"YE LOUELY LADYES WITH YOURE LONGE FYNGRES": THE SILKWOMEN OF MEDIEVAL LONDON

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ABSTRACT

The silkwomen of medieval London have become a celebrated case in the history of women's work, but the surviving evidence about the status of their work and their social situation is ambiguous at best. This essay examines their famous petition to Parliament in 1455 in which they describe silkwork as the virtuous labour of "gentlewomen", and reads it against a number of other representations of women and silk work from romance, sumptuary legislation, estates literature and political poetry. My focus is on both the possibilities and the limitations offered by interdisciplinary research into medieval women's lives.

One of the most celebrated cases in medieval women's history is that of the London silkwomen in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[1] They have featured prominently in recent debates about the economic and social autonomy of late medieval women, relative to later periods. This is a complex issue whose resolution is well beyond the scope of this paper, and whose implications are much broader and deeper than the case of the silkwomen. However, their prominence in the debate over whether medieval women enjoyed a "golden age" of prosperity and independence raises some important second-order issues. I hope to address some of these issues in this essay, which is conceived in part as a methodological inquiry. I will also introduce a further dimension to discussion by considering some different kinds of evidence about women, work and luxurious textiles, especially the anxious texts of romance, estates literature and sumptuary legislation, to explore some of the broader contexts in which we might

[1] My thanks to Jeremy Goldberg, Philippa Maddern and Kim Phillips for discussing aspects of this paper with me. Any errors of fact and judgement remain my own. Special thanks to Helen Hickey for her invaluable assistance in collecting primary and secondary references for this paper.

find representations of medieval women's work. I will also suggest that some aspects of the complexity we expect of such texts might also be found in some of the seemingly more straightforward "historical" documents. My intention throughout is to reflect on the disciplinary traditions and influences that still tend to shape the directions of our research, as historians and literary critics, even in this "interdisciplinary" era in medieval studies.

1. The London silkwomen and their petition

The English silk industry is of particular interest, as it seems to have been predominantly in the hands of women. There was no sericulture in England at this time, and no large scale silk weaving either, in contrast to a number of European countries. But English ecclesiastical embroidery, known as *opus anglicanum*, had been famous since at least the thirteenth century, when Pope Innocent IV was so impressed by English ecclesiastical vestments that he commissioned a number of embroiderers to make more such garments for Rome. At court, too, the fashion for elaborate silk and gold embroideries required their constant renewal and remaking. Robes and other garments associated with Edward III's Order of the Garter in the late 1340s and 1350s constituted a large proportion of this elaborate work. The work of court embroidery seems to have been shared equally by men and women: of its nature, it was closely linked to the heraldic work of the armourers. We know the names of a number of male embroiderers, for example, and we know that male workers at court earned twice as much as women (Staniland 1989: 277; Staniland 1991: 22; Christie 1938: 31-37).

But the production of thrown silk and small items, the "narrow ware" produced on very small looms, or by other methods of knotting or tying, was almost exclusively the domain of women, most of whom were based in the city of London. Women silkworkers specialised in converting, or "throwing" raw silk into yarn, weaving small items such as fringes, tassels, ribbon, laces, and girdles, and making up small items such as purses. As traders, they also undertook large and sometimes lucrative contracts with other European traders. These women were the wives or widows of wealthy merchants and Aldermen (Thrupp 1948: 170); and were often registered as *femme soles*, meaning they could trade, borrow and incur debt in their own right, and conduct risky overseas trade. We know of a number of silkwomen, such as Margaret Cliderowe (who left a collection of silver valued at over £16[2]), Alice Claver, Beatrice Fyler, and Elizabeth Nevyle,

[2] The executors of Margaret Cliderowe, "silkwoman", widow of Elias Cliderowe, delivered to John Bederenden, the Chamberlain, "certain vessels in trust for Elias and Margaret her surviving children": they included "a silver-gilt piece pounded (pounsonat) with falcons, a covered silver cup called 'standyng cuppe' with gilt top and border, silver spoons, a silver 'pouderbox', a silver 'flatpece' with cover, a 'cruse' for 'Reynisshwyne', silver pieces with 'trayll' of vine and roses, etc. the whole being valued at £16 2s.6d. The executors, moreover, delivered to the said Margaret a black gown furred with

who traded in their own right, and took in other women as apprentices, though the apprentices were bound to both husband and wife, to learn the wife's trade. Girls came from counties such as Norfolk, Warwickshire and Yorkshire to be apprenticed to London silkwomen (Dale 1933: 325-327).

