

Charity amid Inequality: Poor Relief in Bruges at the Turn of the Fifteenth Century

“Little did it matter to us.” So wrote the 14th century chronicler Jean le Bel on the misfortunes of the poor, echoing the prevailing indifference towards the impoverished.¹ Only when the Count of Flanders took refuge in a poor woman’s house in 1382 Bruges, did the contemporary Jean Froissart, whose chronicle continued le Bel’s account, give us a glimpse of the livelihoods of the poor. The scarcity of their possessions paints a portrait of economic destitution of the lowest social strata. Nonetheless, the poor woman knew the Count well, “for she had been oftentimes at his gate to fetch alms.”² While admitted to the Count’s favor, she would find herself barred from most of Bruges’ almshouses in the 1400s. In fact, she lived in a period of transition, when charitable institutions became increasingly selective and restrictive in their clientele. Social tensions, popular revolts, and the shifting image of the poor all played a part in this change. Charity, which we might think stems primarily from altruism and fraternity, was added the dimension of social negotiation. Poor relief in early fifteenth century Bruges increasingly found its locus in the intersection of seemingly disparate realms: ecclesiastical duty, individual salvation, corporate solidarity, and social control. Far from delivering unqualified good, charitable institutions in early fifteenth century Bruges, especially the secular institutions then on the rise, promoted social compartmentalization and solidified existing hierarchies.

Tensions in a “golden age”

¹ Mollat, Michel and Arthur Goldhammer. *The Poor in the Middle Ages : An Essay in Social History*. (New Haven, 1986). 254-5.

² Froissart, *Chronicles*, 275. Bruges is a commercial city in nowadays Western Belgium, then southern Flanders, possession of the Count of Flanders.

The economy of post-Plague Bruges, despite the disruptions associated with the Black Death, nevertheless managed to resume its renowned medieval focus on textile production and international trade.³ As had been the case previously, beneath the hubbub of merchants and artisans there was significant inequality, social and economic. Within the guilds emerged a hierarchy of positions and wage levels, from master craftsmen to apprentices. Restrictions to lower guildsmen appeared in rework, fines, professional eviction, and the closing off of advancement to master craftsman status. The multiple technical operations in textile production meant that the whole process could be concentrated in a few hands.⁴ Also concentrated was political power and decision-making: after the Ghent Wars of 1379-85, Bruges was ruled by a “clique” of rich merchants supported by some wealthier guildsmen.⁵

These restrictions should make us reconsider if the century after the Plague was indeed “the golden age of labor”. The silver content in Flemish coins was reduced by three fourth from 1373 to 1382, but guild representations in the city government did not protect workers’ wages or purchasing power. Granted, the period between 1375-1475 was one of plentiful food;⁶ but the abundance also raised the pauper’s expectations. The poorer guildsmen in Bruges probably had

³ Also about 1/3 of the population in Bruges were cloth workers. See Dumolyn, Jan, Wouter Ryckbosch and Mathijs Speecke. “Did inequality produce medieval revolt? The material position and political agency of textile workers during the Flemish Revolt of 1379–1385.” *Social History* 46, no. 4, (2021): 376.

⁴ Mollat 207-8, 225.

⁵ The crafts were stripped of political and military powers, as well as symbols of their identity: their banners and candles they carried during annual civic processions were seized. See Dumolyn et al. 377, Mollat 208, Brown, Andrew, and Jan Dumolyn, eds. *Medieval Bruges: c. 850–1550*. (Cambridge, 2018). 295.

⁶ Cohn Jr, Samuel K. "Rich and poor in Western Europe, c. 1375–1475: the political paradox of material well-being." In *Approaches to poverty in medieval Europe: Complexities, contradictions, transformations, c. 1100-1500*, 148-150.

higher living standards than the rest of Europe;⁷ but the fancy goods and inaccessible luxuries available in this trading metropolis only accentuated their relative deprivation. To the weaver who had no table nor pillow, the hosteller's 'Prussian' table and 'Parisian' chandeliers would be an object of "envy", if not discontent.⁸

