Reasoning Rebellion and Reformation: Natural Law and the Ethics of Power and
Resistance in Late Medieval English Literature

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Reasoning Rebellion and Reformation: Natural Law and the Ethics of Power and Resistance in Late Medieval English Literature argues that the natural law was a vital ethical, political, and literary discourse in England amid the social rebellions that comprehensively shook communal bonds in the 1380s and 90s. It illuminates the centrality and complexities of this natural law discourse through analysis of the works of two fourteenth-century writers, Thomas Usk and Geoffrey Chaucer. Twice branded a traitor and finally executed for treason in 1388, Usk held a resolute faith in the political power of the natural law, interlacing his own tumultuous political history with the natural law in an effort to save his life and reform his culture. Unlike Usk, and indeed unlike many of his contemporaries, Chaucer foregrounds in his poetry the possibility that effective resistance through the natural law may be impossible in vicious and tyrannical societies. Chaucer questions the view that the natural law is an unshakeable foundation for effective resistance, demonstrating in major poems like *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale* that the natural law can be obfuscated and indeed appropriated by corrupt forms of power. In response to his culture's debates about natural and unnatural forms of resistance, then, Chaucer posed a more fundamental question which is often marginalized within the natural law tradition itself: are the definitions of natural and unnatural determined by the dominant powers in a culture?

Dedication

For my teachers.

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This dissertation would not have been possible without my family and my teachers.

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to the natural law that I follow in this dissertation. Without them this would be a much poorer dissertation, and I would be a much poorer medievalist, academic, and teacher.

My final thanks is to my mentor and dissertation director, David Aers.   From him, I've learned not only how to be a better medievalist, academic, and teacher, but also how to be a better human being. His teaching has changed my life in small and big ways, and it will continue to shape my life long after I leave Duke. Thank you.

Introduction

A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the ruler…Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind…Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely; for this is tyranny, being conducive to the private good of the ruler, and to the injury of the multitude.

—St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

According to medieval ethical and political theory, the natural law provides all rational beings basic ethical and political precepts that should structure our lives. Through the natural law we recognize that vicious acts such as murder and theft are morally wrong. We also understand that acts of virtue are good for us and our communities. This natural knowledge stems from inclinations that are integral to our nature as rational creatures. In his treatise on the forms of law, St. Thomas Aquinas identifies three central sets of natural inclinations, each defined in relation to a good end. Like all living things, we are inclined to self-preservation. This is our first and foremost inclination. Our second inclination is to sex and to the education of our children.

Finally, and most importantly, we are inclined to live in a community and to learn the

truth about God. All that pertains to these inclinations belongs to the natural law.

Theft, for example, is against the natural law because it hinders and prevents our

participation in a community and our learning the truth about God at the end of our

lives. An act of justice, on the other hand, is prescribed by the natural law because it is

conducive to these two ends.[1] These are some of the basic principles of natural law

theory, a theory that was fundamental to how medieval writers understood themselves

and their communities.

Midway through *The Parson's Tale*, the penitential treatise that concludes *The

Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer's Parson instructs rulers "to kepe and mayntene and

deffenden hire underlynges or hire subgetz in resoun."[2] Here, the Parson defines just

rulership using language bound with the natural law. In medieval ethical and political

discourse, the term *reason* indicates adherence to the precepts of the natural law. To be

reasonable, rulers must govern themselves and their communities in accordance with

the natural law. To such rulers, medieval writers believed, subjects owed their

obedience. This is an ideal of government in the Middle Ages. Rulers promulgate

reasonable laws and subjects obey them, their actions coming together to make for a just

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[1] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae.94.2-3. Throughout the dissertation I use the following edition: *Summa Theologiae*, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, eds. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcon (Lander: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).
[2] *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), X.773. All subsequent references to Chaucer's works are to this edition and are given parenthetically throughout the text.

and peaceful society. When rulers depart from this ideal, governing in ways that

contravene "resoun," they cease to act as legitimate rulers and become, in the Parson's

vocabulary, "lyk wolves"—tyrants committed to their private good over the common

good (X.775). According to medieval ethical and political theory, subjects are not

helpless before tyrants. On the contrary, they possess the justification to resist and

overthrow tyrannical regimes through the natural law.

In *Reasoning Rebellion and Reformation*, I demonstrate that this natural law

understanding of power and resistance is at the core of ethical and political discourse in

English prose and poetry during the 1380s and 1390s. These decades were punctuated

by major crises of authority, including the Great Rising of 1381, which saw servants and

laborers rebel against their lords in an effort to abolish serfdom; the 1388 Merciless

Parliament, in which the Lords Appellant executed allies of Richard II to weaken the

king; and the revolution against and deposition of Richard II in 1399. During this

turbulent period, English writers turned to the natural law to define and recover

ostensibly natural forms of community, power, and resistance. Drawing on this timeless

and universal law would, in theory, be the first step towards concord. But far from a

unifying discourse, the natural law was itself a site of disagreement and conflict in late

fourteenth-century England as writers advanced rival interpretations of nature and

reason. In one of the most striking examples, the poet John Gower characterized the

attempt to end serfdom in the Great Rising as an effort to "conquer Nature's laws"

shortly after the rebel leader John Ball preached that the natural law supported the

abolition of servitude.[3] This project asks: what is the status of the natural law as an

ethical, political, and literary discourse amid such conflicts and disagreements in late

fourteenth-century England?

While all major English writers of the period participated in the discourse of the

natural law, my project focuses on the works of Thomas Usk and the poetry of Geoffrey

Chaucer. Usk was a scribe, politician, and writer who seemed to believe that the natural

law could reform his culture and save his life. Twice branded a traitor and finally

executed for treason during the Merciless Parliament, Usk wrote about the natural law

as way out of the labyrinth of rumor, rebellion, and betrayal that gripped London

politics in the 1380s and that threatened his life. Chaucer held no such hopes about the

natural law. His poetry foregrounds the possibility that effective resistance and cultural

reformation through the natural law may be impossible in tyrannical societies. In major

poems such as *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer demonstrates that

corrupt forms of power can obfuscate the natural law and appropriate its discourse to

justify their own dominion. Not only might subjects forget the precepts of the natural

law in such cultures, but they also might come to believe that the *unnatural* practices

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[3] I quote Gower's *Vox Clamantis* here from *John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events: The Visio Anglie (1381) and Cronica tripertita (1400)*, ed. David R. Carlson, trans. A.G. Rigg (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011), 208. For John Ball's alleged use of the natural law to justify the abolish of servitude, see Thomas Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham (1376-1422)*, trans. David Preest (Rochester: The Boydell Press, 2005), 162.

which perpetuate a corrupt order are in accordance with the laws of nature. In response

to his culture's debates about natural and unnatural forms of power, resistance, and

community, then, Chaucer posed a more fundamental question which is marginalized

within the natural law tradition itself: are the definitions of natural and unnatural

determined by the dominant powers in a culture?

Even though many intellectual historians have focused on medieval natural law

theory, there has never been a major study on the proliferation of natural law writing in

England in the 1380s and 1390s.[4] When literary critics have offered readings of the

natural law writing of the period, their analysis is often mired by oversimplifications or

misunderstandings of the natural law itself.[5] In his *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, for

example, Lee Patterson reads the natural law in Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* as an invisible

hand that governs the universe:

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[4] The literature on medieval natural law theory is vast. I have found the following works on the tradition of natural law theory indispensable: Annabel S. Brett, *Liberty, Right and Nature: Individual Rights in Later Scholastic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); Francis Oakley, *Natural Law, Laws of Nature, Natural Rights: Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Ideas* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005); Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law 1150-1625* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997); and Brian Tierney, *Liberty and Law: The Idea of Permissive Natural Law, 1100-1800* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

[5] There are some notable recent exceptions. David Aers's treatment of the natural law in William Langland's *Piers Plowman* has inspired some of the questions on which I focus in this dissertation: David Aers, *Beyond Reformation?: An Essay on William Langland's Piers Plowman and the End of Constantinian Christianity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015), 46-47, 64-65. Rebecca Davis has also written about nature and the natural law in *Piers Plowman*: Rebecca Davis, *Piers Plowman and the Books of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). Her questions are not my own, but her book is an important contribution to a topic in medieval literature that remains underexplored.

> [*The Miller's Tale*] bespeaks a calm confidence in the just workings of
> natural law. The *Tale* everywhere displays an apparently flawless
> orderliness: not only does the apparently random aimlessness of the plot
> reveal itself to be ordered by an exquisite logic, but the unthinking
> hedonism of the actions leads to judgments of an impeccable
> exactness…Compared to the moral anarchy over which the Knight has
> (however unwittingly) presided, the *Miller's Tale* seems to articulate a
> world of perfect moral sense.[6]

 In this analysis of *The Miller's Tale*, the natural law is understood as an efficient and

infallible instrument of justice, tabulating the wrongdoings of Chaucer's characters with

an all-seeing eye and rendering suitable punishments through the workings of nature

and contingency. What Patterson misconstrues here is that the natural law guides rather

than intervenes in human lives. We choose to follow the natural law. And when we

choose to depart from it, it does not correct us. This does not mean that there are no

intelligible consequences for deviating from the natural law. On the contrary, medieval

writers believed acting against the natural law prevented the attainment of the goods

that make us happy. Readings of the natural law in medieval literature thus must

concentrate on the choices of characters as well as the outcomes of these choices.

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[6] Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991),
259.

I begin my dissertation with Thomas Usk. In my first chapter, I argue that the natural law is key to understanding Usk's urgent meditations on obedience and resistance in his *Appeal* and *Testament of Love*. Usk wrote these two texts under an immense amount of pressure. In 1384 Usk was arrested for his role in the vicious factional conflicts which dominated London politics in the aftermath of the Great Rising. In his *Appeal*, written after his arrest, Usk alleges that John of Northampton, Usk's former boss and London's mayor from 1381-1383, tried to instigate a revolt after he lost reelection to his rival Nicholas Brembre. One year later, arrested again and facing backlash for his defection, Usk wrote the *Testament of Love* to justify his decision to write the *Appeal*. Drawing on medieval chronicles and legal documents, I contend that Usk's *Appeal* employs charged language tied to the Great Rising to accentuate both the lingering danger of Northampton's failed revolt and the importance of civic obedience to Brembre and his allies. Then, in the *Testament of Love*, Usk uses the natural law to broaden this political vision. First, he demonstrates that Northampton instituted an unnatural order as a tyrant. Next, he shows that he followed Brembre's command to appeal Northampton because the natural law establishes that citizens in monarchical societies should obey the rational commands of their superiors. Against his medieval critics, then, Usk portrays his actions in 1384 as in accordance with the precepts of the natural law.

Usk's use of the natural law extends beyond his justification for his defection in 1384. My second chapter argues that Usk sees the natural law as foundational for cultural reformation in his *Testament of Love*. Across his text Usk orders his reflections on natural law ethics and politics into a model of service rooted in the *fin'amor* tradition. Literary critics have not considered the complexities of this model of service, arguing instead that Usk's *Testament* everywhere discloses his desire for employment from Brembre and his allies. In contrast to these critics, I show that Usk's model of service offers a sophisticated social vision founded on the natural law. Through this model Usk defines the fundamental ethical, political, and theological concepts which he believes should structure and inform a virtuous life in a monarchical society. This definitional work, I argue, aspires to reformation. By defining natural behavior, Usk hopes to inspire his culture to abandon its vicious practices and secure civic peace in London through acts of virtue and charitable love.

What Usk did not consider in his *Testament of Love* is that the natural law could be drawn into corrupt forms of power and culture. Within such cultures, Chaucer shows, it becomes very difficult to discern the precepts of the natural law. In my third chapter, I argue that in *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer reveals that the discourse of the natural law itself can be used to legitimate vicious forms of power. Chaucer's explorations of power and the natural law in this poem are centered on the discourses and practices of love. Across the poem Pandarus, who aids Troilus in his pursuit of

Criseyde, claims to be the voice of reason and the natural law in matters of love. Early

in the poem Pandarus attempts to coerce Criseyde, telling her that it is natural and

reasonable for her to return Troilus's love. Later, he glosses a range of actions, including

abduction, as in accordance with and supported by the precept of the natural law that

tells us to love. While Chaucer believed, like many medieval writers, that love is indeed

natural, he did not think that nature teaches us how to love. Pandarus's naturalizations

are shown to be definitively unnatural, the products of a male-dominated culture. For

women, Chaucer demonstrates, these naturalizations are entrapping. Theoretically, the

natural law offers women the resources to challenge corrupt forms of power. But what

sort of resistance is possible when the natural law itself has become so deeply enmeshed

in the practices that constitute power?

