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The Voice of the Hammer

The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature

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Introduction

In the alliterative poem known as the *Complaint against Blacksmiths*, the rhythmic noise of forging is transmuted into the music of poetry: “Swarte smekyd smēþes smateryd wyth smoke / Dryue me to deth wyth den of here dyntes. / Swech noys on nyghtes ne herd men neuer: / What knauene cry, and clatering of knockes!”¹ In another Middle English poem, a carpenter’s tools actually speak, debating how to reform their unthrifty master: “With grete strokys I schall hym pelte [says the mallet]. / My mayster schall full well thene, / Both to cloþe [and] fede his men.”² These similar representational moments drive home in complementary ways that late medieval English literature had something to say about work, that it gave voice to labor as a significant category of experience. This is not labor’s voice as the self-expression of medieval laborers, which is so difficult to find in medieval texts.³ In the *Complaint* it is precisely the inarticulate and wayward speech of workers that is judged and controlled by the superior voice of poetry: “‘Huf, pufl!’ seith þat on; ‘haf, paf!’ þat ofer. / þei spıytyyn and spraulyyn and spellyn many spelles; / þei gnauyn and gnacchen, þei gronyg togydere” (7–9). In the *Debate of the Carpenter’s Tools*, the carpenter himself is conspicuously absent.⁴ Rather, these instances of poetic animation, in which work becomes more than work, speak to the meaningfulness of work itself, as an activity that has its own structure and significance as well as complex relationships to other values. As the *Complaint* is constituted and caused by the industry that keeps its
author awake at night, so does it present a homology between manual and poetic labor that reenacts the legend of music’s discovery at the forge and underscores the more general interdependence of material and intellectual production within human culture. And the arguing tools of the Debate, faithful and unruly, dramatize tensions inherent to the process of work—above all, the conflict between the economic need for efficient production and the deep inertia all work must overcome.

This book seeks to understand several ways Middle English literature made meaning out of work. The cultural landscape of late medieval England was fertile territory for the representation of work, shaped as it was by the new possibilities for economic self-determination among the laboring classes created by the plague, the ongoing attempts by government to control the labor market in the interest of landlords and employers, the political agitation of artisans and agriculturalists in 1381, the growing formalization of status consciousness, and increasing commercialization. The appreciation of this fact by literary scholars has been dominated, for obvious reasons, by the study of Piers Plowman. But that a poem so focused on the issue of work would be made at this time also attests to a more general consciousness of its significance. Part of my intention in this study has been to take the interpretive conversation about late medieval literary representations of work in new directions, and it is encouraging to find other recent studies doing the same. The following chapters examine three areas of such representation: the Middle English lexicon, accounts of the history of work, and Fragment VIII of Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales. Their common premise is that late medieval English society, through its language and literature, conceptualized work as a distinct, problematical feature of life and that the work-related crises of the period effected corresponding needs to articulate and question work’s meaning and value.

The Middle English vocabulary of work offers rich and challenging evidence of how late medieval people conceived of work, how they gave meaning to it at the most fundamental level. Chapter 1 investigates both the semantic structure of the vocabulary and its cultural significance. The vocabulary is divisible into terms that emphasize the subjective, effortful dimension of work and those that emphasize work’s objective, productive dimension. This dichotomous structure, I argue, originates chiefly in the intersection of status-based and class-based attitudes toward work. The influence of social attitudes on the vocabulary is demonstrated, for ex-
ample, by the fact that Middle English adopts from Anglo-French only words for work that are associated with servitude and pain. I then show how this rich vocabulary reflects late medieval society’s broad awareness of the nature and processes of work, an awareness that is corroborated, for example, by medieval discourse on the related concepts of *artes illiberales*, *artes mechanicae*, and *opera servilia*. Last, I address the question of how ME *werk*, in light of its subsequent semantic history, might be considered a cultural keyword. I propose that the substantial polysemy of *werk*—its signification of both labor and action in general—attests not to a lack of distinction between the economic and the noneconomic in medieval culture but to a cultural habit of perceiving relations between work and life, between occupational and personal agency.

