' to use the pejorative term of the period – were the target of Duvillers' contempt, conveyed in an explosion of exclamation marks:

<p>En gy durft spreken          Van haer' gebreken!          En 't is een lompe, ruwe tael!          En voor Mynheer is zy te plat en al te          kael!          Z' is goed alleen voor lager' standen!<sup>17</sup></p>	<p>And you dare to speak          Of its [the Flemish language's] flaws!          That it's a boorish, coarse language!          And that for Monsieur, it's too          commonplace and dull!          That it's only good for the lower classes!</p>
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Those that 'deny their native language, thereby insult their homeland and exchange their fathers' religious faith and Christian manners for foreign godlessness' he declared.<sup>18</sup>

Duvillers' championing of the Flemish language opened another front in his ongoing conflict with the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which was less averse to Francisation. According to Duvillers, it was his language activism that would eventually lead to his

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<sup>15</sup> Henk de Smaele, 'Catholic Republicanism Revisited', in Jan De Maeyer and Vincent Viaene (eds), *World Views and Worldly Wisdom: Religion, Ideology and Politics, 1750–2000* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), p.62.

<sup>16</sup> Hendrik Willaert and Jan Dewilde, *Het lied in ziel en mond: 150 jaar muziekleven en vlaamse beweging* (Tielt: LannooCampus, 1987).

<sup>17</sup> Constant Duvillers, *De Fransquiljonnade of dichtproef op de verbasterde Belgen, de Fransquiljons en Cie* (Ghent: C.J. Vanryckegem, 1842), pp. 5-6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p. v: 'Zy die hunne moedertael verloochenen, hun eygen land beschimpen, en der Vaderen godsdienstigen aert en christelyke zeden met vreemde goddeloosheyd verwisselen'.

demotion from Middelburg in 1854 to the smaller, poorer and even more out-of-the-way parish of Woubrechtgem.<sup>19</sup>

One of the problems faced by the Flemish Movement was the absence of contemporary literature in Flemish. Duvillers, alongside several other Flemish priest-writers, attempted to remedy this lack.<sup>20</sup> He was a prolific author – quite how prolific it is difficult to say given that much of his output was in ephemeral forms such as almanacs and newspaper poems, and he was a habitual user of pseudonyms.<sup>21</sup> His demotic and forthright Flemish explains why he is the most cited author in the main Flemish dialect dictionary.<sup>22</sup> Elements of his work, including folk plays and proverb collections, were aimed at moralizing the Flemish peasantry and confirming them in their identity as good Catholics and good (that is anti-French and anti-Dutch) patriots. However, he was by inclination drawn towards satire. In 1852 *De Brugsche Vrye* asserted that Duvillers was the pseudonymous poet ‘D’ who had contributed several derisive songs to rival, clerical newspapers, including some which had personally insulted the governor of West Flanders Adolphe De Vrière and his wife.<sup>23</sup> Duvillers could not resist polemic.

Both motivations – the urge to moralize and the urge to satirize – manifest themselves in the works by Duvillers considered here, the songs he wrote for the Flemish lace schools.

### The Traditional Song Repertoire of Flemish Lace Schools

In the dozens of literary representations of singing lacemakers in Belgian literature, it is usually assumed that the practice was evidence that women took pleasure in the task, and that this enjoyment, and the companionship of other women, were compensation for their poor remuneration. Thus the Flemish poet Marie Doolaeghe’s 1850 ode to the ‘De Kantwerkster’ [the lacemaker] opens with this statement: ‘Al woon ik onder 't dak van riet,/ Ik zing: de kommer stoort my niet’ [Although I live under a thatch roof,/ I sing: misery doesn’t make me weep].<sup>24</sup> Travel writers drew the same conclusion from their observation of singing lacemakers. Rose Kingsley, an English visitor to a Bruges lace-

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<sup>19</sup> Jaak Muyltermans, ‘Constant Duvillers (1803-1885): Zijn leven en zijn schriften’, *Verslagen en mededelingen van de Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie voor Taal- en Letterkunde* (1928): 148-202 (here 152).

<sup>20</sup> Lieve Gevers and Jan Roes, ‘Apostolaat van de poëzie: Priester-dichters in Vlaanderen en Nederland in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw’, *Trajecta* 8 (1999): 289-92.

<sup>21</sup> Both van Es and Muyltermans provide a bibliography, but for these reasons they are not complete.

<sup>22</sup> Leonard-Lodewyk De Bo, *Westvlaamsch idioticon*, 2 vols (Bruges: Gailliard & Co., 1873).

<sup>23</sup> *Het Brugsche Vrye* 13 November, 1852, p. 3; 17 November, 1852, p. 2, 24 November, 1852, pp. 1-2. There is more information on this heated poetic exchange on the Bruges Library website: <https://brugseverzen.wordpress.com/2018/12/11/mevrouw-geef-myn-kleeren/>

<sup>24</sup> Marie Doolaeghe, *De avondlamp* (Ghent: De Busscher, 1850), pp. 118-20.

school in the 1880s, reported a conversation with the nun in charge: the girls ‘shall sing you a song of their *métier*. See how their faces brighten. They will all begin to laugh.’<sup>25</sup>

For Duvillers too, a singing school was a happy school, one that he could proudly show off to visiting clerics and officials. He wanted the girls to sing. He had no problem with traditional tunes: although he did not always designate a tune for his newly composed songs, when he did it was almost always set to an upbeat folk melody or popular dance of the period. He did not set his texts to the tunes of religious songs, even though these were numerous in Flanders. However, the texts of traditional songs – and especially tells – were, from a Catholic perspective, more questionable. Duvillers’ texts were meant to supplant, or at least supplement, the existing repertoire.

