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Title: The Role of Singing in Places of Work as an Aspect of Women's Popular Culture

Year: 2018

Version: Publisher's PDF

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Please cite the original version:

Porter, G. (2018). The Role of Singing in Places of Work as an Aspect of Women's Popular Culture. In L. Kääntä, M. Enell-Nilsson, & N. Keng (Eds.) *Työelämän viestintä: VAKKI-symposiumi XXXVIII. Vaasa 8.-9.2.2018*, 225-232. Retrieved from http://www.vakki.net/publications/no9_fin.html

The Role of Singing in Places of Work as an Aspect of Women's Popular Culture

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Naisten populaarikulttuuri on usein liitetty kulutukseen, ei niinkään tuottamiseen. Lukuisat tutkimukset ovat kuitenkin osoittaneet, että työskennellessään yhdessä sekä pienissä työpajoissa, että tehdasteollisuudessa naiset todennäköisesti laulavat miehiä useammin ja he myös laulavat yhdessä eivätkä ainoastaan yksinään. Juuri nämä naisryhmät ovat jääneet vaille työlaulujen kerääjien huomiota, eivätkä kerääjät ole myöskään olleet kiinnostuneita yhdessä laulamista. Tässä artikkelissa haluan tarkastella juuri yhteislaulamisen dynamiikan kehittymistä työpaikoilla. On jossain määrin paradoksaalista, että tähän dynamiikkaan usein liittyy jopa niinkin henkilökohtaisia asioita kuin sopivan puolison valinta. Nauhoitetun musiikin toistamisella työpaikoilla on tietty funktio, kun taas Belfastissa tehty tutkimus osoitti, että naisten oma laulaminen ei ole ainoastaan voimaannuttavaa vaan myöskin vastavuoroista. Naisten työlaulujen on todettu palvelevan kolmea tarkoitusta, jotka ovat aikajärjestyksessä: rytmin luominen työprosessiin, yhteisöllisyyden rakentaminen ja ryhmäidentiteetin aikaan saaminen. Laulut loivat usein diskursiivisen kontekstin, jossa naiset itse puhuivat eivätkä tarvinneet ketään puhumaan puolestaan. He itse toimivat symbolisen minuutensa siirtämisessä puhujaan. Artikkelissa esitän, että työlaulujen kaltaiset sosiaaliset käytänteet voivat syntyä ja elää ainoastaan kiinteässä yhteisössä, jonka jäsenet viettävät yhdessä tuntikausia työnsä ääressä tai toimiesaan yhdessä työn ulkopuolella mielenosoituksessa tai karnevaaleissa.

Keywords: popular culture, singing as resistance, women's song culture, work songs

1 Introduction

Several recent studies (Korczynski, Pickering and Robertson 2013; Porter 2017) have remarked on the fact that women working together, both in small workshops (nailmaking, lacemaking) and in manufacturing industries (potteries, textiles) are more likely to sing at work than men, and to sing together rather than to themselves. This supports an early observation by Raymond Williams (2005/1980: 50) that “the means of communication as means of social production, and in relation to this the production of the means of communication themselves, have taken on a quite new significance, within the generally extended character of modern societies and between modern societies”. This article draws on a study by Betty Messenger (1978) of women workers in a flax mill in Belfast because it is precisely groups like this one that have been neglected by song collectors, who generally privilege solitary singers. This distinction is important since, following Saussure, the individual voice is *parole*, while social discourse is *langue*. In addition, women's popular culture has often been considered as belonging to a field of consumption (fashion and cosmetics) rather than (as in this article) production (Smith 2014:177–78). Using a comparative method, this study places Messenger's study of Belfast women in the context

of work by the present writer and others to recover evidence of earlier singing at work by women on the one hand, and among women in modern factory settings on the other (Porter 1993; Korczynski et al 2013).

Music at work frequently functions as both empowering and reciprocal. Among women it has taken three distinct forms (in roughly chronological order):

- 1) establishing rhythm for work processes, as with lacemaking in early modern England (Porter 1994).
- 2) constructing social unity, such as among London matchmakers in the eighteenth century (Porter 1992: 115).
- 3) defining group identity, such as among the flax spinners in Belfast in the last century.

The last group, which is the subject of this paper created a discursive environment where women spoke rather than were spoken for, one in which they carried the bulk of the symbolic meaning to encourage a personal identification with the ‘us’ of those who were singing (Williamson 1993: 79) even while working in a crowded spinning shed.