Chaucer explores this question further in *The Knight's Tale*. In my fourth and

final chapter, I contend that *The Knight's Tale* shows that tyranny can obfuscate the

precepts of the natural law, so confusing subjects that reasonable and lawful resistance

becomes an impossibility. Early in this tale, Palamon, one of the two main pagan

knights of the tale, wonders why he must live in accordance with the natural law when

animals may follow all of their lusts. This is an odd remark: medieval writers believed

that all humans, including pagans, should recognize and desire the behaviors and ends

of the natural law. His failure to do so, I argue, must be attributed to Theseus, the

tyrannical ruler who conquered Palamon and Arcite's society. Building on the works of

David Aers, I argue that Theseus presides over a corrupt culture which obscures the precepts of the natural law. The ends accessible to pagans through the natural law —the virtues and the common good—are replaced by the ends of Theseus: ends bound up with the forms of violence practiced by the medieval knightly class. By instituting these ends, Theseus secures his dominion, ensuring that Palamon and Arcite cannot mount a rebellion against him, which the natural law would justify. The tale then is a penetrating critique of tyranny, an issue increasingly on the minds of English writers at the end of the fourteenth century when Richard II was widely viewed as a tyrant. Could the confusions and failures of the pagan knights Palamon and Arcite become those of English men and women living under Richard II?

The natural law is integral to the medieval political imagination. During two decades of social turmoil, Chaucer, Usk, and their contemporaries turned to the natural law to make sense of their culture and their lives in it. By analyzing Chaucer and Usk's divergent writing on the natural law, *Reasoning Rebellion* illuminates a strand of ethical, political, and literary discourse that structures the social imagination of late medieval writers and that has been ignored by literary critics. The implications of this work, however, extend beyond Chaucer's age. The natural law is the foundation for just resistance in a tradition of political theory from Thomas Aquinas to Thomas Jefferson. The issues that Chaucer raises around the natural law cut to the heart of this tradition,

raising questions about its intelligibility in the face of the forms of power against which

it purports to protect.

1. "Al the town in a rore": Authority, Revolt, and Rational Obedience in Thomas Usk's Texts

In the early 1380s Thomas Usk was caught between two competing factions. John of Northampton, a draper and mayor of London from 1381-1383, led a party comprised of London's poorer residents alongside members of the city's non-victualing guilds. Nicholas Brembre, Northampton's rival, represented the interests of London's mercantile elite, including, most prominently, the grocers (Brembre's company) and the fishmongers. Northampton and his party hired Usk, a trained scrivener, "to write thair billes" (11).[7] It is clear, however, that Usk did much more than serve as a scrivener to Northampton's faction. In 1384, months after Northampton lost reelection to Brembre, Usk authored his *Appeal*, a text that outlines Northampton's alleged wrongdoings and Usk's role in them during his mayoralty and after his failed reelection and attempt to

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[7] I quote Usk's *Appeal* from R.W. Chambers and Marjorie Daunt, eds., *A Book of London English, 1384-1425* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931), 22-31. All subsequent references to the *Appeal* are given parenthetically by line number.

rebel against Brembre in 1384.[8] Broadly, Usk accuses Northampton of trying to stir the

"pore poeple" of London who have "non skyl of gouernance" into a rebellion against the

"grete men" of the city, Brembre and the mercantile elite (67, 68).

As Paul Strohm observes in his essential account of the *Appeal*, this language

evokes "the specter of class warfare."[9] But it does more than that. It recalls the Revolt of

1381, the events of which constituted in London what is arguably "the most disorderly

crisis in the history of the medieval city."[10] On June 13, 1381, rebels from Kent and Essex

entered London, inspiring, so chroniclers tell us, many Londoners to join with them in

their rising. Before the leader of the Revolt, Wat Tyler, was killed on June 15 at Mile

End, the rebels burned John of Gaunt's palace, killed agents of the government and

Flemings residing in the city, and demanded from Richard II freedom from serfdom and

the execution of traitors within his government.[11] In many petitions, chronicles, and

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[8] On the conflict between Northampton and Brembre, and more broadly the London politics of the early 1380s, I have found essential the following works: Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company & the Politics & Trade of London, 1000-1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); Nightingale, "Capitalists, Crafts and Constitutional Change in Late Fourteenth-Century London," *Past and Present*, no. 124 (Aug., 1989): 3-35; Ruth Bird, *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1949); Marion Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); and Frank Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[9] Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 151.

[10] R.B. Dobson, *The Peasants' Revolt of 1381* (London: MacMillian Press, 1983), 153. Recently, James Davis has noted that Usk's *Appeal* involves "a *post hoc* attempt to tarnish Northampton with the stigma of the 1381 revolt." But he does not comment at length on this. See James Davis, "Towns and Trade," in *Historians on John Gower*, ed. Stephen H. Rigby with Siân Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2019), 207.

[11] On the events of the Rising in London, and the goals of the rebels, see Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), 137-143, 214-232, particularly 139 and 224-225.

poems that address these events, the rebels are represented as irrational and among

England's poorest residents. Their illegal "mob" is characterized as contravening the

licit power of England's "worthy men."[12]

The purpose of Usk's utilizing the language of the Revolt is to delegitimize

Northampton as ruler and to legitimize Brembre and the mercantile elite. In his

Testament of Love, began a year after his *Appeal*, Usk continues to define Northampton as

illegitimate and Brembre as legitimate. Why did Usk address the conflicts between

Northampton and Brembre with such fervor? On this New Historicists have been

uniform. In 1990 Strohm read the *Testament* as the work of a turncoat intent on securing

political favor and material profit from Brembre and Richard II. Since then New

Historicist critics have followed Strohm's reading, looking for language in the *Testament*

that reveals Usk's "hope for future advancement from his new allies."[13] In these

readings, Usk's life and texts are bound together as a response to power. Central to this

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[12] My attention to the literature of the Revolt and its contexts has been shaped by three superb works: David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing 1360-1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), 20-35; Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); and Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 33-56.

[13] Paul Strohm, "Politics and Poetics: Usk and Chaucer in the 1380s," in *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, ed. Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 83-112, 99. There have been two major studies on Usk which have been influenced by Strohm's essay: Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict: Languages of Antagonism in Late Fourteenth-Century London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 93-126, especially 112-126, and Joanna Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24-59. For an excellent philosophical account of Usk's *Testament*, see Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages: Ethics and the Mixed Form in Chaucer, Gower, Usk, and Hoccleve* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 166-183.

approach is the fact that Usk was appointed by Richard II in 1387 to be the under-sheriff

of Middlesex.[14]

In this chapter, I offer an alternative interpretation of Usk's *Appeal* and *Testament*,

one that has been excluded as a possibility in New Historicist readings of Usk's texts.

This interpretation is not structured around Usk's appointment as under-sheriff.

Because the ethical and political commitments of individuals have complex relations to

their material desires in any age, we cannot, in my view, use Usk's appointment as

under-sheriff as the key to his texts. My interpretation, rather, centers on what Usk and

his culture would have understood as a political virtue: rational obedience. In the first

part of the chapter, I consider Usk's *Appeal* within the context of the Revolt and its

literature. The *Appeal*, I contend, attempts to tie Northampton to the Revolt of 1381 in

order to show that obedience to Brembre and the mercantile elite is vital to the

restoration of peace in London. True, Usk need not have been committed to obedience

as a virtue to offer this political vision. Nor, indeed, would he have had to have

different motivations than his own enrichment to do so. But the *Appeal* does not stand

alone. In his 1385 *Testament of Love*, Usk revisits the events and issues he considers in his

Appeal. Thus, in light of my reading of the *Appeal*, in the second part of the chapter, I

offer an account of Usk's writing on obedience in the *Testament*. Here we find a

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[14] For Usk's appointment as under-sheriff, see Gary W. Shawver's excellent introduction to his edition of Usk's *Testament*, which I use throughout this chapter: *Testament of Love*, ed. Gary W. Shawver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 20-21.

philosophical account of obedience as it relates to Usk's defection and decision to write

the *Appeal*. In this philosophical reflection, Usk is careful to delineate the limits to power

and the interdependence of ruler and subjects. Following his political tradition, he

maintains that obedience is reasonable only insofar as rulers maintain their communities

according to reason and the common good. Taken together, Usk's *Appeal* and *Testament*

present a continuous political vision: rational obedience is the bedrock of a peaceful

monarchical society.[15]

     This chapter will not definitively elucidate Usk's intentions in his *Appeal*,

Testament, or in 1388, as he went to his execution for treason refusing to recant his

writing against Northampton.[16] Nor will any piece of literary criticism be able to do so.

It posits, instead, a possibility against the one that has dominated literary criticism.

Might Usk have joined Brembre, and condemned Northampton, not because he wanted

a better job, but because he was committed to rational obedience as the foundation to

peace in his monarchical society? This possibility, which I believe cannot be so easily

dismissed, necessitates that we reevaluate our paradigms for understanding power and

try to arrive at a conception of how Usk and his culture understood power.

1. The Language of the 1381 Revolt and Usk's Appeal

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[15] Despite the fact that Usk's *Testament* is deeply connected to his *Appeal*, there has, to my knowledge, been
no attempt to read the ethics and politics of these two texts together.

[16] For Usk's refusal to recant his writing against Northampton, see *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394*, eds.
L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 314-315.

Usk's *Appeal* includes a cornucopia of political language which had become charged in the aftermath of the Black Death and especially the Revolt of 1381. After the outbreak of the Black Death in 1348, there was a shortage of labor and a precipitous rise in wages.[17] For many agricultural and skilled laborers, the rise in wages led to an improved standard of living.[18] But for the gentry, this was a disaster, one that required an immediate response. In 1349 Edward III's council introduced ordinances which attempted to freeze wages at their rates in 1346. These ordinances failed.[19] What followed was a series of national legislation, enacted across the successive two decades, which tried to mitigate the labor problem in the favor of the gentry. This legislation is inextricably linked to many of the issues which came to the fore in 1381, and so I draw on it accordingly in the following analysis. My main resources, however, are the chronicles, petitions, ordinances, and poems which specifically address the Revolt. These texts contain the language which I believe most fundamentally informs Usk's writing of Northampton's stymied rebellion in the *Appeal*. I have divided my treatment of this language into two sections, each dealing with specific language found in Revolt literature and Usk's *Appeal*. I begin, however, with an account of both Usk's

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[17] Miri Rubin, *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), offers an excellent account of the demographic and economic changes introduced by the Black Death: see 22-33. I have also found helpful L.R. Poos, *A rural society after the Black Death: Essex 1350-1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[18] Rubin, *Charity and Community*, 27.

[19] See Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 63, and Bertha Putnam, *The Enforcement of the Statutes of Labourers During the First Decade after the Black Death, 1349-1359* (New York: Columbia University, 1908), 2.

terminology and the conflict between Northampton and Brembre, as both are extremely complex and essential to understanding the rhetorical choices Usk makes in his *Appeal*.

In the *Appeal*, Usk tells us that his former boss held the fervent support of "the poeple" during and after his mayoralty (43). This is a tricky collective noun, one into which Usk enfolds a set of different collective nouns: "pore poeple," "smale poeple," "comun poeple," "craftes," "comun conseil of craftes," and "wardeyns of craftes" (67, 165, 48, 166, 204-205). Against these collective nouns he sets several others, far easier to gloss: the "myghty," "grete men," "worthy persones," and "worthiest of the town" (57, 68, 72, 109-110). Most simply, the former cluster of terms refer to Northampton's supporters according to their poverty or their position within London's non-victualing guilds and its Common Council; the latter set undoubtedly denotes London's merchant oligarchs, men such as Nicholas Brembre, Nicholas Exton, and Adam Carlisle. These terms are vital to our understanding of Usk's *Appeal* and require careful explication.

I shall focus on the terms "pore poeple," "smale poeple," and "comun people," in part because these are the most important and most difficult terms to gloss in Usk's *Appeal*, but also because we will cover the remaining terms in the course of our treatment of these three seemingly synonymous collective nouns. As historians have noted, Northampton sought and attained the support of London's poorer residents as

mayor.[20] Several of Northampton's acts as mayor overtly appealed to London's poor.

For example, he issued an ordinance which set the price of bread to a farthing "in order

to assist the poor."[21] Similarly, Northampton restricted the amount that could be

offered at Mass to one farthing, and he also limited the amount that could be given at

baptisms and marriages to 40*d*. The ordinance alleges that these controls on

ecclesiastical gifts are necessary because "folks of the higher class…have given large

sums of money" and "folks of lower rank," following the example of the wealthy, "have

given just the same…[to the] impoverishment of the ordinary classes."[22]

This *seems* clear. But who might have Northampton and Usk included and

excluded from the designation *poor*? This question poses some sharp and indissoluble

challenges as the term *poor* was undergoing profound shifts in signification in the late

Middle Ages. After the Black Death, the national labor legislation introduced a

distinction between true beggars and able-bodied beggars. The former were those

unable to work, such as the blind or the old; the latter were individuals who, in the

language of the 1376 Petition against Vagrants, "might well ease the commons by living

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[20] Most recently, Turner has argued that Northampton "brought in a series of regulations designed to ease the plight of the poor," and that he "had a programme of promoting the interests of the less powerful in London." See Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 278.