Famously, too, the silkwomen petitioned the king and parliament on a number of occasions, complaining against foreign traders importing inferior materials, or forestalling supplies of raw silk, forcing up the prices. These documents can tell us a great deal about how the silkwomen represented their own work and their socio-economic status. In 1368 a group of certain women called "silkwymmen" had brought a petition to the Mayor and Aldermen of London against the actions of Nicholas Sarduche, a merchant of Lombardy. They said they had no other means of livelihood than their craft, and accused Sarduche of forestalling and regrating "all the crude and coloured silk and other kinds of merchandise brought by aliens, thus grivously enhancing the price" (*Calendar of plea*: 99-106). The petition of 1455, however, is the more extensive and detailed. It opens:

> ... besechen the silke-wymmen and throwestres of the craftes and occupation of Silkework within the Citee of London, which be and have been craftes of wymmen within the same city of tyme that noo mynde renneth unto the contraries. That where it is pleasying to God that all his creatures be set in vertueux occupation and labour according to their degrees, and convenient for thoo places where their abode is, to the norishing of vertue, and eschewying of vices and ydelness. And where upon the same craftes, before this tyme, many a wurshipfull woman within the said citee have lyved full honourably, and therewith many good Housholds kept, and many Gentilwymmen and other in grete noumbre like as there now be moo than a M, have been drawen under theym in lernyng the same Craftes and occupation ful vertueusly... (*Rotuli Parliamentorum* 5, 34 H. VI (1455): 325)

They complain that while they have only ever imported raw, or "unwrought" silk, that various Lombards and other "aliens estraungers" now routinely import thrown silk, ribbons, laces, corses and other ready-made silk products.

> The sufferance of this grievance ... hath caused and is like to cause, grete ydleness amongs yonge Gentilwymmen and other apprentices ... and also laying down of many good and notable Housholdes... (*Rotuli Parliamentorum* 5: 325)

'Grey', a black hood, and two kirtles." 18 Oct. 7 Henry VI [1428]. Letter Book K, 58 b (*Calendar of letter-books*: 86). The same letter book includes a note about Alice, daughter of Simon Herward, "late mercer" who had been apprenticed to Elizabeth Nevyle, a widow and "sylkewoman", who was also guardian to Alice, fol. 163a, 208 (Sutton 1994: 129-42; see also Goldberg 1992: 123, 191 and Staniland 1991: 49-50).

Parliament is then requested to ask the King to ban all finished silk from coming into England. Their petition was successful and a statute was passed that year confirming this ban (*The statutes*; 33rd Henry VI.c. 3-5). They petitioned for an extension of the ban in 1463 (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*: 5.506a) and it was renewed for another five years. There were a number of such petitions from other trading groups in this period, and nor were the silkwomen the first group of women to petition parliament. In 1483, a further petition was made, this time coming from the "men and women" of the mystery of silkwork, and this time the complaint is made against Jews, Saracens and other unnamed foreign traders (Sutton 1994: 136).

In 1455, however, the silkwomen and throwsters claim that silk work is the natural, divinely-ordained and ethically nurturing work of women in the home, "where their abode is" (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*: 325). That is, silkwork is not presently overtly as economic trade but as an extension of the household economy, as we would expect with most medieval trades.[3] The petition mentions "good Households and gentilwymmen" (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*: 325) in the same breath. There is no mention of price here; just that the Lombard imports of poor quality raw silk are threatening "ydelnes amongs yonge gentilwymmen and oyer apprentices" (*Rotuli Parliamentorum*: 325). Competition and shortage will cause "leying down of many good and notable householdes, of them that have occupied the same crafts, which be convenient, worshipfull and according to Gentilwymmen and oyer wymmen of wurship, as-wele within ye same cities, as all oyer places within this reallme ..." (*Rotuli Paliamentorum*: 325).

It is hard to know the extent to which these women might have voiced their own petition, as opposed to asking a lawyer or clerk to do it, and we would be hard pressed to find too much direct agency here. Even so, the way in which they plead their case implies a very strong ethical sense of the nature of their work: in addition to the nationalist, even xenophobic, appeal against foreign imports, they plead according to the conservative ideology of estates literature, positioning themselves as women nourishing virtue *within the home*. The petition also draws on the traditional work of women in nurturing the young and in training. Sylvia Thrupp (1948: 173) comments succinctly: "they diplomatically claimed that their work pleased God and the gentry, and the petition was granted". I think this petition goes some way to explaining why English silkwomen, no matter how elaborate or lucrative their national business and their international trade, did not form a gild and constitute themselves formally as a body of merchants and traders. It is further evidence, of course, for the importance of the merchant household economy, and its very powerful ideology.

