

Trapped Maidens and Mocked Weavers

Semantics of Ambiguity Between Remunerated and Coerced Labour in Twelfth-Century Textile Production

Abstract: In *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, a French Arthurian romance written by Chrétien de Troyes around 1180, the protagonist finds three hundred captive maidens forced to work on silk fabrics in a cursed castle and complaining about their insufficient remuneration. According to the *Gesta Abbatum Trudoniensum*, a twelfth-century chronicle of the Abbey of Sint-Truiden (Limburg, Flanders), hired weavers were forced by domanial officers – most probably their employers – to pull a false ship from Kornelimünster near Aachen to Sint-Truiden in 1133. In this article, the two mentioned texts are examined using semantic methods to understand the logics behind the combination of coercion and remuneration in textile labour. The action phrases are analysed, as are the lexical fields of poverty and freedom. The weavers in the *Gesta Abbatum Trudoniensum* seemed to have the status of hired servants (*mercennarius*), which implied temporary servitude for the duration of a contract. In *Yvain*, the insufficient wage of the weaving maidens is presented as chicanery employed to force them to work more. In both texts, poverty is conceptualised in a social, economic, legal, and political sense at once.

Keywords: Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, Sint-Truiden, textile history, labour history, historical semantics

Textile production was one of the first economic sectors with a capitalistic structure and the use of free remunerated workers. Historiography generally points out the difference between early medieval textile manufacturing based on self-production and domanial unfree labour on the one hand and late medieval commercial

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-2-5>



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

Colin Arnaud, Department of History, University of Münster, Domplatz 20–22, 48143 Münster, Germany; arnaud@uni-muenster.de

and monetarised production based on output and free labour on the other. David Herlihy presents the twelfth century as a period of transition between “the old and the new economic order”, and he identifies two sources illustrating the “amalgam of servile and salaried labour” during this transition in Europe.¹ The first is the *Gesta Abbatum Trudoniensum*, a chronicle of the Abbey of Sint-Truiden in present-day Belgium; it recounts a story of wage weavers forced to pull a false ship from Aachen to Sint-Truiden in 1135. Secondly, in the late twelfth-century romance *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, Chrétien de Troyes imagines 300 captive damsels weaving silk in a castle and complaining about insufficient wages.

Considering the scarcity of pragmatic sources, these two texts offer a rare possibility to glimpse the labour relations of the time. They present situations challenging some of the fundamental categories of social sciences with regard to labour relations: namely, that unfree workers are unpaid and wage workers are free. The maidens in *Yvain* are captive but nevertheless receive wages, while the weavers in the *Gesta Abbatum Trudoniensum* are hired but still forced to pull a false ship, which has nothing to do with their textile labour.

Scholars of global labour history have recently begun replacing the simplistic opposition between wage labour and slave labour with a model including cases of transition.² Mixed forms of wage work and slavery and the transformation from an “old” to a “new” economy do not suffice to explain the logics of our two selected texts, however. The economic structures of the twelfth century remain elusive, although some historians are inclined to transpose onto it the monetarised guild-based production system of the thirteenth century.³ The sparse sources about labour relations speak their own language – and rather than attempting to make such unexpected working conditions fit into the teleological narrative of capitalism, we should embrace their “radical alterity”⁴ and attempt to understand their intrinsic dynamics and the conceptual categories of their time.

Without a doubt, both texts represent distorted prisms of the reality of the time. In addition, they are difficult to compare since they belong to different genres and were written 50 years apart in different languages. *Yvain* is a fictive romance in verses written in Old French for the amusement of the lay aristocracy, while the *Gesta* are

1 David Herlihy, *Opera Muliebricia. Women and Work in Medieval Europe*, Philadelphia 1990, 88.

2 Marcel van der Linden, *Workers of the World. Essays toward a Global Labor History*, Leiden/Boston 2008, 20–27.

3 John H. A. Munro, *Medieval Woollens. Textiles, Textile Technology and Industrial Organisation, c. 800–1500*, in: *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, vol. 1, Cambridge 2003, 228–324, 218–221; Hektor Ammann, *Deutschland und die Tuchindustrie Nordwesteuropas im Mittelalter* (1954), in: Carl Haase (ed.), *Die Stadt des Mittelalters*, vol. 3: *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*, Darmstadt 1973, 55–136, 55–65.

4 See the introduction of the *vade mecum* in this special issue.

a chronicle composed in Latin prose with the purpose of recording the history of a monastery. Nevertheless, the narrative structure of the texts reveals uncommon situations and allows for an examination of contemporary discourses on wage labour. Instead of a direct semantic parallel analysis, this article will perform two separate analyses with the same research questions and similar methods.

The first step of these analyses will focus on the lexical fields of poorness/richness and freedom/captivity and their intersections. As noted by Karl Bosl and Otto Gerhard Oexle, the opposite of *pauper* in the Early and High Middle Ages was more often *potens* (powerful) than *dives* (rich).⁵ An absence of freedom and agency was a hallmark of poverty, which explains why coerced and wage labour were linked in discourses on poor workers. Our examination will thus attempt to identify distinctions and confusions between both types of poverty in the selected texts. The document-centred analysis⁶ is sometimes complemented by a recontextualising of specific words by way of larger corpora, like the Latin *mercennarius* (hired labourer) or the Old French verb *gaaigner* (earn).

In a second step, this study analyses action phrases to measure the gradient of agency of the actors and the nature of coercion. To this end, the action phrases are tagged according to their *outcome* (successful or not), *intention* (willingly or not), *incentive*, and *target compliance* (required or not, expected or not), following a tentative method discussed in the working sessions of the WORCK group “Grammars of Coercion”. All action phrases in the studied passages are numbered and collected in a table recording their properties and the associated actors, along with important contextual information including the duration of the action and of the related extraction phases (entry, extraction, exit). These phases correspond to separate cases of coercion and present different actors’ conjugations, legal terms, and justification strategies, as the tagging reveals. The tagging of the properties of lawfulness and justification for the action phrases contributes to reconstructing the legal, moral, and political framework in which the labour relations and acts of coercion are presented.

5 Karl Bosl, Potens und Pauper. Begriffsgeschichtliche Studien zur gesellschaftlichen Differenzierung im frühen Mittelalter und zum Pauperismus des Hochmittelalters, in: Historisches Seminar der Universität Hamburg (ed.), *Alteuropa und die moderne Gesellschaft. Festschrift für Otto Brunner*, Göttingen 1963, 60–87; Otto Gerhard Oexle, Potens und Pauper im Frühmittelalter, in: Wolfgang Harms/Klaus Speckenbach (eds.), *Bildhafte Rede in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit. Probleme ihrer Legitimation und ihrer Funktion*, Berlin/New York 1992, 131–149.

6 See Ludolf Kuchenbuch’s vignette in the *vade mecum*.

Table 1: Example of tagging table for Action Phrase 7 in Yvain

Tagset	Tag	Subtag 1	Subtag 2	Properties	Values
Action phrase	action phrase	weave	weave silk clothes	ID	AP7
				Type Lawfulness Outcome Intention Incentive Occurrence	To produce something Lawful Success Unwillingly Earn something to eat Repeated
Actors	Group			Id	P3
				Gender Role in action Employer/ Media- tor/ Worker	Female Actor Worker
Phase	Extraction				
Contextual information	Duration				Always, everyday, forever

Source: author's own representation

This manual tagging activity enables a granular dissection of the individual actions in the text and helps to take details into account that would be overlooked in a classical hermeneutical analysis. An initial evaluation of the action phrases has been published in two data stories on the WORCK internet platform; it includes both texts in original version and English translation, along with a summary and explanation of the action phrases.⁷

1. The captive silk workers in *Yvain*

The novel *Yvain ou le Chevalier au Lion*, written in octosyllabic verses⁸ by Chrétien de Troyes between 1177 and 1181, contains the tales of Yvain, a knight of the Round Table, and is part of the Matter of Britain inspired by Gaelic legends.⁹ The narration

7 WORCK, Data Stories, <https://dkan.worck.digital-history.uni-bielefeld.de/?q=stories> (20 February 2023).

8 The version and verse numbering used correspond to Mario Roques (ed.), *Classiques Garnier: Chrétien de Troyes, Le Chevalier au lion (Yvain)*, Paris 1960, digital edition: Claude Blum (ed.), *Corpus de la littérature médiévale, des origines au XV^e siècle*, in: <https://num.classiques-garnier.com> (20 February 2023).

9 Jean Frappier, *Étude sur Yvain ou Le chevalier au Lion de Chrétien de Troyes*, Paris 1969.

is divided into distinct episodes, each corresponding to a single adventure and epic deed.