[21] *Calendar of Letter-Books: Letter-Book H, 1375-1399*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe (London: John Edward Francis, Bream's Buildings, 1907), 183. Northampton's choice of the farthing was deliberate. As Frank Rexroth explains, the farthing was no longer in use in 1380s London, and its disuse sharply impacted the amount of bread London's poor could purchase. See Frank Rexroth, *Deviance and Power in Late Medieval London*, trans. Pamela E. Selwyn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 157. See also Davis, "Towns and Trade," 208-209.

[22] *Memorials of London and London Life*, ed. and trans. Henry Thomas Riley (London, Longmans, Green, and Co, 1868), 463.

on their labour and services" but who beg instead because they wish "to lead an idle

life."[23] As Miri Rubin has shown, this distinction, combined with animosity about the

improved standards of living for many laborers, led to very significant changes in

medieval understandings of poverty and the role of charity:

> A vigorous image of the labourer as disruptor of social order, and as
>
> greedy and harmful to the general weal developed in this period when
>
> his services were most desperately needed. However, this image did not
>
> only affect the relations between employers and labourers, it coloured a
>
> wider range of social relations and aspirations, since those traditionally of
>
> the laboring classes were associated with unproductivity, idleness,
>
> lawlessness, immorality and greed…Now the poor were not to be helped
>
> but to be hunted down and put back to work.[24]

How did this impact Usk's "dere" London in the 1380s (1.6.86)? Not long after he was

elected as mayor in 1381, Northampton put on trial a beggar for "wandering through the

city begging and pretending that he was unfit for work, whereas, upon examination of

his body, it was manifest that he was strong and lusty, capable of labour." Such an act

defrauded "genuine beggars."[25] A day later, Northampton issued a proclamation

prohibiting the able-bodied from begging in the city, itself part of a string of London

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[23] Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 74.
[24] Rubin, *Charity and Community*, 31-32.
[25] *Calendar of the Plea and Memoranda Rolls of the City of London: Volume 3, 1381-1412*, ed. A. H. Thomas
(London, 1932), A25, membr. 3.

proclamations since the 1350s which sought to control the alleged influx of able-bodied

beggars into the city from the countryside.[26] *If* Northampton had "genuine compassion

for the poor," as one historian suggests, it was modulated according to the categories

imposed by the national labor legislation of his culture.[27]

In the *Appeal* Usk does not tell us whether the "pore poeple" who supported

Northampton were able-bodied or not. In fact, he tells us little about the makeup of this

collective. He does, however, seemingly impart illuminating distinctions, ones which

helps us better understand Usk's use of the terms "pore poeple," "craftes," "wardeyns of

craftes," and the "comun conseil of craftes."   Throughout the *Appeal* he joins "pore

poeple" and "smale poeple" with "craftes," but he never seems to collapse the former

two into the latter. This suggests that there was some difference between the two for

Usk. The latter almost certainly includes masters from London's non-victualing guilds.

As Ruth Bird has shown, the majority of those who are recorded as Northampton's

supporters were masters from non-victualing guilds. Most of these men were by no

means wealthy.[28] Neither, however, were they "pore," at least not according to Usk.

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[26] See Rexroth, *Deviance and Power*, 145. For an example of these proclamations, see *Memorials*, 304-305.

[27] Ruth Bird, *The Turbulent London of Richard II* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1949), 65. Pamela Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile Community: The Grocers' Company & the Politics & Trade of London, 1000-1485* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), offers an opposing view, one with which I agree: "Far from being the champion of the common man…Northampton tried twelve years later in defiance of all economic and social pressures to restore labour services on his own manor at Tottenham. He only desisted when the peasants refused to pay their rent," 283.

[28] See Bird, *Turbulent London,* 71-81. Most prominently for our purposes, the London goldsmiths, who hired Usk as a scrivener in 1382, were among the non-victualing who supported Northampton. They lent him their hall to plan a rebellion against Brembre in 1383. The record of Usk's hiring is in *Wardens' Accounts and*

Usk seems to further distinguish between "craftes" and the craftsmen who held

positions of leadership: the "wardeyns of craftes" and the "comun conseil of craftes."

After Northampton lost reelection to Brembre, Usk claims, he summoned both the

wardens and the craftsmen who belonged to London's Common Council. At the hall of

the goldsmiths, where Northampton met these men, he urged "euery man" to "gon

hom, & kome fast a-yein strong in to Chepe with al her craftes…to go to a newe

eleccion" (191-194). Here, there is a relatively clear hierarchy of supporters from the

crafts. Near the top were the wardens and the craftsmen from the Common Council.[29]

Who were these men in the late medieval London? Wardens were leaders within guilds

and companies who were responsible for a range of administrative and organizational

duties.[30] Common Councilors shared in the matters of governance in the city.

Beginning in the 1340s, councilors were elected according to wards.[31] In 1376, however,

Northampton successfully pressed for the Common Council to be elected by guilds,

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Court Minute Books of the Goldsmiths' Mistery of London, 1334-1446, ed. Lisa Jefferson (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003), 199. Caroline Barron discovered this record: see her "New Light on Thomas Usk," *The Chaucer Newsletter*, Fall 2004. As Matthew Davies notes, the majority of scriveners who were hired to record and assist in the matters of guilds were members of the London Scriveners, not the guild that hired them. See Matthew Davies, "'Writying, making and engrocyng': clerks, guilds and identity in late medieval London," in *Medieval Merchants and Money: Essays in Honour of James L. Bolton*, eds. Martin Allen and Matthew Davies (London: University of London School of Advanced Study, 2016), 32.

[29] These masters were still yet below the select wealthy masters who conspired directly with Northampton (such as Adam Bamme).

[30] For an overview of wardens and their responsibilities, see Caroline Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People, 1200-1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 226-228.

[31] See Ibid, 130.

most likely in an effort to limit the power the grocers and fishmongers could wield in

the Common Council.[32] This constitutional change was one of Northampton's signature

political achievements. Below the wardens and Common Councilors from "craftes"

were the "craftes" themselves: most likely masters who held no positions of political

leadership.

These are all men Usk seems to exclude from his designation "pore." Who, then,

were Northampton's poor supporters, according to Usk? Again, Usk offers no specifics,

and as I noted earlier, the term *poor* was undergoing profound shifts in interpretation in

the late Middle Ages. Further, *poor* remains an equivocal term for literary and historical

critics today, with various critics offering both different definitions of poverty and

different estimations of the number of poor within medieval London.[33] But with these

caveats, based on what we may gather from Usk's distinctions, Usk's collective "pore

poeple" must have encompassed people who generally lived below master craftsmen.

As Rodney Hilton has noted, however, craft masters were far from a homogenous

collective.[34] Among them were people like Adam Bamme and Nicholas Twyford,

extremely wealthy goldsmiths who supported Northampton and who later served as

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[32] See *Cal. L.B. H*, 35-36; Bird, *Turbulent London*, 36-42; Pamela Nightingale, "Capitalists, Crafts and Constitutional Change in Late Fourteenth-Century London," *Past and Present*, no. 124 (Aug., 1989): 3-35, 18-19; and Nightingale, *A Medieval Mercantile*, 244-246.

[33] Caroline Barron notes that poverty was officially recognized through exemption from property taxes, but she argues that it is "impossible" to know the number of Londoners who "were truly destitute and dependent upon the charity of others." In contrast, Rodney Hilton has argued that most male Londoners were poor in the fourteenth century. See Caroline Barron, *London*, 274, and Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, 187.

[34] Ibid, 190.

mayor.[35] So too were there craft masters whose income was very modest.[36] Those below these more modest masters seem the most likely to belong to Usk's designation. Among those below were apprentices and journeymen. Did Usk group these men into "craftes" or "pore"? It is impossible to tell. Also below the modest craft masters were beggars, hucksters, and laborers unable to afford apprenticeships.[37] These men certainly could have been characterized as "pore," and some of them almost surely are included in Usk's collective noun.

Having explicated the challenging terms Usk uses to denote Northampton's supporters, we can now see how Usk uses them in his narrative. All of Northampton's supporters, "pore" and craftsmen alike, were drawn by Northampton and his circle of schemers into his conflict with Brembre and the merchant elite, men Usk variously calls the "myghty," "grete men," "worthy persones," and "worthiest of the town." Throughout the *Appeal*, Usk alleges again and again that Northampton hoped "to put ovte of the town al the worthiest" (116). Why might he have wanted to do so? Northampton's animosity for Brembre and the grocer and fishmonger elite went back to the Good Parliament, when Brembre and the merchants sacrificed the reinstitution of the

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[35] Usk mentions Bamme as one of Northampton's supporters in the *Appeal*. It is harder to associate Twyford with Northampton. But as Nightingale notes, it is difficult to imagine that Northampton held meetings in the hall of the goldsmiths without Twyford's approval. See Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 274-275.

[36] See Christopher Dyer, *Standards of Living in the Later Middle Ages: Social Change in England, c. 1200-1520* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 195-196.

[37] For information about those who lived below master craftsmen in medieval London, see ibid, 196, and Barron, *London*, 277.

London franchise, from which Northampton and the drapers (his company) would benefit, in order to restore the wool staple in Calais, which had been a massive source of income for the fishmongers and especially the grocers.[38] To weaken these "grete men," Usk claims, Northampton appealed to the "poeple," the poor and the craftsmen, and then rallied them against Brembre and his allies.

While some may perhaps feel inclined to read Usk's *Appeal* suspiciously, as the text of a defector, there is significant evidence to support his characterization of Northampton's goals. In 1382, in what are perhaps his most popular acts as mayor, Northampton issued a series of ordinances concerning the trade of fish in London. These ordinances allowed foreign traders the freedom to sell fish within London and explicitly prohibited the fishmongers from buying the imported fish and reselling it at a profit.[39] This dealt a stunning blow to the fishmongers, something that was widely celebrated.[40] As Thomas Walsingham notes with apparent antipathy, "the mayor reduced citizen fishmongers to such straits" that they "were barely permitted to stand

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[38] See Nightingale, "Capitalists, Crafts," 12-13, 17-18, and Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 244-245.
[39] See *Cal. L.B. H*, 194.
[40] Nightingale contends that Northampton's actions "almost deprived…[the fishmongers] of their livelihood." Bird argues that the London fishmongers were "a monopoly which, as its history shows, almost everyone in London, except the monopolists themselves, was eager to attack." This is very likely an overestimation. As Rexroth suggests, there is little reason to doubt that other victualing guilds, especially the grocers, would have opposed Northampton's measures. See Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 277; Bird, *Turbulent London*, 76; and Rexroth, *Deviance and Power*, 138-139.

among the lowest" in the city. In turn, "the common people, seeing this improvement in

the market, praised the mayor to the skies."[41]

Having won popularity through this act (and the earlier acts I noted which

overtly appealed to the poor), Northampton set his "poeple" against the fishmongers

and grocers in an effort to weaken them. As Usk explains in the *Appeal*, and again in the

Testament, Northampton did so by manipulating the language of the common good. He

told his supporters that all those "that hielden the contrarie of hys menyng wer Enemys

to alle gode menyng" (65-66). There is also evidence to support this characterization of

Northampton's method. In 1382 Northampton attacked two London aldermen, both

allies of Brembre: Nicholas Exton, fishmonger, and Adam Carlisle, grocer.[42] First, Exton

was forced out of the aldermen for speaking "opprobrious words" against

Northampton. Months later, Northampton threatened to imprison Exton for voicing his

opposition at parliament to the Northampton's ordinances on the trade of fish. In the

Letter Book, Exton's exhortations to parliament are set against the ordinances

Northampton has "made…for the common good."[43] We find similar language in the

sentence upon Carlisle. According to the Letter Book, there were "many enemies of the

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[41] Thomas Walsingham, *The Chronica Maiora of Thomas Walsingham, 1376-1422*, trans. David Preest (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 184.

[42] For the connection between Exton, Carlisle, and Brembre, see Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 204 and 238. On the conflict between Northampton, Exton, and Carlisle, see 274-275. There is an excellent biography of Carlisle in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1386-1421*, eds. J.S. Roskell, Linda Clark, and Carole Rawcliffe (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1992), 485-487.

