

'Good ladies be working': singing at work in Tudor woman's song

Article

Published Version

O'Callaghan, M. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6084-0122> (2019) 'Good ladies be working': singing at work in Tudor woman's song. *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 82 (1). pp. 107-126. ISSN 1544-399X doi: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2019.0005> Available at <https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/66755/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

To link to this article DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2019.0005>

Publisher: University of Pennsylvania Press

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in the [End User Agreement](#).

www.reading.ac.uk/centaur

CentAUR

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online





PROJECT MUSE®

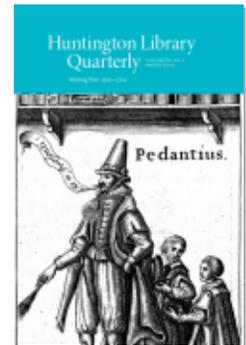
"Good Ladies Be Working": Singing at Work in Tudor Woman's
Song

Michelle O'Callaghan

Huntington Library Quarterly, Volume 82, Number 1, Spring 2019, pp. 107-126
(Article)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hlq.2019.0005>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/722913>

“Good Ladies Be Working”: Singing at Work in Tudor Woman’s Song

Michelle O’Callaghan

ABSTRACT Early ballads provide evidence for a wide social range of female voices in lyric verse and song. The scene of speaking, or rather singing, in the ballad “Attend thee, go play thee” is of a young woman at work spinning and sewing for her mistress. The ballad therefore draws attention to the non-elite working woman’s voice in performance, raising questions about how working subjectivities were fashioned through song. The trope of women singing at work can offer a way into conceptualizing working women’s agency because it brings into play the complex interrelationships between gender, genre, voice, and embodiment in a figurative and material sense. “Attend thee, go play thee” is a remarkable ballad because it fictionalizes the conditions of its own performance, providing evidence for how and where it might have been voiced and heard. By attending to these questions of performance, it is possible to examine issues of historical agency in relation to women’s writing. In “Voicing Text 1500–1700,” ed. Jennifer Richards and Richard Wistreich, special issue, <http://muse.jhu.edu/resolve/66>.

KEYWORDS: flyting ballads; sixteenth-century women’s labor; female-voiced texts; women’s work and courtship; *chanson de toile*; *pastourelle*

“ATTEND THEE, GO PLAY THEE,” as indicated by the title it is given in the Tudor ballad collection *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*—“The scoffe of a Ladie, as pretie as may be, to a yong man that went a wooing”—is an example of female-voiced invective, or flyting.¹ While early modern female-voiced *complaint* has attracted a wealth of

1. *A Handfull of Pleasant Delites* (London, 1584), sigs. A6v–A7v; for a digital edition, see *Verse Miscellanies Online*, <http://versemiscellaniesonline.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/texts/handful-of-pleasant-delights/handful-sig-aviv>. Another version of the ballad was copied into a manuscript miscellany compiled by John Harington of Stepney and his son, John Harington of Kelston; see *The Arundel Harington Manuscript of Tudor Poetry*, ed. Ruth Hughey, 2 vols. (Columbus, Ohio, 1960), 1:281–82 (text), 2:392–94 (notes). On flyting, see Douglas Gray, “Rough Music: Some Early Invectives and Flytings,” in *English Satire and the Satiric Tradition*, ed. Claude Rawson (Oxford, 1984), 21–38.

critical work, little attention has been paid to the female-voiced *scoff*.² The comic *scoff* is pitched at a lower social register than that which conventionally characterizes the more courtly love complaint and so provides evidence for a wider social range of female voices in lyric verse and song. Moreover, this particular *scoff* is especially significant because it draws much-needed attention to the status of the non-elite working woman's voice in performance, raising questions about how working subjectivities were fashioned and deployed.³ Such metaphors of voice are, of course, highly mediated and not transparent windows onto the lived experience of women or forthright expressions of agency. Yet, by attending to the complex relationship between gender, genre, voice, and embodiment, it is possible to address these difficult questions of historical agency in relation to women's writing.

The ballad "Attend thee, go play thee" opens in the female voice, and there is a loose narrative structure to the song as it appears in *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*: the young woman, while at work spinning and sewing for her mistress, is importuned by a suitor, with whom she remonstrates, insisting he leave because she is busy, with no time for courtship. After the suitor departs, the woman addresses her female co-workers on the theme of work and courtship; a "sir," presumably the master, tells the women it is time to go home to their lovers, and the women answer with a jibe at the young man. The young man's response is printed in *A Handful*, attributed to the pseudonymous "Peter Pick"; the male speaker takes the maid's rejection of his suit as a sign of female inconstancy and delivers a "flout."⁴ The conventions through which the female voice is constructed in the *scoff* mean that this ballad sounded and was heard differently from other genres of female-voiced song, such as the lament. Bruce Smith uses the concept of an "acoustic field" or "acoustic community" to describe how voice is incorporated into a wider "system of sound" shared between performers and auditors, which is embodied and social, located in time and space.⁵ The distinctive features of the acoustic field of this ballad accentuate issues of social class alongside those of gender. The ways in which songs, such as this *scoff*, were performed and heard are thus context-sensitive, bringing into play a range of social, cultural, physical, and literary codes. Voices are located within particular historical soundscapes and, simultaneously, modulated by shared conventions of how lyrics should sound, even though these conventions may be manipulated, disrupted, or even suspended

2. On the complaint, see, for example, John Kerrigan, *Motives of Woe: Shakespeare and "Female Complaint"* (Oxford, 1991); and Lindsay Ann Reid, *Ovidian Bibliofictions and the Tudor Book: Metamorphosing Classical Heroines in Late Medieval and Renaissance England* (Farnham, U.K., 2014).

3. For other work in this field, see Michelle Dowd and Natasha Korda, *Working Subjects in Early Modern English Drama* (Farnham, U.K., 2013).

4. *Handfull of Pleasant Delites*, sig. A7v.

