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## Heated Words: The Politics and Poetics of Work in ‘A Complaint against Blacksmiths’

Deborah Thorpe

*‘A Complaint against Blacksmiths’, unique to BL, MS Arundel 292, may gesture towards fourteenth-century legislation against night-time work, yet is underpinned by delight in the sights and sounds of the forge. The smith’s smoke-smattered visage is simultaneously disgraceful and inspiring to its medieval audience. Many of us experience a different kind of unease in the digital age, as hours are converted into immaterial goods. For many, the clamour of physical labour has been replaced by the noise of automation. Looking back into the forge, the modern urban worker may yearn for its sonic landscape, with clattering hammers, grunting mouths, and hissing waters.*

My hips are a desk.  
From my ears hang  
chains of paper clips.  
Rubber bands form my hair.  
My breasts are wells of mimeograph ink.  
My feet bear casters.  
Buzz. Click.<sup>1</sup>

Weighted by paper clips and rubber bands, filled with ink, and conveyed by squeaky casters, Marge Piercy’s secretary is inseparable from the apparatus of bureaucracy. The desk, clips, bands, ink, and casters are objects that store, sort, and record rather than tools that design, carve, and finish. The paraphernalia that tangles with the secretary is burdensome rather than productive. The ‘Buzz’ and ‘Click’ are the dull flat-line of automation, rather than the noise of human craft. Eventually, the secretary’s womb is prodded into angles by an inhuman pregnancy:

Swollen, heavy, rectangular  
I am about to be delivered

<sup>1</sup> Marge Piercy, ‘The Secretary Chant’, in Piercy, *Circles on the Water: Selected Poems of Marge Piercy* (New York: Knopf, 1989), p. 77, lines 1–7. The author would like to thank the two anonymous readers of this article for their pertinent comments and acknowledge the part-funding of the research by the Wellcome Trust (ref: 105624) through the Centre for Chronic Diseases and Disorders (C2D2) at the University of York.

of a baby  
Xerox machine.<sup>2</sup>

The ‘baby’ is semi-animate, heaving into life periodically, but in order to replicate rather than procreate. This unnatural reproduction is marked by short lines, which invoke the jabs and swipes of a Xerox machine. Even the poem’s title – ‘The Secretary Chant’ – with its absence of a possessive apostrophe, denies this working woman an element of agency. The chant relates to her, but it does not belong to her. The poem narrates a steady erosion of human identity through unproductive work.

The blacksmith’s forge, as depicted in the fourteenth-century poem, ‘A Complaint against Blacksmiths’, with its heady mixture of human sweat, heat, and deafening noise, is the antithesis of the modern secretary’s sterile office.<sup>3</sup> ‘A Complaint’, which survives uniquely in BL, MS Arundel 292, fol. 71<sup>v</sup>, condemns the smith for his noisy, socially disruptive work. However, this is underpinned by a sense of delight in his craft as a source of poetic inspiration, as a place to hang ‘rhetorical ornaments’.<sup>4</sup> In contrast with Piercy’s secretary, his work is creative, energetic, dirty, and thus delightful to the poet. The writer of ‘A Complaint’ revels in the smith’s clattering hammer and smoke-smattered visage as a source of material for stylish expression.<sup>5</sup>

This article situates the smiths of ‘A Complaint’ alongside later representations of ‘hammar men’ in a variety of literary and sociological settings.<sup>6</sup> It creates a dialogue between these medieval and post-medieval representations to explore the world of human work as conveyed by sound. The sound of the forge, which was ear-splitting to the medieval listener in ‘A Complaint’, pales in comparison to the soundscape of industrialisation, with its hellish but productive blast furnaces, belching noise that was previously unimaginable. The figure of the blacksmith allows us to trace a reversal of acoustic values and meanings, in relation to work, between the medieval and

<sup>2</sup> Piercy, ‘The Secretary Chant’, lines 17–20.

<sup>3</sup> BL, MS Arundel 292, fol. 71<sup>v</sup>. The manuscript gives no title, but for the given title, see Elizabeth Salter, ‘A Complaint against Blacksmiths’, in *English and International: Studies in the Literature, Art and Patronage of Medieval England*, eds Derek Pearsall and Nicolette Zeeman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 199–214. The poem is presented as prose, upon a single folio, with *punctus elevatus* to indicate the ends of verse lines. Here, the text has been separated into these verse lines, to which I have assigned numbers in parentheses. Abbreviations are expanded and represented in italics, and I have reproduced upper- and lower-case letters as they appear in the manuscript.

<sup>4</sup> Salter, p. 209.

<sup>5</sup> Salter, p. 209.

<sup>6</sup> Corporation of London, *The Lawes of the Market* (London, 1595), sig. A6<sup>v</sup>; Emily Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench in England 1600–1770* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 113; David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: Profile, 2013), p. 149.

modern worlds. In this article, then, I will show how the acoustic dimensions at work delineate manual labour from mechanised work: the cries of knaves and ‘clateryng of knockes’ became the ‘shrieking noise’ of a nineteenth-century iron mill and, ultimately, a post-industrial, dehumanised, and dehumanising, ‘Buzz. Click.’. Thus, instead of despising the blacksmith, modern audiences might yearn to glimpse and hear him, as a relic of a pre-industrial era.

Many humans now feel dehumanised at work, to an even greater extent, perhaps, than Piercy’s pre-digital age secretary. Jeremy Rifkin, writing *The End of Work* in 1995, predicted that sophisticated technologies were going to bring civilisation closer to a ‘world without workers’.<sup>7</sup> Rifkin’s prophecy was made during a period of especially rapid progress in the speed of digital information transfer. In 1990, a single optical fibre could transmit about one billion bits per second; by 2000, it could transmit nearly one trillion.<sup>8</sup> Internet usage increased dramatically in the years following the publication of Rifkin’s book. Worldwide, there were about thirty million computers connected to the Internet at the beginning of 1998, which increased to nearly one hundred million by July 2000.<sup>9</sup> Rifkin feared the negative impact of such a ‘technological revolution’.

By 2015, many of us have become accustomed to fast-paced technological expansion. Indeed by 2011, Rifkin had progressed from an analysis of the general impact of electronic communication on the individual to a more specific, and optimistic, approach. In *The Third Industrial Revolution*, he focused on a digital communication revolution that was becoming the means of organising new renewable energy systems.<sup>10</sup> Rifkin’s latest book shone a more positive light on technology, specifically on ‘the collaborative power unleashed by the merging of Internet technology and renewable energies’, which he promised would restructure human relationships.<sup>11</sup> He believed that a new triad between human, Internet technology, and energy was the only way to avoid catastrophic climate change.<sup>12</sup>

Regardless of this potential adaptation to, and synthesis with, new technologies, there is some unease in the urban workplace. This also took root

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labour Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 1–14.

<sup>8</sup> See *Science and Engineering Indicators, 2002* (National Science Foundation, Division of Science Resources Statistics, 2002) <http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/seind02/> [accessed 26 May 2015], chap. 8, Trends in IT: Networking.