To understand why a priest might feel that new songs were necessary, let us consider a traditional Flemish lace tell. Duvillers mentions several by name, including ‘the one about the cat’.<sup>26</sup> This is almost certainly a reference to ‘Kat aan de zee’ [Cat by the sea], a common lace tell. Adolphe Lootens recorded a version of 200 lines from his mother in Bruges in the 1850s or 60s; she learnt it in a city lace-school in the early 1800s.<sup>27</sup> A further seven versions were collected by Magda Cafmeyer in and around Bruges after the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> They display a remarkable likeness, given not only their length but also what Lootens termed their ‘incoherence’.<sup>29</sup> The tell is really a mash-up of singing games, riddles, hymns, ballads and prayers; both Lootens and Cafmeyer identify several interpolated verses. Lifted lines are chained together in such a way that it is impossible, for an outsider at least, to follow the narrative. However, as Gerald Porter has argued for the equally opaque tells used in English lace schools, for insiders familiar with the dialect vocabulary of lacemaking, there may be some logic at work.<sup>30</sup> Certainly there are features that recur in other lace tells, such as the references to counting, clocks striking, journeys (to local landmarks and foreign countries as well as Hell, Purgatory and Heaven), and interactions with supernatural figures. Some themes loom large, in particular food and its absence, and domestic violence. In one verse that survives in most versions, a girl kills her mother with needles and her father with pins. Amidst the rest of the cartoon brutality, one might not attach much significance to these lines, but it may be that they encode the pupils’ bitter feelings towards the people who had placed them in the school. The assumption that singing implied pleasure was misplaced.

The violence, the profanities and the nonsense might all have worried a priest responsible for girls’ education, but more problematic still was the treatment of religious figures and locations. A comic passage in the tell concerns the religious burial of a cockerel; elsewhere a dog and a cat are married in church. In another section a bishop

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<sup>25</sup> Rose Kingsley, ‘A Lace School at Bruges’, *Art Journal*, March 1887: 81-84 (here 84)

<sup>26</sup> Constant Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (Bruges: Vandecasteele-Werbrouck, 1846), p. 24.

<sup>27</sup> Lootens and Feys, *Chants populaires flamands*, pp. 276-81.

<sup>28</sup> Magda Cafmeyer, ‘Tellingen van het “Katje aan de zee”’, *Biekorf* 56 (1955): 238-46.

<sup>29</sup> Lootens and Feys, *Chants populaires flamands*, p. viii.

<sup>30</sup> Porter, ““Work the Old Lady out of the Ditch””.

orders a soul to Hell, but the soul refuses to go and instead forces its way into Heaven. Jesus, Mary, Joseph – as well as the saints Elizabeth, John and Peter – appear in the tell, alongside a Saint ‘Ruwe’ or ‘Maruut’, the uncanonical patron of drunkards and beggars.<sup>31</sup> These holy figures busy themselves with incongruous tasks such as shelling peas or peeling pumpkins. Their treatment is disrespectful at best, blasphemous at worst.

Duvillers, while condemnatory of some of his parishioners’ customs and beliefs, was not hostile to every aspect of folk culture. In Flanders, as elsewhere, the stereotype of the priest as the sworn enemy of the demotic can be overstated.<sup>32</sup> Duvillers actively encouraged singing in the school, drawing a distinction between this kind of happy labour and the impossibility of singing in the mechanized factory – a very dubious place in the Catholic imagination. Nor did he object to traditional rhymes; he mentioned several that enlivened the school hours, such as ‘Houp Marjanneken’, an anti-French nursery rhyme from the revolutionary wars.<sup>33</sup> None the less, it is not difficult to see why he may have wanted to provide the lace pupils with something more appropriate to sing while they learnt their craft.

### A Village Soap Opera

Duvillers published three volumes of songs use in lace-schools. Although intended, at least initially, for his own institution, he advertised them in Flemish newspapers for use in similar schools. The first *Twintig nieuwe liedjes, ten gebruyke der meysjesschool van Middelburg, in Vlaenderen* [Twenty new songs, to use in the Middelburg girls’ school, in Flanders] was published in Ghent in 1844 (and republished in 1846); the second, entitled *Liedjes voor de kantwerkscholen, gevolgd door de spreuken van baeske Van de Wiele* [Songs for the Lace Schools, followed by the Aphorisms of boss Van de Wiele] consisted of fourteen songs as well as the wise ‘sayings’ of a farmer character who recurs in Duvillers’ other works; this booklet was published in Bruges in 1846. The last volume, whose title – *Liedjes voor de kantwerkscholen en spreuken Van baeske Van de Wiele* – is very similar to the second’s, included fifteen new songs and was printed in Ghent in 1847.

These three volumes appeared, therefore, in the years following the publication, in 1838, of the work credited with kickstarting the Flemish literary renaissance, Hendrik Conscience’s *De Leeuw van Vlaenderen* [The Lion of Flanders]. That novel, emulating Walter Scott’s medieval romances, depicts the events leading up to the Battle of the Golden Spurs in 1302, when the foot-soldiers of Flanders’ textile cities defeated the King of France’s mounted knights. The High Middle Ages, when Flanders was the cultural centre of the northern world, while its citizen militias maintained its autonomy, was a

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<sup>31</sup> Antoon Viaene, ‘Op 't schip van Senten-Uut geraken. Op 't eiland van Sint-Kenuut zitten’, *Biekorf* 52 (1951): 275.

<sup>32</sup> On priests as allies of popular culture, see the contributions to the special issue on ‘L’Apport des prêtres et des religieux au patrimoine des minorités’, *Port Acadie* 24-6 (2013-14).