It is natural that periods in which work is foregrounded as a force of history would be especially interested in imagining the history of work. Where the Victorian age projected its dreams of humane industry onto medieval workers, late medieval authors envisioned the origins of work in no less creative ways, using the past to define work’s meaning and value. Chapter 2 examines several Middle English representations of work’s history. It demonstrates that the history of work, though rooted in biblical, classical, and earlier medieval traditions, was malleable and contested, that it constituted a significant form of discourse on the meaning of work in contemporary society. After reading John Ball’s use of the proverb “Whanne Adam dalfe and Eve span / Who was þanne a gentil man?” as a sign of the ideological nature of work’s history, this chapter looks closely at three texts: the history of masonry contained in the Cooke MS (British Museum, Add. MS 23198), John Gower’s account of the history of work in book 4 of the *Confessio amantis*, and Chaucer’s *Former Age*. The uniqueness of the Cooke MS lies in its opposition to the general concealment of the world of work within medieval historiography. It defends the dignity of masonry by rewriting legendary and biblical material into a genealogical narrative of craft progress. It also defines masonry in ways that blur the boundary between the liberal and mechanical arts. These moves, I suggest, were fostered by three distinguishing characteristics of late medieval masonry: its close association with the ruling classes, its itinerancy, and the relatively permanent and hence historic nature of its products. By contrast, Gower’s history of work constructs parallel but discrete histories for intellectual and physical labor. In doing so, Gower both upholds the
social legitimacy of intellectual work as a form of production and preserves its superior value and dignity vis-à-vis material production, thus showing his characteristic devotion to the morality of social order, hierarchy, and place. Gower also prefaces his history of work with a discourse on true nobility that identifies gentilesse with besinesse. In this context, Gower’s history of work also articulates a specifically bourgeois work mentality, a simultaneous valorization of industry and subordination of it to higher noneconomic values. Last, this chapter offers a revisionary reading of The Former Age. I argue that Chaucer’s primitivist lyric is not so much a critique of contemporary civilization as a critique of contemporary primitivism, that its effective strategy both lures its reader into nostalgia for an atechnic past and exposes the irrationality of such nostalgia.

Complementing these historicizing impulses, late medieval authors also sought work’s meaning in the self by representing work as a subjective necessity, a fulfillment that the individual requires over and above labor’s fulfillment of material and moral responsibility. This search, my concluding chapter argues, was encouraged by the attention the labor problems of the fourteenth century generated around the issue of the motive for work. First, I demonstrate the general currency of interest in work’s subjective dimension through a series of examples: the broadening of the concept of acedia or sloth to include occupational laziness, Gower’s representation of work as a moral necessity, and Langland’s vocational self-examination in the apologia (PPI C.5.1–104). I then show how Fragment VIII of The Canterbury Tales, comprising the Second Nun’s Tale and Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, is Chaucer’s deepest reflection on work as a requirement, not only of the conditions of life, but of human nature itself.
chapter 1

“Labour of Tonge”

The Middle English Vocabulary of Work

[Go forth again to gaze upon the old cathedral front, where you have smiled so often at the fantastic ignorance of the old sculptors: examine once more those ugly goblins, those formless monsters, and stern statues, anatomiless and rigid; but do not mock at them, for they are signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone.


The seductiveness of Ruskin’s invitation to nostalgia may have waned, but the polarized construction of medieval and modern work on which it is based is one of the more durable legacies of romantic medievalism. Since the eighteenth century, work in the Middle Ages has been repeatedly imagined in opposition to its modern counterpart, usually in terms of the relation of economic to social life: where modern work is separated from the life of the household, or even life itself, medieval work was fused with social and personal experience. The idea that medieval people lived within a now lost unity of work and life is the necessary counterpart to the claim that the separation of work from “life” is specifically modern. Whatever its truth value, this idea contributes to the reduction of the
history of work to an antithesis between then and now, a narrative of loss and inversion centered on the rupture of past and present. And despite the general lack of evidence as to how work was experienced in the Middle Ages, the designation of medieval work as traditional, communal, and intrinsically satisfying is buttressed by a number of now classic theoretical formulations of fundamental differences between capitalist and precapitalist society: Polanyi’s account of precapitalist economic activity as embedded in other social and political institutions and capitalism’s reverse embedding of social relationships in the economic system, Tönnies’s description of urban industrialism’s replacement of Gemeinschaft ("community") with Gesellschaft ("society"), Durkheim’s model of transition from mechanical to organic social solidarity through the increasing division of labor, Weber’s description of the rational organization of free labor and the separation of capitalist enterprise from the household, and (behind them all) Marx’s account of the alienation of the modern worker.

The oppositional understanding of medieval and modern work has had a decisive influence upon studies of the medieval vocabulary of work. While there have been relatively few analyses of medieval words for work as cultural, as opposed to simply linguistic, artifacts, what has been said on the subject is characterized by an emphasis upon semantic alterity and supports the view that medieval and modern concepts of work are radically different. According to Ruzena Ostrá, the history of the French work vocabulary is defined by the genesis of a general, objective, occupationally nonspecific term (travail) and the proportional loss of medieval semantic distinctions between artisanal conceptions of work as a professional and creative activity and agricultural conceptions of work as "une triste devoir de l’homme condamné à gagner son pain à la sueur de son front." Similarly, Jacques Le Goff draws attention to the absence of a general concept of work and corresponding word in the Middle Ages and deduces that work per se was not a medieval value: "Le travail n’était pas une ‘valeur,’ il n’y avait même pas de mot pour le désigner." For both Ostrá and Le Goff, the lack of a general term and concept is the medieval work vocabulary’s defining and essential feature.

