

CHAPTER xxx

BALLADS AND BROADSIDES IN FRANCE: ACCOUNTING FOR AN ABSENCE

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French-speaking France – which before 1800 probably only encompassed about half the total population – was not rich in ballads. The relative absence of historical ballads comparable to the Child ballads of the English-speaking world has long puzzled scholars. France was surrounded by regions with strong ballad traditions, including Brittany, Germany, Flanders, and Spain. Some Scandinavian and Central European experts posited, not always convincingly, a medieval French origin for their own national ballad repertoires. Yet, by the time French collectors recorded singers – a practice that only took off during the Second Empire and the first decades of the Third Republic – few such ballads were to be found in the oral repertoire.¹ The collector and musicologist Julien Tiersot regretfully concluded, “In truth, one might assert the principle that the historic ballad [*chanson historique*] does not exist in the [French] folk tradition.”²

It was not only the medieval and early modern ballads that were missing: the two competing French folk song catalogues (Laforte and Coirault) contain few examples of songs that drew their inspiration from more recent historical events – that is, songs that in English might be termed “broadsides ballads”.³ The index of English folk songs includes a

¹ William J. Entwistle, *European Balladry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), pp. 132–33; Michèle Simonsen, “The Corpus of French Ballads”, in *The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies*, ed. Thomas A. McKean (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2003), pp. 285–94.

² Julien Tiersot, *Histoire de la chanson populaire en France* (Paris: Plon, 1889), p. 36.

³ Conrad Laforte, *Le catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*, 6 vols (Laval: Les presses de l’université Laval, 1977–87); Patrice Coirault, *Répertoire des*

dozen or more song types about Napoleon, whereas the French folk song catalogue lists just one, “Le bombardement de Mantoue”. There are no French folk songs catalogued about the deaths of Marceau, Lannes, or Ney to compare with English-language ballads celebrating “Bold General Wolfe” and “Lord Nelson You See”, nor were there any lasting ballads about the wreck of the *Medusa* or other maritime disasters to rival “Lady Franklin’s Lament”.

In part, this contrast is explained by different collecting and, above all, cataloguing practices: the French compilers were sterner in their application of the rule that only songs that have been passed on through oral performance count as folk songs; dependency on print diffusion meant exclusion, whereas British song experts have long recognized the importance of print to the maintenance of traditional song. However, even if one goes beyond the catalogues and investigates the print and manuscript collections of songs made in the nineteenth-century France, there is little evidence that many historic events attained long-term purchase on the French popular imagination in musical form. Certainly, songs were composed, printed, and performed in French streets and marketplaces about the deaths of French generals and the loss of French ships, but few people continued to perform them decades later. The French preference for lyric and disinclination for narrative song indicated by the catalogues does appear to reflect a genuine feature of French popular culture – or, rather, francophone culture, because in non-French-speaking parts of France narrative songs were more common. In abbé Louis Pinck’s folk song collection made in German-speaking Lorraine, for example, one does find songs celebrating the life of Napoleon, General Ney (a local hero), and French feats of arms during the Crimean War (an event completely unmarked in the francophone folk song tradition).⁴

How can we account for these distinctive aesthetic choices? Were songs consumed differently in francophone France, were they performed on different occasions and to achieve different communicative ends? Or does the distinction lie in how songs were created and diffused in France? Specifically, given that in England with its large repertoire of narrative songs, “the songs that the ordinary people turned into ‘traditional’ or ‘folk’ songs were normally written by outsiders and reached them first in printed

chansons françaises de tradition orale, rev. Georges Delarue, Yvette Fédoroff, and Simone Wallon, 3 vols (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 1996–2006). I rely on the latter.

⁴ Louis Pinck, *Verklingende Weisen: Lothringer Volkslieder*, 5 vols (Kassel: Bärenreiter-Verlag, 1963 [1933]), III, 99–105.

form”,⁵ does the distinction lie in the particularities of the French cheap print market and its relationship to street music? That is the question I will attempt to answer in this chapter.

French Street Literature from the Old Regime to the New

At first glance, the world of cheap print and street literature in France resembles that of other Western European countries. Indeed, it was a French export industry, influencing both the themes and aesthetics of street literature in neighbouring countries, although the direction of influence was by no means one-way.⁶ In the nineteenth century, when cheap print production had become concentrated in eastern France, near the borders with Germany, Switzerland, and the Low Countries, publishers often included titles in multiple languages.⁷ Henri de la Madeleine’s claim in 1866 that one could find popular prints labelled “Imagerie d’Épinal (Vosges)” on the walls of American homesteads, Madagascan plantation cabins, Indian wigwams, and Eskimo huts may have been exaggerated, but not by much.⁸

The range of genres and formats issued from French printers was likewise similar to that available elsewhere. Almanacs were the single most popular printed item in *ancien régime* France and would remain so through much of the nineteenth century.⁹ Troyes and, to a lesser extent, Rouen, were famous for their production of chapbooks, although there were specialist printers of similar wares in many other French cities. These

⁵ Steve Roud, *Folk Song in England*, with music chapters by Julia Bishop (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), p. 443.

⁶ A French influence can be detected, for instance, in the catchpenny prints of the Low Countries. See Maurits de Meyer, *De volks- en kinderprent in de Nederlanden van de 15e tot de 20e eeuw* (Antwerp: Standaard-Boekhandel, 1962), pp. 49–51.

⁷ This is particularly true of the production of the Wentzel firm of Wissembourg, which specialized in semi-fine prints with relatively little text (not unlike the production of the Remondini firm of Bassano). See Dominique Lerch, *Imagerie populaire en Alsace et dans l’Est de la France* (Nancy: Presses universitaires de Nancy, 1992); Dominique Lerch, *Imagerie et société: L’imagerie Wentzel de Wissembourg au XIXe siècle* (Strasbourg: Istra, 1982).

⁸ From an article by Henri de la Madeleine in *Le Temps*, quoted by Jacques-Marin Garnier, *Histoire de l’imagerie populaire et des cartes à jouer à Chartres* (Chartres: Garnier, 1869), p. 219. Catholic missionaries in particular were responsible for some of this far-flung distribution.

⁹ On almanacs, see Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, et al. (eds), *Les lectures du peuple en Europe et dans les Amériques du XVIIe au XXe siècles* (Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines: Complexe, 2003).

small books were known colloquially as *la bibliothèque bleue*, due to the colour of their wrappers.¹⁰ The themes covered – religion, basic instruction on human and animal welfare, prophecies and magic, tales of Charlemagne’s paladins, folktales – have their exact counterparts in the English chapbook trade – which is not surprising given that some of the latter were direct translations from the original French.¹¹

There is an extensive scholarly literature in French interpreting the content and uses of these prose works, at least for the *ancien régime*. In French historiography, the Revolution of 1789 is considered a caesura when the modern world began. It thus becomes a matter of doctrine that traditional genres such as chapbooks and almanacs properly belong in the pre-revolutionary period, even though they were equally popular and widely diffused through most of the nineteenth century. Less attention has been paid in France to songbooks, the equivalent of English songsters or “garlands”, which was another popular cheap format, though one more likely to have originated in the capital than in the provinces.¹² This lack of scrutiny highlights the important role of collectors in shaping our understandings of the scale and range of ephemeral literature. In England, broadsides were collected by the likes of Samuel Pepys, Anthony Wood, Francis Douce, and other antiquarians. Their enthusiasm fed commentary on the ballad as a form and their collections have formed the basis for historians’ analysis of popular culture. Few comparable collection exist in France, and where they do they usually privilege the political content of songs over their aesthetic form.¹³ This may be evidence of absence, but it might also indicate that the attention of devotees of vernacular culture was directed elsewhere, as discussed below.

