

The Factory Girl Song

Prefatory Note: The Gypsy Scholar has selected certain passages from the *Mainly Norfolk: English Folk and Other Good Music* webpage (already linked above) about “The Factory Girl” folk song (discovered only after his “Beltane / May Day” musical essay series). These passages are what the GS considers relevant to his take on the song. Indeed, they basically confirm his own reflections about the song. The passages are here reproduced with added emphasis in the form of bold blue-colored highlighting of the text (to distinguish from the text’s bold highlighting in black). In addition, the GS has made bracketed annotated notes in purple after the passages.

Sarah Makem sang *The Factory Girl* in 1968 on her Topic album **Ulster Ballad Singer**. This track was included in 1998 on the Topic anthology **Who’s That at My Bed Window?** (The Voice of the People Series Vol. 10). An earlier version recorded by Diane Hamilton in 1955 was included in 2012 on her Topic anthology **The Heart Is True** (The Voice of the People Series Vol. 24). Sean O’Boyle commented in the first album’s sleeve notes:

In this song the poetry of eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland joins hands with the love songs of the industrial revolution. The verse has faint reminiscences of the stereotyped Gaelic “Aislinq” (vision poetry)—the

poet, as he walks out in the early morning, sees a maiden “more fairer than Venus”, with lily-white skin and rose-red cheeks, a Goddess in form and feature. But here the Goddess is on her way to a factory, a poor girl not ashamed of her poverty nor afraid to resist the advances of a young gallant. **To me the factory bell in this song seems to toll the knell of the “maypole” type of folk song.**

[Again, as noted in the text box under the Factory Girl image, the Irish song expert, Sean O’Boyle, has confirmed the GS’ notion that what we have in the “Factory Girl” folk song is a special type of May Day song and, therefore, fits perfectly into the GS’ theme of the unity of the pagan May Day and the worker May Day (the ancient seasonal May Day and the modern international workers May Day)—both featuring the mainstay of the May Day observance, the maypole (as shown in the double image of people dancing around the maypole on the GS’s “Beltane / May Day” webpage). Therefore, O’Boyle’s opening sentence succinctly relates the GS’ take on how the “Factory Girl” folk song merges the old Irish love songs with those of the industrial revolution: “In this song the poetry of eighteenth-century Gaelic Ireland joins hands with the love songs of the industrial revolution.”]

Sandra Kerr sang *The Factory Girl* in 1968 on the Critics Group's album **The Female Frolic** and in 1983 on her own LP **Supermum**. The former album's notes commented:

In songs prior to the Industrial revolution, a squire might set his fancy on a shepherdess or milkmaid and, through her sense of class pride and her consciousness of **the consequences in social terms, he might be rebuffed. This theme has extended itself into industrial song**—it is a kind of sense of fitness and knowledge that certain class attitudes would never mix even in the marriage bed. Although ***The Factory Girl is primarily a love song***, it is also an expression of this declaration of independence, i.e. that a woman, no matter how poor or humble, is still her own master and needn't marry to have money or peace of mind.

[This passage gives some allowance for the GS' notion that the "Factory Girl" folk song has its origins in the troubadour repertory of songs in which either a courtier or knight (sometimes an outright lothario) comes upon an innocent shepherd maid in the countryside and attempts to woo or seduce her. If she rebuffs him, it's classified as a song of "unrequited

love.” This traditional troubadour genre is typically found in the Irish romantic folk-ballad “As I Roved Out,” a classic May type folk song that tells the story of a man who encounters his true love while walking on a May morning, which opens with the lyric line: “As I roved out on a bright May morning ...” (as in versions by The Clancy Brothers, Irish Band, The High Kings, Christy Moore, Andy Irvine, Loreena McKennitt, and Brian Kennedy). In any case, the fact is that the “Factory Girl” song can be traced back to a very old folk song—and nobody really knows how old—, but which has been surmised to be around the late eighteenth century and of Northern Irish origin. (See Frank Purslow’s comment on the original webpage.) As far as the album notes regarding the “consequences in social terms” of the suitor being “rebuffed,” we read that “this theme has extended itself into an industrial song.” This transition of the older song theme of “unrequited love” (originating with the 12th-century troubadours) to the industrial period strongly suggests that the GS’ take on the folk song has a good deal of merit; i.e., the “Factory Girl” song puts the old, pre-industrial romantic ballad—and thus the typical May Day song—in an industrial setting. In other words, the old unrequited love theme meets the factory worker’s lament. Hence the above

statement follows: “Although the Factory Girl is primarily a love song ...”]

Different versions of the song seem to fall into two endings: one where, after a dialogue, the couple marry, the other with the man being rejected and wandering off in despair. Bill Cassidy’s text seems to be of the latter type, but lacks the penultimate verse in which the would-be suitor is rejected.

[The latter ending is the old genre “unrequited love,” which goes back to the 12th-century troubadours.]