Intentionally or not, these accounts follow the logic of Marx’s comments on the abstract conception of work in the Grundrisse, in which the oppositional understanding of modern and premodern work is brought to bear upon the issue of semantic change. Just as the imperfections and im-
precisions of the Gothic style were for Ruskin reflections of the medieval worker’s nonalienation (“signs of the life and liberty of every workman who struck the stone”), so the lack of an abstract term for work was for Marx a sign of premodern man’s inability to alienate the concept of work, a semantic reflection of a mentality that conceptualized work only in particular forms. Discussing the economic conception of labor in general first represented by Adam Smith, Marx explains how “the simplest abstraction . . . which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.” Marx is concerned, then, with the abstract sense of labor not only as a discursive tool of political economy but as the semantic manifestation of significant social and conceptual change. How words reflect such change is no small question, but Marx constructs a correlation between changes in labor (the word) and changes in labor (the activity) by connecting the process of abstraction with the experience of indifference: “[T]his abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form.” In other words, the abstract conception of labor, as a freeing of the concept of labor from specific forms of labor, is formally related to the development of free labor. Marx does not explain the two modern abstract senses of labor—“first the economic abstraction of the activity; secondly the social abstraction of that class of people who performed it”—as reflecting a dehumanized, exploitative conception of labor by its capitalist organizers (though we may consider this point implicit). Instead, Marx locates the semantic change more broadly in the socioeconomic situation of workers and in doing so reveals his interest in the organicism of the past. The explanation illustrates the point, fundamental to Marx’s thinking, that “the more deeply we go back into history, the more does the individual, and hence also the producing individual, appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole.” As one form of the absence of this belonging, “indifference towards specific labours”
characterizes the alienated perspective of the worker for whom the meaning of work is absorbed by the exchange of labor for livelihood. With this indifference as the middle term in his equation, Marx identifies the individual worker’s experience of the meaning of work as the meeting place of semantic and social changes in work, as the conceptual agency that reveals the relation of word to thing.11

Marx’s explanation of the socioeconomic context of labor’s modern abstract sense remains compelling, but it should not serve as a starting point for the interpretation of the medieval work vocabulary. Like other oppositional accounts of medieval and modern culture, it succeeds in understanding a particular feature of the present by defining it against generalized and romantic assumptions about the past, in this case the idea that work in earlier times was “organically linked” with individuals. In this regard, it is as problematic as the Polanyi thesis, which, as Todd Lowry explains, implies that “we cannot study ideas about the economy in ancient and medieval times, but only ideas that had economic content and that may have cumulatively contributed to the eventual comprehension of the economy as an independent functioning entity.”12 Not surprisingly, Marx’s account has been read as implying the impossibility of studying medieval words for work in general.13 If one accepts this, it is easy to produce an analysis of the medieval work vocabulary that validates the oppositional view of medieval work. One need only describe the occupational and cultural associations of the various terms, the social relations they described and supported, and their positive and negative connotations and then conclude that the propriety of every term to particular situations and definitions of work reflects a state of affairs in which work and life were fused and that the absence of a dominant, general, abstract term (such as work, travail, Arbeit, lavoro) results from the concreteness of medieval work, its subordination to use value, and its task orientation.

The problems with such an approach are manifold and irremediable. First, the oppositional construction of medieval and modern work is in general problematic. The comparison of medieval to modern work is a valid, though incomplete, means of historical representation, but there is no self-evident reason why such comparison should take the form of opposition. Instead, the oppositional construction of medieval work is rooted in nostalgia, in the belief that the ills of today are a corruption of the health of yesterday. Nostalgia obscures both historical similarity and real histori-
cal difference. Where historical similarity blurs the distinction between traditional and modern upon which nostalgia rests, historical difference—difference per se, or diversity, irreducible to simple opposition—depolarizes it, frustrating the dream of a return to tradition and draining the past of immediate polemical value. A historically legitimate estimation of the medieval experience of work, one that is optimally aware of both its familiarity and its alterity, can emerge only from the acceptance of the fluidity of the traditional-modern distinction. Specifically, the a priori view of medieval people as less aware than we of work as a distinct realm of experience and consequently less aware of the relation of work to other aspects of life should be set aside. If we are to understand and not only imagine the medieval experience of work, the possibility that the relation of work to life was as problematic in the Middle Ages as today must remain open.

Second, the application of the oppositional approach to the study of the medieval work vocabulary is methodologically crippled. To assume that the most culturally significant lexical features are those that appear to the present most alien is to disregard the whole for the part. Such analysis can at best produce an incomplete and distorted picture of the conceptual structure of medieval work. Specifically, the isolation of the medieval work vocabulary’s lack of a dominant, general term as its essential, most “medieval” characteristic disregards the value of the general meanings it does possess. Moreover, there is no clear basis for the comparison of the cultural significance of terms across periods. With respect to Marx, the fact that the abstract sense of labor corresponds within modern society to indifference toward specific labors does not necessarily imply that the absence of such a term is possible only in a society where there is no such indifference.