On the way to Arthur's court, Yvain seeks shelter for the night at the Castle of Ill Adventure, where he finds 300 captive and poorly dressed young women working on silk and golden fabrics (vv. 5184–5205). The girls explain that their king – the king of the Isle of Damsels – had been captured by two demons, champions of the lord of the castle. In exchange for his freedom, he agreed to send 30 maidens from his kingdom to the castle each year, and only once the demons were vanquished would these damsels be free (vv. 5244–5290). They complain of harsh labour conditions and insufficient wages (vv. 5292–5318). Warmly welcomed by the lord of the castle, Yvain is forced to fight the demons the very next morning, defeating them with the timely help of his lion.

The questions of the source of inspiration for the setting of the silk weavers, the realism of the workshop, and the meaning of the wage have been the focus of controversy among medievalists interested in textiles and labour relations.¹⁰ Although the text is pure fiction, the episode featuring the silk weavers has intrigued scholars because it breaks with the typical literary motifs of the genre. It reveals the extent of conceivable work relations and permits analysis of the mechanisms of labour relations and mental framing activated in the narration.

1.1 Agency of the actors: entry and exit phases of coercion

We can distinguish three distinct entry phases for the three coerced actors in the episode: the king of the Isle of Damsels, Yvain, and the weaving maidens. The grammar of coercion in the king's misadventure corresponds to the logics of *physical* and *spatial* compulsion. Although stuck in the castle and forced to fight the demons, he is not entrapped: He enters the castle of his own accord (v. 5255) and is vanquished in a face-to-face fight (vv. 5268–5272). In exchange for his freedom, he takes an oath to send thirty damsels to the castle every year (vv. 5275–5278). Through this oath, legal compulsion impacts the agency of the king even after the end of spatial and physical enforcement. The oath is sworn under con-

10 Jacques-Kees Noble-Kooijman, La Pire Aventure d'Yvain. Aventure, conjointure, manufacture dans Le Chevalier au Lion, in: Anastasis. Research in Medieval Culture and Art 6/2 (2019), 67–84 and the listed literature 83f.; E. Jane Burns, Sea of Silk. A Textile Geography of Women's Work in Medieval French Literature, Philadelphia 2009, 37–69; Sophie Cassagnes-Brouquet, The Worst of Adventures. The Knight Yvain and the Silk Weavers (Late Twelfth Century), in: Clio 38/2 (2014), 228–233; Krijnie N. Ciggaar, Chrétien de Troyes et la "matière byzantine". Les demoiselles du Château de Pesme Aventure, in: Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale 32/128 (1989), 325–331; Robert A. Hall, The Silk Factory in Chrestien de Troyes' *Yvain*, in: Modern Language Notes 56/6 (1941), 418–422.

straint (v. 5279), but it has enduring binding effects, since the king continues to send damsels every year after returning home.

The deeds of Yvain in the Castle of Ill Adventure follow a similar scheme: The logic of a feud lends a legal aspect to his compulsion, and he is warned three times before entering the castle. These warnings seem to be the rule and give the capture an appearance of lawfulness: The knight is free to enter the castle knowingly.

Legal tricks are also employed with regard to the duels between the demons and the knights coming to the castle. The face-to-face fight appears as a ritualised, honourable duel: Yvain is not attacked by surprise. He is courteously received by the lord of the castle and is merely made to comply with the custom of the castle by fighting the demons – with the prize of victory being the hand of the lord's daughter and the title of new lord of the castle (vv. 5458–5472). What sounds like a fair deal is an act of compulsion and an unfair duel, however: Although Yvain refuses the hand of the daughter, the lord still demands that he fight alone against the two demons (vv. 5492–5498). The use and abuse of legal tricks in combination with physical compulsion is omnipresent in the novel, for example for ordeal by duel.¹¹ The phases of entry and exit of Yvain's coercion follow traditional chivalric patterns.

More unusual is the compulsion of the weaving maidens. The entry phase of their work is never formulated in any action phrase with the maidens as subjects: Being the object of a ransom is sufficient to explain their imprisonment. How they are chosen and whether they sacrifice themselves voluntarily is not explained. They are nothing but a collective of victims without individual destiny and proper agency; it is enough to know that Yvain can rescue them by defeating the demons – which he does, initialising their exit phase by invoking the terms of the deal.¹²

The passage on the joyful liberation of the damsels emphasises their passivity and submission.¹³ They do not leave the castle on their own; rather, they are the object of verbs whose subjects are the men concluding the deal: Yvain “takes” the girls with him (*avec soi menez*, v. 5768); the lord “gives them away” (*li a bailliees*, v. 5769). The only actions they are subjects of are ones of submission to their saviour Yvain: They ask for his permission to quit (*congié demandé*, v. 5792), bow to him (v. 5793), and address good wishes to him (v. 5794). This is a typical repartition of agency in Arthurian romance: Yvain rescues defenceless victims without agency.

11 There is a similar situation in the romance where Yvain fights against three champions and wins only with the help of the lion (vv. 4469–4542).

12 Vv. 5702–5705: “Mes, s’il vos plect, delivrez moi / les cheitives que vos avez; / li termes est, bien le savez, / qu’eles s’an doivent aler quites.” (“But deliver to me now, if you will, the wretched maidens in your possession. The agreement, as you well know, is that they shall all go free.” [English translation: William Wistar Comfort, *Arthurian Romances*, London 1914]). All other translations by Comfort with modifications of the author.

13 Vv. 5765–5777, vv. 5791–5803.

1.2 Extraction phase: polysemy of poverty

The damsels are qualified as “poor” in numerous verses, but their poverty is not always economic in the sense of an antonym to richness. Let us investigate the lexical fields of poorness, captivity, and richness in order to understand the framing of the weaving maidens’ deprivation.

The architectural setting of the castle enhances the impression of captivity. Upon encountering the damsels for the first time, Yvain finds them in a “yard enclosed by large, round, pointed stakes” (*un prael clos / de pex aguz reonz et gros*, vv. 5185–5186) in front of a “grand new hall” (*une grant sale haute et nueve*, vv. 5184). The splendour of the new hall contrasts with the daunting effect of the stakes, a contrast accentuated by the explicit opposition between the luxurious embroidery of golden thread and silk the maidens are producing (*qui diverses oevres feisoient / de fil d’or et de soie ovoient*, vv. 5189–5190) and the “poverty” (*povreté*, vv. 5192, 5194) of their appearance characterised by a lack of decent clothing and visible malnutrition. This initial description of the damsels’ poorness resorts to adjectives referring to their bodies: they are “without lace and girdle” (*desliées et desceintes*, v. 5193); their garments are “torn” (*derotes*, v. 5196) and “with soiled back” (*a dos sales*, v. 5197); their necks are “thin” (*gresles*) and their faces “pale” (v. 5198).¹⁴

Even though poverty is clearly economic, the adjectives referring to the young women show that they suffer not only from a lack of subsistence goods: Poverty becomes a condition, a social status they are ashamed of.¹⁵ Indeed, their first reaction upon seeing Yvain is to hide themselves with shame and weep, their eyes downcast (vv. 5200–5206). Yvain himself points out the disparity between their physical condition and the appearance they would have (*beles et gentes*, “beautiful and respectful”, v. 5228) were they to be provided with “things that would please them” (vv. 5229–5230). The economic availability of goods, the social status, and the degree of agency are thus intimately embedded within the definition of poverty.

By contrast, silk embroidery is not only a sign of economic luxury but also a hallmark of a social status linked to a setting of coercive power where economic affluence, high social rank, and political might are entangled. While describing their labour conditions and pay, the damsels describe their naked poverty (v. 5294, v. 5311) in distinction to the wealth of the one they work for (*s’est riches de nostre deserte / cil por cui nos nos traveillons*: “Only the one for whom we work is enriched

14 Similar description in vv. 5226–5227.

15 For a general discussion of poverty as social abasement in romance, see Éléonore Andrieu, *Quelques transactions dans les textes dits littéraires au XII^e siècle. Les discours économiques des grands laïcs*, in: Julie Claustre (ed.), *Transiger. Éléments d’une ethnographie des transactions médiévales*, Paris 2019, 62–122, 84f.

by our merit” vv. 5312–5313). Though they weave silk clothes, they themselves are not well clothed and remain poor, naked, hungry, and thirsty (vv. 5292–5295). Even if they earned enough wages (under normal conditions?) to be as rich as a duke, they would still be destitute (vv. 5309–5311). The contrast between rich and poor is clearly framed in monetary terms here, with the adjective *riche* being used twice in an economic sense (vv. 5310, v. 5312) – though the model for a rich person is not a banker or merchant but a duke (v. 5310). Economic wealth and political or social status are considered inseparable.