<sup>33</sup> Judith Amsenga and Geertje Dekkers, ‘Wat Nu?’ *zei Pichegru. De Franse Tijd in Nederland, 1795-1813* (Hilversum: Verloren, 2004), p. 90.

particularly inspiring period for the writers associated with the Flemish Movement.<sup>34</sup> The collecting of lacemakers' ballads, some of which related to this period, was an attempt to reconnect Flanders' undistinguished present to this more glorious past. (Incidentally, and inaccurately, some writers attributed the invention of lace to the same period and location.) Duvillers, by contrast, was completely indifferent to this heroic epoch. More surprisingly still, his creativity was not stimulated by the region's religious history with its trove of saints, martyrs and pilgrimages, topics one might have thought suitable to edify lace pupils. His focus was entirely contemporary.

Duvillers' attempt to shape young minds through song was hardly surreptitious. The third song of the first volume is called a 'sermon', and urges the girls, among other things:

<p>Wanneer gy t' huys by moeder zit, Doet alles wat de vrouw zal zeggen. En vaegt, en wascht, of leest en bidt, Of helpt haer dragen en verleggen. In alle werk staet moeder by: Zyt altyd moedig, altyd bly<sup>35</sup></p>	<p>When you're at home sitting with your mother Do whatever she tells you. And sweep and wash, or read and pray, Or help her fetch and carry. In all tasks stand by your mother: Be always courageous, always eager</p>
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The bulk of Duvillers' texts were not so blatantly didactic, but rather took the form of narratives or dialogic songs. They were set in and around the actual school and dramatizing events and featuring named, or at least recognizable characters from the community. While Duvillers' moral messaging was still discernible, these songs were more grounded in the daily life of the school. For instance, in a song in which the sister in charge chastises the pupils for relating gossip heard on the street, the children fall over themselves to deny that it was they who had introduced the subject of werewolves, ghosts, mysterious white hares and black dogs into the conversation: but their disclaimer only confirms that these were precisely the kind of topics that were talked about in school.<sup>36</sup>

Read consecutively these songs create a kind of village soap opera, recognisable to the inhabitants of Middelburg. The local references include named farms, streets and buildings. The songs take place in real time too, so we follow the progress of the school through different seasons and years. Duvillers named over seventy individuals in the course of the three volumes, some of whom were certainly real. Thus we meet, as regular characters, Sister Monica, the head teacher of the school, and Mrs Delcampo, the *koopvrouw*, the intermediary between the school and the Bruges lace merchant. Nor could he resist taking a swipe at some national figures, such as the Liberal and anticlerical

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<sup>34</sup> W. Gobbers, 'Consciencen *Leeuw van Vlaenderen* als historische roman en nationaal epos: een genrestudie in Europees perspectief,' in Ada Deprez and W. Gobbers (eds), *Vlaamse literatuur van de negentiende eeuw. Dertien verkenningen* (Utrecht: HES, 1990), pp. 45-69.

<sup>35</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 5.

Liègeois deputy, Noël Delfosse.<sup>37</sup> Duvillers also invoked fictional characters that appeared in his other works, such as farmer ‘van der Wiele’, a source of wise aphorisms. Occasionally he borrowed characters from other peoples’ work, such as the rival schoolteacher ‘Pier Verzeyl’, which was the pseudonym of another priest-writer on educational matters, Jan Baptist Decorte.<sup>38</sup> Other names, such as the hosts of Ciscas (Franciscas), Wantjes (Johannas), Mietjes (Marias), Thresekens (Therasas) and Trienes (Catharinas), were more generic and were, I assume, invented for his moralizing purposes, but his intention was to evoke the kind of people one might meet in the school or around Middelburg.

In the first volume, *Twenty New Songs, for use in the Middelburg Girls’ School*, the linen industry had already begun to decline:

Komt! Hoort nu ’t liedje der spinnetten, ... Den loon is kleyn; en ’t is duer leven; Er ligt geen’ boter op ons brood Maer God zal ons wel beter geven, Couragie! God kent onzen nood. <sup>39</sup>	Come listen now to the spinners’ song, ... The wage is small and life is dear; There’s no butter on our bread But God shall give us something better, Courage! God knows our need.
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That ‘something better’, according to Duvillers, was lacemaking:

O zalig land ! Waer ook een’ kinderhand Zyn’ ouders onderstand, Al spelen, kan verschaffen. Al spelen, ja! <sup>40</sup>	O blessed land! Where even a child’s hand, Their parents’ lowly position, Can maintain just by playing. By playing, yes!
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This last claim is partly based on a pun: one Flemish term for lacemaking is ‘spellewerk’ (pin work), and it is fairly easy to slip from ‘spellen’ (pins) to ‘spelen’ (to play). According to Duvillers, lace bobbins are not manipulated, they ‘fly’ or ‘dance’ across the pillow. These same metaphors were used by other Flemish writers of the period, and to convey the same idea, that lacemaking was more like a game than a chore. Duvillers used another word that dispelled the notion of labour: lacemaking was all ‘tooverly’, that is magic. It was an enchanted craft; one conjured lace into existence.

Wy spelen hier een spel Waer ieder moet op kyken; Dat speldewerken schynt	We’re playing a game here That everyone should look at; That lace shines
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<sup>37</sup> Duvillers was affronted by Delfosse’s speech to the Belgian Parliament, in which he declared that ‘the Catholic clergy had been one of the obstacles preventing the transformation of manufacture in the Flemish provinces, and thus is one of the causes of the misery that afflicts those two provinces’: Chambre des représentants de Belgique: Séance du mercredi 16 décembre 1846. See: <https://unionisme.be/ch18461216.htm>.

<sup>38</sup> J. Huyghebaert, ‘De “Pieter Verzeyl”-reeks van Jan Baptist Decort, 1837-1852’, *Biekorf* 74 (1973): 354-5.

<sup>39</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 4.

