

Female Work Arrangements in the Datini Letters

Exploring the Semantic Roles and Negotiating Scopes of Servants, Slaves, and Wet Nurses

Abstract: In the letters preserved in the Datini archive, women could take the epistolary stage when it came to their (pre-)entry into a labour relation with the Datinis or their social network. The negotiating scope of women during these entries is the analytical focus of this paper; to negotiate and/or to be negotiated is the central question. Based on 53 letters from the years 1393–1398, four different search and recruitment processes for three different types of female workers – servants, slaves, and wet nurses – are comparatively examined by way of a historical semantic reading. Taking the verb-oriented method as a starting point, this study proposes two methodological extensions: an attribute-oriented method and an adaption of the semantic roles approach from linguistics. The paper argues that this historical semantic trio of methods can help to understand group-related and individual degrees of (non-)control over actions in the arrangement of labour relations in late medieval Tuscany by bringing positions of power to the epistolary surface.

Keywords: Datini letters, late medieval Tuscany, history of labour, slavery studies, female labour, servitude, work arrangements, semantic roles

1. Introduction: letters from the Datini Archive and the study of labour¹

The merchant Francesco di Marco Datini (1335–1410) regularly travelled between business centres in Tuscany to manage his “holding company system”² in the West-

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25365/oezg-2023-34-2-7>



Accepted for publication after external peer review (double blind)

Corinna Peres, Department of Economic and Social History, University of Vienna, Universitätsring 1, 1010 Vienna, Austria; corinna.peres@univie.ac.at

1 I would like to thank the editors and co-authors of this special issue as well as the anonymous reviewers for insightful and helpful comments on this paper.

2 Ann Crabb, *The Merchant of Prato's Wife. Margherita Datini and her World, 1360–1423*, Michigan 2015, 34.

ern Mediterranean. Like many Italian merchants of his time, Datini “traded in nearly everything that could be bought and sold, ranging from silks to salt and art to alum in addition to arms and clothing”.³ In his absence, his wife Margherita (1360–1423) supervised the main household in Prato or the secondary household in Florence.⁴ In the Pratese tax return for 1393,⁵ the Datini household consisted of eight members: Francesco and Margherita Datini, the 50-year-old servant Piera, the 20-year-old slave Lucia, the servant Domenica, her husband Saccente and their six-year-old daughter Nanna, and a blind woman named Monna Tinga di Simone who had been taken in out of charity.⁶ However, only the persons living under the Datinis’ roof are recorded in the tax return. Temporary enlargements of the household by way of relatives, apprentices, business partners, and visitors are not included.⁷ Neither are the workers who lived on their own near the *palazzo* Datini and came by to work regularly or occasionally. The management and provisioning of this flexible and changing group of people, which consisted of kinship ties and “the wider circle of the working and economic community”,⁸ required meticulous planning by the Datinis.

To keep track of pending tasks of daily life, Francesco Datini often wrote ‘notes of things to do’ (*ricordanze di cose da fare*) for himself or others on loose sheets of paper, similar to the to-do lists of our time.⁹ When away for business, he would

3 Jeffrey Miner, Letters, Networks, and Reputation Among Francesco di Marco Datini and his Correspondents, in: Paula Findlen/Suzanne Sutherland (eds.), *The Renaissance of Letters. Knowledge and Community in Italy, 1300–1650*, London 2019, 31–50, 32.

4 The historiography on the Datinis is extensive and includes many socioeconomic publications, e.g. by Enrico Bensa (1928), Federigo Melis (1962), and Jérôme Hayez (2006). For a recent synthesis, see Giampiero Nigro (ed.), *Francesco di Marco. L'uomo il mercante*, Firenze 2010. For the most detailed biography, see Iris Origo, *The Merchant of Prato. Francesco di Marco Datini*, London 1957.

5 Cesare Guasti (ed.), *Ser Lapo Mazzei. Lettere di un notaio a un mercante del secolo XIV, I*, Firenze 1880, XLIVf.

6 Ibid.; Iris Origo, *Im Namen Gottes und des Geschäfts. Lebensbild eines toskanischen Kaufmanns der Frührenaissance*, Berlin 1997, 229 [German translation of the original from 1957].

7 Joseph P. Byrne/Eleanor A. Congdon, *Mothering in the Casa Datini*, in: *Journal of Medieval History* 25/1 (1999), 35–56, 37. On the concept of “open houses”, see Joachim Eibach, *Das offene Haus. Kommunikative Praxis im sozialen Nahraum der europäischen Frühen Neuzeit*, in: *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 38/4 (2011), 621–664.

8 Juliane Schiel, *Mord von zarter Hand. Der Giftmordvorwurf im Venedig des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: Juliane Schiel/Stefan Hanß (eds.), *Mediterranean Slavery Revisited (500–1800)*, Zürich 2014, 201–228, 213, note 43, the responsibility for all translations from German and Italian and any resulting errors lies with the author.

9 See e.g. letters from Francesco Datini (FD) to Margherita Datini (MD) on 26 March 1397 and 22 October 1397, in: Elena Cecchi (ed.), *Le lettere di Francesco Datini alla moglie Margherita (1385–1410)*, Prato 1990, nos. 82 (Archivio di Stato di Prato (ASPr), Fondo Datini, Codice 6300108) and 107 (6300132). *Ricordanze* could also be “domestic journals” in which births, deaths, or property transfers of a family were recorded, see Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Genitori di sangue, ‘genitori’ di latte. Andare a balia a Firenze*, in: Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *La famiglia e le donne nel Rinascimento a Firenze*, Bari 1988, 213–252, 214; *Treccani Vocabolario*, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ricordanza/> (3 January 2022).

either leave a *ricordanza* for those in charge of the household or enclose it in a letter after his departure. Since individual *ricordanze* are rarely preserved, we know of their organisational value mostly through direct references in letters. In their 433 letters,¹⁰ the Datinis reported and commented – sometimes on a daily basis – on which tasks from the current *ricordanza* had been completed by whom and under what circumstances.

The working community described in the letters is overwhelmingly male. In keeping with Marcel van der Linden's phase model of (coerced) labour,¹¹ the extraction phase of male workers predominates with detailed descriptions of tasks, working environments, and job titles: Male masters (*maestri*) build the Datinis' house, male labourers (*lavoratori*) work in the fields and vineyards, male carriers (*aportatori*) transport food, household goods, and letters.¹² The letters do not provide an equally detailed account of women's daily activities; in fact, working women were largely in the margins of letter communication within the Datini network. Female work performance in and around the Datini household only becomes visible when the context was out of the ordinary or situations went wrong – like a female slave's eye injury while drawing water from a well or wine stains persisting on a tablecloth washed by a woman from the neighbourhood.¹³

Nevertheless, women could take the epistolary stage when it came to entering into a labour relation with the Datinis or their social network. It is precisely for this phase of (pre-)entry that we have snippets of information on female servants, slaves, and wet nurses, some of whom enjoyed individual and/or group-related bargaining power during the hiring process. Even though this process was generally shaped by the employers' claims of domination and ownership, there were specific moments in which women made their opinions and demands central to their work arrangements.

10 There are 251 preserved letters by Margherita and 182 by Francesco Datini, see Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990; Valeria Rosati (ed.), *Le lettere di Margherita Datini a Francesco di Marco (1384–1410)*, Prato 1977. For an English translation, see Carolyn James/Antonio Pagliaro (eds.), *Margherita Datini. Letters to Francesco Datini*, Toronto 2012.

11 Marcel van der Linden, *Dissecting Coerced Labor*, in: Marcel van der Linden/Magaly Rodríguez García (eds.), *On Coerced Labor. Work and Compulsion after Chattel Slavery*, Leiden/Boston 2016, 293–322, 297.

12 See e.g. letter from MD to FD on 4 December 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, no. 192 (1401866).

13 Letters from MD to FD on 8 May 1394 and 8 May 1399, in: *ibid.*, nos. 63 (1401758) and 214 (1401933).

2. (Pre-)Entry into a labour relation: five scenes

Nine search and hiring processes relating to women are reported in the marital correspondence.¹⁴ Two source-critical preliminary remarks are in order here. First, not all entries into a labour relation with the Datinis and their network are mentioned in the letters, as such matters were usually recorded in household books or settled orally. Second, the nine recorded instances vary greatly in their narrative density. Entry into a labour relation is a complex process encompassing numerous persons (employers, candidates, and mediators), activities, and settings. It is an act of varying length with scenes in chronological order. Through the letters, we can follow either the first of these scenes, which deals with the need for a female worker and the beginning of a general search, or the final scene featuring the actual entry of a female worker.