5. Bruce Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago, 1999), 46.

in performance. There is therefore a complex interplay between social, generic, and other literary constructions of voice and the materiality of voice in performance.⁶

One set of codes delineating the soundscape of “Attend thee, go play thee” derives from medieval “woman’s song,” or *chanson de femme*. “Woman’s song” is used by medievalists to describe a lyric mode said to have its origins in the songs and dances accompanying the work and ritual activities of non-elite women.⁷ Traces of such songs survive. Snatches from thirteenth-century women’s dance songs, for instance, were copied in the sermon notes of friars, where they are ascribed to local, albeit anonymous, women and used to illustrate unruly behavior.⁸ However, as this example illustrates, woman’s song often comes down to us framed within and therefore mediated by a male text. In the case of male-authored lyrics, woman’s song is characteristically represented in the form of “borrowed” speech and frequently used to signify a non-elite, unlearned culture.⁹ Thomas Wyatt, for example, identified the origins of his tale of the country mouse in songs sung by lower-class women at work in the household: “My mothers maides when they do sowe and spinne: / They sing a song made of the feldishe mouse.”¹⁰ Similarly, when Orsino requests the performance of woman’s song in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, this “old and plain” genre is signified by women singing while they work: “The spinsters and knitters in the sun, / And the free maids that weave their thread with bones, / Do use to chant it.”¹¹

Given that woman’s song was frequently appropriated by elite male writers and composers, it is difficult to determine, as Anne Klinck points out, if its presence is a trace of songs sung by historical women, and hence of female authorship, or a literary convention, a fictional device created by male composers. Her solution to this problem of attribution is to argue that femininity is embodied “in voice rather than in authorship” and in the gendering of the scene of performance.¹² The resulting “double voice,” in which a male author writes in a female voice, may result in a male-authored script of the woman’s part, but it did not necessarily close off woman’s song to women as composers, performers, and auditors. As we have seen, not all fictions of woman’s song are without basis in historical practice: there is anthropological evidence for a long-standing tradition of women singing their own songs, which includes both those dance songs of non-elite women preserved in sermon notes and

6. Paul Zumthor, *Oral Poetry: An Introduction*, trans. Kathryn Murphy-Judy (Minneapolis, 1990), 21–23; Smith, *Acoustic World*, 19–47.

7. Anne Klinck, “Woman’s Song in Medieval Western Europe,” in *Medieval Oral Literature*, ed. Karl Reichl (Berlin, 2012), 521–46.

8. Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou, “*I Have a Yong Suster*”: *Popular Song and the Middle English Lyric* (Dublin, 2002), 222–23.

9. Doris Earnshaw, *The Female Voice in Medieval Romance Lyric* (New York, 1988), 122.

10. *Tottel’s Miscellany: Songs and Sonnets of Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey, Sir Thomas Wyatt and Others*, ed. Amanda Holton and Tom MacFaul (London, 2011), 122.

11. Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, ed. Elizabeth Story Donno (1985; Cambridge, 2003), 95 (2.4.41–44).

12. Klinck, “Woman’s Song,” 525–26.

courtly love complaints composed and performed by the medieval *trobairitz*, elite female troubadours.¹³ That said, if we take the logic of Klinck's argument that gender inheres in the voice to its logical conclusion, as Bruce Smith has done, then it may not make a difference whether the author or the performer is male or female to how the song is performed or heard. Writing of the phenomenon of woman's song in early modern ballads, Smith argues that the physiological effect of singing on both performer and auditor results in a process of bodily transformation that has the potential to erase gender differences. The male singer identifies with the female voice so intensely that he embodies the "person" he sings, undergoing a momentary gender reassignment; at the same time, the audience identifies with the singing voice and so hears a woman, not a man.¹⁴ This argument is compelling, particularly in relation to the impassioned appeal of the tragic female-voiced lament. Yet how a song is performed and heard is also determined by generic and ideological codes. Laments sound different from comic songs, like the *pastourelle*, in that the latter allow for the use of irony in performance, which introduces "a dissonance in the voicing of the female speaker," thus problematizing the process of identifying with the singing voice on the part of both performer and audience.¹⁵ Furthermore, to recast Elizabeth Harvey's point in *Ventriloquized Voices*, the question of whether a male singer can become a woman for the duration of a performance is not just ontological but also ethical and political; to put it another way, "when these women speak in these songs, in whose interests are they speaking?"¹⁶

The anonymous ballad "Attend thee, go play thee" shares many generic features with medieval woman's song. One is its scene of speaking—that of women at work. Since the young woman's scoff is answered in *A Handful* by the male flout attributed to Peter Pick, this pair of flyting ballads recalls the formula of the medieval *tenso* or debate lyric, in which contending voices, typically arguing about love, are set against each other either within a single lyric or across answering songs, as is the case in *A Handful*.¹⁷ In the version of "Attend thee" printed in *A Handful*, the argument is about courtship and work; the prioritizing of work, I will argue, distinguishes this ballad from earlier woman's songs and speaks of an acoustic field structured by patterns of labor emerging in the sixteenth century. "Attend thee" situates itself within and gives voice to a community of "good Ladies" who "be working" (line 38); the

13. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "Fictions of the Female Voice: The Women Troubadors," in *Medieval Women's Song: Cross-Cultural Approaches*, ed. Anne L. Klinck and Ann Marie Rasmussen (Philadelphia, 2002), 133.

14. Bruce Smith, "Female Impersonation in Early Modern Ballads," in *Women Players in England, 1500–1660: Beyond the All-Male Stage*, ed. Pamela Allen Brown and Peter Parolini (Aldershot, U.K., 2005), 281–304.

15. See Boklund-Lagopoulou, "I Have a Yong Suster," 219–21, on the "Jolly Jankyn" carols.

16. Elizabeth D. Harvey, *Ventriloquized Voices: Feminist Theory and English Renaissance Texts* (London, 1992), 12; Judith M. Bennett, "Ventriloquism: When Maidens Speak in English Songs, c. 1300–1550," in *Medieval Women's Song*, ed. Klinck and Rasmussen, 190.

17. Earnshaw, *Female Voice*, 45–47.

identity of this community “is maintained not only by what its members *say* in common but what they *hear* in common.”¹⁸ Their song gives voice to and speaks in the interests of a social identity that is informed by the particular socioeconomic and material conditions of women’s work in the sixteenth century.

☞ Precursors: *Chanson de Femme* and Early Tudor Carols

“Attend thee, go play thee” draws on two main forms of woman’s song that derive from medieval French traditions. The figure of the lady at her needlework singing songs of love and courtship has a precedent in the *chanson de toile*, a form of female-voiced complaint in which the lady sings while she sews, establishing an analogy between needlework and love work.¹⁹ While “Attend thee” shares this needlework motif, the conventions of the *scoff* mean that the register of the female voice in this ballad differs from the *chanson de toile* both in terms of its affective properties and its social situation, drawing instead on the more aggressive debate form of the earthy *pastourelle*. Moreover, since the speaker of this ballad is not a court lady but a working woman whose needle is employed in the service of her mistress and not in the service of courtly love, she also has more in common with the maid at work fending off the sexual advances of a would-be lover in the *pastourelle*. A study of the *pastourelle* can therefore elucidate the models for voicing working women available to “Attend thee” in the early sixteenth century and the particular ways in which this mode of woman’s song is shaped through performance and by historically inflected generic and ideological codes.