¹⁰ On the *bibliothèque bleue*, see Robert Mandrou, *De la culture populaire aux XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* (Paris: Stock, 1964); Lise Andriès and Geneviève Bollème, *La bibliothèque bleue: littérature de colportage* (Paris: Laffont, 2003); Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), chapters 7 and 8; Thierry Delcourt and Élisabeth Parinet (eds), *La bibliothèque bleue et les littératures de colportage* (Troyes: Maison du Boulanger, 2000).

¹¹ Ruth Bottigheimer, “Misperceived Perceptions: Perrault’s Fairy Tales and English Children’s Literature”, *Children’s Literature*, 30 (2002), 1–18.

¹² Robert M. Isherwood, *Farce and Fantasy: Popular Entertainment in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), chapter 1. Useful though this is, it does not cite the most important historian of the genre, Patrice Coirault.

¹³ See, for example, Tom Hamilton, *Pierre de L’Estoile and his World in the Wars of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), ch. 5.

Street Singers in France from the Old Regime to the New

The titles of songbooks normally ascribed their contents to a particular singer, who also sold the volumes directly on the streets of Paris, especially around the Pont Neuf and the Palais Royal. The contents could be entirely traditional, but still the singers would claim them as their own compositions. *Pont-Neufs* had already become a colloquial term for popular songs about contemporary events, usually at the more comic or satirical end of the market, by the second half of the seventeenth century.¹⁴ The Parisian street singer was a familiar character in literature, and especially drama, illustrating the animation and pleasures to be found on the capital's streets. Some singers, such as Françoise Chemin (1737–c.1800), known as “Fanchon la vielleuse”, became famous in their own right, inspiring songs, chapbooks, plays, and operas, as well as biographies.¹⁵

Louis-Sébastien Mercier in his guide to the kaleidoscopic entertainments of Paris in the last decade before the Revolution, reported that street singers were “of two kinds”.¹⁶

Some intone hymns, while the others reel off lusty songs. The first offers you a blessed scapular to ward off the devil who is painted in red on his canvas with his tail swishing; the other celebrates a famous victory, and this too seems like a miracle and so the listeners standing around lend one ear to the sacred and another to the profane; one hears about the snares of the devil (who transformed himself in order to entice a poor man with gold), and at the same time about the heroic qualities of some general who battled sword in hand. The religious singer wears his hair straight and appears a simpleton; the celebrator of battles is a joker with a drinker's nose; and he has the larger audience, and the contrast clearly illustrates that the elect are small in number compared with the reprobate.

¹⁴ Joan DeJean, *How Paris Became Paris: The Invention of the Modern City* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 34–37. See also Nicholas Hammond's online project dedicated to the Chansonnier Maurepas: Seventeenth-Century Parisian Soundscapes <https://www.parisiansoundscapes.org/>.

¹⁵ The most famous is the play by Jean Nicolas Bouilly and Joseph Pain (music by Joseph Doche), *Fanchon la Vielleuse*, first performed at the Théâtre du Vaudeville in 1803, though a more sober biography can be found in Auguste Jal, *Dictionnaire critique de bibliographie et de l'histoire*, 2 vols (Paris: Plon, 1867), I, 376–78.

¹⁶ Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris*, 12 vols (Amsterdam, 1782–88), VI, 24–25 ; X, 255–57.

To the singers of hymns, and singers of songs that “advertise wine, good food and love”, Mercier then added a third category of singers who lament the fate of the hanged and the tortured, “which the people listen to with a tear in the eye and hurry to buy [. . .] A parricide, a poisoner, a murderer, the day after – what am I saying – from the very day of their execution, ballads are born that are sung at every cross-roads, and which are composed by the Pont-Neuf singers.”

While most street singers lived too hand-to-mouth an existence to exercise a constant specialism, nonetheless the three types distinguished by Mercier – the ‘worldly’, the religious, and the chronicler of crime and executions – do broadly match divisions of labour observed in the provinces as well as in Paris, and after the Revolution as well as before it. I will consider each in turn.

The ‘Worldly’ Street Singer

The worldly Pont-Neuf singer was celebrated less for the content of his songs than for their tone, a celebration of the joys of the table, the bottle, and the bed, with numerous satirical sideswipes at the great and the good. The singers’ adopted names such as “Belhumeur” (unidentified but prolific in the 1740s and 50s), “La Joye” (real name Bazolle, active in the mid-eighteenth century), “Le Divertissant” (Baptiste, who together with his wife was active in the last decades of the eighteenth century), “La Gaîté” (Asselin, active during the Revolution). These pseudonyms encapsulate the kind of character they wished to portray through their performance.¹⁷ Several of these adopted names are also *noms-de-guerre* – the new names that *ancien régime* soldiers took when joining a regiment – and the glorification of wine, women, and song was likewise central to soldiers’ self-fashioning.¹⁸ Some singers like Belhumeur and La Joye had been (or claimed to have been) soldiers, and their songs were certainly used to attract recruits. The Pont-Neuf was also the primary haunt of recruiting sergeants and commercial military touts. Mercier’s association of lusty pleasures with military themes was a commonplace; it was also a

¹⁷ On Parisian street singers, see Patrice Coirault, *Formation de nos chansons folkloriques*, 5 vols (Paris: Scarabée, 1953–63), esp. vol. 1 “Chanteurs-chansonniers populaires (XVIIIe siècle)”; Constant Pierre, *Les hymnes et chansons de la Révolution* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1904); Laura Mason, *Singing the French Revolution: Popular Culture and Politics, 1787–1799* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ See David Hopkin, *Soldier and Peasant in French Popular Culture, 1766–1870* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002), pp. 219–20.

deliberate ploy. According to Charles-Nicolas Cochin's 1742 engraving of *The Hymn Singer*, even one of Mercier's religious singers could serve as a useful adjunct to the recruiting sergeant.¹⁹

Parisian singers sometimes toured the provinces – Belhumeur mentioned his departures from the capital and arrivals in the provinces in his songbooks – and we can find evidence of their influence on local repertoires of songs, particularly (but not only) those with military and comic themes. Patrice Coirault, the most diligent researcher into the genealogy of song, has demonstrated some strong connections between Pont-Neuf singers and the French folk song repertoire. He indicates that many, though by no means all, of the 2,230 items in his catalogue are attested in pre-Revolutionary Parisian songbooks. However, the relationship was bidirectional: Pont-Neuf singers relied on their audience's knowledge of existing songs because much of their wit relied on playing with familiar texts.²⁰ Almost all their tunes likewise drew on a familiar repertoire, which also circulated through the vaudeville theatre and other spectacles of the Parisian leisure economy. In the early years of the nineteenth century a series of writers associated with the musical theatre collected these tunes for the benefit of songwriters in the three published (and one manuscript) volumes of *La clé du Caveau*, named after a famous singing club, "La Société du Caveau", originally founded in 1729 and the inspiration for numerous imitators.²¹

The regions had their own supply of street and marketplace singers, some of whom also found fame in their own lifetimes. For example, Lille had a dynasty of singers from the Cottignies family. The first, François Cottignies (1678–1740), was known as "Brûle Maison" (reputedly a reference to his practice of setting fire to a paper house as way of attracting a crowd), who specialized in humorous and satirical songs similar to the "profane songs" described by Mercier, though he also commemorated national events. His son, Jacques Decottignies (1706–62) continued in the same vein. However, their output was almost entirely in

¹⁹ See Valerie Mainz, *Days of Glory? Imaging Military Recruitment and the French Revolution* (London: Palgrave, 2016), chapter 2.

²⁰ In addition to Coirault, *Formation de nos chansons folkloriques* (n. 16 above), see Patrice Coirault, *Recherches sur notre ancienne chanson populaire traditionnelle*, 5 vols (Vannes: Lafolye frères, 1927–33); Patrice Coirault, *Notre chanson folklorique* (Paris: A. Picard, 1941).