[43] *Cal. L.B., H*, 204.

common weal [who] from one day to another do compass how that they may undo the good and profitable Ordinances which have been made in the City as to the buying and selling of fish." One such "enemy" was Adam Carlisle, who "in the hearing of all," cursed a foreign fish trader, and further declared that he would rather pay his neighboring fishmonger a higher price for fish than buy from the foreign trader. The Letter Book notes, parenthetically, that Carlisle had "oftentimes heretofore opposed and contradicted the common profit of the City." His opposition to Northampton's ordinances continued his history of "contraven[ing] the common profit." As punishment for his act against the ordinances, Carlisle, like Exton, was removed from the aldermen. He was also debarred from holding any political office in the city.[44]

In this overview of Usk's terminology and the conflict between Northampton and Brembre, we have found much of Usk's *Appeal* true. Northampton did court the support of London's non-victualing guilds and its poorer residents, and he did attack the merchant elite as mayor. Yet Usk is not a disinterested observer, as indeed no one is. Far from it. Throughout his *Appeal* he makes key rhetorical choices, ones bound with the memory of the Revolt and designed above all to highlight the danger of Northampton. Before we can understand these choices, we must first consider the language found in the chronicles, poems, and legal documents of the Revolt. I have divided my treatment

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[44] *Memorials,* 468-469.

of this language into three sections, each focusing on specific ideas and words which

inform Usk's writing in the *Appeal*.

1.1 The Language of Revolt Literature: Poor Men, Great Men

Thomas Walsingham is insistent: the Revolt of 1381 was a rising of England's poorest against England's "best men." According to his account, the Revolt began in Essex, when "five thousand of the most mean commons and rustics" assembled. These rebels inspired in Kent "a large band of commons and rustics in the same manner as the men of Essex" to join their cause. Once the rebels reached London, they "easily persuaded all the poorer citizens to support them in their conspiracy," and together they burnt John of Gaunt's palace, which Walsingham describes as "unrivaled in splendour and nobility within England." Later, a group of rebels entered the Tower of London, the place Richard II and his mother were hiding. Walsingham characterizes the interactions of the rebels with Richard II, his mother, and his retinue of knights as a particular affront:

> For who would ever have believed that such rustics, and most inferior ones at that, would dare…to enter the chamber of the king and of his mother with their filthy sticks; and, undeterred by any of the soldiers, to stroke and lay their uncouth and sordid hands on the beards of several most noble knights…The rebels, who had formerly belonged to the most

lowly condition of serf, went in and out like lords; and swineherds set

themselves above soldiers although not knights but rustics.[45]

As Paul Strohm observes in his illuminating study of the chronicles, Walsingham's

"abundance of superlatives exaggerates a difference, establishing a polarity that exists

mainly at the imaginative level." The rebels are the lowest—"the most lowly condition

of serf," the "most inferior" of "rustics," a term which itself denotes "those peasants

who, even in the last decades of the fourteenth century, remained bound to the land in

customary or sworn relations."[46] The knights, on the other hand, are "the most noble."

What is elided from Walsingham's narrative of the Revolt is the fact that the rebels were

diverse, not a monolithic cluster of "rustics" but all those below the lords, poor and

modest agricultural workers and craftsmen alike.[47] Walsingham's account of the Revolt

is perhaps the most vitriolic among the texts we will consider. However, this does not

mean that his language and version of the Revolt are eccentric. On the contrary, we find

rhetorical and interpretive continuities across late medieval texts documenting the

Revolt.[48]

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[45] Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 132, 133, 169, 171-172.
[46] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 38, 36.
[47] See Hilton, *Bond Men*, 176-185, especially 184.
[48] Most notable among other chroniclers, perhaps, is the Monk of Westminster, who in his narrative of the Revolt echoes Walsingham's vocabulary, labelling the rebels *rustici, agrestis*, and *villani*—rustics and villeins. The rustics and villeins, the Monk tells us, burned John of Gaunt's palace. For examples, see *Westminster Chronicle*, 4, 6, 12.

Apart from the poet John Gower, who we will come to shortly, Walsingham's

account of the Revolt is perhaps the most spiteful among the texts we will consider,

brimming with the language of the ruling elite. However, this does not mean that his

language and version of the Revolt are eccentric. On the contrary, we find rhetorical and

interpretive continuities across texts documenting the Revolt. Most notable among

other chroniclers, perhaps, is the Monk of Westminster, who in his narrative of the

Revolt echoes Walsingham's vocabulary, labelling the rebels *rustici, agrestis*, and *villani*—

rustics and villeins. The rustics and villeins, the Monk tells us, burned John of Gaunt's

palace.[49] Later, they executed an archbishop and one of Gaunt's surgeons at the Tower

of London.[50] Against the *rustici, agrestis,* and *villani* the Monk sets London's "*generosa*

civitatis," superior citizens, who, at the mayor William Walworth's plea, rushed to aid

Richard II and surround the *rustici* after Richard's nobles killed Wat Tyler, the rebel

leader, during their peace negotiations at Mile End.[51]

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[49] "In crastino vero agrestis illa societas totum stimulata in rabiem hora quasi quarta post nonam hospicium ducis vocatum le Savoye invaserunt, omnes clausuras disrumpentes, nichil quod preciosum erat parcentes quin illud aut igne combusserunt aut in Thamense flumen demergendum projecerunt. Cerneres ibidem rem nostris seculis insolitam, nam dum preciosissima cernerent, tractarent, et colligerent, non audebat rustica manus preciosa furtivis minibus surripere, quia si quis in aliquo furto fuerat deprehensus, sine processu sive judicio ad mortem rapiebatur decapitandus." I quote the Latin from *The Westminster Chronicle, 1381-1394*, eds. L.C. Hector and Barbara F. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 4.

[50] "Interea dum ista agenrentur, pars funesta villani cetus ad Turrim London accessit extraxitque archipresulem et thesaurarium et quondam fratrem Minorem, cirurgicum domini ducis Lancastr, et in Monte Turris adductos et quondam Johannem Leeg, clavigerum regium, et alium ibidem decollarunt." Ibid, 6.

[51] "Paruit statim majoris imperiis generosa civitatis communitas et ad arma ruens nunc per unam portam nunc per aliam turmatim egrediens in campum in regis auxilium citissime currunt, rusticamque multitudinem ungique circumvallantes eorum minabantur internicionem." Ibid, 12.

Beyond the chronicles, we find a similar language in the narrative of the Revolt recorded in the London Letter Books. Like Walsingham, the Letter Books classify the rebels from Kent and Essex as "persons of the lowest grade." The Londoners who joined with them were the "perfidious commoners within the city, of their own condition."[52] As Walsingham does towards the conclusion of his narrative of the Revolt, the Letter Books place God on the side of the gentry. According to Walsingham, God worked through the noble collective who surrounded Wat Tyler at Mile End—king, mayor, and the noble citizens of London.[53] But according to the Letter Books, it was a single agent through whom God gave "His own gracious aid." Perhaps unsurprisingly, God's chosen agent was the mayor of London, William Walworth, characterized in the Letter Books as "the most renowned man." At Mile End, the Letter Books claim, Walworth "most manfully, by himself, rushed upon the captain of the said multitude, 'Walter Tylere' by name, and…first wounded him in the neck with his sword, and then hurled him from his horse, mortally pierced in the breast."[54] As in Walsingham's account of the rebels in the Tower, so too here we find in abundance superlatives which emphasize class differences: Walworth is the "most renowned" and the most manly, whereas the rebels from Kent, Essex, and London are the "lowest."

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[52] *Memorials*, 449.
[53] See Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 176-177.
[54] *Memorials*, 450.

The language of these texts underscores their basic narrative: the Revolt of 1381 was the lowest of the low against the very best. This rhetorical strategy, like all the rhetorical strategies we will consider in the literature of the Revolt, aims simultaneously to delegitimize the goals and actions of the rebels and legitimize the responses of the "great men."

1.1 The Language of the Revolt: Reason and Speech

In addition to depicting the rebels as the lowest of the low, the writers of the Revolt also characterized the rebels as subhuman, lacking, like beasts, human rationality and speech. After the events of 1381 John Gower inserted a visionary "nightmare" at the beginning of his Latin poem *Vox Clamantis*.[55] In this vision, Gower characterizes the Revolt as a violation of natural law, a law which medieval writers believed was universally accessible through our reason. Roaming the fields, the narrator discovers a "raging mob" of "common folk."[56] As the narrator watches, God strips these "folk" of their rationality:

> Then suddenly the curse of God blazed down
>
> On them and changed their form and made them beasts.
>
> Thus men endowed with reason at their birth

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[55] This is how David R. Carlson and A.G. Rigg characterize Gower's vision in their introduction to his poem. See *John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events,* 10.
[56] Ibid, 173, 171.

33

Take on the form of beasts irrational.[57]

No longer humans created in the image of God, the beasts begin to rebel against a hierarchy Gower thought established by natural law. The narrator soon discovers asses who have cast aside their "former usefulness" and are now "braying" continually "'hee-haw,'" pursuing the "more tasty food" reserved for Gower and the ruling elite.[58] These asses recruit other beasts to help them "conquer Nature's laws," and so the Revolt begins.[59]

While lacking Gower's poetic sophistication, the chroniclers, perhaps unsurprisingly, echo his charged language, stripping the rebels of their rationality and their speech. The *Anonimalle Chronicle* calls the rebels from Essex and Kent a "great multitude of people…without reason." Froissart asserts that the rebels "followed each other like beasts." Once again Walsingham's vitriol remains peerless among the chroniclers. In words which redound through the literature of the Revolt, all that Walsingham heard during the Revolt was "noise" and "clamour"—devilish, animalistic noise, as ostensibly unintelligible as it was frightening:

> When he [Archbishop Sudbury] arrived there, a most horrible shouting
> broke out, not like the clamour normally produced by men, but of a sort
> which enormously exceeded all human noise and which could only be

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[57] Ibid, 175-178.
[58] Ibid, 192, 189, 190, 196.
[59] Ibid, 208.

compared to the wailings of the inhabitants of hell. Such shouts used to

be heard whenever the rebels beheaded anyone or destroyed

houses…Words could not be heard among their horrible shrieks but

rather their throats sounded with the bleating of sheep, or, to be more

accurate, with the devilish voices of peacocks.[60]

Here we find another instructive superlative. By characterizing the sounds of the rebels

as "enormously" in excess of "all human noise," Walsingham emphasizes for his class

just how far he believes the rebels have devolved from acceptable human behavior.

Whatever concerns and goals the rebels voiced are collapsed into this sweeping

designation, rendering them unintelligible, as indeed they must have seemed to

England's ruling elite.

This points us to the political end at the core of the attempt to strip the rebels of

their rationality, an end which is no doubt clear at this point. In medieval ethical and

political theory, humans are able to know good and evil through natural reason and

speech. Because we have knowledge of good and evil through these natural abilities, we

are able to establish ethical laws and practices ordained to the common good, the

fundamentals of a just community. By stripping the rebels of their reason and speech,

Gower and the chroniclers mark them as monsters in the community, no longer capable

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[60] Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 127, 138, 132, 173. For "noise" in the literature of the Revolt, see Steven Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 206-231, especially 206-208.

of contributing to society as reason and natural law (both as defined by Gower and his class) dictate. In turn, this legitimized the reactions of the ruling elite to the Revolt. Whatever was done to the rebels could be sanctioned by the ruling elite as an attempt to reaffirm the hierarchy and social practices set in place by the natural law and verified by reason.[61]

1.2 The Language of the Revolt: Illicit Assemblies

After the Black Death there was an increased fear that England's laborers, servants, and journeymen might band together in associations to demand wage increases or to rebel against the lords.[62] The 1377 parliamentary Commons petition against rebellious villeins relays this fear unmistakably. This petition alleges that villeins "have made confederation and alliance together to resist the lords and their officials by force." Such associations, so the parliamentary Commons claims, scare the lords. As they fear for the loss of their life, the lords have stopped making distraint upon the villeins to attain the services they believed were owed to them. Because of this, "the said lords lose and have lost much profit from their lordships, to the great prejudice

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[61] Reason, nature, and natural law had become contested concepts in the aftermath of the Black Death and especially the Revolt. The chronicles record John Ball, a leader of the Revolt, as preaching that all are equal by nature and that servitude itself was a sinful institution against God's will. As Hilton observes, Ball's teaching was "an important twist to the old orthodox doctrine that although men may have been equal in the state of nature, serfdom had been introduced by God as a punishment when man fell into sin." See Hilton, *Bond Men*, 222. For Ball's sermon on equality, see Walsingham, *Chronica*, 162. For some critical reflections on contested ethical and political concepts after the Black Death and the Revolt, see David Aers, *Faith, Ethics and Church: Writing in England, 1360-1409* (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 56-75, especially 56-60, 67-73.
[62] See the 1377 Commons petition in Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 76-77.

and destruction of their inheritances and estates." The rebellious associations of villeins are not, however, just harmful to the lords. The petition insists that these associations are detrimental to the common good: "Moreover in many parts of the realm the corn lies unharvested for this reason and is lost for all time, to the serious damage of all the commons." Beyond this, the parliamentary Commons fears that these associations and accompanying acts of rebellion will lead to something much more drastic: England's villeins may go to war with its lords or, more drastic yet, they will treasonously ally themselves with England's "foreign enemies" if there is "a sudden invasion."[63]

As we might assume, England's ruling elite grew even more suspicious of such associations after the Revolt. On June 15, 1381, in the immediate aftermath of the Revolt, Richard II issued a royal commission granting London political leaders (Nicholas Brembre among them) the authority to punish by law, beheading, or "mutilation of limbs" the defeated rebels who have not dispersed but "at present assemble in illegal groups."[64] This is an extreme if perhaps unsurprising reaction, no doubt made in the fear that the victory at Mile's End was temporary and that another rising could occur. This was not a momentary fear. It persisted well beyond the summer of 1381. In perhaps the most well-known example of this fear, the parliamentary Commons called

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[63] Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 76-77.
[64] Ibid, 318.

for the eradication of guilds and fraternities at the Cambridge parliament of 1388.[65] This

led to a royal inquiry into the guilds of England, a process that required individual

guilds to answer questions about their associations.[66]

In response to the perceived threats posed by "illicit" associations, documents

both before and after the Revolt prohibited "covins," "confederacies," "assemblages,"

"congregations," and "alliances."[67] These charged words were widely deployed in the

late Middle Ages. Most important for us, Usk himself uses them at key moments in the

Appeal. But there are numerous other examples across the period under consideration.