The medieval vocabulary of work comprises fundamental evidence of medieval attitudes toward work, evidence that has its own story to tell and that should not simply be assigned a place within a preexisting historical framework. It is the linguistic equivalent of the other types of cultural products—textual, visual, and material—through which the medieval experience of work may be understood, and its analysis is not ancillary but complementary to the study of these other kinds of representations. The uniqueness of vocabulary as cultural evidence lies in its very generality. A vocabulary is to a superior degree a collective product, not a statement but the medium and the result of myriad statements, not an idea but the
vehicle and breeder of ideas. To historical study the generality of vocabulary is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand it constitutes a severe limit on the nature of the cultural evidence that vocabulary contains. On the other hand it ensures that the evidence vocabulary contains is cultural, a reflection not of a particular life but of a way of life, not of a particular mind but of mentalities.

As the medieval artifact points to the history of the nature of work, so the medieval work vocabulary points to the history of the concept of work. The meaning of work and the meaning of work are historically relative. What is their interrelation? What can words tell us about the attitudes and conceptions of the people who use them? How does mentality shape the meaning of words? My purpose in this chapter is to address these questions as they relate to the conceptual structure of work in late medieval England. Some attention will be given to Latin and French terms, but Middle English words are my focus. This choice is not arbitrary, as several things suggest that among the languages current in the period Middle English is the most fitting for the study of work mentalities. English was the language most closely aligned to the experience of those who themselves engaged in that multitude of productive activities that we collectively term work. As William of Nassyngton wrote around 1325, "Bothe lered and lewed, olde and yonge, Alle understonden English tonge." Existent statements by peasants and artisans may be lacking, but we may look at the language they spoke and shaped. Middle English also displays to a higher degree than Anglo-Latin or Anglo-French the double movement of linguistic change—growth and stabilization—that links it in form more closely to its historical situation. As a language of increasing textual production and formal use, English was least anchored to norms of expression controlled by bureaucratic and academic tradition. To the extent that developments in attitudes toward work are reflected at the lexical level, we may reasonably expect to find them in the language that was developing the most.

The analysis that follows consists of two parts. The first part briefly describes the Middle English work vocabulary term by term. My objective here is not interpretation but a synthetic representation of the vocabulary that will enable its interpretation as a whole. The Middle English lexicon embodies a multiplicity of perspectives on the nature of work, and as an undifferentiated mass of meanings this multiplicity is unintelligible. Some
conceptual framework or measuring rod is necessary to disclose the relationship between its elements. For this I have chosen a definition of work as a four-part concept built around the subjective and objective dimensions of action and end.

The second part assesses the cultural significance of the vocabulary. My primary concern here is with the work vocabulary as a reflection of ideology and mentality, as a complex of socially contingent meanings. The preponderance of Middle English words for work that emphasize the difficulty and painfulness of work, for instance, relates not only to Christian belief in the fallen nature of work and to the palpable experience of work’s difficulty, but to status-conscious and especially upper-class conceptions of work as degrading and ignoble. The formative influence of social structure upon lexicon is clearly demonstrated in this regard by the fact that English takes from Anglo-French only words for work that are associated with servitude and pain (travail and labour)—a particular instance of the well-known fact that upper-class words (e.g., military and bureaucratic terms) predominate in the French portion of the English vocabulary. My conclusions in this section are several, but I hope to demonstrate above all that late medieval conceptions of work were significantly more complex and sophisticated than the polarized construction of medieval and modern work allows and that the Middle English work vocabulary is the product of a culture that was highly conscious of work as a distinct and problematic realm of experience, a culture attuned to the question of its meaning.

THE SEMANTICS OF WORK

Concepts of work per se are reflected primarily in those words that signify work in general. Among the multitude of work-related words in Middle English, these are travail, labour, swink, werk, and craft, with their verbal forms travailen, labouren, swinken, werken, and craften.7 The most direct method of understanding the semantic structure of these words in relation to each other is to measure them against the immeasurably old and current conception of work as a particular kind of action directed to a particular kind of end, namely the definition of work as “action involving effort or exertion directed to a definite end, esp. as a means of gaining
one’s livelihood.” A division of this idea into its essential parts will furnish the types of features according to which the Middle English work vocabulary may be most clearly studied.

Work, then, consists of an action and an end. The action and the end of work are each of a certain character, and each may be considered with regard either to the agent or to the act of work itself. That is, we may think of work either in terms of the worker’s experience of and motive for work or in terms of the nature of the process and the product of work. I will refer to these two aspects of work as work’s subjective and objective dimensions. Subjectively, the action of work is characterized by effort, exertion, and the overcoming of inertia (as opposed to leisure, which is characterized by ease). Objectively, the action of work is characterized by productivity and utility, especially material productivity and utility, making and doing things necessary to life (as opposed to leisure, which involves doing things whose utility is less apparent). Subjectively, the end of work is first and foremost livelihood, the meeting of basic needs through compensation or the products of work (as opposed to play, which is not motivated by basic needs). Objectively, the end of work consists of a product or service, especially a materially necessary product or service (as opposed to play, which is its own end).