There are two main scenarios in *pastourelle*: one in which a knight overhears a love complaint sung by a beautiful shepherdess, and one that takes the form of a debate between the maid and the knight. It is a very flexible format, and varying versions of these scenarios and characters can be found across different regions of Europe.²⁰ A carol copied into an early Tudor songbook (Henry VIII Manuscript, Add. MS 31922, British Library) features a milkmaid and is a *tenso*, a female–male dialogue. The knight accosts the maid as she is on her way to milk her cow, makes sexual advances (which she refuses), and departs with the threat that he will not spare her maidenhead the next time.²¹ A more violent scenario is played out in another early Tudor carol in the *pastourelle* tradition, “Be pes, ye make me spille my ale.” In this female–male dialogue, the maid is at work at home brewing ale in the buttery when she is sexually assaulted by a gentleman intruder.²² A very similar scenario is

18. Smith, *Acoustic World*, 46.

19. E. Jane Burns, “Sewing Like a Girl: Working Women in the *Chanson de Toile*,” in *Medieval Women’s Song*, ed. Klinck and Rasmussen, 98–124.

20. Earnshaw, *Female Voice*, 93. For an overview of *pastourelle*, see *The Medieval Pastourelle*, trans. and ed. William D. Paden, 2 vols. (New York, 1987).

21. John Stevens, *Music and Poetry in the Early Tudor Court* (Cambridge, 1961), 424.

22. See the discussion of this song in Bennett, “Ventriloquism,” 197ff. The carol is printed from the Ritson Manuscript (Add. MS 5665, British Library) in Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 339–40. Line references are to this edition.

played out in the song “Mannerly Margery milk and ale,” in which a serving maid is raped by a church clerk who then mocks her, leaving her without the promise of marriage. This song, which has been attributed to John Skelton, belongs to a tradition of Middle English woman’s song in which a priest or clerk, typically called John or Jankyn, seduces a young working girl. Traces of these “jolly Jankyn” poems can be heard in the refrain “Jak of the Vale.”²³

All these carols survive in early Tudor songbooks, where they are set to three voices. The milkmaid carol and its setting, which opens with the conventional refrain, “Hey trolly loly lo!,” were copied into a songbook produced at Henry VIII’s court (Henry VIII Manuscript, Add. MS 31922, British Library).²⁴ “Mannerly Margery” is also copied into a songbook, the Fayrfax Manuscript (Add. MS 5465, British Library), similarly produced within the Henrician court.²⁵ The settings of both these carols have been attributed to William Cornysh, composer at Henry VIII’s court and master of the Chapel Royal. The composer of “Be pes, ye make me spille my ale” is unknown. Its setting appears in the Ritson Manuscript (Add. MS. 5665, British Library), a songbook of church music and secular songs, copied between 1460 and 1510, that probably began life at Exeter Cathedral.²⁶ Given that so few settings for woman’s song have survived, these songbooks provide an opportunity for studying “song as music-interacting-with-words,” as Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner puts it, instead of focusing on the lyrics “as a verbal artifact read by a consumer of written texts.”²⁷ Moreover, for all these carols, we know something of at least one of the acoustic communities in which they were sung and heard, and the social, cultural, and physical codes that shaped their performance. These are professional rather than amateur productions, and their composition and performance relies on a high degree of musical literacy. Available in polyphonic settings in court and ecclesiastical songbooks, these particular iterations of the carols exemplify the ways in which woman’s song was appropriated by elite professional male composers. The *pastourelle*, which emerged in Europe in the twelfth century, was composed by troubadours for the entertainment of noble audiences.²⁸ Like the *pastourelle*, the carols in these songbooks appropriate the soundscape of non-elite woman’s song for courtly and learned game-playing. The onomatopoeic refrain of “Hey trolly loly lo!,” for example, is an

23. See Klinck, “Woman’s Song,” 544. The carol is printed from the Fayrfax Manuscript in Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 378–79. Line references are to this edition.

24. See *Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music*, GB-Lbl Add. MS 31922, <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/sources/1238/#/>; Ray Siemens, “Revisiting the Text of the Henry VIII Manuscript (BL Add. MS 31922): An Extended Note,” *EMLS* 14, no. 3 (January 2009): 3.1–36.

25. See *Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music*, GB-Lbl Add. MS 5465, <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/sources/1237/#/>.

26. See *Digital Image Archive of Medieval Music*, GB-Lbl Add. MS 5665, <https://www.diamm.ac.uk/sources/796/#/>; Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 1–8.

27. Bruckner, “Fictions of the Female Voice,” 127.

28. Kathryn Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval Literature and Law* (Philadelphia, 1991), 118–20.

echo of folksongs, pointing to its origins in the round dance or *carole*, in which the singers' movement in the dance corresponds with the structure of the song.²⁹ The self-conscious citing of this folk dance within the setting in the Henry VIII songbook is part of courtly game-playing; the wit of the compositions resides in the incorporation of a vernacular "resisting" non-elite woman's song into the polyphonic settings of these elite male soundscapes.

The debate format of this mode of woman's song means that the conflict between the male and female voices is a structural principle of the lyrics. What then happens to the sound of these lyrics when sung within the settings of these polyphonic part-songs? Since "Hey trolly loly lo!" is a refrain song, it is possible to hear distinctly the musical contrast between the male and female parts. The male voice dominates the verses, where he issues invitations and warnings, while the maid's voice dominates the refrain, encompassing the male response:

Nay, in good feyth, I wyll not melle with you;
I pray you sir, lett me go mylke my cow!
Why, wyll ye nott geve me no comfortt,
That now in the feldes we may as sportt?
Nay, God forbede! That may not be;
I wysse my mothyr than shall us se!