<sup>9</sup> *Science and Engineering Indicators*, chap. 8, Trends in IT: Networking.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Rifkin, *The Third Industrial Revolution: How Lateral Power is transforming Energy, the Economy, and the World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 2, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Rifkin, *Third Industrial Revolution*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>12</sup> Rifkin, *Third Industrial Revolution*, pp. 5–6.

in the 1990s as the Internet began to make its impact. Maurizio Lazzarato, in 1996, worried about the immaterial product of work in the information age.<sup>13</sup> He showed that the skills needed to produce these goods – usually ‘content’ rather than a physical object – involve cybernetics and computer control, rather than crafting and finishing.<sup>14</sup> Lazzarato perceived a lack of individuality in this modern workplace, as the labourer exists as part of a collective, or ‘team’.<sup>15</sup> As introspective scholarship of the information age has progressed, a more hopeful view of this re-organised workplace has developed: re-negotiated hierarchies; connections that transcend geographical limitations; and utopian levels of productivity in a ‘near-workerless wonderland’.<sup>16</sup> As Rifkin’s later book shows, many are now accustomed to the pace of digital growth, and so there is optimism about how Internet technology can be used to the advantage of the human race. A generation that has grown up with the Internet may well enjoy its deployment to the service sector, finding satisfaction in social connectivity and individual reward in giving themselves to a larger ‘networked community’.<sup>17</sup>

In promoting a ‘Third Industrial Revolution’, Rifkin argues that we have now abandoned the nineteenth-century obsession with productivity in favour of being free of the pursuit of material wealth: ‘*we live to play*’.<sup>18</sup> While undoubtedly enjoying this social connectivity, the worker who produces an immaterial good might still crave pre-First Industrial Revolution dexterity – the kind of physicality that is seen in ‘A Complaint Against Blacksmiths’.

The question of how far intellectual work can really be considered ‘work’ is an old one. Doubts about the benefits of immaterial labour such as the preaching and praying of friars were persistent in the Middle Ages.<sup>19</sup> Rather than *creating* unease about the productivity of cerebral labour, the digital age has intensified it. So, this article pushes back into the lively world of the medieval forge to explore its political and poetic appeal to audiences, both medieval and post-medieval.

<sup>13</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, ‘Immaterial Labor’, in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 132–46 (p. 132).

<sup>14</sup> Lazzarato, p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Lazzarato, p. 132.

<sup>16</sup> Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel, ‘Introduction’, in *The Middle Ages at Work: Practicing Labor in Late Medieval England*, eds Kellie Robertson and Michael Uebel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 1–15 (p. 3).

<sup>17</sup> Rifkin, *Third Industrial Revolution*, p. 268.

<sup>18</sup> Rifkin, *Third Industrial Revolution*, p. 269 (emphasis in original).

<sup>19</sup> Robertson and Uebel, p. 3.

As 'A Complaint' opens, soot and smoke cling to the blacksmith's clothes and skin: 'Swarte smekyd smeþes smateryd wyth smoke' (1). Quickly, the poem moves to the crux of its complaint. The deafening din of the smith at work causes the narrator distress:

Dryue me to deth wyth den of her dyntes  
Swech noys on nyghtes ne herd men neuer  
What knaueene cry *and* clateryng of knockes (2–4).

The narrator's aversion to night-time knocks and cries may gesture towards late fourteenth-century movements to legislate against noisy night work.<sup>20</sup> It was not only blacksmiths whose work caused such disruption after dark: the neighbours of the London armourer Stephen atte Fryth complained that the blows of his sledge-hammers 'shake the stone and earthern party-walls' and 'disturb the rest of the plaintiffs . . . day and night'.<sup>21</sup> However, it was the blacksmiths who became the target of legislation. Arguments for these laws invoked quality control in addition to noise limitation; there was a concern among merchants that late-night work resulted in slipshod craftsmanship and saturated markets.<sup>22</sup> Legislators ruminated over the plummeting prices that resulted from extended work days.<sup>23</sup> Thus, the integrity of the smith of 'A Complaint', who continues to clatter late 'on nyghtes', is called into question. He is socially irresponsible and irritating. This concern persisted well into the early modern period: *The Lawes of the Market* (1595) prescribed that, 'No hammar man, [such] as a Smith, a Pewterer, a Founder, and all Artificers making great sound, shall not worke after the hour of nyne in the night, nor afore the houre of four in the Morninge'.<sup>24</sup> 'Hammer men' were evidently an ongoing nuisance, whose late-night work provoked contempt from the sleep-deprived populace, and attracted legislative attempts from successive governments.

BL, MS Arundel 292 belonged to the Benedictine monastery of Holy Trinity in Norwich. Thus, it is likely that the scorn of blacksmiths was

<sup>20</sup> See Salter ('A Complaint against Blacksmiths', p. 202) who considers 'a clustering of documents of legislation in the fourteenth century, and the comparative silence of the fifteenth century' to suggest a date for the poem, and to argue that the fourteenth century might have presented conditions strong enough to provoke poetic composition on the topic of noisy night work.

<sup>21</sup> Helena Chew and William Kellaway, eds, *London Assize of Nuisance* (London: London Record Society, 1973), p. 160. I would like to thank Brad Kirkland for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>22</sup> Salter, pp. 203–04; see also E. P. Kuhl, 'Daun Gerveys', *Modern Language Notes*, 24 (1914), 156.

<sup>23</sup> Salter, pp. 203–04.

<sup>24</sup> *Lawes of the Market*, sig. A6<sup>v</sup>; Cockayne, *Hubbub: Filth, Noise & Stench*, p. 113; Henty, *Noise: A Human History*, p. 149.



characterised by their narrativised bodies, with visually unpleasant features that may form connections with Chaucer's oeuvre.<sup>31</sup>

There is further intertextuality in the sounds of the bellows. The 'huf puf' resembles an early fourteenth-century Latin poem, where a drunken priest recites a prayer, punctuating his Latin with belches: 'Laudate Dominum, *puf*, omnis gens, laudate, *puf*, et omnis spiritus laudet, *puf*.' This priestly belching was later echoed in Chaucer's 'Summoner's Tale' as the fat friars burp their way through prayers: 'Lo buf they seye, cor meum eructavit.'<sup>32</sup>

'A Complaint' contains several more similarities with contemporary texts, each of which casts aspersions on the figure of the smith. There are further connections with Chaucer's works in its opening line: 'Swarte smekyd smeþes smateryd with smoke' (1). The unusual verb 'smatre' appears in the 'The Parson's Tale', used to represent fools defiling themselves through vile, lecherous, kisses: 'Thise olde dotardes holours, yet wol they kisse thogh they may nat do, and smatre hem.'<sup>33</sup> There are also thematic links with the portrayal of blacksmiths in 'The Miller's Tale'. In this tale, the blacksmith, Gerveys, is visited by the vengeful Absolon in the middle of the night. In love with the adulterous Alisoun, Absolon is keen to redress his humiliation after being tricked into kissing the backside of her lover, Nicholas. Absolon wishes to borrow a hot coulter (the iron blade that was fixed in front of the share in a plough), with which to burn Nicholas's bottom.<sup>34</sup> The blacksmith's character is dubious: Absolon knows instinctively that Gerveys will be working at night, and will lend him the hot coulter to exact his revenge. The night-working smith does not adhere to social conventions, and is deemed likely to provide the instruments of mischief. As Edmund Reiss observed, 'Absolon has really put himself in the hands of the wrathful devil'.<sup>35</sup>

So, the images of the forge in 'A Complaint' seem to hint towards Chaucer's stylishly immoral figures. Frequent allusions to these contemporary

<sup>31</sup> See Kellie Robertson, 'Branding and the Technologies of Labour Regulation', in *The Middle Ages at Work*, eds Robertson and Uebel, pp. 133–53. For the moral implications of physiognomy for the worker, see 'the pardoner's speaking body', as discussed in Caroline Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 156–84; and Glen Burger, 'Kissing the Pardoner', *PMLA*, 107 (1992), 1143–56.

