Working, Singing and Telling in the Nineteenth-Century Flemish Pillow-Lace Industry

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Biography

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Abstract

The female lacemaker who sings at her work is a European literary trope from Shakespeare to Nerval. However, there is considerable evidence from many countries that pillow lacemakers did sing while working, and that their repertoire of songs was in part learnt in the lace schools which many of them attended from about the age of six. Such schools were often under some kind of religious authority. In the English Midlands, the Erzgebirge region of Saxony, and Flanders, trainee lacemakers learnt "tells" which provided a rhythm to the production process; many of these tells were noted down in the nineteenth century. This article examines the corpus of Flemish tells to explore lacemakers' own responses to the strict environment of the lace school. Singing together helped establish a corporate identity which lacemakers were proud to proclaim, and reinforced bonds of mutual sympathy between workers. But tells in particular were meant to foster competition. Tells could be used to voice resistance to, or at least the fantasy of escape from, the lace mistress as well as the parents who forced their children into this occupation. But lace mistresses also used tells to teach moral and religious lessons, and to break young girls to the discipline of the school and the relentless expectations of production.

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Keywords: lace tells; lace schools; Flemish Movement; singing at work; work discipline; child labour; protoindustry

Introduction: Lacemakers as "Missing Persons"

Nearly half a century ago, Sheila Rowbotham argued that working-class women were "hidden from history" (Rowbotham 1973). Over the intervening decades much has been done to uncover the history of working women, and girls, including the hundreds of thousands who in the nineteenth century laboured in the European pillow-lace industry. Precisely how many thousands it is difficult to say: census data routinely

undercounted them as trainees were listed as “scholars” and mothers as “housewives”, but industry spokesmen routinely exaggerated (and were seemingly unable to think of any number less than a quarter of a million). A rough estimate is that in the mid-nineteenth century there were about 150,000 in France, of which 100,000 were found in the Haute-Loire and adjoining regions and most of the rest in Calvados, 130,000 in Belgium and 40,000 in England. At least for English lacemakers we now have studies of their training in lace schools, some evidence of their remuneration and the effect on them of the growing competition from machine-made lace (Bourke 1995; Buck 1966; Horn 1972; Horn 1974; Spenceley 1973; Spenceley 1977; Verdon 2002). Yet in most of this research, lacemakers appear only as an aggregate, we get little sense of what they themselves thought about their trade, their relations with other workers, their customers, their dealers and the lace mistresses who taught them their craft. As agents with their own subjectivities, they remain “missing persons”, in part because so few have left any written account of themselves.

The explanations for this lack are evident: most working-class autobiographers were urban men — the most literate members of the working-classes — whereas lacemakers were almost exclusively women and increasingly rural, and therefore among the least literate. Thus we have autobiographies written by the sons, brothers and husbands of lacemakers, but not the women themselves (Verdon 2002: 146; Humphries 2010: 116). Such memoirs tend to relate these men’s social ascension through education and their growing religious or political awareness (Maynes 1995). Lacemakers, however, were enrolled in lace-schools from the age of five or six, and so, as Friedrich Engels explained, “They are almost wholly without education, least of all do they receive moral training” (Engels 1887: 129). Nor, given their long-working hours — ten, twelve, even fourteen hours a day, before considering their other domestic obligations — did they have the leisure to write. Although they had a strong occupational culture, the trade was highly dispersed and there were no lacemakers’ trade unions in England. While there are some indications of lacemakers’ involvement in protests in the early nineteenth century, for instance around the 1820 elections (Gibbs 1885: 621), yet as their wages declined over the century one suspects that crushing poverty militated against any form of activism that could leave a trace in the historical archive. One of the few sources through which lacemakers can speak to us are their songs (Porter 1994; Constantine and Porter 2003: 63-74).

These statements hold not just for Britain but also for Flanders, with the added factor that lacemaking there was considered a bastion of social, religious and political conservatism, and thus largely uninteresting to those labour historians whose subject was the development of workers' militancy. "This very numerous and interesting social category has passed practically unnoticed through history" wrote the leading pre-First World War commentator on lace affairs in Belgium (Verhaegen 1912: 17). And unlike in Britain, the historiographical position has barely improved since. If we were to rely on texts written in lacemakers' own hands, our situation would be more desperate still, as such sources are all but unknown in Belgium. However, as in England, there is another archive in which the voices of nineteenth-century Flemish lacemakers can be found: their songs.

Herder, the progenitor of the movement to record folk song in the eighteenth century, called songs "the archive of the people", that is an alternative archive to that constructed by the state and other powerholders, and one that conveyed the history and the hopes of the powerless. Historians in turn have turned to song as a source for "history from below". Protest songs in particular have drawn their attention, as the bonding agent that turned rebellious crowds into effective political movements. But there is a tendency to examine all songs for evidence of popular agency and resistance, including work songs. The use of songs by slave and prison workgangs in the American South is an influential example. Because songs were performed collectively, because the words were anonymous and widely circulated, they were an ideal means to voice defiance without negative consequences. The authorities found them difficult to contain. Even when a singer had no refractory intention, her song might express unpoliced desires. Songs could provide a cathartic release from domination (Guillorel and Hopkin 2018). We can detect some such uses in lacemakers' songs. However, it is also clear that in lace schools songs were used as a tool of work discipline and a means to reinforce social, religious and patriarchal authority. Songs helped make young workers economically productive while inuring them to their lot in life. One of the oddities of songs as a communicative genre is that they can often perform all these functions at once.