(Lines 11–16)³⁰

The *tenso* form of the *pastourelle* can be heard in the setting provided in the Henry VIII Manuscript. This refrain-song is through-set, with a varied burden, and so the setting is different for each verse. Nonetheless, when the song opens, the lower voices take the "man's part," and the higher voice takes the woman's. For this earlier section of the song, the man's part is set in duple time and, as Linda Austern has noted, "is rhythmically and metrically more complex": a musical and ideological code that denotes gentlemanly status within the soundscape of the song. By contrast, the "female" refrain is set in triple time—described by Austern as "simple and dance like"—pointing to its source in folksong and the round dance. The song therefore begins with a type of musical gendering at work in the contrast between the slower, measured pace of the elite "male" verses and the tripping lightness of the lower-class "female" refrain. After the initial verses, however, when both voices become more insistent, the three voices sing together.³¹

29. Karl Reichl, "Plotting the Map of Medieval Oral Literature," *Medieval Oral Literature*, 45.

30. The carol is printed from Henry VIII's Manuscript in Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 424–25.

31. See Linda Phyllis Austern's discussion of this setting, "Women's Musical Voices in Sixteenth-Century England," *Early Modern Women: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 3 (Fall 2008): 127–52 at 133.

The lyrics of “Be pes” and “Mannerly Margery,” by contrast, do not have such a clear musical distinction between the female and male parts. “Be pes” is not a refrain song, while the refrain in “Mannerly Margery” is assigned to a narrator. Voice is very complicated in both songs. Male–female flyting occurs within and across verses, meaning that it is often difficult to determine who is speaking and so to distinguish vocally between the sounds of the two voices in performance. Neither the Fayrfax nor the Ritson setting attempts to distinguish systematically between the male and female voices in order to represent the interplay between different characters. Rather the three parts or voices—countertenor, tenor, and bass—operate as a unified voice.³² The setting for “Be pes” is strophic, meaning that each verse is sung to the same setting. The male and female voices are not assigned the same lines in each verse: the maid does not always open the verse, that is, or sing the same pairs of lines. This means that distinctive musical effects, such as melisma, do not characterize individual speakers but rather occur across both male and female parts to signify an emotional affect—the agitation of both characters. All these settings provide instructive examples of how woman’s song, even in its most resistant form of “rough music,”³³ can be accommodated and contained within the sophisticated polyphonic settings of elite male song.

Who might have sung these carols to these settings in the early sixteenth century? “Hey trolly loly lo!” was probably sung at the court of Henry VIII, and its setting in this songbook “is demanding enough” to require either “professional performers” or “more skilful amateurs.”³⁴ The same point can be made about the other carols. This means that all could have been performed by aristocratic and royal women at the Henrician court, given their high level of musical ability—but it is extremely unlikely. If the singer embodies the “person” she sings, it is improbable that a woman of rank would have chosen to impersonate and so become a non-elite woman in a comic song. The most likely scenario, given settings of “Hey trolly loly lo!” and “Mannerly Margery” by Cornysh, master of Chapel Royal, is that they were composed for boy choristers in his charge and performed at court entertainments. Cornysh is not identified as the composer of “Be Pes,” but given its presence in an ecclesiastical songbook, it was also probably intended for performance by a cathedral choir of men and boy choristers.³⁵ The music could also have been performed, more informally, by a single musician singing one part and playing the other two parts on the lute. Here another possibility emerges: that these woman’s songs were performed by working women in

32. Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 339–40, 378–79. I am grateful to Gawain Glenton for this point.

33. Gray, “Rough Music.”

34. Austern, “Women’s Musical Voices,” 133. “Hey trolly loly lo!” was copied at the end Henry VIII’s book in a different hand and so may have been composed later than the preceding songs, which have been dated to probably 1522–23.

35. Stevens, *Music and Poetry*, 1–8; Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2013), 112–13.

aristocratic households. There is evidence that women were sometimes hired to play music alongside their domestic work. Anne Browne, a servant in the household of the Marquis of Exeter, for example, was employed for her needlework and to play on the lute and virginals at entertainments.³⁶ A single singer can introduce vocal distinctions between the male and female parts. Does it therefore make a difference if the performer is male or female to how the song is performed and heard? A skillful male or boy singer may become the woman he sings for the space of the performance and even add an erotic frisson to these sexualized songs.³⁷ However, a maidservant-singer structurally occupies the place of the woman she sings within the household. As a consequence, the process of “becoming” through the act of singing is ideologically loaded. This does not necessarily mean that the woman singer takes the woman’s part in an ethical and political sense, but it does lend additional physical and ideological substance to the set of emotions and subjectivities made available to both singers and auditors through performance.

Musical settings are realized through performance, and much depends on how performers used pitch as well as gender and class-coded gestures to give the song physical expression. For example, physical gestures may have been used to signify and accentuate the maid’s low social status; such gestures were themselves licensed by the comic and satiric form of these carols. The comic mode that characterizes the “rough music” of these carols results in a dissonance that renders unstable the singer’s impersonation of woman’s song and the audience’s identification with “her” voice. Comic songs allow for the use of parody in performance: the exaggeration of vocal and physical characteristics is intended to provoke laughter and introduces an internal, mocking distance between the singer and the woman who speaks. Heard within the elite soundscape of the court, the artful playfulness of the settings of “Hey trolly lollylo!” and “Mannerly Margery” encourage collusion with the male jest at the maid’s expense. The presence of “Be pes” in a cathedral songbook suggests that it was performed in ecclesiastical contexts and, like such other seduction carols as “Mannerly Margery,” may have been used as a preaching aid in sermons to condemn both the seduced maid and her seducer in a warning against ungoverned lust.³⁸

That said, “Be pes” and “Mannerly Margery” are complex comic songs that hover between the forms of the male jest and the religious and social complaint. Therefore these songs, through different inflections and gestures, can be performed and heard either as a jest or as a complaint. Since singers can shape and reshape meaning through performance, one song can be made to speak in the interests of different communities. “Mannerly Margery,” like other clerk seduction lyrics, probably

36. Austern, “Women’s Musical Voices,” 136.

37. On the construction of the boy’s body as a site for erotic appeal in dramatic performances, see Mary Bly, *Queer Virgins, Virgin Queens on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford, 2000).

38. Austern, “Women’s Musical Voices,” 135; Boklund-Lagopoulou, “*I Have a Yong Suster*,” 218–21; see also Gravdal, *Ravishing Maidens*, chap. 4.

originated in clerical circles. While some critics have heard the poem as a male joke at the not-so-mannerly Margery's expense, it could have been performed and heard as a complaint.³⁹ The flying satirizes the abuses of church clerks, opening in Margery's voice:

Ay, besherewe yow! Be my fay
 This wanton clarkis be nyse allway.
 Avent, avent, my popagay!

