

Re-inventing London Citizenship in Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love*

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Work in Progress

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Also the Citie of London that is to me so deare and sweete, in which I was fourth growen, and more kindly loue haue I to that place, then to any other in yerth (as every kindly creature hath full appetite to that place of his kindly ingendure, and to wilne rest and peace in that sted to abide) thilke peace should thus there haue been broken, which of all wise men is commended and desired.

--from "The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer" in *The Works of Our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geffrey Chaucer* (1598)¹

Also the cytie of London, that is to me so dere and swete, in which I was forthe growen; and more kyndely love have I to that place than to any other in erthe, as every kyndely creature hath ful appetite to that place of his kindly engendrure, and to wylne rest and peace in that sted to abyde: thylke peace shulde thus there have ben broken—and of al wyse it is commended and desired.

--from Thomas Usk's *The Testament of Love* (1385), I.577-582²

Geoffrey Chaucer's London origin was attested in the sixteenth-century *Life* that accompanied early print editions of his *Complete Works* by Thomas Usk's homage to their common native city. *The Testament of Love* (1385), which had become a crucial part of the Chaucerian apocrypha in 1532, verified Chaucer's London origin and testified to an imagined political catastrophe in the canonical Middle English poet's life. The *Testament* was allegedly compiled as a "comfort to himselfe [Chaucer] after great griefs conceived for some rash attempts of the commons, with whom he had ioyned, and therby was in feare to loose the fauour of his best friends" (C 6). But it was the professional scrivener Thomas Usk—not the more politically astute royal servant Geoffrey Chaucer—who "ioyned" with the commons, the people he identified as the thoughtless followers of his populist former employer John of Northampton (Member of the Draper's Guild and Mayor of London in 1381 and 1382).³ In his 1384 *Appeal of Thomas Usk against John of Northampton*, Thomas Usk accuses Northampton of attempting to determine and, later, to meddle with the results of the mayoral election of 1383 by raising crowds to protest any rulings against what Usk presents as misguided populist policy. Usk describes his role as go-between as well as scrivener—he negotiated support for Northampton among the "smale people of the town" (53) and he was

¹ *The Works of Our Antient and Lerved Geoffrey Chaucer* (London, 1598).

² All citations of *The Testament of Love* refer to book and line numbers from R. Allen Shoaf's edition (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 1998). All citations refer to book number and line number.

³ Paul Strohm elaborates distinguishes between these two native Londoners in terms of their political capacities in his seminal "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s" in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain*, Ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990), pp. 83-112.

party to a secret attempt to win the support of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, after the lost election.⁴ Usk's *Appeal*, a document that repeatedly accuses Northampton and members of his faction of treacherous wrongdoing by name, is also a confession of being party to regular participation in civic conspiracy.⁵

The *Appeal* failed to win Usk immediate intimacy with the new ruling members of the City of the royalist faction of Nicholas Brembre (Member of the Grocer's Guild and Mayor of London in 1376, 1377, 1383, 1384, and 1385).⁶ Thomas Usk had become a social and political pariah for his confessed crimes *and* his act of betrayal. He found himself "in feare to loose the fauour of his [new] best friends" as well as his old ones. The grief noted by Chaucer's early modern editors is movingly rendered in Usk's own description of friendless life after the *Appeal*. Although actually imprisoned only briefly after the trial of Northampton, the political isolation that followed his incarceration and the inability to assume a public role—an effective disenfranchisement—is trying: "I endure my penaunce in this derke prisone, caytised fro frendshippe and acquayntaunce, and forsaken of al that any wode dare speke" (I. 11-2); "O, where art thou nowe, frenshyppe, that somtyme with laughande chere madest both face and countenance to me wardes?" (I.34-36). Thomas Usk describes a metaphorical imprisonment, an absolute isolation tacitly imposed by a civic community imagined as a society of friends and acquaintance. The *Testament* has been usefully described as Usk's bid for preferment with the royalists of Brembre's faction who found themselves (briefly) in power. As a literary performance, particularly in its determined affiliation with the vernacular literary star Chaucer, the *Testament* may have won Usk a large enough audience of civic servants and legal professionals to allow him to emerge out of his political isolation.⁷ But it is actually royal privilege that allows Usk to attain a civic position and to re-enter the official civic record as a royal sergent-at-arms and as undersheriff of Middlesex in 1387. Given that the *Testament* is not a politically effective document, it might then be read, more simply, as a bid for imaginative restoration to community. In the *Testament*, Usk reclaims his legacy as a member of a community of citizen-friends by

⁴ All citations to the *Appeal* refer to *Appendix 2* of R. Allen Shoaf's edition, pp. 423-29. The citations refer to line numbers.

⁵ See Paul Strohm's seminal work on Thomas Usk's *Appeal* and his capacity for manipulating legal genres in "The Textual Vicissitudes of Usk's 'Appeal'" in *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), pp. 145-60.

⁶ There are two influential historical accounts of London's factional politics in the 1380s and they offer competing views and approaches. Ruth Bird's *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London: Longman, 194), sympathetic to Northampton, has provided the foundational account of fourteenth-century London politics for scholars of medieval literature. Pamela Nightingale's *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocer's Company and the Politics and Trade of London 1000-1485* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1995) is a corrective to Bird's account that also looks to the longer history of London guild and trade cultures.