3 Rodney Hilton comments of the urban crafts: "[t]he identity of home and work-place is even more marked than in the countryside..." (Hilton 1990: 133).

But it also implies that for the prosperous middle classes, it was an important mode of their self-presentation to align themselves with gentlewomen. If this was the best way to make their case to enhance their monopoly and to keep up the trade barriers, it was, ironically, by downplaying the economic independence that is so highly prized by modern historians. And if this is so, it might further explain why they had no need of a gild which would mark them very clearly as in the silk business for profit, rather than for the "vertueux occupation and labour" as an extension of their role in "the norishing of vertue".

It is difficult to ascertain how many "gentlewomen" were actually apprenticed to the silkwomen of London, as the petition implies. We know that the silkwomen were among the few who took in female apprentices: the London regulation of 1419 stipulates that they must be trading independently of their husbands "saunz ioure barouns", though the apprentices are indentured to both husband and wife, in order to learn the wife's trade (*Borough customs*: 223-230), and that apprentices sometimes came from regional centres well outside London (Dale 1933: 325; Jewell 1999: 89). Kay Lacey (1987: 193-194) discusses one indenture of apprenticeship of 1454 in which "John Eland, armiger of Parva Stirton, Lincolnshire, apprenticed his daughter Elizabeth to John Langwith, citizen and tailor of London, and Elene his wife, silkwoman, of the ward of Walbrook for seven years at 6d per annum". Simeon Fyncham, a gentleman, of Norfolk, also apprenticed his daughter to a London silkwoman.[4] A statute of 1405-6 had "decreed that no man or woman worth under 20 shillings a year could apprentice his son or daughter to any craft within any city or borough" (Thrupp 1948: 215) and it seems that the gilds were increasingly concerned, in this period, about the social status of their apprentices. The question of class and nomination is notoriously difficult, of course, since "gentle" status depended increasingly on being recognised as "gentle" by one's clothes, household and demeanour as much as on landed income or birth. It depended, that is, on displaying exactly the kind of social capital deployed to such good effect in the petition.

In fact, Kay Lacey (1987: 193) finds that relatively few silkwomen took apprentices: only 12 of 123 examples she studied between 1300-1500. In Lacey's research, moreover, only "a few silkwomen were related to members of the ruling merchant group". And these, whom she says may be described as gentlewomen, were not the most active in the industry. Lacey's work with the records exemplifes some of the difficulties here. In 1985 (55), she commented that "Many silkwomen also appear to have been wives or daughters of Aldermen, and it was probably an occupation which was socially acceptable for the wealthier merchant families". Two years later, she had not found

4 I owe this reference (Norfolk Record Office, MS Hare 2091), to both Philippa Maddern and Kim Phillips (compare her forthcoming study, 2003).

> any conclusive evidence for any of the years in which the Acts were passed that silkwomen were married to, or related to the most influential Londoners, that is, M.P.'s, Aldermen and Sheriffs, who would have been in a position to help them in their petitions. It is surprising that such evidence cannot be found as one would expect the mercers and tailors who supplied and used the silkwomen's products to have a vested interest in protecting the silkwomen's industry ... A few silkwomen were related to members of the ruling merchant group, but generally they seem to have belonged to the class of ordinary citizens, liverymen and artisans. (Lacey 1987: 193)

These two statements are not mutually exclusive, as the second is concerned only with the years of the petition, but their different emphases do seem to show how contradictory this material can seem, and how shaky is the question of class identification. Numbers are difficult, too: the petition cites more than a thousand, but Lacey finds just over a hundred, so we must allow for some exaggeration.

For the purposes of the petition, however, it was obviously rhetorically judicious to make these links with the gentry appear as strong as possible. Moreover, if there is any analogy between the term gentlewoman and gentleman, then the former, like the latter was increasingly used as a courtesy title in the fifteenth and into the sixteenth century; while the silkwomen were not alone among merchant groups with social aspirations (Hunt 1996: 155). Petitions like this are not useful simply for their evidence as to the economic status of medieval women; they also reveal a great deal about the silkwomen's collective identity and self-representation.