Een' regte tooverkonst. Al wie het na komt zien Geeft ons veel liefdeblyken; Wy zingen dan een lied, En elk geeft zyne jonst. <sup>41</sup>	A real piece of magical craft. Whoever comes to see it Gives us many tokens of affection; We sing then a song, And each offers his goodwill.
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Consequently, lace was easy money. Duvillers claimed that one pupil, Isabelle, 'earns ten francs per ell': the ell (about one 1 metre 20 centimetres) is the standard measurement of lace: ten francs for such a length would be an extraordinary wage, about ten times higher than average.<sup>42</sup> Another pupil earned a crown (five francs) a week, a slightly more reasonable, though still unlikely sum. However, the benefits of the lace school were not, in Duvillers' opinion, limited to the financial: unlike fieldwork, the school was dry, clean, one's clothes were not ruined, and one could sit with one's sisters and friends. The fact that the classroom was heated was a major attraction. The whole song book was, in fact, an extended advert for Duvillers' school, running parallel to the handbills he had printed.

At the same time, Duvillers was also clear about the other purpose of his school, to keep girls away from the street. The street was, he claimed, the source of all evil: a song in a later collection was entitled 'Away from the street, away'.<sup>43</sup> He explained his rationale in the speech he made at the school prize-giving, held on Saint Gregory's Day, 'The most beautiful day of the year'.<sup>44</sup> (Pope Gregory the Great was the patron of teachers and pupils, as well as singers, had become the patron of the lace schools in East Flanders. His feastday is 12 March, but for meteorological and other reasons his feast was often celebrated on 9 May, the summer feast of Saint Nicholas who, according to legend, had saved young women from having to prostitute themselves.) The prizes were supplied through the charity of the local landowners, who were invited to the ceremony. Duvillers told the pupils, the nuns and the other assembled guests, that:

De school is eenen scheidingsmuer, Een bolwerk, eenen wapentoren, Die ons bevrydt van schicht en vuer. Neen ! Satan's list zal ons niet overhalen, De goede leer moet immer zegepralen.	The school is a dividing wall, a stronghold, a castle keep, that saves us from thunderbolts and the flames [of hell]. No, Satan's ruses will not trick us, Here righteous doctrine must always triumph.
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He explicitly termed his school 'God's house'.

By the time of the second, 1846 volume, the ravages of the linen crisis were fully apparent. When he was young, Duvillers lamented, a family could earn its bread from spinning and weaving, whereas now:

<sup>41</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 19, 'Tien franken d'elle/ Krygt Isabelle'

<sup>43</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 9 'Weg met de strate, weg'.

<sup>44</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 10, 'Het is den schoonsten dag van 't jaer'.

De spinsters hebben lang gedaen, 'K hoor 't wielken niet meer ronken. <sup>45</sup>	The spinners are long gone, I don't hear the spinning wheel humming anymore.
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Industry was, instead, enthroned in the school where all was play, chatter and song.

Many of the songs in this volume were composed as dialogues: between a schoolgirl and a benevolent landowner; between Duvillers and Sister Monica; between Sister Clara (the teacher in a second lace school, whose opening was celebrated in this volume) and Mrs Delcampo; between a lace apprentice and her mother; between Duvillers, the sister and visiting clergy interested in doing something similar in their own parish; between Duvillers and a former pupil who has been taken on as a lace mistress in the visitors' newly established school.<sup>46</sup> Through these dialogues he explored many practical matters to do with the lace trade. The English were identified as the main consumers, eccentric in their demands but reliable when it came to payment. He also went into considerable detail about the material benefits of lacemaking. These included not just the money earned, but the rewards and prizes doled out within the school. Duvillers often referred to 'santjes' – cheap religious prints which played a large role in nineteenth-century school life in Catholic countries – which he gave out for good behaviour. Even more important were the prizes distributed on Saint Gregory's day:

En, dan kom ik afgetreden Met den heere van 't kasteel, En mevrouw, en al de leden Van 't weldadigheids-bureel. En wy geven groote boeken, Nieuwe kleedren, mutsen, doeken, Al die braef is krygt zyn deel. <sup>47</sup>	And then I come, following in the footsteps With the lord from the chateau, And my lady, and all the members Of the charitable commission, And we hand out hefty books, New clothes, hats, shawls, Everyone who has been good will get their share.
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After the prize-giving the pupils marched off into the country for a picnic of sweet tea and *mastellen* [cinnamon buns], singing as they went. Flemish lacemakers' celebrations of their patronal feast-days such as Saint Gregory, including their repertoire of festive songs, are well documented.<sup>48</sup> The preparation for this day, and its observance, occupy several of Duvillers' songs.

<sup>45</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 1.

<sup>46</sup> The next-door parish to Middelburg is Maldegem, and it is possible one of these visitors was Maldegem's priest, Father Vinckier, who received a subsidy to set up his own lace school in 1842. The malign effects of the Maldegem lace-school were the subject of a novel by the liberal feminist Johanna Courtmans-Berchmans, *De hut van tante Klara* (1864): see <https://laceincontext.com/lacemaking-as-slavery-in-aunt-klaras-cabin-1864/>

<sup>47</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 3.

<sup>48</sup> For lacemakers' celebrations of Saint-Gregory's Day in another East Flanders town, see Augusta de Clercq: *Kantwerksters en Kantnijverheid te Geeraardsbergen. Folklore en Geschiedenis* (Geeraardsbergen: Victor van Nieuwenhove, 1931).

The girls' behaviour also drew Duvillers' attention: one song narrated his visit to the school, where he invited the sister to report on each girl:

Anneken, mynheer den pastor, Is veranderd in een lam: Wantje slaept om langs om vaster; Trientje is nog dikwils gram; En, die groote meyd, Coleta Knaeuwt nog op den <i>Alpha, beta</i> ; Cisca's hand blyft even stram; ... <sup>49</sup>	Annie, Father, has become a lamb: Josie is always falling asleep; Kate is still a bit stubborn; That big girl Colette, still stumbles over her ABC; Frances remains rather clumsy; ...
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The girls in the school were clearly not perfect, but there were worse outcomes. In the final song, Duvillers invited the pupils to 'Listen to the fate of Anastasia De Bal': she used to have an easy life in the school but she threw her lace pillow into the fire and went to work for a farmer.<sup>50</sup> Yes, Duvillers admitted, there she might earn a franc more a week, but she is cold and wet, and the hard work means that she needs to eat more, her clothes are torn, she swears like a trooper, and when winter comes and there is no more fieldwork she will have to go begging. However, the very fact that Duvillers needed to relate this cautionary tale suggests that not everything was rosy in his school.