It is worth noting that at the end of the twelfth century, the opposition *riche/povre* in Old French was already as frequent as in later medieval centuries. The relationship between the two words can be further elucidated by applying the resources and methods of corpus-based semantics.¹⁶ For this purpose, I used the corpus “Base de Français Médiéval 2022” (BFM2022), which contains 219 texts and 6.4 million words written primarily from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.¹⁷ As not all texts are lemmatised, corpus analysis must occur at the word level. Using the corpus analysis tool TXM,¹⁸ I searched for the most frequent co-occurrences of *povre* and its variants (*povres*, *pouvre*, etc.). The co-occurrences with the best scores (combination of co-frequency and absolute frequency) are *riches* and *riche*. Dividing the corpus according to centuries, the search for co-occurrences delivers similar results: *Riche* and *riches* are the highest-scoring co-occurrences for the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Surprisingly, when counting the relative frequency of the words *povre* and *riche* with all their variations century by century (table 2), the term *riche* (a newcomer according to Oexle’s model)¹⁹ is most frequent in the twelfth century and becomes less common in each subsequent century. By contrast, the term *povre* occurs most often in the fifteenth century, even though it is already frequent in the twelfth century. The combined use of both *povre* and *riche* already appears often in the twelfth century as well before reaching a peak in the thirteenth century and declining surprisingly in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

16 See Tim Geelhaar’s vignette in the vade mecum.

17 Base de Français Médiéval 2022 (BFM2022): <http://bfm.ens-lyon.fr/> (20 December 2022).

18 Textométrie – TXM: <https://txm.gitpages.huma-num.fr/textometrie/index.html> (20 December 2022).

19 Otto Gerhard Oexle, Armut und Armenfürsorge um 1200. Ein Beitrag zum Verständnis der freiwilligen Armut bei Elisabeth von Thüringen, in: Sankt Elisabeth. Fürstin, Dienerin, Heilige. Aufsätze, Dokumentation, Katalog, Sigmaringen 1981, 78–100, 82, 88.

Table 2: Frequency of the occurrences of *povre* and *riche* in BFM2022

(Co-)Frequency	12 th c.	13 th c.	14 th c.	15 th c.
Frequency for <i>povre</i>	210.6	289.0	153.4	304.0
Frequency for <i>riche</i>	328.4	332.5	222.6	138.2
Co-frequency for <i>povre/riche</i>	22.6	47.8	19.0	14.1

Frequency per 1 million words. Co-occurrence within 15 words.

Source: author's own representation

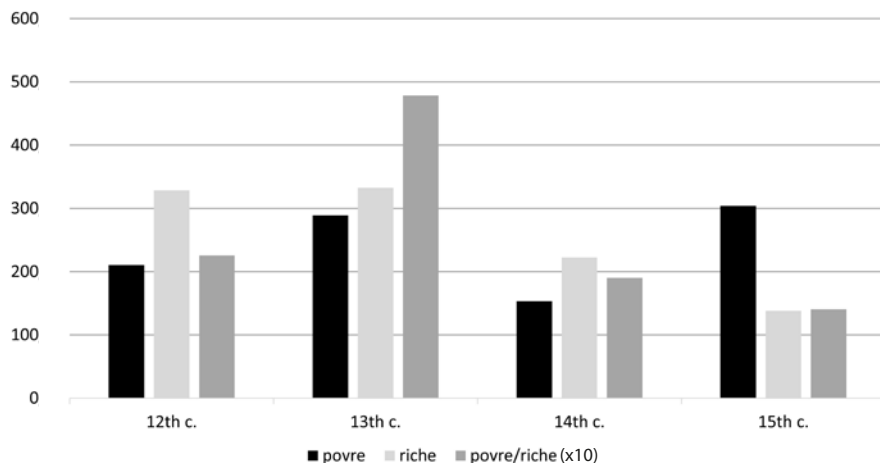


Figure 1 accompanying table 2: Values for the co-occurrence of *povre/riche* multiplied by 10 to better visualise its evolution over time

Source: author's own representation

This contextualisation reveals that the twelfth century is not a period of transition from an opposition poor/powerful to an opposition poor/rich. The association of poorness with an absence of freedom or agency and of richness with power as encountered in *Yvain* should not necessarily be understood as an intermediate between the old and new economic orders, but rather as a genuine medieval understanding of poverty. Indeed, the subsequent centuries experiencing growing monetisation did not enhance the poor/rich opposition.

1.3 Conditions of labour

While the entry and exit phases correspond to known topoi of Arthurian romance, the conditions of the weaving damsels' captivity are more challenging. Although the figure of women occupied with textile work is frequent throughout the Middle Ages,

it is generally linked to a respectable role rather than to coercion, poverty, and dishonour.²⁰ The cognitive framing associating compulsion and remunerated work in our context is not evident. Historians have interpreted it as a reference either to the manorial women's textile workshops (*gynaeceum*) of the early Middle Ages²¹ or to Islamic or Byzantine state-run textile workshops.²² Knowledge of the Greek weavers captured by the king of Sicily in 1147 and forced to work in the silk workshop in the royal palace at Palermo²³ may have influenced Chrétien de Troyes. However, the very specific work relation combining physical coercion and remuneration (as well as the stated precision of the payment) suggest that he had a more immediate horizon in mind. Éléonore Andrieu interprets the episode as an explanation of bad lordship and a lay denunciation of the aristocratic girls locked up in convents.²⁴ To understand the frames of the economic discourse evoked in the episode in *Yvain*, let us examine the action phrases and the lexical field of the labour relations.

Directly after explaining the reason for their captivity, the girls complain about their everyday working life in the castle and detail their harsh labour conditions:

5296	<i>ja tant chevir ne nos savrons que mialz en aiens a mangier. Del pain avons a grant dongier au main petit, et au soir mains,</i>	for we shall never achieve enough to procure for ourselves any better food. We have very little bread to eat, very little in the morning and in the evening even less.
5300	<i>que ja de l'uevre de noz mains n'avra chascune por son vivre que quatre deniers de la livre; et de ce ne poons nos pas</i>	From the labour of her hands, each will receive, for her living, only four pennies for the pound. With that, we are not able
5304	<i>assez avoir viande et dras car qui gaaigne la semaine vint solz n'est mie fors de painne. Mes bien sachiez vos a estros</i>	to obtain enough food and clothes, because the one who earns twenty shillings a week is far from being out of business. And rest assured

20 Burns, *Sea of Silk*, 2009, 61–63.

21 Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria*, 1990, 88.

22 Burns, *Sea of silk*, 2009, 43f.; Ciggaar, Chrétien de Troyes, 1989.

23 David Jacoby, *Seide und seidene Textilien im arabischen und normannischen Sizilien. Der wirtschaftliche Kontext*, in: Wilfried Seipel (ed.), *Nobiles officinae. Die königlichen Hofwerkstätten zu Palermo zur Zeit der Normannen und Staufer im 12. und 13. Jahrhundert*, Wien 2004, 61–73, 64f.

24 Andrieu, *Quelques transactions*, 2019, 85.

5308	<i>que il n'i a celi de nos qui ne gaaint cinc solz ou plus. De ce seroit riches uns dus! Et nos somes ci an poverte</i>	that none of us brings in five shillings or more. That would be enough to enrich a duke! And we are in poverty
------	---	--

Tagging the action phrases according to the respective action's outcome (success/failure), intention (willingly/unwillingly), and incentive help to analyse the mechanism of compulsion. The result of the extraction is satisfactory for the exploiter: The girls work on their embroidery as best they can, as stated in the very first description of the damsels (*oevroit chascune au mialz qu'ele savoit*, v. 5191). The verbs *chevir* (achieve) (v. 5296) and *gaaigner* (earn) (vv. 5304, 5309, 5315) show that the work is related to results: silk embroideries for the exploiter, money for their living for the weavers. The damsels perform their work willingly to earn a remuneration. But since they never earn enough for their living, the incentive of the wage becomes a means of compulsion: They are forced to labour day and night to earn more (*Des nuiz grant partie veillons / et toz les jorz por gaaignier*, vv. 5314–5315). Additionally, the employer threatens to molest them if they rest (*qu'il nos menace a mahaignier / des manbres, quant nos reposons*, vv. 5316–5317). Through physical coercion, the corporal limits of extraction are thus surpassed: Rest duration is minimised and work time maximised. Finally, the fenced workshop within the walls of the castle underlines the coercive immobilisation of the workers. Captivity, threat, and physical compulsion are marginal in the passage, but not surprising – we find many other examples in the romance. The abuse of remuneration as a tool for coercion, on the other hand, is far more original.