<sup>32</sup> Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 53, fol. 27'; see also *The Latin Poems Commonly Attributed to Walter Mapes*, ed. Thomas Wright (London: Camden Society, 1841); Chaucer, 'The Summoner's Tale', in *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 132, line 1934.

<sup>33</sup> Chaucer, 'The Parson's Tale', in *Riverside Chaucer*, p. 318, lines 861–62.

<sup>34</sup> See Cornelius Novelli, 'Sin, Sight, and Sanctity in the "Miller's Tale": Why Chaucer's Blacksmith Works at Night', *Chaucer Review*, 33 (1998), 168–75 (p. 168).

<sup>35</sup> Edmund Reiss, 'Daun Gerveys in The Miller's Tale', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 6 (1970), 115–24.



literary scoundrels, including the unscrupulous blacksmith of ‘The Miller’s Tale’, infuse the thickest possible air of distrust into the grimy medieval forge.

There is more explicit moral vilification in other fourteenth-century works depicting blacksmiths. A gruesome scene in the anonymous *The Vision of Tundale* presents the smith in the worst possible light.<sup>36</sup> In its twelfth-century Latin source, the *Visio Tnugdali*, the devil Lucifer is chained to a giant cauldron tended by demonic smiths.<sup>37</sup> The fourteenth-century version intensifies these demonic associations by giving the name of the Roman god of fire, Vulcan, to the master of a band of blacksmiths, who delights in doling out grizzly punishments to wrongdoers (1042). The eponymous antihero, Tundale, is shown the way to the deep valley of death, which is full of grim-looking forges (1031–35). These forges are packed with souls who weep and make ‘grett dyn’ (1038). The smiths throw the sinners onto the fire and beat them with their hammers (1039–40). As Tundale enters one of the forges, the smiths run at him furiously: ‘with furgons and with tongus glowand’ (1056). They throw him into the middle of the fire with obvious delight (‘as hem liked best’) and blow bellows at him as if he were a piece of molten iron (‘as hit wer as yron ymulton new’, 1062).

The unhinged and energetic delight with which the smithy-fiends punish their captive souls is evident as they beat them madly with their hammers: ‘And leyde on hem as thei wer wode’ (1074). They are described as ‘fowle and blake’ (1081), and they never tire of their ‘wykkyd labourus’ (1084). In a particularly foul scene, the pack of smiths fight with a rival group, who seize the souls and brand them until there is almost nothing left of their bodies (1087–1100).

The early fourteenth-century preachers’ handbook *Fasciculus Morum* depicts the devil inflaming a soul with sensuality, as a blacksmith blows upon a fire. The scene links the blacksmith to the source of all evil.<sup>38</sup> This association between blacksmiths and hell is also presented in *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, where the captive soul’s ears flap like blacksmith’s bellows, fanning the brain.<sup>39</sup> These poetic descriptions of the visual and auditory world of the

<sup>36</sup> *The Vision of Tundale*, in *Three Purgatory Poems: The Gast of Gy, Sir Owain, The Vision of Tundale*, ed. Edward E. Foster (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2004), pp. 179–280. Subsequent references to this edition are provided in the text, denoted by line number.

<sup>37</sup> See *Visio Tnugdali lateinisch und altdeutsch*, ed. Albrecht Wagner (Erlangen: Verlag von Andreas Deichert, 1882), pp. 35–36; and its translation in *The Vision of Tnugdali*, ed. and trans. Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin: Four Courts, 1989), p. 138.

<sup>38</sup> Reiss, pp. 115–24.

<sup>39</sup> *The Revelations of St Birgitta of Sweden*, eds Bridget Morris and Denis Searby, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), II, 39.

forge and the 'gryslly smythys'<sup>40</sup> resemble those of 'A Complaint' in their heat, stench, and noise, and depict the smith as a figure of utter obscenity.

Despite the abundance of wicked images in fourteenth-century literature, the forge was not invariably connected with depravity. A synchronous association with godliness was focused upon the most productive smiths. The metalworking story of St Dunstan is illustrated in a twelfth-century manuscript now in the British Library (see Figure 1). While a hermit in Glastonbury, Dunstan passed time as a smith. When he realised that a visitor to the hermitage was the devil in disguise, Dunstan seized him by the nose with his tongs. This evocative image is well attested in medieval manuscripts, demonstrating an enduring positive conception of the medieval smith.<sup>41</sup> Unlike agricultural labour, craft production had a capacity for newness and 'things that were not there before', which marked it as the production of an intelligence.<sup>42</sup> This connection with creation meant that God Himself was sometimes characterised as a craftsman.<sup>43</sup> The trade of the blacksmith was also one that inspired special pride, as was demonstrated in the fourteenth-century tale, *The Tale of the Smyth and his Dame*, in which the smith exalts himself as 'the kynge'.<sup>44</sup> However, though the craft had prestige, excessive pride comes before a fall and the smith is humbled by Christ. The shaming of the proud smith by Jesus exposes the inferiority of his 'making' next to the work of God. In addition, the potential for holiness was reserved for artisanal smiths, as opposed to the brutes of 'A Complaint', whose night work held implications of ineptitude.

Though morally questionable, the cacophony of the forge is a source of material for rhetorical brilliance.<sup>45</sup> The dints and clattering of the smith can be transmuted into the music of poetry.<sup>46</sup> The ephemeral nature of sound makes authors and musicians yearn to capture it, whether in words or musical scores. Otherwise, it 'inhabits its own time and dissipates quickly'.<sup>47</sup> For Hugh of St Cher, writing in the thirteenth century, like the writer of

<sup>40</sup> *The Vision of Tundale*, line 1103.

<sup>41</sup> See BL, MS Royal 10 E. IV, fol. 250<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Nicola Masciandaro, *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 41.

<sup>43</sup> George Ovitt, Jr, *The Restoration of Perfection: Labor and Technology in Medieval Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 57–70.

<sup>44</sup> An edition of the Middle English *The Tale of the Smyth and his Dame*, which survives only in a later print, can be found in *Altenglische Legenden mit Einleitung und Anmerkungen*, ed. Carl Horstmann (Heilbronn: Henninger, 1881), pp. 322–28. See Masciandaro, p. 41.

<sup>45</sup> Salter, 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths', p. 209.

<sup>46</sup> Masciandaro, p. 1.

<sup>47</sup> Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 5.