Dumolyn, Ryckbosch and Speecke's study of confiscation records following the 1379-82 Bruges rebellions confirm the presence of extreme economic disparities between lesser guildsmen and their masters, as well as between members of different guilds. Craftsmen in the textile and metalworking industries shared similar guild polarization and material destitution far below average. They were also the most over-represented among the insurgents,⁹ where social tensions were translated into political action. For Froissart, the 1380 "strife between the great men and the commons" broke out in Bruges as "the mean crafts would have had everything at their pleasure and the great men would not suffer it."¹⁰ Two years later, the Ghent artisan-rebels, upon their entry into Bruges, ordered the four trades of the brokers, glass-makers, butchers and fishmongers — some of them wealthier monopolists¹¹ — to be slain without mercy.¹²

⁷ Brown and Dumolyn eds. *Medieval Bruges*, 259. Households in Bruges enjoyed more domestic comfort than elsewhere in Europe. See Dumolyn et al. 391. Confiscation records showed that they did not live in abject destitution, but their goods were regarded deficient and "in bad condition" with regards to social standards. See Dumolyn et al. 395.

⁸ The inventories are drawn from the Bruges confiscation records of 1383-84. See Dumolyn et al. 392-3. Hostellers (innkeepers) were the politically powerful commercial elite of the city, employers to common brokers, many of whom came from Bruges' wealthiest families. See Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 205-8.

⁹ Dumolyn et al. 380-2, 386-7.

¹⁰ Froissart, 242.

¹¹ Brokers belonged to the wealthy commercial class. See Dumolyn et al. 383, 385. Butchers and fishmongers were richer crafts guilds (Dumolyn et al. 377). Some butchers were wealthy monopolists see Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 258

¹² Froissart, 276. Further riots to reestablish guild power in 1378, 91, 92, 94, 98-99 were repressed. The guilds were able to regain their banners and some privileges in 1407 and 1411, but in general ducal power was ascendent. See Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 296-8.

One witness to the social tension was the preaching of renowned Carmelite friar Thomas Conecte, recorded by chronicler Enguerrand de Monstrelet.¹³ In his tour de Flanders, Conecte denounced the luxurious life of the rich and the priests, especially the extravagant hennins (hair-dresses) adorning wealthy ladies. He was idolized by burghers, clergy, knights and paupers alike, but his celebrated sermons were “to the delight of the poor” and to the “shame” of ladies of rank. Grievance was channeled to hennins and chess boards, publicly burned at Conecte’s order, not to the rich, still less the social order which remained untouched even in Flemish revolts. Hennins were burned, only to be worn higher.¹⁴ The poor were relieved by alms, only to appear in growing numbers.¹⁵

Friar Thomas’ admonishment of “the damnation of their souls and [...] pain of excommunication” resonated in an age of “anxiety over sin, fear of death, uncertainty of salvation”.¹⁶ Certainly hennins did not aid personal salvation, but charity almost certainly did: it was believed that charity wiped away sin, and alms was often likened to “a bill of exchange drawn in Heaven.”¹⁷

¹³ Monstrelet, 239-44

¹⁴ Ibid. 241.

¹⁵ Mollat 233-4. Note that Mollat’s conclusion, that the number of poor rose between 1350 to 1500, applies to Europe as a whole. Increased unemployment and poverty in the Low Countries in the fourteenth century, in a forthcoming work by Peter Stabel, is cited in Geens, Sam. “The Great Destruction of People and Wealth: The Impact of the Ghent Revolt on Wealth Inequality in the Last Quarter of the Fourteenth Century.” In *Inequality and the City in the Low Countries (1200-2020)*, 216.

¹⁶ Monstrelet, 242. The latter phrase see Mollat 263.

¹⁷ Mollat 259. A medieval bill of exchange was more than currency exchange: a person borrows a sum of money in one place, and repays in another currency somewhere else after an agreed amount of time. In this simile, the alms-giver is the initial lender who will be repaid in Heaven.

Besides individual salvation, humanist brotherhood between all human beings, and altruism — all of these hard to assess — social reasons must also have motivated charitable bequests and the foundation of new institutions. As we have seen, there was tension that the society needed to address, and a poor artisan population to pacify. The indiscriminating almsgiving of the church — without bothering to find out who needed relief and who didn't — was questioned for its efficacy. The rising secular institutions had agendas beyond excluding sloths and vagabonds from their clientele: it is hard to believe that their boards of directors, composed of ex-city councilors and guild masters,¹⁸ were not furthering existing social policies in their new charity posts. It must be known to them that available funds could only sustain a small fraction of the burgeoning indigent.¹⁹ The question was to whom they should spend, and for what end.