Before the Revolt a 1353 London proclamation states that "no one shall hold an

assemblage, within the City or without, for making covin, confederacy, or alliance."[68]

Similarly, journeymen cordwainers, over three decades later, were charged for making

illegal covins. The charge begins by emphasizing that "no person [i.e. the poor,

servants, or journeymen] should make congregations, alliances, or covins of the people,"

and then goes on to allege that journeymen cordwainers "brought together a great

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[65] For the petition of the Commons, see *Westminster Chronicle*, 356-357. As J.A. Tuck cogently explains, the "class of landowners who sent their representatives to the Commons had been badly frightened by the Peasants' Revolt." So "the rapid formation of parish gilds in the second half of the fourteenth century may have given rise to the fear, especially after the Peasants' Revolt, that, as the petition [of the Commons] implies, the real purpose of some gilds was not religion at all but sedition." J.A. Tuck, "The Cambridge Parliament, 1388," *The English Historical Review* 84, no. 331 (April 1969): 225-243, 236-237.
[66] See Gervase Rosser, *The Art of Solidarity in the Middle Ages: Guilds in England 1250-1550* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 65.
[67] On these ubiquitous words in late medieval documents, I have found helpful David Wallace, "Chaucer and the Absent City," in *Chaucer's England: Literature in Historical Context*, ed. Barbara A. Hanawalt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 59-90, 75-78; Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 196.n.14; and Rexroth, *Deviance and Power*, 85.
[68] *Memorials*, 272.

congregation of men like unto themselves, and there did conspire and confederate to hold together; to the damage of the commonalty, and in prejudice of the trade…and in rebellion against the overseers."[69] As in the 1377 parliamentary Commons petition, as indeed in all the writing surrounding the Revolt which we have considered, the concept of the common good in this charge is monopolized, defined according to the interests of a dominant power. By classifying the association of the journeymen as an illegal "congregation," the cordwainer masters set the journeymen in opposition to "the commonalty" and so legitimize coercion against them. As we have seen repeatedly in our survey of Revolt language, this is how classifications function. They brand groups in order to exclude and control them.

In this brief consideration of Revolt literature, we have found in chronicles, poems, and civic documents of the Revolt a range of classifications that aim simultaneously to delegitimize the goals and actions of the rebels and legitimize the responses of the "great men." Whatever was done to the rebels could be sanctioned by the ruling elite as an attempt to reaffirm the hierarchy and social practices they believed set in place by natural law and verified by reason. As is the case for much charged political language, it did not take long for this language to be redeployed in a new context, with a different teleology.[70]

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[69] Ibid, 495.

[70] As Justice reminds us, writers and politicians were eager to use the Revolt to attain their own political goals: *Writing and Rebellion*, 193-194.

1.3 The Language of Usk's *Appeal*

According to Usk in the *Appeal*, Northampton and his "pore" supporters waged a war on London's "grete men" during Northampton's mayoralty. Usk centers his *Appeal* on this evocative dichotomy between the "pore" and the "grete men." Alongside these terms Usk deploys other language associated with the Revolt and its contexts: he accuses Northampton of forming a "confederacie, congregacion, & couyne" with irrational "smale poeple" to scheme to take down the "grete men." With this language, Usk invites his readers to imagine the conflict between Northampton and Brembre as a resurgence of the animosities that grew into the Great Rising in 1381. He utilizes this language for the same reason the Revolt writers use it in their accounts of 1381: he hopes to delegitimize a rebellious group and urge obedience to the current political order. What becomes clear across his *Appeal* is that Northampton's politics have led to chaos and violence in London and that Brembre and the mercantile elite are the bastions of civic peace and must be obeyed as such.

At the beginning of the *Appeal*, Usk makes it clear that Northampton doggedly sought the destruction of the "grete men." He lists several of Northampton's political achievements, all directed against Brembre and the mercantile elite, which the mayor hoped would "be meigtened euer more afterward" (42-43, 35-40). On this list, Usk includes the two London constitutional changes Northampton successfully fought for in 1376: the election of the Common Council by guild rather than ward and the annual

election of aldermen. Usk also includes on this list Northampton's parliamentary statute

prohibiting all victualers (meaning Brembre and his associates) from holding a judicial

office in London.

No doubt these constitutional changes were meant to diminish the political

power of the mercantile elite in London. Their success, however, was decidedly mixed.

It is clear that Northampton's change to the election of the Common Council enraged the

merchant oligarchs. Almost immediately after he was elected in 1383, Brembre

rescinded this change, reinstituting election to the Common Council by ward.

Northampton's other constitutional change, the annual election of aldermen, proved less

controversial. If it was designed to dramatically reduce the number of grocers and

fishmongers on the aldermen, as it surely was, then it was also unsuccessful. In 1382 the

grocers and fishmongers still held considerable aldermanries.[71] Despite the somewhat

limited success of these constitutional changes, Usk mentions them as evidence that

Northampton intended to disrupt the hierarchy in London and install a new order that

could be maintained "a-yeins any mayr that wolde haue do the contrarie" (42-44).

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[71] For Brembre's recension, see *Calendar of Letter-Books: Letter-Book H, 1375-1399*, ed. Reginald R. Sharpe. (N.p., 1907), 227. On this change, see Nightingale, "Capitalists," 18-19, and Bird, *Turbulent London*, 36-42. The relative failure of Northampton's attempt to reduce the aldermanries of the fishmongers explains in part his decision to attack the fishmongers in 1382 as well as his 1382 parliamentary statute banning grocers and fishmongers from office. On the 1376 institution of the annual election of aldermen, see Bird, *Turbulent London*, 30-36. On Northampton's decision to attack the fishmongers in 1382, see Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 273. On the effectiveness of Northampton's 1382 statute in contrast to the 1376 institution of the annual election of aldermen, see Nightingale, "Capitalists," 26-27.

In this same statute Northampton also asked parliament to punish usury.[72]

Modern historians have not often commented significantly on Northampton's

parliamentary request to punish usury. Usk, however, views this request as highly

critical. It provokes him to lament for around twenty lines how this statute would have

destroyed London's "grete men": "in thys wise…many of the worthiest of the town

sholde haue [be] ther-by enpesched, & be execucion ydo so vpon hem, that they sholde

noght haue bore nomore estat in the town" (108-112). According to Usk, this would

have meant civic ruin: "me may wel se the destruxion of the [t]own with-jnne a litel

proces of tyme, as for to haue so many thrifty men owt of towne" (123-124). For Usk,

this is a horrific image of the city. It is an image of London with a weakened hierarchy,

absent the people Brembre, in one of his first ordinances as mayor in 1383, calls "men

qualified by means" for government.[73] What some Londoners undoubtedly feared

might happen in the summer of 1381, when the rebels from Kent and Essex entered

London, Usk holds up here as the likely result had Northampton realized his goals: the

defeat of the elite and the destruction of London.

To associate Northampton's mayoralty and politics even more so with the

Revolt, Usk writes that the "pore poeple" were the means through which Northampton

envisioned the annihilation of London's "grete men." According to the appellant,

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[72] See III-142a-b of the *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. I use the superb online edition: *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, eds. Chris Given-Wilson, et. al. On the use of the term *victualer* to refer to Brembre and his associates in the statute, see Rexroth, *Deviance and Power*, 139-140.
[73] *Cal. L.B. H*, 227.

Northampton and his associates (including, assumedly, Usk himself) "drogh to hem the

comun poeple for to stonde be thes [Northampton's] purposes to lyue & to dye" (47-48).

Live and die: the threat of revolt, of violence between the "pore" and the "grete," hangs

in these two words. Later, Usk offers a similar image, alleging that Northampton saw in

"the smale poeple" a way to protect himself against those that "wolde oght do a-yeins

hym"— Brembre and the mercantile elite. What he implies here is that Northampton

stood in command of a violent collective of "pore" and "smale" people, ready to rebel

against the "grete men" of the city.

These are provocative images. There is some truth to them. Northampton's acts

in 1376 and many of his acts as mayor were clearly designed to weaken the grocers and

fishmongers.[74] Further, Northampton did seek and attain popular support, and at the

height of his conflict with Brembre, in 1384, Northampton assembled around 500 of

these supporters in a public show of defiance against Brembre.[75] Yet Usk's images

remain misleading. Intentionally so, I believe. Seen from one angle, the London conflict

on which Usk's *Appeal* centers was one between "great men"—John of Gaunt,

Northampton, and other wealthy men like Adam Bamme against Brembre and the

merchant oligarchs of London. Indeed, this seems to be how Bamme himself

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[74] While the 1376 constitutional changes did not drastically tip the London Common Council or aldermen in Northampton's favor, his parliamentary statute banning victualers from judicial office did significantly, if momentarily, weaken the political power of the grocers and fishmongers, "banishing…[them] from the councils at one fell swoop." See Rexroth, *Deviance and Power*, 139.
[75] See *Westminster Chronicle*, 62-63, and Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 285.

characterizes the conflict when he issued a proclamation as mayor in 1391 prohibiting

Londoners from discussing the "divers controversies" surrounding Brembre and

Northampton.[76] But as we have seen, this is not how Usk chooses to describe the

conflict. Instead, he writes the conflict in a way that more explicitly recalls the Revolt,

using the language we found in the Revolt literature. To write the conflict in this way,

Usk had to make a fascinating rhetorical choice. His designation "grete men" excludes

some individuals the rebels might have identified as "great men" in 1381. Usk classifies

Brembre and the merchant oligarchs as "grete men," but has chosen to omit from this

designation the elite who supported Northampton, men like Gaunt and Bamme.[77]

Through these rhetorical classifications and omissions Usk makes the conflict between

the two factions emblematic of the Revolt. Across the *Appeal* Northampton is

inextricably linked to the potentially rebellious "pore" and "comun poeple"; Brembre

and his associates, on the other hand, are made to represent the "grete men." As in 1381,

Usk claims, so again in 1382-1384: "pore" people threatened the "grete men."

This powerful dichotomy between the "pore" and the "grete" is enough to invite

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[76] *Memorials*, 526.
[77] Gaunt is a particularly telling exclusion. Wealthier than Brembre and his allies, Gaunt was certainly regarded by the rebels who burnt his palace in 1381 as one of the "great men" well worth their enmity, and his centrality to the conflict between Northampton and the merchant elite cannot be denied. There is little doubt that Northampton owed his ascension to power in 1381 to Gaunt. And there is no question that Gaunt supported Northampton's attacks on Brembre and the merchant elite. Gaunt and the merchant elite had maintained sharp antipathy for one another since the early 1370s, when the merchant elite opposed the Crown and Gaunt for selling licenses to Italian merchants around the wool staple in Calais, from which Brembre and his associates wildly profited. On this conflict, see Turner, *Chaucer*, 172-180, 279. On Gaunt's influence in Northampton's election as mayor in 1381, see Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 269-271.

stirring imaginings of another rising.   Yet Usk does not stop there. Towards the end of

the *Appeal*, he introduces more language linked to the Revolt. He reiterates that

Northampton and his associates (including, once again, Usk himself) "drewe to hem

many craftes & mochel smale poeple" (204-205). This time, however, he notes that these

"smale poeple" have "non skyl of gouernance ne of gode conseyl" (205). With this

language, Usk recalls the manifold images found in the Revolt literature of the rebels as

an irrational collective, provoked through their unbridled passions into an unnatural

rebellion against the "great men." While this is the only time Usk explicitly

characterizes the "smale" as irrational and without legitimate agency, much in his *Appeal*

implicitly supports this characterization.