Tríona Ní Dhomhnaill sang *The Factory Girl* in 1977 on the Bothy Band’s Mulligan album **Out of the Wind Into the Sun**. They noted:

The Factory Girl has strong links with the North of Ireland, but versions of it have been found in most parts of the country. In the one given by Sam Henry in the **Songs of the People**, the young woman accepts the gentleman’s offer to make her “a great lady of fame and renown”. In this version, however, she doesn’t. The rejection is thought likely to be the older of the two endings.

[The GS concurs with the last statement, because the theme of “unrequited love” goes back to the 12th-century troubadours.]

Sinéad Caher sang *The Factory Girl* in 1978 on her Mulligan album **Flower of Magherally**. Cathal O Boyle noted:

In the case of the factory girl the different class of the two is not clearly stated but it is obvious that the factory girl feels inferior because she says she doesn't. The social distinction is different from the distinction in *The Ploughboy*, but it is overcome in the same way. **The message that “love conquers all” has thus passed from the agricultural to the industrial age unchanged.**

[This last statement also gives credence to the GS' take on the song; i.e, the Irish and British pre-modern (agricultural) romantic ballad, which originated with the troubadours and their belief in the absolute power of amor, morphs into the industrial age's issue of factory labor with the genre of the factory worker's song.]

Frankie Armstrong sang *The Factory Girl* in 1980 on her album **And the Music Plays So Grand**. She noted:

At one level this simply is a beautiful song of unrequited love, like thousands of lyrical country songs. **However, there is a new element in the familiar story. It is the factory looming in the background.** The introduction of machinery into the textile industry in particular revolutionised women's lives. For the first time, in large numbers, they worked outside the home and had some economic independence. It is the clear consciousness of this on the part of the woman here that makes this into a song of significance in relation to women's history. The tune here is from Sarah Makem of Armagh in Ireland. The text is a collation from a number of Irish versions.

[The statements “However there is a new element in the familiar story” and “It is the factory looming in the background” also gives credence to the GS’ take on the song, because it translates into the GS’ idea that the “familiar story”—the old romantic ballad genre—developed into the industrial era’s song of the factory worker’s complaint (especially found in the related folk song, “The Factory Girl’s Song”), which in the “Factory Girl” version is more of a female factory worker rejecting the advances of the suitor (“unrequited love”). To put it a little differently, the

familiar love story with the “factory looming in the background” means, for the GS, that “the factory” (as an archetype) is now the background of the old romantic love ballad (instead of the countryside or the greenwood). And when the GS writes “now” he is not only referring to the “now” of the industrial era but also the “now” of the post-industrial age, given the contemporary renditions of factory work song complaints, such as those the GS has played (e.g., Bruce Springsteen’s “Factory,” Warren Zevon’s, “The Factory,” The Kinks’, “Working At The Factory,” Dick Gaughan’s “Worker’s Song,” and Richard Thompson’s “Pharaoh”).]

Louis Killen sang *The Factory Girl* in 1980 on his Collector album of songs of the British industrial revolution, **Gallant Lads Are We**. He noted

One of many Northern Ireland versions of a song in which the young, idle rich try to romantically exploit the working girl—but here the factory girl says “No!”

From the period of the use of water power for spinning, pre-steam.

[Again, this “but here the factory girl says ‘No’” is a reference to the old genre of “unrequited love.”]

The House Band sang *The Factory Girl* in 1998 on their Green Linnet album **October Song**. They noted:
A song where the rich handsome hero does not get the girl for once. The tune cut into the song is Northumbrian and is called *Morpeth Lasses*.

[Once again, the old genre of “unrequited love.”]

Hannah James learned *The Factory Girl* from her mum and sang it in 2012 with Maddy Prior and Giles Lewin on their CD **3 for Joy** and in 2013 on **Lady Maisery's CD Mayday**. The latter album's notes commented:

Social class is also at the heart of *The Factory Girl*, a traditional song of Irish origin which we learnt via 1980s female pop trio, The Roches. The factory girl's work is a source of her independence, strength and identity, and so **she rejects the rich man** who would turn her into a 'lady' who need never work again.

[That Lady Maisery has the “Factory Girl” cover, which has “social class at its heart (thus romantic love and sociopolitical reality are combined),” on her album entitled “Mayday” is extremely significant for

the GS, because it speaks to his contention that the “Factory Girl” folk song properly belongs to the genre of May Day songs. Hence, the GS including the “Factory Girl” song in his “Beltane / May Day” musical essay series is totally appropriate. Again, “she rejects” means that it belongs to the genre of “unrequited love.”]

On a research visit to the John Rylands Library in Manchester, we found a tatty four page leaflet containing this song, versions of which were printed as broadsides in the late 1830s throughout England. **It is thought that they originated from Northern Ireland and sung in Linen Mills.** Margaret Barry and Sarah Makem sing versions of this song. I have only found two versions of this broadside that mention a large village, most use factory or building and are shorter versions. There was no tune, so we devised this one.