Sources for Flemish Lacemakers' Songs

The lacemaker singing at her pillow is a literary stereotype already present in the works of Shakespeare and Cervantes and regularly invoked throughout the nineteenth century by writers as various as Gérard de Nerval and Maxim Gorky. However, the practice is also well documented, notably in England, France and Germany, and especially so in Flanders. Collecting folksongs was a significant if haphazard form of activism within the nineteenth-century Flemish Movement (D'hulst 2018). By 1831, when the new Kingdom of Belgium was established, French had long been the literary language of the region; now it became the only official language as well. If the Flemish language, and with it the identity of the Flemish people, was to survive, the writers associated with the Movement had to demonstrate that Flanders possessed its own literary tradition. Folksongs were ideal vehicles for their purposes because, recorded from oral performance, they were by definition "the voice of the people", a cultural heritage that united Flemings past, present and future (Willaert and Dewilde 1987). Secondly, because some ballads originated in the High Middle Ages, they established a link to Flanders' golden age, the period when the Flemish urban militias had fought off all would-be overlords and Flanders became the creative powerhouse of all Europe. (Some of these same writers argued, less convincingly, that lace itself was a legacy of this period of Flemish independence and artistry.)

Because, ideologically speaking, folksongs belonged to entire peoples, authors of the Romantic era seldom felt obliged to give credit to the actual singers who provided them with their texts. Nonetheless lacemakers are mentioned as sources in the first major Flemish folksong collection, assembled by the so-called "Father of the Flemish Movement" Jan Frans Willems (Willems 1848: 529-31). His two songs celebrating the patron saint of lacemakers in West Flanders, Saint Anne, had been sent to Willems by Edmond de Coussemaker, a magistrate and musician from Bailleul in French Flanders. A few years later, Coussemaker would publish an entire book of folksongs collected in the French Westhoek (Coussemaker 1856). Although Coussemaker likewise did not name his sources, he often noted that the songs were sung in the lace-schools and lace workshops of Bailleul and Hazebrouck. Coussemaker's work in turn inspired the surveyor Adolphe Lootens to start noting down his mother's songs. Her name was Catherine Beyaert, a lacemaker born in Bruges in 1795, and she possessed a repertoire of nearly two hundred songs (Lootens and Feys 1879; Stalpaert 1946). Lootens was an example of the shift from a Romantic to a more scientific approach to folksong

collecting, one which paid more attention to those who sang and where they learnt their songs, so his book contains quite a lot of details about the lace production process. This trend was perpetuated by the teacher Albert Blyau in the last decade of the nineteenth century; he collected hundreds of songs from lacemakers in and around Ypres, though the bulk of his published work consisted of the repertoire of just one of them, Mrs Ingelaere, born in 1836 (Blyau and Tasseel 1962). If one leaves aside those songs for which the sources are unknown or derived from existing printed material, and only draws on texts recorded from oral performance, then three out of four of the substantial nineteenth-century Flemish folksong collections were made mostly, or entirely, among lacemakers (the exception is Bols 1897). Dozens more lacemakers' songs would find their way into print in the twentieth century, particularly in the journals *Volkskunde*, *Biekorf* and *Brabantse Folklore* (De Vuyst 1967).

It is possible that workers engaged in many other kinds of pre-industrial craft sang as they worked, and if that were the case the prominence of lacemakers in the song record may simply be the result of the difficulty of mechanizing lace production; other textiles had transferred to the factory long before song collectors came knocking. However, there are evident reasons why lacemakers, more than other occupations, were associated with public singing: pillows were portable so lacemakers often worked collectively; it was sedentary, repetitive and while debilitating it was not exhausting, so lacemakers had the physical and mental energy required; and lacemakers' training in the lace schools was vital to creating a collective, singing culture which they carried with them into later life. By 1851, after a very rapid expansion designed to mitigate the collapse of the linen industry, there were well over 350 lace schools in East Flanders, probably double that number in West Flanders, and many others scattered across Flemish-speaking Belgium. Though their numbers declined over the rest of the century there were still 160 lace schools in operation in 1900 (Verhaegen 1902: vol 1, 110, 201). The religious personnel who often ran lace schools used songs to propagate their doctrines. Lacemakers also had their own feast-days and celebrations, which were accompanied by songs. The Saint Anne's Day songs recorded by Coussemaker are examples of this numerous category, and other Flemish towns and regions had their own patrons and customs (Nuyts 1939; De Clercq 1939). Although these were an important part of lacemakers' work culture, and a direct expression of lacemakers'

sense of their corporate craft identity, such festive songs are outside the ambit of this article which will concentrate on work songs.