Over a period of several years (1385, 1394, 1397), Margherita Datini's sister, Francesca dell'Ammannato Tecchini, searched three times for female workers for her and her husband Niccolò's household in Florence.¹⁵ The outcomes of these searches are not reported. Conversely, for two completed entries we know nothing about the initial search: Once, Margherita writes that her sister Francesca had bought a female slave (1386);¹⁶ another time, Francesco writes that he is not satisfied with the female servant he had hired for his provisional business household in Pisa (1385).¹⁷

Only four entry situations offer a more complete picture. On two occasions, the Datinis sought female workers for their main household in Prato. In April 1394, they needed to replace a female servant, Monna Piera, who had left the household abruptly. A woman from Florence, Monna Giuliva, entered the household following a one-week trial period, but left again after three months.¹⁸ This (never-ending) search for a servant occurred in parallel to a hunt for a female worker on the Italian slave markets. We learn little of this latter search from the marital letters, however.

14 Cases of women seeking employment are not considered here.

15 Francesca di Domenico Bandini was married to the merchant Niccolò dell'Ammannato Tecchini, see Carolyn James, Introduction, in: James/Pagliari, Letters, 2012, 1–25, 4. For the cases, see letters from FD to MD on 4 August 1385, 2 April 1394, and 13 July 1397, in: Cecchi, Lettere, 1990, nos. 3 (6000905), 42 (6300076), and 104 (6300129); letters from MD to FD on 2 April 1394 and 11 July 1397, in: James/Pagliari, Letters, 2012, nos. 50 (1401745) and 138 (1401813).

16 Letter from MD to FD on 16 January 1386, in: James/Pagliari, Letters, 2012, no. 10 (1401885).

17 Letter from FD to MD on 16 December 1385, in: Cecchi, Lettere, 1990, no. 4 (6000861).

18 Letters from FD to MD on 10 March 1394, 2 April 1394, 29 April 1394, 30 April 1394, 5 May 1394, 7 May 1394, 9 May 1394, and 11 May 1394, in: Cecchi, Lettere, 1990, nos. 31 (6000921), 42 (6300076), 50 (6300085), 52 (6300086), 53 (6300087), 54 (6300088), 55 (6300089), and 56 (6300090); letters from MD to FD on 10 March 1394, 2 April 1394, 3 April 1394, 14 April 1394 (two letters), 15 April 1394, 6 May 1394, 7 May 1394, 9 May 1394, 11 May 1394, 13 May 1394, 8 August 1394, and 14 August 1394, in: James/Pagliari, Letters, 2012, nos. 38 (1401733), 50 (1401745), 51 (1401746), 53 (1401749), 54 (1401748), 56 (1401751), 61 (1401756), 62 (1401757), 65 (1401760), 66 (1401761), 68 (1401763), 72 (1401767), and 75 (1401770).

In April 1394, Francesco informed Margherita only briefly of the unavailability of slaves, which suggests that she had no active role in the process. In fact, Margherita's involvement can be attested in all cases except the search for a slave.¹⁹ Yet there are clues relating to this specific case in other (edited) letters. From the letters exchanged between Francesco Datini and Andrea di Bonanno di Ser Berizo (a business partner in Genoa) as well as Bindo di Gherardo Piaciti (Margherita's cousin and a merchant in Venice),²⁰ we can reconstruct the entire process from May 1393 to December 1394, concluding with the entry of a female slave into the Datini household at the end of 1394.²¹ In the remaining two cases, Margherita searched for wet nurses for the male babies of two of her husband's business associates, Lodovico Marini (April 1397) and Manno d'Albizzo degli Agli (August 1398). In the first instance, a wet nurse was found in Florence after Margherita had unsuccessfully tried to mediate an agreement between Lodovico and the wife of one of the Datini's workers in Prato, Ceccarello.²² The search for a nurse for Manno's baby was likewise fraught with obstacles for the mediator Margherita, leading to temporary and complicated solutions until a wet nurse was finally engaged in Prato.²³

Discussed in a total of (at least) 53 letters between Margherita and Francesco Datini as well as between the latter and his business partners, all four cases shed light on what happened between the initial search and the final entry. From the employers' perspective, they have the same broad entry pattern consisting of five consec-

19 This contradicts Cluse's assumption that wives would have a say in the acquisition of slaves, see Christoph Cluse, *Frauen in Sklaverei. Beobachtungen aus genuesischen Notariatsregistern des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts*, in: Frank G. Hirschmann/Gerd Mentgen (eds.), *Campana pulsante convocati*, Trier 2005, 85–123, 103.

20 On Andrea di Bonanno's complicated career, see Maria Giagnacovo, *La compagnia di Genova tra aspettative e delusioni*, in: Nigro, *L'uomo*, 2010, 329–355. On the Piacitis, see Crabb, *Merchant*, 2015, 42, 246, note 3.

21 Letter from FD to MD on 18 February 1394, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, no. 22 (6000912); letters from FD to Andrea di Bonanno (AB) on 12 May 1393, 15 May 1393, and 26 August 1393, in: Ridolfo Livi, *La schiavitù domestica nei tempi di mezzo e nei moderni. Ricerche storiche di un antropologo*, Padova 1928, nos. 36 (6101418), 37 (413529), and 39 (800792); letters from AB to FD on 6 June 1393, 15 December 1393, and 20 December 1393, in: *ibid.*, nos. 38 (2333), 42 (107167), and 43 (2338); letters from Bindo Piaciti (BP) to FD on 5 September 1394, 10 September 1394, 6 October 1394, and 16 December 1394, in: *ibid.*, nos. 48 (6000634), 49 (6000635), 50 (6000636), and ASPr (308692).

22 Letter from FD to MD on 4 April 1397, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, no. 90 (6300114); letters from MD to FD on 5 April 1397 (two letters) and 7 April 1397, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, nos. 120 (1401960), 121 (1401796), and 122 (1401797).

23 Letters from FD to MD on 19 August 1398, 21 August 1398, 22 August 1398, 15 October 1398, and 22 March 1399, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, nos. 138 (6000941), 139 (6000942), 140 (6000943), 142 (6000945), and 149 (6000880); letters from MD to FD on 17 August 1398, 19 August 1398, 20 August 1398, 21 August 1398 (two letters), 22 August 1398 (two letters), 23 August 1398, 25 August 1398, 15 October 1398, 16 October 1398, and 24 November 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, nos. 169 (1401843), 170 (1401844), 171 (1401845), 172 (1401846), 173 (1401847), 174 (1401848), 175 (1401849), 176 (1401850), 178 (1401852), 179 (1401853), 180 (1401854), and 185 (1401859).

utive scenes that can be tentatively structured using the narrative arc known from drama theory:²⁴ 1) Exposition. Triggered by the need for a female worker, a search begins. 2) Complication. The required worker cannot be found immediately on labour and slave markets. 3) Turning point. Many persons from the Datini network (including the Datinis themselves) intervene as mediators with recommendations. 4) Retarding moment. Female candidates are assessed. 5) Resolution. A woman is employed (even if only temporarily). Although the four cases share a general pattern, they are nevertheless four separate entry acts with different historical actors and settings. It is a coincidence that out of the nine total entries referred to in the correspondence, these four so densely reported cases also deal with three different types of female workers: servants, slaves, and wet nurses.

3. Exploring negotiating scopes through a historical semantic trio of methods

In late medieval Tuscany, female slaves usually lived under their master's roof as live-in workers.²⁵ Although servants and wet nurses also sometimes lived in their employer's household, this was not necessarily a condition for their work. Such arrangements often depended on negotiations conducted between the two parties during the entry process. These negotiations, the 'in-between scenes' of the entry act, will be placed at the focus of the analysis by addressing the following question: Did the women in the four selected cases – a female servant, a slave, and two wet nurses – enjoy any scope for negotiation before entering their work arrangements, and if so, do the letters tell us in what way and why?