²¹ Brigitte Level, *A travers deux siècles: Le Caveau, société bachique et chantante, 1726–1939* (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1988).

the Picard dialect of northern France, which obviously limited its reach.²² Although François Cottignies did, apparently, present himself on the Pont-Neuf, the relationship between the songs sold in the capital and those taken up in the regions is less clear than for England in the same period. The output of dialect singers was cherished by local patriots and so is well attested, whereas cheap provincial songbooks in French do not seem to have attracted collectors.

Parisian garlands certainly circulated beyond Paris and were sometimes imitated by provincial printers, and this practice would continue well into the nineteenth century.²³ Many French folk songs have been catalogued across the francophone world; they are not, by and large, limited to one region. Itinerant street singers and street literature must have played a role in that diffusion, but, while Coirault offers indications, there are few similar studies for the nineteenth century, making it difficult to reach firm conclusions. Albert Meyrac collected a song from an old lady in Charleville in about 1889 celebrating “The Female Patriots of the Ardennes” which shared some lineage with “The Republican Heroines” of 1792 composed by the Parisian street singer Leveau.²⁴ However, in general, there are relatively few traces of revolutionary or Napoleonic events in catalogued folk song

Tracing connections is difficult because printed ballads often underwent a process of “lyricization” as they became established in the oral repertoire. For example, in the 1950s, the Belgian folk song expert Albert Libiez was sent some verses that a teacher from the Nord department of France had heard from his mother. They took the form of a dialogue between an over-ardent male wooer and the reluctant object of his desires, a theme developed hundreds of times in that most popular of French folk song genres, the pastoral. Only by comparison with a manuscript songbook from the eighteenth century was Libiez able to demonstrate that these were the central verses of a song commemorating

²² Fernand Carton (ed.), *François Cottignies dit Brule-Maison (1678–1740): Chansons et Pasquilles*, Société de Dialectologie Picarde, vol. VII (Arras: Archives du Pas-de-Calais, 1965); Fernand Carton (ed.), *Jacques Decottignies (1706–1762): Vers naïfs, pasquilles et chansons en vrai patois de Lille. Édition critique* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2003).

²³ Renaud Quillet, “Le Colportage de librairie en pays picard durant le second XIXe siècle: de l’apogée de sa réglementation au déclin de sa pratique”, *Revue du Nord*, 385 (2010), 341–64 (pp. 351–52).

²⁴ The history of this theme in cheap print and folk song is explored in David Hopkin, “Female Soldiers and the Battle of the Sexes in France: The Mobilization of a Folk Motif”, *History Workshop Journal*, 56.1 (2003), 78–104.

the unsuccessful siege of Lille by Prince Eugene of Savoy in 1708. Nothing of the historical circumstances had been preserved in the oral tradition.²⁵

Pont-Neuf singers and their provincial rivals continued in this same facetious vein during the Revolution, even though the authorities increasingly expected citizens to demonstrate more serious engagement with contemporary events. Martial and political songs became the order of the day. Hence one of the most prolific Parisian street singers of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary period, Leveau, known as “Beauchant”, styled himself in 1792/3 as “chanteur des menus plaisirs des sans-culottes”. Given that in 1789 he had been “chanteur des menus plaisirs du roi et de la famille royale”, and would become an enthusiastic versifier for Napoleon, it is hard to know how serious his radicalism was. Nonetheless, his suspect sympathies got him arrested after the last major sans-culotte revolt of 1 Prairial Year III (20 May 1795). It could be dangerous to comment too light-heartedly on current affairs.

All governments are inclined to associate levity and song with sedition, and successive French regimes, themselves brought into being by urban disorder, were keen to regulate what was being said and sung on the streets. They also hired their own hack writers to flood the market with loyalist songs. After Waterloo and the second restoration of 1815, the minister of police, Élie-Louis Decazes, wrote to all French prefects urging them to use their authority against “the army of pedlars that criss-cross the country”, and specifying in particular the “sellers of chapbooks, almanacs and songs: these little works have always had a great influence on the people and the collection of all popular songs would be a fairly accurate representation of the changing state of public opinion”.²⁶ Many similar injunctions had been issued in previous decades, and indeed centuries, but the centralized government of nineteenth-century France was better able to erect bureaucratic controls over who could become a printer and what they could print, as well as who could become a pedlar or street performer and what they were allowed to sell.²⁷ None of which prevented further panics: after every political upheaval new orders rained down from Paris on to

²⁵ Albert Libiez, *Chansons populaires de l'ancien Hainaut*, vol. 1 (Brussels: Schott Frères, 1939), p. 11.

²⁶ “Surveillance des colporteurs”, circulaire, Ministre de la police générale, 15 décembre 1815 ; cited in *Bulletin de la Société Philomatique Vosgienne*, 73 (1970), 101.

²⁷ The regulatory regime is well documented in Jean-Jacques Darmon, *Le Colportage de librairie en France sous le second empire* (Paris: Plon, 1972), chapter 3.

local administrators. In August 1852, for example, after the attempted republican uprising against the future Napoleon III, the minister of police, Charlemagne-Émile de Maupas, inveighed against the whole industry of cheap literature, “whose purpose is always and everywhere the same: to attack governments, to uproot healthy and religious ideas, to corrupt morals, to spread slander, and thus to nurture the seeds of those guilty passions that speculate on turmoil”.²⁸ Maupas did not single out songs, but songbooks and broadsides fell under the remit of the permanent commission he set up later that year to vet cheap literature. (Its chairman, Charles Nisard, would become the leading historian of cheap print in nineteenth-century France, and an important collector.²⁹) Increasing regulation is one explanation why these “worldly” street singers became rarer under Napoleon and rarer still in the later nineteenth century.

The aesthetic preference for songs that celebrated the comedic, the satirical, the gastronomic, the bibulous, and the occasionally licentious did not disappear but moved into the singing clubs, known as *goguettes*, and the *cafés-chantants*.³⁰ The former were an important part of middle- and working-class sociability, especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. Here, male camaraderie and opposition politics could combine to make song a potent form of protest. This mode of political action blossomed before 1848 in the banquet campaign: when most types of formal politicking were illegal, banquets were a useful space where middle- and working-class representatives could meet and form alliances through toasts and songs.³¹ Later in the century some singing clubs became more commercialized, places to consume song rather than participate in its creation – a parallel trajectory to that observed in Britain

²⁸ “Le ministre de la police générale, circulaire du 28 juillet 1852”, *Gazette nationale ; ou, le Moniteur universel*, 6 August 1852 (no. 219), p. 1195.

²⁹ Charles Nisard, *Histoire des livres populaires, ou de la littérature du colportage*, 2 vols (Paris: Amyot, 1854).

³⁰ See Marie-Véronique Gauthier, *Chanson, sociabilité et grivoiserie au XIXe siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1992).

³¹ Vincent Robert, *Le temps des banquets: Politique et symbolique d'une génération (1818–1848)* (Paris: Sorbonne, 2010), chapter 3. On *goguettes* and, in particular, working-class singing practices, see Pierre Brochon, *La chanson française*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions sociales, 1956–57); Pierre Brochon, *La Chanson sociale de Béranger à Brassens* (Ézanville: Éditions ouvrières, 1961); Sophie-Anne Leterrier, *Béranger: Des chansons pour un peuple citoyen* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2013). The best and most detailed history is provided by Philippe Darriulat, *La Muse du peuple: Chansons politiques et sociales en France, 1815–1871* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011).

from singing saloons to music halls.³² However, a rich tradition of working-class, and specifically dialect, singing continued in the *cabarets* (bars) of burgeoning industrial towns such as Roubaix and Saint-Etienne.³³

There could be a relationship between street literature and singing clubs and bars. Alexandre Desrousseaux, the Lille songwriter best known for the hit “Le p’tit quinquin” and a stalwart of the city’s popular singing clubs from the 1840s onwards, started his musical life selling songbooks during carnival in 1838. Carnival remained an important moment in the year for the creation and distribution of garlands, and not just in Lille.³⁴ Yet even at the time Desrousseaux’s performance was deliberately nostalgic, invoking the glory days of Picard lyric culture under “Brûle-Maison”.³⁵ From the mid-century onwards, this kind of singer was disappearing from the streets, and while the songs that emerged from the *gouquettes* were sometimes published in broadside form, the preference for dialect restricted their distribution. These kinds of songs, whose authors are usually known, are almost completely unrepresented in the catalogues of French folk song, which reflect a strong rural bias in collecting practices.