The story of Anastasia De Bal set the tone for Duvillers' third and final volume of songs for the lace schools, which was very bad tempered. In the very first song, Duvillers upbraided the parents of Wantje Loete who were planning to take her out of school, both because they thought she could earn more money by making lace at home (better-off parents had to make a contribution to the school's running costs), and because she was needed for other tasks such as looking after younger children or taking care of animals.

Werken t' huys! t' huys! kan dat zyn? Met uw geitjen en uw zwyn, En met al die kleyne gasten Die altyd, als ware 't vasten, Staen te kryschen om wat brood, Of die vechten schier om dood?	Work at home, at home! Are you serious? With all the goats and pigs, And the younger children Crowding round all the time Demanding to be fed As if they'd been fasting Or brutally fighting each other?
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Worse yet, her homemade lace would be smoke yellowed, and so unsaleable. However, the Loetes were not alone: in the very next song Duvillers harangued the father of Mieken Van de Walle, who wanted his daughter at home to look after his pig: 'The pig, the pig! Are you having a laugh?'<sup>51</sup>

Duvillers was angrier with the parents than the girls themselves, but the latter did not escape his ire. In a series of songs he condemned girls who had left the school, such as Francesca Bral who had become a pedlar, or Barbara Kwikkelbeen (bendy legs, so

<sup>49</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 3.

<sup>50</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1846), no. 14, 'Hoort, kinders, hoort nu 't lotgeval/ Van Anastasia De Bal'.

<sup>51</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 2, 't' Zwyn! het zwyn! 't is voor den lach'.

Barbara Gadabout) who had become so fine with her Mameluke sleeves, cords, piping and ribbons, that she did not deign even to acknowledge the priest in the street. But how could she afford them he wanted to know? Nothing to her credit to be sure.

However, both the girls and their parents were becoming tired both of Duvillers' sermons and the discipline in the lace schools. In one of his dialogic songs, a mother complains that her daughter has been beaten, which especially riles her given that it was the parents who provided the stool and the pillow, and even bought a cross to decorate the school: she warns the sister in charge 'Don't lay a finger on her'. The nun disputes the facts: Theresa has not been beaten but only made to kneel in front the class; parents provide the chair, but the pillow belongs to the school; but she also asserts that discipline was a necessity in a lace school if the children were ever to make progress, and she ends by declaring 'Woman, this is no dovecot!'<sup>52</sup>

Duvillers did not acknowledge, in these song-books, another explanation for parents' desire to remove their daughters from the lace school: because it was making them sick. The ill health and poor physical development of lace pupils became a matter of urgent national discussion in the 1860s and 70s, strengthening the attack on the lace-schools during the first Belgian 'School War'. It was the central theme of Johanna Courtmans-Berchmans 1864 novel *De Hut van Tante Klara*, which was based on events in the next parish to Middelburg – Maldegem.<sup>53</sup> According to Henry van Holsbeek, a Brussels doctor who had observed lace schools in that city,

the girls remain enclosed for ten to twelve hours in these unsanitary, and often completely filthy places, obliged to take up working positions that prevent the proper growth of their internal organs. It must also be said that their food, too insubstantial, is not in keeping with their way of life, and that the fatal habits which they contract early contribute powerfully to affecting their constitution and the development of scrofula, rickets, consumption, etc., which diseases carry off the majority.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 3, 'Nog op haer den vinger legt'... 'Vrouw, 't is her geen duyvenkeet'.

<sup>53</sup> Lia Van Gemert (ed.), Brenda Mudde (trans.) *Women's Writing from the Low Countries, 1200-1875: A Bilingual Anthology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), pp. 521-8.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Van Holsbeek, *L'industrie dentellière en Belgique. Étude sur la condition physique et morale des ouvrières en dentelles* (Bruxelles: Sigismond Gerstmann, 1863), p. 54: 'Elles restent enfermées pendant dix à douze heures dans ces lieux peu salubres et souvent tout à fait insalubres, obligées de prendre des positions défavorables à l'accroissement des organes. Il faut encore ajouter que leur nourriture, trop peu substantielle, n'est point en rapport avec leur manière d'être, et que les funestes habitudes qu'elles contractent de bonne heure concourent puissamment à altérer leur constitution et à développer les scrofules, le rachitisme, la phthisie, etc., qui en moissonnent le plus grand nombre.'

Doctors even associated the practice of singing with the ravages of tuberculosis in the lace schools – possibly correctly given more recent scholarship on the role of choirs in the spread of aerosol diseases.<sup>55</sup>

Duvillers was aware of this excess mortality associated with the lace-schools. A priest character in one of his folk plays from around this period explains ‘I shall have to bury them one after another, because the children cannot take it’. However, he did not blame the school so much as the parents, who he said kept their daughters working at their pillows at home, long into the night. It was the lack of sleep, not the overcrowding in unventilated schoolrooms, that was killing the lace apprentices, he claimed.<sup>56</sup>

By the late 1840s, Duvillers felt he was being attacked from all sides: from above by liberal deputies like Delfosse, and from below by his own parishioners.

Sticht gy ook een schole, vriend, Eene school van goede zeden, Waer het kind zyn mondgebeden Leert, en daeglyks geld verdient: ‘t Volkske zal gaen perlesanten! Elkeen zal u tegenkanten; En, is ‘t mooglyk, zy verbiên ‘t. <sup>57</sup>	Erect yourself a school, my friend, A school for morals, Where a child learns to say her prayers, and daily earns money: People will swear at you! Everyone will oppose you; And, if possible, they’ll forbid it.
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Wandering through the village one winter’s day, musing on the ingratitude of the poor, he met Genoveva d’Hont, another of his former pupils, dressed in rags and working in a field.