Through its comparative approach, the paper addresses current historiographical shortcomings on servitude in premodern Western Mediterranean households that have recently been highlighted by historians Stefan Hanß, Juliane Schiel, and Raffaella Sarti.²⁶ The source material for this study, the 53 letters, were written by mediators and employers. They are the playwrights of the entry acts, and what we

24 Gustav Freytag, *Die Technik des Dramas*, revised new edition (orig. 1863), Berlin 2003, 94–114.

25 The author prefers the term 'live-in worker' to the semantically fuzzy term 'domestic worker'. In cases of slave rentals, slaves lived and worked temporarily within the households of the employers in need of slave labour while still being owned by the masters who hired them out. For a critique on the unreflected use of 'domestic', see Jane Whittle, *A Critique of Approaches to 'Domestic Work'. Women, Work and the Pre-Industrial Economy*, in: *Past and Present* 243 (2019), 35–70.

26 Juliane Schiel/Stefan Hanß, *Semantiken, Praktiken und transkulturelle Perspektiven mediterraner Sklaverei*, in: Schiel/Hanß (eds.), *Mediterranean Slavery*, 2014, 25–45, 32; Raffaella Sarti, *Can Historians Speak? A Few Thoughts and Proposals on a Possible Global History of Domestic Service/Work*, in: Nitin Sinha/Nitin Varma/Pankaj Jha (eds.), *Servants' Pasts. Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century, South Asia*, New Delhi 2019, 345–370, 348.

are consequently reading is *their* version of the plot, in which they could stage themselves and others in any way they liked. While this perspective bias cannot be erased, we can consciously deal with it. The letters from the Datini archive are non-fictional. Examining them through an analytical lens combining historical praxeology with microhistory reveals that practices of establishing a labour relation can be understood not only as “regular, routinised, and structured units of activities, but [also] as open processes that require situationally adequate improvisations and coping strategies from their participants”.²⁷ In fact, the letters represent but one version of experienced social reality in which practical solutions had to be found for hiring women. Assuming that language both represents and produces power relations,²⁸ the letter writers not only *chose* to make the entry of female workers a topic of correspondence, they also *weighed* which words and structures of the Florentine vernacular they used to communicate about it.²⁹

Language-oriented approaches are not new in the research on premodern labour and slavery in Italian regions, as the studies by Stephen A. Epstein³⁰ and Christoph Cluse³¹ attest. What is new here is the adaption of historical semantics for the study of negotiating scopes of the ‘marginalised’ in narrative sources written by the ‘powerful’. The letter writers, the Datinis and their business partners, differentiated between different types of female workers. For each entry situation, they give us their answers to the “praxeological question”³² of what potential servants, slaves, and wet nurses *did* or *were supposed to do*. The action phrase approach (verb-oriented method) was significantly developed in the Swedish project “Gender and Work”³³ led by Maria Ågren, which presented a way of analysing the work performance of

27 With reference to Theodore R. Schatzki, see Dagmar Freist, *Historische Praxeologie als Mikro-Historie*, in: Arndt Brendecke (ed.), *Praktiken der Frühen Neuzeit. Akteure – Handlungen – Artefakte*, Köln/Weimar/Wien 2015, 62–77, 74.

28 With reference to Reinhart Koselleck, see Ernst Müller/Falko Schmieder, *Begriffsgeschichte und historische Semantik. Ein kritisches Kompendium*, Berlin 2016, 310–312.

29 A similar approach can be found in Julia Heinemann, *Motion Pictures of the Royal Family. Making Kinship Relations and Political Concepts Visible in the Letters of Catherine de’ Medici, Henri III, and François d’Anjou*, in: *French Historical Studies* 44/2 (2021), 191–216, 212.

30 Steven A. Epstein, *Speaking of Slavery. Color, Ethnicity, and Human Bondage in Italy*, Ithaca 2001.

31 Christoph Cluse, *Zur Repräsentation von Sklaven und Sklavinnen in Statuten und Notariatsinstrumenten italienischer Städte um 1400*, in: Peter Bell/Dirk Suckow/Gerhard Wolf (eds.), *Fremde in der Stadt. Ordnungen, Repräsentationen und soziale Praktiken (13.–15. Jahrhundert)*, Frankfurt am Main et al. 2010, 383–408.

32 Arndt Brendecke, *Von Postulaten zu Praktiken. Eine Einführung*, in: Brendecke (ed.), *Praktiken*, 2015, 13–20, 16. For an overview of the “praxeological [...] family of theories”, see Marian Füssel, *Die Praxis der Theorie. Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft im Dialog*, in: *ibid.*, 21–33, esp. 24. Many thanks to Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Thomas Wallnig for pointing out the diversity of praxeological approaches to me.

33 Maria Ågren (ed.), *Making a Living, Making a Difference. Gender and Work in Early Modern European Society*, Oxford 2017.

persons with and without job titles – the so-called ‘unskilled’ masses that included children and women – in sources. The action phrase approach is therefore also used here to explore what persons did during the phase of (pre-)entry.³⁴

Social reality, however, is not only about acting people. Persons not only *do* or *make* things, but things are also *done to* them – often according to qualifications as perceived by the action controllers. That is why this paper proposes two additional approaches: the attribute-oriented method and the analysis of semantic roles in actions. During the entry acts, candidates were assessed by the mediators and employers for their qualities, including categories such as age, physical constitution, and legal or marital status (often expressed in emic labels). The ‘playwrights’ reveal their desired search profiles in comparison to the existing supply on labour and slave markets. In this context, attributes become the core element through which the letter writers express their recruitment logics. Furthermore, the writers assign roles to all participants in the entry act by using a wide range of lexically distinct verbs in different modes.³⁵ Semantic roles in actions “are based on universally valid [...] concepts that correspond to certain judgements people can make about events [...], judgements about who did it, to whom it happened, and what changed in the process”.³⁶ Servants, slaves, and wet nurses were not only *agents* of an action; things were also done to them, they felt and wished for things, and they received things. This paper therefore adopts the semantic roles approach from linguistics³⁷ for a social history that systematically takes into account various degrees of (non-)control over an action. In methodological terms, this approach contributes to departing from ambiguous or simplistic notions of agency and an active-passive binary.³⁸

The following table shows a simplified overview of semantic roles:³⁹

-
- 34 The software CATMA was used for the practical implementation: <https://catma.de/> (17 June 2021).
- 35 On the valence of verbs, see Giampolo Salvi/Laura Vanelli, *Nuova grammatica italiana*, Bologna 2004, 28.
- 36 Beatrice Primus, *Semantische Rollen*, Heidelberg 2012, 12.
- 37 The classics in the field of construction grammar are Charles Fillmore, *The Case for Case*, in: Emmon Bach/Robert T. Harms (eds.), *Universals in Linguistic Theory*, New York et al. 1968, 1–88; David Dowty, *Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection*, in: *Language* 67/3 (1991), 547–619.
- 38 For a critical approach to the use of the notion of agency in social history, see Juliane Schiel/Isabelle Schürch/Aline Steinbrecher, *Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden. Dialog über den Nutzen aktueller Agency-Debatten für die Sozialgeschichte*, in: *Schweizerisches Jahrbuch für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* 32 (2017), 17–48.
- 39 List inspired by Primus, *Rollen*, 2012, 15f., 26, 31f., 44, 73; Salvi/Vanelli, *Grammatica*, 2004, 28f.

Table 1: Semantic roles in actions

	Semantic Roles (Selection)	Explanations
HIGH	Agent	initiates and controls an action
A C T I O N C O N T R O L	Comitative	is engaged in an action like an agent (co-agent)
	Experiencer	perceives sensations, feels emotions
	Addressee	receives a verbal message and becomes co-knowledgeable
	Benefactive	derives benefit from an action
	Recipient	receives something and becomes its owner
	Patient/Theme ⁴⁰	is affected by an action, endures an action as part of the agent's action goal
LOW		

Source: author's own work

The combination of verb- and attribute-oriented methods as well as the analysis of semantic roles in actions is the experimental aspect of this study. The approach represents an understanding of historical semantics as an ensemble of methods.⁴¹ Computer-assisted historical semantics can provide us with frequencies of verbs and attributes, while human assessments of semantic roles in actions contextualise these findings. Both close and distant reading⁴² of the letters from the Datini archive may help us to better understand negotiating scopes and underlying power relations during the arrangement of labour relations in late medieval Tuscany.

4. Summarising the settings, quantifying the cases: how many words, places, and people?

In April 1394, the 50-year-old servant Monna Piera left the Datini household, most likely of her own will (*se nò partita*) even though Margherita Datini later claimed to have sent her away (*nò mandata lei*). According to Francesco Datini, Monna Piera no longer wanted to look after the much younger slave Lucia.⁴³ A few weeks later Monna Giuliva, who had been recommended to Francesco in Florence, joined the Pratese

40 In some approaches, the change of state by way of the action is a distinguishing criterion between patient and theme, see Primus, Rollen, 2012, 31f. *Patient* and *theme* are used synonymously here.