*Tundale* discussed above, the sound of the hammer was suggestive of the devil. However, he also found the noise delightful: 'he is delighted by the harmonious variety of sounds coming from the stroke of the hammer.'<sup>48</sup> Ranulf Higden's *Polychronicon* describes the joy with which the biblical father of music, Jubal, listened to the sounds of the forge and the work of the smith, Tubalcain:

Tubal cain fonde first smythes craft and grauynge, and whan Tubal cain wrouzte in his smeþes craft, Tubal [Jubal] hadde grete likynge to hire þe hameres sowne, and he fonde proporcions and acorde of melodye.<sup>49</sup>

An association between the smith and harmony persisted into the fifteenth century. At the end of Chapter 8 of the first book of the *Theorica musice*, published by Franchino Gaffurio in 1492, there are images representing the origin of musical scales.<sup>50</sup> One depicts Jubal watching smiths as they beat a piece of metal with hammers. The labels on the hammers indicate their different weights, which is the cause of the variance in the noise that each hammer produces. In this depiction, the sounds of the forge are harmonious and it is the mastery of the smith that creates this harmony. This idea of the blacksmith's creative harmony is reflected in the medieval association between Nature and blacksmiths. In an ornate copy of the thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*, a queenly, hammer-wielding, Nature crafts a baby at her forge, thereby ensuring the harmonious continuation of our species (see Figure 2).<sup>51</sup> As Boethius demonstrated, drawing together the wisdom of Greek, Arab, and Latin philosophers, even the human body itself generated music, *musica humana*, which needed to be in tune with cosmic harmony.<sup>52</sup> David Hendy has shown that the human body's instrument-like quality necessitates occasional

<sup>48</sup> Hugonis de Sancto Charo, *Opera omnia in uniuersum Vetus et Novum Testamentum*, 8 vols (Lyons, 1645), III, 246: 'delectat propter consona varietatum sonorum ex percussione malleorum peruenientium'; English translation from Novelli, 'Sin, Sight, and Sanctity', pp. 172–73.

<sup>49</sup> Ranulf Higden, *Polychronicon*, eds Churchill Babington and Joseph Rawson Lumby, 9 vols (London: Longman, 1865–86), II (1865), 229, quoting Trevisa's translation. For the history of the legend, see James McKinnon, 'Jubal vel Pythagoras, quis sit inventor musicae?', *Musical Quarterly*, 64 (1978), 1–28; Paul E. Beichner, *The Medieval Representative of Music: Jubal or Tubalcain* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1954); Masciandaro, p. 2 and n. 6; and Richard J. Schrader, 'The Inharmonious Choristers and Blacksmiths of MS Arundel 292', *Studies in Philology*, 104 (2007), 1–14 (p. 9).

<sup>50</sup> C. J. Verduin, 'Hammers, music and scales. Jubal watching Tubalcain: some notes on iconography', available at <http://www.leidenuniv.nl/fsw/verduin/ghio/speculum.htm> [accessed 26 May 2015]; Franchinus Gaffurius, *Theorica musice* (Milan, 1492).

<sup>51</sup> BL, MS Harley 4425, fol. 140<sup>r</sup>; Katherine Park, 'Nature in Person: Medieval and Renaissance Allegories and Emblems', in *The Moral Authority of Nature*, eds Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 50–73 (pp. 54–56).

<sup>52</sup> Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius, *Fundamentals of Music*, trans. Calvin M. Bower, ed. Claude V. Palisca (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), Book 1.2; Hendy, *Noise: A Human History*, p. 121.

retuning.<sup>53</sup> The blacksmith, with his hammers and metal, has an enhanced capacity to make sound, whether pleasing or brain-bursting.

In 'A Complaint', the sounds of the forge are neither pleasing nor harmonious. As Richard Schrader has argued, they force listeners 'to think hard about the traditional association of hammer and anvil and music'.<sup>54</sup> However, they are inspiring to the poet regardless. The 'dyntes' and 'knookes' convey their clattering through hard, clustered, consonants. Alliterative lines with parallel syntactic structures gather spitting, sprawling, tale-telling, gnawing, gnashing, and groaning into a disgusting, evocative, pile of participles. Verbs are taken out of their usual contexts and applied to the smith, using the forge to craft a rich literary piece. The Middle English 'spraulyn' was commonly applied to the writhing of death throes.<sup>55</sup> Alternatively, it could describe the squirming of babies and was used in John Trevisa's translation of *De proprietatibus rerum* to describe the uncontrolled movement of a foetus as it explores the potential of its newly developed limbs: '[the foetus] bigynneþ to meue it self & sprawle & puttiþ wiþ feet & hondes.'<sup>56</sup> In 'A Complaint', 'spraulyn' describes a lolling smith, carrying implications of sluggishness that contrast both with the horrific convulsion of death and the joyful wriggle of babies.

R. Murray Schafer has observed that the eye points ahead of us, looking outwards, whereas the ear draws information inwards.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the sounds of the forge draw the audience of 'A Complaint' directly into it. The poet explores words, combining hypnotic, visual images with centripetal sonic aspects that pull us, by our ears, into the heady, claustrophobic world of the smith.<sup>58</sup> Then, because we are most dependent on sight, and thus internalise vision into every aspect of our being, we open our eyes to the smoky dimness of the forge; an assault on both vision and hearing.<sup>59</sup>

When the American poet, Philip Freneau wrote a eulogy of a dead blacksmith four centuries later, he also found rich material for stylistic

<sup>53</sup> Hendy, p. 121.

<sup>54</sup> Schrader, p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> See 'spraulen (v.)', in *MED*, esp. definition (a): 'To move convulsively, as in death throes, struggle, writhe.'

<sup>56</sup> John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus 'De Proprietatibus Rerum'*, ed. M. C. Seymour, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 1, 296.

<sup>57</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny Books, 1994), p. 11.

<sup>58</sup> Stephen Handel, *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. xi.

<sup>59</sup> Kahn, *Noise, Water, Meat*, p. 4.

expression. In his ‘Elegy on the Death of a Blacksmith’, he used the smith playfully to demonstrate his prowess in punning:

WITH the nerves of a Sampson this son of the sledge,  
 By the anvil his livelihood got:  
 With the skill of old Vulcan could temper an edge;  
 And struck – while his iron was hot.  
  
 By forging he liv’d, yet never was tried,  
 Or condemn’d by the laws of the land;  
 But still it is certain, and can’t be denied,  
 He often was burnt in the hand.<sup>60</sup>

Freneau aligns the blacksmith with violence and criminality, before sweeping him away with a wry smile as he unveils his double meanings. Freneau’s play on the words ‘forging’ and ‘burnt in the hand’ nods briefly towards counterfeiting and corporal punishment, before redirecting us to more innocent meanings. The smith forges – honestly – with his hammer. The branding of his hand was done innocently in the course of shaping hot metal. However, Freneau’s comedic and over-zealous denial of the smith’s sins gestures towards long-established concerns about the morality of smiths.