 'Walke forthe your way, ye cost me nought;
 Now have I fownd that I have sought,
 The best chepe flesh that evyr I bought.
 Yet for his love that all hath wrought
 Wed me or els I dye for thought!

(Lines 1–3, 22–26)

This heated exchange, in which the clerk cruelly discards the seduced maid, potentially leaving her literally holding the baby, censures those clergy who use the presumption of their celibacy to escape responsibility for their licentiousness. In the case of “Be pes,” the maid resists the elite male vocally, socially, and physically. The dramatization of working woman's marginality within the *pastourelle* tradition can provide a vehicle for voicing such dissent.⁴⁰ The maid in “Be pes,” for example, speaks predominantly in the voice of complaint, insisting that the gentleman's assault will result in her sexual ruin and the economic ruin of the household—“A, kan ye that? Nou, gode, go hens! / What do ye here within oure spence? / Recke ye not to make us shende?” (lines 12–14). Her complaint dramatizes a scene of class conflict in which the elite feudal male asserts his ownership of the laboring woman's body, prioritizing his play over her work, and so articulates the grievances of the rural laboring classes against a landowning class that is exploiting the peasantry for its own interests. Whether it was sung by a boy, man, or woman, performing “Be pes” using the conventions of complaint, with its plaintive appeals to compassion, potentially allowed for an identification with woman's song that had radical implications.

The surviving settings for these songs may have been composed within elite environments, but this does not fully determine their transmission. These lyrics could be sung to simpler settings suitable for amateur performers playing by ear. Alternatively, these lyrics may not have been sung at all. Lyrics copied in Middle English manuscripts, which Karin Boklund-Lagopoulou points out look very like later ballads, are variously described “as ‘songs,’ ‘ditties,’ ‘rimes,’ or even ‘talkings,’” the

39. See Stanley Fish's reading of this poem in *John Skelton's Poetry* (New Haven, Conn., 1965), 42–46.

40. Earnshaw, *Female Voice*, 126.

last term suggesting that lyrics could be recited—embodied through voice and gesture but without musical accompaniment.⁴¹ Whereas vocal characterization is not a feature of the surviving settings of “Be pes” and “Mannerly Margery,” it is necessary to the *tenso* structure of these carols, embodied in the different modes of speech, and so has the potential to be realized in performance. In the case of “Mannerly Margery,” “What, and ye shall be my piggesnye?” (line 17) sounds like the male clerk because this invitation speaks of seduction and contrasts with the following declamatory lines spoken by an angrily resisting Margery: “Be Crist, ye shall not! No, no hardly! / I will not be japed bodely” (lines 18–19). Similarly, the vehement, resisting female voice of “Be pes” is counterpointed by the aggression of the male voice. The last stanza in which the maid is violated is particularly discordant, and it is possible to hear the violence at work in the juxtaposition of male and female voices within the rhythm of the verse line: “Cum kys me! ‘Nay!’ Be God, ye shall” (line 17). The conflicting male and female voices are clearly audible, with sound and sense working together to articulate a scene of gendered class conflict. These carols foreground the dynamic, contingent quality of the voice in performance and the resulting unstable, contending subject positions. Whether sung or recited by male or female performers, they make audible and embody a complex gendered working subjectivity.

“Attend Thee, Go Play Thee” and the Working Woman’s Song

“Attend thee, go play thee” is a pivotal ballad. Situated at a transitional point both in terms of genres of vernacular song and the social organization of women’s working lives, it can tell us much about the transmission of working woman’s song across the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. “Attend thee” is a descendant of early Tudor carols, such as “Be pes” and “Mannerly Margery,” and therefore looks back to the earlier musical cultures of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Yet it can also be placed at the start of a burgeoning broadside ballad trade, a phenomenon that has come to define popular song in the early modern period. “Attend thee” survives in two versions: a longer five-verse ballad printed in *A Handful of Pleasant Delights* and a four-verse ballad that was copied into a household miscellany belonging to the Harington family (Add. MS 28635, British Library). Both versions foreground the communality of song by imagining their own performance within the household. The presence of “Attend thee” in a printed ballad anthology and in an aristocratic manuscript miscellany illustrates how a taste for ballads was shared across social classes. There are, however, significant textual, social, and material differences between these ballads that draw attention quite precisely to the ways in which the *Handful* ballad locates itself in an acoustic field that maps onto the non-elite early modern working household.

A Handful of Pleasant Delights, probably first published in 1565 or 1566, is the first ballad anthology printed in Britain, setting a precedent for the later collections,

41. Boklund-Lagopoulou, “*I Have a Yong Suster*,” 16–17.

such as those of Thomas Deloney.⁴² Given so few broadside ballads survive from before 1565, *A Handful* provides a rare glimpse both into the range of amatory ballads circulating in this period and into an emergent ballad culture.⁴³ Its printer-publisher, Richard Jones, was in the business of publishing broadside ballads. His own ballad to the “Reader” prefacing the collection sets out a compelling fiction of consumption in which the acquisitive reader is imagined not just as a buyer of books but also one with particular tastes that must be catered to—and these tastes are, in good part, musical:

Peruse it wel ere you passe by
 here may you wish and haue,
 Such pleasaut [*sic*] songs to ech new tune,
 as lightly you can craue.⁴⁴

Jones’s consumerist fiction is attuned to the mixed market of ballad buyers with its “Songs to reade or heare” (line 18)—in other words, catering to those who are more comfortable with “talkings,” or chanting the words, as well as those who buy ballads to perform in company.⁴⁵ Consumer tastes are gendered and eroticized. Jones repeatedly tempts the male buyer with the promise that “Within this booke such may you haue, / as Ladies may wel like” and “Here may you haue such pretie thinges, / as women much desire” (lines 11–14). Women are imagined as vital to this ballad economy: ballads are bought by men to be sung to women or bought for women to sing in company.⁴⁶ Such mixed company of male and female singers has its counterpart in the anthology’s mix of male- and female-voiced ballads alongside male- and female-voiced dialogues.

Music, of course, is inherently communal. The forms of popular song that “Attend thee” draws on can help to fill in some of the details of the early sixteenth-century performance cultures in which such ballads were sung. The meters and tunes of the ballads printed in *A Handful* point to their origins in popular carols and court songs from the early Tudor period.⁴⁷ Many of the tunes named in *A Handful* take their titles from the first lines of Henrician court lyrics set to music, such as

42. Only the 1584 edition survives, in an incomplete state; for fragments of other editions, see STC 21104.5 (ca. 1575, sigs. D2, 3, 6, 7 only), STC 21105 (1584, lacks sig. B6), 21105.5 (ca. 1595, sig. D2 only). *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers of London, 1554–1640*, ed. Edward Arber, 5 vols. (London, 1875), 1:141. *A Handful of Pleasant Delights by Clement Robinson and Divers Others*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins (Cambridge, Mass., 1924). On Deloney’s ballads, see Christopher Marsh’s essay in this issue.