41 Whether historical semantics can be considered a “precise method” or a “generic term of heterogeneous methods” is a subject of debate, see Müller/Schmieder, Begriffsgeschichte, 2016, 17.

42 With reference to Franco Moretti, see Silke Schwandt, Digitale Methoden für die Historische Semantik. Auf den Spuren von Begriffen in digitalen Korpora, in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 44 (2018), 107–134, 134.

43 Letter from FD to MD on 2 April 1394, in: Cecchi, Lettere, 1990, no. 42 (6300076).

household in her stead. In August of the same year, Monna Giuliva left at her own request due to an unspecified issue on her part.⁴⁴ Monna Simona Rinaldeschi, the Datinis' neighbour, subsequently recommended a woman from Prato as replacement.

Case 1 is documented in a total of 21 letters and 1,623 words: eight letters and 857 words by Francesco (52.8 %) vs. 13 letters and 766 words by Margherita (47.2 %). In Florence, Francesco received recommendations from Niccolosa di Bartolomeo degli Albizzi, the wife of an important figure in Florentine politics (Giudo del Palagio),⁴⁵ and Margherita's sister Francesca. In Prato, Margherita received an initial recommendation from the wool merchant Niccolao Martini, and later another from her neighbour Monna Simona.⁴⁶ She was aided in assessing Monna Giuliva by Caterina di Bernarbò, the servant Ciglia, another woman called Niccolosa,⁴⁷ and her niece Tina. The search and recruitment process for a servant thus involved eight persons from the Datinis' close social environment and was geographically limited to the surroundings of their *palazzo* in Prato as well as their secondary residence in Florence.

The phases of the labour relations of several persons were interrelated in this case: The departure of the former servant (Monna Piera) led to the entry of a new candidate from Florence (Monna Giuliva) who left after three months, whereupon the once again vacant position was filled by another woman from Prato. This linear succession of three servants within a short time occurred in parallel with another, lengthier entry act (Case 2). In April 1394, while writing to Margherita about two women as possible servants, Francesco added news from Genoa: "I am not counting on female slaves, because [...] those who brought them [to Genoa] have shared them among their relatives."⁴⁸ As early as May 1393, Francesco had instructed Andrea di Bonanno to acquire a young female slave.⁴⁹ Since no ships with slaves from the Black Sea region had arrived in the Genoese port in 1393 and Bonanno strictly advised against buying a slave on the Genoese resale market, the request remained unfulfilled.⁵⁰ Several months later, in September 1394, Francesco tried once again to obtain a slave, this time by contacting Bindo Piaciti. Because of the Venetian *mude* system with cyclically organised naval convoys with fixed shipping routes to various ports in the Mediterranean, Piaciti expected slaves from the Black Sea region to

44 Crabb assumes that Monna Giuliva "had fallen into a depression", in: Crabb, Merchant, 2015, 101f.

45 Guasti, Lettere, 1880, LIX, LXVI.

46 Crabb, Merchant, 2015, 122, 151.

47 This could be Niccolosa, donna del fu Ser Chimenti di Ser Leone, see the ordered delivery of letters from Avignon to her in Prato indicated in a letter from FD to Monte Angiolini on 16 April 1385 (ASPr, 4094).

48 Letter from FD to MD on 30 April 1394, in: Cecchi, Lettere, 1990, no. 52 (6300086).

49 Letter from FD to AB on 12 May 1393, in: Livi, La schiavitù, 1928, no. 36 (6101418).

50 Letter from AB to FD on 20 December 1393, in: *ibid.*, no. 43 (2338).

arrive around All Saints' Day.⁵¹ And indeed, at the end of the year he bought a "slave girl" in Venice and sent her to the Datinis in Tuscany.⁵²

Case 2 is described in eleven letters and 1,099 words. Bonanno wrote three letters with 118 words (10.74 %) and Piaciti wrote four letters with 362 words (32.94 %); Francesco dominated the correspondence with his four letters comprising 619 words (56.32 %). This is surprising given the archival absence of his letters to Piaciti. Only two agents (Bonanno and Piaciti) actively participated in the search process for a female slave at Francesco's request, but the geographical radius was much larger than in Case 1 and included Florence, Prato, Genoa, Venice, and (indirectly) the Eastern Mediterranean.

Other Tuscan merchants owned slaves as well – such as Lodovico Marini,⁵³ the uncle of Manno d'Albizzo degli Agli, Francesco's junior business partner in Pisa. In Case 3 (April 1397), Lodovico was not explicitly searching for a slave but instead for a wet nurse for his son.⁵⁴ At Francesco's request, Margherita attempted to arrange an agreement between Lodovico and the wife of one of their labourers, Ceccarello.⁵⁵ She asked another of their labourers, Ceccarello's brother Schiavo (also named Piero di Lenzo),⁵⁶ to mediate. The negotiations were delayed, however, because the father of Ceccarello's wife could not be found. By the time the woman and her relatives finally wanted to know more about the conditions of employment, Lodovico had already found a wet nurse in Florence.

Margherita's mediating services were once again in demand more than a year later in August 1398, when Manno degli Agli himself was in need of a wet nurse for his son (Case 4). The matter was complicated further because the baby's mother, most likely Manno's slave Caterina, was to be rented out as a wet nurse to Zanobi di Taddeo Gaddi, Francesco's business contact in Venice.⁵⁷ As Francesco reported, Zanobi

51 The return of the *muda di Romania et del mar Nero* was scheduled for autumn, see Danuta Quirini-Popławska, The Venetian Involvement in the Black Sea Slave Trade (Fourteenth to Fifteenth Centuries), in: Reuven Amitai/Christoph Cluse (eds.), *Slavery and the Slave Trade in the Eastern Mediterranean* (c. 1000–1500 CE), Turnhout 2017, 255–298, 265.

52 Letter from BP to FD on 16 December 1394 (ASPr, 308692).

53 Letter from Franco Sacchetti to Manno degli Agli on 12 August 1388, in: Livi, *La schiavitù*, 1928, no. 8 (132100).

54 Cases 3 and 4 are analysed in Corinna Peres/Juliane Schiel, *Searching for a Wet Nurse: Prato, 1395–98*, Bielefeld 2021. Some of the following summaries and results were taken from this data story.

55 On Ceccarello's tasks, see e.g. letter from MD to FD on 4 June 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, no. 159 (1401833).

56 Origo, *Im Namen Gottes*, 1997, 334.

57 Crabb offers a different interpretation of this case because she does not take into account the entanglement of Manno's and Zanobi's demands for wet nurses, see Crabb, *Merchant*, 2015, 107–110. This may be due to an error in the transcription of Francesco's letter to Margherita on 19 August 1398 (no. 138, 6000941). Instead of *atende la schiava di Marino*, it reads [...] *di Manno*, since the scribe did not use *ri*-ligatures. On Zanobi di Taddeo Gaddi, see Reinhold Mueller, *The Venetian Money Market. Banks, Panics, and the Public Debt, 1200–1500*, Baltimore 1997, 268.

had dismissed the wet nurse already in his service to replace her with Manno's slave. Providing Manno with a wet nurse thus meant absolving the enslaved mother from breastfeeding her own child so that she could nurse Zanobi's baby instead.⁵⁸ The Datinis' plan was in line with the common practice in late medieval Tuscany for mothers not to breastfeed their own babies, instead giving them to wet nurses for financial remuneration (often on a monthly basis).⁵⁹ During her time-consuming search, Margherita found seven potential wet nurses, but none of them had the ideal qualities she was looking for. She thus came up with an interim solution: She asked a breastfeeding woman from her neighbourhood to transport Manno's son from Florence to the house in Prato. From there, she sent the baby to a temporary wet nurse. On 27 August 1398, the Datinis finally found a long-term solution, as Francesco reported to Manno: "this day, we gave your baby boy to [...] a good wet nurse who [...] gives fresh milk and resides in Prato. [...] Caterina tends well to Zanobi's baby boy [...]."⁶⁰

Cases 3 and 4⁶¹ together comprise 21 letters and 2,796 words of the marital correspondence, with six letters and 623 words (22.28 %) by Francesco and 15 letters and 2,173 words (77.72 %) from Margherita. In Case 3, the labourer Schiavo as well as Niccolò and Agnolo di Piero di Giunta del Rosso (both relatives and business partners)⁶² also negotiated, recommended, and forwarded updates. In Case 4, the social network of mediators was expanded even further: Niccolo di Pierò and his wife Lapa, the servants Monna Bartolomea d'Aleso and Chaterina d'Andrea, Benedetto, Pellegrino, Colomba, and Stefano d'Arrigo's niece were directly involved, in addition to Manno's mother Bice in Florence. With a total of eleven persons of both sexes (besides the employers and the Datinis) from different social levels, the largest

58 Cluse describes the capitalisation of the body functions of female slaves as "a new escalation level of the exploitation of human beings", in: Cluse, Frauen, 2005, 85. For the late medieval Iberian Peninsula, Winer also speaks of a "double exploitation" of slaves as "sexual chattel" and "nursing mothers", see Rebecca Lynn Winer, *Conscripting the Breast. Lactation, Slavery and Salvation in the Realms of Aragon and Kingdom of Majorca, c. 1250–1300*, in: *Journal of Medieval History* 34/2 (2008), 164–184, esp. 164.