2. Silkwomen in the medieval imaginary

I turn my attention now to some broader textual contexts, against which I think it is useful to read this petition. In its rhetoric, the document naturalises the connection between gentlewomen and silkwork: to this extent it taps into a very suggestive semiotic field in the medieval period. Silk is a textile associated with powerful social capital, an important context to take into account in reading "historical" documents. In reading these documents, I want to draw attention to this important though less tangible frame: the symbolic work performed by representations of women's work, in texts drawn from a range of cultural fields. In particular, I will focus on the issue of the kinds of cultural and social capital available to women in the late medieval period.

The wearing of silk is associated with the upper classes in the romance tradition, and it is clearly restricted to the upper classes in the sumptuary legislation of this period (in 1363, to those of the rank of Esquires worth more than 200 Marks per year). Here the contrast between those who *produce* and those who *consume* silk is clear: textile workers (*gentz de meistere dartifice*) are among those specifically excluded from the wearing of cloth of stone, or silk (*The statutes*: 380, 37° Edward III, 1363). Of course, such legislation tells us far more about the transgression than the observance of those distinctions: we need look no further than the urban, bourgeois realism of Chaucer to find the prosperous middle classes wearing silk: most studies of silk work and embroidery draw attention to Alysoun's outfit in the *Miller's Tale*. As Alan Hunt points out (1996: 126-127) in *Governance of the passions*, silk, compared to fur, the other medieval "vehicle of sumptuous display", is the more clearly marked as the garment of conspicuous leisure, not work, or practical warmth.

Silk is also associated with the leisure of the upper classes, as the recommended "work" for women. Both by example, in the romances, and by precept, in the various forms of courtesy literature, silk work is recommended for upper class women. In 1300, for example, Walter de Bibbesworth, tutor to the children of Kentish heiress Denise de Montchesney, described the way the child should work in silk and thread under guidance (Staniland 1991: 62). But the *Ancrene wisse* insists that the anchoresses stitch only the simpler kinds of borders in their production of church vestments, and that they should not be making silk caps, or lace, or purses to win friends (Millett and Wogan-Brown 1990: 138). There are many examples of the attempted regulation of this kind of work, which is mostly directed towards the production of elaborate and luxurious church vestments (Staniland 1991: 7-8). One of the most graphic and illuminating examples is from *Piers Plowman*, where the women are taught how to play their part in the allegorical ploughing of Piers's half-acre. While the knights protect the community and the workers plough the field, the women are directed to sew. The wives and widows are to spin wool and flax and to instruct their daughters likewise, to make cloth in order to clothe the poor, while the upper class women are instructed to embroider luxurious church vestments:

> And ye louely ladyes wiþ youre longe fyngres,
> That ye haue silke and Sandel to sowe whan tyme is
> Chesibles for Chapeleyns chirches to honoure.
> Wyues and widewes wolle and flex spynneþ:
> Makeþ cloþ, I counseille yow, and kenneþ so youre douȝtres
> (*Piers Plowman*: 348, B. VI.10-14)

Langland's focus on the women's long fingers seems to be one of the rare intrusions of alliterative romance tradition into his poem, akin to the procession of Lady Mede into the court at Westminster. His insistence on the bodily difference of the aristocracy possibly functions as a further distinctive marker of class hierarchy in a period where the prosperity of the merchant class threatened to obscure the visible differences between the classes. Indeed, while elaborate silk, silver and gold embroidery was an occupation for noblewomen, it was more often the work of specialist professionals when it came to be completed on a larger

scale, such as the matching robes for court ceremonials. Like sumptuary legislation and estates literature, any mention of class based activity is necessarily grounded in anxiety about the possible infringements of the symbolic hierarchical differences on which they depend.

This anxiety takes a different form in a number of romance texts that also feature aristocratic or gentlewomen working with silk. I am particularly concerned with a very distinctive scene: a group of well born women imprisoned as political or marital hostages, forced to engage in manual labour, the weaving or embroidery of silk. It is a scene rich in contradictory significations concerned with class, gender and sometimes, race, but it is also a scene that exemplifies the difficulties faced by historians and literary critics wanting to consider the mutually informing relations of fictional or poetic texts and the material conditions of medieval women's lives. Critical response to such scenes plays out some of the dynamics to which our attention is drawn in recent discussions of historiography: our different ideological investments in medieval texts.