43. Carole Rose Livingston, *British Broadside Ballads of the Sixteenth Century: A Catalogue of the Extant Sheets and an Essay* (New York, 1991).

44. *Handefull of Pleasant Delites*, sig. A1v, lines 5–8; see also the online version at <http://versemiscellaniesonline.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/texts/handful-of-pleasant-delights/handful-sig-aiv/>.

45. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 247–48.

46. On women as consumers of ballads, see Marsh’s essay in this issue.

47. The modern ballad measure only becomes the dominant meter of broadsides in the late sixteenth century; see Livingston, *British Broadside Ballads*, 31–37.

Surrey's "When raging love," or from European dances popular in the early sixteenth century—"Kypascie" (Qui passa), "The Quarter braules," and "Lumber me."⁴⁸ The presence of "Attend thee" in an aristocratic miscellany may point to its origins in court song. Some of these songs, like carols, combined song with dance, thus enhancing the physical and communal expression of music.⁴⁹ The influence of the carol on "Attend thee" is evident in its verse form, in particular, its use of repeated and unsophisticated half-rhymes, as in the third stanza:

the little dogge Fancie,
Lies chaste without moouing,
And needeth no threatning,
For feare of wel beating.
(Lines 32–35)

This rhyme and stress pattern is shared not only with a number of thirteenth-century French *pastourelles*, suggesting a common lineage with *chanson de femme*, but also with English carols, often based on French models.⁵⁰ Examples of these carols were copied into a commonplace book compiled by a London merchant, Richard Hill (MS 354, Balliol College, Oxford), before 1536. "Bonjowre, bonjowre a vous," for instance, is a conviviality carol, with a refrain, drawing on French song; like "Attend thee," it makes use of repeated half-rhymes:

I hold you excused,
Ye shall be refused,
For ye haue not be vsed
To no good sport nor play.⁵¹

48. John Ward, "Music for *A Handefull of Pleasant Delites*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 10 (Autumn 1957): 151–80; see also Marsh, *Music and Society*, 231.

49. See, for example, the opening of Surrey's "Good Ladies: ye that have your pleasures in exile, / Step in your fote, come take a place, & moorne with me a while," *Tottel's Miscellany*, ed. Holton and MacFaul, 26.

50. See *Medieval Pastourelle*, ed. Paden, vol. 2, nos. 82, 84, 85, 93. The verse form is regularized to a twelve-line stanza scanning aa2b3aa2b3anap.c4ddeee2anap in Steven May and William Ringler, *Elizabethan Poetry: A Bibliography and First-Line Index of English Verse, 1559–1603*, 3 vols. (London, 2004), 1:379 (EV 3200). See also the carol, a love complaint against a fickle mistress, printed as a broadside with a musical incipit by John Rastell, "Now she that I louyd trewly" (London, ca. 1525; STC 207003), twelve-line stanza aa2b3cc2b3dd2b3ee4b3, William Ringler, *Bibliography and Index of English Verse Printed 1476–1558* (London, 1988), 275 (TP 1239); and the William Dunbar Scots carol (ca. 1568), "Thir Ladies fair / That makes repair," twelve-line stanza aa4b6aa4b6cc4d6cc4d6, May and Ringler, *Elizabethan Poetry*, 2:1622 (EV 25357).

51. *Songs, Carols, and Other Miscellaneous Poems: From the Balliol MS 354, Richard Hill's Commonplace Book*, ed. Roman Dyboski, Early English Text Society 101 (1908; repr., London, 1937), 118, lines 32–34. "Bonjowre" has an eleven-line stanza, aaa4b3ccc3b3DD3B3.

The purpose of the stress and rhyme pattern in these conviviality carols is to encourage others to join the song and to allow for communal improvisation in performance, since its simple repetitive structure allows for other lines to be easily added, recast, or removed while singing.⁵² Given the shared prosodic features with “Bonjowre,” the sound patterning of “Attend thee” may similarly function to invite fellow singers to join a musical game.

The kinship between “Attend thee” and the conviviality carols copied into a London merchant’s commonplace book suggests shared performance cultures that included households of the middling sort. Hill does not provide musical settings, but it is likely that the tunes to these carols were well known and sung either from memory or by ear.⁵³ Because repetition is a key feature of “Attend thee,” the ballad would have been comparatively easy to memorize by ear. The tune no longer survives. However, the first line of the ballad was adopted as the name of a tune to which other ballads were sung: “Attend thee, go play thee” is named as the tune for “Not light of loue lady,” a male flout, printed in *Gorgeous Gallery of Gallant Inventions*,⁵⁴ and a song in Francis Marbury’s university play, *The Marriage between Wit and Wisdom*, “Lye still & heare nest the[e].”⁵⁵ All have a very similar and distinctive verse form and basic stress pattern, suggesting they could all be sung to the same tune. For example, compare the sound patterning of the first six lines to the Marbury song and “Attend thee”:

Lye still & heare nest the
good witt lye & rest the
& in my lap take thou thy sleepe
since Idlenis brought the
& now I haue caught the
I charge the let care away creepe.

Attend thee, go play thee,
Sweet loue I am busie
my silk and twist is not yet spun:
My Ladie will blame me,
If that she send for me,
And find my worke to be vndun:

Along with their tunes, ballads were highly mobile, traveling throughout the country along trade routes, and were performed in alehouses as well as households across the social scale. It is likely that many of the ballads in *A Handful*, for example, were transmitted within the repertoire of professional minstrels; two of its ballads were copied into a manuscript ballad anthology, MS Ashmole 48.⁵⁶ Thought to have been

52. Boklund-Lagopoulou, “*I Have a Yong Suster*,” 208–13.

53. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 6, 188.

54. T. P., *A Gorgious Gallery of Gallant Inventions* (London, 1578), sig. E3v. This ballad is an alternative “answer” to the female scoff and so a counterpart to the male flout; “Alas Loue, why chafe ye?” printed in *A Handful*, sigs. A7v–A8r; for the text of this latter ballad, see: <http://versemiscellaniesonline.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/texts/handful-of-pleasant-delights/handful-sig-aviiv/>. May and Ringler regularize the scheme to a twelve-line stanza, aaz2anap.b8cc2anap.b8d2eefff2anap, *Elizabethan Poetry*, 2:1097 (EV 16204).