59 Considering wage and price developments in Barcelona after the Black Death of 1348, Winer notes a shift in childcare practices with the increasing use of enslaved women as wet nurses, see Rebecca Lynn Winer, *The Enslaved Wet Nurse as Nanny. The Transition from Free to Slave Labor in Childcare in Barcelona after the Black Death (1348)*, in: *Slavery & Abolition* 38/2 (2017), 303–319. For medical and social reasons as well as mechanisms between city and countryside resulting from this practice in Italian territories, see Cluse, Frauen, 2005, 96.

60 Letter from FD to Manno degli Agli on 27 August 1398 (ASPr, 500660). Caterina most likely breastfed Zanobi's son in the Gaddis' main household in Florence, see letter from Lodovico Marini to Manno degli Agli on 5 December 1398 (ASPr, 503379).

61 Since these are two separate searches for wet nurses, the cases remain numerically distinct; they are considered together to make general statements on wet nurses, however.

62 Piero di Giunta was Francesco's boyhood guardian; Niccolò was Piero's son and Agnolo his grandson. Francesco Datinis had "a wool manufacturing company and a dyers' company" with them in Prato, see Crabb, *Merchant*, 2015, 19.

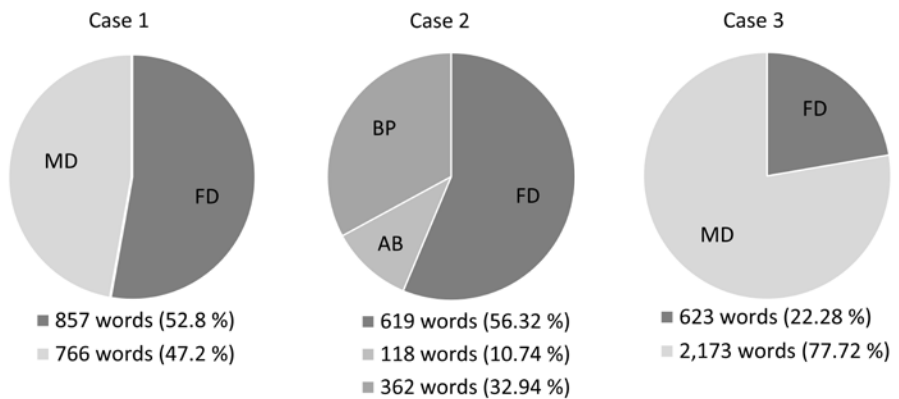


Figure 1: Quantification of words in the four studied cases. The abbreviations stand for the names of the letter writers: FD (Francesco Datini), MD (Margherita Datini), AB (Andrea di Bonanno), BP (Bindo Piaciti).

Source: author's own calculation based on all letters consulted in the cases

network was activated in the search for wet nurses. This network was limited to Florence, Prato, and the latter's surroundings, with a search radius of up to eight kilometres.

Measuring the words, geographical radius, and social network of each case helps us to roughly distinguish the entry situations. Whereas the recruitment process for servants and wet nurses was strictly locally organised, with the involved people seeing each other regularly, the recruitment process for slaves was a Mediterranean affair involving selected male agents in distant Italian slave markets. The search for a female slave (Case 2) took a year and a half, the search for a female servant (Case 1) several weeks, and the two searches for wet nurses only four (Case 3) and eleven (Case 4) days, respectively. Whereas the search for slaves was a matter of patience contingent on the conjunctures of the Mediterranean slave trade,⁶³ the wet nurse searches were characterised by time pressure and helpers from different social strata. Both Francesco and Margherita Datini were equally busy in reporting about the replacement of the servant (Case 1). In the other cases, their engagement differed: Francesco invested many words into the search for a slave compared to his business partners (Case 2), and Margherita quantitatively dominated the communication on the wet nurses (Cases 3 and 4) by a large margin, which underlines her high level of involvement in the search process. All participating letter writers described actions and attributed labels to involved actors. The four cases together describe a total of

63 On slavery and the slave trade in the late medieval Mediterranean, see Schiel/Hanß (eds.), *Mediterranean Slavery*, 2014; Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise. The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500*, Philadelphia 2019; Charles Verlinden, *L'esclavage dans l'Europe médiévale*, vols. 1–2, Bruges 1955/1977.

270 actions of ‘working’ women during the phases of (pre-)entry: female servants are involved in 95 actions, slaves in 65 actions, and wet nurses in 110 actions.

5. The curtain rises. Attributes, verbs, and semantic roles of female workers

5.1 Of a trial period and a debt. The entry of female servants (Case 1)

In 40 percent of the 95 recorded actions involving potential female servants, the latter were described as initiating and controlling actions (*agents*), sharing control over an action with someone else (*comitative agents*), or being carriers of mental states over which they had partial control (*experiencers*).⁶⁴ Monna Giuliva verbally addressed the Datinis (*diseimi*) as well as visiting their residence (*è venuta*) in Florence and the house in Prato (*ène gunta*), her potential workplaces. During her one-week trial period, she tested the Datinis (*dee [...] provare noi*), saw the house (*vedere la casa*), and had a say – along with her employers-to-be – in the terms of the labour relation (*che patti ài fatto cho’ lei; achordare mecho*). The negotiations likely involved her tasks and associated workplaces, as Margherita’s request for clarification in a letter to Francesco suggests: “Write to tell me what agreement you made with her [Monna Giuliva] and whether I should send her to the bakery or anywhere else I need.”⁶⁵

In general, the prospective work duties are semantically vague: to serve (*servire qn*) and to stay (*stare con qn*). There is only a single remark about a specific task concerning Monna Piera’s exit: to supervise a younger female slave (*guardare*). The hierarchy of the Datinis’ female household staff was not only structured by legal status, but also by marital status and age.⁶⁶ One of the prevalent labels for female servants in this case – *Monna* followed by the respective woman’s name (37.14 %) – indicates this, since “*Monna* is the honorific used for all married or widowed women.”⁶⁷ All employed women were of advanced age and mothers: Monna Piera was around fifty years old and had a son named Giorgio;⁶⁸ Monna Giuliva was of the same age and had daughters; the female neighbour was old enough to have a daughter to be married off. Conversely, this did not fundamentally exclude “single women as servants.”⁶⁹

64 Primus, Rollen, 2012, 26, 73; Salvi/Vanelli, Grammatica, 2004, 29.

65 Letter from MD to FD on 7 May 1394, in: James/Pagliari, Letters, 2012, no. 62 (1401757).

66 Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Le serve a Firenze nei secoli XIV e XV*, in: Klapisch-Zuber, *La famiglia*, 1988, 253–283, 281.

67 Crabb, Merchant, 2015, 217.

68 *Libro dell’uscita*, Prato, 1391–1399, fol. 3r, 21 February 1394 (ASPr, Fondo Datini, 619/4).

69 Crabb, Merchant, 2015, 101.

For Francesco Datini, it was a disqualifying attribute to have a husband, a mother, and daughters, as Monna Giuliva did.⁷⁰ He argued for a servant who “did not have so many things going on” (*non avesse tante cose*) – in other words, for a local woman without a family of her own. The woman recommended by Niccolao Martini before Monna Giuliva was hired was described by Margherita as a “good woman” (*buona femina*) because she had neither husband nor children, and Margherita regretted that she could not “have” (*avere*) her.⁷¹ The desired single status of female servants was probably linked to their primary task: staying with and attending to members of the Datini household. Own familial duties placed the fulfilment of this task at risk.