The Singer of Religious Songs

Paris was a comparatively dechristianized city after the Revolution, and hostility to demonstrations of piety became engrained in parts of Parisian working-class culture. Hence the religious singer as described by Mercier and portrayed by Cochin does not appear in the numerous nineteenth-century accounts of *flânerie* through the streets of Paris with its endless parade of diversions. Parisian *flâneurs* such as Charles Yriarte and Victor Fournel recounted in detail their encounters with other street musicians,

³² Concetta Conde­mi, *Les cafés-concerts: Histoire d’un divertissement, 1849–1914* (Paris: Edima, 1992).

³³ Laurent Marty, *Chanter pour survivre: Culture ouvrière, travail et techniques dans le textile à Roubaix, 1850–1914* (Lille: Fédération Léo-Lagrange, 1982); Jean Lorcin, Jean-Baptiste Martin, and Anne-Marie Vurpas, *Le Rêve républicain d’un poète ouvrier: Chansons et poésies en dialecte stéphanois de Jacques Vacher (1842–1898)* (Saint Julien Molin Molette: Jean-Pierre Huguot, 1999).

³⁴ See, for example, Bernard Rulof, “The Affair of the Plan de l’Olivier: Sense of Place and Popular Politics in Nineteenth-Century France”, *Cultural and Social History*, 6 (2009), 323–43.

³⁵ On Desrousseaux, see Éric Lemaire, *Le chansonnier lillois Alexandre Joachim Desrousseaux et la chanson populaire dialectale* (Haubourdin: DELEM, 2009).

but not with hymn singers.³⁶ However, in provincial France they remained familiar figures until the end of the century. Oral history interviewees from the 1970s in the southern Vosges remembered the passage of these “exhibitors of Saint Hubert” (a name they retained regardless of what saint, or even secular figurine such as Genevieve of Brabant, they displayed).³⁷ They were particularly assiduous in their attendance at pilgrimages, but were also to be found at rural fairs and even in provincial streets.³⁸

According to Jacques-Marin Garnier, a specialist printer of street literature from Chartres who supplied their needs, religious singers travelled as couples and came from the province of Lorraine:

With their pious and contrite demeanour they seemed made expressly to glorify the kingdom of God [. . .] Their place of business consisted of a box containing a statue either of a more or less richly dressed pilgrimage Madonna, or a crucifixion scene, or Saint Veronica with her Holy Veil. In front of this principal figure one almost always found Saint Hubert on his knees before the deer that appeared to him in the forest with the cross between his horns. Some of these pedlars also owned a large, painted canvas divided into six or eight compartments that represented the various episodes of Christ’s passion. This was placed behind the box and dominated it. On a linen-covered table were set out rings known as “Saint Hubert rings”, medallions, books of prayers, rosaries: these religious knickknacks were also draped over both doors of the box which opened to form a triptych [. . .] The couple were deployed on each side, one perhaps tortuously playing the violin to accompany the hymn of “Our Lady of Liesse”, or “The Clock of the Passion”, or else that charmingly naive song, “The Creation of the World”.³⁹

The box and canvas that Garnier associated with Lorrainers were props used by other groups of pedlars. They both feature, for example, in Olivier

³⁶ Victor Fournel, *Ce qu’on voit dans les rues de Paris* (Paris: Delahays, 1858); Charles Yriate, *Paris Grottesque: Les Célébrités de la rue* (Paris: Dupray de la Mahérie, 1864). On *flâneurs’* encounters with street musicians, see Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

³⁷ Jean Christophe Demard, *Tradition et mystères d’un terroir comtois au XIXe siècle: Les Vosges méridionales* (Langres: Dominique Guéniot, 1981), pp. 331–35.

³⁸ For a detailed description of one at work, see Xavier Thiriat, *La vallée de Cleurie: Statistique, topographie, histoire, moeurs et idiomes des communes du Syndicat de St.-Amé, de Laforge, de Cleurie et de quelques localités voisines, canton de Remiremont (Vosges)* (Remiremont: Leduc, 1869), pp. 320–21.

³⁹ Garnier, *Histoire de l’Imagerie populaire*, pp. 243–45.

Perrin's engraving of a singer of Breton-language *gwerziou* (a word usually used of ballads, but also of narrative religious songs) at a *pardon*, or pilgrimage, in Lower Brittany.⁴⁰ However, outside of Brittany this kind of religious peddling became a recognized Lorrainer specialism during the nineteenth century, probably because eastern France had become the main centre of production for cheap print. In the village of Chamagne, in the foothills of the Vosges, one third of the village's 150 households were engaged in long-distance peddling, and for other villages in the region this was likewise a seasonal specialist trade. Chamagnons did not, in fact, always travel as married couples; more often a child accompanied a parent or other adult. Their tours extended to most parts of French-speaking France (and, according to local tradition, into neighbouring countries as well; they were certainly familiar in Belgium). And despite their pious demeanour they were not themselves notably religious; they carried secular material alongside their religious stock and could abandon hymns for other songs on occasion.⁴¹

Religious songs form a significant proportion of the French folk song catalogue, and there was some connection between that repertoire and the broadsides, whether printed in Lorraine or in some other provincial centre such as Chartres, that were sold by Chamagnons and other pedlars. However, it is difficult to determine the precise role of commercial cheap print as opposed to that of other institutions such as the churches, religious confraternities, and schools. "The Song of Saint Alexis", the most widely sung folk song dedicated to a male saint, was certainly available on broadsides, but we know that its popular history long predates print.⁴² Only one of the religious songs cited by Garnier, "The Creation of the World", is listed in Coirault's folk song catalogue. Lots of religious

⁴⁰ Olivier Perrin, *Galerie bretonne; ou, Vie des Bretons de l'Armorique*, text by Alexandre Bouet, 3 vols (Paris: Isidore Person, 1835–38), II, 149. The image probably dates to 1808. The box and canvas likewise regularly appear in paintings by the Italian baroque painter Alessandro Magnasco.

⁴¹ On Chamagnons, see Jacqueline Lesueur, "Une figure populaire en Lorraine au siècle dernier: Le colporteur ou chamagnon", *Bulletin de la Société lorraine des études locales dans l'enseignement public*, n.s. 36 (1969), 29–39; Bernard Maradan, "Chamagne et les chamagnons: colporteurs en livres", in *Les intermédiaires culturels: Actes du colloque du Centre Meridional d'Histoire Sociale, des Mentalités et des Cultures, 1978*, ed. Michel Vovelle (Aix-en-Provence: Publications de l'Université d'Aix-en-Provence 1981), pp. 277–87; Philippe Picoche, *Le Monde des Chamagnons et des colporteurs au XIXe siècle dans les Vosges* (Raon l'Étape: Kruch, 1992).

⁴² David Hopkin, *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 246–50.

broad­sides were published, but the song was not the most important element. Chamagnons sang, but descriptions of their sales patter emphasize the visual element: “the pedlar opened the panels and said, ‘You will see what you will see!’”⁴³ The songs they sold accompanied cheap, coloured woodcut (and, later, lithograph) prints, and it was the image that predominated; the text was secondary and confined to the margins and the base. These were prints made to be seen rather than to be read. When considering the relationship between cheap print and the corpus of French folk song, and specifically the absence of ballads, the primacy of the visual is potentially significant.