⁷ On Thomas Usk's likely audience, see May Newman Hallmundson, "The Community of Law and Letters: Some Notes on Thomas Usk's Audience" in *Viator* 9 (1978): 357-65.

emphasizing his status as a London native and articulating a natural, affectionate bond between himself and his native city.

The rhetorical trajectory of *The Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* embellishes an already storied career as a poet, a diplomat, and a royal bureaucrat. But Chaucer's birth and his career must be separated by a period of training, an intellectual upbringing that occurs outside of Chaucer's native London ("His bringing up, as Leland saith, was in the Vniuersitie of Oxford, as also of Cambridge" [B III]). Chaucer's education, for his Cambridge-educated early modern editors, is identified with the foremost pedagogical and intellectual English institutions of the fourteenth and sixteenth-centuries, the universities of Oxford and Cambridge. At Oxford, more specifically, Chaucer allegedly studied at both Canterbury and Merton Colleges and, at Merton, with the most prominent "proto-Reformation" thinker of his century, John Wyclif.⁸ Chaucer's "bringing up" would continue abroad, "in Fraunce and Flaunders" where he "spent much time in his young yeeres" and where he "attained to greet perfection in all kind of learning" (B III). Chaucer's education, which ends with a period of training in the London "Colledges of the Lawyers" (B III),⁹ follows the already naturalized trajectory of a scholarly career.

Hugh of Saint Victor, Parisian educator and theologian (d. 1141), influentially articulated the ideal of removal from the comforts of home for scholarly training. In the *Didascalicon*, his program for boys preparing for a clerical profession, Hugh of Saint Victor argues that the spiritual and intellectual journey required of scholars begins with a self-imposed alienation from one's homeland. Hugh of Saint Victor acknowledges what Thomas Usk identifies as a "kyndely" or natural love for a native place, but insists that exile is a crucial preparation for abandoning the world and the worldly. "The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world" but the "perfect man has extinguished his [love for places]." Hugh's *Didascalicon* presents the author's own life as a model scholarly trajectory: "From boyhood I have dwelt on foreign soil" (3.19).¹⁰ This naturalized trajectory—a removal from home for the sake of study—becomes part of Chaucer's biography and explains why an imagined removal from London to Oxford and Cambridge and to France and Flanders—prior to his return to London as Controller of Customs and later as Clerk of the King's Works—is so insistently emphasized in his early modern editors' bid to locate him within a pantheon of "wise men." Chaucer, unlike Hugh, does not dedicate

⁸ For a far more cautious study of Chaucer's likely connections with Oxford and Cambridge, see J. A. W. Bennett's *Chaucer at Oxford and at Cambridge* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974). Bennett entertains a possibility that friends at Merton may have influenced Chaucer's interest in the astrolabe, but makes no mention of any possibility of a Chaucerian interest in Wycliffite philosophy.

⁹ The inns or "colleges of the lawyers" are not attested as institutions that provided academic training until the fifteenth century. See E. W. Ives, "Training at the Inns of Court" in *The Common Lawyers of Pre-Reformation England, Thomas Kebell: A Case Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), pp. 36-89

¹⁰ See *The Didascalicon of Hugh of Saint Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts*. Trans. Jerome Taylor, Rpt. (New York: Columbia UP, 1991).

himself to a studious monastic profession: he returns home to become a courtly poet and royal servant. But Chaucer's designated role as the "father of English sciences" requires that the time between his boyhood and his poetic and political maturity be accounted for by a period of institutional intellectual training.

As a literary artifact that testifies to Thomas Usk's upbringing rather than to Chaucer's, *The Testament of Love* surprisingly insists upon the possibility of an entirely local intellectual coming of age. Usk conflates his civic birthright, citizenship by patrimony, with his fictive birthright, the teaching of the allegorical figure Lady Love. Learning and citizenship are conflated in the *Testament* so that citizenship, the right to the franchise of the City and to full participation in London governance, requires schooling and personal reformation under Love's guidance. Love's teaching is a legacy, imagined as a kind of property willed to London and her citizens, that is also body of learning that describes and presents the knowledge required of participants in civic life. Love, whose name identifies the primary civic virtue of the late-medieval community (love or *caritas*) teaches citizens how to transform a natural or "kyndely" affection for the city into a series of well-considered actions conducive to the restoration of a broken London peace. Thomas Usk imagines himself intellectually reformed by a course in Love's teaching. In the process, he inaugurates a vocabulary for describing scholarly development within the confines of the City walls. He presents his past self, the Thomas Usk who participated in Northampton's underhanded dealings, as a youthful, misguided, and unlearned political actor. The Thomas Usk of the *Testament*, the man who emerges after a period of difficult instruction in love, is the native citizen who has come of intellectual and civic age.