The boundaries between these dimensions may not always be apparent, but distinguishing between them helps to reveal the complex character of work and its concepts. This complexity is not only conceptual and semantic but very real, a material characteristic of the work process that is of necessity apparent to the worker. As an agent, the worker is aware of the materialization of his effort as something that satisfies a need. As a witness to the work process, he is aware of the transformation of the material worked upon into a product. The complexity of the concept of work derives from the nature of work itself, as an activity that encompasses a double doubleness: the double end of livelihood and the work task itself plus the double nature of the work act as both effortful and useful. Like most human action, work is always doing one thing to achieve another. But work seems especially susceptible to tension and contradiction between its aspects. This owes, at the simplest level, to work’s participation in the fundamental contraries of the life process: living and dying, growth and decay. As Hannah Arendt points out, “Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human
artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time.” At the same time, work paradoxically enacts human mortality and frailty, both by being a necessary, imposed means of sustaining life, and thus an expression of weakness, and more palpably by involving the loss of energy, time, and life, by producing weakness. As work is the means of life, life is the means of death—a transactional complex that is succinctly expressed in the Adamic curse, “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground” (Gen. 3:19).

Similar tensions within the nature of work are visible in the way the major work-related problems of society can be defined in terms of an improper or unbalanced relation among work’s dimensions. Alienation, for example, involves the outweighing of work’s subjective by its objective dimension, whereby the worker is reduced to an object in the work process and all sense of continuity between the subjective and objective ends of work is lost. Professionalization concerns the displacement of work’s objective by its subjective end, so that the inherent value of the work done suffers or ceases altogether to matter. Social justice issues concerning work revolve around the proper proportion between the subjective action and ends of work, between effort and compensation, as well as between work’s objective and subjective ends, between what the worker accomplishes and earns. Last, ideas about the dignity and indignity of work are often expressible in terms of an emphasis upon one of work’s dimensions, as in the indignity of needing to earn a living (an emphasis on work’s subjective end) or the dignity of being a producer (an emphasis on work’s objective action).

These kinds of interrelational complexities bring to light how naming work, more than signifying something that is simply there, involves taking a perspective on its nature, a perspective that may express a range of attitudes and realities. Work has multiple identities and requires several names. In the Middle Ages as now, an array of terms has served the purpose of signifying work’s different dimensions as well as communicating its more abstract qualities like differences in status and class situation. Indeed, the question of what constitutes work within a particular period is sufficiently complicated that in a sense it is more proper to speak of work as constituted by its names. However, naturally determined the forms of work are, its social and cultural nature ensures arbitrariness within the
category as it is defined across class and gender boundaries. Distinctions between what is work and what is not are to a significant degree conventional and perceptual. Even at the individual level, it can make a real experiential difference whether one thinks of a particular action as “work” or not.

Conceived of universally, labor is, as Marx says, a process “in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature.” But however immanent such a general idea may be in human concepts of work, a work vocabulary gives evidence of how work concepts are much more partial and historically contingent. As human beings create both their world and themselves through work, they also create their concepts of work and the words that express them. Old words for work are important, not only for what they can reveal, historically, about the culture that used them, but for how they represent the ongoing process whereby humans give meaning to, and find meaning in, work.

Travail

Travail is first attested in English near the end of the thirteenth century, and most of its derivatives appear during the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The most striking semantic feature of travail is the degree to which it remains true to its prehistory. The established etymology is that travail derives from Late Latin trepalium, a three-staked device of torture. Accordingly, travail primarily expresses work as an action in the subjective sense, as effort, especially painful effort. ModE travail strongly retains this sense, whereas the development of the word in French has taken an opposite course. But ME travail’s range of meaning is much broader than its Modern English version, and the combined range of the Modern English and French versions of the word is a good indication of that earlier broadness. Particularly, ME travail signified work per se to a greater degree than now. It first enters English as a term for work rather than as a term for any type of trying or painful experience. Likewise, travail is found signifying work in most of its four aspects.

It is the association of travail with pain, suffering, and distress, then, that most calls for explication. To say that travail concerns work as effort
is correct but imprecise. Effort may be considered as something expended, with stress on the agency of effort, or as something experienced, with stress on the patiency (the state of being acted upon, as opposed to agency) of effort, and it is the latter sense that travail primarily communicates. Travail is centered on work as something that is suffered through, endured. It is the personal price of work, the toll it takes on the worker. As something paid, travail has currency and may be stolen, squandered, or weighed.27

As travail is focused on the painful experience of work, so may it signify any type of arduous or distressing activity. Hence the Catholicon Anglicum, composed in the latter half of the fifteenth century, defines travail as “labor vel—bos, sudor, vexamen, operia, angor, laboramen, opera.”28 As these definitions make clear, travail may be used to signify both mentally and physically trying activities. “Pere is double maner travaile, of spirit and of wittis and bodely travaile,” writes John of Trevisa, supplying “studiynge, wakyng, wreʃpe, sorewe, and busines” as examples of the former.29 Applications of travail to activities in which the physical component is secondary, however, are rarer and should be considered as metaphoric extensions of the physical sense. As a rule, such usage necessitates the addition of some qualifying phrase.30 Likewise, the only specific activity commonly signified by travail without qualification is travel, whose physical difficulty was the grounds for such usage: “traveillynge men are ofte wery and their horses t.”31