 Alongside his charge that Northampton's "smale" supporters have "non skyl of

gouernance" Usk accuses Northampton and his associates of marshalling his supporters

into a "confedracie, congregacion, & couyne" (204-206). Here is the language that, after

the outbreak of the Black Death, was often applied to groups of laborers, servants, and

journeymen assumed to pose a risk for rebellion. No doubt these words are designed to

communicate to Usk's audience that Northampton formed "the kind of political

association that threatens…[the] hierarchy," the kind that had stormed London in 1381.[78]

Implicitly, this illegal association is set against the legitimate assembly of London's

"great men." As in the chronicle accounts of the Revolt, the former is labeled a threat,

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[78] I quote here Wallace's apt characterization of these words: "Chaucer and the Absent City," 75.

the latter characterized as the foundation of good government. To see this, we need only

recall Usk's imagining "the destruxion of the [t]own" had "the aduersairs of John

Northampton" been banished from London's "offices herafter" (121-123).

All of Usk's language that we have surveyed so far communicates a clear

political vision. Northampton's single-minded drive to upset the established order as

mayor threatened to provoke another Revolt and so disrupted civic peace in London. By

the summer of 1384, when Usk gave his *Appeal*, his former boss had been arrested,

removed from London, and imprisoned in Corfe Castle.[79] However, Usk makes it clear

that Northampton's arrest has not neutralized the danger of another Revolt and ensured

peace in London. Twice in his *Appeal*, Usk uses Revolt language to accentuate that

Northampton remains a threat, that another rising is still possible. He does this not just

to ensure Northampton's punishment, but also to urge obedience to Brembre and the

mercantile elite for stability and peace in London.

The first moment occurs early in the *Appeal*. After Usk reveals that Northampton

sought the destruction of those who "loued noght" his political objectives, the appellant

tells us that Northampton rallied his supporters by casting Brembre and his associates as

the "Enemys to alle gode menyng" (66). Usk claims that this strategy in particular was

> euer-more an excitation to the pore poeple to make hem be the more
>
> feruent & rebel a-yeins the grete men of the town, & ayeins the officers

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[79] Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 285-286.

ek, & yt was seide thus to the poeple that euer the grete men wolden haue

the poeple be oppression in lowe degre, for whiche wordes, & be thair

meigtenance, the dissension ys arrise be-twene the worthy persones & the

smale people of the town (66-72).

This remarkable passage narrates an evolution in the conflicts between Northampton

and his supporters and Brembre and his associates. At the beginning of the passage,

Usk acknowledges Northampton as the author of the assertion which made the mayor's

"pore" supporters "more feruent" to rebel against the "grete men." Not fervent,

crucially, but *more* fervent: the desire of the poor to rebel against the elite is assumed,

only intensified by Northampton's manipulation of the language of the common good.

As the passage goes on, the emphasis on Northampton's influence is reduced, collapsed

into an impersonal passive: "yt was seide thus." By the end of the passage,

Northampton has vanished, and Usk transitions to the present tense. There *is*, Usk tells

his audience, a conflict between the "pore" and the "grete men," one Northampton may

well have sparked and exacerbated but which now has grown into something that may

stand autonomous of his former boss. In other words, Usk urges his audience to believe

that there may yet still be another outbreak of violence between the "pore" and the

"grete" unless Northampton is neutralized and Londoners again come to obey the

"grete men."

The next moment, coming at the close of the *Appeal*, is much less subtle and is

worth quoting at length:

> And also the forseide John Northampton…so fer forth wolden depraue
>
> the worthy men of towne that the people was, & ys, the more enbolded to
>
> be rebel a-yeins thair gouernours, that bien now, & that shul bien in tyme
>
> komyng, be her fals informacion & excitacion, couyns, & gadrynges, &
>
> confederacies, ate that tyme maked & euer sithen continued…& so be
>
> hem, & be ther procurementy, & confederacies, & excitacions, the debates
>
> & the grete styrf, that yet ys regnyng in the cite, ys komen jn principalich
>
> be John Norhampton, John More, Richard Norbury, & William Essex; so
>
> that ys in poynt to truble al the realme; & the cite hath stonde in grete
>
> doute & yet doth (214-226).

Usk recapitulates much of the *Appeal* in these lines. Once again, he tells us that

Northampton sought the destruction of London's "grete men." He also recurs to some

of his charged characterizations of Northampton's methods through several keywords—

namely, "excitacion" and "couyns, & gadrynges, & confederacie." The former recalls

Usk's claiming that Northampton's manipulative language was "an excitation to the

pore poeple"; the latter, more obviously, echoes one of the principal charges of the

Appeal, that Northampton and his cronies formed illegal associations with irrational

"smale poeple." Usk uses this summarization of his *Appeal* to make perhaps his most

dramatic assertions in the text. As he does at the beginning of his *Appeal*, he claims that there remains "grete styrf" in London thanks to Northampton. But here he insists that this strife threatens not just London but also "al the realme." What shapes this belief, surely, is his conviction that Northampton's meddling has emboldened the "people" to rebel against their current and future "gouernours."

Even though Usk's Revolt language implicitly and explicitly forecasts another Revolt throughout his text, this forthright projection remains extraordinary. Usk asserts here that unless the authority of the "grete men" is restored, and obedience to them reaffirmed as a virtue, there will be another national breakdown in the social order as in 1381. However extraordinary this assessment of London politics is within the *Appeal*, Usk's thinking here is not without precedent. In 1383, in a speech to parliament, Michael de la Pole, the Chancellor of England, attributed the Revolt to numerous small acts of disobedience throughout England that had occurred in the years preceding 1381. Like Usk, though more explicitly, the Chancellor accentuates obedience in opposition to rebellion: "as rebellion…was *and is* the source and commencement of mischief and trouble within the realm, so…is true obedience to the king and his servants the foundation of all peace and quiet in the realm itself," an obedience that the Chancellor believes is modeled most effectively by England's "gentlemen."[80]

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[80] See Dobson, *Peasants' Revolt*, 363, italics mine.

Usk ties Northampton to the Revolt, and thus his text to the Revolt literature, to

reinforce the dichotomy we find articulated so succinctly in Michael de la Pole's speech

to Parliament in 1383: disobedience yields disorder, obedience brings about peace. The

whole of the *Appeal* rests on this dichotomy. Because Northampton and his associates

have attempted to provoke a rebellion against London's mayor, Nicholas Brembre, and

have worked otherwise to destroy the "grete men" on whom London's order depends,

they deserve harsh punishment.

Why might Usk have written his *Appeal*, condemning his former boss and urging

obedience to Brembre's mayoralty? A possible answer readily presents itself. As some

of Usk's medieval and modern critics have claimed, the appellant may have believed

that such a vision could erase his misdeeds as one of Northampton's allies and win him

new and powerful friends.[81] It is without a doubt true that Usk wants to be identified in

the *Appeal* as a repentant servant of the rulers of London and England, Brembre and

Richard II. In a highly damaged portion of the text, Usk seems to assert that he stands

ready to act for the profit of London and the "grete men" according to the orders of

Richard II: "I wol…****euer stonde be the town & be the worthy***ght may do next my

lige [lorde] wol" (260-262). And to be sure, Usk did benefit from the position he adopts

in the *Appeal*. Yet to read Usk's language in the *Appeal* as self-serving is to ignore aspects

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[81] *The Westminster Chronicle*, 90-91. For modern accounts of Usk as a political aspirant, see Strohm "Politics and Poetics," 83-112; Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 112-126; and Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing*, 24-59

of Usk's life in London in the 1380s that, I believe, urge us to consider the possibility that Usk acted out of something other than self-interest.

We do not know exactly when Usk started working for Northampton. But it is very likely that Usk worked for him for the majority, if not the totality, of Northampton's mayoralty from 1381-1383. For much of this time, it would have been possible to support Northampton without thinking this support compromised one's loyalty to Richard II or even conflicted with the king's own views of London politics. In 1382, after his attacks on the fishmongers, Northampton went up for reelection. For this election, John of Gaunt, who backed Northampton's attacks on the fishmongers, pushed Richard II to support Northampton's reelection. The king did so, authoring a letter which urged Londoners to "elect a discreet and wise Mayor," John of Northampton, about whom the king "had heard well."[82] Nightingale notes that this letter was vital to Northampton's reelection in 1382, influencing even John Philpot and John Hadley, allies of Brembre, to vote for him.[83] After this moment the dynamics of London politics seem to have changed rather rapidly. In 1383 some of Usk's "grete men" extended the Crown very significant and decisive loans. This gave Richard, eager to shake off Gaunt's influence, a reason to support Brembre over Northampton in the 1383 election.[84] As we know from Usk's Appeal, Northampton did not take his defeat well, turning first to

[82] *Cal. L.B. H,* 200.
[83] Nightingale, *Medieval Mercantile*, 275.
[84] Ibid, 280-281.

Gaunt for help and then, Gaunt having refused help, going on to mastermind seditious

acts against Brembre. In response, Brembre cultivated his relationship with Richard, the

two coming together most forcefully with Brembre's decision to execute Northampton's

rebellious ally John Constantine.

These were perilous times for a scrivener and son of a capmaker.[85] In 1382 Usk

could have acted for Northampton's cause believing both that Northampton was an ally

of the Crown and (as he claims in the *Testament*) a force for the common good and that

Brembre and his associates "wer Enemys to alle gode menyng" (66). He would have

had the king's letter to support his reasoning. But two years later, with the shifts in

power dynamics, the views on Brembre and his associates that seemed to be supported

by the Crown in 1382 had become anathema. After Northampton began his attacks on

Mayor Brembre, and especially after the execution of Constantine, Usk would have had

ample reason to believe himself an enemy to the Crown (newly allied with Brembre) and

to fear for his life. While critics have written Usk's defection as the action of an

opportunist, recognizing in Richard and Brembre's ascendancy over Gaunt and

Northampton a new chance to rise in the political world, it seems to me more likely that

Usk felt incredibly vulnerable in 1384. This was a different political world than the one

in which he likely began his political career. What else was he to do in 1384, with

possibly his life on the line, but submit to Richard II and Brembre and plea for mercy as

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[85] For Usk's parents, what little we know about them, see Shawver, *Testament*, 8.

he does at the close of the *Appeal*: "And of al thys matirs I crie to my [lyge] lo[rd] the king euermore of grace & of mercy" (258-259)?

We are now presented with another possibility: should Usk's authoring the *Appeal* be understood as a response to the threat of power rather than a recognition that writing this text offered a path to power? Perhaps. But this fails to account for the final years of Usk's life. True, Usk's *Appeal* franticly affirms a version of the city that accords with those who held power over him. In 1385, however, the power dynamics in London again shifted. Gaunt regained some of the influence he lost in 1384, and Usk was once again arrested, most likely due to Gaunt's resurgence.[86] Despite his imprisonment, Usk remained resolute. He wrote *The Testament of Love*, reaffirming his views on Northampton while expressing confusion about the actions of his alleged allies, Brembre and the merchant elite. Why, he wonders, must he "dwel in this pynande prison" when he acted according to the virtues he had learned from his political tradition and helped "enden" the "rancours" of Northampton (1.6.68, 71-72)?

More dramatically, at the end of his life, Usk refused to retract his views on Northampton and break with Richard II. During the Merciless Parliament, the Lords Appellant charged Usk with treason for making false indictments against them. Rather than vacillate under such pressure, as we might expect a "supple code-switcher" to do, Usk claimed in defense to have merely obeyed the orders of his king, undoubtedly

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[86] For Gaunt's possible role in Usk's second arrest, see Shawver, *Testament*, 20.

aware that his doing so meant certain punishment.[87] Might Usk have been convinced

that he was to be punished no matter what he said? Possibly. But facing his death, he

refused once more to back away from the political position he had staked his life on

from 1381-1388. According to *The Westminster Chronicle*, Usk went to the gallows

seeking forgiveness for his sins, "reciting with the utmost piety" the Seven Penitential

Psalms, among other hymns, but not forgiveness for his obedience to Brembre and

Richard II and his writing against Northampton: "To the very end he refused to admit

having wronged John Northampton, of whom he maintained that every word was true

that he had spoken before the king [in his *Appeal*]."[88]

Usk's life and texts, I believe, reveal the inadequacy of the paradigms we often

use to diagnose power. As Hannah Arendt instructs us, our modern conceptions of

power tend to be reductive. We often assume that obedience must be the result of

coercion and violence, that there is no power that is voluntarily obeyed.[89] If we are to

offer Usk a "decent and epistemologically humble stab at comprehension," we must try

to understand his own framework for thinking about power and obedience.[90] And we

can start to do this by considering his traditional models of power, obedience, and

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[87] For the quote, see Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 153. For the charges against Usk and his defense, see *RP*, III.234, 240. As Strohm correctly observes in his seminal essay on Usk: "Usk's statement…was that he had done all at the command of the king…In the supercharged factional atmosphere of the trial, admission of having served the king was equivalent to confession of guilt." See "Politics and Poetics," 89. See also Shawver, *Testament*, 21-22.