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How shulde than the name of a synguler Londenoyse passe the glorious name of London, whiche by many it is commended, and by many it is lacked, and in many mo places in erthe nat knowen han knowen? For in many countrees lytel is London in knowyng or in speech, and yet among one maner of people may nat such fame in goodness come, for as many as praysen commenly as many lacken.
---*The Testament of Love*, I.815-9¹¹

¹¹ This passage substitutes London for Rome. Compare to Chaucer's *Boece*: "At the laste, certes, in the tyme of Marcus Tulyus, as hymselfe writ in his book, that the renoun of the commune of Rome ne hadde nat yit passed ne clomben over the montaigne that highte Caucasus; and yit was thilke tyme Rome wel waxen, and greatly redouted of the Parthes and eek of the othere folk enhabitynge aboute. Seestow nat thanne how streyte and how compressed is thilke glorie that ye travilen aboute to schewe and to multeplye? May thane the glorie of a synguler Romeyn stretchen thider as the fame of the name of rome may nat clymben ne passen?" (Pr.7, 59-72). I refer to the *Boece* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, Ed. Larry D. Benson et al, 3rd Ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Chaucer likely translated the *Boece* in the late 1370s and early 80s and the influence of Chaucer's prose style and vocabulary is evident in Usk's work. Usk also names Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, ca. 1382-86, which identifies him as one of Chaucer's earliest readers.

In the autobiographical section of the *Testament*, Thomas Usk narrates the history of his participation in London civic life and he describes the members of the Corporation of London as citizens. The Latin words *civis* (citizen) and *civitas* (city, community) were in common usage in Latin medieval political writing, particularly writing concerned with the establishment of a civic sphere of governance distinct from the Church.¹² The Middle English word *citizen*, which describes freemen of the City as well as of members of an imagined heavenly city (i.e., the saints are citizens of Jerusalem), had also been in common use by the mid-fourteenth century. *Citizen* or *citisein*, as well as the rarer feminine *citiseine*, was virtually interchangeable with the word *burgeys*, a word that more obviously refers to urban persons likely engaged in trade. Thomas Usk describes the participants in London civic strife as “cytezens” of the City of London. In order to describe the community, he alternates between the word *city* and the more abstract words *commune* (community, city-state) and the *commons*. The invocation of the familiar but still Latinate word *citizen* allows Usk to draw parallels between the *communalities* of London and Rome. Instead of a Mayor and Aldermen, Usk’s barely fictive version of London is governed by “the mighty senatours in thilke cyté” (I.551). He draws a parallel between himself, a confessed one-time traitor, and the “Roman Zedeoreys” who turns from the Romans of his “kynde nacion” (542) to ally himself with Hannibal before returning to the Roman faction with crucial insider information. In the epigraph to this section, Usk substitutes London for Boethius’ Rome in Lady Love’s Middle English appropriation of Lady Philosophy’s speech against seeking worldly fame. Love may be arguing that London is not universally renowned and there is no point to seeking rewards of local office when greater, more eternal rewards are at stake. But in the very substitution of London for Rome, Usk makes the point that London can aspire to the status of representative city-state, that it can aspire to be a model *commune*. London should and could be a City as important and as well-governed as Rome or as peaceful as another named city-state, Athens (“Also I remembre me wel howe the name Athenes was rather after the god of peace than of batayle, shewynge that peace moste is necessarye to comunalities and cytes” [I.589-91]).

The most crucial element to producing the peace most “necessarye to comunalities and cytes” is a right assessment of the will of the community. The election becomes an opportunity for articulating the common will which produces the common good. As Usk puts it, the matter of who governs is determined by “auctorité of execucion by comen election” (I.598-99). The emphasis on what is commonly or collectively desired or elected is a crucial antidote to the effects of what Usk, in his earlier *Appeal*, identified as the secretive machinations of Northampton’s “couyns, & gadrynges, & confederacies” (160). Similarly, Usk describes Northampton and his fellows as “covyns of wicked men [who] conspyren ayen my soffthfast truth” in the *Testament* (I.629-30). Usk’s own crime against the common good has as much to do with his maintenance of secrecy as it does with actual wrongdoing: “And also that I nere

¹² I omit a section on medieval political theory for the purposes of brevity.

desired wrathe of the people ne indignacion of the worthy, for nothyng that ever I wrought or dyd in any doing myselfe else but in the mayntenaunce of these foresayd errors and in hydyng of the privytees therof” (I.570-74). The act of publicly accusing Northampton of subverting the common will is described as “trouthe in tellyng out of false conspyred maters” (I.645-646). Thomas Usk accuses Northampton and his men of secretive conspiracy against his own truth-telling and a more general conspiracy to subvert the collective will. For Thomas Usk, the collective good consists of a collective will, but he also emphasizes the necessity of making decisions. Matters pertaining to governance should be public and common, not simply so that the common will might be correctly determined during election season, but also so that the common will be well-informed by “softhfast truth.”