These features of the industry explain lacemakers' extensive repertoires, especially of religious songs, but it does not necessarily mean that those songs were particular to their occupation. Although the distinction can be contested, collectors tended to distinguish between songs sung while working for pleasure and escape, and work-songs proper, that is functional songs whose performance was directly tied to the labour process (Korczynski, Pickering and Robertson 2013). Sailors' shanties are the best-known examples of the latter, and in a similar fashion lacemakers learnt "tells" in the lace-schools where they enforced a work rhythm. As in English so in Flemish "to tell" means "to count" as well as "to narrate", and the rhymes marked the placing of pins in the cushion. They were a mechanism for inculcating lace skills including, it seems, rudimentary numeracy, and a distinct feature of lace-schools in Flanders, the English Midlands, and the Erzgebirge mountains on the Saxon-Bohemian border (Blechschmidt 1986). Lacemakers in other regions, such as Calvados and the Velay in France, sang while they worked but they did not use the equivalent of tells (Hopkin 2012: 210-53). Tells were primarily a feature of lace schools: lacemakers could recall them in later life and sometimes performed them, but it is not clear whether they still used them to time their work rate.

Flemish song collectors themselves noted this distinction between songs sung at work – which were part of a wider musical culture even if lacemakers' had made them their own – and "tellingen" or "telliedjes", which were more intimately related to production. Flemish tells often started life as ballads or even hymns, but they had been adapted to the needs of lace manufacture. In some cases, the original material was radically deformed, compressed, mashed together with elements from other songs, so that, as Lootens put it, "they appear to be a challenge to common sense" (Lootens and Feys 1879: vii). (Lootens also explained that most tells were intoned to what was effectively the same tune, which is one reason why I have, contrary to best practice among folksong scholars, ignored the melodies and concentrated on the texts.) Some tells refer explicitly to the experience of the lace schools, but most do not, at least at first glance. Yet one can read them as a commentary on the life, hopes and fears of lacemakers. When song is at its most functional, it still allows performers to imagine

other times, places and ways of being, and communicate them to the members of the group (Korczynski, Pickering and Robertson 2013).

Even the meagre collection of comparable English lace tells reveals much about the collective experience and imaginative life of pupils in the Midlands lace schools, as Gerald Porter has shown. Like their Flemish counterparts, English lace tells were often made up of elements of longer ballads, riddles and nursery rhymes, put together in a way that could subvert their original meaning. Although some alluded unambiguously to the lace-making process, they tended to be condensed and elliptical: they only made sense to someone familiar with lace terminology and with the story they narrated. In this way they established an occupational identity — a group of "insiders" who were in the know. The very process of singing together can generate a strong sense of *communitas*, a sense of fellow-feeling and intense belonging within a defined group. Tells could be ludic, invoking a verbal fantasy that acted as a release from the grim discipline of the school. Songs could relieve boredom, make work pleasurable, or even a game (games encouraged competition, and thus speeded production). Yet "death and physical violence are a constant presence" in English tells (Constantine and Porter 2003: 69). Tells referred to the punishments meted out by the mistress; they also intimated at revenge. According to Porter they were, therefore, a form of resistance (Porter 1994).

The Corpus of Flemish Lace Tells

Although they are similar in form and content to English tells, the corpus of Flemish tells is much larger, and individual tells are longer, sometimes running to several hundred lines. They have received some attention from folklorists and textile specialists (Peere 2002; Peere 2003; Coppens 2007), but not from labour historians, nor from literary scholars, despite the fact that many significant Flemish writers either made use of, or themselves attempted to contribute to, the corpus of lacemakers' work-songs. For example, the Flemish *carbonaro* Pieter Frans Van Kerckhoven wrote "Hier aan ons speldenkussen" [Here at our lace-pillows] for his collection titled *Volksliedjes* [folksongs] (Van Kerckhoven 1854: 12-13). Frans Carrein's play *Elisa de Kantwerkster* [Elisa the lacemaker], set in Bruges, opened and closed with the song "Laet rollen de klosjes" [Let the bobbins roll] (Carrein 1859: 11-12, 71). Both songs contrasted the fate of the lacemakers, working themselves to death, to that of the

aristocrats and fashionable ladies who consumed their product. Neither transferred to the canon of popular song, but René De Clercq had more success with his "Voor 't kantkussen" [For the lace pillows]. Although a radical figure – De Clercq would later write the Flemish separatist anthem – this mildly royalist piece has entered the nursery songbook. (De Clercq 1911: 235). Its first line, "Losjes, losjes, losjes" [Playfully, playfully, playfully] echoes the title *Klosjes, klosjes* [Bobbins, bobbins] of a 1903 short story about an aged lacemaker by Gustaaf Vermeersch (1991). These intertextual references could be extended almost indefinitely.

Tells are described as counting rhymes, and some do use number sequences, occasionally within a call and response framework that evokes Catholic liturgy. Some count down, often starting, as do many English tells, with the number twenty: "twintig – de paus zijn huis / negentiene – de bisschop zijn kasteel…" [Twenty, the pope, his house/ Nineteen, the bishop his castle] (Cafmeyer 1968: 277-8). Others count up, for instance, Coussemaker's "De Twaelf Getallen" [The Twelve Numbers] proceeds, in a manner very similar to "Green Grow the Rushes Oh!", from "Een is eene, Eenen God alleen" [One is one, one God alone] to "Twaelf is Twaelve, Twaelf apostelen" [Twelve is twelve, Twelve apostles] (Coussemaker 1856: 129-35). In other cases a song was converted into a tell by simply enunciating a number before each line was sung. However, others did not specify any number, and it is not always clear precisely how they were employed. According to Lootens, his mother stuck a pin in for each line, but in general lace patterns, once one gets beyond simple net, are too irregular for such symmetry between sung words and movement (Lootens and Feys 1879: vi). Blyau, who actually visited lace-schools in Ypres and Poperinghe, described how songs were slowed, chanted rather than sung, in order to fit the rhythm of the workers. Blyau also distinguished "tellingen" from "telseltjes": the latter directly involved counting as these songs were used in games that pitted one group of pupils against another to see who placed the most pins in an allocated time, or an allocated number of pins in the shortest time (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 25-38). Yet none of these collectors were lacemakers themselves and they did not explain precisely how tells suited the patterns. A school could contain literally hundreds of lace pupils with different levels of experience and working on different patterns: how then were they brought into the same rhythm? There are no audio or video recordings of Flemish lacemakers using tells, and modern

