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Legends of Lace: Commerce and Ideology in Narratives of Women's Domestic Craft Production

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Abstract: Although a relatively recent invention (c. 1500), many legends have accumulated around the origins of lace, more than have been recorded for other crafts. Almost every region involved in pillow or needle lace had its own origin story: I will concentrate on those circulating in Italy, Catalonia, France, Belgium, and England. Lacemaking was a poorly paid, dispersed and overwhelmingly female occupation, but none the less it had a strong craft tradition, including the celebration of particular saints' feastdays.

The legends drew on elements of this work culture, and especially the strong connections to royal courts and the Catholic Church, but they did not originate among lacemakers themselves. Rather they were authored by persons – lace merchants and other patrons – who in the nineteenth century took on the task of defending homemade lace in its drawn-out conflict with machine-made alternatives. Legends first circulated in print, in lace histories, newspapers and magazines, before transferring to other media such as the stage, historical pageants, even the visual arts. More recently they have continued to propagate on the web. While not originally oral narratives, they behave much like legends in oral storytelling environments: they are usually unsourced; they accumulate and shed motifs; they adapt to new circumstances and audiences. They were told with the intention of creating a special status for handmade lace, and to mobilize protectors and consumers.

Zusammenfassung: Obwohl Spitzenherstellung erst um 1500 entwickelt wurde, haben sich viele Sagen um ihren Ursprung entwickelt; mehr als für alle anderen Handarbeiten. Fast jede europäische Region, in der Klöppel- oder Nadelspitzenherstellung üblich war, hat ihre eigene ätiologische Sage. Ich konzentriere mich in diesem Aufsatz auf Italien, Katalonien, Frankreich, Belgien und England. Klöppeln war fast immer Frauenarbeit und schlecht bezahlt. Es hatte dennoch

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eine hoch angesehene Handwerkstradition, und demzufolge gab es auch Schutzheilige mit dezidierten Feiertagen.

Die Entstehungssagen beinhalten Elemente dieser Arbeitskultur, vor allem ihre Beziehung zu Königshöfen und zur katholischen Kirche. Die Sagen entstanden jedoch nicht im Milieu der Arbeiterinnen, sondern haben ihren Ursprung in Kreisen der Händler und Kunden; diese erfanden diese Ätiologien im neunzehnten Jahrhundert, um handgemachte Spitze gegen die aufkommende Konkurrenz der Maschinenherstellung zu verteidigen. Diese Sagen zirkulierten ursprünglich gedruckt, in Veröffentlichungen zur Geschichte der Spitze, Zeitungen und Zeitschriften, bevor sie in Bühnenstücke, historische Darstellungen und bildliche Darstellungen übernommen wurden. In letzter Zeit sind sie auch online zu finden. Obwohl sie keine mündlichen Ursprünge haben, verhalten sie sich dennoch wie Sagen in mündlichen Erzählsituationen: Sie haben keine Autoren und keine Nachweise, sie akkumulieren und streichen Motive; sie werden an neue Gegebenheiten und Publikum angepasst. Sie wurden mit dem Ziel tradiert, den speziellen Status handgemachter Spitze hervorzuheben und zu ihrer aktiven Bewahrung als Luxusgegenstand beizutragen.

1 Introduction: lace, a transcendent textile?

Lace is a relatively recent invention – there is no firm evidence for it as a distinct manufacture before 1500, and only scattered clues before 1550.¹ In the mid nineteenth century when, for the first time, patrons, collectors and manufacturers concocted a history for this textile, they proposed an older origin, in medieval times or even earlier.² They did so to claim precedence for a regional tradition, as various centres asserted their moral rights over lace. Yet these same authors also pointed to more distant origins, across the Mediterranean, citing the same set of explanations that folklorists of the time used to explain cultural shifts from east

¹ Levey, Santina M.: *Lace*. London 1983, 4–11.

² Almost the first, and certainly the most important of these histories, is Fanny Bury Palliser: *History of Lace*. London 1865. Other women collectors, many of them also involved in efforts to protect the handmade lace industry, followed, including Emily Nevill Jackson, Margaret Jourdain, Cora A. Slocomb di Brazzà, and Mme Laurence de Laprade. Some lace merchants also contributed their own histories, including Auguste and Ernest Lefébure, Michel Angelo and Ernesto Jesurum, Mme Daimeries and Antoine Carlier de Lantsheere. A third group of historians were the men appointed (by themselves or by an official agency) to preserve and renew the handmade lace industry, such as Alan Cole of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Herman Baccart and Pierre Verhaegen.

to west: the Moorish conquest of Spain; the return of the crusaders from Palestine; the fall of Constantinople ... As almost nothing was known about the early history of lace there was no reason to deny oneself the simultaneous pleasures of local patriotism and exotic connections.

These speculative interpretations continue to be advanced in specialist literature on lace because little more solid information has come to light in the intervening decades. For most of its history lace was manufactured in the home by an almost entirely female workforce, the least well documented type of workers. It did not have the infrastructure of guilds that provide archives for other early modern trades. It often depended on local female religious orders, seemingly too busy to manage their own record-keeping. In most European languages the terms for lace derive from various types of edging — this linguistic confusion itself indicative of how lace emerged from other forms of decorative work — so it is difficult to be certain whether a mention in an account book refers to actual lace or other braiding. Portraiture demonstrates that from the mid sixteenth century onwards lace was in widespread use among elites, but not who made it or where. Less romantically inclined authors favour Venice in the early decades of the sixteenth century as the likely point of origin, but the evidence is not conclusive. The statement of the first significant lace historian, Eugène Woestyn, that 'like a foundling, lace knows neither its age nor its origin', remains true.³

The absence of a documented history helps explain the proliferation of legends concerning the origins of lace, more than have been recorded for other textiles, or other manufactures. But there are other reasons why lace should be singled out for such treatment. Lace was associated with key moments in the life cycle: baptism; first communion; marriage; and, in the form of the veil, with funerals and mourning. Lace was a marker of distinction between social groups (it was the subject of sumptuary laws until the eighteenth century) and between the sexes. In the form of headdresses, it became a dominant feature of women's regional costume. Used extensively by the Catholic Church in clerical dress and church ornament, it had strong religious associations. Lace, which simultaneously conceals and reveals, is freighted with symbolic meanings, and these have found expression in narrative.⁴

Many such lace legends, told in various parts of Europe, assert that lace had either a divine origin, or at least heavenly connections. The French ethnographer

³ Woestyn, Eugène E.: *La Dentelle*. Paris 1852, 12.

⁴ The only comparative study of lace legends known to me is Martha Verleyen's masters thesis (KU Leuven, 2017): 'Kant: rand – boord – tand. Een zoektocht naar betekenisvormers in de kronkels van kantwerk'. I am grateful to Ms Verleyen for allowing me to read her work.

Marlène Albert-Llorca finds a deep pattern in these stories.⁵ According to the *goig* (Catalan devotional song) *La Mare de Déu, quan era xiqueta* [The Mother of God, when she was a girl], the first named lacemaker was the Virgin Mary herself, who carried her lace-pillow to the *costura* (the girl's school where nuns taught sewing and lacemaking). It was there that the Angel Gabriel brought her the news that she would bear a son, the saviour of the world.⁶ The *goig* drew on the apocryphal writings about the life of the Virgin. According to these non-Biblical gospels, Mary's parents presented her to the Temple in Jerusalem in fulfilment of a vow; there she spent her childhood preparing liturgical ornaments, including the Temple veil. She carried on this work after her betrothal to Joseph, which is why, in many paintings of the Annunciation, she is pictured with a basket of linen. The apocryphal stories of Mary were popular among the active orders of female religious which sprang up across Europe in the mid nineteenth century, including the Sisters of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin who ran lace schools in Catalonia. The Feast of the Presentation of Mary to the Temple (21 November) was a specific lacemakers' holiday for these Dominican tertiaries.⁷

Albert-Llorca compares the passage to womanhood proposed in the Catalan lace schools with that investigated by her colleague Yvonne Verdier. According to Verdier, it was common practice in the French countryside for young women to spend some time with the village dressmaker, to learn useful skills, to prepare their trousseau, and to acquire some coquettish arts. These women were destined for a life as wives and mothers, and embroidered their linen with red, the colour of menstruation and thus a symbol of fertility.⁸ The most common forms of lace, however, are white, and Albert-Llorca associates this textile with the *blanchiment* [whitening] of the Virgin, expressed in the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. The idea that Mary was free of the taint of original sin was already in circulation in the late Middle Ages, but became more central to Catholic teaching after the Counter-Reformation; it was pronounced official doctrine by the Pope in 1854. This 'whitening' — the exaltation of chastity and virtuous sterility — was relevant to all women because Mary was an example for the whole sex.