In Britain, the nineteenth century heralded an idealisation of blacksmiths, as the Industrial Revolution brought about ever-greater mechanisation. The isolatable sounds of craftsmen were being replaced by ‘a new and apparently all-encompassing din: the sound of the steadily advancing Industrial Revolution’.<sup>61</sup> Thus, there was a desire to capture, to preserve, the ‘organic soundscape’ that preceded this ‘super-human, or rather inhuman noise’.<sup>62</sup> In 1836, the musician and writer Richard Clark wrote an account of the life of George Friedrich Handel.<sup>63</sup> In it, he developed a legend that Handel’s final movement, *Air and variations*, Suite No. 5 in E major, HWV 430, for harpsichord, was inspired by the sounds of a blacksmith’s forge. This story, which mirrors that of Jubal and the blacksmith Tubalcain, recounts how Handel sought shelter from a rain shower in a roadside smithy and heard the smith singing at work and beating time upon his anvil. In this idyllic image of artistic inspiration, the legendary Handel went home and wrote a set of variations on the tune that the blacksmith sang.

<sup>60</sup> Philip Freneau, ‘Elegy on the Death of a Blacksmith’, in *Poems Written and Published during the American Revolutionary War*, 2 vols (Philadelphia: Laura R. Bailey, 1809), II, 209, lines 1–8 (emphasis in original).

<sup>61</sup> Hendy, p. 217.

<sup>62</sup> Hendy, p. 217 (emphasis in original).

<sup>63</sup> Richard Clark, *Reminiscences of Handel, His Grace the Duke of Chandos, Powells the Harpers, the Harmonious Blacksmith, and others* (London, 1836); Victor Schoelcher, *The Life of Handel* (London: Trübner & Co, 1857), p. 65.

Three years later, when the American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow peered into the forge to write 'The Village Blacksmith', the medieval smith's brute power had been superseded entirely by benign and admirable strength:

Under a spreading chestnut-tree  
The village smithy stands;  
The smith, a mighty man is he,  
With large and sinewy hands;  
And the muscles of his brawny arms  
Are strong as iron bands.<sup>64</sup>

The craftsman remains a figure upon whom poetic ornaments can be hung with style, but Longfellow's gentle giant is the antithesis of the dirty-faced, spitting, noisy medieval smith. His brawny arms have latent power, yet their comparison with 'iron bands' implies restraint. Longfellow's blacksmith is a bridled colossus. His bellows do blow relentlessly and his hammer does swing noisily: 'You can hear him swing his heavy sledge' (15). However, there is no agitated, sleepless listener to cast aspersions. Instead, the moral focus is upon the smith's religious devotion and reverence for his mother. This figure, unlike the disgusting blacksmith of 'A Complaint', lacks a distinct identity. He is merely an archetype of the loyal son and devoted Christian. This absence of individuation is fuelled by idealisation: he is an unnatural fantasy of the 'good' labourer. Longfellow's smith is a theological creation, representing the smith as the simple antithesis to the nineteenth-century reality of industrialisation and materialism.

As the nineteenth century progressed, the association between the sounds of the forge and charming simplicity became entrenched. The American poet, Alice Cary depicts the smith as a benignly sitting, sweetly singing, little man in her children's poem 'The Little Blacksmith', first published posthumously in 1877:

We heard his hammer all day long  
On the anvil ring and ring,  
But he always came when the sun went down  
To sit on the gate and sing.  
  
His little hands so hard and brown  
Crossed idly on his knee,

<sup>64</sup> Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 'The Village Blacksmith', in *The Complete Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (London: G. Routledge, 1871), p. 214, lines 1–6. Subsequent references are provided in the text, denoted by line number.

And straw hat lopping over cheeks  
As red as they could be.<sup>65</sup>

With a tuneful, ringing hammer, later described as a ‘happy ring’ (26), and a healthy-coloured face, Cary’s blacksmith is a sentimental figure to be enjoyed and reminisced about, rather than abhorred and cursed. He is described fondly as ‘a picture sweet’ (12) and is aligned with the virtuous ‘rustic’ tending fields nearby (17). Crucially, unlike the socially disruptive fifteenth-century smith, he finishes work and begins to sing a sweet song as darkness descends: ‘As forth he came when the sun went down | And sat on the gate and sung’ (15–16). Not only do those who hear the smith not despise his voice, but they yearn to hear it: ‘And half the busy villagers | Lean from their doors to hear’ (19–20). A sense of restorative nostalgia emerges from the sonic aspects of the forge in this poem, which is written as a blissful memory. While sight and touch are inextricably tied to everyday life – what we might call ‘reality’ – sound has ‘privileged access to the emotional life of the hearer’.<sup>66</sup> Sound is less connected to objects and things and thus is free to connect with hazy recollections, emanating as it does ‘from nowhere or everywhere’.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the poem presents an idealised sound of the forge, which evokes the pleasant memories of the blacksmith and his ruddy cheeks. This sound of hammers bashing ‘all day long’ contrasts with the noise of the industrialised nineteenth-century city, which is equally persistent, but less evocative of glowing cheeks and rough, ‘brown’ hands.

In Ireland, late nineteenth-century depictions of blacksmiths were equally positive. In William Allingham’s poem ‘The Blacksmith’, published in 1889, the smith makes a din:

His anvil makes music from morning till night,  
And the swing of his arm keeps it polish’d and bright,  
Bing-bang!’ ting-clang!<sup>68</sup>

However, the forge is a social centre, ‘where neighbours peep in with a greeting or smile | Or stand in the doorway to gossip awhile’ (29–30). Allingham’s chorus lauds the blacksmith for his melodious clatter:

<sup>65</sup> Alice Cary, ‘The Little Blacksmith’, in *Poetical Works of Alice and Phoebe Cary*, ed. Mary Clemmer (New York: Hurd & Houghton, 1877), p. 254, lines 1–8. Subsequent references are provided in the text, denoted by line number.

<sup>66</sup> Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), p. 22; Helen Dell, “Yearning for the Sweet Beckoning Sound”: Musical Longings and the Unsayable in Medievalist Fantasy Fiction’, *Postmedieval*, 2 (2011), 171–85 (p. 178).

<sup>67</sup> Dell, p. 179.

<sup>68</sup> William Allingham, ‘The Blacksmith’, in *Life and Phantasy [verse]* (London: Reeves & Turner, 1889), p. 144, lines 3–5. Subsequent references are provided in the text, denoted

Success to the Smith in his Forge!  
 Long life to the Smith in his Forge!  
 Sing, all you good fellows,  
 Tongs, hammer, and bellows  
 Hurrah for the Smith in his Forge! (6–10).

Allingham anticipates the aspersions that might be cast upon the blacksmith for his dirty visage, and dismisses them. He is not *disgustingly* grimy, as is the smith of ‘A Complaint’. Instead, Allingham’s smith is ‘besmudged’ because he has done an honest hard day’s work:

His hands are besmudged, his features the same  
 It’s the sign of his trade, and he thinks it no shame,  
 A varnish of coal needn’t cause him to fret,  
 For an honest day’s work never soil’d a man yet (11–14).

The poetry of Longfellow, Cary, and Allingham demonstrates how the harsh clanking of the forge was muffled by nineteenth-century poets. The din of a solitary, rural smith paled in comparison to the noise that was shaking the nineteenth century. For instance, the Industrial Revolution brought the blare of blast furnaces, which Thomas Carlyle in 1824 described roaring like ‘many whirlwinds all around’.<sup>69</sup> In these iron mills, the hammers were of ‘monstrous size, which fell like so many little earthquakes’, and Carlyle heard a ‘hideous shrieking noise’ that was almost unparalleled in nature. A hundred and fifty thousand men ‘grind out their destiny’ there; labour on an unimaginable scale. So, in the midst of this hellish nineteenth-century clamour, nostalgic literature ejected the brash medieval smith from the forge, and replaced him with a sweetly singing, heart-warming, solitary, and justifiably dirty vision of a rural smith.