Spinning has been regarded as a gendered activity since Biblical times: the virtuous woman “maketh fine linen, and selleth it” (Proverbs 31: 24 in the Bible, Authorized Version 1945: 695), and making linen was still the prerogative of women in the early seventeenth century in England at least (Smith 2014: 181). In fact, when they entered the factories of the eighteenth century they at first had an economic edge over men who had remained at their looms at home. The wages of women still “put the bread on the table” in the linen, cotton and wool industries of England and Ireland until quite recently. However, drawing on data from the important early Messenger study (1978), this suggests that such social practices could exist only in a tightly-knit community that shared long hours of work and bursts of shared free time such as a carnival or a demonstration.

2 Song as a Discourse of Communication for Women

While song has been analysed anthropologically in terms of the senses, work and memory, it has been barely considered as a way of communicating in the workplace. The sea shanty is perhaps the only exception. The songs of women as a group in a working environment have been almost wilfully marginalized. The leaders of the early folk music revival concentrated on the singing of women as individuals rather than in groups. When the leading English song collector Cecil Sharp was collecting folk songs in Somerset in the south west of England at the beginning of the twentieth century, he largely ignored communal songs even though the area was the centre of a domestic industry for women making up shirts together at home. The workers, many of them young girls, sang at their machines:

The sewing of the shirts called for no great powers of concentration, so the women and girls used to meet in one another's cottages to sew, chat and sing, and you could walk down the village street and hear through the open windows snatches of song mingled with the hum of the machines. A singer with a good repertoire was a great asset at these gatherings, for time passed quickly and pleasantly as song followed song in unending succession. (Newall 1993: 14)

However, Sharp did not collect any of these songs, but passed by and concentrated instead on the singing of a single older informant, Louie Hooper. It is impossible now to recover the songs that Sharp missed, or even to know whether the songs were related to the women's work in any way. It is unlikely that the shirtmakers used their singing to maintain a regular work rhythm, even though this has often been regarded as one of the defining elements of the (male) work song (G. Thomson 1980: 15–19). The same example is also a reminder that singing in a group is not necessarily synonymous with group singing: frequently one woman took the lead and the others joined in at will. This was the case in Messenger's study.

Because of the privileging of the trope of the lone singer, little attention has been paid to singing by women in groups, a key feature of the expressive culture of all societies (see Porter 1992: 115). The songs of women in Gaelic Scotland, particularly those of women waulking, or softening cloth, have now been published and widely discussed, but studies of the songs of women at work in English-speaking communities have remained cursory. In addition to Betty Messenger's early study (1978), and one by the present writer (Porter 1994) on the counting rhymes (*tells*) of young lacemakers in the English Midlands, Korczynski, Pickering and Robertson (2013) have published an important study of these and many other productive environments, such as biscuit factories.

The fact that the repertoire of the Somerset shirtmakers and others has been lost is a gender issue, since there is circumstantial evidence, both contemporary and historical, to suggest that such singing in a group was practiced more by women than by men. This can also be applied to industrial production: "singing cultures within factories were overwhelmingly the creation of female workers" (Korczynski et al. 2013: 199). However, the corollary that women were less likely than men to sing on their own when they could be overheard may also be true. There were obvious reasons for this: women might have been unwilling to sing alone in places where there were large numbers of people. Singing was more likely in factories where jobs were decided by gender, an illegal practice but one that was common for reasons of pay.

Corroboration of the Raymond Williams' hypothesis that communication in this way was as much a part of production as the tools and equipment in the workplace receives support from sources going back many centuries. Indeed, the earliest evidence of singing by working women, from the sixteenth century onwards, is for women in the textile industry. As early as the 1530s in England, the reformer Miles Coverdale was complaining of the

low nature of the songs sung by spinners, while in “Jack of Newbury,” licensed in 1597, Thomas Deloney describes two hundred women singing as they worked in a spinning room (Spufford 1981: 14, 20). There are even references in contemporary plays. Duke Orsino says of a song in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* (1952: 307):

The spinsters [spinners] and the knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave their thread with bones [lacemakers]
Do use to chant it. (2. 4. 44-46)

Despite Coverdale’s complaint, they were associated with verbal powers (Smith 2014: 240), even though by the beginning of the following century the word “spinster” had once again become associated negatively with old and unmarried women, a meaning that continued till modern times.