5 Albert-Llorca, Marlène: *Les fils de la Vierge. Broderie et dentelles dans l'éducation des jeunes filles*. In: *L'Homme* 35 (1995) 99–122.

6 In the Hispanic ballad type catalogue (Indice General del Romancero) this song is ascribed number 2741. It has been recorded many times during the twentieth century in Catalonia, Valencia and Mallorca, and remains popular as a lullaby.

7 Faro, Carme: *La Verge Nena venerada a l'Escola de les Germanes Dominiques de l'Anunciata de Manresa*. In: *Amics dels Goigs* 22 November, 2016. <http://assocamicsdelsgoigs.blogspot.com/2016/11/canco-popular-de-la-mare-de-deu-quan.html> (01. July 2021).

8 Verdier, Yvonne: *Façons de dire, façons de faire. La laveuse, la couturière et la cuisinière*. Paris 1979.

Lace was primarily a commercial textile dependent on the fashion industry; lacemakers were not constantly under the direction of the Catholic Church. But Albert-Llorca is undoubtedly justified in highlighting lace's manifold religious connections. The Church not only consumed lace, it also promoted its manufacture. Lacemaking was already taught in the Church administered orphanages and workhouses of sixteenth-century Venice, because it was seen as a means to provide poor young women with a livelihood and thus save them from prostitution.⁹ These institutions in turn served as models for other religious, state, municipal and private philanthropic foundations, even in Protestant countries: English workhouses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often insisted that the wives of poorhouse superintendents could teach lace.¹⁰ Outside of these enclosed institutions, lace skills were often taught in lace schools which were under some sort of clerical oversight. If they were not attached to female religious orders then they might be run by lay religious women, such as the beguines of Flanders or the béates of the Velay.¹¹ In all these places, religious doctrine was imparted alongside lace. Lace schools, and lacemakers generally, celebrated particular religious holidays by honouring their patrons: these included Saint Anne (26 July), mother of the Virgin, in most of West Flanders; Saint Catherine (25 November), a virgin saint, played the same role in Malines and the English Midlands; and Our Lady of the Snows (5 August), a Counter-Reformation cult that 'whitened' the Virgin, was honoured in the region around Turnhout in Brabant.¹²

Lacemakers across Europe possessed strong craft rituals and traditions, which religious institutions helped to maintain. This is precisely the kind of work culture in which one might expect to find workers expounding craft legends justifying their customs and practices, and encapsulating their relationships with clients and patrons. In other words, one might suppose that such narratives formed part of the everyday fabric of working lives, and therefore they could

⁹ Allerston, Patricia: An Undisciplined Activity? Lace Production in Early Modern Venice. In: *Shadow Economies and Irregular Work in Urban Europe, 16th to early 20th Centuries*. eds. Thomas Buchner and Philip R. Hoffmann-Rehniitz. Vienna 2012, 63–72.

¹⁰ See, for example, the advert for a couple to superintend the workhouse in Sherrington (Buckinghamshire), placed in: *Northamptonshire Mercury*, 28 March 1812, 3.

¹¹ The role of Flemish lay sisters as teachers of lace is discussed in various works by Maurice de Vroede, for example: 'Kwezels' en 'Zusters': De geestelijke dochters in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden, 17de en 18de eeuw. Brussels 1994. The role of 'béates' in the Velay is discussed in: Auguste Rivet, Philippe Monet, Pierre Burger and André Crémillieux. *Voyage au pays des béates*. Romagnat 2003.

¹² Stalpaert, Hervé: Westvlaamse kantwerksters folklore. Kortrijk 1956; Baccaert, Herman: *Bijdrage tot de Folklore van het kantwerk*. In: *Volkskunde: Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Folklore* 21 (1910) 169–175; Nuyts, Jozef: *Het Domineeren der Turnhoutsche Kantwerksters*. In: *Annuaire de la Commission de la vieille chanson populaire* (1939) 119–133

enable an anthropological investigation into an otherwise largely undocumented milieu of women's domestic production. But in fact, these legends did not originate among lacemakers themselves. Rather their origins lay among those art historians, philanthropists and the noble, clerical, and royal patrons who sought to protect and promote the handmade lace.

One reason for doubting that lace legends were an important part of lacemakers' work culture is that none of them appear to be very old. For instance, I can find no evidence for the circulation of the Catalan version of the Annunciation before Manuel Milá y Fontanals published the *goig* in 1882.¹³ The Dominican Sisters, who were among the female religious orders that developed the cult of 'Mary when she was a girl', were only founded in 1856 as part of the upsurge in female teaching orders that was a feature of European Catholicism in the period.¹⁴ It was in this specific nineteenth-century context that this story developed.

Lace legends are not as old as lace itself, but rather only began to circulate in the same period that histories of lace began to be written, that is from the 1850s onwards. In this same period, the lacemaker became an embattled figure as the idea of the woman worker became contested. Not just in Catalonia but in other lacemaking regions, girls' education became a matter of bitter polemic between liberals and those who supported religious authority. Other conflicts opposed socialists, who wanted to ban women's domestic manufacture altogether in order to bolster the concept of the male breadwinner's wage, against conservatives who saw lacemaking as a support for their ideal of the family. And throughout this period the handmade lace industry was caught between competition from ever-improving machine-made lace on the one hand and better paid opportunities for women workers in domestic service or in factories on the other.

The battlelines in these ideological disputes are sometimes hard to follow: one can find clerical authors hostile to domestic lacemaking, and revolutionaries and feminists who were enthusiasts. These conflicts were mixed up with other commercial and literary interests, which also helped to shape the legends that emerged in the decades before the First World War. But because we know the persons who authored and diffused these legends, we can explore their motivations. We can also track the purposes to which they were put. No more than my predecessors can I elucidate the origins of lace, but I can clarify something about the origins of lace legends.

¹³ Milá y Fontanals, Manuel: *Romancerillo catalán, canciones tradicionales*. Barcelona 1882, 1–2.

¹⁴ Laguna, Ana Yetano: Congregaciones religiosas femeninas: algunos datos sobre el movimiento fundacional en Cataluña durante el siglo XIX. In: *Analecta sacra tarraconensis: Revista de ciències historicoeclesiàstiques* 73 (2000) 161–174.

2 Lace Legends of the Venetian Lagoon

We must start with what was the best-known legend about the origins of lace, which locates the events in Venice, or one of the islands of the Venetian lagoon such as Burano.

A sailor youth, bound for the Southern Seas, brought to his betrothed a bunch of that pretty coralline known to the unlearned as the mermaid's lace (halimeda opuntia).

Intrigued by its patterns the young woman attempted to model it in thread, and thus lace was born. The earliest record of this legend, as far as I am aware, occurs in Bury Palliser's *History of Lace*. I have found no mention in any earlier Italian writing on lace, nor in the literature aimed at tourists to the city. Bury Palliser's only cited source was a "lingering tale" in the isles of the Venetian lagoon.¹⁵ Since 1865 innumerable versions of this legend have appeared in print, and now on the web, locating events in other Italian centres of lace production, as well as in Flanders, Portugal and further afield. The gift might be a coral rather than seaweed, or even an actual mermaid's veil. In some versions the woman's lace becomes a bridal veil in which she marries her sailor; in others the sailor dies, and lace becomes a means to perpetuate his memory.¹⁶ In the early versions of this narrative it is only offered as the origin story for particular kinds of lace – Venetian point or Rose point (another Venetian speciality) – but recent variants claim it as the beginning of the entire lace industry.

The Venetian legend is not typical of lace legends in general because it provides lace with a purely plebeian origin; there is no suggestion of divine intervention or royal patronage. Yet the influence of this story is palpable on many of the lace legends that emerged later.

¹⁵ Palliser (see note 2), 46.