55. Francis Marbury, *The Marriage between Wit and Wisdom* (1579) (Oxford, 1971), 18–19.

56. MS Ashmole 48, fols. 110v–11r, Bodleian Library.

compiled by professional minstrels in the early to mid-sixteenth century, this anthology was possibly owned at one point by Richard Sheale, a Tamworth peddler and minstrel. Sheale “almost certainly played and sang mainly by ear,” often traveling and possibly performing with his wife, a linen and silk seller.⁵⁷ Ballad sellers and singers were often non-elite women, forging particular associations with the genre that in turn drew on the earlier medieval model of woman’s songs with its collocation of women, work, and singing.

If the opening phrase “Attend thee” invites its auditors to join a communal musical game, then the space of this game in the ballad printed in *A Handful* is the working household. There is a wealth of historical evidence for women singing at work, stereotypically while spinning and sewing.⁵⁸ The ballad opens with a maid admonishing her lover because he is interrupting her work for her mistress, before opening out to address the wider acoustic community of the ballad—“Good Ladies be working, / dispatch a while that we had done” (lines 38–39). What is produced in the ballad is a fiction of woman’s song that has the capacity to be realized in its own performance. There appear to be three sets of voices in the ballad—the maid, the “Good Ladies” who “be working,” and the master—suggesting that it was composed for communal singing. If its fiction of speaking is realized in performance, then one voice sings the maid’s verses and a second voice takes the part of the master at the start of the final stanza, who addresses the ladies, instructing them to “leauw worke I say, and get you home” (line 50). The song ends with the flout, “The fault was in him sir” (line 55), either delivered by the first singer, the maid, or by the first singer and a third set of voices, the “Good Ladies.” It is also possible that the formulaic three to four lines at the close of each stanza, linked together by those simple repeated half-rhymes, for example, “Haste, haste, and be merie, / Till our needles be werie. / Till our needles be werie” (lines 45–47) were a chorus sung by all voices—the maid, the master, and the “Good Ladies.”

Although “Attend thee” shares many features with late-medieval songs of women at work, what is new is the way this ballad configures the relationship between women’s work and courtship. Whereas in the *chanson de toile*, needlework and courtship are analogous, the social plot of this ballad is structured by a tension between work and love. The working woman in “Attend thee” occupies a different situation from her counterpart in the feudal *pastourelle*. Gone is the sexualized class conflict that drives the flying; instead the working woman and her suitor are social equals,

57. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 140; Andrew Taylor argues that Ashmole 48 is a minstrel songbook and a source for, rather than copied from, printed broadsides; *The Songs and Travels of a Tudor Minstrel: Richard Sheale of Tamworth* (York, 2012), xiii–xiv, 20–22. See also Michael Chesnutt, “Minstrel Poetry in an English Manuscript of the Sixteenth Century: Richard Sheale and MS. Ashmole 48,” in *The Entertainer in Medieval and Traditional Culture: A Symposium*, ed. Flemming G. Andersen, Thomas Pettit, and Reinhold Schroder (Odense, Denmark, 1997), 73–100.

58. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 191–92.

servants within working households. The social world of this scoff is informed by a relatively new early modern modality of women's work in which domestic service is scripted as a premarital phase of female life, preparing women for wifely domestic duties. Yet women's working lives did not necessarily end with marriage but could be prolonged either out of choice or necessity: domestic servants were no longer bound by feudal terms of service but by an annual contract, which gave them more independence to move between employers and to extend their working lives.⁵⁹

The ballad registers this tension in the way women's work was defined and experienced. Framed by a social script in which women's work ends in marriage, the scoff itself marks the temporal suspension of this marriage plot—courtship is put on hold for the duration of the song. Like the earlier carols, the scoff begins in the voice of the woman at her work. Yet, rather than the seamless transition between needlework and courtship of the *chanson de toile*, the ballad articulates a conflict between the maid's work for her mistress and love. Within the household, work takes priority—a discipline that is expressed physically (the maid fears her mistress's anger if she finds her “worke to be vndun”), sexually, and morally. The notion that desire renders the working subject incapable is reinforced by a cautionary tale, a proverb counseling against hasty courtship:

If loue were attained
 My ioies were vnfained,
 my seame and silke wil take no hold:
 Oft haue I beene warned,
 By others prooffe learned:
 hote wanton loue soone waxeth cold,
 Go now:
 I say go pack thee,
 Or my needle shal prick thee:
 Go seeke out Dame Idle:
 More fit for thy bridle,

(Lines 12–22)

Within this admonitory framework, love is the antithesis of work—time spent in courtship is wasted, idle. The ballad gives voice to a working subjectivity shaped by emergent modalities of women's work.⁶⁰ This ventriloquized working woman articulates a social identity predicated on her reputation as a good worker within the household economy, which, in turn, derives from her willingness to prioritize work over courtship. In this, she speaks both for herself and for the household. The female

59. Paula Humfrey, *The Experience of Domestic Service for Women in Early Modern London* (Farnham, U.K., 2011), 9–12, 26.

60. Dowd and Korda, introduction to *Working Subjects*, 3.

servant's marketability, and hence agency, relied on her ability to protect her reputation, since the household's creditworthiness depended on the reputation of its servants as much as those of its masters and mistresses.⁶¹ The scoff defines the working woman's primary relationship with her mistress; however, it is not based on personal fealty but on her ability to manage her work and by association her sexuality. Only on these grounds is this figure accorded a limited degree of agency through her ability to negotiate the terms of her courtship and even reject the constraints—the "bridle"—of marriage. That said, the depiction of female agency in the ballad is unstable and contradictory. These liberties also render the maid comically unruly and in need of male discipline. Her bawdy threat that "my needle shal prick thee" (line 20) finds its response in the following male flout, with its curbing of female presumption: "Maids must be mannerly, not ful of scurility" (line 37).