In sum, travail expresses above all the unavoidable difficulty of human work, not the technical difficulty of its processes or the social difficulties of the worker, but its most palpable pains. Viewed through the lens of travail, the nature of work appears narrowly focused on the suffering subject, a subject who, like one who is tortured, experiences pain as something forced upon him from without. Thus centered on the patiency of effort, travail encompasses the most undesirable aspects of work, those that are most often rationalized in terms of individual spiritual, particularly penitential, benefit, those whose material utility is least apparent. Travail is what is left behind in Augustine’s imagination of work before the Fall,32 just as it is the mot juste in the Wycliffite translation of Genesis 3.17: “cur-sid is the erthe in thi werk; in traueyls thow shalt ete of it alle the daies of thi lijf.”33
Labour

Though the MED records one use of labour as early as 1300 (s.v. “labour n.” 3a), it generally appears in English during the last quarter of the fourteenth century, at the end of the period of the greatest assimilation of French words. The lateness of its adoption may be partially explained by both the previous existence of swink and werk and the earlier assimilation of travail. Evidently another term for work was not what English usage most required, particularly one whose Latin equivalent was already commonly translated by travail, as the above citations from the Catholicon Anglicum and Wyclif’s Bible show. Like travail, labour is strongly tied to effort and pain. Etymologically, labor has been compared to the verb labor, meaning to slip or fall—a homographic coincidence that ties into one elegant knot the primorum parentum lapsus and the double labor imposed upon them. In the Aeneid, Labos, labor personified, is in infernal company with Luctus, Curae, Morbi, Senectus, et al. (6.273ff), though positive valuations of labor are equally easy to find. The equivalent of Greek ponos, labor is the suffering that exalts Hercules and makes a hero of Virgil’s farmer: “Herculem duri celebrant labores”; “labor omnia vicit / improbus et duris urgens in rebus egestas.”

How did labour enrich the Middle English work vocabulary? A preliminary answer can be found by looking at the semantic relationship between OF laborer and travailler. According to Ostrá, the general features of this relationship are as follows: laborer and travailler both represent work as effort, as fatigue, and as torment; laborer stresses the result and the utility of work, whereas travailler does not; laborer is more closely tied to agriculture and does not stress the negativity of work as much as travailler.

These conclusions generally hold for Middle English as well. Labour was used to signify work generally, as effort or exertion, and as product. The relationship of labouren to work as production is revealed most clearly in its transitive senses. Though labouren, like travailen, may denote harassment, it is primarily used in connection with the object of work (what labor is expended upon) and, more rarely, with the subjective end of work (what is earned or achieved by labor). Labour is not used to signify livelihood or professional occupation (as craft, mistre, lif-lode, and werk
are), but it comes closer than *travail* to doing so through its close connection to agriculture, which is especially clear in *labour*’s cognates.42

As a term for work as effort, *labour* is distinguished from *travail* through the emphasis it places on the agency, rather than the patience, of effort. This defines its uniqueness. *Labour* emphasizes more the effort expended on something, the directed exertion of the worker, and less the pain per se of that exertion. While both *travailen* and *labouren* may be used to signify the endurance of pain generally, the multifarious transitive senses of *labouren* that *travailen* does not admit indicate the preoccupation of *labouren* with pain not simply as an effect but as an intrinsic element of the process of work.43 Like *travail*, *labour* is unequivocally postlapsarian,44 but it places less emphasis on the negativity of work because it is more holistic. *Labour* signifies work as both experience and as act, and reflects above all the fundamental productive work that constitutes man’s nourishing and painful relationship to the earth:

Ffor the erthe was made of erthe
At the first begynnynge,
That erthe schuld labour the erthe
In trowthe and sore swynkyng.

Swink

Before the late medieval adoption of *travail* and *labour*, *swink* was the term of choice for translating Latin *labor*—a fair indication of its focus on work as effort.46 Like *travail* and *labour*, *swink* signifies the postlapsarian nature of work, its specifically human character.47 God does not *swink*, as Ælfric makes clear in his commentary on the seasons: "His nama is omnipotens, δæt ys, ælmigtig, for dan de he mæg eall þæt he wille, and his miht nahwar ne swyncþ."48 Often found in alliteration with *swete* (in both alliterative and nonalliterative texts), *swink* signifies work primarily as physical exertion. Etymologically, *swink* is “a collateral form of *swigan*, 'to beat, strike, whip.'”49 *Swink* is thus strongly tied to the notion of work as a type of bodily act. But it is also flexible enough to signify work both generally and more specifically as effort, production, or product.50 *Swink*’s semantic uniqueness lies in the emphasis it places on the physical
activeness of work, its motion and athleticism. Where *travail* and *labour* emphasize the patiency and the agency of effort, respectively, *swink* completes this trio of effort-centered terms by emphasizing the act of effort itself.