¹⁶ For a variety of versions see: Lefébure, Ernest/Cole, Alan S.: *Embroidery and Lace: Their Manufacture and History from the Remotest Antiquity to the Present Day*. London 1888, 261; Beebe, Mrs C.D.: *Lace: Ancient and Modern*. New York 1880, 131–132; Slocomb di Brazzà, Cora A.: *A Guide to Old and New Lace in Italy*. Chicago 1893; Nevill Jackson, Emily/Jesurum, Ernesto: *A History of Hand-Made Lace*. London 1900, 182. For more modern versions see: Sciamà, Lidia D.: *A Venetian Island: Environment, History and Change in Burano*. New York 2003, 178–180.

3 The Lace Legend of Le Puy en Velay

In other regions it was common for holy figures to play a role in the origin of lace. And, just as in lace histories, legends push the origins of lace back a century or more before other evidence allows. The following is an example both of the content of these legends and the means by which they spread and developed.

In August 1921, the poet Jane Catulle-Mendès was holidaying in the Velay, the main centre for handmade lace in France, where she admired the women sitting together outside their cottages while working at their pillows. She reported the following legend in her column for the conservative newspaper *La Presse*; the gist of the story she obtained from Victor Thévenon, a lace merchant from Le-Puy-en-Velay.¹⁷ The cathedral of Notre-Dame du Puy celebrates a Jubilee whenever the feast of the Annunciation (25 March) falls on a Good Friday. To mark the occasion in 1407 the leading women of the city wanted to present a new robe to the cathedral's famous black Madonna, the object of pilgrims' veneration. They entrusted this task to the city's most talented, and beautiful, embroidereress Isabelle Mamour, who lived in the house at the junction of the rue du Prat du Loup and the rue Rochetaillade. For a month she vainly tried to find an embroidery that suited her purpose. In despair she prayed to the Virgin, and in the instant was inspired to weave bobbins of fine linen thread between pins stuck on a board to create a gracious adornment. Thus, lace was born.¹⁸ The story has a sequel: in 1419 Yolande of Aragon, Queen of Naples, went on pilgrimage to the Madonna of Puy. Isabelle and another young woman presented the Queen with a basket of lace, establishing a tradition of royal patronage, while also indicating the main direction of trade for the Vellave lace industry, which was towards Spain.

Albert-Llorca cites this legend, but not its origin. The first mention of Isabelle Mamour and her invention was in a series of articles published in the local newspaper *La Haute-Loire* between September 1852 and March 1853. They were authored by Alphonse Richard, a prominent lace merchant from Le Puy.¹⁹ Although Richard's version did not specifically impute divine inspiration, his timing was propitious. Firstly, in February 1853 the lace merchants of Le Puy had presented a basket of lace to their new Empress Eugénie as a thank you for the

¹⁷ Thévenon, Victor: La Dentelle du Puy – Sa situation présente. Son avenir. In: Bulletin historique, scientifique, littéraire, artistique et agricole illustré par la Société scientifique et agricole de la Haute-Loire 7 (1922) 3.

¹⁸ Catulle-Mendès, Jane: En Vacances. In: *La Presse*, 20 August 1921, 1.

¹⁹ Richard, Alphonse: Fabrication de la dentelle, a series of 21 articles which appeared in *La Haute-Loire* between 12 September 1852 and 27 March 1853.

large order she had placed before her marriage to Napoleon III.²⁰ The lace industry in every European country depended on royal patronage and major court events such as weddings were a vital stimulus to the trade. The wives of reigning monarchs regularly received such gifts both as a token of gratitude but also as a reminder of their responsibilities towards lacemakers. These official presentations were always in the form of a basket, emphasising that lacemaking was a feminine and domestic craft, and perhaps recalling the Virgin's basket of linen. The new Empress of France was, like the Queen Yolande of Naples, a Spaniard by birth. Secondly, in March 1853 the cathedral would celebrate a particularly important Jubilee.

Le Puy's original black Madonna had been dragged through the streets and burnt on 8 June 1794 in a grotesque act of revolutionary vandalism.²¹ However, in 1844 a copy of the original was relocated from the nearby church of Saint-Maurice to the main altar of the cathedral. The next Jubilee fell in 1853 and it was marked in lavish style. It drew crowds of pilgrims, including sixty-five official delegations, and the celebrations lasted ten days from 24 March to 4 April. The final and most spectacular event was the procession of the replacement statue through the city, an event witnessed by up to 120,000 people (some said 200,000).²² Contemporary accounts do not mention whether the statue was dressed in lace, but undoubtedly she would have been sumptuously clothed for the occasion, a task likely performed by a select group of women.²³ In these circumstances Richard's story of Isabelle Mamour and the sponsorship of lace by both religious and imperial institutions looks quite a lot like commercial promotion.

Isabelle Mamour's role was highlighted by the Le Puy lace merchants as part of their display at the Paris Universal Exposition in 1855.²⁴ Thereafter she disappeared from the print record for several decades. I have found no mention of her in any of the devotional literature surrounding the crowning of Notre-Dame du Puy in 1856, or the Jubilee of 1910. She only reappeared in 1912 in newspaper accounts authored by the journalist Ulysse Rouchon; perhaps he found the

20 *L'Industrie*, 27 February 1853, 3.

21 The history of this statue has been documented many times. See Vilatte, Sylvie: *La "dieuote image noire de Nostre-Dame" du Puy-en-Velay: histoire du reliquaire roman et de son noircissement*. In: *Revue belge de philologie et d'histoire* 74 (1996) 727–760.

22 *La Voix de la verité*, 11 April 1853, 3; Abbé Edouard Peyron, *Mois de Marie: Historique de Notre-Dame du Puy*. Le Puy 1898, 190.

23 On the rituals surrounding the dressing of processional statues, see: Albert-Llorca, Marlène: *Les Vierges miraculeuses: Légendes et rituels*. Paris 2002, 135–167.

24 Martha-Beker, Félix-Victor: *Exposition universelle de 1855: Rapport*. Clermont-Ferrand 1855, 10.

legend in archived volumes of *La Haute-Loire*, for which he also worked.²⁵ It is not explicit in either Richard's or Rouchon's version that Mamour received divine inspiration – Thévenon and Catulle-Mendès were responsible for this elaboration. The immediate post-war years were periods of desperate activity to save the Velay handmade lace industry in the face of falling demand, declining wages, and competition from machine-made lace. It is not a coincidence that such legends resurfaced in the context of such campaigns.

4 Lace Legends of Bruges 1: Serena

A better-known lace heroine than Isabelle Mamour is Serena of Bruges, a city which, like Le Puy, is strongly associated with the lace industry. Sometime in the high Middle Ages, a young woman, who had lost her father at sea, made a vow to the Virgin Mary that she would renounce her fiancé Arnold, an apprentice sculptor, if she could find the means to provide for her mother and siblings. One Sunday, while walking in the fields with Arnold, the air became full of 'fils de la Vierge', free-floating lines of spiders' thread. (According to a fairly widespread legend, these threads fall from the distaff of Mary, sometimes accompanied by Saint Ursula and her 11,000 virgin companions, spinning in heaven.²⁶) The threads formed a pattern on Serena's black apron. Intrigued, she had Arnold make a frame of sticks and carried the apron home. While studying the pattern she became convinced that the Virgin had given her the means she needed. The inventive Arnold provided her with bobbins, and twisting the thread over pins Serena produced a delicate fabric with which, like Isabelle Mamour, she crowned the statue of Mary in the local church. All the wives of the burghers of Bruges wanted this novel and elegant textile for their own headdresses, and so money poured into the house of the widow. But now Serena was obliged to keep her vow and renounce Arnold. One year later, the sad girl was again walking in the fields when more threads fell and shaped a crown of orange blossom – as worn by brides – on her apron, and in the middle appeared the words 'I relieve you of your vow'. Serena and Arnold soon married and had many children, all girls, who learnt the art of lacemaking from their mother, and thus was established the industry that spread the fame of Flanders far and wide.