Monna Giuliva apparently provided the required service in an unusual fashion. After two days of the trial period, Margherita reported: “She loves to sing and dance, and there is not a dance that she doesn’t know. When she is tired of this, she knows how to play cards.”⁷² It is all the more surprising with a view to this description that Margherita decided to employ Monna Giuliva on the seventh day after her arrival (*Mona Giuliva mi ritengho*) – which also demonstrates Margherita’s decision-making ability when it comes to recruiting staff.⁷³ Why hire, in Margherita’s words, “a woman with so little sense”?⁷⁴ First, Margherita detected no visible faults: Monna Giuliva was “neither a glutton nor a drunkard” (*né gh(i)otta né ubriacha*), and she was in good physical condition (*buona chondizione*).⁷⁵ Second, Monna Giuliva had been recommended by the wife of Guido del Palagio, whose favour Francesco Datini sought. Refusing to employ her would have called into question Monna Niccolosa’s capacities as mediator. Third, the local labour market offered few alternatives: Monna Giuliva had no serious competitor. According to Margherita, the solution was to employ her temporarily and dismiss her in case they found someone “who is really perfect” (*una bene profetta*).⁷⁶ Things were to take a different turn, however: Monna Giuliva left the household of her own accord after about three months and received 7 lire and 14 soldi for the entire period of her employment as live-in worker (about 2.57 lire per month).⁷⁷ This corresponds to the average wage of 2.5 lire/month for female servants in Tuscany from 1390 to 1399.⁷⁸

70 Letter from FD to MD on 30 April 1394, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, no. 52 (6300086).

71 Letters from MD to FD on 14 April 1394, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, nos. 53 (1401749) and 54 (1401748).

72 Letter from MD to FD on 9 May 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 65 (1401760).

73 Letter from MD to FD on 13 May 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 68 (1401763).

74 Letter from MD to FD on 9 May 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 65 (1401760).

75 Letter from MD to FD on 13 May 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 68 (1401763).

76 Letter from MD to FD on 11 May 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 66 (1401761).

77 She was paid “at the rate of eight florins per year”, see letter from MD to FD on 8 August 1394, in: *ibid.*, no. 72 (1401767); *Quadernuccio di Spese di Casa*, 1394, Prato, 8 August 1394, fol. 2r (ASPr, Fondo Datini, 216/14).

78 Klapisch-Zuber, *Le serve*, 1988, 269.

The woman who was to replace her came from the Datinis' Pratese neighbourhood. Although she was recommended by a neighbour, Margherita did not know her well, but she ensured Francesco that she could "find out about her from many people because she is from Prato".⁷⁹ With Francesco's explicit consent, Margherita nevertheless gave her 5 lire, presumably to help finance her daughter's marriage. By adopting the semantic role of *recipient* (of money), the woman may have accepted the creditors as her employers-to-be for a fixed period of time. It is likely that the Datinis lent the money on the condition that the debt could only be settled through work, since they had to replace Monna Giuliva. According to Margherita, the woman "had to come to stay" with her (*deba venire a stare mecho*) after marrying off her daughter.⁸⁰ At Monna Giuliva's remuneration rate, the woman would have worked off her debt within two months – but we can only make assumptions in this regard.

It is evident from the letters that there was a general tension between the assigned semantic roles of (*proto-*)*agent* and *patient* for the group of (potential) female servants. When employers and mediators took on the role of *agents*, they searched (*cercare*), found (*trovare*, or with similar meanings: *avere/venire alle/per le mani*), procured (*procacciare*), promised (*promettere*), sent (*mandare*), saw (*vedere*), and tested (*provare*) candidates. They kept (*(ri)tenere*), took (*tôrre*), and had (*avere*) local women as female servants – all verbs semantically associated with the act of possessing.

5.2 Of a detailed profile and specified tasks. The entry of a female slave (Case 2)

Verbs from the same semantic field, as well as from that of financial operations, dominate the entry of a new slave into the Datini household. Both Andrea di Bonanno in Genoa and Bindo Piaciti in Venice assured they would perform the following actions on Francesco Datini's behalf if they found a suitable female candidate on the slave markets: They would inquire about her (*sentire*), see her (*vedere*), and take (*pigliare/tôrre/togliere*) or buy her (*comprare*) "at the best possible [price]"⁸¹ (*per lo meglio si potrà*). This required that slaves could cost (*costare*) and be sold (*essere vendute*) or supplied (*fornire*) to someone. In December 1394, Bindo Piaciti put these actions into practice on the Venetian slave market and sent a young female slave to the Datinis in Tuscany.⁸²

79 Letter from MD to FD on 14 August 1394, in: James/Pagliaro, Letters, 2012, no. 75 (1401770).

80 Ibid.

81 Letter from BP to FD on 5 September 1394, in: Livi, La schiavitù, 1928, no. 48 (6000634).

82 On the modalities of the slave's 'transport' by the servant (*fante*) Martino da Cortona, see the letter from BP to FD on 19 December 1394 (ASPr, 308693).

Of all the 65 recorded actions involving slaves, there is not a single deviation from the role of *patient* during the (pre-)entry phase. Even when Bonanno and Piaciti write that slaves came (*venisono*) from the Black Sea region, the latter were only mock controllers of the action, for their movement was tied to that of the ships (*navili di Romania chelle rechano*). We know from other sources such as the court documents used in Debra Blumenthal's study of slavery in fifteenth-century Valencia⁸³ that there were certain strategies by which slaves could exert some influence before and during the acquisition process. The letters in our sample, however, assign the control over actions exclusively to mediators and employers. A female slave was "wanted" (*volere*) and "demanded" (*chiedere*) by Datini. Bonanno and Piaciti "had her in mind" (*avere a mente*) and "waited for" a slave to come (*chonviensi aspetare*). They did not look for one on the resale markets or in other slave-trading cities, instead accepting the seasonal availability of female slaves brought from the Black Sea region.⁸⁴

Emic labels used for female slaves emphasise their role as *patients* with a price tag. They are mainly designated as *ischiavette/schiave* (slave girls/female slaves, 65 %) according to their legal status, but also as *chosa* (thing, 20 %). The emic label *derata* (commodity, 10 %) further highlights that the entry of slaves was a market-bound business transaction. The high investment was associated with an ideal worker profile: young – here eight to ten years (*g(i)ovane, d'età oto sino i x anni*) – and with a strong physical constitution (*buona costituzione/compressione, rusticha, ben forta*). These qualities enumerated by Francesco were linked to specific tasks expected from the slave during the extraction phase: "I want her [...] to [...] wash the dishes, and carry the wood and the bread to the stove, and do such similar things, and that is why she shall be quietly steadfast and full of strength, for I want her to endure a lot [...]"⁸⁵ In another letter sent three days later, he adds two more specific tasks: "to go from the villa [*Il Palco*] to Prato" (*fala andare di vila a Prato*) and "to make the beds" (*fare le letta*).⁸⁶ Twice Francesco states that the *ischiavetta* "did not have any other tasks to tend to" (*abi a fare niun'altra chosa*), which challenges the assumption that slaves performed all kinds of unspecified household tasks.⁸⁷ In this case, the intended duties were clearly defined: transportation and cleaning.

83 Trial periods in slave sales were intended as a guarantee for the seller and buyer before drawing up the official contract. During these periods, slaves could influence and sabotage the process to some extent, see Debra Blumenthal, *Enemies and Familiars. Slavery and Mastery in Fifteenth-Century Valencia*, Ithaca 2009, 57.

84 On slaving practices in the Black Sea region, see Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 2019, esp. 121–151; Felicia Roşu (ed.), *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, c. 900–1900. Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection between Christianity and Islam*, Leiden 2021.

85 Letter from FD to AB on 12 May 1393, in: Livi, *La schiavitù*, 1928, no. 36 (6101418).

86 Letter from FD to AB on 15 May 1393, in: *ibid.*, no. 37 (413529).

87 See e.g. the term *pluriattività* in: Giovanna Fiume, *Schiavitù mediterranee. Corsari, rinnegati e santi di età moderna*, Milano 2009, 52f.