In the modern period there are numerous accounts by historians, and sociologists. The latter include the study mentioned above, carried out by Betty Messenger with women working in the mechanized flax mills of Northern Ireland. Her findings, based on research carried out between 1969 and 1977 in an industry dominated by women, have great significance from a sociocultural viewpoint, but they also have direct relevance to this study: Messenger showed unambiguously that at least in the flax mills of Northern Ireland, the women did not passively imitate the mechanical features of working life in their songs but related that life to wider experience or set up a challenge to those relations through distancing (Messenger 1988/1978: 207-18). The doffers’ own view of themselves, at least in Belfast, was rather different. “You will easy know a doffer” was one of a large number of occupational songs which equated sexual desirability with the universal sense among skilled workers of the uniqueness and attractiveness of their own crafts:

You will easy know a doffer
When she comes into town,
With her long yellor [*sic*] hair,
And her ringlets hangin’ down,
And her ribbon tied before her,
And her picker in her hand,
For she’ll always get her man,
For she’ll always get her man,
You will easy know a doffer
For she’ll always get her man. (Messenger 1988/1978: 35)

By avoiding circumstantial detail like names and places, the song manages to speak simultaneously on both the individual and the group level. As if to drive the point home, the song was applied to the older, more highly-paid weavers, wielding scissors rather than “pickers” (line 5, for cleaning the flax) but with the mocking last line, “For she’ll never get a man”. This was sung by very young teenage girls working in the spinning-room: it is worth remembering that the average age for starting work in the first half of the twentieth century was 12 or 13 (Messenger 1988/1978: 229-33), and it is understandable that

the doffers' song was later picked up by children: at the height of the "Troubles" (community conflicts) in 1971 it was recorded in a school playground in central Belfast by the BBC (Messenger 1988/1978: 136; Hammond 1978: 23). The repeated chorus is no more than a projection of wish fulfilment, which is only what Fredric Jameson (1981: 68) calls the "paler and more well-behaved predecessor' of sexual desire."

The melody is familiar from the music hall, but the presence of the picker and the repeated emphasis on the fact that the successful lover is a doffer is an example of the way occupation is often synonymous with identity in these songs. Their occupation is a stance, a position, a place to stand. This too has a long history in the textile industry: in Aristophanes' play, *Lysistrata* (Athens, 5th century BC), the magistrate asks the women for advice on how to restore peace and harmony in the state and between states, and Lysistrata suggests an example of weaving from her own experience: "it might not be so idiotic as you think to run the whole city on the model of the way we deal with wool [sic]" (Rooney 2000: 268). That is indeed what they did. It should be added that the prominence of examples drawn from fabric industry which support the Williams thesis that the means of production (the loom) also functions as a means of communication is a result of the central role of textiles in even the earliest societies.

3 Song as a Bearer of Radical Discourse among Working Women

Betty Messenger made it clear that singing in the Ulster flax mills was only empowering for women. At the basic level they used the songs to tease men. Her research in Belfast failed to find a comparable practice among the male workers who were responsible for "hackling," a process where the flax was treated by hand (Messenger 1988/1978: 82-120).

The doffers composed and developed songs about their wretched conditions, while comparing their group spirit favourably with that of those in the other departments. Their work was often synonymous with their identity. My main examples have been those of the doffers in the flax spinning room. In the first half of the 20th century, doffers were usually young (12-18) and almost exclusively girls (Messenger 1988/1978: 229-33). They worked long hours, typically from 6a.m. to 6 p.m. (Messenger 1988/1978: 31). The job of a doffer was to remove full bobbins of yarn, which were large and heavy, from the frames and put empty ones in their place. Spinners and doffers removed full bobbins, which were large and heavy, from the frames and putting empty ones in their place. In this respect their songs often compared themselves favourably with the weavers. However, the reality of their working conditions was very different. John Gregson, describing conditions in the English Midlands in 1975, said:

Doffers in Burnley, well, doffers anywhere was the lowest textile workers you got. A very dirty job and they had to work in their stocking feet. Bare feet, I should say. Weavers would know – weavers didn't congregate with doffers, did they. [N]or [did] winders [responsible for winding the warp

and weft in different departments]. Winders and weavers were the elected cotton people. (Palmer 2010: 83)

As a result, in Belfast songs were primarily used in spinning settings (the machine room was too deafening) to offer resistance to authoritarian and life-denying attitudes (Messenger 1988/1978: 27). This is why the iconic figure of the Easter rising, James Connolly, who in 1912 was working as an organizer of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in the north, became involved with the doffers. During a strike that partly centred on a ban on singing at work, he advised them "not to go back in ones and twos, but to gather outside the mills and all go in in a body: to go in singing . . . before they left me tonight they were busy making up a song to sing as they go back. What wonderful, wonderful fighting spirit" (O'Brien 1935: 136). Unsurprisingly, in 1948 they were singing in support of a strike in County Armagh (Messenger 1988/1978: 139). In this way the playground, and the political struggle that convulsed Northern Ireland in the last century, both proved new and fertile arenas for the songs, and by implication offered a much wider audience to songs like "You will always know a doffer" on the one hand and fighting chants to the national hero and martyr James Connolly on the other.