25 Rouchon, Ulysse: L'invention de la dentelle. In: *Journal des Débats*, 24 August 1912, 2.

26 Dubosc, Georg: *Les fils de la vierge*. In: *Journal de Rouen*, 17 September 1899.

The summary given above comes from a nineteenth-century Belgian folklorist, Albert Harou; his is one of numerous variants.²⁷ But they can all be traced to a single print source: a short story by Caroline Popp dated 12 May 1867.²⁸ Popp, née Boussart, was a descendant of a revolutionary family and she proclaimed her robust, francophone liberalism even after her marriage to Philippe-Christian Popp brought her to the Flemish-speaking bastion of clerical influence that was nineteenth-century Bruges. With her husband she founded *Le Journal de Bruges* in 1837 and continued to edit it until a year before her death in 1891. Set up in opposition to the Catholic *Le Nouvelliste de Bruges*, the paper campaigned on both local and national issues, such as the re-establishment of the city's port, the abolition of the death penalty, and women's education.²⁹

Women's education and lace production were interconnected issues. In Flanders, even more than other lace producing regions, lace was taught in specialist 'lace schools'. These had expanded massively in the 1840s after a crisis in the Flemish linen industry effectively wiped-out domestic flax spinning, the most important source of women's and girls' employment. State and Church had combined to fill the gap by teaching lace, usually in institutions run by religious orders. By 1860 there were over 800 lace schools in the provinces of East and West Flanders alone, attended by more than 40,000 girls. They usually commenced around the age of five or six, and might remain there until their teenage years. The school day could last ten hours or more. Some lace schools made time for reading, writing and arithmetic (as well as religious instruction), but in others work continued relentlessly with breaks only for meals and prayers. Hundreds of girls could be crammed into insalubrious rooms, bent over their pillows for hour after hour, damaging their physical health as well as stultifying their intellect.

Popp had warned against the spread of lace schools in the 1840s. Even then handmade lace was in competition from machine-made imports, so why train girls for a trade that could only lead to poverty? She returned to the attack in the 1850s, blaming the clergy for deliberately keeping women ignorant and suggesting their motive was financial, because of the profits they earned on the lace schools' output.³⁰ Popp's was one of many contributions to a political dispute

²⁷ Harou, Albert: *Mélanges de traditionnisme de la Belgique*. Paris 1893, 112–117. Harou's version is shorter than Popp's but the only major change to the plot is his inclusion of the gift to the statue, which is not mentioned in the original.

²⁸ Popp, Caroline: *Récits et légendes des Flandres*. Brussels: 1867, 165–205.

²⁹ On Caroline Boussart-Popp see Gubin, Éliane et al.: *Dictionnaire des femmes belges: XIXe et XXe siècles*. Brussels 2006, 73f.

³⁰ See, for example, articles in the *Journal de Bruges* on 17 and 23 May 1843, 8 October and 27 November 1846, 22 September 1850, 12 March 1857, 13 June 1858, and 23 December 1859.

that continued to simmer in Belgium through the 1860s and 1870s, and culminating in the first 'School War' from 1879 to 1884 which pitted liberals, unsuccessfully, against the Flemish clergy.³¹

Given her role at the forefront of these battles, it is perhaps surprising that Popp authored this explicitly religious legend, although it is worth stressing that Popp always thought of herself as a good Catholic, she was just unwilling to be politically dominated by the clergy. Her motive in writing was probably local patriotism, to counter the claims of Venice. She certainly knew the legend of the Venetian sailor, which she learnt from Bury-Palisser (there are no citations, but their versions of his story are very close). Popp was active in promoting the artistic legacy of the Flemish Middle Ages, much less celebrated then than it is now. Her paper campaigned for a museum for Bruges, and statues for the city's artists, such as the one of Hans Memling, erected in 1871 outside Popp's house. Among Belgian, and in particular Flemish patriots, it was axiomatic that not only did lace originate in Flanders but that it did so in the High Middle Ages, the same period of economic vitality, political autonomy and cultural creativity that also produced sculptors and painters like Memling, Jan Van Eyck and, of course, Popp's fictional Arnold.

None-the-less, there are several indications in the story of Popp's liberal politics. In the context of the coming 'School War', it is important that the miracle happened in the countryside, because healthy outdoor activity for young women was a touchstone of liberal pedagogy. Without the sun, wrote Popp, mankind would become, like plants, enfeebled, weak and sickly. It is Serena's mother who ensures that her daughter experiences the benefits of fresh air. Liberals criticised the lace schools because they were places of confinement and contagion. The family, on the other hand, was a healthy institution, so it is not irrelevant that Serena passed on her knowledge to her daughters, rather than in the context of a school. And it is very unlikely that a Flemish clerical author would have relieved Serena of her vow. Those involved in running lace-schools implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, envisaged them as a stepping-stone to the convent, as will become apparent in the lace legend of Argentan.

³¹ Lory, Jacques: *La Résistance des catholiques belges à la "loi de malheur"*, 1879–1884. In: *Revue du Nord* 266 (1985) 729–747.

5 The Lace Legend of Argentan

Popp's Flemish legends were a literary success, admired by Victor Hugo, among others. So, it is probable that Serena helped inspire the legend of Argentan lace, which first appeared in print in 1874. The town of Argentan in Normandy specialized in fine needle-lace rather than the pillow-lace made in Bruges. A connecting feature in all these legends is that they give a precise address for the lacemaker. In the case of Serena, it was the alley Garre van Conné; in Argentan it was the Rue de vicomte. Here lived another orphan with her grandparents for whom she was, as Serena was for her family, the sole support. Beautiful as well as modest, she worked long into the night making lace, especially when her grandmother sickened and needed medicine. One night, overcome with fatigue, she fell asleep. In her dreams she saw heaven open and the Virgin herself descend into her kitchen, pick her lace from her lap, and continue her work. In the morning, the lacemaker was astonished to discover that not only was the order completed but it was done so beautifully that the merchant was willing to pay much more than usual. The Virgin returned every night until the household's needs were satisfied. But after her grandparents' death the lacemaker entered the convent of the Sisters of Saint Clare.

This story first appeared in a magazine, *La Fantaisie parisienne* in 1874.³² The author was the marquis Eugène de Lonlay (1815–1886), a dandy poet and songwriter originally from Argentan. Lonlay had published a small volume of legends about his hometown in 1873, and at first glance this text appears as an afterthought to that collection. In fact, it was part of a more ambitious project to revive lacemaking in this part of Normandy. Argentan lace, like all needle laces, was even more time-consuming and expensive than pillow-lace. It had already been in decline in the late eighteenth century as court tastes shifted towards lighter fabrics. The French Revolution, which dealt a terrible blow to all luxury trades, effectively killed it off.³³ Yet in 1874 the sub-prefect of the arrondissement Alphonse Béchard, hand-in-hand with mayor Emmanuel Lebouc, decided to revive it.

As the Belgian response to the linen crisis demonstrates, calling on nuns or lay sisters to set up a lace school was an established strategy for dealing with a crisis in female employment. The lace industry of nearby Bayeux had been started by this means in 1676.³⁴ The same impulse continued to animate patrons

³² de Lonlay, Eugène: Légende du point d'Argentan. In: *La fantaisie parisienne* 6:16 (September 1874) 7–8.

³³ Moulinet, Jean: *La Dentelle à l'aiguille en Basse Normandie*. Argentan 1912, 97.

³⁴ Lefébure, Ernest: *Histoire de la dentelle à Bayeux de 1676 à 1900*. Bayeux 1913, 2.

in the nineteenth century. The most important such initiative, and the inspiration for many others, was the re-establishment of the Burano lace school in 1872 by Countess Adriana Marcello, under the protection of Queen Margaret of Savoy. It was a response to a particularly hard winter when the waters of the Venetian lagoon had frozen, denying the fishermen and their families their sole means of livelihood.³⁵ Argentan in 1874 was still suffering the ill effects of the economic downturn that followed the Franco-Prussian War, and so the municipal authorities reached for the old blueprint for such times, freshly brought to mind by the widely publicized initiative in Burano.

However, unlike Burano where the Countess Marcello found an aged lace-maker, Cencia Scarpagliola, who still knew the secrets of the island's lace traditions, there was no one left in Argentan who could teach lace skills. Béchard approached Ernest Lefébure, a lace merchant from Bayeux who enjoyed a reputation for revitalising old lace techniques. Lefébure explained that, to discover the secret of Argentan lace, he needed not only examples but also the patterns on which lacemakers worked. Happily, some years earlier the nuns of the Hospice de Saint-Thomas had discovered a pile of patterns in an attic. Lefébure passed these on to one of his most skilful employees, Désirée Hamel. Unpicking patterns with lace still attached, she was able to work out the specific techniques associated with Argentan lace. Lefébure then sent her to Argentan to set up a lace workshop in the Benedictine convent. The nuns also ran an orphanage and Hamel taught Argentan point both to the nuns and to the orphan girls.³⁶ By 1878, when Hamel won a silver medal at the Paris World Fair, there were about forty lacemakers employed in the manufacture of Argentan point lace, and the business just about survived until the First World War.