The Chronicler of Crime

Unlike the religious singer, Mercier’s chronicler of crime and execution survived on the streets of Paris until well into the nineteenth century, although the focus shifted somewhat from the tortures experienced by the perpetrators to the sufferings of the victims. The chroniclers were known as *canardi­ers*, and the ephemeral print articles they sold were called *canards*. The term *canard* had already acquired the meaning “false news” by the sixteenth century, but only seems to have been definitively connected with this genre of street literature at the beginning of the nineteenth.⁴⁴

Canardi­ers’ loud presence on the streets of Paris frequently attracted comment from both Parisians and visitors alike. An American tourist in 1835 protested:

About nine [in the morning] is full chorus, headed by the old women and their proclamations: *Horrible attentat contre la vie du roi Louis Philippe* [the attempted murder of the king by Giuseppe Fieschi in July 1835] – *et la petite chienne de Madame la Marquise – égarée à dix heures – L’Archévêque de Paris – Le Sieur Lacenaire* [a notorious thief and murderer, guillotined early in 1836] – *Louis Philippe, le Procès monstre* [a mass trial of Republican leaders] – *et tout cela pour quatre sous!* Being set loose all at the same time, tuned to different keys. All things of this earth seek, at one time or another, repose – all but the noise of Paris.⁴⁵

⁴³ Lucien Descaves, *L’imagier d’Epinal* (Paris: Ollendorff, 1918), pp.48–55.

⁴⁴ Jean-Pierre Seguin, *L’information en France avant le périodique: 517 canards imprimés entre 1529 et 1631* (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1964); Jean-Pierre Seguin, *Nouvelles à sensation: Canards du XIXe siècle* (Paris: Colin, 1959).

⁴⁵ “An American Gentleman” [John Sanderson], *Sketches of Paris, in Familiar Letters to his Friends* (Philadelphia: Carey & Hart, 1838), p. 21.

Not all *canardiers* were women, nor were all *canards* about crime or courtroom dramas. According to the romantic poet Gérard de Nerval, “the *canard* is a piece of news, sometimes true, usually exaggerated, often false. It offers the details of a horrible crime [. . .] or a disaster, a phenomenon, an extraordinary adventure”.⁴⁶ But crime was the *canardiers*’ stock-in-trade, to the point that they were sometimes termed *marchands de crimes*.⁴⁷ They had a marked predilection for victims who were young, female, or otherwise defenceless. A typical title, in this case from a *canard* of 1835, offered “Details of an appalling crime committed in the rue Richelieu against a woman who was dismembered and her body parts thrown into the Seine. The arrest of the perpetrators of this dreadful crime.”⁴⁸

The title, or *boliment*, to use the slang term, had to be long and detailed because the law forbade Parisian *canardiers* from crying anything other than the title.⁴⁹ This was only one of a number of repressive measures: all Parisian *canardiers* had to have a licence, which they had to display, the number of licences was limited, and texts of the *canards* had to be submitted to the censors for approval.⁵⁰ Parisian *canards* were usually in the form of broadsheets, resembling the newspapers with which they were increasingly in competition. In addition to the title, they were composed of three other elements: a prominent black and white illustration; a text, which was often drawn verbatim from court reports or newspaper accounts, thus avoiding difficulties with the censors; and a song, which, unlike the text, might be in the voice of one of the drama’s participants, and usually offered a clear moral. Sometimes one element could squeeze out another, but most surviving examples demonstrate that purchasers expected both visual and oral stimulation. *Canards* were composed by the

⁴⁶ Gérard de Nerval, “Histoire véridique du canard”, in *Le Diable à Paris: Paris et les parisiens*, ed. Théophile Sébastien Lavallée (Paris: Hetzel, 1845), pp. 281–88.

⁴⁷ An illustration of a *canardier* is thus labelled in Edmond Texier, *Tableau de Paris*, 2 vols (Paris: Paulin et Le Chevalier, 1852–53), I, 247.

⁴⁸ Reproduced in Thomas Cragin, *Murder in Parisian Streets: Manufacturing Crime and Justice in the Popular Press, 1830–1900* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), p. 40. Numerous *canards* are reproduced on the website Signes: Histoire et actualité du graphisme et de la typographie <http://signes.org/set.php?id=582>.

⁴⁹ Gaëtan Delmas, “Le Canard”, in *Les Français peints par eux-mêmes*, ed. Jules Janin, 4 vols (Paris: Curmer, 1840–41), III, 43–56.

⁵⁰ Cragin, *Murder in Parisian Streets*, chapter 3, is doubtful about the effectiveness of this control.

criers themselves or by a handful of specialist printers, such as Antoine Chassaignon, or wood-engravers, such as Garson.⁵¹

The Parisian *canardier* was challenged by the arrival of *Le petit journal* in 1863, a cheap, daily, tabloid newspaper devoted to crime and other *faits divers*, and even more so when in 1884 the same editors started selling an illustrated colour supplement.⁵² In the provinces, however, the *canard* was still popular in the 1920s and 30s.⁵³ The provincial *canard* could be in broadsheet format, but in the middle years of the nineteenth century was more likely to be a booklet. Later in the nineteenth century slip-songs became the dominant form. In the provinces there was less need to rival the newspapers and a marketplace singer could travel for several months hawking the same *canard*. Often, Garnier noted, the singers claimed some direct knowledge of, or even participation in, the events recounted. They might also invest in a prop, such as a painted canvas showing the most important scenes, similar to those used by religious singers. Jean Drouillet described how a pedlar made use of such a device to attract a crowd on market day in Nevers, probably in the 1920s:

All eyes were fixed on the immense painted canvas fixed on top of a pole, a picture divided into the different scenes of the drama, which the art of the signwriter had depicted in the most garish colours. A roll on the drum, a short patter, and then were sung the sinister verses, in the most theatrical of voices, invariably to the tune known as “Fualdès” [. . .] Wham! With a thwack of his baton against the canvas which dripped with horror, the showman punctuated the end of each verse which described one episode of the drama illustrated in the picture, as if to affirm the veracity of the story. The song, a long page of emotional outpourings written in the most

⁵¹ Jean-Pierre Seguin, “Antoine Chassaignon: Imprimeur, Libraire et Canardier Parisien (1810–1854)”, *Arts et Traditions Populaires*, 3 (1955), 1–22; Jean-Pierre Seguin, “Un grand imagier parisien, Garson aimé: Son oeuvre et notes sur les canards et canardiens parisiens de la première moitié du XIXe siècle”, *Arts et Traditions Populaires*, 2 (1954), 97–146.

⁵² For the impact of the tabloid press, see Dominique Kalifa, *L'encre et le sang: Récits de crime et société à la belle époque* (Paris: Fayard, 1995).