The words describing the wage are an issue in the comprehension of the text. The girls apparently do not earn enough to acquire decent food and clothing, with their remuneration amounting to four pennies for the pound. According to their words, even earning (*gaaigne*, v. 5304) twenty shillings a week would not be enough for them to live decently – despite the fact that five shillings a week were normally enough to enrich a duke. Philologists like Yvan Lepage and Jean Frappier have interpreted *gaaigner* in this passage in the sense of 'producing profit for the employer' rather than 'earning for oneself'. This makes the statement seem clear: Although the girls generate ample profit, they are poorly remunerated.²⁵ However, Jacques Noble-Kooijman refutes this interpretation since such a signification of *gaaigner* is evidenced nowhere else in the texts of Chrétien de Troyes, nor in dictionaries of Old French.²⁶

25 Frappier, *Étude*, 1969, 124–127; Yvan G. Lepage, *Encore les trois cents pucelles* (Chrétien de Troyes, Yvain, vv. 5298–5324), in: *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 34/134 (1991), 159–166.

26 Noble-Kooijman, *Pire Aventure*, 2019, 80–83.

Beyond basic definitions, the context and the way in which the word is used in Old French texts need to be analysed. Looking at the occurrences of the verb *gaaigner* in its various conjugations and orthographies in the BFM2022, I found that the word saw far less use in the twelfth century than in other centuries: In the corpus, it appears only 23 times per 1 million words in the twelfth century compared to 91 in the thirteenth, 174 in the fourteenth, and 134 in the fifteenth.

The 36 occurrences from the twelfth century allow us to distinguish at least five acceptations of the verb, all linked to the idea of bringing in or taking an advantage (table 3). In a rare acceptation (4 occurrences), it signifies land that is harvested or used for pasture, always as a passive or adjective past participle (*terre gaaignée*) and in combination with other adjectives outlining the quality of the land. A more frequent acceptation (11 occurrences) points to the idea of profit or something gained through economic transactions. It is used in the passive (e.g., a fortune is gained) or with an object (e.g., he gained everything), but most often in an intransitive fashion as the mere activity of making profit, sometimes with an additional modifier (to make much profit or twice the profit, etc.). Profit can also be referred to as *gaaigner* in a substantive form.

Gaaigner also means ‘to win’ in a mostly intransitive way, for example in the context of a tournament, battle, or fight (7 occurrences). It can also mean ‘to obtain something as spoils or plunder’ (mostly horses from an opponent) in a fight or tournament (10 occurrences). This last acceptation can be linked directly to the sense of ‘earning through one’s own work’ because the fighter worked hard to win the spoils, but the context is not that of a labourer.

Table 3: Acceptations and forms of *gaaigner* in BFM2022 (subcorpus: 12th century)

Acceptations of <i>gaaigner</i>	occurrences	adjective/passive	transitive	intransitive
gain, make profit	11	3	1	7
obtain as spoils	10		8	2
win	7		6	1
harvest, use as pasture	4	4		
earn through work	4		3	1
Total:	36	7	18	11

Source: author’s own representation

Only a single text testifies to the acceptation of *gaaigner* for ‘earning through work’. In the *lai of Tydorel* written between 1170 and 1230, the son of a widow is sent to a goldsmith as apprentice: “assez savoit de son mestier. De ce qu’il pooit gaaingnier

peissoit sa mere chascun jor” (“He knew much of his profession. Of what he could earn, he carried [all he could] to his mother every day”).²⁷ Together with the passage in *Yvain*, it represents the earliest instance of *gaaigner* employed in the context of craftsmanship to mean ‘earn through manual work’. The sense of ‘making profit’ continues to dominate in the thirteenth century,²⁸ and it is only in the fourteenth century that the use of the word to signify ‘earning a living’, ‘earning through a profession’, or ‘earning through labour’ clearly becomes more frequent (which can be explained by the presence of pragmatic texts in the corpus).²⁹ Interpreting *gaaigner* as ‘earning through work’ in *Yvain* would thus have been new and appears non-evident. In transitive form with money as the object, the common acceptation at this time was ‘to make profit’. However, to ‘provide profit for someone else’ cannot be found in the corpus at all: The money or land providing profit for an owner is never a person and always encountered in the passive form. Chrétien, on the other hand, uses the active form (v. 5305). Besides, use of the verb in intransitive form as it occurs in our passage (*por gaaignier*, v. 5315) is only testified in the corpus in the sense of ‘making profit for oneself’.

Another word that indicates remunerated work is *desserte* (v. 5312). The substantive word means ‘merit’ or ‘rendered services’, and at the same time the reward for such merit or the payment for rendered services.³⁰ It thus conveys reciprocity between an accomplished labour and a reward. In mid-thirteenth-century ordinances, the verbs *desservir* and *gaaigner* are used as interchangeable synonyms.³¹

According to the semantic analysis of the corpus – which of course cannot consider missing sources or exclude unusual word use in specific passages – the most probable acceptation of *gaaigner* is ‘making profit for oneself through work’. If this is the case, why could the damsels not purchase enough food even with such a significant amount of five shillings per week? I propose a new interpretation to solve this paradox: Rather than low remuneration (four pennies per pound was not a

27 Prudence Mary O’Hara Tobin (ed.), Tydorel, in: Les lais anonymes des XII^e et XIII^e siècles. Édition critique de quelques lais bretons, Genève 1976, 207–219, 219, v. 260.

28 Cofrequency of some highly scoring co-occurrences for the texts from the 13th century: *saisine* (13 co-occurrences), *propriété* (9), *plet* (11), *eritage* (14), *avoirs* (9).

29 Cofrequency of some highly scoring co-occurrences for the texts from the 14th century: *vie* (58 co-occurrences), *vies* (7), *mestier* (26), *vendenges* (6), *argent* (23), *ouvrier* (9), *peine* (10), *labour* (7).

30 Art. deserte², in: LFA/Université d’Ottawa – ATILF – CNRS/Université de Lorraine, DÉCT: Dictionnaire Électronique de Chrétien de Troyes, <http://www.atilf.fr/dect> (20 December 2022).

31 The first statutes of the drapers from Châlons-en-Champagne in 1244 specified that it was forbidden to give money in advance to the spinners or carders before this money has been merited (*devant qu’il soit desserviz*); in the confirmation of those statutes from 1245, the word *desserviz* (‘deserved’) is replaced by *gaaignez* (‘earned’): Ernst Gotthelf Gersdorf, Die Urkundensammlung der Deutschen Gesellschaft, in: Mitteilungen der Deutschen Gesellschaft zur Erforschung vaterländischer Sprache und Altertümer 1 (1856), 125–208, 134–139.

bad wage),³² the reason might be high living costs. Apparently, the lord pays them a proper wage – but because they are locked in his castle, he can demand prohibitive prices. The girls only receive bread in the morning and in the evening, but they have to pay for meat and dresses (vv. 5298–5304). With the manipulation of wages and prices, the bad lord focusses only on his own interest in maximising rent extortion, forgetting his duty to consider the interests of the entire community in his dominion – a fault often condemned in the novel.³³

Low or high, the remuneration is explicitly stated as not covering the maiden's subsistence costs. This uncommon form of labour relation seems to combine all the horrors imaginable during the given period: forced spatial immobilisation, psychological and physical violence, and insufficient remuneration. The lord of the castle uses wages as a subtle means of coercion to solve the problem of the intrinsic lack of motivation on the part of unfree labourers. Instead of relying on mere physical coercion, the promise of a remuneration appears much more efficient for maximising labour extraction. Firstly, the lord thereby saves the subsistence costs related to the workers. Secondly, he can make use of the power asymmetry: The captive workers cannot choose another employer or negotiate their remuneration. Their lord can therefore readily pay insufficient wages compared to the cost of living, so that the workers are constantly in need of money and forced to work more.

Here again, the evil master uses the appearance of legality (fair wages) to justify the injustice the damsels are subjected to during the extraction phase. The lord of the Castle of Ill Adventure is never named in the text, with the damsels merely mentioning him when telling of the defeat of the king as well as indirectly by calling him “the one whom we work for” (v. 5313). The character only receives a contour once Yvain encounters him, but at this point in the narration, it is not clear who the maidens actually work for. By leaving the author of the coercion undefined, Chrétien draws an impersonal picture of the described labour relation.