Lonlay's story would inspire works in many different artistic genres. In 1884 the artist Gaston La Touche painted a version of the legend for the salon. In 1904 a local musician, Léon Boschet, combined it with another Argentan legend – about a fourteenth-century Parisian merchant who had come to town to buy laces, and made a vow to build a clock-tower for the church of Saint-Germain if he should escape brigands on his return journey – to make a two-act operetta.³⁷ Two silent films recount the legend, though in slightly different forms. Both, like Boschet's

³⁵ Anon.: *Origines de la dentelle de Venise et l'école de Burano*. Venice 1897.

³⁶ Lefébure, Ernest: *Point d'Argentan. Se fait-il par les anciens procédés? Est-il aussi beau que celui d'autrefois? A-t-il conservé une grande valeur?* In: *Annuaire normand* 46 (1880) 145–154. To understand what it was that Hamel recreated, consult: Tambrun, Brigitte: *La technique du "point d'Argentan" dévoilée*. In: *Artefact* 11 (2019) 279–307.

³⁷ I rely on the account given in the *Bulletin de la Société historique et archéologique de l'Orne* 23 (April 1904) 230. It was performed in April 1904 at the *Theatre Athénée-Saint-Germain* in Paris.

theatrical piece, and consistent with the pattern we have already encountered, were set in medieval times. In *La légende du point d'Argentan* (Radio, 1907), a poor girl must finish her lace for the grand lady Anne d'Argentan before the morning or she will not have the money to feed her grandmother. When she is too exhausted to continue, a statue of the Virgin comes to life to finish the work for her.³⁸ *Le rêve de la dentellière* (Lux, 1910), while not explicitly set in Argentan, offers a very similar narrative in which a lacemaker falls asleep, is replaced at her pillow by the Virgin, who then carries the product to the castle and returns with the money while the girl is still sleeping.³⁹

Somewhere among these transformations the Virgin's intervention became mixed up with another legend of Argentan lace — the 'bride picotée'. Bury-Palliser explained that this stitch "consists of the six-sided button-hole bride [mesh], fringed with a row of three or four picots or pearls round each side". But she went on, "The manner for making 'bride picotée' is entirely lost."⁴⁰ There had been attempts before Hamel to rediscover the secret of this stitch, one of which even became the subject of an English novel in 1883.⁴¹ The two stories combined in another operetta, *La légende du point d'Argentan* with music by Félix Fourdrain, which was first performed in December 1906 at the Opéra-Comique in Paris. It remained part of the repertoire of the Opéra-Comique for many years afterwards, as well as being regularly performed around the country.⁴²

For once the setting is not medieval but eighteenth century; and nor, despite the name, is the piece set in Argentan. The scene is a hovel near Granville on the Normandy coast, not an area noted for its lacemaking, but it had the virtue of re-establishing the connection between lace and the sea, and perhaps recalled to the audience's mind attempts to bring lacemaking to the Atlantic coast as a palliative to the sardine crisis of 1903.⁴³ Certainly the scenario envisaged by Fourdrain was just as desperate.

A young lacemaker, Rose-Marie, nurses a dying child through a storm. Her sailor husband, luckless in his search for work and so incapable of buying the

38 Taillebert, Christel: Collection Alan Roberts (II): Films primitifs et messages religieux. Regards sur différentes stratégies cinématographiques'. In: 1895 revue d'histoire du cinéma 19 (1995) 59.

39 Amy de la Bretèque, François: Présence de la littérature française du Moyen Âge dans le cinéma français. In: Cahiers de recherches médiévales et humanistes 2 (1996) 157.

40 Bury-Palliser (see note 2) 207.

41 Roberts, Margaret: Bride picotée. London 1883.

42 Félix Fourdrain (music), Henri Cain and Arthur Bernède (lyrics), *La légende du point d'Argentan*. Paris 1906.

43 Association 'Dentelles d'Irlande bretonnes': De la crise de la sardine à l'âge d'or de la dentelle. Rennes 2003.

necessary medicine, threatens murder-suicide as the only resolution to their plight. Rose-Marie, however, puts her trust in the Virgin and her hope that she can rediscover the 'lost stitch' of Argentan point lace. The cardinal de Rohan has promised 1000 gold écus to the person who can make the lace he wants to present to the queen (unnamed but presumably Marie-Antoinette). Although Marie's eyesight is failing, a common complaint among lacemakers, she promises to cover the steps to the Virgin's altar with her bobbins if she succeeds (Fourdrain, like Lonlay before him, was under the mistaken impression that Argentan point is a pillow, rather than a needle lace). An old beggar woman comes to her door and Rose-Marie, despite her poverty, offers her food and shelter from the storm. The old woman tells her the miraculous origin of Argentan lace, which is a vague echo of the story of Serena: three centuries ago, spiders' threads had woven themselves into a diadem that adorned a statue of Mary. But Rose-Marie is exhausted and falls asleep over her pillow. Then the stranger reveals herself as the Virgin: while the lacemaker dreams, angels come and take threads from Mary's head-dress to weave into celestial lace, singing an 'Ave Maria' while they work.

The message of this story could not be clearer: the family was the bedrock of the social order and woman, as wife and mother, was the keystone of the family, providing physical and spiritual support to her husband as well as her children. Domestic work, such as lacemaking, was essential to the maintenance of the household, but only as long as it was performed under the protection of religion and the patronage of the court.

The operetta was, therefore, a contribution to a long-running debate in French society about how to reconcile modern capitalism with family stability.⁴⁴ *La légende du point d'Argentan* can be seen as a dramatisation of the numerous surveys and investigations conducted from the 1840s onwards into workers' lives, which concluded that when women worked in factories, outside of the family's supervision, they were inevitably drawn into promiscuity and other vices, whereas the domestic woman worker was a beacon of morality and femininity. The political economist Armand Audiganne made exactly this point by comparing the dissolute women of the Rouen textile factories with the Normandy lacemakers whose habits of cleanliness, taste and moral propriety were all shaped by their contact with lace. Lacemakers' family life "was full of charm" and "a perfect union reigns in all hearts" as husband and children gathered around the lacemaker's lamp in the evening.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ For a summary of this debate see McMillan, James: France and Women, 1789–1914: Gender, Society and Politics. London 2000, chap. 8.

⁴⁵ Audiganne, Armand: Les Populations ouvrières et les industries de la France. Paris 1860, vol. 1, 103–108.

I do not know if Foudrain's politics were as conservative as his aesthetics, though it is surely relevant that his father was a church musician and he himself trained as an organist.⁴⁶ However, it was not only clericals and conservatives who eulogized women's domestic work. It was the anticlerical and socially radical government of Emile Combes which in 1903 passed the law Engerand-Vigouroux, which reintroduced several hours of lacemaking into girls' primary education in certain regions, including Normandy, as well as lace skills as part of women teachers' training.⁴⁷ The various dramatic, musical and cinematic treatments of the legend of Argentan lace promoted a particular vision of women's work and her place in family life which were simultaneously being debated in society and in the legislature.

6 Lace Legends of Bruges 2: Barbe Winkel

The number of domestic lacemakers was in rapid decline in the decades immediately preceding the First World War.⁴⁸ But even as she became economically insignificant, the lacemaker became the icon for a substantial group of workers who had been left behind by the social movements, and the attendant protective interventions, of late nineteenth-century Europe. Trying to define who should receive health insurance, pensions, maternity leave and other benefits of social legislation led to the rediscovery that homes were also centres of production – not just of lace but of toys, gloves, cutlery, armaments, artificial flowers, and a myriad of other objects. Women made up the bulk of this domestic workforce, and lacemakers, because they were such a well-known and picturesque group, and because the contrast between the level of skill needed to create lace contrasted

46 Louis Vierne, later organist at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, tells several amusing anecdotes about his fellow pupil Foudrain when they studied together. See: Crawford, Jack Reed: *Mes Souvenirs* by Louis Vierne: An Annotated Translation. PhD thesis, University of Miami 1973, 102–103, 146–150.

47 The law is named after its leading proponents: Fernand Engerand, the right-wing deputy for Calvados (the lacemaking region including Bayeux and Caen); and Louis Vigouroux, the centre-left deputy for the Haute-Loire (the lacemaking region around Le Puy).