We return to the medieval forge of ‘A Complaint’ as the sounds of the blacksmiths reach their maximum brain-bursting potential. Animalistic features become prominent in the smith’s physical appearance:

And holdyn hem hote *with* her hard hamers  
 Of a bole hyde ben here barm fellys  
 Her schankes ben schakeled for þe fer flunderys  
 Heuy hamerys þei han þat hard ben handled

by line number.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Carlyle to Alexander Carlyle, 11 August 1824, in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and James Welsh Carlyle, Vol. 3*, eds Charles Richard Sanders, Kenneth J. Fielding, Ian Campbell, John Clubbe, and Janetta Taylor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970), p. 125. See Humphrey Jennings, *Pandaemonium 1660–1886: The Coming of the Machine as Seen by Contemporary Observers*, eds Mary Lou Jennings and Charles Madge (London: André Deutsch, 1985), p. 165; Hendy, pp. 207–08.



Stark strokes þei stryken on a stelyd stokke  
Lus. bus. las. das. rowtyn be rowe (10–15).

The smith is shielded from the licking flames by an apron made from coarse bull hide. His ankles are protected from loose sparks by thick guards. The word ‘schakeled’, like Wadsworth Longfellow’s iron bands, invokes imagery of restraint. However, the shackled smith of this poem is bursting with crude energy as he handles his hammers ‘hard’ and his strokes strike ‘stark’. There is no gentle nobility in this fettered beast. The secretary of Marge Piercy’s poem is similarly encumbered by the apparatus of her work: her paperclip earrings, and rubber band hair. In contrast with the blacksmith’s shackles, which hint at his underlying strength and energy, the secretary’s burdens suggest unnatural inertia, and enervation.

The poet of ‘A Complaint’ rendered the smith animalistic to emphasise the horrendous sights and sounds of the forge. The French engraver, Nicolas de Larmessin II, in 1695 also explored the dehumanising potential of work, using the figure of the smith. Larmessin’s smith is not bestial, but instead is mechanised by his occupation-appropriate attire. In a similar image to Piercy’s paperclip-encumbered secretary, this blacksmith is made up of bellows, a furnace, and various tools (see Figure 3). An anvil rests on his head, horseshoes hang over his ears, and hot coals nestle in his belly. In the same series of engravings, the locksmith sits astride an anvil, with a body made up of a furnace and tools, and the ironmonger has a costume composed of various tools, bells, locks, and body armour.<sup>70</sup> Returning to ‘A Complaint’, the potential for work to erode human identity is reiterated in the refrain: ‘Lus. bus. lus. das.’ In the medieval working day, the rhythm of song, the street cries and chants, were reassuring markers of the passing of time.<sup>71</sup> They were reminders of a human’s position within a community of other working bodies. However, the blacksmith’s song, or ‘rowe’, is not intoned by human voices, but instead by heaving bellows. The hiss of air alternates with the dints of the hammers – ‘Tik. tak. hic. hac. tiket. taket. tyk. tak.’ (19) – to form a din that has musicality as it hits the treble, but also an inhuman sharpness.

The rowdy song of the blacksmith contrasts sharply with contemporary depictions – perhaps idealistic – of the studious quietude of a writer. The life of ‘trauailous stiness’ that might have been experienced by the writer of ‘A Complaint’, is described by Thomas Hoccleve in *The Regiment of Princes*:

<sup>70</sup> London, British Museum, I, 7.187, *Travestissements*: ‘Habit de maréchal’; I, 7.193, ‘Habit de serrurier’; and I, 7.200, ‘Habit de quincaillier’.

<sup>71</sup> David Garrioch, ‘Sounds of the City: The Soundscape of Early Modern European Towns’, *Urban History*, 30 (2003), 5–25 (pp. 8–9).

This artificers, se I say be day  
 In þe hotteste of al hir bysynesse  
 Talken and syng, and make game and play  
 And forth hir labour passith with gladnesse  
 But we labour in trauailous stilnesse;  
 We stowpe and stare vp-on þe shepes skyn,  
 And keepe muste our song and wordes in.<sup>72</sup>

Hoccleve contrasts the strenuousness of writing with the relative mental freedom of craft work.<sup>73</sup> The writer's mind is fixated on his page, his lips pursed in silence, whereas the craftsman has breathing space, represented by his capacity to make noise, to sing, and to 'make game and play'. Unlike the blacksmith, the writer is not able to make noise, because all of his attention is held by the page. For the writer, the song and words are internalised, ruminated on, focused upon, and fed into the work at hand, in a marked contrast to the grunting, clattering smith.

Returning to the forge of 'A Complaint', its unrestrained sounds reach their climax and the sleepless narrator loses his composure:

Swech dolful a dreme þe deuyt it to dryue  
 Þe mayster longith a lityl *and* lascheth a lesse  
 Twyneth hem tweyn and towchith a treble  
 Tik. tak. hic. hac. tiket. taket. tyk. tak.  
 Lus. bus. lus. das.  
 Swych lyf þei ledyn  
 Alle clope merys cryst hem gyue sorwe  
 May no man for brenwateres on nyght han his rest (16–22)

The narrator condemns the blacksmith to Hell for this anguished waking dream. The poem reaches the peak of its claustrophobia as we see the tiny pieces of metal that the smith smashes: he makes one little piece longer ('longith a lityl') and deals a heavy blow upon an even smaller one ('lascheth a lesse'). The narrator's thoughts are interrupted by the sound of the hammers and bellows, which join into a final raucous refrain. He wishes Christ's damnation upon these 'clope merys', literally 'one who clothes mares'. Finally, he exclaims resignedly that no man may get sleep, because of these 'brenwateres', referring to the hissing noise as a smith cools his irons in water.<sup>74</sup> The smith persists with his unceasing racket seemingly unaware of the distress he is causing. He might be deaf. Pierre De La Primaudaye (1546–1619) claimed that blacksmiths were, 'thicke of hearing, because

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), lines 1009–15.

<sup>73</sup> Masciandaro, *Voice of the Hammer*, p. 48.

<sup>74</sup> See 'bren(ne)-water (n.)', in *MED*.

their eares are continually dulled with the noise of and sound of their hammers & anuiles'.<sup>75</sup>

Insomnia can prop the door of the mind open and invite anguish in. It ushers any remaining resilience out. Every wakeful hour can remove a protective stone of the mind's fortifications. Insomnia's capacity to incapacitate has been a long-established source of literary inspiration. An eighth-century Chinese poem by Tu Fu describes how a lack of sleep erodes the mind's protection against what torments it: 'Sleepless, memories of war betray me: I am powerless against the world.'<sup>76</sup> Loss of sleep was both the cause and result of misery for Thomas Hoccleve in his 'Complaint':

Syghenge sore as I in my bed lay,  
For this and othar thowghts whiche many a day,  
Before I toke sleape came none in myne eye  
So vexyd me the thoughtful maladye.<sup>77</sup>

Equally, sleeplessness is a muse. The smallest noise is concentrated and even the sounds of inspiration and expiration of breath are made more intense.<sup>78</sup> Sleeplessness in the deepest part of the night is a source of heightened poetic movement. In the lyrics to the 1995 song 'Insomnia' by Faithless, the effect of insomnia is magnified by mind-altering drugs:

Deep in the bosom of the gentle night  
Is when I search for the light  
Pick up my pen and start to write  
I struggle, fight dark forces  
In the clear moon light  
Without fear ... insomnia  
I can't get no sleep ...  
  