experiments to rejoin song and movement have not been altogether successful (Coppens 2007: 93-107).

Learning to be a Lacemaker through Tells

Nonetheless, we can explore their textual meanings, because tells connected with lacemakers' lives. For example, they were often firmly located among people and places that they knew. In one Ypres tell, the designated leader (usually an experienced pupil) claimed the house of a rich family, while the other pupils travelled, in their imagination, through the city to the door of the house, of which they then, if they had done sufficient pins, took figurative possession, the clear message being that hard work was the path to wealth and status (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 210-12). One can still follow these journeys on a map, just as one can those in Catherine Beyaert's tells:

> 'k Ging ermee over de kaaie liggen.
> 't Eerste schuitje dat kwam gevaren,
> 't Kwam van achter Sinte Klare,
> Van achter Sint Amands kapelle. (Lootens and Feys 1879: 279).
>
> [I go and lie down on the quay
> The first barge that sailed by
> Came from behind Saint Clara's
> From behind Saint Amand's chapel.]

This tell then visits various people and houses in the city such as Miss Tsanne at the "Boterhuis" (in the same district of Bruges as Saint Clara's and Saint Amand's) who, for some reason, has a louse on her sleeve.

The "telseltjes" used in counting games were more likely to refer explicitly to lace manufacture than other tells. One recorded by Blyau offered a straightforward account of the pupils' "Dag en Nacht" [Day and Night]. The mistress announced the hours, from 5:00am, to which the pupils' response was "'k Staan op en 'k kleên en 'k wasschen me en 'k gaan naar de kerke" [I get up and I dress and wash myself and I go to church]. By six the pupil was expected to be "In de school, op mijn werk" [in school, at my work]. They went home for lunch between 12:00 and 1:00 but then returned to school until 8:00pm and by 8.45 they were saying their night-time prayers. This is a largely accurate portrayal of lace-school hours in Flanders. Later, in the middle of the

night “Teuntje” (presumably Saint Anthony of Padua, a patron of children, but this is unclear) visited each child by name and left a present by her head or foot. When five came around again they called out in turn what they had received. It could take more than an hour to complete this tell, which set out the mistress’s disciplinary expectations and the supposed rewards of hard work and pious behaviour (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 221-3). The pupils were internalizing not only time discipline but the logic of delayed gratification which underwrote the “industrious revolution” (De Vries 2008). Some historians have ascribed the enforcement of clock-time on workers as a consequence of mechanisation, so it is noteworthy that this pre-industrial craft nonetheless kept strictly to the clock (Thompson 1967). The regulations of lace-schools, placarded on the wall for all the pupils to see, were equally clock conscious. The discipline imposed by lace mistresses habituated lacemakers to an extremely long working day which remained the norm long after they had left the lace school: “Up in the morning before it is light,/ Done all her work before it is light”, as an English lace tell expresses it (Curtis 1910).

If tells made direct reference to lace manufacture, it was likely to be positive. After all, the singing of tells was overseen by lace-mistresses who had an interest in promoting the occupation. Nonetheless, whether freely expressed or enforced from above, lacemakers did possess a strong sense of their own skill and their corporate identity, that was expressed in song and other customs and rituals.

‘t Is op te letten
Wij maken netten
Voor de kornetten
Der juffers van de stad
De fijnste kanten
Voor ons kalanten
Verrijken wij met bloem en blad
Een malie, een tralie te groef gewrocht
Het kantje van Wantje bleef onverkocht
Tien frank van d’elle
Kreeg Isabelle
Maar ‘t was een felle
Zij keek niet eens omhoog,
Haar vingers krollen,
De stokken rollen

…
Vaarwel aan den akker,
De boer en de bakker
Hoe snel en hoe wakker,
‘k En won nog maar een kleine loon,
‘k Werk hier wat geruster
bij mijne zuster,
‘k Zit hier warm en ‘k zit hier schoon. (Cafmeyer 1948: 206-7)

[It is worth seeing
Us making net (i.e. lace)
For the bonnets
of the young ladies of the city.
The finest lace
For our customers
Enriched with flower and leaf
one link, one lattice opening made
Wantje’s lace rests unsold
Ten franks the ell (the unit used for measuring lace, about 70 cm)
Receives Isabelle
But she’s a fierce one
She doesn’t even look up
Her fingers twirl
The sticks (bobbins) roll
…
Farewell to the field
The farmer and the baker
How fast and how wide-awake (I am)
And I also get a little wage
I work here peacefully
By my sister
I sit here warm and clean.]