Another prominent feature of *swink* is its relative rarity in texts, as compared with *travail* and *labour*. The word does not occur once in such large prose texts as Wyclif’s Bible, the works of Malory, or *An Alphabet of Tales*, a rarity that the propensity of translators to employ cognates cannot alone explain, particularly in the case of the Bible, which contains numerous references to work. Chaucer, Gower, and Langland all used *swink* much less frequently than *travail* and *labour*, despite their significant intersection in meaning.51 Since there is no indication that *swink* was simply losing its currency, except to the degree that some of its earlier functions were being shared by *travail* and *labour*, this suggests that *swink* is both the most colloquial and the most narrow in meaning of the Middle English terms for work as effort.

Evidence for *swink*’s colloquialness is not hard to find. For example, *swink* is almost entirely unrepresented in fifteenth-century lexicographical books, indicating that the word had little place in the textual life of the schools such works served.52 And in the *Canterbury Tales*, *swink* occurs more often both in reported speech and in syntactical connection with a first-person subject or pronoun than either *travail* or *labour*.53

*Swink*’s narrower semantic range must also be counted as influencing the relative infrequency of its attestations. All of the meanings that the *OED* and *MED* provide for *swink* are also provided for *travail* and *labour* but not vice versa, except those related to sexual intercourse, which *labouren* alone may also signify. This semantic “deficiency” is to some degree a function of *swink*’s minimal transitivity. OE *swincan* is wholly intransitive, and the transitive senses of *swinken* do not appear until the early thirteenth century, and generally later.54 But there are also more telling differences. Most striking is *swink*’s relative lack of associations with textual, intellectual, and legal practice, a difference with *travail* and *labour* that reflects the latter’s origin in the language of administration and privilege.55 *Swink*’s use in military contexts is also relatively limited. *Swink, travail, and labour* were all used to signify the toil of battle, but *travail* and *labour* could also signify military and heroic action objectively.
as military service, knightly competition, siege, or feat of strength, revealing their affiliation with the language of the court and its literature.  

Altogether, these distinctions reveal how *swink* expresses the very real continuity between the corporeality of work and the colloquial. In the late medieval period, *swink* was and had the aura of being the common worker’s word for the most common kind of work. Words that stress the agency and the patiency of effort may carry ineradicable associations with manual labor, but exertion and pain are common to all types of work, both manual and mental, and are thus easily assimilated to a wide range of contexts and values. This is not so true of the physical act of work itself, especially those iterative acts of agricultural labor (*diching*, *delving*, *threshing*, etc.) that in their singularity make up the process of production. It is this kind of physicality that is the basis for the striking continuity in the restricted use of *swink* in two vocational portraits written almost four hundred years apart. In both Ælfric’s *Colloquy on the Occupations* and Chaucer’s *General Prologue* it is the plowman who swinks: “La leof, þeart ic swince!” (8) and “A trewe swynkere and a good was he” (1.531).  

**Werk**

*Werk* is preeminent among the Middle English terms for work in its generality. Though not as general as *don* or *maken*, *werken* may also signify action or production per se, *werk* an act or a product. Where *travail*, *labour*, and *swink* are all anchored in the concept of work as effort, *werk* frees work, as it were, from its difficulty by stressing the creativity of its process and the tangibility of its product. This “positive” emphasis is succinctly evident in *werk*’s application to divine creation and its equivalence to *opus*. The objectivity of *werk* is not so absolute as to preclude association with suffering—*werken* may simply mean “to tax and exert oneself physically”—but it is the basis for its marked association with craft, particularly the architectural and ornamental crafts. *Werk*’s objectivity is the basis for this association more specifically in the sense that *werken*’s transitivity and *werk*’s substantive sense express the nature of artisanal work as a creative working upon some material that produces a conceptually and functionally distinct object: for example, the making of leather into shoes or stone into a building. ModE *werk* has lost much of this craft
association, which survives conspicuously in the past-participle-turned-adjective wrought. More than its Modern English descendant, werk distinguishes itself from nonproductive types of work and those in which the worker, as agent, does not appear as the prime cause of production, such as agricultural cultivation. Craft, as ordered toward and valued by the object it creates, is preeminently a transitive activity. As the crafted product objectifies the labor and skill of the craftsman, so the semantic representation that craft elicits is objective. 61

Werk’s generality is also greater than that of ModE work, whose most general senses are now obsolete or archaic. 62 A significant rapprochement between werk’s general and specific senses may be found within specific contexts, such as the cycle plays’ representation of Noah as a good worker in both senses. 63 But werk was frequently used, more than travail or labour, without any reference to work and could indicate just about any action whatsoever. From the perspective of this generality, werk’s signification of work may appear as simply one application among many of a term more broadly rooted in the concept of effective action. Yet the centrality of werk’s connection to work is indicated by the fact that nearly all of its derivatives, such as werkman, werkday, werkhouse, and werkless, concern productive, occupational labor.