Within the working soundscape described by the ballad, the song itself keeps time with women's labor, their spinning and sewing. This is not so much needlework-as-writing (a conceit often found in the *chanson de toile*) as it is needlework-as-communal-performance—a *chanson a toile*, in which manual labor and singing coincide within the working household. Yet what is the precise spatial temporality of the ballad's acoustics in *A Handful*? Is it a song of work, sung by women while they work? Or is it sung to mark the end of work and the beginning of a period of leisure, play, and, in the terms of the wider social plot, courtship? The subject of the ballad is the proper *contracted* time for work and for play—as the female speaker tells her coworkers, "Lets worke at *due* howres" (line 44; my emphasis). Work time and leisure time are marked out proverbially in the ballad and thus established as household lore. Within the admonitory framework, needlework signifies the instrumental use of time, whereas love work is idle play, non-instrumental time. And yet the female speaker urges her fellow women workers to finish their work and their song—but to what purpose?

Good Ladies be working,
 Dispatch a while that we had done,
 The tide will not tarrie,
 All times it doth varie,
 The day doth passe, I see the Sun,
 The frost bites faire flowers,
 Lets worke at due howres,
 Haste, haste, and be merie
 Till our needles be werie.
 (Lines 38–46)

61. Humfrey, *Experience*, 2–3.

The *carpe diem* arguments that are put forward imply that the women should leave work at the song's close and turn to courtship. A similar movement is set out in the master's call to the women, insisting their proper business is with their lovers and courtship:

Now Ladies be merie,
 Because you are werie:
 leau worke I say, and get you home,
 Your businesse is slacking,
 Your louer is packing:
 your answer hath cut off his comb.
 (Lines 48–53)

What seems to be articulated here is a normative view of women's work as a phase that properly ends in marriage rather than an end in itself. Yet this is a scoff and thus structured by contesting voices: hence the maid, possibly along with the "good Ladies," puts forward an opposing, dissonant point of view:

The fault was in him sir,
 He wooed it so trim sir,
 Alas poore seelie fellow,
 Make much of thy pillow.
 Make much of thy pillow.
 (Lines 55–59)

If not closing off the courtship narrative, the scoff at least puts it on hold, since the playful openness of the ending entertains a range of other social possibilities for the working woman.

The scene of speaking in this ballad contrasts markedly with the earlier English carols. The marginality of the solitary maid, isolated in a buttery or meadow, whose cries are heard only by the man, provides an apt metaphor for the appropriation of woman's song to signify a non-elite oral tradition within courtly musical games and its reception within an elite milieu. By contrast, "Attend thee" self-reflexively imagines that both its primary auditors and composer-performers are a household of women at work. Although a comic song like the earlier carols, it lacks the dissonance between high and low that can ironize the voicing of the maid in the *pastourelle* and "Jolly Jankyn" carols. Instead, we have a projection of a non-elite gendered soundscape, an acoustic community located in the working household. Might the ballad have therefore been composed for and performed by women singing at work?⁶² The

62. See Marsh's essay in this issue on how ballads might open up vocal possibilities for women.

self-reflexivity of the ballad in *A Handful*—the way that “Attend thee” deliberately and repeatedly locates its scene of composition, performance, reception, and transmission within the working household—certainly asks its auditors to imagine they are hearing women singing at work. Even when male singers performed the ballad, the re-gendering of the body in performance through female impersonation would have harmonized with the ballad’s deictics, which in turn locate its acoustic field in the working household, so that the audience would hear women singing at work.

As we know, this was not the only acoustic community in which the ballad was performed and heard. The ways in which the version of “Attend thee” copied into the Harington family’s household miscellany differs from the *Handful* ballad provide an instructive example of how changes to the literary codes—in particular, the ballad’s deictics—can alter its acoustics. Both appear to have circulated at the same time as distinct, separate versions, since “Attend thee” was copied into the Arundel Harington Manuscript after 1586.⁶³ Whereas the female speaker in *A Handful* is placed among the assembled women at work, addressing her fellow workers using the collective “we”—“Good ladies be working, / Dispatch a while that we had done” (lines 38–39)—the Arundel Harington version separates the female speaker from her companions—“the Ladies be working / dispatche a while, that you had done.”⁶⁴ Here, the speaker no longer addresses the other women directly; instead they are “the Ladies,” spoken about rather than to, and the collective “we” has become a more indefinite “you.” The absence of the direct address effectively distances the speaker from the scene of speaking. Moreover, the Arundel Harington ballad lacks the final stanza, with its dialogue between the master and the women over work and play, meaning that the acoustic field made up of women at work is much attenuated. This manuscript was the household miscellany of the Harington family, compiled over a number of years by John Harington and his son, Sir John Harington of Kelston, the courtier poet and godson of Elizabeth I. The differences in the acoustics of this ballad are commensurate with its location and performance within an elite aristocratic milieu, in which it sounds less like the *chanson a toile* of the *Handful* version and more like a courtly *chanson de toile*.



The trope of women singing at work can offer a way into conceptualizing working women’s agency because it brings into play the complex interrelationships between gender, genre, voice, and embodiment, in a figurative and material sense. Historical women singing songs at work shaped their environment—the acoustic communities in which they worked. Arguably in this context, it does make a political difference if

63. “Attend thee” is preceded by an epitaph on Sir Philip Sidney; *Arundel Harington Manuscript*, 2:356, 394.

64. *Arundel Harington*, 1:281, lines 25–26.

this ballad were sung by early modern women at work: a male singer may undergo a momentary metamorphosis, whereas for women, singing the ballad at work was a creative act that shaped their “always evolving identities” beyond the end of the song’s performance.⁶⁵ Moreover, when women sing working women’s songs at work, the line between singer and auditor is dissolved and all take part in the construction of working subjectivities. “Attend thee, go play thee” is a remarkable ballad because it fictionalizes the conditions of its own performance, providing evidence for how and where it might have been voiced and heard. In the case of the version of the ballad in *A Handful of Pleasant Delights*, the household is imagined from the perspective of those in service as a place of work, a social and economic unit, in which needlework is both a communal activity and paid labor. The “good Ladies” of the ballad derive their ludic and acoustic authority from their work, and it is this that defines the soundscape of the ballad itself.

MICHELLE O'CALLAGHAN is Professor in the English Literature Department at Reading University and author of *The ‘Shepherds Nation’: Jacobean Spenserians and Early Stuart Political Culture* (2000), *The English Wits: Literature and Sociability in Early Modern England* (2007), *Thomas Middleton: Renaissance Dramatist* (2009), and co-editor of Verse Miscellanies Online. She is writing a book on poetry anthologies.

65. See Susan Frye on needlework as a particularly female mode of agency that allowed “women in households [to] continuously [shape] their environment by creating objects that expressed their always evolving identities”; *Pens and Needles: Women’s Textualities in Early Modern England* (Philadelphia, 2010), 116.