[88] *Westminster Chronicle*, 314-317.

[89] Hannah Arendt, "What Is Authority?", in *Between Past and Future: Six Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), 91-141.

[90] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 160.

tyranny in his *Testament of Love*. Through our consideration of this work, we will find

consistency, ethical and political ideas that have been ignored by literary critics but

which, I believe, draw together the seemingly disparate pieces of Usk's fraught life and

challenging texts.

2. Rational Obedience in The Testament of Love

Towards the beginning of *The Testament of Love*, Usk's teacher Lady Love

maintains that her law is "al the lawe of kynde" (1.5.50). This is the conceptual bedrock

of Usk's project in the *Testament*. Throughout his text Usk uses Love to define the

behavior that accords with natural law ethics. This involves a wide-ranging account of

the ethical, political, and theological concepts which shaped the literature of Usk's

society. In a "song" in Book II, Love offers, among other things, a model of rational

obedience using some of these concepts.[91] This model, which has been ignored by

literary critics, speaks to the political position Usk adopts in the *Appeal* and defends at

the beginning of the *Testament*. As such, it is crucial to our understanding of Usk's texts

and his life. As we will see in this section, Usk was adamant about obedience, insisting

that nature requires that we follow the just commands of a ruler. He was not, however,

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[91] Usk tells us that Love, like Boethius's Philosophy, sang to him "a wonder mater of enditynge in Latyn" (2.2.1-2). So eloquent is this song, Usk claims, that his "connyng wol not stretche to remembre" it (2.2.3). He must therefore render the song in prose and English (2.2.6-7). This is a perplexing moment, made all the more so by the fact that Usk, a scrivener, knew Latin. For an instructive reading of this moment, see Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 168-169.

an absolutist.[92] Usk recognized the limits on political power imposed unconditionally

by natural law and divine law.[93]

Love's song in Book II is both lament and lecture. Love presents a number of

issues that she believes plague Usk's culture, some addressed more so than others. Most

important for our purposes, she complains about the forms of power in Usk's culture, an

issue that leads her to expound her model of obedience. She laments that in Usk's

culture now "governaunce fayleth, as thus: to sene smale and lowe governe the hye and

bodies above" (2.2.69-70). Here we have the reintroduction of Usk's collective noun

"smale." In the mouth of Usk's instructor, however, this term is not confined to the

(comparatively) narrow factional world of Usk's London. It stretches beyond this,

including, it seems to me, all those within and outside London who might be classified

as "smale." So according to Love, it is throughout England that the "smale and lowe"

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[92] Turner argues that Usk characterizes "submission of the will to that of the sovereign…[as] the path to fulfilment." See *Chaucerian Conflict*, 119.

[93] Usk's views on tyranny and obedience are far from idiosyncratic in the Middle Ages. Most medieval political philosophers sought to impose limits on power. Most prominently, Italian political theorists, such as Marsilius of Padua, saw consent as central to secular government. Beyond secular government, early Conciliarists argued that the pope's power depended on the consent of the cardinalate, who acted on behalf of the wider Christian community. These major strands aside, even Giles of Rome, who tended to favor monarchy unburdened with constitutional limitations, rejected absolutism, upholding, as James Blythe suggests, "the supremacy of divine and natural law" in matters of government. See James M. Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 70. For Giles's writing on natural law, see *The Governance of Kings and Princes*, eds. David C. Fowler, Charles F. Briggs, and Paul G. Remley (New York: Routledge, 2014), III.ii.24-26. On consent in the political thought of Marsilius of Padua and early Conciliarists, see the final work in Francis Oakley's outstanding trilogy on European political thought: *The Watershed of Modern Politics: Law, Virtue, Kingship, and Consent (1300-1650)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 172-239. Alongside Blythe and Oakley's respective works, Brian Tierney's introduction to medieval constitutional thought remains essential: *Religion, Law, and the Growth of Constitutional Thought, 1150-1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

have an illegitimate power over the elite.[94] Love identifies this power as a "polesye" that

is destructive and cannot stand (2.2.70). In the lines that follow, she addresses this form

of power, offering as a solution a model of obedience that is in accordance with

Aristotelian political theory in the Middle Ages.

Love begins her account of obedience with a simple (and thoroughly

unsurprising) pronouncement: "the hygher" should govern "the lower" (2.2.72-73). To

support this assertion, she cites the learning of political theorists (2.2.71). Love explains

that these theorists have shown that "beestly wytte shulde ben subjecte to reason"

(2.2.72). Love is referencing here a commonplace in medieval ethical and political

theory—namely, that reason should order the natural inclinations we share with

animals. As long as we follow reason, we act according to our nature, and thus are able

to attain to ends which are natural for us—individually, the virtues; communally, the

common good.[95] When we depart from reason, we act against our nature and so against

our natural ends, leading us to ethical and political disorder.[96] The medieval political

theorists Love seems to cite often apply this ethical principle analogically to

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[94] The notion that the "smale" held power over the elite is a belief that we might assume few would have found convincing in fourteenth-century England. But Usk wrote in a culture in which rebellious "smale poeple" could be construed as monopolizing control over the processes the lords identified as essential to the common good, binding these men in states of weakness.

[95] Of course, this does not mean that one is habituated in the virtues in isolation. Nor are the virtues inessential to the common good. On the contrary, these ends are crucially interrelated.

[96] See Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.94.1-4 and 71.1-2, 6 ad 4.

government.[97] Love follows their example. As our bestial inclinations are subject to

reason, she argues, so too should the "smale" be subject to the "hygher"—the king,

obviously, but also the lords. This is the organizing principle of Love's model of

obedience. To obey one's superiors is to follow human nature and reason. To disobey

them, to rebel against them, is tantamount to allowing our bestial instincts to dominate

our reason. The former is profitable, tending towards the achievement of the good ends

we desire by nature; the latter is fruitless, a "polesye [that] is naught" (2.2.70). In most

circumstances, it seems, Love believes that Usk's culture should follow this principle.

Most, not all.[98] Love is no proponent of absolute obedience. If she were, she

would condemn, not support, her pupil's decision to appeal a superior he deems a

tyrant (1.6.61). Instructively, Love follows her pronouncement that "the hygher" should

govern "the lower" with an exhortation to rulers to govern rationally. This exhortation,

grounded in Usk's political tradition, is crucial to Love's model of obedience. Implicitly,

it defines the terms and limits to obedience.

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[97] Love does not reveal who exactly she means by "them that of governaunce treaten and enformen" (2.2.71).
But examples abound in the Aristotelian political tradition. For particularly cogent examples, see ibid, IIa-
IIae.104.1, and Giles, *Governance*, III.ii.34.6-14. This political concept was not strictly the purview of political
theorists. As James Simpson has shown, this concept shapes John Gower's political thought in his *Confessio
Amantis: Sciences and the Self: Alan of Lille's Anticlaudianus and John Gower's Confessio Amantis* (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1995), 272-299.

[98] I see no reason to believe that Usk would not have agreed with Giles's statement that "he þat is wel
obedient to þe kyng is a good man." As Usk committed an act of disobedience, he could not, of course,
follow Giles in believing that it is better to suffer tyranny than to be "vnobedient" to tyrants. See
Governance, III.ii.34.23, 44-46. For Giles's reticence to support rebellion, see M.S. Kempshall, *The Common
Good in Late Medieval Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 150. Giles's *Regimine* was an
extremely popular text in the late Middle Ages. On its popularity, see Charles F. Briggs, *Giles of Rome's De
Regimen Principum: Reading and Writing Politics at Court and University, c.1275-c.1525* (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2009), 53-73.

Love begins her exhortation by opining that rulers and lords should govern with the following in mind: "'I am servaunt of these creatures to me delyvered': not lorde, but defendour; not mayster, but enfourmer, not possessoure, but in possessyon…and not to be [a] tyraunt" (2.2.77-82). Here, Love urges rulers and lords against the desire to master and dominate their subjects. She identifies this desire as the mark of tyranny, a vicious and denaturing form of government no better than the fruitless rule of the "smale" over the elite.[99] As Usk knew well, tyrants seek to concentrate their power over their subjects, preventing them from enjoying the political good Usk claims to prize above all in the *Testament*: "peace and tranquylite" (1.6.58).[100] By contrast, just rulers are the defenders of peace, maintaining their power over their subjects according to reason. For Love, this is the ideal of rulership. It is an ideal she shares with Geoffrey Chaucer's Parson. In his treatment of the vice avarice, the Parson contends that "sovereyntee [was] ordeyned, to keep and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynges or hire subgetz in resoun, as ferforth as it lith in hire power, and nat to destroyen hem ne confounde" (X.774, 773).

Love joins this statement against tyranny with one about prudence, a cardinal virtue Love considers indispensable to a well-ordered community: "lytel or naught is

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[99] The definition of tyranny as domination stems from Aristotle's *Politics*. See the following edition: Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Carnes Lord (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 4.10.1295a1-24. This definition pervades medieval political theory. See, for example, Sir John Fortescue, *On the Laws and Governance of England*, ed. Shelley Lockwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85. For a rich introduction to Fortescue, see James Simpson, "Reginald Pecock and John Fortescue," *A Companion to Middle English Prose*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 278-284.
[100] Aquinas argues that tyrants "hinder them [their subjects] from enjoying the rewards of mutual peace." See his *De regimine principum*, 1.4. I quote Aquinas's *De regimine* from Aquinas, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

worthe erthely power, but if reignatyfe prudence in heedes governe the smale" (2.2.74-

75). In medieval ethical and political theory, prudence is chief among the cardinal

virtues. Through natural law we know the ends of the other cardinal virtues—justice,

temperance, and fortitude. Without prudence, however, we are unable to work out the

means to these ends.[101] It is therefore integral to our habituation in the other cardinal

virtues. As Thomas Hoccleve writes in his early fifteenth-century *Regiment of Princes*:

> Prudence, attemperance, strengthe, and right,
>
> Tho foure been vertues principal;
>
> Prudence gooth byfore and geveth light
>
> Of conseil what tho othir thre do shal.[102]

Love mentions a special form of prudence, one that belongs specifically to rulers:

regnative prudence. For Aquinas, this is the most perfect form of the virtue. It includes

the general form of the virtue. But it also enables the ruler to identify the means to the

common good of the community, an end that is higher (but no less natural) than the

individual's habituation in the virtues. Through regnative prudence, then, rulers govern

themselves and their community, at once realizing the means to the virtues and the

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[101] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.47.6-7.

[102] Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 4754-4757.

common good.[103] This is the medieval ideal of rulership: a ruler with regnative

prudence promulgating just laws for the common good of the community.

This exhortation to rulers colors Love's model of obedience. At the end of her

sentence highlighting that worldly power is worth little unless "reignatyfe prudence in

heedes governe the smale," Love adds the following: "to whiche heedes the smale owen

to obey and suffre in their governaunce" (2.2.75-76). This seems to be a vital

qualification to the organizing principle with which Love begins. Yes, the "lower"

should obey the "hygher," but this obedience is conditional upon regnative prudence.

Lines later, in a grammatically tricky sentence, Love expands on this statement, stressing

that if rulers act as "defendour[s]," adhering to the principles of reason, "*than* the smale,

in reste and quyete, by the heedes wel disposed, owen for their soveraynes helth and

prosperyte to pray, and in other doynges, in maintenaunce therof, performe withouten

other admynistracion" (2.2.82-84, emphasis mine). Here again obedience seems

conditional: if rulers are reasonable, then obedience and other acts are owed. Within

this language Love appears to set limits to obedience. This prompts an obvious

question, one Love does not address explicitly: what are the limits to obedience? On this

subject Usk's political tradition is unambiguous. For Aquinas, positive laws and

commands must accord with natural law and be for the common good in order to be

legitimate. Obedience to legitimate laws is owed according to natural law and is a part

[103] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.50.1, resp. and ad. 1.

of the virtue justice. If, however, laws or commands fall away from natural law, they cease to impart moral obligation to obedience, becoming instead more like violence against the community. Indeed, there is a moral obligation to disobey laws or commands which contravene natural or divine law. One could do so on the grounds of either natural or divine law.[104] Love's views on the limits of obedience seem to cohere with Aquinas's treatment. Here, she only appears to affirm that obedience is due only to rulers who govern rationally. Elsewhere, however, she is much more explicit. Late in Usk's text, for example, Love celebrates pagans who challenged tyrannical rulers, instructing Usk that he, like these virtuous pagans, has "maynteynest lawe of kynde" with his *Appeal* against the tyrant Northampton and thus "is worthy to be rewarded" (3.2.26-27).