The special value of werk within the Middle English work vocabulary lies in its being a holistic and versatile term that places relatively balanced emphasis on the subjective and objective dimensions of work. Werk involves effort, but that is not its defining attribute. In this respect werk is unlike craft, which, being more purely objective, carries little connotation of the difficulty of work. Yet like craft, werk is rooted in the productivity and utility of work. Werken is not only to labor but to accomplish. Hence werk, unlike the effort-centered terms, gets at the purposes of work, both subjective and objective. Werk’s signification of the objective end of work, built around its substantive sense, is particularly evident in such phrases as worke of thy handes and clerk of the werkes and in a variety of compounds such as handwerk, castyn-werk, and iren-werk. Werk’s signification of the subjective end of work, livelihood, which is now often taken for granted in ModE work, is less obvious. For the noun, the meanings “labor” and “occupation, employment” are often only contextually distinguishable. But from the fourteenth century onwards, werken is found meaning “To do one’s ordinary business; to pursue a regular occupation” 64—a strik-
ing indication that the development of a content-neutral, strongly economic concept of work was well underway during this period.

*Craft*

The most original meaning of *craft* is "strength, power, might, force." This sense dies out in the sixteenth century, while the derivative meaning, "skill, skillfulness, art," which is also attested from the Old English period, does not. *Craft*, like *werk*, was thus a flexible term whose basic meaning extended well beyond the sphere of work. Yet its association with productive, economically oriented labor is strong and pervasive. Moreover, as its general meanings testify, *craft* embodies a concept of work not only free of any association with suffering but rooted in the appreciation of its power.

Beyond its basic work-related meanings, *craft*’s strongest association with work is its signification of economic institutions of work, especially those of manufacture. Like *mister*, *craft* signifies trade or occupation, especially those of the artisan, and by the end of the fourteenth century an organization of craftsmen or tradesmen, or a guild. In opposition to *labourer* and *swinker*, which generally signify an agricultural worker, and in contrast to the more versatile *travailour* and *werker*, *craftesman* is almost always used to denote an artisan or, after the adoption of *craft* to denote a guild, a member of a guild. But this, like other derivatives, is built upon only the primary connotation of its root, and many nonartisanal or marginally artisanal occupations are indicated by compounds that employ *craft*: gleo-*craft*, leche-*craft*, wode-*craft*, baking-*craft*, scrivener-*craft*, *tilling-craft*, and so on. From this perspective, we may say that *craft* designates the skill necessary to work in general. Langland, extending St. Paul’s enumeration of the spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 12.4–10) to include all occupations, uses *craft* to signify both occupation and occupational skill in general.

*Craft*’s semantic flexibility also reflects its more general designation of art. *Craft* translates Latin *ars* and likewise crosses the boundary between *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae*, whence the terms *seven craftes* and *craftes mechanic*. But Middle English also had *art*, which could likewise designate industrial pursuits. Gower, for example, refers to “hem that ben Artificiers, / Whiche use craftes and mestiers, / Whos Art
is cleped Mechanique” (CA 7.1691–93). While craft and art are thus comparable within specific contexts, above all within schematic organizations of theoretical and practical types of knowledge, their difference lies in the deeper affiliation of the former to the practical side of things. Art and craft both imply knowledge, but craft to a superior degree implies its use. As Reginald Pecock puts it, craft is essentially know-how: “Craft . . . is a knunnyng wherbi we knowen how þis or þat is to be maad of þe newe in sum outward abidyng mater: as is kunnyng to make an hous, a schipp, a knyf, a cloke, and so forþ of opire lijk.”

Craft’s most important contribution to the Middle English work vocabulary lies in its expression of the rationality of work and the worker. Of all the Middle English terms, craft places the least emphasis on the effort of work and stresses instead both its intellective, technical component and the tangibility of its product. Craft is not only production but making, the purposive creation of a new and exceptionally human product. Accordingly, craft does not share in the negativity of the other terms, the negativity that attaches to the painfulness of work. The negative sense that craft does carry, that of trickery and deception, derives from its rationality and has no relation to work, except in specific contexts. Perhaps the strongest indication of craft’s rationality and positivity is that it is attributable to divinity, both as God’s creativity—“after þis hap crafte of God so medlid mannis partis togidere þat noon contrarieþ to anoþer”—and as the partial revelation of that creativity to man: “God . . . ȝeueþ wit in alle craftes.”

BETWEEN VOCABULARY AND CULTURE

What does the Middle English work vocabulary reveal about attitudes toward work in late medieval England? To try to answer this question presupposes that the relationship of language to culture is intelligible and meaningful, that lexical structure is more than linguistic but is in some significant way about culture. But this is far from obvious. Like artifacts, words both embody and conceal the conditions of their formation. Verbal meaning is not static but is subject to continual modification through usage, which both applies and creates the current meanings of words. As Gadamer puts it, “[T]he general concept meant by the word is enriched

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