Although the fictional and fantastical narration cannot be transposed into real-life contexts, the framing used in the passage reveals a normalisation of wage relations of labour monetarisation as well as a criticism thereof – particularly from the perspective of confusion between lord/master and employer, or between political and economic dependence.

32 Jean-Charles Payen, Art. Chrétien de Troyes, in: Dictionnaire des littératures de langue française, Paris 1984, 453–460, 456.

33 Andrieu, *Quelques transactions*, 2019, 87.

2. The hired weavers of Villa Inda and Sint-Truiden

After exploring how unfree labourers could receive a remuneration, let us now investigate why wage labourers could eventually obey blindly like unfree subjects. The first continuation of the *Deeds of the Abbots of Sint-Truiden* in Limburg is a first-hand account of the history of the monastery for the period 1107–1138, written by a monk close to abbot Rudolf (1070–1138) in 1138.³⁴ Chapters 11, 12, and 13 of book XII relate an intriguing episode about wage weavers forced to pull a false ship in 1135:³⁵

“11. There is a type of hired persons whose occupation is to weave cloth from linen and wool. They are generally regarded as more impudent and haughtier than other hired persons. To diminish their haughtiness and pride and to avenge a personal injury, a certain poor rustic from the villa named Inda [Kornelimünster near Aachen] thought up this diabolical trick [AP1]. As he received the complicity of the judges (*judices*) and the help of frivolous men who enjoy games and novelty [AP2], he built a ship in the next forest and attached wheels to it so that it could move overland [AP3]. He effected from the potentates (*potestates*) [AP4] that it would be pulled by the rods of the weavers from Villa Inda to Aachen [AP5]. In Aachen the ship is welcomed with a great procession of men and women, so it is carried by the weavers to Maastricht. There it receives a sail and a mast, and it is led to Tongeren, and from Tongeren to Borgloon [AP6].”³⁶

Against the recommendation of the abbot (AP7) and refusing to listen to their lord (AP8), the inhabitants (*oppidani*) of Sint-Truiden bring the ship to their town (AP9). They command the weavers of their villa to keep watch by the ship day and night (AP10), and the *judices* even prescribe a ransom to be extorted by the weavers from people approaching too close to the ship (AP11).

“12. Meanwhile, in a secret complaint coming from the bottom of their heart, the weavers invoked God [AP12], the fair and almighty judge, that they were humiliated by such ignominy, although they lived according to the right way of the ancient Christians and of the Apostles, who worked day and night with their own hands so that they might be fed and clothed and could provide for

34 Paul Tombeur (ed.), *Gisleberti Trudonensis Gesta Abbatum Trudonensium VIII–XIII: liber IX opus intextum Rodvufi Trudonensis*, Turnhout 2013 (Corpus Christianorum – Continuatio Medievals, 257A), IX–XIV.

35 Action phrases and actors were tagged in a separate data story, where action phrases are marked with AP. Hereafter, I will reference quotations using their chapter and line number according to the most recent edition of the text (e.g., 11.5 for Chapter 11, Line 5). Cf. Tombeur (ed.), *Gesta*, 2013, IX–XIV, 77–78, chapter 11–12.

36 Translation from the data story.

their children. They asked themselves and complained wailfully [AP13] why they were touched by this ignominy and opprobrious energy more than other hired men (*mercennarii*), since among Christians there were many offices more despicable than theirs, for they did nothing despicable, no activity that implied a sin to Christians. It is better to be simply lowly and out-of-favour than to enter into contact with the impurity of sin. A rustic and poor weaver is better than an urban (or polite) and noble judge, who robs orphans and despoils widows.”

The people of Sint-Truiden revel and play promiscuous games around the ship to the sound of instruments for twelve days (AP14) before deciding to move it to a neighbouring locality, Léau. But the lord of Léau, the Duke of Brabant, refuses to let the ship in and comes in person with armed forces to restore order, resulting in a violent end as predicted by the abbot. There is no further mention of the weavers.

The passage has been linked to ancient pagan rites since the nineteenth century, but the lack of chronological continuity seems to refute this assumption.³⁷ However, the author of the text uses classical references to pagan Roman gods to discredit the feast (12.16–17). In absence of other sources relating the episode, we cannot exclude that the false ship was merely a defamatory fabrication by the author or a distortion of the events through rumours. But for our analysis, conceptions shared by author and audience are more important than facts. As with the episode of *Yvain*, the question is how the weavers are represented in plausible and comprehensible fashion.

2.1 Agency of the actors

We can distinguish seven actors in the story:

1. the weavers, hired persons who weave cloth from linen and wool;
2. the peasant who organises the joke;
3. the men who like jokes and novelties;
4. the judges and potentates;
5. the mass of persons of both sexes from the town;
6. abbot Rodulfus;
7. the citizens of Sint-Truiden.

It is striking that the actual lords – the abbots of the abbeys – appear only in roles with little agency. No monk from Kornelimünster is explicitly mentioned, and the abbot of Sint-Truiden – the protagonist of the chronicle – has no decisional power

37 Paul Bonenfant, L'épisode de la nef des tisserands de 1135, in: *Mélanges Félix Rousseau. Études sur l'histoire du Pays Mosan*, Bruxelles 1958, 99–110, 105–107.

in this situation: He can only warn (*predicabat*, AP7) the town's inhabitants of the danger of the weavers' ship, but they ostensibly ignore his warnings (AP8) and even make legal decisions on their own (AP11, AP15).

Legal decisional power is held by the *judices*, who appear in Villa Inda (11.7) and Sint-Truiden (12.20). In Villa Inda, we also find another denomination: *potentates*, the "owners of the power" (11.10) – presumably a synonym for *judices*. The lack of agency of the abbots of Sint-Truiden is probably less pronounced than it is presented in the text: Abbot Rodulfus was likely less aware of the danger than the text indicates and hence let the town inhabitants play with the ship. When the situation escalated and the Duke of Brabant took advantage of the situation to attack the territory of Sint-Truiden, it was too late for the abbot to step in. For the author of the *Gesta*, it was then presumably convenient to lay the blame on the townspeople and their *judices* while ascribing to the abbot a mere moral, non-decisional authority. Nevertheless, the text shows that the legal and political power was shared by different actors.

The issue being initially of little significance, the agency of the community of the villa is enhanced in the text. The initiator is a peasant, well integrated in his community, who can count on the assistance of other members of the populace and the *judices*. In Aachen, the decision to let the ship's journey continue is made by an indistinct mass of people of both sexes who welcome the ship with enthusiasm. The indefinite nature of this group is reinforced by the use of the passive form and the verbs concerning the towns visited en route to Sint-Truiden (AP6): *suscepta* (welcomed), *est pervecta* (is carried), *emendata* (improved), *insignita* (marked), *est inducta* (is led) (11.11–11.14). The text suggests that the driving force behind the process was a larger non-institutionalised group of local inhabitants acting spontaneously. The inhabitants of Sint-Truiden are presented in a similarly indefinite manner as they welcome the ship (AP8–9), but soon begin to invoke legal bans and decisions by the *judices*, pointing to a more institutionalised type of actor (AP11, AP15). Like in Villa Inda, the spontaneous local community superposes itself with the legally organised community led by the *judices*.

In early medieval northern Europe, the term *judex* not only designated the judges of a tribunal but also the earls (*comes*) and their local representants such as the administrators of a domain.³⁸ At the time of our case, the secular representative or advocate (Latin: *advocatus*, German: *Vogt*) of the lord of Villa Inda was the count palatine,³⁹ whose officials were probably the *iudices* and *potestates* mentioned in the text. In Sint-Truiden, the Count of Duras, the advocate of the abbot, also plays a role

38 Jürgen Weitzel, Art. *Iudex*, in: Handwörterbuch der deutschen Rechtsgeschichte, vol. 2, Berlin 2011, col. 1331–1333.

39 Norbert Kühn, Art. Kornelimünster, in: Bayerische Benediktiner-Akademie (ed.), *Germania Benedictina 8: Die Benediktinerklöster in Nordrhein-Westfalen*, München 1980, 404–421, 412.

in the story.⁴⁰ However, the *judices* of Sint-Truiden may also have been the jurors (French: *échevins*, German: *Schöffen*), the town representatives also referred to as *judices* in the sources of the time.⁴¹ Up until 1108, the sources also mention local jurymen (*scabini*) representing the town inhabitants.⁴² The abbot of Sint-Truiden thus shared legal authority with the *advocatus*, the Bishop of Metz (who was the lord of one half of the urban territory), and the magistrates of the local community. This means that the described lack of agency of the abbot is not simply a pretext by the author to mask mistakes by the abbey.