In schole zat zy warm en stil, Zy won hier geld, jaer in, jaer uyt; Want wint ze nu ? .. Geen duynt! ‘k Beklaeg ik zulke menschen niet: Zy zyn de schuld van hun verdriet; Zy zoeken d’armoên ‘t gebrek, Met heel hun nagetrek	In school she sat warm and peaceful, She earned money here, year in, year out; Because what is she earning now? .. Not a farthing! I do not pity such people: They are to blame for their grief; They pursue poverty and want, With everything that follows in its wake
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Finally he declared

Neen, neen ! ik wensche niemand kwaed, Maer als den armen ‘t zoo verstaet, Dan doe ‘k er maer myn hand van af, En ‘k jon ze hem, de straf. <sup>58</sup>	‘No, I don’t wish harm on anybody, But if this is what the poor want, Then I’m not going to lift a finger to help
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<sup>55</sup> Ministère de l’Intérieur, Royaume de Belgique, *Enquête sur la condition des classes ouvrières et sur le travail des enfants. II: Réponses, Mémoires et Rapports des Chambres de commerce, des Ingénieurs des mines et des Collèges médicaux* (Brussels: Lesigne, 1846): Réponse de la Commission médicale du Brabant, p. 372.

<sup>56</sup> Constant Duvillers, *Den baron Penninck, of Samenspraken waerin de Vlaemsche zeden getrouwelyk worden afgeschetst* (Ghent: Snoeck-Ducaju, 1851), p. 50.

<sup>57</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 14.

<sup>58</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 9.

	them, And let them get what's coming to them.
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Duvillers, as has no doubt by now become clear, was egocentric, authoritarian and cantankerous. However, his concern for the rural poor was deep-felt and the mainspring of his careers both as a priest and as a writer. So, this reads like the statement of a man at the end of his tether. To what extent such public avowals of his deteriorating relationships with his parishioners led to his removal from Middelburg is unclear, but he certainly nursed a grudge against the parish. In a complicated series of property transactions – and much to the dismay of the village council, his successor as priest and the bishop – Duvillers finally sold the building that housed the lace school, which was therefore forced to close in 1858.<sup>59</sup>

### Eavesdropping on the Nineteenth-Century Culture Wars

These songs take us deep into the micro-politics of a rural parish as it grappled with one of the great divisive issues of the nineteenth century, the imposition of primary education, especially for girls. Across the century, and throughout most parts of Europe, both the political and religious authorities increasingly wanted children to attend school, to the point that in many countries (though in the case of Belgium not until 1914), elementary schooling became mandatory. At the risk of a gross generalization, one can say that neither of the main providers – the Church and the State, at least in the first half of the century – regarded the purpose of primary education as equipping young people with the skills and knowledge to participate in an industrializing and urbanizing society. The 1842 Belgian law which required each municipality to provide a school of some kind (though it did not oblige children to attend) was explicit on this point. What mattered was the teaching of morality and religion, and for that reason the teacher was placed under the supervision of the priest.<sup>60</sup> Social order, rather than social movement, was the goal. The authorities wanted to use schools to create an obedient, moralized population, one that would obey laws – whether those of God or those made in parliament.

Yet despite these similar intentions, different political regimes, and the various ecclesiastical hierarchies, had divergent ideas about what should be taught in primary schools, and these conflicts – particularly between liberal governments and the Catholic Church – would become very bitter in the second half of the century.<sup>61</sup> In Belgium it would lead to the first of two ‘School Wars’, between 1879 and 1884, when the government attempted to develop a network of secular primary schools which would have excluded both priests and teaching orders – ‘schools without God, teachers without faith’,

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<sup>59</sup> According to a letter dated 21 April 1858 from J.J. Le Clercq, the new priest of Middelburg, to the Bishop of Ghent: *Archief Bisdom Gent, Middelburg III, item 143.*

<sup>60</sup> Carole Sägesser, ‘Les Cours de religion et de morale dans l'enseignement obligatoire’, *Courrier hebdomadaire du CRISP* 15-16 (2012): 5-59.

<sup>61</sup> Els Witte, ‘The Battle for Monasteries, Cemeteries and Schools: Belgium’, in Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflicts in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

in the view of their Catholic opponents.<sup>62</sup> Belgian bishops organized a boycott of the state primary schools. The success, particularly in the Flemish half of the country, of this resistance movement would enshrine the Church's role in Belgian education for the best part of a century.<sup>63</sup>

However, during the period when Duvillers was most involved in education, Belgian liberals and clericals had achieved a compromise, if not a consensus. One area in which their visions of the social order cohered was around the gender hierarchy, as both agreed that women were destined for household tasks, always under the supervision of patriarchal authority – fathers, husbands, the priest, the mayor... The virtue of lacemaking as an occupation, as far as the Church, and to an extent the State was concerned, was that it could be practiced in the home. As Benoit Van der Dussen, a Brussels lace designer who wrote the first Belgian history of lace, explained, 'While devoted to the exercise of her profession, [the lacemaker] can watch over her children, or suspend her task in order to take care of housework, only to pick it up later'.<sup>64</sup> Not only would husbands be fed and children supervised, but women would make the home a proper, Christian environment, thanks to the grounding in Catholic doctrine they had received in the lace school. Work in the factory, on the other hand, removed women from paternalistic supervision and introduced them to a world of social mixing, urban pleasures, sexual opportunities, political subversion and irreligion.<sup>65</sup>

One of the purposes of nineteenth-century primary schooling was to train girls to accept their role as domestic helpmeets, to become meek, passive, receptive to male instruction, and to embody 'the modesty/ which accords with your social position and your sex', as Duvillers expressed it.<sup>66</sup> One of the benefits of a lace school, in terms of this gendered education, was that it trained a lacemaker to keep her eyes down, in order to work harder but also to prevent her challenging authority. Duvillers emphasised this humble position on more than one occasion.<sup>67</sup> But he was equally emphatic that the girls should accept their subordinate class position. It is a paradox of the Church's

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<sup>62</sup> Jacques Lory, 'La Résistance des catholiques belges à "la loi de malheur", 1879-1884', *Revue du Nord* 67 (1985): 729-47.