48 It is difficult to establish reliable figures for the number of lacemakers: the census was a poor measure of homeworkers. But to give an idea, the number of lacemakers in mid-nineteenth-century Belgium was around 150,000; by the end of the century this number had fallen to around 50,000, and by 1910 may have dwindled to just 20,000.

so dramatically with the penury in which they lived, literally became the poster-women for these 'sweated trades'.⁴⁹

Lacemakers also illustrated the difficulty of extending social legislation to the domestic sphere.⁵⁰ The lace merchants, who distributed the lace patterns and thread and bought the finished product at piece rates, were clear that lacemakers were not their employees who might therefore benefit from legal protection, but independent producers. But if every lacemaker's home was also an autonomous workshop, why should she not pay business rates? These and other questions triggered a plethora of social investigations, conferences, publications, and other initiatives aimed at protecting such workers. There were exhibitions which re-created the working conditions of homeworkers, staffed by real representatives of each group.⁵¹ Some initiatives, such as the Engerand-Vigoroux law, looked to increase recruitment; others, such as the consumer leagues that sprang up in practically every European country, attempted to put more money in lacemakers' pockets by cutting out the middle-men. The Lefébures, middle-men themselves, were more enthusiastic about protecting the product through a form of *appellation contrôlée*: home-made lace would be sold as 'true lace', machine-made would have to bear the title 'false' or 'imitation lace'.⁵²

It was in this context that old legends were revived, and some new ones put into circulation. We have already encountered an example of this. In 1911 a young lawyer and would-be writer from Valenciennes (a former lace town) produced a thesis on the means necessary to save the lace industry in French Flanders. His justification for so doing rehearsed all the familiar ideas about the need to protect women from the corruption of the city and the factory: "Supporting the manufacture of homemade lace in the countryside would simultaneously encourage the renewal of a healthy and well-constructed society built upon its natural

49 See, for example, the poster, and related postage stamp, for the *Exposition du travail à domicile*, held in Brussels in 1910.

50 These discussions were waged across Europe, but for a good history of the debate in France see: Avrane, Colette : *Ouvrières à domicile: Le combat pour un salaire minimum sous la Troisième République*. Rennes 2013.

51 Including the *Sweated Industries* Exhibition held in London in 1906, the *Heimarbeit* exhibitions held in Berlin and Frankfurt in 1906 and 1908, and in Zurich 1909, the *Hausindustrie* exhibition in Amsterdam in 1909 and the *Travail à domicile* exhibition held in Brussels in 1910. Working lacemakers were certainly part of the show for the last two.

52 Lefébure, Auguste: *Dentelles et guipures, anciennes et modernes, imitations ou copies*. Paris 1904, 277–279. The family had been pushing this line since 1867 at least, but recent action to protect the name 'champagne' had given them hope.

base, which is at the same time its irreducible component, the family.”⁵³ His proposed solution was for lacemakers to form cooperatives to buy raw material and to sell their wares, thus cutting out the middle-men. In the course of this thesis Mabille de Ponchonville repeated, rather sceptically, the legend of Serena; he was unaware of its literary origins.⁵⁴ Ulysse Rouchon read the thesis and responded to its Flemish claims over lace by reviving Le Puy’s Isabelle Mamour.

A new legend also started to circulate in this same period, in the same newspapers that commented on the rights and wrongs of women workers. The story of Barbe Winkel links many of the themes we have already encountered – orphans, sailors, royal connections ... Barbe, an orphaned dress-maker, the finest in all Bruges, was due to be married to Gilliodts Hapken, a sailor for the Fugger family of the city. Gilliodts had been given command of the ship *Sainte-Ursule* for a voyage to the Levant, while Barbe sewed fine dresses for the great ladies of the city. However, when the *Sainte-Ursule* failed to return, all Barbe had to remind her of her fiancé was a dried seaweed, brought back from the Mediterranean. As it became clear that the ship was lost for ever, Barbe cried so much over this souvenir that it began to crumble away. Then she took her needle and attempted to copy it in thread. She attached this new textile to the clothes she was making, and it became all the fashion. Isabella of Portugal, wife of Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy (which situates this story in the mid fifteenth century) started to wear it, and the court followed suit. Barbe took on apprentices to learn the art of lace-making, for work pacified her sorrows. And thus, a divine art was born out of human misfortune.

A tradition that lace derived from the suffering of a fisherman’s wife, who played her lost husband’s nets obsessively through her hands until the idea came to her to make a net of lace, had already established itself on the Belgian coast.⁵⁵ However, this particular narrative of loss at sea was clearly lifted from the Venetian legend described above. Elements were borrowed from other legends: the setting is very similar to that inhabited by Serena, as is Barbe’s relationship to the women of Bruges; the role of Isabella of Brabant recalls that of Yolande of Aragon in the Le Puy legend. The pieces were put together by another journalist, Ernest Laut, the editor of the hugely successful *Petit Journal Illustré*. Laut was born, like Mabille de Poncheville, in Valenciennes, and he remained strongly attached to the northern region of France and its Belgian neighbour throughout his life. I have not been able to discover where he first published this text, but it was already

⁵³ Mabille de Poncheville, André: *L’industrie dentelière française spécialement en Flandre. Enquête dans la région de Bailleul*. Valenciennes 1911, 44.

⁵⁴ Mabille de Poncheville (as note 53) 54.

⁵⁵ Mme Daimeries: *La Dentelle en Belgique*. Brussels 1895, 1.

translated for the Dutch newspapers in the summer of 1903.⁵⁶ Newspapers of that époque often included short stories, and Laut's text, syndicated no doubt, would continue to fulfil this role for another quarter of a century. It found its way into a French language daily in New Orleans in 1904, and another in Edmonton Alberta in 1911, before crossing back across the Atlantic to serve as filler in various French publications including the fascist journal *L'Action française* in 1922, as well as the house magazine of the French gymnastic association in 1928.⁵⁷ In all these places, in its small way, it preached the message that women's work in craft was a form of moralisation.

7 English lace legends: Which Queen?

As mentioned above, Saint Catherine was the patron of lacemakers in both Malines (Mechelen in Antwerp province) and in the English Midlands. In both places Saint Catherine's Day (25 November, or 6 December for those who continued to follow the pre-Gregorian calendar) was a 'candle-feast', a ritual to mark the official beginning of night work, and it was celebrated in very similar ways on both sides of the Channel, with a party to 'wash the candle-block', the mount in which lacemakers' placed their 'flashes' or flasks of water used to concentrate candlelight on the small square of the pillow on which they were working. These parallels are indirect evidence that lacemaking was introduced to England from this region of Flanders in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Throughout the nineteenth century, Midlands newspapers continued to report on lacemakers' observance of 'Catterns' as the feast was termed, although largely to contrast the pitiful state of the lace industry with that of 25, 50 or 100 years ago. The following report from Kettering (Northamptonshire) in 1861 is fairly typical:

Soon after six o'clock on Monday morning last the church bells were set ringing for the purpose of reminding the people of the time when Katherine, Queen of Henry VIII, first patronised pillow lace. This anniversary in bygone days was a perfectly holiday-keeping among the lacemakers, who were then earning from 15s. to £1 per week. Rich cakes were made, and sugar boiled in every lace-maker's house. Tea parties were numerous, and, as

⁵⁶ Het takje zeewier. In: *De Middelburgsche Courant*, 31 July 1903, 2–3; Het takje zeewier. In: *De Nieuwe Tilburgsche Courant*, 13 September 1903, 554.

⁵⁷ La Dentelle. In: *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle-Orléans*, 17 April 1904, 6; L'Algue. In: *Le Progrès*, 23 February 1911, 3; L'Algue. In: *Grand Écho du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais*, 4 September 1922, 1; L'Algue. In: *L'Action française*, 31 August 1922, 2; L'Algue. In: *Les Jeunes*, 5 August 1928, 560.

a wind-up, there was a merry dance [...] The anniversary this year passed away with little demonstration, owing, no doubt, to the small earnings of the lacemakers.⁵⁸

Given that the same paper had been reporting on lacemakers' poverty since the Napoleonic Wars, claims that lacemakers had once earned 1 British Pound (four times the wages of an adult male labourer) were inflated. The other oddity about this report is that it introduces, for the first time, the idea that the feast was not a celebration of a saint but of a queen. However, Henry married three different Catherines, which one had been the patron of lace? The likely author of this report, the worker poet John Plummer, clarified later that he meant Catherine Parr, Henry's last wife, whose family had strong local connections.⁵⁹ But tradition has settled on a different Catherine.