Unlike Case 1 involving servants, considerations regarding the prospective slave's young age were a central part of the entry process from the employer's perspective. Francesco Datini explains this as follows: "I want her so young because she will learn better and faster, and I will be better served in the six or ten years [to come] during which I can still form her as I wish."⁸⁸ Francesco thus had a two-fold motivation for acquiring an 8-to-10-year-old slave: to shape the enslaved girl according to his own wishes, and to use her labour for at least six to ten years. In fact, he intended to "accustom" (*potesi avezare*) and "make" (*le potrò più fare*, meaning "form" or "shape") the slave in his way (*a mio modo*).⁸⁹ This ties in with Piaciti's advice to "have her baptised and give her a name to your liking so that God may give you luck."⁹⁰ The case-specific performative pattern of buying, baptising, and naming is by no means new in the study of entry practices of Eastern Mediterranean slaves into Western Mediterranean households in the Late Middle Ages.⁹¹ What is more astonishing here is the discrepancy between the role of *experienter* (*proto-agent*) in the supposed extraction phase and that of *patient* during the actual entry. During the patriarchally controlled 'learning process' outlined by Francesco, slaves necessarily had to take control over actions at some point after their entry. Francesco's comments on the slave who was already in the Datini household attest to this: The existing slave *knew* very well how to make bread, how to cook, and how to serve at the table (*sa bene fare il pane, e otimamente chuocere e aparechiare*).⁹² The fact that she had obtained these skills (as a slave or before) and applied them in the Datini household characterises her as "weakly agentivistic"⁹³ (*experienter*). Because of these skills and her higher age (*schiaiva* without the diminutive suffix), Francesco wanted the new slave to be "subordinate to her" (*che sia sotto di lei*). Given the same legal and marital status (enslaved and unmarried), the hierarchy of the Datinis' female household staff was thus structured according to age, the length of time spent in the household, and skills, resulting in separate yet interrelated spheres of tasks.

88 Letter from FD to AB on 12 May 1393, in: Livi, *La schiavitù*, 1928, no. 36 (6101418).

89 *Ibid.* In the correspondence with Piaciti, Datini raised the age to 10–12 years, see letter from BP to FD on 10 September 1394, in: Livi, *La schiavitù*, 1928, no. 49 (6000635).

90 Letter from BP to FD on 16 December 1394 (ASPr, 308692). On practices of giving a Christian name to slaves in the late Middle Ages, see Epstein, *Speaking*, 2001, 24–30; Blumenthal, *Enemies*, 2009, 139f.

91 On "those speech acts that change reality" in contracts on slave sales, see Epstein, *Speaking*, 2001, 156, 159.

92 Letter from FD to AB on 12 May 1393, in: Livi, *La schiavitù*, 1928, no. 36 (6101418).

93 Primus, *Rollen*, 2012, 26.

5.3 Of expressed wishes and lending milk. The entry of wet nurses (Cases 3 and 4)

Cases 3 and 4 revolve around the specific duty of giving mother's milk to a baby (*dare [del latte]/popa, alevare*). Any woman who had given birth to a child and had milk could take on the remunerated task of breastfeeding another woman's infant. The dominant emic label for a breastfeeding woman was the job title *balia* (43.86 %). Servants and slaves could also be wet nurses. The indebted woman from the neighbourhood (Case 1) had previously been a wet nurse for the child of Niccolò di Piero,⁹⁴ and the mother of Manno's baby, the slave Caterina, gave milk to Zano-bi's son.⁹⁵ Regardless of their legal status, both women operated as wet nurses in the Datini network.

In 10 percent of the 110 recorded actions involving wet nurses, they took on the role of *recipient* – usually of the baby and its belongings. Taking in a baby meant entering into a working relationship. This was the final step of a process in which potential wet nurses could assume a negotiating position as *agents, comitative agents, and experiencers* (25 % of all actions). They decided (*se delibera, arà risposta*) to nurse a baby (*togle questo fancullo*), they promised (*à promeso*) to be a wet nurse, and they expressed wishes concerning the place and remuneration of the job. The exercise of control over such actions depended strongly on the qualities of the candidates. In the event that they were disqualified by virtue of having too little or too much milk, being ill or too old, or living too far away, a negotiation situation never occurred. Only a handful of women seem to have matched Margherita's ideal profile: a healthy, young woman with 'fresh' milk (about two months after giving birth)⁹⁶ who had lost or given away her child⁹⁷ and lived in the immediate neighbourhood. After having been offered the job, the women in both cases could decide whether or not to "take the baby". In Case 3, Ceccarello's wife could decide whether to assume the nursing of Lodovico Marini's child because "[s]he has all the qualities that make an excellent nurse, and she is at the stage where she will not become pregnant for twenty-eight months or more."⁹⁸ In Case 4, hearsay described the woman from Piazza della Pieve as a "good wet nurse" who "promised that if her dying baby succumbs tonight, she will come as soon as it is buried."⁹⁹

94 Letter from MD to FD on 14 August 1394, in: James/Pagliaro, Letters, 2012, no. 75 (1401770).

95 Letter from FD to Manno degli Agli on 27 August 1398 (ASPr, 500660). On enslaved wet nurses in the Florentine Ospedale degli Innocenti, see Philip Gavitt, *Charity and Children in Renaissance Florence*. The Ospedale degli Innocenti 1410–1536, Ann Arbor 1990, esp. 162–185.

96 Klapisch-Zuber, *Genitori*, 1988, 223; Crabb, *Merchant*, 2015, 107.

97 Letter from MD to FD on 19 August 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, Letters, 2012, no. 170 (1401844).

98 Letter from MD to FD on 5 April 1397, in: *ibid.*, no. 121 (1401796). On contemporary notions of the contaminated milk of a pregnant woman, see Cluse, *Frauen*, 2005, 98.

99 Letter from MD to FD on 21 August 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, Letters, 2012, no. 173 (1401847).

A promise to become a wet nurse depended on the preceding negotiations, which could address the remuneration and the workplace. In Case 3, Francesco Datini wanted to know how much a wet nurse usually “demanded per month”¹⁰⁰ (*quanto vorebbe il mese*). If wet nurses could propose a monthly remuneration, this means that the average wage of 4 to 4.5 lire per month (Margherita’s answer) was negotiable. The same seems to have applied to the location of breastfeeding. The ‘temporary wet nurse’ expressed her wish not to breastfeed Manno’s baby under any other roof than her own (*no ci vole venire*).¹⁰¹ Yet we do not know what or who was the driver of this wish respectively of her final decision to enter into the proposed labour relation. What we do know from the letters is that the ‘pick-up wet nurse’ in Case 4 had to accede to her husband’s decision to fulfil Margherita’s request to transport the baby from Florence to Prato: She was the *addressee* of his order to do as Margherita wished (*il marito l’ha dato la parola ch’ella faccia quello ch’io voglio*).¹⁰² It may be that the negotiation of contracts was a “male affair”¹⁰³ on behalf of the prospective wet nurses after all.

Being the target of an action performed by another person dominates the picture (63 % *patient*) in Cases 3 and 4 as well. Mediators and employers searched (*cercare*), found (*trovare, avere/venire/essere arretrate alle mani*), sent (*mandare*), and checked (*tenere a bada*) women. The Datinis supplied (*fornire*) and had (*avere*) candidates for the prospective employers. They even employed them on their behalf (*fermare/prestare*), as Margherita did with the ‘temporary wet nurse’: “I have engaged the woman”¹⁰⁴ (*Io presta la femina*). In the marital correspondence, *prestare* is used in the context of temporary transactions, meaning “to lend something to someone”. This could refer to money, pack animals, clothes, or household goods, and it was also the case here: For Margherita, the employment of the wet nurse was only “until [she] can provide someone truly suitable”.¹⁰⁵ She had previously articulated the same thought when engaging Monna Giuliva (Case 1), indicating the difficulty in finding workers with the desired profile. In general, if a wet nurse could not be found, Margherita sometimes used the emic label *chose* (things, 15.74 %), a label also used in the communication on the entry of the slave (Case 2). This suggests that the task of giving milk to someone else’s baby could objectify women in the eyes of employers. The exclusive right to use certain female bodily functions may resemble ownership claims over a slave’s body, providing a possible explanation for the cross-case

100 Letter from FD to MD on 4 April 1397, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, no. 90 (6300114).

101 Letter from MD to FD on 21 August 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, no. 172 (1401846).

102 Letter from MD to FD on 21 August 1398, in: *ibid.*, no. 173 (1401847).

103 Klapisch-Zuber, *Genitori*, 1988, 226.

104 Letter from MD to FD on 22 August 1398, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, no. 174 (1401848).

105 *Ibid.*

use of the abstract label *chose* – aside from the fact that slaves could (and were often expected to) operate temporarily as wet nurses.