As Thomas Usk has painfully learned, assertions of truth are cheap and members of the community, like himself, have great difficulty distinguishing between what is true and good and what is not. This is particularly true when people are “feoble-wytted” (594) and incapable of discerning the “privy entent” (593-4) of a particularly moving rhetorical speech that invokes the common good (“In my youth I was drawe to ben assentaunt and, in my mightes, helping to certain conjuracions and other great maters of ruling of cytezens, and thylke thynges ben my drawers in, and exitours to tho maters werne so paynted and coloured that, at the prime face, me semed them noble and glorious to al the people” [I.544-8]). His own crime, as an alleged youth, had been to fall under the sway of exciting civic rhetoric and then to incite incompetent, unqualified people to mistakenly stick their nose in matters where they don’t belong in support of these seeming noble and glorious ideas (“Firste that thilke persones that hadden me drawn to their purposes and, me not wetyng the privy entent of their meanyng, drawn also the feoble-wytted people, that have non insight of gubernatyfe prudence to clamure and to crye on maters that they styred” [I.592-5]). Usk clearly argues that certain people are more qualified than others, by virtue of “gubernatyfe prudence” (595), to participate in civic governance. There are, it turns out, gradations in the qualities of London’s citizens even if Usk’s terms are not exacting. For example, his poetic avatar makes a distinction between the *people* and the *worthy*: “I nere desyred wrathe of the people ne indignacion of the worthy, for nothyng that ever I wrought or did” (I.571-3). Some of the people are “feoble-wytted people” (594), “innocentes of connyng” (597) who are incapable of discerning when they are being stirred by “hyndrers” (600). Some people should remain “pasyfe” rather than active in matters of civic concern (596). But people with feeble wits are not and should not be disqualified from citizenship, even if they are easily moved by the language of “torcencious cytezyns” (I.602). The people, generally, desire “comune avauntage” (596) even when they are being taken in by men who “shal bringe in pestylence and distruction” (603). Usk, as we shall later see, articulates the conditions for fruitful citizen-participation. His distinction between the worthy and the people more generally becomes the foundation an imaginative inauguration of a program of citizen-education.

In these same autobiographical passages, Thomas Usk's gestures towards his status as a native citizen of London—it is the city of “his kyndely engendrure” from where he is “forthe growen.” Thomas Usk, like Geoffrey Chaucer, was a rare kind of London citizen, a citizen by patrimony. Since their fathers were members of professional London guilds and London citizens—a hurer and a vintner respectively, Usk and Chaucer were automatically entitled to the franchise of the City. The franchise of the City conferred a series of privileges such as the right to vote, the right to participate in civic office, the right to own property in the City, and the right to be taxed and tried in London by London authorities. Usk's status as a citizen, as well as his claim to native citizenship, establishes Usk's good intentions (i.e., he feels a natural love for London). But Thomas Usk understands that such a claim is insufficient, not only because of his confession of treachery, but also because most London citizens were, in fact, migrants like Chaucer's London Cook who comes from Ware. Most migrants to London earned the franchise of the City by becoming members of professional guilds after a period of indentured apprenticeship or by purchasing their citizenship outright. London's population in the late-fourteenth century had been depleted by the plague and, while the City was an increasingly popular destination for workers and clerics in search of livelihoods, such migrants looking to profit from urban density and traffic were just as likely to reside in the less-regulated and cheaper nearby jurisdictions of Southwark and Westminster. In 1381, immediately after the Peasant Rising, a civic ordinance was issued that intended to make London citizenship more widely appealing and easily available. The price of the franchise of the City had been set at the fixed price of three pounds. The 1381 ordinance, proclaimed because of the alarmingly number of empty residences within the City walls, allowed the Mayor and two Alderman to set an alternative price more suitable to the estates of people intending to purchase a franchise and that banned multiple parties from profiting from such a purchase.¹³

Citizenship by patrimony, indeed citizenship of any kind, was not inalienable nor did it confer inalienable privileges. Thomas Usk, at the time of writing the *Testament*, had just witnessed the possibility that one could be alienated from the City in spite of native or natural citizenship and even of civic prominence. His former employer John of Northampton had been punished for his participation in undermining civic electoral processes and of inciting civic unrest with perpetual exile from the City. More importantly, Thomas Usk clearly found himself alienated from civic participation in the aftermath of both his actual participation in Northampton's political party and in the aftermath of his virtuoso performance of betrayal in the *Appeal*. The invocation of natural citizenship with the evocation of the natural through the repeated use of variations on the word “kynde” could not be the sole ground for an appeal for inclusion political life. Indeed, natural citizenship was a contested privilege in late medieval London. By

¹³ See *Calendar of Letter Books: Letter Book H, 1375-99*, Ed. Reginald Sharpe (London: John Edward Francis, 1908), p. 162.

1387, all men who were citizens by patrimony were legally obliged to swear an oath of allegiance to the City upon coming of age. This oath of fealty had formerly been required only of new citizens, citizens by guild membership or by purchase. This civic ordinance was particularly concerned with citizens by patrimony residing elsewhere in England—demanding that they announce themselves and proclaim their fealty to the City and in the City regardless of where they resided in order to exercise the privileges of their franchise.¹⁴ Around the time of Usk's writing, the already contested status of natural citizenship allowed him to invoke his patrimony—he was born a citizen—even as he revised the terms of citizenship so that his membership in the community might be described in terms of his multiple patrimonies which will be constituted by his native citizenship *and* the transformation and reform that comes from Love's teaching.