Because it is presented in the context of romance as transgressive, even shocking in nature, this scene of women "forced" to work as a sign of their imprisonment or servitude, foregrounds issues of work, class and gender. Because it is especially concerned with the symbolic realm, the imaginative work of romance can often rehearse anxieties and issues in ways more prescriptive or more literal texts cannot. The fact that these women are represented as working with silk is crucial here: the emphasis on silkwork, as opposed to the activity of spinning or weaving jute or wool, for example, helps to define the activity, if loosely, as upperclass, and underlines the indignity of gentle or noblewomen being forced to perform an aspect of their "natural" estate in conditions of imprisonment. That is, although the cultural associations of women with textile work of all kinds are rich and various, I am concerned here with a very specific instance.[5]

The most extensive such scene in French literature comes from Chrétien's *Yvain*; and so another frame or level of analysis will be concerned with the "translation" of this episode from one social and cultural context into another; from French into English tradition.

Yvain comes to the Castle of Pesme Aventure, and comes to "a large hall, lofty and new. In William Kibler's translation (*Arthurian romances*: 360):

[5] I exclude, then, the topos of the Fates, the women spinning the courses of human lives; the initiation into maturity and marriageability that is a feature of so many fairy tales concerned with spinning (Rumpelstiltskin, Sleeping Beauty and others); the punishment of Eve, forced to spin after the Expulsion from Eden; images of Mary as an exemplary spinner or embroiderer, and many tropes and narratives that associate women with textile work in classical and medieval literature. Compare Parker (1984); and more recently, Kruger (2001).

> Before it was a meadow enclosed with huge, round, pointed staves; and by peering between the staves he could make out up to three hundred maidens doing various kinds of needlework. Each one sewed as best she could with threads of gold and silk; but they were so poor that many among them wore their hair loose and went ungirded. Their dresses were worn through at the breasts and elbows, and their shifts were filthy at the collar, their necks were gaunt and their faces pale from the hunger and deprivation they had known. He observed them, and as they caught sight of him they lowered their heads and wept; and for a long time they remained there without doing anything, because they felt so miserable that they could not raise their eyes from the ground.

One of the maidens explains their shame: they are there as hostages for their King. At the age of 18, the king of the Isle of Maidens had come in search of adventure ("like a true fool", she remarks) and had come to this town where two demons threatened to kill him. "The terrified king saved himself as best he could", and promised an annual hostage of thirty maidens, as long as he lived, or until some knight could defeat the two demons in battle. She then makes her famous complaint:

> We shall remain poor and naked for ever ... Our bread supply is very meagre: little in the morning and less at night, for by the work of our hands we'll never have more to live on than fourpence in the pound; and with this we cannot buy sufficient food and clothing. For though our labour is worth twenty shillings a week, we have barely enough to live on. And you can be sure that there's not one of us whose work doesn't bring in twenty shillings or more, and that's enough to make a duke wealthy! Yet here we are in poverty, while he for whom we labour grows rich from our work. We stay awake much of the night and all day long to earn his profit, for he has threatened us with torture if we rest; therefore we dare not rest.
>
> (*Arthurian romances*: 361)

The early critical response to Chrétien's version focussed on the question of realism in this episode; and the extent to which it might reflect conditions of silk and textile production in twelfth-century Troyes. As David Matthews argues (1994: 113), most such readings are founded on circular arguments: the critic claims the text refers to historical practices; and thus obviates the need to cite the evidence, since the text *is* the evidence.

Of course the question of realism in medieval literature remains a contested one, and this scene of romance is not the only one to be situated at the crossroads of history and literature. While literary critics invoke "history" to explain or dispute the scene's realism, historians invoke the literary scene as historical evidence. David Herlihy's confused discussion (1999: 80-81) exemplifies the difficulties. In his discussion of the gynaeceum, or women's workshop, he argues that *Yvain* demonstrates the idea that "women worked at least part of the

year in the open", while at the same time, he acknowledges the fictionality of Chrétien's scene in the scale of the workshop: "Chrétien's 300 girl workers ... surely existed only in the poet's imagination". Similarly, "It is hard, of course, to know whether women cloth workers were even given as tribute, but they were certainly donated, especially to churches". He later describes the scene as "indeed a medieval sweatshop", operating fully within a commercial economy, while at the same time acknowledging that such workshops were never engaged in the production of silk; rather wool, flax and other textiles. He concludes his discussion by referring the difficulties to changing economic conditions: "Could Chrétien's colorful depiction of a gynaeceum have had any correspondence with reality? Chrétien was writing even as the commercial production of and trade in cloth were rapidly developing. His striking amalgam of servile and salaried labor seems to combine elements of the old and the new economic orders." (Herlihy 1999: 88).