The person responsible for diffusing this legend was, yet again, Fanny Bury Palliser. She noted in 1865 that in Bedfordshire "certain traditions handed down in the county villages of a good queen who protected the craft"⁶⁰ From this slender lead she inferred "that the art of lace-making, as it then existed, was first imparted to the peasantry of Bedfordshire as a means of subsistence, by the charity of Queen Katherine of Aragon", who was resident in the county at Ampthill from 1531 to 1533.⁶¹ This inference, for there is no documentary or other evidence to back up the assertion, has none-the-less proved tenacious.

In the English Midlands from the 1880s until after the First World War, "ladies of fashion" formed consumer and marketing associations with the intention of cutting out the lace middlemen.⁶² They collected examples of fine lace and exhibited them to try and raise the quality of production. They organized evening classes to teach lace skills to a new generation. Their reasons for doing so encompassed many of the anxieties about domesticity, family stability, and craft as a motor of moral and aesthetic improvement that impelled lace patrons on the continent. Catherine of Aragon, and the Catterns celebrations supposedly held in her honour, were invoked in their attempts to revivify, or at least memorialize, the Midlands lace industry. Mrs Francesca Orlebar of Hinwick House (Bedfordshire) organized a Catterns tea in 1887, and her account, complete with reference to Catherine of Aragon, provided the template for further revivals in 1906 and 1937. When

58 Kettering. In: *Northampton Mercury*, 30 November 1861, 6.

59 Plummer, John: *Kattern's Day*. In: *Notes and Queries* 4th series II. 3 October 1868, 333.

60 Palliser (as note 2) 375.

61 Palliser (as note 60).

62 Spenceley, Geoff: The Lace Associations: Philanthropic Movements to Preserve the Production of Hand-Made Lace in Late-Victorian and Edwardian England. In: *Victorian Studies* 16 (1973) 433–452.

the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that the Duchess of Argyll had opened the annual sale of the North Bucks Lace Association, attended by many aristocratic ladies, it claimed they were following in Catherine's footsteps.⁶³ A lace pattern named "Catherine of Aragon" was part of Northamptonshire's contribution to the Franco-British Exhibition in London in 1908.⁶⁴ The queen was invariably mentioned in talks about lace at flower shows and church bazaars throughout the first half of the twentieth century. She was portrayed in parades, pageants and tableaux vivants, such as that laid on by the Girl Guide troop of Hambleden at Ascott Park in Buckinghamshire in 1929.⁶⁵ The connection is still maintained by the group of hobby lacemakers from Bedfordshire – Aragon Lacemakers – who regularly put on a show during the annual Aragon Day held in Ampthill since 2003.

Catherine of Aragon fulfils two motifs we have encountered in other legends: firstly, she pushed the origins of English lace further back in time; secondly, she provided exotic southern and, via Spain's Muslim heritage, eastern connections. She also embodied a very widespread notion among lace historians that lace was initially a court activity, a past-time of royalty and their ladies-in-waiting, which only subsequently became a plebeian livelihood; yet another unproved example of the *gesunkendes Kulturgut* theory. However, the most important message of the story was that royal patronage was essential for a flourishing lace industry, and this did chime with long-held assumptions among both lacemakers and lace merchants. In August 1830 a committee of the lace merchants of the counties of Northamptonshire, Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire had sent a petition to Queen Adelaide, "entreating your Majesty that by wearing Pillow-Lace at your coming Drawing Rooms, or in any way your Majesty may think fit, you would be pleased to introduce Pillow-Lace again into fashion", and thus "restore to comfort thousands who are nearly starving at present".⁶⁶ The Lace Associations of the later nineteenth century likewise sought aristocratic and royal patronage. In 1896 the Midland Lace Association publically triumphed in a large order placed by Queen Victoria herself which would "keep many willing hands happily employed, not only through these trying winter months but long after".⁶⁷

Bury Palliser only referred to village traditions of "a good queen who protected the craft"⁶⁸, but other folkloric sources offered a more precise account of her role. The unidentified author 'A.A.' reported in 1862 that Catterns was held

⁶³ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 April 1907, 3.

⁶⁴ For the Franco-British Exhibition. In: *Northampton Mercury*, 3 April 1908, 6.

⁶⁵ 'Girl Guides of Bucks. County Rally at Ascott Park. In: *Bucks Herald*, 7 June 1929, 13.

⁶⁶ *Northampton Mercury*, 4 September 1830, 3.

⁶⁷ Spenceley (see note 59) 441.

⁶⁸ Palliser (as note 2) 375.

“in remembrance of a Queen Catharine, who, when the trade was dull, burnt all her lace, and ordered new to be made.”⁶⁹ This variant of the Catherine of Aragon legend became interwoven with the origin story in multiple retellings throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For example, when Bedfordshire Women’s Institutes (W.I.) put on a Tudor pageant at Aspley Heath in August 1928, Ridgemont and Eversholt W.I. performed a tableau in which Catherine of Aragon and her ladies-in-waiting were approached “by a party of distressed Bedfordshire lace-makers to whom she gives employment after destroying her Spanish lace”.⁷⁰

By the 1920s commercial handmade lace production had dwindled beyond resurrection. These performances were less about revival and more about the development of a rural public sphere through local branches of national organisations such as the Girl Guides, the Band of Hope (a children’s temperance organisation) and the W.I. The wives of clergy and landowners, the same class who acted as lace patrons a generation before, were also active promoters of such institutions, as well as organizers of historical pageants. Pageants propounded a “Merrie England” version of history which tied the local to the national, and the rich to the poor. Queens, courtiers, and cottage lacemakers were bound together in a single narrative of national progress. The emphasis on women’s history is an interesting facet of the ‘craze’ for pageants, but not necessarily a radical one.⁷¹ As Elaine Freedgood explains in her study of lace histories such as Bury Palliser’s, lace production was envisioned as a feminine alternative to class relations that pitted (male) labour against (male) capital, not just because of lacemaking’s pre-industrial quality but because it was, in theory, an activity shared by women both rich and poor. “These connections between royal and working women project, implicitly, a utopia in which the ability to create and to consume lace not only unites women of all classes, but also harmoniously brings together the otherwise separate processes of production and consumption.”⁷² The lesson of gendered social harmony remained important even as its vehicle, lace, disappeared from fashion.

69 A.A.: Lace-Makers’ Custom: Wigs, A Sort of Cake. In: *Notes and Queries* 3rd series I, 17 May, 1862, 387.

70 Tudor Pageantry at Aspley Heath. In: *Bedfordshire Times and Independent*, 31 August 1928, 12.

71 On the enthusiasm for pageants see Bartie, Angela et al. (eds): *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*. London 2020.

72 Freedgood, Elaine: “Fine Fingers”: Victorian Handmade Lace and Utopian Consumption. In: *Victorian Studies* 45 (2003) 637.

8 Lace Legends of Bruges 3: Trude

Many of the themes rehearsed in these legends came together in the play *Le Miracle des fuseaux* [The Miracle of the Bobbins], first performed in Paris in February 1908 to raise money to help send city children to the countryside.⁷³ Its author was Geneviève Hennet de Goutel, the child of artists and an artist herself, but better known as a Catholic social activist and a prime mover in the organisation Le Sillon whose aim was to win back the increasingly anticlerical working classes. (It was disbanded by order of the Pope as too radical in 1910.) She died while serving with the French Red Cross mission to Romania during the First World War.⁷⁴ Her variant lace legend is a perfect patchwork of every trope concerning lace in pre-1914 culture.