Little emphasis has been placed upon Usk's native citizen status, primarily because he had many other claims to citizenship. Thomas Usk was a member of one of the most powerful and prestigious guilds of the City, the Goldsmiths, and he was actually employed as their scrivener, a skilled position that required intimate knowledge of legal forms.¹⁵ He was, additionally, employed by Northampton as the writer of his bills and records demonstrate that he had often appeared in court. In 1384, Thomas Usk betrayed Northampton through the composition of a legal document in in London English even though he actually delivered the contents of the *Appeal* orally in the presence of the King at the Court in Reading. By actually composing and writing the *Appeal* ("I, Thomas Vsk, in the presece of John.....co.....of London knowleched thes wordes & wrote hem with myn owne [honde]" [2-3]), Thomas Usk had made his profession crucial to his performance of his public political identity. In the *Testament*, he reclaims that identity, which he now hopes to dissociate from that one infamous instance, by very explicitly assuming the role of Love's scribe and servant. He identifies his capacity, within the fiction, as her scribe and her translator (Love teaches in Latin, Usk translates her teaching into English).¹⁶ He associates himself, professionally, with Love's cause and identifies himself as Love's servant rather than Northampton's. He now puts his skill to use in the service of a new employer, Love, whose instruction by definition must contribute to the common good ("I wol, and I charge thee, in vertue of obedience that thou to me owest, to written my wordes and sette hem in writynges that they mowe as my witnessynge ben noted among the people" [I.233-5]). In his "Prologue," in addition, Usk identifies the document as his composition, but also as a material manuscript object as his own production, through the artful rendition of an authorial

¹⁴ *Letter-Book H*, pp. 309-10.

¹⁵ See Marion Turner's "Usk and the Goldsmiths" in *New Medieval Literatures* 9 (2007): pp. 139-177.

¹⁶ "Lo, thus ganne she syng in Latin as I may constrewe it in our Englysshe tonge" (II.ii.101-2). On the productive relationship between narrative, vernacular legal writing and imaginative writing, see Sheila Lindenbaum, "London Texts and Literate Practice" in *CHMEL*, Ed. David Wallace, Rpt (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), pp. 284-309.

signature and an allusion to the conditions of scribal production that are also metaphors for his compositional skills (“Some men there ben that peynten with colours ryche and some with verse as with red ynke and some with coles and chalke; and yet is there good matere to the leude people of thilke chalky purtreiture” [I.10-12]).¹⁷

Usk’s professional scribal capacities are as crucial to his performance of public citizen identity as his status as London native. In order to make the case that he should be restored to the community, he makes allusions to his many claims to citizenship: he is a native citizen—a natural citizen—as well as a citizen by guild membership. He would make a more than capable scribe and community servant. Furthermore, the *Testament* is imaginatively doing the work of an oath of citizen fealty. *The Testament of Love*, by its title, invites a reading of the work as a form of civic writing: it is a contract, a bequest, and a law. The authorial signature, an acrostic that permitted the belated identification of the author, is a petition: MARGARETE OF VIRTW HAVE MERCI ON THINE VSK. The narrative itself is obsessed with oath-taking and the legal consequences of swearing: “Every othe... must have these lawes, that is true jugement and rightwysenesse, in which thyng, if any of these lack, the othe is ytourned into name of perjury” (I.687-90). A “trewe serment [oath]” should be followed by judgment and justice, otherwise it is invalid (689-90). False accusations, when made known to the commons, constitute “sklauder” (I.702). The narrative investment in the capacity of language to tell the truth or not to tell the truth and to effect a form of justice and judgment is easiest to understand in the work’s discussion of marriage, a relationship constituted entirely by an oath. For a courtly love narrative, Usk’s text is surprisingly willing to describe marriage as a non-erotic relationship. Instead, “spousayle” refers primarily to the sacramental and legal union between a man and a woman that demands an oath as well as “consent in heart” (I.ix.909). The oath, the spoken words, enseals the consent between two people who promise to live in assent and accord. Marriage, therefore, has little to do with desire—Usk’s model marriage is the sexless relationship between Mary and Joseph—and everything to do with the capacity to make a legally binding, effective contract.¹⁸

Thomas Usk was one of the first vernacular English authors, if not the first, to make the discourse of courtly love explicitly refer to civic love. Love is the affect that binds men and women together in marriage, but she is also the bond between people in her service more generally. Love imagines her servants as like to members of a guild, a collective who constitute her retinue and who wear her livery (“‘Loke than,’ quod she, ‘thou persever in my service in whiche I have thee grounded that thilke skorne in

¹⁷ For an imaginative and useful account of Usk’s capacities as a scribal technician, see Anne Middleton, “Thomas Usk’s ‘Perdurable Letters:’ *The Testament of Love* from Script to Print” in *Studies in Bibliography* 51 (1998): pp. 63-116.

¹⁸ This insight comes from Marion Turner’s “‘Certaynly his noble sayenges can I not amende:’ Thomas Usk and *Troilus and Criseyde*” in *The Chaucer Review* 37:1 (2002): pp. 26-39.

thyn enemyes mowe this on thy person be not sothed: lo this man began to edefye, but, for his foundement is bad, to the ende may he it not bringe. For mekenesse in countenance with a manly hert in dedes and in longe contynuaunce is the consyngance of my livery to al my retinue delyvered” [I.489-94]).¹⁹ Love, because her name is so identifiably English, explicitly refers to the language of vernacular London guild ordinances, which often begin with a formulaic oath between members that they profess mutual love and accord.²⁰ The restoration of Love’s teaching, which we will see below, enables Thomas Usk to claim that this text, in which he proposes to persevere in service, acts as an imaginative substitute for a renewed oath of civic fealty: it is his promise to love and serve his “kyndely” City.