6. To negotiate and to be negotiated – that is the cross-case question

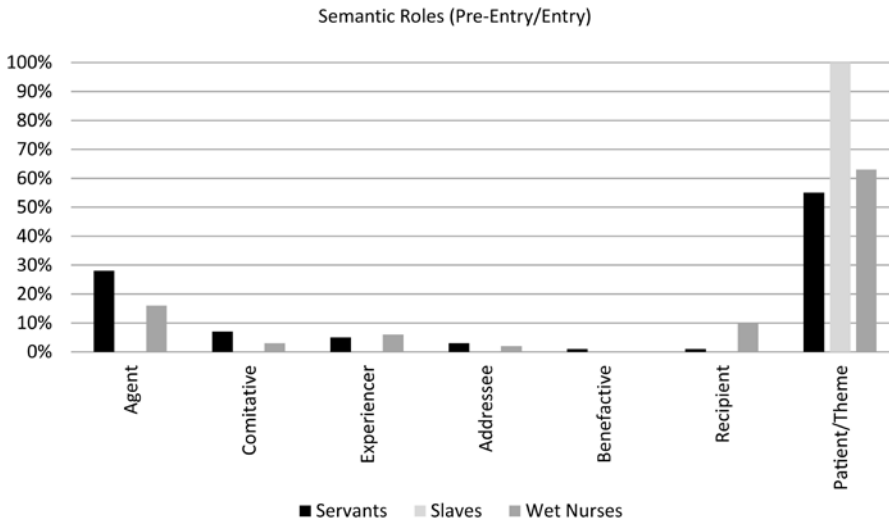


Figure 2: Distribution of semantic roles in actions in the respective cases. Female servants are mentioned in a total of 95 actions, slaves in 65 actions, and wet nurses in 110 actions. Source: author’s own calculation

One semantic role dominates in all cases: The role of someone who endures an action initiated and controlled by someone else (*patient*). Female servants, slaves, and wet nurses were the targets of actions by mediators and employers. For the act of (pre-)entry into a labour relation, the ‘playwrights’ Datini and their business partners assigned the primary role of *patient* to working women. The semantic fields of verbs they used to apply this role to candidates describe actions associated with the claim of ownership. Mediators and employers “had”, “took”, “supplied”, “bought”, “lent”, and “kept” women. In the Datini correspondence, the verb *tôrre* (to take)¹⁰⁶ is used when someone appropriates something. Candied pine nuts, flasks, letters, oil, money, clothes, lambs, wine, or grain were taken. Sometimes they were taken at a price, making *tôrre* a synonym for ‘to buy’.¹⁰⁷ This notion of appropriation is also evoked in all cases through the expressions *avere/comprare/venire per le/alle mani*

¹⁰⁶ On the semantical facets of *tôrre*: Treccani Vocabolario, <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/togliere/> (5 January 2022).

¹⁰⁷ See e.g. letter from FD to MD on 15 April 1394, in: Cecchi, *Lettere*, 1990, no. 48 (6300082).

(to have/come to hand; to buy through someone's hands):¹⁰⁸ Women who could potentially be part of the working community as servants, slaves, and/or wet nurses were within the reach of the 'hands' of mediators and employers. This is emblematic for the power relations underlying the (pre-)entry phase from the view of the narrating 'powerful'.

However, the lack of control over actions during the entry phase was not absolute according to the statements of mediators and employers – at least not for some of the 'marginalised' women. The letter writers allude to this through the use of a cross-case group-related designation. The women who potentially had the "capacity to negotiate [...] working [...] conditions"¹⁰⁹ during the (pre-)entry phase predominantly share a specific emic label that functions as hypernym: *femine* (women; 42.85 % in Case 1; 19.3 % in Cases 3 and 4). In the studied letter corpus, the women with an (albeit limited) bargaining capacity – wet nurses and servants – are distinguished by way of this label from the female slaves who appear to have had none.¹¹⁰

But not *all* female servants and not *all* wet nurses had the same negotiating scope. In some scenes, it was not just about being part of a group of workers but also about being a woman with certain qualities in particular circumstances. Recommended by an influential Florentine and without competitors, Monna Giulia had a tremendous range and control of action. She not only had a say as a *comitative agent*, she also had the opportunity to try out her employers. Her replacement did not enjoy the same options. As the *recipient* of a sum of money, she depended on the creditor-employers' control over the entry into the work arrangement. The 'temporary wet nurse' decided whether and where she would nurse Manno's baby, not only because she matched Margherita's profile of an ideal wet nurse better than any other candidate but also because she had no dependency relationship with the Datinis. If the Datinis' servant Domenica, who is mentioned with her family in the cadastre of 1393¹¹¹, had not been disqualified for the task because Margherita considered her unhealthy, unable to provide sufficient milk, and "useless",¹¹² she probably would not have had the same choice. The fact that Domenica was also financially dependent on the Datinis due to her husband Saccente's debt would not have left her with any realistic option to refuse if the Datinis had wanted her to nurse Manno's

108 Today the expression is used in the sense of "getting into a fight with someone", see Treccani Vocabolario, https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/prendere_%28Sinonimi-e-Contrari%29/ (5 January 2022).

109 Sarti, *Can Historians Speak?*, 2019, 353.

110 The label *donna* functions in the same way, but with a minor share.

111 Domenica appears for the first time in the Datini letters in February 1394 on the occasion of the baptism of her child, see letter from MD to FD on 14 February 1394, in: James/Pagliaro, *Letters*, 2012, no. 28 (1401723).

112 Letter from MD to FD on 21 August 1398, in: *ibid.*, no. 173 (1401847).

baby.¹¹³ In the cases of servants and wet nurses, the possibility of changing the predominant group-related role of ‘being negotiated’ to the agentivistic role of ‘negotiating’ depended on individual qualifications, life situations, social hierarchies, and labour market conditions. It was a specific conjuncture in which women were able to “make a difference”.¹¹⁴ The agentivistic performance of women during the entry into a labour relation was never a *deus ex machina* moment according to the letter writers.

7. Before the curtain closes. Final remarks on historical semantics for social history

Reading the letters preserved in the Datini archive through the lens of verbal phrases, attributes, semantic fields, and roles has helped to differentiate and measure the degrees of (non-)control over actions performed by historical actors during the establishment of labour relations. In the version of the entry act written by the Datini and their business partners, employers and mediators are not invariably the only ones with bargaining power. Female workers took control over actions in various scenes of the process. The semantic roles approach brings these positions of power and influence concerning labour relations to the epistolary surface. However, it tells us nothing about the reasons for the distribution of certain (shifting) roles, and this is where hermeneutical interpretation comes into play. It is the historian’s task to reread the results provided by historical semantic analysis in their situational contexts in order to understand and reconstruct why certain women were more likely than others to *act*, to *wish*, to *receive*, or to *endure* during their entry.

In terms of further findings from historical semantic analysis for social history, we can state that Juliane Schiel and Stefan Hanß’s appeal to adapt “a comparative approach that consistently historicises premodern semantics of servility”¹¹⁵ has proved fruitful for bringing together the study of labour and slavery. Relations of domination and ownership characterised all discussed work arrangements of women in the Datini network of the late fourteenth century, whether they applied to female servants, slaves, or wet nurses. Notions usually associated with slaves – such as the ‘appropriation’ of a body or the desired single status – were not exclusive to that context from the perspective of the employers and mediators; rather, they were

113 Two months after this case, Domenica spent a day in prison because of Saccente’s debts, see letter from MD to FD on 24 November 1398, in: *ibid.*, no. 185 (1401859).

114 On “making a difference” as an indicator of interagency, see Schiel/Schürch/Steinbrecher, *Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden*, 2017, 23.

115 Schiel/Hanß, *Semantiken*, 2014, 32.

applicable to a larger group of female workers. From the inverse perspective, women (except for slaves) were constantly torn between 'negotiating' and 'being negotiated' when establishing labour relations, resulting in a range of special agreements on workplaces, remuneration, and work tasks. In the future, historical semantics with a comparative perspective and backed by digital resources will certainly provide further thought-provoking findings in labour and slavery studies.