This tell, recorded from some elderly Bruges lacemakers shortly after the Second World War, was originally composed around 1844 by the Catholic priest of Middleburg in East Flanders, Constant Duvillers (1844:43-45) It was intended, along with twenty other songs Duvillers published that year, and two further books of songs that appeared in 1846 and 1847, to advertise the merits of the new lace-school he had

set up in the village and which was overseen by a nun. Some of these songs became part of the regular repertoire of the "Foersche school", a leading lace school in Bruges founded by the priest Leon De Foere in 1816 and run by the Sisters of Onze-Lieve-Vrouw-Hemelvaart. Top of the list of the benefits foreseen by Duvillers was that children could earn money and support their family, vital as the primary employment of women in Flanders, flax spinning, went into rapid and terminal decline in the 1840s. But he also emphasized that the lace school was a place of warmth, of cleanliness, of companionship, of playful competition, indeed of play. In another of his songs he called Flanders blessed because there "ook een' kinderhand/ Zyn' ouders onderstand,/ Al spelen" [even a child's hand can support its parents while playing] (Duvillers 1844: 13). This notion, that lace was more a form of play than work, that bobbins "dance" under lacemakers' lissom fingers, recurs throughout Duvillers' songs. Singing while working reinforced the image that lacemaking was a joyful activity, and indeed Duvillers claimed that he wrote his little books precisely so that the pupils would have something to sing and that visitors would not leave with the impression "is dat hier/ In onze school geen recht pleyzier" [that here in our school there is no true pleasure] (Duvillers 1846: 24). In Flemish literature too, singing was usually a sign of contentment. In a novella by Herman Baccaert, who was himself married to a lacemaker, the leading lacemaker character sings when happy, but when troubles arrive "zelden klonk nog een liedje door de huiskamer" [seldom did a song sound in the living-room] (Baccaert 1910: 151). That lacemakers sang was supposedly an indication that they achieved some satisfaction through their craft, or at least from the sociability that was associated with their craft.

Yet the songs that lacemakers themselves chose to sing conflict with this image, for in terms of content they emphasized both the threat to, and the limitations on, women's lives. Like their English counterparts, they revelled "in coffins, corpses and worms that creep in and worms that creep out" (Wright 1919: 185). Death haunts these texts, but in particular the deaths of girls and young women. The first tell given in Blyau's collection concerns a child of seven years old, executed for hunting a rabbit in the lord's warren: the second features a young woman, an exiled duchess, going unsuccessfully from door to door begging for food, until she dies; in the third, a king's daughter throws herself into the Red Sea after her lover dies; in the fourth one of two sisters marries a farmer, while the other becomes a nun, and after three years commits

suicide; in the fifth a nobleman returns to find his unmarried daughter apparently pregnant – but in fact she has been poisoned by his wife and when she is cut open (fatally) out slither serpents and toads — the nobleman offers his wife either death by hanging or by drowning, and she chooses the latter (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 1-22). Similarly, the corpses pile up in Lootens' tells. In the second of his non-religious tells, a seventeen-year old infanticide is given up to justice and death by her father; in the third a married daughter kills her own father; in the fourth a new bride is murdered by her son-in-law; in the fifth a girl returning from six years' in service is robbed and murdered by a cripple... (Lootens and Feys 1879: 266-71). Violence, particularly between fathers and daughters, together with rape, sexual murder, incest, infanticide, and drawn-out executions were recurrent themes.

One suspects that pupils relished this gruesomeness, but at the same time in the context of the lace-school the songs were meant to be didactic, warnings to young women to beware false young men, to guard their virginity, and to honour the saints. In one of Lootens' tells about "De Drie Koningsdochters" [The Three Princesses], the first two go to church, but the third goes dancing. When all three die in the course of a day, the first two are carried to heaven by doves, whereas the third is taken by an old man to Hell (Lootens and Feys 1789: 94-7). It is not insignificant that, in the song, the girls' schoolmistress witnesses all this, for in the school it was the mistress who was responsible for the moral environment. Many lace-schools in Flanders were run by religious orders or by lay sisters, but even in private schools the mistress was expected to give some religious instruction. Songs were a pedagogical mechanism: for instance, in the tell "De Doornen uit de Kroon" [The Crown of Thorns], the pupil was supposed to lightly prick her own forehead with each of seventy-seven pins to remind her of Christ's crown of thorns (Lootens and Feys 1879: 262). The Bruges priest-poet Guido Gezelle used this image of the young worker reminding herself of Christ's sufferings with every pin, in his poetical celebration of the lacemaking as the ideal, moral occupation for Flemish maidens for whom the Immaculate Conception was the patron and the model (Gezelle 1893: 23; Hopkin 2018b).