Chrétien's episode, then, seems to toy with various codings of realism and romance episodes: but at heart is the contradictory representation of class. The women imprisoned here are forced, for payment, to engage in weaving or embroidery of a kind that in the world of romance, of sumptuary legislation and estate literature, is normatively the privileged prerogative of the upper classes. It is a double humiliation to be both imprisoned *and* forced to turn a leisure activity, the former indicator of social superiority, into textile production for someone else's commercial profit. Using this insight, it is interesting to pursue the later history of this scene and its *translatio* into later English romance contexts, where the material conditions of silk production, and romance production, for that matter, are rather different.

All the English examples present the episode on a much smaller narrative scale than Chrétien, but they still deploy the same symbolic meaning, contrasting the nobility of the women and their humiliation.

My first English text is *Joseph of Arimathie*, which introduces the motif where its French sources make no mention of it. When Joseph describes to Evalak his early history, the French *L'estoire del Saint Graal* describes how the Emperor Augustus, hearing prophecies of Christ's imminent birth, demanded hostages from his subject states: France had to send a hundred knights, a hundred knights' daughters and a hundred children under five years of age. The English version, dated around the middle of the fourteenth century, reduces the story thus:

> That tyme þat Augustes Cesar was Emperour of Rome
> Thou wast lenged in the lond that that lorde oughte.
> Fourti knihtes doughtre she wolde haue of fraunce
> forte souwe selk werk and sitten in his chaumbre.
> (*Joseph of Arimathie*: 14, ll. 424-427)

Joseph speaks to Evalak: "In the time when Augustus Caesar was Emperor of Rome, you were living in that lord's land. He would have 40 knights' daughters from France to sew silk work and sit in his chamber." What is lost in numbers, not three hundred, but forty, is made up for in dramatic impact and the higher nationalist stakes: the noblewomen are a visible sign of France's humiliation, adding elegance and luxury to the conqueror's court through the work they do, and adding to Caesar's power by virtue of their being decorative hostages, potent symbols of his prowess. The usual image of the upper class woman sewing silk is of course, the woman sitting in *her* chamber: the unexpected male pronoun ("sitten in his chaumbre") marks this out as a particularly violent appropriation of female space. In the romance of *Emaré*, for example, the heroine is taught "Golde and sylke for to sewe,/Amonge maydenes moo .... Whyle she was in her bowre" (*The romance*: 3, ll. 59-63).[6] If the women are to sew in *his* chamber, this does seem to imply their sexual as well as their textile servitude. These women are also framed in a more decorative context than Chrétien's, since there is no mention of their torn clothes and ragged appearance.

When we turn to the more direct English translation of Chrétien's romance as *Ywain and Gawain*, a number of startling differences appear, which have the combined effect of making the episode even more pathetic. The king is fourteen when he sets out on his adventures, not eighteen as in Chrétien's version; while it is emphasised that the women are all "of hegh parage/And the fairest of his land" (*Ywain*: 80-82, ll. 336-337). Moreover, while the French are threatened with torture, the English are certainly beaten. There is a further inflationary contrast: the women's silk work in the French text brings in 20s each week, but the women in the English version seem even more skilled: they could earn 40s per week and more.

Another important difference is that the English text is much more specific about the kind of work done by the women. Chrétien's women are described variously as doing "various kinds of needlework", "sewing with threads of gold and silk", and "weaving silk cloth". In the English translation, though, there is no mention of weaving; and it is clear that the women are engaged in silk and gold embroidery ("Wirkand silk and gold-wire", *Ywain*: l. 2967; "We wirk here silver, silk and golde", *Ywain*: l. 3047). The detail of this description does seem to reflect the more specific nature of English silkwork, which, as we have seen, took the form of silk, gold and silver embroidery on imported silk cloth, not weaving.