Hennet de Goutel sets her scene in 1473 in a dank cellar in Bruges because, as lace histories taught, linen thread was best worked in humid conditions. Here lives a lacemaker, Trude, a widow despite her youth (her husband, inevitably, was a sailor lost at sea). Like the lacemaker of Argentan, Trude supports her aged grandmother Gudule, rendered blind by her dedication to lacemaking. Like Rose-Marie in Fourdrain's opera (and the lacemaker in Alexandre Desrousseaux's hugely popular lullaby *P'tit Quinquin*⁷⁵) she is also nursing her infant son, Klaus, whose health is imperilled by the damp atmosphere. Trude has inherited from her grandmother the task of finishing the bridal veil for a great noble lady, Hilda de Valkerke, modelled on lace from the age of Charlemagne – thus pushing back the legendary history of lace by multiple centuries! The design is so complex no other lacemaker has the skill to complete the task. The lacemaker who works on a bridal veil she will never get to wear herself was a common motif, not only in lace legends but also in literature, such as poems by Charles Fuster and Camille Lemonnier (both popular as performance pieces in the first decade of the twentieth century, and likely an influence on Hennet de Goutel).⁷⁶ Hilda, accompanied by her lady-in-waiting Ortrade, visit the family, thus establishing the direct relationship between consumer and producer, noble patron and lacemaker, which was an essential element in contemporary social activism such as the consumer

⁷³ Hennet de Goutel, Geneviève: *Le Miracle des fuseaux: légende du XVe siècle*. Paris 1908.

⁷⁴ Alambert, Marthe: *A Life's Oblation: The Biography of Geneviève Hennet de Goutel*. London 1921.

⁷⁵ The song was first published in 1853: Éric Lemaire, *Le chansonnier lillois Alexandre Joachim Desrousseaux et la chanson populaire dialectale*. Haubourdin 2009, 253–280.

⁷⁶ Fuster, Charles: *La Dentellière de Bruges*. Paris 1891; Lemonnier, Camille: *La jeune fille à la fenêtre In: La petite femme de la mer*. Paris 1898, 143–154. Lemonnier's prose poem was set to music in 1904 by Eugène Samuel-Holeman.

leagues, and another literary commonplace. But Hilda is unmoved by the family's poverty or Klaus's suffering: her wedding will take place in a month, and she demands that the work be completed by then, even though it still requires at least eight months' labour. Trude sits to work through the night – endangering her own health as well as her child's – when she hears a knock at the door. She admits a beggarwoman and offers her the family's poor food, but continues to work, singing the while. As she falls asleep at her pillow, the beggarwoman reveals herself to be the Virgin who summons angels to finish the lace and cure Klaus and Gudule.

For Hennet de Goutel the relationship between rich and poor was primarily a moral one. At one point in the play Trude reads the beatitudes from Jesus's sermon on the mount to her grandmother, but tellingly she does not follow "Blessed are the poor" with the phrase "in spirit". It is the literal poor who will inherit the kingdom of heaven. "The poor are our friends" Hennet de Goutel repeatedly claimed, because their labour, their suffering, and their resignation, provide moral examples to the rich. At one point Trude breaks out in bitter recriminations against Lady Hilda: a rare moment of overt class antagonism in these narratives. But Gudule brings her back to Hennet de Goutel's trinity of virtues – work, prayer, and charity – by asking her to read from the Bible. Gudule and Trude serve as lessons in faith and hope for Lady Hilda. Without the poor the rich could not engage in charity, their only means of salvation. The play was a fundraising exercise, and its last lines are an exhortation to the audience to open their purses.

9 Conclusion

Le Miracle des fuseaux proved very popular and continued to be performed by amateur groups throughout France until the Second World War at least. It was particularly appreciated by Catholic girls' schools because all the parts were female, but was also staged by Red Cross associations, Noëlistes (a Catholic youth group) and even by Protestant organisations such as the Salvation Army. Meanwhile across the Channel in Britain, similar types of local associations such as the Band of Hope, the Girl Guides, Sunday Schools and Girls' Friendly Associations were performing the operetta *The Lacemakers* which drew, albeit remotely, on the legend of Catherine of Aragon.⁷⁷ These are just some of the mechanisms through which legends of lace were transmitted throughout the twentieth century. Others

⁷⁷ The first mention of a performance of this operetta that I have found so far is from Herefordshire in November 1909, and the last from Sunderland in 1933. In the intervening period dozens

include more professional dramatic performances, historical pageants, newspaper articles, magazine pieces, local lectures, radio programmes and a whole range of other, largely ephemeral media representations. New legends continued to be put into circulation, even after the Second World War, especially through the fecund genres of children's and tourist literature.⁷⁸

The sheer scale of these, largely forgotten forms of cultural production, is only now becoming apparent thanks to digitization. Yet while the representations are legion, they all draw on a similar set of ideas about the special status of lace and its makers, the leading role of patrons, the feminine virtues of passivity and submission, and the ennobling effects of work, suffering and poverty. They also share motifs: the absent sailor father, husband or lover, the role of the woman worker as provider for her extended family, the lost or hidden secret of the craft, divine intervention ... *Le Miracle des fuseaux* was inspired by the legend of Argentan, which drew on the legend of Serena, which was written in knowledge of the Venetian lace legend ... This genealogy could be extended.

Because of the intermediate status of these narratives as legends, and therefore not the intellectual property of anyone, writers felt free to borrow, amend and reinterpret existing motifs. New versions almost immediately became part of this anonymous but generalized cultural repertoire. Few accounts of performances of *Le Miracle des fuseaux* name its author, and not one account mentions an author for the operetta *The Lacemakers*. Like legends in an oral culture, they have multiple performers but no identifiable source.

What should be clear, on the basis of the examples discussed in this article, is that lace legends are not contemporaneous with the events they depict: they cannot be, because they reach back into a time before lace was being made. They were not passed down in an oral culture, they originated in the second half of the nineteenth century, mostly in print. They were not part of the work culture of lacemakers themselves; they were authored by the many patrons, artists, philanthropists, social and political activists who interested themselves in the lives of lacemakers and who sought, for commercial or ideological reasons, to defend homemade lace production. They promoted idealized concepts of womanhood, the home, the family, craft, and industry, none of which were necessarily shared by lacemakers themselves.

However, this is not another historian's attempt to debunk the concept of "oral tradition", not least because lacemakers' work culture was a vibrant milieu

of newspapers throughout the British Isles reported on performances. Yet I have not been able to track down a copy of the play text, nor identify the authors.

78 The Lady, or Fairy, of the Flax, who first appeared in a children's book in 1982, has already passed into popular legend: Schnitzer, 'Luda': La Dame du lin: conte flamand. Paris 1982.

for other folkloric narratives.⁷⁹ It is precisely because we know so much about lacemakers' oral culture that it is possible to detect what was alien to it in these legends. Yet lace legends were not entirely remote to the lives of lacemakers. In their manifestations of their corporate identity, for example on their feast-days, lacemakers certainly appealed to clerical, aristocratic and royal patronage, aspects of which were encapsulated in legends. Occasionally lacemakers adopted these legends and incorporated them into their own traditions. After all, they had the most to gain from efforts to conserve the handmade lace industry. And while lacemakers remained poor, the impact of such narratives on the consumers of handmade lace does help explain how the industry survived in the face of economic realities.

Lace legends were not, originally, an oral genre, but they behave as if they were. These small, anecdotal texts move freely through different media, adapting to the needs of different tellers and different audiences. Today they are particularly at home on the web. They are seldom attributed, but are introduced with the vaguest of nods to tradition. Like migratory legends, stories or motifs seemingly linked to one location can spring up almost anywhere; they can be contracted to a single sentence or expanded to fill a novella. Yet despite this flexibility, and variability, they are often insistent on material details, such as addresses, that tie them to specific place and time. They are, like legends, historicist if not actually historical. Whether many of the proponents of such legends believed them to be accurate, they are narrated as *believable*. As Tim Tangherlini explains, believability gives legends "rhetorical weight",⁸⁰ which narrators deployed to define their own ideological position and to influence the opinions and actions of others. Lace legends might not be true, but they set the parameters for discussion; in consequence they had economic and political force.

Lace legends might appear fairly marginal, reproduced in ephemeral journals, on the back pages of local newspapers, in amateur performances. But it is their very ubiquity, providing a set of generalized assumptions about lace and its producers, patrons, and consumers, which made them so persuasive. They conferred a special status on lace, and the people who made it. In the drawn-out battle to preserve the handmade lace industry, they certainly had their uses.

⁷⁹ Hopkin, David: *Voices of the People in Nineteenth-Century France*. Cambridge 2012, chap. 6: The Visionary World of the Vellave Lacemaker.

⁸⁰ Tangherlini, Timothy R.: *Rhetoric, Truth and Performance: Politics and the Interpretation of Legend*. In: *Indian Folklife* 25 (2007) 8–12, here 8.