Flemish lace schools were primarily workshops. Some, particularly those associated with more well-established congregations, offered a modicum of teaching in the three Rs, but for most of the nineteenth century there was no obligation to do so. Parents, who had a constitutional right to send their child to any school of their

choosing (or none), preferred daughters to attend institutions where they could start earning; the congregations and lay mistresses too were dependent for their livelihoods on the lace produced in the school. These pressures squeezed out lessons in other subjects, except religious education which was mandatory. Throughout the nineteenth century the pitiful level of primary education, and particularly girls' education, was a matter of intense political debate in Belgium as well as occasional attempts at reform, but because any change to the law would jeopardize the position of the Catholic Church, clerical opposition was furious and usually successful (Grootaers 1998). However, just as tells imparted very basic numeracy, so they could provide other rudimentary elements of education, such as the Christmas tell used in the lace school of Sint-Kruis, near Bruges, which ran through the vowels:

> Oo, oo, oo! Zijn beddeke is van stroo,
> 't staat daar tussen os en enzel,
> bij Maria, nooit volprezen,
> Oo, oo, oo
>
> [O, O, O! His bed is made of straw,
> There he lies between ox and ass
> By Mary, never praised enough,
> O, O, O…

Lace Tells as Complaint

Not all lacemakers' tells simply rehearsed the vision of lacemaking promoted by the Catholic Church. The girls also sang out their resentments. Through this genre they could express their anger against their mothers, and in particular their fathers, who sent them to work such long hours at such an early age. Lace-schools were associated with ill-health and premature death. In a campaigning novel from 1864 directed against the lace-schools, Johanna Courtmans-Berchmans railed against those who "by forcing them to labour well beyond their years and strength, had transformed… golden youths into pale flowers bending towards the grave even in the morning of life" (Courtmans-Berchmans 1864: 67; Hopkin 2018c). The issue was a live one in Belgian public debate. In 1872, a series of articles by the sociologist Guillaume Degreef appeared in the paper *La Liberté* concerning "these pale creatures, dying of anaemia or tuberculosis, knowing nothing of the world but its crushing weight and a few rare and short

pleasures...” (Degreef 1886: 5). In in a political climate polarized between Catholics and Liberals, both Courtmans-Berchmans and Degreef took aim at the Church and the profits it drew from the trade. But for the pupils themselves, those responsible were closer to home: parents were killing their children by sending them to the lace school. In their imaginations, the children returned the favour:

> Zij steekt haar moeder met naalden dood,
> En haar vader met spellen. (Lootens and Feys 1879: 277)
> [She stuck her mother dead with needles
> And her father with pins.]

Dissatisfactions even appear in Father Duvillers’ songs. His first volume advertised lace-schools as warm and clean places, and therefore preferable to employment in agriculture or domestic service. But his tone became increasingly angry in the two later volumes as either parents or the children themselves refused to attend his school, complaining of ill treatment. In one song the lace mistress explains to a mother who objects to the punishments inflicted on her child how important it was to discipline the young children: “Vrouw, ‘t is hier geen duyvenkeet” [Woman this is no dovecot!] (Duvillers 1847: 12-13). The pupils knew only too well that the schools were places of wearying labour and cruel punishments, and they voiced this in the tells that they themselves composed:

> Mijnheere, mijn kinders en willen niet werken,
> Wat doe ik er al mee?
> Steek ze al in een duister kot,
> En geef ze daar wat van haver en zop,
> En wat letter eten.
> Mijnheer, die kinderen zullen wel beteren.
> Fraai, fraai, kinderen, werkt maar zeere,
> Er komt t' avond een schoone mijnheere,
> Een mijnheere die u wat brengen zal,
> Vijgen uit het peerdestal
> Corinthen van de schapen,
> Dat zal u wel smaken.
> Fraai, fraai, kinderen, werk maar gauw,
> 't Avond komt er eene schoone mevrouw,
> Een mevrouw met wat roeien (roeden),

Zij zal slaan dat handen en voeten zullen bloeien (bloeden). (Lootens and Feys 1879: 282-3)

[Sir, my children do not want to work
What shall I do with them?
Stick them in a dark hole
and give them oat gruel
and only light food to eat.
Sir, the children will do better
Good, good, children, work harder,
In the evening comes a nice man
A man who will bring you
Figs from the stable
Currants from sheep,
You'll like that.
Good, good, children, work faster
In the evening comes a nice woman
A woman with some canes
She'll strike your hands and feet till they bleed.]

Forcing young lacemakers to eat animal dung as a punishment is, sadly, historically documented (Hopkin 2015).

It is no surprise, then, that teachers are ambivalent figures in lacemakers' songs. Catherine Beyaert knew a song (not a tell), about "De Kwade Stiefmoeder" [The Wicked Stepmother] who sold her daughter Antonetteje for seventeen pennies and a gold ring to seven young men who each beat her with a rod and then cut her head off (Lootens and Feys 1879: 80-1). However, in Blyau's version, which was used as a tell, the stepmother sends Antonetje to school, where it is the "scholemeester" and seven students who beat her to death (Blyau and Tasseel: 30-2). In another tell, Ansje [Annie] is the offspring of an unhappy marriage that started with "kussen en lekken" [kissing and licking] but by the third year had descended into "kijven en slaan" [quarrels and blows]. By the fourth year, Ansje must go to school: when the teacher hits her, Ansje stabs him dead (Lootens and Feys 1879: 264-5). In both these cases the teacher is male, an unlikely scenario in a lace-school, but given that the mistress was standing right in front of them perhaps lace pupils disguised the real target of their animosity.

Once they had left the lace school, lacemakers associated the pressure to work faster and longer with husbands:

> Twee elletjes ben ik gesteld
> van ’t bladje op en neder,
> of hij trommelt op mijn vel
> Maar ik haaste mij, maar ik haaste mij
> Op dat ’t er niet op zou zijn. (Heyns 1942: 139-41]
>
> [Two ells he demands of me
> of the leaf (presumably a particular pattern) up and down,
> Or he drums on my skin
> So I hurry, so I hurry
> That it might be finished.]