⁵³ Jean-François “Maxou” Heintzen, “Le canard était toujours vivant! De Troppmann à Weidmann, la fin des plaintes criminelles, 1870–1939”, *Criminocorpus* (26 November 2013) <http://journals.openedition.org/criminocorpus/2562>. Heintzen has created a wonderful map locating the scenes of crimes committed between 1870 and 1939 which led to the creation of songs <https://complaintes.criminocorpus.org/>.

lachrymose style and illustrated in lively colours, only cost 10 centimes, so customers abounded.⁵⁴

Chamagnons sometimes dealt in this kind of material, but so did many other pedlars and singers. For some it was their primary occupation, while others dipped in and out of the trade, such as the singer encountered in Pontorson by the journalist Oscar Havard one fair day in September 1882. The singer had been a travelling salesman in fabrics but as trade was bad had switched to song. His *canard* drew on a recent court case in Rennes of a child, “The Little Martyr”, imprisoned by his own parents. The salesman’s colleague had written the song and set it to the tune of “Fualdès”. Having hawked it around Brittany, the pair planned to take it south to the Corrèze, the Creuse, the Tarn, the Lot – all departments, as Havard noted, with a relatively low level of education.⁵⁵

Some printers, such as Mongel of Charmes (near Chamagne) and Duchesne of Rouen, specialized in this kind of product, but generally, as in the case of “The Little Martyr”, it was the *canardier* him- or herself who supplied the text to a jobbing printer, and very often the illustration as well.⁵⁶ Garnier, who recalled printing numerous such canards, explained that “Many pedlars, especially those who deal in murder ballads, never travel without a roughly engraved woodblock depicting an execution. This is their property and a veritable pass-key because the physiognomy of the prisoner remains exactly the same through all the different narratives they have printed, only the name of the guilty party changes according to the time and location of their itineraries.”⁵⁷ According to one historian of the genre, a canard printed at Valence in 1870, a new telling of the old story of the unrecognized soldier murdered by his parents, was illustrated with a fifteenth-century woodblock depicting knights.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Jean Drouillet, *Folklore du Nivernais et du Morvan*, vol. 2, (La Charité-sur-Loire: Thoreau, 1961), p. 204.

⁵⁵ Cited in Jean-Louis Le Craver (ed.), *Contes populaires de Haute-Bretagne, notés en gallo et en français dans le canton de Pleine-Fougères en 1881* (Rennes: Dastum, 2007), pp. 31–34. The song, “Complainte du petit martyr de Saint-M’Hervé”, can be found on Heintzen’s website <https://complaintes.criminocorpus.org/complainte/complainte-du-petit-martyr-de-saint-mherve/>.

⁵⁶ On Mongel and other Charmes printers, see Picoche, *Le Monde des Chamagnons*, pp. 167–80. On Duchesne, see René Hélot, *Notes sur l’imagerie populaire en Normandie* (Lille: Lefebvre-Ducrocq, 1908).

⁵⁷ Garnier, *Histoire de l’Imagerie populaire*, pp. 296–97.

⁵⁸ Jean-Pierre Seguin, “Les ‘canards’ de fait divers de petit format en France, au XIXe siècle”, *Arts et traditions populaires*, 4 (1956), 30–45, 113–35 (p. 120).

Canards are clearly similar to the murder ballads and execution ballads sold in the anglophone world. However, their influence on the French folk song catalogue was slimmer. A few songs did pass from the *canard* into oral tradition, but, as was the case with the song on the siege of Lille mentioned above, they had undergone lyricization. For example, four different song types on the theme of the returning soldier, murdered unknowingly by his own parents, are listed in the Coirault catalogue.⁵⁹ This is the same basic story as found in the English broadsides *The Lancashire Tragedy* and *The Liverpool Tragedy*. This narrative had appeared repeatedly in French *canards* from 1618, when the events were located in Nîmes, to 1881, when they were set in Angoulême.⁶⁰ In print, the details of time and place mattered. However, the folk song versions usually divested themselves of all specifics – the names, the places – the very features that were emphasized when presented by street singers. The one exception was the most recent retelling, known as “La femme du Perrier”, which circulated widely as a *canard* in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this case, versions recorded by folk song collectors in the same period do retain such details.⁶¹

There are two possible reasons why the *canard* was unable to fertilize the folk song tradition in the same way that broadsides did in the anglophone world. The first is that *canards* resemble the religious broadsides described above, in that the image was often dominant, relegating the text. Although *canard* wood-engravings were almost always printed in black-and-white (Drouillet’s mention of colour is unusual and late), they were still made to be seen and displayed. The second reason concerns the melody: nineteenth-century *canards* were almost always sung to the same tune, “Fualdès”, named for a particularly famous murder of a prosecutor of that name in Rodez in 1817.⁶² The ubiquity of this dirge became a running joke in French literature: Balzac, Hugo, and Baudelaire

⁵⁹ Coirault 9611, 9612, 9613, 9614.

⁶⁰ Seguin, *Nouvelles à sensation*, pp. 184–89; Maria Kosko, *Le fils assassiné (AT 939A): Étude d’un thème légendaire*, FF Communications 198 (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1966).

⁶¹ Éva Guillorel and Robert Bouthillier, “L’influence des livrets de colportage dans le renouvellement du répertoire oral: La destinée de trois complaintes criminelles imprimées en Bretagne au XIXe siècle”, in *Bretagnes du cœur aux lèvres: Mélanges offerts à Donatien Laurent*, ed. Fañch Postic (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009), pp. 97–122.

⁶² Michel-Louis Rouquette, *La Rumeur et le meurtre: L’affaire Fualdès* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1992).

all mention not just the crime but the ballad.⁶³ According to Thomas Cragin, more than half of all *canard* ballads published in Paris between 1830 and 1900 were designated “to the tune of Fualdès”, while the next most popular choice was “Maréchal du Saxe”, which is an earlier name for the same tune!⁶⁴ There are reasons for this narrow selection: it alerted an audience immediately to the kind of material on offer, it predisposed their reception of the story, and its resonances also lent themselves to satire, but as a vehicle for musical diversity it left something to be desired.⁶⁵

Popular Imagery

By and large, antiquarians disdained the *canard* – even Nerval, an early proponent of folk song collecting in France, could not muster much enthusiasm. Our knowledge of the genre comes less from collections made at the time than from the printers’ and pedlars’ obligation to acquire official permission for what they printed and sold. Thus *canards* are preserved in administrative archives. However, nineteenth-century collectors did invest in another form of broadsheet, the *image populaire*, or popular print. This enthusiasm predated the publication in 1869 of Champfleury’s *Histoire de l’imagerie populaire*, but just as Nerval’s claims for the aesthetic value of folk song would inspire a new generation of collectors, so Champfleury’s praise for popular imagists’ gothic style and audacious rejection of perspective and every other rule of academic art encouraged serious attention to this genre.⁶⁶ Collections gave rise to regional studies and museum exhibitions, which in turn led to the creation of a national catalogue.⁶⁷ The popular print has been much better served in

⁶³ For a later example, see Marc Angenot, “La ‘Complainte de Fantômas’ et la ‘Complainte de Fualdès’”, *Études françaises*, 4.4 (1968), 424–31.

⁶⁴ Cragin, *Murder in Parisian Streets*, p. 234.

⁶⁵ Una McIlvenna, “The Power of Music: The Significance of Contrafactum in Execution Ballads”, *Past and Present*, 229 (2015), 47–89.

⁶⁶ “Champfleury” [Jules François Félix Husson], *Histoire de l’imagerie populaire* (Paris: Dentu, 1869).

⁶⁷ The bibliography on popular imagery is substantial, but most is listed in Nicole Garnier (ed.), *Catalogue de l’imagerie populaire française, I: Gravures en taille-douce et en taille d’épargne* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1990); Nicole Garnier (ed.), *Catalogue de l’imagerie populaire française, II: Images d’Epinal gravées sur bois* (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1996). The printed catalogue is incomplete: it does not cover eastern France, other than Epinal, nor Paris; it mostly ignores *canards*; and by and large it does not list holdings deposited by printers in administrative archives. To an extent, it has been

academic and erudite circles than the song that usually accompanied it. Thanks to connoisseurship, we often know the name of the engraver, even if his (rarely her) name does not appear on the image, but I am unable to name a single one of the authors of the texts commissioned by the printers of popular imagery.