Charity for compartmentalization

It is hard to say in hindsight if social tension was exacerbated by the humanist regard for the dignity of labor.²⁰ But the humanist recognition of man concurred with the recognition of man within his particular social category. Constraints were raised on indiscriminate almsgiving. The poor were divided between “deserving” and “undeserving”.²¹ Exemplary of the “deserving poor” was the new category of the “shame-faced house-poor”, workers and their families who fell into poverty due to circumstances understood to be beyond their control.²² Existing categories

¹⁸ Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 262.

¹⁹ A rough estimate is that one in five of the poor in Bruges could receive charity assistance. Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 264.

²⁰ We see this regard in the response of the Burgundian Auxerre Parliament in 1390s: “even though they are poor men, still they are men [...] Once cannot compel a free person to work against his will.” I do not know if such regard permeated the other holding of the Duke of Burgundy (i.e. Flanders). See Mollat 239.

²¹ Davis, Adam J. "The social and religious meanings of charity in medieval Europe." *History Compass* 12, no. 12 (2014): 938.

²² Galvin, Michael. "Credit and parochial charity in fifteenth-century Bruges." *Journal of Medieval History* 28, no. 2 (2002): 131.

became more visible. Vagrants were identified apart from the poor and subject to increasing regulations.²³ And not just collective identities became more precise in the late Middle Ages: accounting, clock time, punishment in purgatory²⁴ — of all these things man was increasingly the measurer.

Hospital clientele turned more precise as well. Bruges' nine private lay hospitals, founded by wealthy individuals in the 12th and 13th century to care for the ill, homeless, drifters and paupers alike,²⁵ assumed a monotonous existence in the 14th and 15th centuries: funded and governed by the wealthy, admitting only the elite and the upper-middle class, dedicated to healing not to hospice.²⁶ Beguine hospitals, originally without any social selection, were reserved for the clergy and their wealthy relatives who could afford to pay for a bed.²⁷

Other charitable institutions also turned to a more targeted (and restrictive) audience: not the beggars, vagabonds, or other outcasts, but the “deserving poor,” and often, just those occupying a defined place in the social order: fellow guildsmen and the “shame-faced house-poor.” Even though compartmentalization might not have been the goal of charity in the first place, these institutions nonetheless defined and strengthened social categories through their new policies.

²³ Davis 938. Mollat 257-8.

²⁴ Mollat 259.

²⁵ Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 72-3. Also see Haemers, Jelle, and Wouter Ryckbosch. “A Targeted Public: Public Services in Fifteenth-Century Ghent and Bruges.” *Urban History* 37, no. 2 (2010): 222.

²⁶ Haemers and Ryckbosch, *A Targeted Public*, 222.

²⁷ Haemers and Ryckbosch, *A Targeted Public*, 218-9.

Safety net for one's own class

The “Holy Spirit Tables,” or poor tables, helped to those easier to help and those closer to the helper. The seven poor tables in Bruges assisted householders and wage workers with insufficient income, distributing food, giving small loans and burying the poor. Generally well-managed by a board of rich merchants, landholders and guild representatives, they benefited perhaps 700 to 900 people, and this tiny lucky fraction did benefit considerably. Insufficient in scope for the full needy population, the poor tables were “nonetheless structural for a specific, targeted group of paupers.”²⁸ To turn individual bequests into annual income, they sold annuity rents to members of the middle class and even urban elite,²⁹ but not the poorest bourgeois who could not provide security. Thus, rich and middling donors provided capital to members of their own class, while at the same time improving the prospects of their own salvation.³⁰ Their credit was both economic and social — in helping the non-poor get through hardships, it inhibited downward mobility. Moreover, the money got recirculated in the market before it was consumed in the poor person’s stomach — and generated value that was well-aligned with that of the mercantile society.

While poor tables were more bequest than exchange, mutual aid was one of the craft guild’s responsibilities. From the 13th and 14th centuries onwards, the urban craft guilds of Bruges set up poor relief “boxes” funded by a compulsory tax on guild members and donations from the wealthier guildsmen. Several guilds, including the weaver and fuller guilds (both exhibited significant polarity) set up hospitals of the infirm to support their own members: usually old,

²⁸ Haemers and Ryckbosch, *A Targeted Public*, 219-20. Also see Mollat 275-7.