Dreams and Discipline

The pupils dreamt of freeing themselves from the domination of the lace-school. This desire found expression in the song “Achter Sinte Annadag” [After Saint Anna’s Day]. The day itself was a holiday, and the singer “wilde dat g’heele dage / Sint’ Anna mogte zyn” [wishes that everyday / could be Saint Anna’s]. The mistress asks her what the devil she means, if she can finish a pattern in eight days, isn’t that enough money? But the pupil rejects her advice: “Myn kussen aen de galge, / Myn boetjes aen ‘t Pelorin” [My pillow to the gallows, / my bobbins to the pillory] (Coussemaker 1856: 315-16; Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 302-3). These holidays were the “few rare and short pleasures” mentioned by Degreef.

Although the pupils’ sense of grievance is tangible, it is hard to characterize these songs as resistance. Lacemakers did not riot, as contemporaries were wont to observe. We cannot treat tells as the emergent voice of militant labour which, during the nineteenth century, was developing in the cafés and song-clubs of nearby industrial centres, such as the textile towns of northern France and the coal and steel regions of Wallonia (Marty 1982; Raxhon 1998). One could make a stronger case that tells were cathartic, offering a release for strong emotions yet without altering the conditions of the girls’ lives. Their action, their violence even, acted as a contrast to the monotony of the work, but it did not inhibit it.

However, through singing the pupils were simultaneously being conditioned to accept the mistress's authority. They were, in a contemporary phrase, being "rompu au metier" [broken to the trade].[1] We can see this process underway in the song "Lisa's Terechtstelling" [Lisa's Execution] which Blyau heard a Poperinge lace-school, the senior pupil calling out the numbers and the other pupils responding (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 156-9). Lisa's crime is not disclosed in the song. The description of her sufferings is similar to that given in tells about infanticides, but according to Blyau, such pretend executions were also used to shame those pupils who turned up late or failed to do their allotted pins (Blyau and Tasseel 1962: 35). The person enacting the violence is the speaker, that is the pupil: by repeating the tell she was learning to identify with the scourge rather than the victim.

Twintig. 'k Neme mijn gevangen aan Lisa.
Aan negentiene. In justitie's handen.
Aan achttiene. Haar endeklokje luidt.
Aan zeventien. Haar reveilje is geluid.
Aan zestien. Zij is voor al de Heeren aanschouwd.
Aan vijftien. Ze gaat daar moeten sterven, als waar' zij van roode fijn goud.
Veertien. Op het schavot.
Aan dertien. Mijn eersten voog'l is half kapot.
Aan twaalve. 'k Heb een roei in mijn handen genommen.
Aan elve. 'k Heb ze 'ne keer ekwispeld.
Aan tiene. 'k Heb ze tweemaal ekwispeld.
Aan negen. E doodebonnet die daar hangt vóór haar oogen.
Aan acht. 'k Zal ze laten dooden.
Zeven. 'k Slaan haar hoofd of.
Zesse. Hare beid' haar armen zijn of.
Vijve. Hare beid' haar voeten zijn of.
Vier. Haar hoofd die staat op e stake.
Drij. Haar lichaam legt op haar graf.
Aan twee. Voor zuk een jongedochter wat voor schanden maakt dat!
Aan één. 'k Maken den pit. Aan nooit ééne. 'k Steke ze d'rin.

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[1] It is used, for example, in the 'Monographie' dedicated to lace which accompanied the 1910 Brussels exposition on domestic work.

[Twenty. I take Lisa into custody
At nineteen. In the hands of justice.
At eighteen. Her death knell sounds.
At seventeen. She is woken.
At sixteen. She is shown before all the lords.
At fifteen. She is going to die there, as if she was of fine red gold.
Fourteen. On the scaffold.
At thirteen. My first bird is half dead.
At twelve. I take a rod in my hand.
At eleven. I lashed her for the first time.
At ten. I lashed her for the second time.
At nine. The death bonnet is put before her eyes.
At eight. I will let her die.
Seven. I chop her head off.
Six. Both her arms are off.
Five. Both her feet are off.
Four. Her head is put on a stake.
Three. Her body is laid in her grave.
At two. For such a young daughter, what a scandal this makes!
At one. I make a pit.
At not one. I stick her in.]

Conclusion: The Limits of Resistance

Porter in his consideration of English lace tells argues that they were "empowering a group that had no collective authority within patriarchal discourse". The very act of singing brought imagination and playfulness into the disciplined arena of the lace-school. Singing together helped generate a sense of communion among the pupils, which could translate into practical support among lacemakers. The more subversive messages could be used to intimate to the lace-mistress and the other persons who held power over their lives that there were limits to what they would endure. In some cases, songs could even become a form of negotiation, setting out lacemakers' expectations: for example, that mistresses and merchants should observe their traditional holidays. Even when no relief to their labour was on offer, Porter argues that "the songs of the lacemakers represent the dreams of disalienation that are characteristic of the cultural production of any subculture" (Porter 1994: 41, 50).