This legal scenery is one of the conceivable reasons why the weavers consented to perform the humiliating actions. It is possible that the *judices* of Sint-Truiden disguised their obligation as a kind of privilege, granting the weavers the competence to take as hostages and ransom people who would approach the ship. Moreover, the ban has legal validity against which the weavers cannot appeal. In the eyes of the weavers, a typical *judex* is polite and noble but corrupt, while a typical weaver is rustic but honest (12.6–12.14).

Like in the tale of the weaving damsels in *Yvain*, legality is abused to legitimate and enable coercion, but it is only one part of the explanation. Here, legal compulsion is important for the entry phase of the forced labour: A decree by the *judices* obliges the weavers to begin pulling the ship in Villa Inda and then guard it in Sint-Truiden. The crowd surrounding the ship serves as a fence of sorts, so that we can speak of physical compulsion. Nevertheless, across all phases of this episode, social pressure seems to be the most important factor of compulsion. The enthusiastic mob possesses particular convincing power, especially since the entire situation is presented as a joke. It is difficult for the hazed weavers to refuse to comply, as they are faced not only with an obligation but also with a challenge and an occasion to integrate the community. The ship motif is reminiscent of the later *Ship of Fools* written by Sebastian Brandt in 1494, although there is no proof that ships were already a carnivalesque theme in the twelfth century.⁴³ The humiliation has a humoristic and mild appearance: The weavers are granted permission to ransom persons who approach the ship and thus to use coercion against other people themselves – a sign that the compulsion they are submitted to is merely part of the joke. Ending the carnivalesque activity seems almost impossible, not only for the weavers but also for

40 Bonenfant, *L'épisode*, 1958, 101, 109. See also Constant Leclère, *Les avoués de Saint-Trond*, Louvain/Paris 1902.

41 Jürgen Weitzel, Art. *Schöffe*, -ngericht, -nbank, I. Rechtsgeschichte, in: *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, vol. 7, Stuttgart 1995, col. 1514–1516.

42 Hektor Ammann, *Sankt Trauten*, in: *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* 54/2 (1967), 145–186, 150; see also Jean L. Charles, *La ville de Saint-Trond au moyen âge. Des origines à la fin du XIV^e siècle*, Paris 1965.

43 Bonenfant, *L'épisode*, 1958, 107.

the abbot of Sint-Truiden, as well as for the town inhabitants who claim to stop the wandering ship after twelve days of revelry.⁴⁴ The Duke of Brabant is eventually able to put an end to the events only through the use of armed forces, seizing the opportunity to pillage the territory of Sint-Truiden.⁴⁵ The various actors can blame the festivities and refuse to participate, but they cannot forbid the goings-on.

Did the employer himself give the formal order to pull the ship (in Villa Inda) and guard it (in Sint-Truiden)? As we shall see, the *judices* as administrators of the demesne were not only holders of legal authority but most likely also the weavers' employers. David Herlihy argues that the duty to pull the ship imposed by the authorities in Villa Inda is similar to a *corvée*.⁴⁶ However, a *corvée* is usually clearly delimited in time and in nature and only levied on tenured peasants. The obligation to pull the ship, if ordered by the employer, would mean that the latter could ask anything from his *mercennarii* for the duration of their service: In this sense, their status would be closer to that of the unfree and untenured members of the *familia* working exclusively for the demesne.

2.2 Poorness of the weavers

The weavers are presented as poor workers. Their self-proclaimed comparison of their way of life with the one of the Apostles – hard work for minimal comfort – reveals that poverty is defined as a scarcity of material subsistence goods. There is even a minor reflection of moral economy: The weavers are poor but dignified because they live off their own work.⁴⁷ As with the weaving damsels in *Yvain*, however, poverty is understood not only in economic terms. The concomitance with political and social aspects becomes clear when we look at the assumption of the weavers themselves: The adjectives used to describe their situation – besides *pauper* (12.13) – all refer to their low social status: *vitabile* (out of favour, that nobody wants to be, 12.11), *ignobile* (of low rank, 12.11), and *rusticus* (rustic/rural/boorish, 12.12–12.13). The juxtaposition of a poor rustic weaver with a noble urban judge who robs orphans and despoils widows⁴⁸ can be seen as describing poverty in opposition to

44 Tombeur (ed.), *Gesta*, 2013, 79.

45 *Ibid.*, 79–81.

46 Herlihy, *Opera Muliebra*, 1990, 94.

47 12.3–12.5: “*cum juxta rectam vitam antiquorum christianorum et apostolicorum virorum manuum suarum laboribus viverent*” (“although they lived according to the right way of the ancient Christians and of the Apostles, who worked with their own hands”).

48 12.12–12.14: “*meliorque sit rusticus textor et pauper, quam exactor orphanorum et spoliator viduarum urbanus et nobilis judex*” (“a rustic and poor weaver is better than an urban (polite?) and noble judge, who robs orphans and despoils widows”).

richness and power. The contrary of a poor weaver is not a rich merchant but rather a *judex*, whose wealth derives from taxing defenceless people and abusing political and juridical authority. While *rusticus* is opposed to *urbanus*, *pauper* is more strongly opposed to *nobilis* and thus refers to social status. The economic aspect is not completely ignored, however, since weavers perform labour that nobody wants to do (*vitabile*) and are contrasted with a *judex* who becomes rich through spoliations and exactions.

The opposition between *rusticus* and *urbanus* has been read by David Herlihy as an opposition between the rural habitat of the weavers and the urban life of the *judices*.⁴⁹ And indeed, the term *rusticus* is used in substantive form in the sense of ‘peasant’ for actor 2.⁵⁰ But as an adjective, it also possesses the sense of ‘boorish, uneducated’, while the adjective *urbanus* can mean ‘polite, well-educated’.⁵¹ More than just habitat, the adjectives *rusticus* and *urbanus* thus seem to characterise social habitus.

The lack of political agency of the weavers is also enhanced by the verbs of the action phrases. While the *judices* “stipulate” bans (*sancitum*, 12.19, AP15) and “oblige through a legal sentence” (*cogebant sententia proscriptiois*, 11.30) the weavers to gather around the ship (AP11), the weavers only “invoke” God (12.1–12.2, AP12) and “complain and weep” (12.6–12.7, AP13). This is similar to the submissive and passive reaction of the damsels in *Yvain*, while at the same time contrasting sharply with the previous description of hired weavers as particularly haughty and impudent. Their bad reputation therefore seems to have less to do with a rebellious attitude than with their place in society.

The other poor people in the story do not complain about discrimination like that suffered by the weavers. The initiator of the bad joke at their expense is called a “poor peasant” (*pauper quidam rusticus*, 11.4–11.5) as well, but he can count on the help of his community and the authorities. The weavers wonder why only they among all hired workers (*mercennarii*) are discriminated against,⁵² implicitly noting that all hired labourers are similarly poor. The reason seems to be their specific profession, although they assert that it implies nothing sinful.

With this assertion, they appear to be responding to implicit general allegations – and indeed, several sources from the twelfth century link weavers to heresy: The author of the *Chronicon St. Andreae Castri Cameracensi* argued around

49 Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria*, 1990, 93.

50 See AP1 (“*pauper quidam rusticus ex villa nomine Inda*”, 11.4–11.5) and in Tombeur (ed.), *Gesta*, 2013, 36 (l. 5), 37 (l. 29).

51 Bonenfant, *L'épisode*, 1958, 101, note 9.

52 12.7–12.8: “*unde illis magis quam aliis mercennariis haec ignominia*” (“why they were touched by this ignominy and opprobrious energy more than other hired men”).

1133 that in the Flemish town of Cambrai, adepts of the Anti-Simonists were notably found among those making a living by weaving.⁵³ And in a sermon written in 1144, Bernard of Clairvaux accused the Cathars of being the source of social disorder because of their mobility, their feigned pious and modest way of life, and their pretensions to live off their own work: “Women are leaving their husbands, men are putting aside their wives, and they flock to the heretics! Clerics and priests [...] are leaving their congregations and churches and are more often found in the company of weavers of both sexes.”⁵⁴ The Council of Reims in 1157 depicted the Cathars as weavers moving from place to place, changing their names and inveigling girls into sin.⁵⁵ Weavers were accused of mixing the two sexes at work and of often changing their location, but also of developing independent theological notions outside the clerical church. Echoing these allegations, the joke in our study seems to imitate the wandering of the weavers through the peregrination of the ship, and the presence of the textile workers appears to stimulate male and female inhabitants to mingle during the revelry in Sint-Truiden.⁵⁶ Finally, the weavers’ reference to the Apostles and their judgement about sinful (and not sinful) occupations (12.3–12.14) indicates independent reflection on religious subjects and a pious way of life. As unconventional free thinkers and unstable workers, they constituted a disesteemed fringe group, which in turn contributed to their poverty.