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The Testament of Love, by its title, refers immediately to the poetic discourse of courtly love, already associated in Middle English with Geoffrey Chaucer in the late fourteenth century. Thomas Usk’s narrative is a daunting three-book prose allegory: Books I and II contain translations of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* interspersed with topical allusion, scholastic argumentation, and autobiographical narrative and Book III is primarily a translation of an early scholastic tract on the relationship between free will and Divine providence composed by Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109). These disparate elements are made coherent, not simply through the shared theological preoccupations of Boethius and Anselm, but also through the imposition of a unifying courtly love narrative: Usk’s poetic avatar speaks to Lady Love about his desire for an ideal love-object, the Margarite-Pearl with whom he desires to be “knytte.” Usk’s avatar generally understands “blysse” as membership in community, a community alternatively identified as the basic political community of husband and wife and as a community of friends. Love is a universal capacity and affect: she identifies herself with a universal and a natural law repeatedly, but she also seems oddly attached to London through her repeated allusions to local legal practices, such as the English love-day, which have been named after herself (“‘What,’ quod she, ‘most of al maked I not a lovedaye bytwene God and mankynde, and chese a mayde to be nonpere [umpire] to put the quarrel at ende?’” [I.168-70]).²¹

Love, like London, is an agent of “noriture” or nourishment in *The Testament of Love*. She identifies herself as Thomas Usk’s lifelong intimate: she attends to him in “propre person” (174) because

¹⁹ See Marion Turner’s argument in “Usk and the Goldsmiths” on the timely materiality of the rewards that Love offers: “The repeated mentions of livery are especially important, as Usk himself wrote the Goldsmiths’ livery and sought the wear the king’s” (162).

²⁰ See Caroline M. Barron and Laura Wright’s collection of the Middle English guild ordinances of 1388 in “The London Middle English Guild Certificates of 1388-89” in *Nottingham Medieval Studies* (1995): pp. 108-45. Middle English, as opposed to Latin or French, guild ordinances were composed long before 1388 and perhaps as early as 1333. Large urban centers, such as London or York, were the first witnesses to official writing in Middle English.

²¹ I omit a long section on the love-day for the shorter version of this piece.

he is one of her folk and one of her lost sheep (I.152-61). She identifies herself and Usk as each other's *nory*: the word *nory*, most familiar to readers of Middle English from Chaucer's *Boece*, refers to tutor and student, but also to wet nurse and child. Each time that Lady Love invokes the terms "nory" and "noriture," she invokes her double-status as Usk's nurse and teacher ("O my nory, wenyst thou that my maner be to foryet my frendes or my servauntes?" [I.127]; "'Wel than,' quod she, 'for I se thee in disease and sorowe I wote wel thou arte one of myn nories'" [I.185-6]). The intimacy between the two figures implies that Love's teaching is Usk's earliest knowledge and his first food. Her teaching is as natural to Usk as his "kyndely" love for his native City, the site of his "noriture."²² Love's teaching identical to the kind of instruction performed within the home, the elementary instruction that precedes institutional instruction at schools such as the school of the Abbey of Saint Victor in Paris or, more locally, the grammar schools at Saint Paul's, St. Martin Le Grand, or St. Mary Arches in late medieval London. Home is identified here with the City, but also simply with teaching in the home.²³ Love's teaching is elementary and necessary, but also, because it comes so early, almost natural. The natural capacity for thought, the "inwytte," and Love's teaching are the earliest formed and most crucial enablers of reasonable thought ("'But enquire of thy next frendes, that is, thyne inwytte and me, that have ben thy maystresse and the recour [help] and fine of thy disease" [369-70]). The status of Love's teaching—a homely teaching—becomes the very basis for Usk's language of composition, even if he alludes to his work's partial status as a translation from Latin: Latin, is the language of clerks, and French is a "straunge langage" (Prol. 23) or a foreign language ("Let than clerkes endyten in Latyn, for they have the propertie of science and of knowynge in that facultie; and lette Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes" [25-6]). Usk's own book, *The Testament*, is most helpful to a London audience—imagined as consisting only of the English—if presented, like Usk's teaching, as an intimate kind of instruction "in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge" (Prol. 26-7). The very language of Usk's *Testament* allows it to assume the status of a homely learning.

The "feeble-witted" people of Usk's allusive, autobiographical passages are, like himself, not incapable of learning or thought. Instead, they have likely forgotten an exiled Love's first and most nourishing teaching. Love complains that Thomas Usk has been learning all the wrong things since he has replaced her milk with the wrong kind of solid food: "'O where haste thou be so longe commensal [companion at the dining table] that hast so mykel [much] eaten of the potages of foryetfulnesse and

²² See Middle English Dictionary, *norice* 2c. The examples, from the later fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century, identify Jerusalem as the universal *norice* of Christians, Athens as the legendary *norice* of philosophers, and Greece, more generally, as the *norice* of knighthood.