Definitions of popular imagery require that they be cheap. They are frequently termed “image d’un sou”, a *sou* being an *ancien régime* coin worth five centimes in the new money – in other words a “penny-print”.⁶⁸ It should be provincial. There were few Parisian printers of this kind of imagery, its producers were to be found in regional centres such as Orleans, Chartres, Nantes, Rennes, Caen, Rouen, Lille, Cambrai, Amiens, Toulouse. By the time Champfleury was writing, production had shifted to eastern France: Metz, Pont-à-Mousson, Nancy, Montbéliard, Belfort, and above all Epinal. “Image d’Epinal” became another synonym for this kind of print. The print should be a woodcut. Although from the 1850s onwards printers replaced woodblocks with lithographs, they continued to make the image look like a woodcut, such were the established aesthetic preferences of the audience. They should also be coloured, the original print overlaid with bright reds, blues, yellows, pinks, and greens, applied with stencils and with little regard to verisimilitude or sometimes even the outline. Although *canards* used the same woodcut technique they are usually excluded from considerations of popular imagery because they stuck to black-and-white, and in general they do seem to be two separate specialisms, with printers in one format rarely dabbling in the other. In the nineteenth century the image was almost always accompanied by a text, whether in prose or verse (and often both), which appeared in columns both beside and beneath the image. Pre-revolutionary images tend to have much less text, which might be engraved in the block rather than added using moveable type.

Champfleury came to popular imagery via art criticism. He was a defender of the realist painter Gustave Courbet, and while there is little about the latter’s art that resembles the popular image’s use of colour and line, Courbet did take inspiration from the genre for his plebeian themes and designs. Contemporary critics wishing to denigrate his paintings described them as “images d’Epinal”. Champfleury turned this attack on its head: Courbet’s power derived from his simplicity of expression which

overtaken by Joconde, the online catalogue of the holdings of French public museums <http://www2.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/joconde/fr/pres.htm>.

⁶⁸ Jules Claretie, a leading collector, uses this term in his memoirs, *La vie à Paris, 1895* (Paris: Charpentier, 1896), pp. 415–16.

communicated directly with the people.⁶⁹ Later French artists, such as Paul Gauguin and his followers, likewise took inspiration from popular imagery in their use of bold outlines, even bolder colours, a flattened presentation, and absence of chiaroscuro.⁷⁰ This interplay between popular and highbrow art is one reason why popular imagery has attracted the attention of scholars when other forms of street literature have been neglected.

The visual was also paramount in the marketing of popular imagery. Alexandre Ponchon, remembering his youth near Amiens in the 1850s and 60s, recalled the visit to his school of an image pedlar from eastern France:

When the schoolchildren made their noisy escape at lunchtime, he was there near the school gate, sitting on his pinewood box which a dirty leather strap enabled him to carry. The astonished children made a circle around him, and then he took from his box a thick role of paper which he opened up [. . .] Heavens! What vibrant colours: red, blue, yellow, and – ecstasy for the eyes – gold which sparkled in the sun and made one think of handsome lancers [. . .] or of the fairies that grandmothers talked about.⁷¹

When Thomas Adolphus Trollope, brother of the more famous Anthony, encountered a pedlar at the fair of Caulnes, in Brittany, in the 1830s he, too, emphasized that colour was essential to the commerce:

Another great favourite among his customers was a most splendidly coloured representation of purgatory. A great variety of heads and shoulders of men, women, and children, were seen rising above an ocean of red and yellow flames. Their hands were all held in the attitude of prayer to the person looking at the picture, imploring them not to spare a little cash to assist them out. Who could fail, after contemplating this, to drop a sou in the “Tronc pour les ames [*sic*] en Purgatoire” the next time they went to church.⁷²

⁶⁹ Meyer Schapiro, “Courbet and Popular Imagery: An Essay on Realism and Naïveté”, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 4 (1941–42), 164–91.

⁷⁰ Jean Adhémar, “L’imagerie vue par l’écrivain au siècle dernier”, *Bulletin de la Société archéologique, historique et artistique, le vieux papier*, 28 (no. 270) (1978), 407–19. For possible connections between Gauguin’s art and popular imagery, see Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin’s Vision* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005).

⁷¹ Alexandre Ponchon, “‘A l’Veille!’ La veillée vers 1850: Contribution à l’étude des traditions populaires de l’Amiennois”, *Conférence des Rosatis Picards*, 41 (1909), 1–51 (pp. 11–12).

⁷² Thomas Adolphus Trollope, *A Summer in Brittany*, ed. Frances Trollope, 2 vols (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), I, 278.

As this description makes clear, popular imagery was made to be seen more than to be read. The bright colours were necessary because the prints were destined for the walls of cottages and village inns, whose rooms had little natural light but a good deal of smoke-blackening from open fires and rush-lights. In paintings of dark Breton peasant interiors by Amédée Guérard, Eugène Leroux, and Jean Villard, one can barely make out the images placed round the box-beds.⁷³

Realist paintings of the nineteenth century are one of sources for understanding how imagery was consumed. In the paintings and drawings of Alexandre Antigna and Léon Lhermitte, for example, we find images over the mantelpiece and around the beds, but also over and around windows and doors – in other words, the apertures where danger might enter the house. These images were supposed to do work – to protect. Some saints preserved the house against fire, Saint Margaret was set up to watch over women in childbirth, Saint Sebastian was placed over the door to ward off cholera, Saint Blaise watched over the cattle in the adjoining stable, and so on.⁷⁴ Religious images were devotional objects the texts of which explained how they should be approached: “Prostrate yourself before the image of Our Lord Jesus Christ”, or “God bless the house where this image is placed.” In Augustin Thierriat’s 1815 painting of a Lyonnais spinning woman, now in the Musée des beaux-arts de Lyon, a stoup for holy water can be seen directly beneath an image of a miracle-working madonna. The image was clearly the centre of this woman’s domestic devotions. The folklorist Paul Sébillot, who attempted to collect images in situ, found their owners very reluctant to give them up, even for money, because of their religious attachments.⁷⁵

George Sand told a story from her childhood when, stuck in a local farm during a storm, she observed the farmer and his family prepare for the attack of a “beast” (a wolf, or perhaps a werewolf). While the menfolk armed themselves, the farmer’s wife and her daughters-in-law, with their children, knelt and prayed before “a coloured image of I don’t know what general of Napoleon’s empire that they took for a saint; pedlars at that

⁷³ Examples of Guérard’s and Villard’s work can be found in the catalogue. *L’imagerie populaire bretonne: Catalogue de l’exposition au musée départemental breton* (Quimper: Musée départemental breton, 1992), pp. 11–16.

⁷⁴ Pierre Louis Duchartre and René Saulnier, *L’Imagerie populaire: Les images de toutes les provinces françaises du XV^e siècle au Second Empire* (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925), chapter on “emploi”.

⁷⁵ Paul, Sébillot, “L’imagerie en Haute et Basse-Bretagne”, *Revue des traditions populaires*, 3 (1888), 309–16, 407–17.

time would sell anything to the peasants as devotional figures”.⁷⁶ Religion, which was the dominant theme of popular imagery in the eighteenth century, continued to be important in the nineteenth, but the Napoleonic legend became an increasingly prevalent topic. Nonetheless, because the format of popular imagery had taken shape around the portrayal of saints, imagists’ treatment of the emperor and his marshals was surprisingly similar to that of religious figures, so the mistake of the farmer’s family was more natural than first appears. Secular images of this kind were also meant to be displayed, as a symbol of political allegiance, or as a visual mnemonic of a military career.⁷⁷ In the Epinal workshop of Nicolas Pellerin, the leading producer of popular imagery, hung a copy of the firm’s own image of the Battle of Essling and the death of Marshal Lannes, with a sign underneath, “Battle where Monsieur Vadet was wounded.” Pierre-Germain Vadet was Pellerin’s brother-in-law, business partner, and a veteran of the 16th chasseurs, who lost his leg in this encounter – and a chasseur can be seen falling from his horse in the foreground of the picture.⁷⁸ The image served as a sign of Vadet’s allegiances, which overlapped with Pellerin’s liberal politics.