The attitude of the doffers in Belfast was not by any means unique. Most significantly from the point of view of women's empowerment, in more recent times a study was carried out by J. Sarsby (1988) on women potters in Staffordshire singing at work and being actively encouraged by their overseer:

"He was at one end of the warehouse and we were all singing, and he stood and listened to us – And he said – he clapped his hands – he says: 'Very good, very nice', he says. 'I know you're working when you're singing!' He understood how singing . . . could help the work along" (Sarsby 1988: 64).

Later, the overseers of women potters in mid-20thC Staffordshire "understood how . . . *Music While you Work* could help the work along" (Sarsby 1988: 64). Sarsby gives examples of a worker being encouraged to sing by her boss, and later transferring "from a relatively light job as a looker-over in the greenhouse to the rigours of mouldrunning" (carrying plates from the flat-pressers' wheels to the drying rooms) because the young women there seemed to be having more fun (Sarsby 1988: 64). In short, patriarchal power (controlling, conserving, excluding) was being resisted by *jouissance* (giving, enjoying, consuming).

When the English reformer William Cobbett travelled round the south of England in 1826, he commented: "Here are, through all these towns, and throughout this country, weavers from the North, singing about the towns' ballads of distress!" (1967: 341. Original italics). Although songwriting among weavers reached a peak at this time, there is little sign in their songs of the tendency towards organisation represented by the Chartists and the early trade unions, or the young Belfast linen workers who are the subject of this paper. Instead, these songs express their sorrowful experience in a non-lament context,

extending their expression beyond death rites into the solitary moments of their daily lives. As one displaced weaver put it: "I sit and grieve at my loom all day" (Palmer 1977: 274). Many of these songs of distress are associated with women singers, and in this respect the spinners' songs show affinity with the *dainas* sung by Latvian women on their wedding day, songs which, in Vaira Vike-Freibergs's words, "stem from the observation of genuine life experiences involving emotional coldness, therefore becoming a partly constructed and hence symbolic, but also real, state of exile" (2001: 199). In the process their songs often created a discursive environment where, as was said earlier, women spoke rather than were spoken for.

4 Conclusions

Like food, and like sport today, singing has always been a paralanguage, a means of communication that accompanies, or often replaces, speech, as such one of the best bridges between cultures and between social groups. This paper makes a larger claim of the role of discourse of all kinds in not only communicating but also challenging the dominant discourse of the employer) or discourses (of those working in the other departments of the mill). The working songs in this paper are increasingly parodic, directed *against* the occupational discourse of the petty official who implements the dictates of a system that discriminates against the dispossessed, or the employer who refuses to deal equally with the men and women in his employ. Marek Korczynski and others (2013) showed how songs have continued to create solidarity among women until recent years. It is clear that singing was empowering for women in the spinning mills in Belfast, not only in the way they used the songs to tease men but also in the way the young workers developed a group identity. Messenger's research failed to find a comparable practice among the male workers in other sections of the mills (1988/1978: 94). This applies to other workplaces as well: women and minorities are often vulnerable to technological change. In this respect this paper has suggested that not only in the Belfast linen mills but also in many other workplaces women have used more than song in resistance. Piped music has been used to reduce stress among women in a factory environment:

"there is also evidence that there was a tendency to see women workers as the most appropriate recipients of broadcast music . . . In part, this can be seen because it was mainly women who were undertaking the low-skill, repetitive jobs [and] because women suffer more from the fatigue of factory work" (Korczynski et al. 2013: 217–8).

In *The Political Unconscious* (1981: 94), Fredric Jameson showed how the study of generic work songs like those of the women in the Ulster mills allows the cultural history of oral forms to be coordinated with the evolution of social life. This paper has suggested that *work songs* were both empowering and reciprocal in such settings. In occupational songs, love, labour and money are part of the same discourse (Porter 1992: 94). As Adam Fox (2003/2000: 240) put it in relation to one of the subjects of the present study, "Spinning has long been a metaphor for gossiping." This paper has further sought to identify

such a collective dynamic in the development of what has been a significant aspect of occupational lore in smaller mills and factories.

The song as an aspect of popular culture has been studied unusually in this paper as belonging to a field of production rather than of consumption (concerts, recordings etc.). It has featured women who sing rather than listen to taped music while they are working. While there is no question that the songs of the doffers qualify as a “means of communication as means of social production,” Raymond Williams’ model remains a provisional one, and one that has inevitably been replaced by the social media.

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