At least a couple of weeks  
Since I last slept, kept takin' sleepers  
But now I keep myself pepped  
Deeper still, that night I write by candle light  
I find insight, fundamental movement, uh  
So when it's black this insomniac take an original tack  
Keep the beast in my nature under ceaseless attack

<sup>75</sup> Pierre de la Primaudaye, *The French Academie Fully Discoursed and finished in foure Bookes*, trans. Thomas Bowes and Richard Dolman (London: Thomas Adams, 1618), p. 375.

<sup>76</sup> Tu Fu, *Facing the Snow: Visions of Tu Fu*, trans. Sam Hamill (Fredonia: White Pine Press, 1988), p. 103; Lisa Russ Spar, 'Insomnia and the Poet', *New York Times*, 9 March 2013, online at [opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/09/insomnia-and-the-poet](http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/03/09/insomnia-and-the-poet) [accessed 9 January 2014].

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Hoccleve, *Complaint and Dialogue*, ed. J. A. Burrow, EETS, o.s. 313 (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 2–3, lines 18–21.

<sup>78</sup> Russ Spar, 'Insomnia and the Poet'.

I gets no sleep  
I can't get no sleep.<sup>79</sup>

The result of this combination of mind-altering drugs and insomnia is 'insight', writing 'by candle light'. The insomniac is destitute, yet experiences a 'fundamental movement' within the mind. This song, like 'A Complaint', is crafted by insomnia.

In 'A Complaint', prolonged wakefulness conspires with a shroud of darkness to magnify every gnashing sound of the forge. The narrator's eyes and ears consume the exhaustive, and exhausting, details: the smith's apron, his shin guards, every single blow of the hammer. The narrator's tiredness intensifies with every irritable twitch until his anger discharges: 'cryst hem gyue sorwe.' His insomnia invites us to share in every disturbing stimulus of the forge with rapt irritation. In this process, we relish the poem's ever-increasing attention to detail.

Though the 'song' of the forge is brain bursting, there is a simple connection between the smith's labour and the sleep-depriving product. It is this uncomplicatedness that enthral a modern audience. The simplicity of the blacksmith's noise contrasts with the opening scene of the film *Metropolis* (1927), in which machines appear to move independently. It is uncertain who puts them in motion, or what their movement produces.<sup>80</sup> The film's orchestral score is interrupted by loud, halting clunks as the machine elements shift. The only obvious product of human labour is sporadic bursts of steam from the machines' outlets. In *Metropolis*, there is a disconcerting gulf between the toils of the human beings and the mechanic operation of the machines. This is quite unlike the simple, monosyllabic noises of the blacksmith at work. The noises of the forge are undeniably loud and jarring, but they are also the sounds of simple human endeavour.

Many modern workers experience a schizophonic confusion of non-human noises: there is a split between any original sound and its electro-acoustical reproduction.<sup>81</sup> It is not always possible to identify the source of any sound. This inability to associate noise with its source makes the mechanised office as distressing as the ear-bursting forge. In 'A Complaint', the narrator is, at least, able to attribute blame for the noise and thus retain a sense of control. This helplessness in the modern workplace was narrated in an advertisement from 1931, which was published in the United States

<sup>79</sup> Rollo Armstrong, Ayalah Deborah Bentovim, and Maxwell Alexander Fraser, 'Insomnia' (Champion/BMG, 1995), lines 1–7, 17–25.

<sup>80</sup> Anton Kaes, 'Metropolis: City, Cinema, Modernity', in *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, 'Metropolis', Architectural Fantasy*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 146–65 (p. 151).

<sup>81</sup> Schafer, *The Soundscape*, p. 90.

Chamber of Commerce's *Nation's Business Magazine* (see Figure 4). In this promotion, the Celotex Company speaks directly to managers responsible for employees who are distressed by sound:

“4 o'clock fatigue means OFFICE SHELL SHOCK”  
 Take a good look at your staff when the clock rolls 'round to 4.  
     Nerves on edge. Exhausted. Praying for 5 o'clock.  
 Study your own face. Rather pinched? Lined a bit?  
 “Office shell shock” etched those lines. It's “office shell shock” that  
     wastes precious hours for you and your employees.<sup>82</sup>

It then invents an internal monologue for the troubled office manager: “I'll get used to this racket” you say to yourself. But you don't. Noise – uncontrolled – always wins.’ Promoting its sound-absorbent wall padding, the advertisement argues for the existence of a psychological condition caused by ‘clattering typewriters’ and ‘jangling telephones’, dubbed ‘office shell shock’. The ‘nerves on edge’ and exhaustion of the 1930s office are caused by the constant exposure to ‘racket’. The advert imagines that the human victim of nervous exhaustion is passive among the clamour of the workplace. (S)he can find no identifiable, human source of the noise. The only answer is for managers to build a sound-proof cushion around their workers, to eliminate the distressing, mechanic noises of the office.

The twenty-first-century audience listens with fascination to the range of sounds of medieval industry. It is impossible for many of us to comprehend a medieval sonic landscape, when the developed, urban world is so completely different. As the Celotex advertisement shows, modern industry is full of intrusive and varied sounds. Even those who do not work in offices – agricultural labourers, builders, or carpenters, for example – have usually been exposed to the rich diversity of the modern city soundscape. Thus, it is difficult to comprehend the isolated, man-made din of a smith at work. R. Murray Schafer pushed towards an understanding by studying blacksmiths in twentieth-century rural Germany. His findings described the small hammer strikes and the heavy blows, the ‘tik’ and the ‘tak’:

While on a recording expedition in Europe, we were fortunate in persuading an old Swabian blacksmith and his assistant to fire up their abandoned forge and to demonstrate his techniques. Shaping scythes consisted of a rapid series of taps, followed by slight pauses for inspection. By comparison, the shaping of horseshoes called for the assistant to strike the metal with mighty sledgehammer beats while the smith, with a little

<sup>82</sup> The Celotex Company, ‘4 o’Clock Fatigue Means “Office Shell Shock”’, *Nation's Business Magazine*, July 1931, p. 10. I would like to thank Celotex for permission to reproduce the image, and acknowledge that there has since been a change in product range and business ownership.

hammer for shaping, struck the metal off the beat ... When the smith wanted more flattening he would tap the side of the anvil with two rapid flourishes.<sup>83</sup>