Flemish tells served similar purposes, but songs are multivalent in their functionality, and they facilitated other processes too. Work-songs associated with manual labour, such as those used by slaves on the plantations of the southern United States, could be used to slow down labour, and to ensure that no individual broke ranks and increased their own labour to curry favour with overseers, though there is debate about the effectiveness of such "weapons of the weak" (Baptist 2016: 310 n10).[2] However, in lace-schools it seems tells, and in particular the songs associated with competitions known as "telseltjes", were designed to speed up work rates and thus increase output. Through tells, pupils in the lace schools learnt the expectations of the mistress, and the values of clock time and delayed gratification which facilitated this type of capitalist production. Although tells could give voice, either directly or implicitly, to their complaints about work demands, nonetheless tells normalized those demands and internalized the discipline necessary to meet them, so that young lacemakers might identify not with the resister but with the enforcer. And as parents of future young lacemakers they would make the same demands for financial contributions to the household income, and apply the same discipline to extract it.

Anthropologists working in many parts of the world have witnessed that women's voices raised in song could undermine assertions of a hegemonic and patriarchal gender order. Women's songs are in dialogue with the "official" expectation of male dominance and offer an alternative vision of gender relations. Through collective singing, solidarities are maintained that provide women with shelter in an unequal society (Abu-Lughod 1986; Raheja and Gold 1994). Given the focus of Flemish lacemakers' songs on women's sufferings, usually at the hands of men, one could argue that tells were performing similar social functions. Yet it is also plausible that by identifying with the victims of violence, lacemakers placed themselves within narratives that replicated the same structures. A young girl who sang about the anguish of an infanticide was not thereby inoculated against following her path through illegitimate pregnancy to punishment: on the contrary, her knowledge of such cultural exemplars may have normalized the experience for her (Hopkin 2018d).

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[2] Though there is some debate among historians about the effectiveness of such an approach:), p. 310 n. 10.

Catholic teaching, which was so influential on this corpus, taught that women's suffering had the power to save not just themselves but potentially others, including the men who exploited and threatened them. Suffering was itself a form of action. In literature young lacemakers were often described as "martyrs" (Fuster 1891), but the pupils themselves may have taken the simile seriously: their misery could be redemptive. The exemplars of the Madonna, Saint Anne and other female saints were constantly placed before them. Yet even pious figures could offer lessons in resistance, as so many of the saints revered by lacemakers achieved martyrdom through their resistance to male authority, such as Saint Catherine who was the patron of lacemakers in Mechelen and Antwerp province (Baccaert 1908-8).

Songs, and in particular folksongs, seldom enounce one clear viewpoint. They are part of a common culture which must perform communicative work on many people's behalf. They are, therefore, multivalent, delivering different messages to different listeners. This inherent ambiguity makes them awkward as historical sources, but all the more rewarding. The corpus of Flemish lacemakers' songs is peculiarly rich, and this article has barely scratched the surface of what they might tell us about their social and emotional lives.

Coda: A Cross-Channel Hidden Heritage?

"Lisa's Terechtstelling" is similar to a tell in use in the English lace-schools, also aimed at refractory pupils, and which likewise reinforced clock-time consciousness.

> One o'clock and my scholar aint come,
> Two o'clock and my scholar aint come,
> Get a rod and nettle by four,
> And whip her well by five,
> And send her to bed by six,
> Lay her in salt and water by seven,
> And threw her down stairs by eight,
> And break her neck by nine,
> Put her in coffin by ten,
> And screw her down by eleven,
> And put her in ground by twelve,
> One o'clock and Old Dainty's hung! (Stewart 1908)

Lace schooling, and the industry in general, were organized along analogous lines in Flanders and the East Midlands, so the parallels may have arisen simply from the similarity of the situation. Yet they may also point to historical connections between lace regions. It is often alleged that the industry was introduced to England by Flemish migrants fleeing war and religious persecution in the 1570s, but this provenance is very hard to prove (Spenceley 1973). However, such cultural echoes offer their own evidence. Along with the skills of lacemaking, perhaps Flemish lacemakers also introduced elements of their work culture, including tells. Tells from each side of the Channel can sometimes appear very similar. This tell was heard by Harold Massingham in Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire, just before the Second World War:

> Nineteen little round holes
> Gaping for a wire,
> Every pin that I stick
> Gets me one the nigher.

It is effectively the same as one recorded by Blyau in Poperinge at the end of the nineteenth century:

> ‘k Zien daar van verren een spellegatje blinken
> ‘k Zoun dere zoo geren daarinne gaan zinken
> ‘k Zinkere daarin, half uit, half in:
> Nog een spellegatje te min van ’t scherrewerkje.
>
> [From far away I see a pinhole shining
> I really want to push one in there
> I push down there, half out, half in:
> Another pinhole less in the plaitwork.]

Other links are apparent in the feastdays and customs observed in both regions, such as “washing the candleblock”. The block was a mount for a candle and several “flashes” or flasks filled with water that concentrated the light of the flame on the small area on which the lacemakers were working. “Washing the candleblock” was a customary name for the celebrations of Saint Catherine’s day, which was a holiday for lacemakers in Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire (St. John Orlebar 1930: 205). The same term was used, and the same practice observed, in Antwerp

province (Baccaert 1907-8: 227). This cross-channel relationship may be another "hidden heritage" in European lace-making that tells can help to reveal.

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