<sup>63</sup> Luc Courtois, "'Des écoles sans Dieu et des maîtres sans foi, délivrez-nous Seigneur": Les évêques belges et la première guerre scolaire en Belgique (1879-1884)', in Condette (ed.), *Éducation, Religion, Laïcité*, pp. 355-62.

<sup>64</sup> Benoit Van der Dussen, *L'industrie dentellière belge. Résumé historique, fabrication, statistique, et nomenclature des communes dans lesquelles se trouvent des écoles dentellières* (Brussels: Veuve Parent et Fils, 1860), p. 81: 'Tout en se livrant à l'exercice de son métier, elle peut surveiller ses enfants, interrompre sa besogne pour vaquer aux soins de ménage, et ensuite reprendre son ouvrage, ce que ne peuvent faire les femmes employées dans les fabriques'.

<sup>65</sup> Eliane Gubin, 'Home, sweet home: l'image de la femme au foyer en Belgique et au Canada avant 1914', *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine* 22 (1991): 521-68.

<sup>66</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 6, 'de zedigheyd veracht/ Die zoo wel staet aen uw geslacht'.

<sup>67</sup> Duvillers, *Liedjes voor de Kantwerkscholen* (1847), no. 15, 'Zy en heft haer hoofd niet op'.

involvement in the lace business that the market relied on the existence of rich and fashionable women, given to extravagance: these were the consumers of lace. But Duvillers was clear that such luxuries were not suitable for village girls, characterized as modest and simple. Lace was for others – ‘young ladies from the town’ – not for the people who made it.<sup>68</sup>

There was, however, another party to nineteenth-century conflicts over rural primary education, and one that had different concerns to those of either the State or Church: rural parents. We know more about the intention of educational reformers – teachers, priests, inspectors – because their mastery of the written word means they dominate the official archives. But parents’ interests and values also shaped the history of schooling, and it is one of the virtues of Duvillers’ songs that they enable us to hear from them, albeit filtered through the priest’s sarcasm. Belgian parents were especially empowered, because the 1831 constitution of the revolutionary kingdom guaranteed ‘liberty of education’. What this meant in practice was that parents had the right to decide not only what education their children should receive but whether they needed any at all. Children were under the authority of their parents, or specifically their father as head of the household, who could determine whether they went to school or went to work.<sup>69</sup> In Flanders, as elsewhere, rural parents could be unenthusiastic, or even downright hostile, at any attempts to corral their children into schools, whether by the State or the Church.

At ‘the heart of much of this indifference or opposition encountered by school reformers’ explains the historian Mary Jo Maynes, ‘was the compelling fact that children had more important things to do than go to school.’<sup>70</sup> In all agricultural societies, children were a necessary part of the labour force, guarding animals, picking stones, scaring birds, fetching firewood... Other families might rely on children’s monetary contribution to the household budget, or at least require them to free up their parents to take on remunerative tasks by looking after their youngersiblings and taking care of the house. Even the handful of centimes earned by child lacemakers could make the difference between subsistence and the margins of starvation. And nowhere were these competing concerns more urgent than in Flanders during the ‘Hungry Forties’.

Even if parents agreed to send their children to school, they might have different ideas about the purposes of education from those of the curriculum setters. Rural parents might accept that the three R’s had a general utility, but they were less enthusiastic about attempts to reform behaviour, especially when these ran counter to their own values and beliefs. In general, even when parents could see a point in making boys attend school, they were less convinced of its usefulness for girls, who were usually destined for a role in the household. As a historian of rural education in France explains, parents ‘feared that their sons and daughters would soon disdain habits and customs which the parents considered essential to family survival. They feared that children would question

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<sup>68</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes*, no. 19: ‘Der juffers van de stad’.

<sup>69</sup> Marie-Sylvie Dupont-Bouchat, ‘Le père, l’enfant et l’État. Les débats relatifs aux lois protectrices de l’enfance (Belgique, 1888-1914)’, *Lien social et Politiques* 44 (2000): 63–74

<sup>70</sup> Mary Jo Maynes, *Schooling in Western Europe: A Social History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 85.

parental authority and the child's obligation to its parents'.<sup>71</sup> Duvillers' emphasis on the school as the sole locus of piety and morality clearly irked some parents who thought they were quite capable of bringing up their children properly. They may have resented attempts to counter their forms of knowledge, such as stories about ghosts and werewolves. And they were more reluctant than Duvillers to consider the school as a stepping-stone to the convent, where these girls' labour would be permanently lost to their families.

Duvillers' girls' school, and the others established by Catholic priests in the wake of the linen crisis, were really workshops combined with religious education and some meagre instruction in the three 'R's. This arrangement recognized the reality that neither Church nor State had unfettered power to decide what education was for: the authorities had to acknowledge that, for rural parents, 'work and schooling were a trade-off, that work had to take priority for many parents'.<sup>72</sup> Yet despite his attempts to appease parents' need for their daughters to earn money and contribute to the household expenses, Duvillers' angry encounters with his parishioners show that they continued to resist his monopolization of the girls' time and energies. Despite his protestations, lace did not pay that well, so it is unsurprising that they still had other priorities: caring for younger children, feeding the goats, 'the pig, the pig!'. And they resented Duvillers' high-handed attempt to repress or control other aspects of their lives. A girl might just as easily make lace at home, under the eye of her parents rather than priests and nuns, who would save themselves the school fee into the bargain.