²⁹ The seller of annuity rent gives the buyer an amount of money on one occasion, in return for annual payback from the buyer for a fixed number of years or indefinitely.

³⁰ For a detailed analysis see Galvin 145-53.

sick, or widowed, but for guildsmen (and their families) only. To the lesser artisans, these charitable institutions were irreplaceable in times of hardship — they also bound the guildsman to the guild.³¹ Having no financial reserve of his own and barred from the city’s private hospitals, he could only turn to his guild (possibly also the church and the crown, but not with much hope of success), however oppressive his guild might be.

Interlude: the urgency of charity

The aforementioned artisans were fortunate to live in “the golden age of labor.” But they still needed charity. When even some skilled artisans struggled to make ends meet, falling into poverty was not difficult to do.³² Importantly, the post-Plague century was far from a plague-free one. Visitations of plague made frequent enough appearances so as to..... Fluctuating wages and currency debasements also rendered market insecurity and cyclical crises.³³ People were often at the mercy of fortune; artists being perhaps one of the most extreme examples. Prior to 1420 many of them emigrated from Bruges due to the scarcity of commissions. After the 1420s Bruges enjoyed a sudden emergence as an art hub: desire for panel paintings attracted illustrious immigrants like Jan van Eyck and Gerard David.³⁴

The weavers and fullers were less fortunate. Mounting foreign competition and transaction costs threatened Bruges’ textile export industry, one of its two long-time economic powerhouses.

³¹ Haemers and Ryckbosch, *A Targeted Public*, 220-1. Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 263. The wealthy broker’s guild was the first to set up their hospital.

³² Mollat 244, Dumolyn et al. 385. Skilled journeyman in construction often lived at the edge of sustenance. Also see Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 260-1.

³³ Dumolyn et al. 375-6. Brown and Dumolyn, eds, *Medieval Bruges*, 259-60.

³⁴ Wilson, Jean C. *Painting in Bruges at the close of the Middle Ages: studies in society and visual culture*. (University Park, 2010), 14.

External pressure demanded the suppression of wages to keep the city afloat in the export market, escalating internal tensions.³⁵ The poor tables and intra-guild charity compensated wage-earners who otherwise could not support himself, being an incentive for his solidarity, and a brake on what might otherwise have been his path towards vagabondage. Nonetheless, in have to turn to a particular, targeted institution for help, the supplicant himself reaffirmed his position in the society and the group he had been assigned to.

The giving and the waiting

The other two charitable institutions were the crown and the church. They are much older and their selectivity requires further research. As part of his image-building campaign for example, the Count of Flanders (later Duke of Burgundy) dedicated 0.25% of his revenue to poor relief, sponsoring religious institutions, hospitals, and poor paupers. But this amount was only symbolic and not structural at all: each year 25 to 50 people received alms from him at a time when Bruges had a population of about 40,000.³⁶ It could be that the poor women who hosted the Count was among this especially fortunate few, or, the story could be propagated to the court's advantage. In the latter case, charity was made a justification of privilege and power.

Ecclesiastical institutions also played a considerable role in poor relief.³⁷ Though the church might be less selective in its alms-giving, by pacifying the poor they also solidified the social structure. Poor relief was just one aspect of charity, which, ultimately, was the love of God, not men. Its alms provided vital sustenance, but not a chance at upward mobility. Secular institutions

³⁵ Dumolyn et al. 375-6.

³⁶ Haemers and Ryckbosch, *A Targeted Public*, 219.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

might aim at eradicating poverty, but never was this the goal of the church, which viewed poverty as “an inherent part of human condition”:³⁸ The religious institutions were inefficient in this respect because they never meant to be otherwise. After all, if God had ordained the social order, why change it?

The moral theology of late Medieval charity was nicely summed up in a poem, inscribed in the south porch of Bourges cathedral in the fifteenth century, cited in Michel Mollat’s foundational work on medieval poverty. In the poem, the poor should endure their predicament and wait for their place in Heaven; the rich would join them by distributing their wealth, through the former’s intercessions.³⁹ Here, the pauper, enduring, suffering, resigned, “happy [...] in spirit,” had his attention attuned to posthumous heavenly reward, not contemporary structural injustices, for example the recessive tax system.