The visual predominated in both the marketing and the consumption of popular imagery. Nonetheless, images were accompanied by songs, so it behoves us to investigate the degree to which imagery influenced the folk song repertoire. Garnier claims that the ballads printed by his father and uncles of “Genevieve of Brabant”, “The Wandering Jew”, “Damon and Henriette”, and “Pyramus and Thisbe” were sung at *veillons* – evening gatherings of rural neighbours – and that he had heard them himself in his youth.⁷⁹ Other commentators on rural popular culture have made the same assertion. According to the folklorist Henri Labourasse, when villagers gathered at the *veillée* they would sing the songs of “Genevieve of Brabant”, “Pyramus and Thisbe”, and “Damon and Henriette”, of which “an Epinal image, stuck on the wall, recounted the dramatic but no less true story. The rhymed legend of Ashaverus [the Wandering Jew] was

⁷⁶ George Sand, *Légendes rustiques* (Paris: Morée et Cie, 1858), pp. 13–14.

⁷⁷ Barbara Ann Day, “Political Dissent and Napoleonic Representations during the Restoration Monarchy”, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques*, 19 (1993), 409–32.

⁷⁸ François Blaudez, Jean Mistler, and André Jacquemin, *Epinal et l’imagerie populaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1961), p. 115.

⁷⁹ Garnier, *Histoire de l’Imagerie populaire*, pp. 78–89.

always accepted as an article of faith.”⁸⁰ It is true that these songs are represented in the Coirault catalogue, but it is striking that precisely the same four images are named, and while a few other folklorists and local historians also credit popular imagery with a role in providing material for collective singing, together they add hardly more than half-a-dozen titles. Alexandre Ponchon recalled that, after being bowled over by the colours, he and his schoolmates held an impromptu singing lesson around the visiting image pedlar, and mentions “Marlborough”, “The Handsome Drummer-Boy”, “The Angry Shepherdess”, and the inevitable “Genevieve of Brabant” and “The Wandering Jew”.⁸¹ Imagists had a direct role in shaping the repertoire of French folk song, but their contribution was limited.

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, popular imagery was increasingly restricted to a juvenile clientele, like the young Ponchon. Pellerin and his competitors created images that they knew would be hung up on schoolroom walls, distributed as prizes in catechism classes, or given away as enticements by shopkeepers who recognized the value of children’s pester-power.⁸² Folktales, edifying stories, and paper toys became their most profitable lines, alongside songs aimed at children. Popular imagists probably were significant in defining the canon of “national songs” – that is, songs that every French person knows because they were sung in infant schools, such as “Good King Dagobert”, “The Handsome Drummer-Boy”, “On the Bridge of Avignon”, “Cadet Rousselle”, and so on.⁸³ Very occasionally, Pellerin took his inspiration from local oral culture, but more usually he and others reused texts that were already in circulation in print, and for this reason they seldom appear in the folk song catalogues, even though they were, and are, widely performed.

⁸⁰ Henri-Adolphe Labourasse, *Anciens us, coutumes, légendes, superstitions, préjugés, etc. du département de la Meuse* (Bar-le-Duc: Contant-Laguerre, 1903), p. 78.

⁸¹ Ponchon, “A l’Veille!”, p. 12.

⁸² René Saulnier, “De l’imagerie populaire à l’imagerie enfantine”, *L’art populaire en France*, 2 (1930), 162–78; Chantal Georgel, *L’enfant et l’image au XIXe siècle*, Les dossiers du musée d’Orsay 24 (Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux, 1988).

⁸³ Michel Manson, “Les chansons pour enfants deviennent des livres: du folklore à l’album de comptines”, in *Livre en chantant: des albums de comptines*, ed. Sylvie Rayna, Chloé Séguret, and Céline Touchard (Toulouse: Érès, 2015), pp. 133–56.

As readers will no doubt appreciate, the premise of this chapter has largely been an excuse for a canter through French street literature, both Parisian and provincial, from the *ancien régime* as well as the nineteenth century. I have no statistics to back up my assertions, only intuitions. Yet the topic of popular aesthetics is certainly worthy of investigation. The pedlar's showmanship reaffirms that retail is performative – it is the object's associations as much as its utility that we purchase. Consumption, too, is performative – we use objects to make statements about ourselves. But the preferences that underwrite consumer choices are shared – they have to be, or the performance would not be understood. Variations in taste are therefore revelatory of how a society, or a particular social group, sees itself and wishes to be seen. When we use the term “national character” – and admittedly historians rarely do – this is what we really mean, shared aesthetic preferences.

By comparison with other countries and regions, francophone France demonstrated a preference for the visual over the textual in its consumption of street literature. And the French likewise demonstrated a preference for lyric over narrative when it came to songs, a genre that in other countries was highly dependent on cheap print for its distribution. The argument of this chapter is that those two facts are connected. The purveyors of cheap print sang to market their wares, but on the whole the purchasers were not buying the song. They paid money to enjoy the joke, or the protection of a saint, or the frisson of horror engendered by a *canard*.

Why should this be so? In British historiography much has been made of the shift from the dominance of the eye to the dominance of the ear as a consequence of the Reformation.⁸⁴ But that France remained Catholic can hardly be an explanation for the absence of ballads, as Flanders, Brittany and Spain – if anything, more overtly Catholic than central France – nevertheless possessed a rich ballad culture.

A more prosaic reason for the variation in taste may lie in the local exigencies of production. In both *ancien régime* and post-Revolutionary France printing was a controlled and scrutinized profession. Printers had to be licensed, and to acquire their license they had to convince the authorities of their good character and their political reliability. Cheap print was disreputable, so there were few printers operating at this end of the market. The suppliers of images came not from the world of printing but from trades that required skills in wood-engraving. The Pellerins

⁸⁴ As an example, see Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

started as makers of playing cards, so did the Garnier-Allabres of Chartres, and so did most imagists.⁸⁵ Makers of playing cards required no licence, nor did their output require submission to a censor (or at least that is how some of them chose to interpret the law; in practice, from the 1820s they were supposed to gain prior approval), so long as they did not make use of a letterpress. Other imagists had connections to the manufacture of *indiennes*, printed cotton clothes which also required the skills of a wood-engraver. But while imagists were comparatively free from oversight, the investment in the manufacture of a woodblock and the stencils for the colours (they had to be made waterproof, a surprisingly difficult and maloforous task) precluded the kind of rapid change in stock that characterized British ballad printers. Imagists used the same blocks for decades, and print runs could reach into the tens if not hundreds of thousands. While imagists did respond to events and fashions, it was harder, and financially riskier, for them to do so. By the time they produced an image, with its accompanying ballad, the event itself was old news. Thus, as long as imagery was the predominant broadside genre, the narrative ballad withered.

While factors of production may be a more convincing explanation than “national character” for the idiosyncrasies of the French trade in cheap print, that trade did undoubtedly shape how the French saw themselves in the past and, to an extent, how they see themselves now. One could argue that the light-hearted, satirical, streetwise, and rebellious song tradition that moved from the Pont-Neuf into the *goguettes* and then into the *café-chantants* would emerge in the twentieth century as French *chanson*, which is now promoted both within and outside France as the epitome of Frenchness. Cheap print had a role in the creation of this mythic quality.⁸⁶

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⁸⁵ The connection to the playing card industry is particularly well documented in a recent thesis: Christophe Beauducel, *L'imagerie Populaire en Bretagne aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2009).

⁸⁶ See, for example, Marc Robine, *Il était une fois la chanson française: Des trouvères à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2004); David Lelait-Helo, *Le Roman de la chanson française* (Rocher, 2009); Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2000); Adeline Cordier, *Post-War French Popular Music: Cultural Identity and the Brel-Brassens-Ferré Myth* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

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