Malory, who makes no direct translation of *Yvain*, attributes the rescue of silkworking women to Lancelot. The knight first approaches a castle, after being warned by a *passyng foule carle*, and the villagers, then defeats two giants, be-

6 See also line 730, p. 23.

heading one and cleaving the second to the navel. As he enters the hall, sixty ladies and damsels kneel and thank God and him:

> "For", they seyde, "the most party of us have bene here this seven yere [theire] presoners, and we have worched all maner of sylke workys for oure mete, and we ar all grete jentylwomen borne. And blyssed be the tyme, knyght, that ever thou were borne, for thou haste done the moste worshyp that ever ded knyght in this worlde; that woll we beare recorde."
> (*Works*: 162)

This episode is much briefer, and does not have the contrast with the noble family taking their leisure in the garden, since it is based on a different source and is part of a different story. But it does insist on a detail that Chrétien takes for granted: the women Lancelot rescues are all "grete jentylwomen borne". Malory also stresses that the women are in prison, not hostages, a further humiliation for *jentylwomen*. In Malory's source, the prose *Lancelot*, Lancelot rescues the female prisoners, but there is no mention of silk work: the castle's original owner, Kahenin, had given it, and its inhabitants, to one of the giants for four years as a reward for having rescued him from prison.

For Vinaver, Malory's remark about silk work "is reminiscent of several other passages in which [he] has deliberately added details drawn from real life", though he does not show us which part of "real life" the imprisoned silkworkers might come from (*The works*: 1. 1422). With the exception of Malory, these other poems have not attracted the kind of detailed commentary reserved for canonical literary texts. And unlike Chrétien's poem, they have almost no profile for historians seeking to consider the English medieval silk trade. This also points up one of the difficulties of interdisciplinary research: we are all very dependent on the investigative traditions and canons of the other discipline to render our texts and materials visible.

My final text is less prescriptive than Langland's, less anxious than the romance tradition about the vulnerability of its gentlewomen, but like these other texts, it also exploits silkwork as a very suggestive symbolic signifier. The prophetic Yorkist poem, "The twelve letters that shall save merry England" opens with an unusually public scene:

> Erly in a someristide
> y sawe in london, as y wente,
> A gentilwoman of chepe-side
> working on a vestment
> (*Political, religious and love poems*: 1, ll. 1-4)

This prophetic "vestment" encodes the names of Edward IV (1461-83), the Earl of Warwick and others. Kay Staniland (1991: 53) quotes these lines as evidence that the silk trade was based in Cheapside, and that their work "still centred upon ecclesiastical vestments and court work", but it is hardly straightforward "court work", especially if the poem were written while Henry VI were still on the throne, a possibility countenanced by V. J. Scattergood (1971: 191-192). The use of the word "vestment" links it to the ecclesiastical garments that Langland's ladies are enjoined to produce, and seems to be a shorthand way of sanctifying its prophetic political content. What is remarkable about this scene, of course, is the sight of a gentlewoman in public view in the streets of London, though the poem says no more about her, whether she was seen through a window, or sitting outdoors. It is still a far cry from the romance vision of women doing silkwork in their chambers, or in someone else's, or even the general normative understanding that a gentlewoman's rightful place was indoors, in her chamber (Hanawalt 1995: 1-17). Perhaps this is designed as a bizarre juxtaposition of class and context, suitably distanced from realism so as to be appropriate for a prophetic marvel; perhaps it is supporting evidence of the fact that some gentlewomen, however we define them, were indeed apprenticed to the London silkwomen; or perhaps it is an earnest way of dignifying the merchant classes and their wives, along the lines of the 1455 petition. Perhaps all these factors are in play here, but the absolutely serious nature of the poem reveals the importance late medieval writers were prepared to accord women's work, and the ease with which they could borrow the symbolic capital of silkwork to lend additional gravitas to their own representation, re-writing the scene of the gentlewoman sitting quietly with her work, bringing her into public view in Cheapside, and dignifying the content of her work by inscribing it with contemporary national politics. Taken together with my other examples, this poem indicates the powerful suggestiveness of "gentlewomen's work" as a social and cultural signifier in late medieval England.

None of these texts, or our readings of them, is straightforward, but this is precisely my point, that interpretative and critical questions are raised in equal complexity by all my examples, whether they are drawn from the modes of imaginary writing in the symbolic realm, like romance, from the prescriptive texts of estates literature and sumptuary legislation, or from the more overtly ideological texts of political poetry and parliamentary petitions. This kind of text adds a powerful dimension to our understanding of medieval women and their own experience of their lives. The difficulties we face in interpreting these lives also draw attention to the critical and historical traditions which have mediated these texts so powerfully for us, and which still drive the questions we ask of the medieval period.

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