²³ On Thomas Usk and the description of home, see Isabel Davis' "Them and Usk: Writing Home in the Middle Ages" in *Writing Masculinity in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), pp. 37-75.

drunken so of ignorance that the olde soukynghe whiche thou haddest of me arne amaystred and lorn fro al maner of knowyng?” (I.375-7). Aside from the identification of Love’s teaching as material nourishment (“the olde soukynghe”), the passage also identifies Usk’s earlier participation in factional politics as partaking of the feast of a new set of unloving teachers. The reference to a feast suggests the historical conditions of civic and guild life, but also represents the temptations of seeming plenty (Usk eats “so mykel” of the “potages of foryetfulness” and has drunk a great deal of “ignorance”) that is opposed to Love’s measured, nourishing instruction.²⁴ In a later, similarly motivated passage, Love’s maternal teaching is opposed to the seductions of an allegorical strumpet, in a parable retold from Proverbs 7:22, who also promises bliss and joy and who seduces the narrator with her promise of fulfilling nourishment: “‘Come,’ they sayne and ‘be we drunken of our pappes’” (II.1385-6). The temptations of the body and the temptations of immoderate youth are represented as misguided desire for a new kind of knowledge, seeming love represented not by the body but by “softe speche and mery, and with fayre honyed wordes” that “skleren [veil]” and “wimplen [conceal]” errors (I.1365-66). Love’s nourishing “pappes” have been momentarily displaced by a seductive teaching. The seductions of gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual excess represent the seductions of youth, but also remind readers of the civic language of Northampton and his faction. Their civic rhetoric, which produced regrettable divisive actions, “werene so paynted and coloured that, at the prime face, me semed them noble and glorious to all the people” (I.547-8).

“Miss-menynghe” civic language has been the instrument to inciting and stirring the poetic narrator and, through him, the people. The incapacity to do what is right, to act ethically, is rooted in hermeneutic capacity, an ability to distinguish between false and true civic speech and to recognize the hidden meanings “skleren” and “wimplen” by factions who want to divide the City. Love’s teaching reanimates Usk’s capacity to distinguish between true and false speech, which additionally identifies her with the earliest arts of institutional instruction, grammar and rhetoric. Since civic language in Usk’s divided London is allegorical, in the political sense of being secretive (privy) and divisive rather than the poetic sense of containing a kernel of truth that must be unraveled, Love’s teaching now imparts the most crucial capacity for civic participation. Her teaching reveals truth, as Usk tells her: “‘Thou bearest the keyes of al privy thinges’” (I.384-5). Love’s key unlocks a metaphorical treasury of knowledge, but Love’s “lore” is also the equivalent of learning to read the secret intentions of the allegorical language that had become part of public life.²⁵ Appropriately, Love is also a teacher of composition: “‘And

²⁴ I omit a section on Dante’s *Il Convivio* or *The Banquet* another vernacular work that imagines the possibility of continued learning in the active spheres of life that deliberately imagines methods for teaching academic disciplines in civic context.

²⁵ I omit a section on civic rhetoric and the standard trajectory of the medieval curriculum as well as multiple references in the *Testament* to the practices of grammatical instruction in medieval schools. Ethics and politics get taught with grammar and rhetoric in medieval schoolrooms.

also...whan any of my servaunts ben alone in solytary place, I have yet ever besyed me to be with hem in comforte of their hertes and taught hem to make songes of playnte and of blysse, and to endyten letters of rhetoricke in queynte [ornate] understondynges, and to bethynke in what wyse they might best their ladyes in good servyce please" (I.193-8). Usk takes advantage of the possibility of figuring himself as a "youth," in need of learning and susceptible to forgivable political error, because he is "in connyng...yonge:" "[I] can yet but crepe, this leude A B C have I sette into lernyng" (II.84-86). By referring to the *Testament* as a first attempt in his practice of imaginative composition, Thomas Usk excuses error, but also imagines that such a learning may have value for an equally "leude" civic audience. The "leude" or vernacular status of Usk's writing, "this leude A B C," also establishes the possibility of a "leude" or vernacular learning distinct from institutional training conducted in Latin and available. *The Testament* becomes part of a civic English learning that acknowledges that "every man travayleth by dyvers studye and seke thylke blysse by dyvers wayes" (II.300-1). *The Testament of Love* entertains the possibility of a kind of study limited to what is immediately useful to the "leude" engaged in the active life rather than presenting "homely" study as a necessary prelude to clerical training.

In his "Prologue," Usk acknowledges his debt to a Latin clerical tradition when he identifies himself with Ruth as the gatherer who comes after the harvest and when he, borrowing a figure from the historian Ranulph Higden, identifies himself as an intellectual dwarf (60) who must gather learning from heroic philosophical traditions. But Usk also effaces his debt to Anselm of Canterbury, never naming the scholastic philosopher whose methods *and* figures animate his work, preferring instead to refer to writing already "Englished," Boethius' *Consolation* available in Chaucer's translation and Chaucer's own *Troylus and Criseyde*. The only "Latin" authority that Usk invokes by name repeatedly is Aristotle. Aristotle is identified in the *Testament* as a student of "kynde" or nature ("Whereof Aristotle in the boke *de Animalibus* saythe to naturel phylospheres 'It is great lykyng in love of knowynge their creatour, and also in knowynge of causes in kyndely thinges consydered'" [Prol. 45-7]) and of moral philosophy or ethics and politics ("Aristotel determyneth that ende and good ben one and convertible in understanding, andhe that wyl doth away good, and he that loketh nat to th'ende, loketh not to the good. But he that doth good and doth not goodly and draweth away the direction of th'ende nat goodly, must needs be bad" [III.ii.194-6]).²⁶ Aristotelian writing was crucial to university study in the later Middle Ages, but Usk's invocation of Aristotle makes his teaching immediately available to civic audiences and, in fact, refers to the branches of Aristotelian writing that had long been part of civic and courtly traditions.²⁷ For Usk, knowledge of Aristotle does not prompt a turn to the university curriculum or the further study away from

²⁶ See also II.194-6.