But the indigent could also be addressed differently. When the rebellious poor Ghenters were marshaled before their march to Bruges, the sermoning priests likened them to Israel fighting the Pharaoh, and Maccabees fighting Romans.⁴⁰ It seems that the poor only knew themselves when they were told who they were; they could not articulate their desires on their own, nor discover

³⁸ Serrahima i Balius, Pol. "The Almoina of Barcelona during the Catalan Civil War (1462-72): Changes and Continuities in the Conception of Catholic Poor Relief in Late Medieval Europe." In *Approaches to Poverty in Medieval Europe: Complexities, Contradictions, Transformations, c. 1100-1500*, pp. 176. If we allow downplaying regional differences, it is illustrative to consider the case of the Barcelona *Almoina*, administered by the canons of the city’s cathedral. A detailed study its books found poor relief expenditures cut by 93% during the 1461-1473 civil war, while other expenses (benefices, masses, anniversaries, pensions etc.) were cut by 41%. Love of God was placed before the love of men. The act of giving, no matter to whom, was considered more important than the impact of giving, to the recipients and the society as a whole. See Serrahima 175-202.

³⁹ Mollat 262-3.

⁴⁰ Froissart 272.

the solutions of their predicament. This made them constant victims of demagogues in popular revolts.⁴¹ Those told to fight took Bruges by storm and reduced the Count to a poor woman's supplicant. Those told to wait were disarmed, deprived of agency, and waited.

Images of the poor

The poor's better-off contemporaries saw both the fighting and the waiting, with a mixture of fear and contempt. The poor were seen as a potential threat to social order, if not society's parasites.⁴² In this light, charity in Bruges was an ongoing negotiation for class armistice. In England, France, Castille, and Savoy, the assumed threat of the poor was also addressed by hardening social control: unauthorized beggars and illicit alms-giving were punished; poor shelters and "charity workshops" were set up to lock up vagrants and force them to work.⁴³ In the meantime, the poor was stigmatized to be lazy, sinful, morally corrupt and foolish⁴⁴ — an essentialist characterization that made them unworthy for anywhere else than the bottom of the social ladder, and unworthy of charity, unless they were the working, "respectable", "shame-faced house-poor". The pauper's image was exploited, and he would always be condescended upon.

Literature and visual arts depicted "the lower sort" in grotesque material and mental states.⁴⁵ The image of the poor served as a cue for laughter, as well as a warning against falling into poverty. Class-conscious charity evolved amid a generalized dread of poverty. In the English poet John

⁴¹ Mollat 228-30.

⁴² *ibid.* 251-2.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 291-3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 254-8.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 232, 298.

Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* (1431-38), however, personified "Glad Poverty" physically overwhelmed Fortune, for Poverty alone imparted free will and immunity from the whims of Fortune.⁴⁶ Yet few would live in poverty with gladness. Lydgate had Fortune, like the economically fortunate, scoff Poverty for being "most hateful to people in all walks of life."⁴⁷ In their social engineering, including charity directed at their own class, the fortunate sought to secure their immunity from temporal hardships and from the conquest of Poverty.

Sadly, all the images we see are one-sided. Sources tell us how the upper strata viewed the poor, but not how the poor viewed themselves or others.⁴⁸ The poor woman said nothing of her own poverty. Froissart imagines the Count, hiding under a couch, calling himself "one of the poorest of princes."⁴⁹ The Count would soon happily regain his possessions, however. Poverty was a category of wealth, but also of social standing. With ongoing compartmentalization, partly promoted by charity, it was harder to financially relieve a person than to rehabilitate him socially. The alms-receiving woman remained in destitution. The Count of Flanders, despite imagining himself to be the poorest, was still a prince.

⁴⁶ Scott, Anne M. "The poor and their power: images of poor women in Medieval literature and art." In *Approaches to poverty in medieval Europe: Complexities, contradictions, transformations, c. 1100-1500*, pp. 243-248.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 245-6.

⁴⁸ Another problem with this essay is its organization around charitable institutions set up by the better off, rather than the different kinds of the poor and their experiences: beggars, immigrant unskilled laborers, lesser guildsmen, women, children etc.

⁴⁹ Froissart, 275.

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