Duvillers' dialogues allow us to eavesdrop on the village-level discussions between the three powers shaping primary education in the Flemish countryside in the 1840s – the State, the Church and parents – whose positions were all recognized in law. But he also introduces us to other, unforeseen players who nonetheless influenced the success or failure of his venture: the girls themselves. If parents' expectations of education are difficult to uncover in the bureaucratic record, those of children are barely visible at all: yet we find them reflected here in Duvillers' impotent rage. Girls thwarted Duvillers' plans in a myriad of small ways. In school they yawned, fell asleep, chatted, deliberately worked slowly; in the street they danced and gossiped. We could call these, adapting the formulation of the anthropologist James Scott, the 'small arms' of the nineteenth-century culture wars.<sup>73</sup> But sometimes the girls' resistance went further: after all it was Anastasia De Bal, not her mother or father, who threw her lace pillow into the fire and walked out of the school. Genoveva d'Hont, Francesca Bral, Barbara Kwikkelbeen and the other girls who refused his authority and sought other means to make a living, were also, in their small way, shaping the history of education.

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<sup>71</sup> Laura Struminger, 'Square Pegs into Round Holes: Rural Parents, Children and Primary Schools; France 1830-1880', in Marc Bertrand (ed.), *Popular Traditions and Learned Culture in France* (San Francisco; Anma Libri, 1985), p. 137.

<sup>72</sup> Mary Jo Maynes, *Schooling in Western Europe: A Social History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), p. 88.

<sup>73</sup> James C. Scott, 'Small Arms Fire in the Class War', in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven Co.: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 1-27.

### Conclusion: Shaping a Folk-Song Repertoire

Duvillers felt that he was losing the battle for hearts and minds in Middelburg, and clearly his parishioners, both young and old, were imposing limits on his ambitions. It is also the case that some of the richer members of the community, the farmers and landowners, the people whom Duvillers expected to fund the school, were becoming exasperated by his demands, especially as the school was taking their source of cheap labour out of the fields. Duvillers only occasionally alludes to these political battles in the song books but they loom larger in other sources. His Lammenaisian concern for social equity did not go down well with the well-off faction in the village, which was supported from outside by Middelburg's former priest turned politician, Joseph-Olivier Andries, who was lobbying the bishop to eject Duvillers.<sup>74</sup>

Yet, albeit unnoticed, perhaps Duvillers was winning the war. The girls who attended his schools in the 1840s, whether reluctantly or not, would be parents who heeded the Flemish bishops' call to boycott state primary education in the 1870s. They, or enough of them, had come to accept clerical authority in matters of education. This intergenerational shift from resistance to external authority towards acceptance of obligations is documented in other experiences of educational reform in the nineteenth century. This change enabled the clergy to win the School War, which in turn set the stage for politics in Flanders up till the First World War and beyond. Liberals, socialists and Walloons bemoaned the clerical grip on the Flemish rural population, but its effect was tangible, in Middelburg as elsewhere.

Duvillers' songbooks were a weapon in that conflict, and their influence can be measured through their reception. The lace school in Middelburg may have closed, but its counterparts subsisted up until the First World War, and in some cases beyond. Duvillers' booklets were used by religious lace schools in other parts of Flanders. Importantly, they were adopted by the leading convent schools in the main centres of lacemaking, such as the Lamotte School in Ypres run by the Zusters van het Geloof [Sisters of the Faith], The Bruges Foere School run by the zusters van Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Hemelvaart [Sisters of the Assumption of Mary], and the Bruges Balstraat School run by the Zusters Apostolinnen [Apostoline Sisters]. These convent schools were training grounds for the nuns and lace mistresses who went on to work, and so establish the work culture, in other lace schools across Flanders. And it seems that, in at least some cases, they took Duvillers' texts with them and introduced them as part of the training of their charges.<sup>75</sup>

We know this because, when Flemish folklorists such as Marcel Van de Velde and Magda Cafmeyer recorded lacemakers' traditional songs in the twentieth century, a part of their repertoire was derived from Duvillers. Neither the singers nor the collectors were

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<sup>74</sup> Notteboom, 'De meysjes-school van pastoor Duvillers'.

<sup>75</sup> Various unattributed Duvillers' songs appear in the following folksong collections: Anon., 'Speldewerksterslieden', *Biekorf* 14 (1903): 79-80; Marcel Van de Velde, 'Kantwerksterslied uit Brugge', *De Brabantse Folklore* 19 (1939-40): 373-4; Magda Cafmeyer, 'Van de wieg tot het graf III: Dat was de jeugd', *Biekorf* 48 (1949): 206-7; M.C. [Magda Cafmeyer], 'Leerschool en spellewerksschool te St.-Kruis', *'t Beertje* (1969): 21-2.

aware that he was the source; they seem not to have encountered the booklets themselves. They were just part of the songs lacemakers sang in the lace school. These women dropped or rearranged verses, suggesting that the songs had been learnt from oral performance, rather than from the printed text. For example, whereas Duvillers had his lace pupils proclaim, as they entered the school, 'Farewell to the plough, and to farmer De Backer!' (a landowner in Middelburg), when lacemakers in Bruges sang this song a century later, they said 'Farewell to the plough, to the farmer and to the baker'.<sup>76</sup> It is a small change, but indicative that Duvillers' songs had become part of a collective tradition, adapted through the process of oral transmission; in short, they were becoming folk songs.

Rapallo, May 2022, Kidlington January 2023

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<sup>76</sup> Duvillers, *Twintig nieuwe liedjes* no. 19: 'Vaerwel den akker!/ En boer de Backer!' Compare with Cafemeyer, 'Van de wieg tot het graf III': 207: 'Vaerwel aan den akker./ De boer en de bakker'.