2.3 Status of the weavers and conditions of labour

At the beginning of the text (11.1–11.3), there is a general assumption that hired workers (*mercennarii*) with the profession (*officium*) of weaving woollen or linen cloth are impudent and haughty in comparison to other hired labourers. This assumption is presented as a universal rule by use of the terms *genus* (type, race) and *vulgo* (by the people). For the author, hired workers in general and hired weavers in particular were a normal component of society.

53 Ludwig Conrad Bethmann (ed.), *Chronicon St. Andreae Castri Cameracensi*, Hannover 1846 (MGH SS 7), 526–550, 540.

54 Bernhard of Clairvaux, *Predigten über das Hohelied*, Predigt 65, in: *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. by Gerhard B. Winkler, vol. 6, Innsbruck 1996, 358–369, 364–367. English translation: Walter L. Wakefield/Austin P. Evans, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages. Selected Sources*, 2nd edition, New York 1991, 136.

55 *Concilium Reminensis ann. 1157*, in: Gian Domenico Mansi (ed.), *Sacrorum conciliorum*, vol. 21, Venezia 1776, 843.

56 12.29–12.31: “*Videres ibi aliquando mille hominum animas sexus utriusque prodigiosum et infaustum celeuma usque ad noctis medium celebrare*” (“You would see here the souls of thousand people of both sexes performing an unnatural and unpropitious sailor song until the middle of the night”). A crowd of both sexes is already gathered in Aachen: 11.11–11.12: “*Aquis suscepta cum grandi hominum utriusque sexus processione.*”

The term *mercennarius* refers to a person who works for a *merces*, a compensation in commodities or money. In the regulations concerning free workers for the Frankish king from the year 720, Laurent Feller found that the word *merces* designated the remuneration of specialised construction workers, calculated on a piece rate basis.⁵⁷

In order to understand the meaning and use of the term in the twelfth century, analysis of a larger number of texts is useful. The Library of Latin Texts compiled by Brepols contains a 143-million-word corpus of Latin writings, mostly from antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁵⁸ The majority of these texts are of a religious or historiographical nature. The twelfth century is the one with the most occurrences of *mercennarii* in the entire corpus.⁵⁹ The Latin Text Archive, which is based on a corpus of similar but lemmatized texts, enables us to chart the relative frequency of *mercennarius/mercenarius* between the first and the fifteenth century.⁶⁰ This charting reveals that the word was most frequently employed in Late Antiquity and between 1100 and 1300.

Diachronic collocation analysis of the LTA was recently made possible through the web-based tool DiaCollo. A query of the most frequent collocations of *mercen-[n]arius* for each century from the eighth to the fourteenth shows links between this word and the lemmata *pastor* (shepherd), *ovis* (sheep), and *lupus* (wolf).⁶¹ Indeed, many authors used the word *mercennarius* to refer to biblical quotes: A frequent one is the parabola of the *mercennarius* who is paid to tend a flock for one year and flees from a wolf instead of saving the flock because he does not own it.⁶²

However, the most frequent collocations for the twelfth century, *filius* (son) and *servus* (slave, serf), are specific to that period. They partly derive from a theological comparison of three types of obedience (of a son, of a serf, of a paid servant) and show that while authors paid more attention to *mercennarii*, they were primarily interested in their obedience to a master.⁶³

57 Laurent Feller, Le vocabulaire de la rémunération durant le haut Moyen Âge, in: Patrice Beck/Philippe Bernardi/Laurent Feller (eds.), Rémunérer le travail au Moyen Âge. Pour une histoire sociale du salariat, Paris 2014, 154–164, 162.

58 Brepols (ed.), Library of Latin Texts – online: <http://www.brepols.net/Pages/BrowseBySeries.aspx?TreeSeries=LLT-O> (16 December 2022).

59 10th century: 20 occurrences; 11th c.: 30; 12th c.: 582; 13th c.: 531; 14th c.: 12; 15th c.: 291.

60 Latin Text Archive. Published by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Berlin 2022, Time Series, <https://lta.bbaw.de/tr/plot?q1=%2F%5Emercen%2F&corpus=all&start=100&end=1500&slice=50&window=0&nrm=date> (16 December 2022).

61 D*/lta: DiaCollo, profile: collocations; Query: “/^mercen/”; dates: 800–1500; slice: 100; score: Frequency per Million; kbest: 8; http://kaskade.dwds.de/dstar/lta/diacollo/?query=%2F%5Emercen%2F&_s=submit&date=800-1500&slice=100&score=fm&kbest=8&cuttoff=&profile=2&format=html&groupby=&eps=0 (16 December 2022).

62 John 10:12–13.

63 For example: Thomas Cisterciensis monachus (Thomas of Perseigne), Canticum Cantorum commentarii, in: Jacques-Paule Migne (ed.), Patrologia latina 206, Paris 1855, col. 17–862, col. 560.

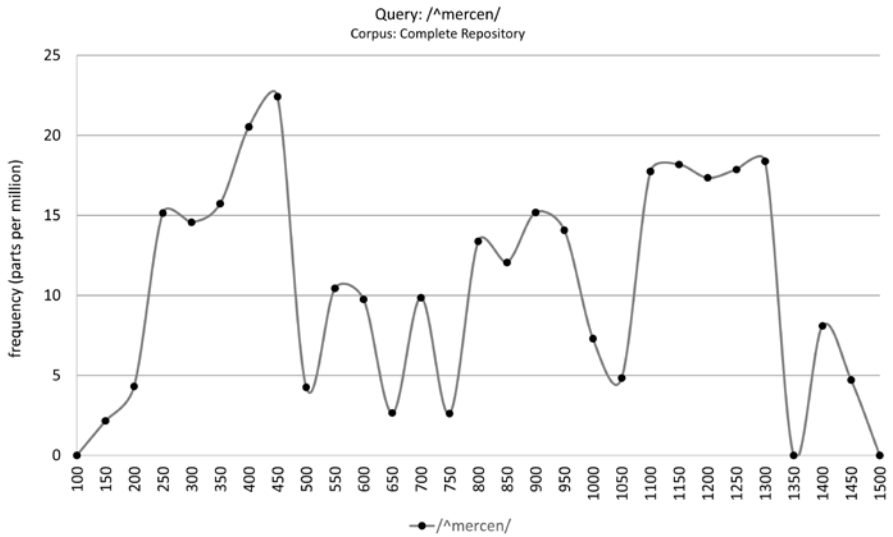


Figure 2: Chronology of relative frequency of *mercen[n]arius* in the Latin Text Archive. LTA Time Series, query: „/[^]mercen/“, from 100 to 1500, slice=50, no smoothing window. Frequency per 1 million words of the summed lemmata *mercennarius* and *mercenarius*, dividing the corpus into 50-year increments
Source: author’s own representation

Another newcomer in the list of the most frequent collocations is the lemma *annus* (year), which sometimes refers to the duration of the contracts. Various texts from the twelfth century depict specific cases of *mercennarii* engaged by monasteries for a period of several years. In a miracle related by Herbert of Clairvaux (d. 1198), the devil takes the shape of a young man and resides at a Cistercian monastery for three years, serving as a *mercennarius*.⁶⁴ Bruno of Asti (1050–1123) tells of a man serving for six years: “Thus, since for six years of service as *mercenarius* always awaiting the remuneration for his labour, he came back to freedom well paid to his homeland.”⁶⁵ It is interesting that the man returns to “freedom” after his service, as though the six years of service had been a period of temporary servitude. There are no other concrete examples of labour agreements concerning *mercennarii* in the texts apart from ones of annual or pluriannual duration: In the twelfth century, *mercennarius* mostly designated servants hired on an annual basis.

64 Herbertus Turritanus, *Liber visionum et miraculorum Clarevallensium*, ed. by Giancarlo Zichi/Grazi-
ano Fois/Stefano Mula, Turnhout 2017, 222: “loco mercennarii seruiens per triennium uisibilis mansit.”

65 Bruno of Segni (or of Asti), *Expositio in Pentateuchum*, in: Jacque-Paule Migne (ed.), *Patrologia
latina* 164, Paris 1854, col. 147–550, col. 510: “Iste ergo, quia per sex annos, id est toto tempore vitae
suae, quasi mercenarius seruiens, sui laboris mercedem semper exspectavit, bene remuneratus ad super-
nae patriae rediit libertatem.”