The sound of the smith in 'A Complaint' – brain-bursting, sleep-depriving noises – would have resonated for miles. Schafer measured the sound of a blacksmith at work at over 100 decibels. Though this is extremely loud, and enough to damage hearing, it is insignificant compared to the levels of noise that can be experienced today: a hairdryer can reach 70 decibels, a jackhammer 105 decibels, and a rock concert up to 140 decibels.<sup>84</sup>

Schafer's study highlighted the dexterity that is channelled into every tap or blow, with the shaping strikes of the 'little hammer' and the 'rapid flourishes' that flatten the metal. It is this skill that lent itself so well to the medium of finely crafted alliterative, poetic rhetoric. The early twentieth century brought an awareness of the slowly eroding world of manual craftsmanship. In the novel *The Man Without Qualities*, written by Robert Musil over the course of the 1930s and unfinished at his death in 1942, Count Leinsdorf reflects on the different type of intelligence that was required for mechanised work, compared with manual craftsmanship. Leinsdorf mourns the loss of crafting skill as a loss of part of the human soul:

there was a time when people grew naturally into the conditions they found waiting for them and that was a very sound way of becoming oneself. But nowadays, with all this shaking up of things, when everything is becoming detached from the soul it grew in, even where the production of soul is concerned one really ought, as it were, to replace the traditional handicrafts by the sort of intelligence that goes with the machine and the factory.<sup>85</sup>

An inseparability of individual and craft pervades the depiction of the blacksmith in 'A Complaint'. He grows into a representative of his trade, which, for the narrator, ties him inextricably to moral degeneration. The secretary of Marge Piercy's poem also grows into her role. However, her lot is precisely the kind of 'shaking up of things' that Musil's Leinsdorf lamented. She has lost touch with any kind of traditional handicraft and thus has become

<sup>83</sup> Schafer, p. 58. For a detailed description of the medieval blacksmith at work, see Jane Geddes, 'Iron', in *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products*, eds John Blair and Nigel Ramsay (London: Hambledon, 1991), pp. 167–88 (p. 173).

<sup>84</sup> See 'Common Sounds', an online resource for educators provided by the US National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, at [www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/teachers/pages/common\\_sounds.aspx](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/education/teachers/pages/common_sounds.aspx) [accessed 9 January 2015].

<sup>85</sup> Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins, 2 vols (New York: Vintage, 1996), II, 367; see also Michael Hardt, 'Affective Labour', *Boundary 2*, 26.2 (1999), 89–100 (p. 91).

a detached soul, whose only value lies in sorting things and controlling machines. She is no longer a producer – as the blacksmith is – but an operator.

To conclude, a sense of guilty delight in the sights and sounds of the blacksmith's forge pervades the fourteenth-century poem 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths'. The smith is burdened with long-established moral implications about his work. The grunting, spitting, night-working creature is representative of the social problems that were associated with the forge. The text, probably produced within a monastic context, carries clear messages about the reprehensibility of illicit work done without the remit of regulated medieval work.

The writer also found the forge compulsive because of the delightful rhetorical possibilities that it afforded. It is this compulsiveness, combined with the moral message of the poem that gives the poem its complicated power. As the narrator crouches in pain, his brain bursting at the horrific clamour of the forge, the poem resounds with delightful alliteration and onomatopoeia. It is the noises that distress the listener that provide such rich material upon which the poet can 'hang his rhetorical ornaments'.<sup>86</sup> The poem may gesture towards work by Chaucer and allude to long-established tropes, while crafting new and brilliant poetic embellishments from the sights and sounds of the forge.

A twenty-first-century urban audience, existing in a world of immaterial work, ubiquitous technology, and flat-line, automated soundscapes, is drawn towards the dirty, noisy smith. It may not idealise him as the nineteenth-century poets did, but those who are surrounded by technology revel in the sensual claustrophobia of his noisy night. The smith, animalistic yet pulsating with human sinews and muscles, is appealing as a vivid and dynamic individual. The audience may sympathise with the narrator's annoyance at the brain-bursting sounds of the forge as he lies awake and disturbed. Most humans can relate to the universal affliction of insomnia. However, many of us now live and work amid greater, and more varied, noise. Many of us can never truly comprehend the clamour of a forge within a comparatively straightforward medieval soundscape. So, from a world of indistinguishable, confusing noises, a modern, urban reader is pulled into the sonic landscape of the forge, with its clattering hammers, grunting mouths, and hissing waters.

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<sup>86</sup> Salter, 'A Complaint against Blacksmiths', p. 209.



Figure 1

St Dunstan seizing the devil by his nose

Source: BL, MS Harley 315, fol. 15<sup>v</sup>

Image from the British Library's *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*  
<<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts>>



Figure 2

Nature forging a baby

Source: BL, MS Harley 4425, fol. 140<sup>r</sup>

Image from the British Library's *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts*  
<<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts>>





Figure 3

Gerard Valck, *Travestissements: 'Habit de maréchal'* (1695–1720)

Engraving on paper (27.6 × 18.5 cm)

London, British Museum, shelf-mark I, 7.187

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## 4 o'clock fatigue means "OFFICE SHELL SHOCK"

**T**AKE a good look at your staff when the clock rolls 'round to 4. Nerves on edge. Exhausted. Praying for 5 o'clock.

Study your own face. Rather pinched? Lined a bit?

"Office shell shock" etched those lines. It's "office shell shock" that wastes precious hours for you and your employees.

"Office shell shock" is nervous fatigue caused by daily exposure to office racket. You develop it by dragging through office routine to the noisy tune of billing machines, clattering typewriters, jangling telephones, and the like.

"I'll get used to this racket!" you say to yourself. But you don't. Noise—uncontrolled—always wins.

Smart business men have found this out.\* That's why so many of them are applying Acousti-Celotex to the ceilings of their offices.

Acousti-Celotex is permanent relief from nervous fatigue. It subdues din. Relaxes tired nerves. Increases output.



Acousti-Celotex tiles are quickly applied to your present ceilings. The deep perforations permit repeated decorating with any kind of paint.

Acousti-Celotex comes in attractive fibretiles. These tiles can be decorated repeatedly with any kind of paint without loss of sound-absorbing value.

They are applied in a jiffy to ceilings in old or new buildings. No remodeling. No fuss . . . write today for further information on this remarkable material.

The Celotex Company, 919 North Michigan Ave., Chicago, Illinois. In Canada: Alexander Murray & Co., Ltd., Montreal. Sales distributors throughout the World. Acousti-Celotex is sold and installed by Acousti-Celotex Contracting Engineers.



\*"Our office was so noisy that billing machines and typewriters had to be segregated in a separate room," writes the Central States Life Insurance Company, St. Louis. "We applied Acousti-Celotex to the ceilings of the main workrooms and now all the office machinery is in these rooms, making it possible to route the work along the most economical lines. Thanks to Acousti-Celotex, our employees now finish the day less tired, and work is handled more quickly and accurately."

*When writing to THE CELOTEX COMPANY please mention Nation's Business*

**ACOUSTI-CELOTEX**  
FOR LESS NOISE—BETTER HEARING

Figure 4

The Celotex Company, '4 o'clock fatigue means "Office Shell Shock"

Source: *Nation's Business Magazine* (July 1931), p. 10

Hagley Digital Archives, Wilmington, DE, f HF1.N38.

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