²⁷ Section on Aristotle and the university curriculum and Aristotelian knowledge in court and city omitted.

home conducted in the language of clerics: instead, Aristotelian teaching becomes part of local, homely, and near “kyndely” knowledge.

Love’s teaching and Love’s law is figured as universal and ancient as well as natural and opposed to contingent, diverse human law:

“Wyste thou not wel that al the lawe of kynde is my lawe and by God ordayned and stablissed to dure by kynde reasoun, wherefore al lawe by mannes wytte purveyed ought to be underputte to lawe of kynde, which yet hath be commune to every kyndely creature that my statutes and my lawe ben kyndely arne general to al peoples? Olde doynge and by many turnynges of yeres used, and with the peoples maner proved, mowen nat so lightly ben defased but newe doynge, contrariauntes suche olde, often causen diseases and broken many purposes”

I.453-69

Love’s speech establishes the possibility of a “kynde reasoun,” which makes a natural capacity for thought sufficient to determine what laws are “kyndely” and, therefore, good. The insistence upon the “kyndely” establishes the possibility that little formal learning is required of citizens who wished to live ethically and to participate well-politically. Love simply demands that she be the affect and the appetite that determines the course of thought and the establishment of laws. Topically, the speech registers a resistance to reform, an opposition to recent attempts to change the civic structure of London proposed by John of Northampton (“newe doynge”), in favor of an established legal and governmental structure. But Usk also inaugurates the need to restore “kynde” learning and “kynde” law, a natural knowledge and law distinguished from abstract and Latin clerical learning and law. Thomas Usk actually locates Love’s teaching amongst the species of knowledge in Book III. Philosophy, knowlege, is divided into the natural (“whiche in kyndely thynges treten” [III.49]), the moral (“which in order of lyvyng maners teachet” [III.52-3]), and rhetoric (which “turneth into reason of understandyng al thynges to be sayd soth and discussed” [59-60]). But these species of philosophy must also be made to accord with the law (“as phylosophie for love of wisdom is declared, lawe for mainteynaunce of peace is holden” [III.62-3]) and both of these must be in accord with love (“and these with love must nedes accorden” [III.63]). The trinity of philosophy, law, and love are identified as the crucial elements to “profitable administration in commynalties of realmes and cytes by evenhed profitably to raigne” (III.65-6). Love, as we have already seen, embodies natural law (“But lawe of kynde is commen to every nation, as conjunction of man and woman in love, succession of children in heritance, restitution of thyng by strength taken or lent, and this lawe among al other hale soveraynest gre in worship, whiche lawe began at the begynning of reasonable creature” [III.83-6]). But she is also crucial to the formation of philosophy and law and foremost of the three (“and love toform al other” [68]) in maintaining peace and profitably in “commynalties of realmes and cytes.”

The “kyndelyness” of Love’s teaching—its status as maternal instruction and natural law—allows Usk to imagine service to the beloved Margarite-Pearl and service more generally speaking as a form or product of “noriture.” The dominant metaphor of cultivation—“How shoulde the ground without kindly noriture bringen forth any frutes?” (I.25-6)—demands the articulation of a model of service that is stable, in the sense of continuous, but also stable, in the sense of set in place. Devotion to the Margarite-Pearl, demands a stable perseverance: “‘Loke than,’ quod she [Love], thou persever in my servyce...A tree ofte set in dyvers places wol nat by kynde endure to bring forth frutes” (I.436-7). The surprising model of service that Thomas Usk fully describes in Book III imagines service, in courtly as well as in civic love, as the cultivation of a tree. Right action in the *Testament* is called “service,” a word that coincides with Usk’s poetic pose as a supplicating lover but also explains a code of ethical service to the city. The Usk-figure asks Love what true service is. Lady Love responds: “I shal say thee...in a fewe wordes: resonable workynges in plesaunce and profit of thy soverayne” (III.ii.163-4). For a service to be fruitful, it must consist of good acts that are freely willed by the heart and accomplished without “surquedry” or pride in thought (III.ii.173-5). Love argues that the heart—the organ that loves and that wills—is the ground for the tree that will produce fruitful service. The free will is the ground of one’s desire and it prompts the beginning of service. Continued service produces a tree’s stock and as that stock grows, it springs branches that correspond to the voicing of desire. Such steadfast and outspoken service necessarily produces fruit or reward. The language of “kynde” and of Usk’s controversial “wexing tree” (III.vii.806-12) elaborates a method of service that does not imply that the person who performs the service stay in a place. Instead, it is service itself and an unchanging sovereign that must be stable in order to “wexe” and be fruitful.

For Thomas Usk, the “kyndely” product of London, the ability to serve the City implies a desperate desire to stay in his native place. He is absolutely opposed to the possibility of exile, of being removed from London in fact or from its political public life. His despair at the opening of his fiction emerges from imagining the possibility of exile, of being estranged from the people of the City and from his native home: “Straunge hath by waye of intrucyon [intrusion] made his home there me shulde if reason were hearde as he shulde” (I.13-4). Strange or estrangement has intruded upon his experience in the City and he hopes to cast strangeness aside by presenting the *Testament* as a substitute for a public oath to the City, an oath of fealty that can be validly spoken only after Thomas Usk has undergone Love’s course of instruction which enables him to realize, in thought and in action, the conditions of loving, peace-making service.