Petrus Venerabilis (d. 1156) tells the story of a rich man from Burgos living in the town of Estrella who employs a domestic servant named Sanchez. Since the king conscripts men from every household for the army, the master sends Sanchez, who later dies in a war. The dead servant subsequently appears to his master in a dream and claims his unpaid wages. Sanchez is described as “one of my hired labourers who serve me for a remuneration” (*unum ex mercennariis mercede michi seruiantibus*) and a *famulus*, a domestic servant.⁶⁶ Like the episode featuring the hired weavers of Villa Inda, this story depicts a master with full authority over his *mercennarius*, able to order the latter to undertake any kind of task or work during the period of his service.⁶⁷

Although nothing is explicitly stated about the contract between employers and employees in the *Gesta*, the author nevertheless provides an idea of how the weavers see their labour conditions: They claim to work day and night in order to provide food and clothing to their children.⁶⁸ Even though this description is linked with biblical references and the clerical author manipulated the words of the weavers to condemn the extravagant partying,⁶⁹ the sentence suggests that low piece rates compelled hired weavers to work more in order to increase their income.

The text does not specify the status the weavers of Villa Inda. They may have been unfree members of the *familia* of the monastery at Kornelimünster working for other employers, similar to how the mid-twelfth-century bondsmen of the Abbey of Werden worked as weavers – perhaps for a wage? – in the town of Wartberg and only paid a census in cash to the abbey.⁷⁰ David Herlihy presumes that they worked for urban merchants.⁷¹ It seems more likely, however, that they were free workers hired by the demesne to weave clothing for the monks and their *familia*. Indeed, the term *mercennarius* is never used for putting-out relations – neither in the twelfth-century religious texts mentioned above, nor in later texts relating to the textile guilds, in which hired weavers are described in other terms (*operarius, laborator*).⁷² Moreover, had it been urban merchants sending work to the weavers, they would hardly

66 On the term *famulus* and the ambiguity between free and unfree tenants in England, see Michael M. Postan, *The famulus. The Estate Labourer in the 12th and 13th Century*, Cambridge 1954.

67 Petrus Venerabilis, *De miraculis libri duo*, ed. by Denise Bouthillier, Turnhout 1988, 87–92.

68 12.5–12.6: “*nocte ac die operantes unde alerentur et vestirentur liberisque suis id ipsum providerent*” (“they worked day and night so that they might be fed and clothed and could provide for their children”).

69 He quotes the *Regula Benedictina*: “*manuum suarum laboribus viverent*” (12.4–12.5, note in the edition, 78).

70 Rudolf Kötzschke/Franz Körholz, *Die Urbare der Abtei Werden an der Ruhr, nebst Einleitung und Register*, vol. 2–4, Bonn 1906, 249.

71 Herlihy, *Opera Muliebria*, 1990, 93f.

72 Colin Arnaud, *Lohnverhältnisse, ‚Arbeitgeber‘ und Armenfürsorge im Wirtschaftsdiskurs der Textilunternehmer in Italien (13.–16. Jahrhundert)*, in: Marian Füssel/Philip Knäble/Nina Elsemann (eds.), *Wissen und Wirtschaft. Expertenkulturen und Märkte vom 13. bis 18. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen 2017, 313–334, 321–326.

have allowed their manpower to be occupied for several days with a wandering ship. The other mentioned *mercennarii* were probably also hired by the demesne itself and used in agriculture or for other artisanal production. Demesne production was still flourishing in the twelfth century, as archaeological evidence demonstrates.⁷³ During the same period, the Cistercians built up their grange system with lay brothers and hired people explicitly named *mercennarii*.⁷⁴

In action phrase AP10 (11.26), the weavers “of the villa” who are ordered to guard the ship in Sint-Truiden are probably not the weavers of Villa Inda but those of the villa of Sint-Truiden itself. Indeed, while the inhabitants of Sint-Truiden are called *oppidani* in the text, the town itself is sometimes referred to as “villa”.⁷⁵ Both groups of textile workers are described as representatives of the general type of hired weavers mentioned at the beginning. It seems likely that the Sint-Truiden weavers were likewise hired by the respective abbey to cover its cloth needs.⁷⁶ However, since Sint-Truiden had a more urban character than Villa Inda, it is also possible that the weavers’ employers were artisans or merchants of the town⁷⁷ – although this type of employment would not correspond to the typical meaning of *mercennarius* described in texts written by monks during the period. In summary, the hired weavers presumably worked at least in part for the abbey or the domanial institutions.

3. Conclusion

It would be illusory to believe we could understand the labour regime of the period discussed here by way of two short anecdotes. However, a final comparison of the mental frames contained in the two sources appears necessary. In both texts, the poverty of the respective weavers is presented as a social status integrating economic, social, and political aspects: Poorness is at once a lack of material subsistence, of agency, and of social recognition. The other extreme is a combination of material richness, political power (power of coercion), and high social status. These

73 Michael Herdick, *Ökonomie der Eliten. Eine Studie zur Interpretation wirtschaftsarchäologischer Funde und Befunde von mittelalterlichen Herrschaftssitzen*, Mainz 2015, 83–89.

74 Klaus Schreiner, “Brot der Mühsal”. Körperliche Arbeit im Mönchtum des hohen und späten Mittelalters. Theologisch motivierte Einstellungen, regelgebundene Normen, geschichtliche Praxis, in: Verena Postel (ed.), *Arbeit im Mittelalter. Vorstellungen und Wirklichkeiten*, Berlin 2006, 133–170, 148. Mention of *mercennarii* in the first Cistercian rules: Chrysogonus Waddell (ed.), *Narrative and Legislative Texts from Early Cîteaux*, Cîteaux 1999, 190, 328, 335.

75 Tombeur (ed.), *Gesta*, 2013, 68 (l. 9), 69 (l. 1).

76 On the vestiary expenses of the abbey, see Alfred Hansay, *Étude sur la formation et l’organisation économique du domaine de l’abbaye de Saint-Trond depuis les origines jusqu’à la fin du XIII^e siècle*, Gand 1899, 84.

77 Ammann, *Sankt Trauten*, 1967, 150.

rich people are exemplified not by merchants, but rather by dukes or *judices* abusing their fiscal authority. 'Poor' is opposed to 'rich', but also to 'noble'. This amalgamation explains the hybrid status of coerced wage labourers.

The pre-entry situation of the two discussed groups is different: Whereas the weavers of Villa Inda are punished for taking too many liberties, the damsels in *Yvain* are objects sent as ransom for their king. This corresponds to a gendered discourse where women are *kept* obedient while men are *made* obedient. During the extraction phase, however, both groups are presented in a passive, complaining role.

Power imbalance is also combined with social inequality: In contrast to the topos of the respectable woman occupied with textile work, the damsels of *Yvain* are ashamed of their condition; the weavers in the *Gesta*, too, are hazed and treated as a deviant fringe group. This shameful social condition is linked to the status of wage labourer.

The employers are described more as domanial administrators than as professional entrepreneurs. The framing applied by Chrétien de Troyes suggests a more monetarised environment, with issues of high costs of living and insufficient wages. While the master of the fictive damsels exploits them in a classical Marxist sense by retaining the value of the workforce for himself, the hired weavers in the *Gesta* only face problems with legal and physical compulsion outside of their weaving activity – their wages are not even mentioned.

But more noteworthy than these differences are the striking similarities in the treatment of the wage weavers in both stories. Above all, the abuse of legality is an important issue in both texts. The *judices* of Villa Inda and Sint-Truiden deliver arbitrary bans to humiliate the weavers. The romance of *Yvain* in general is full of cases of false justice, and in the episode of the Castle of Ill Adventure, the lord abuses legal terms to ransom defenceless knights: His self-proclaimed rule that all knights have to fight against his two demons seems to follow the laws of chivalry with a recompense for the winner, but it is based on an improper use of coercion – specifically, on physical enclosure and an unfair fight. Similarly, the wage conditions of the weaving damsels offer an appearance of legality and fairness, since the wages they are paid would ostensibly make them rich anywhere else – whereas in the castle, they are evidently not even sufficient to acquire enough food, forcing the damsels to work more and rest less. The wage becomes a further cruel legal trick employed by the lord to legitimate and secure the labour compulsion.

Finally, in both texts, the apparent transitional form between unfree and wage labour can be framed in coherent labour relations that can be linked to certain mental and institutional structures of the period. In *Yvain*, it appears sensible to remunerate captive workers in order to enhance their exploitation. In the *Gesta*, the weaving *mercennarii* can be assigned to the category of temporary servants under absolute obedience to their employer for the duration of their service.