We are now able to define Love's model of obedience. Like Aquinas, Love views obedience to reasonable, virtuous rulers as owed according to natural law. For her no less than Aquinas, this is an essential part of a just community.[105] To those rulers who

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[104] Ibid, Ia-IIae.96.4, resp. and ad 2-3, IIa-IIae.42.2 ad 3, IIa-IIae.57.2 ad 2, IIa-IIae.80.1, resp. and ad 3. On this aspect of Aquinas's legal thought, see John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 272-273 and 290-291, and Kempshall, *Common Good in Late Medieval Political Thought*, 124-125. Aquinas's treatment of tyranny, obedience, and natural and divine law is not incongruent with the reflections on political power of a range of political writers in the Middle Ages. For example, William of Ockham begins his tract on papal tyranny by asserting the "rights and liberties" of Christians granted "by God and nature." See Ockham, *A Short Discourse on Tyrannical Government*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade, trans. John Kilcullen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3. On Ockham's understanding of the limits to obedience, see Arthur Stephen McGrade, *The Political Thought of William of Ockham: Personal and Institutional Principles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 157, and Takashi Shogimen, *Ockham and Political Discourse in the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 256-261.
[105] For Aquinas's statements on obedience and its relation to natural law, see *Summa*, IIa-IIae.104.1, 6.

govern as "mayster[s]," however, obedience is not owed. As Love demonstrates across

Usk's *Testament*, disobedience to such rulers is not only licit, but is also something that

could be construed as "worthy to be rewarded" (3.2.27). As we will see in the following

section, this model is key to understanding Usk's self-presentation in the *Testament*.

Before we turn to Usk's account of his defection, however, there is one remaining

aspect of Love's model of obedience which I wish to consider. Love treats "the smale"

quite differently than Usk does in his *Appeal* and the imprisoned Usk does at the

beginning of the *Testament*. Unlike the appellant and the prisoner, Love seems to

remember that all humans are endowed with reason and free will. As we have seen, she

seems to allow "the smale" the reason and autonomy needed to resist tyrannical rulers.

This is not, however, all she does. After she claims that "the smale" should obey their

superiors without "other admynistracion in rule of any maner governaunce," she offers

this fascinating comment: "And they ["the smale"] wyt have in hem, and grace to come

to suche thynges, yet shulde they cease tyl their heedes them cleped, although profyte

and pleasaunce shulde folowe" (2.2.85-88). In other words, "the smale" have the "wyt"

necessary to create a profitable politics. This is a far cry from Usk's earlier comments in

the *Testament* that "the smale" of London "have no consyderacion, but onely to

voluntary lustes, withouten reason" (1.6.130-131). Indeed, as we have seen, it is far cry

from much contemporary commentary on those classified as "smale." What are we to

make of Love's comment? In my view, this is a glimpse into the political imagination

freed from the vicious dogma of the early 1380s. But it is only a glimpse. Love quickly

moves on to another topic, leaving her comment sealed off from Usk's characterizations

of "the smale" in Book I of the *Testament* (and across the *Appeal*).

According to Usk, there are some Londoners who believe that he "shulde for no

dethe have discovered…[his] mayst[eres]," Northampton and his allies, to whom he had

sworn an oath of loyalty (1.7.33-34, 43). Following Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*,

Usk opens his *Testament* with a defense of his actions in 1384, attempting to demonstrate

that his defection was a virtuous response to Northampton's tyranny and the reasonable

commands of Brembre and Richard II.[106] In this defense we will find that Usk presents

obedience to Richard II and Brembre as fundamental to a well-ordered community as he

does in his *Appeal*. Yet his resources here are different. Instead of the Revolt language

he uses in the *Appeal*, Usk draws on the ideas concerning obedience and disobedience

which Love later articulates in her song in Book II. First, he marks Northampton as a

tyrant whose authority imparted no moral obligation to obedience and had to be

resisted in order to avoid civil destruction. Second, he characterizes the command of

Brembre and his associates as reasonable, his decision to obey it a product of rational

reflection about the common good.

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[106] For the "apologetic agenda" of Boethius's *Consolation*, and Usk's writing the *Testament* "as a new vernacular work in the tradition of the *Consolation*" and its form of apology, see Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 166-183, quotes at 173, 167.

Before Usk can begin to account for his defection, however, he must first explain why he joined the cause of a man he later condemned as a tyrant. In the opening lines of his defense, Usk portrays himself as a man drawn to act for the common good, the virtuous end he later claims to follow in his decision to obey Brembre and Richard II. Usk reveals that he had been interested in the "great maters of ruling of cytezins" since his youth (1.6.48). It was this interest which drew him, as an adult, to John of Northampton, whose proclamations Usk thought "noble and glorious" because they seemed to attain to the common good and were profitable to him and his "frendes" (1.6.50-51, 57). Because of this he worked diligently to realize Northampton's goals. This is a fascinating disclosure, one that may very well be true. As I observed earlier, Northampton held the support of John of Gaunt and (at least by appearances) Richard II in 1381-1382. In addition to this, Northampton remained extremely popular among London's non-victualing guilds. This included the goldsmiths, the company that hired Usk as a scrivener in 1382.[107] If Usk worked for Northampton during the first two years of his mayoralty, as seems to be the case, he would have found much in his environment to affirm his view that Northampton's proclamations were "noble and glorious," from Gaunt's (and Richard's) support to the very enthusiastic support of the goldsmiths.

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[107] *Goldsmiths' Mistery of London*, 199.

At some point during his work for Northampton, Usk's conscience accused him, an act which liberated him from the disorienting powers of Northampton (1.6.59-61).[108] Here we can begin to follow the principles related to disobedience which Love later outlines in her song in Book II. Through the working of his reason Usk began to identify Northampton as a man motivated by the sin "envye," not by the love of the common good (1.6.59, 64).[109] The proclamations which "semed…noble and glorious to al" now revealed themselves to Usk as "malyce and yvel meanynge, withouten any good avaylyng to any people" (1.6.60-61). As Usk indicates here, these are hallmarks of "tyrannye": the rejection of the common good for the destructive pursuit of the ruler's own vicious desires (1.6.61). Interestingly, this charge is unique to the *Testament*. Although many of Northampton's alleged actions in the *Appeal* may easily be classified as tyranny, the appellant never once calls Northampton a tyrant in his 1384 text. Usk's reasoning for doing so here, in his defense of his defection, is apparent. As we observed in the previous section, the commands of a tyrant are illegitimate, tending towards the destruction of the community rather than its good, and thus retain no moral obligation to obedience. This is precisely what Usk wishes to highlight. Northampton's tyranny rendered illicit his mayoralty and, more specifically, the power he held over Usk. With his defection, then, Usk did not violate the order of obedience, something Love herself

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[108] As Aquinas understands it, conscience is an act whereby we apply knowledge to a certain case. Our conscience accuses us when we reason that we have done something wrong. See Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia.79.13.
[109] For envy as a sin, see ibid, IIa-IIae.1-3.

emphasizes (1.7.43-48). On the contrary, he contested and helped end a government

which would have led to the "distruction of mokyl people": an act that both he and his

instructor characterize as analogous to defections in pagan history which disempowered

tyrants and saved communities (1.6.65, 42-45; 3.2.16-28).

Having defined Northampton as a tyrant, Usk moves on to the command of

Brembre and his associates and his decision to obey it. Imprisoned in the summer of

1384, most likely in Brembre's house, Usk was instructed that he "shulde openly

confesse how peace myght ben endused to enden al the firste rancours" (1.6.70-72).[110]

He was ordered to do so on his "kynges behalfe" (1.6.148). Usk does not conclude his

defense here, with the command of a superior, as we might expect him to do if he

wanted to portray himself as "a reliable, loyal retainer who wants to bend his will to that

of the Master."[111] Instead, he offers an account of his reasoning about this command.

The common good, he shows, was central to his reasoning. Earlier in his defense Usk

defines the common good as "not but peace and tranquylite" (1.6.58). Crucially for Usk,

this is the end towards which the command of his captors is ordered. Lest someone

think his definition a product of collusion or coercion, or else a baseless assertion by the

defector himself, Usk tells us exactly how he arrived at it. He claims to have considered

Christian and pagan history, recalling both that Christians are meant to live peacefully

[110] For Usk's first imprisonment, see Shawver, *Testament*, 13-14.
[111] Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 119.

in the body of Christ and that Athens was named "rather after the god of peace, than of

batayle, shewynge that peace moste is necessarye to comunalties and cytes" (1.6.101-102,

97-99). These reflections on the common good "styred" him to obey the command of his

superiors, even though the prospect of doing so filled him with "fere": "I thought that

every man that by any waye of right, rightfully done, maye helpe any comune [wele] to

ben saved, which thynge to kepe, above al thynges, I am holde to mayntayne" (1.6.103,

73-76). Usk's language here is careful. He shows his circumstance was congruent with

the conditions Love sets for obedience in Book II. He was given a command by a

superior. Rather than follow it blindly, he reflected on it, reaching the conclusion that

the command was for the common good and thus was legitimate. As such, he decided

to obey his superior, whatever discomfort would follow.

There is considerable art to this defense. Indeed, Usk "submytt[ed]" to the

command made by his superior on his "kynges behalfe" (1.6.177, 148). But this was not

the obedience of an opportunist. Rather, it was rational obedience, following the

principles which Love verifies in Book II as in accordance with the natural law and

essential to well-ordered communities. With this defense rooted in his political

tradition, Usk posits to his culture the following question: would anyone "that any

droppe of reason hath" do differently than he did in 1384 (1.7.17)? Usk's answer

confronts us on nearly every page of Book I and parts of Books II and III. Obedience to

reasonable commands of superiors is natural, the foundation of peace in a monarchical

society. To do otherwise would be to commit an act of "unkyndeness," an act against

the natural law. This is one of the central points of Usk's *Testament*. As he tells Lady

Love at the end of his defense: "And for comers hereafter…I have put it in scripture, in

perpetuel remembraunce of true meanynge. For trewly, lady, me semeth, that I ought to

beare the name of trouthe, that for the love of rightwysnesse have thus me submytten"

(1.6.173-177).

3. Conclusion

If Thomas Usk had been a "code-switcher," sensitive only to the vacillations in

power and eager to secure himself a better job, we might find his politics in his texts

incoherent, rife with conflicts and contradictions.[112] Instead, we find consistency—a

consistency that is not so easily explained by our modern paradigms for exploring

power. Usk's two texts, while vastly different, tell the same story: obedience is essential

to civic peace. In 1384, finding himself on the opposite side of the Crown, Usk

maintained this dramatically and dogmatically in his *Appeal*, using language bound with

the Revolt of 1381. In 1385, arrested again, Usk did not waver but reaffirmed his views

on obedience in his *Testament*, using vitally different resources—no longer the language

of the Revolt, but the principles of his political tradition. And it was, finally, the

principle of obedience that Usk, in Merciless Parliament, maintained against a group of

nobles openly hostile to Richard II's form of power.

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[112] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 153.

Usk's life and texts are not easy to interpret. On this Strohm is certainly correct: the best we can do indeed is offer Usk a "decent and epistemologically humble stab at comprehension."[113] To begin to do this, in my view, we must follow Hannah Arendt and ask: "What was—and not what is—authority?"[114]

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[113] Ibid, 160.
[114] Arendt, "Authority?", 91.

2. "I, Thomas Usk, Traitor": *The Testament of Love* and the Ethics and Politics of Service

As we saw in the previous chapter, Thomas Usk sought in his *Appeal* to condemn Northampton for his actions and to portray himself to his community as a penitent convert, once a member of Northampton's criminal party but now a force for the common good. As Usk's 1385 *Testament of Love* makes clear, however, this attempt at self-characterization was a failure. At the beginning of this text, Usk "lygge[s] ystocked" in a "derke prisone," an outcast from his society (1.1.38, 14). To counter his poor reputation, Usk portrays himself in the *Testament* as a servant to Lady Love, his Boethian interlocutor in prison. He uses ethical, political, and theological concepts which were conventional in the Middle Ages to define service, and accordingly offers an exhaustive account of these concepts in Books II and III of the *Testament*.

New Historicists have attempted to fit this complex model of service into their paradigm for understanding authority that I assessed in the last chapter. In his seminal essay on the *Testament*, for example, Paul Strohm treats these concepts as mere "discursive choices" through which Usk communicates his "hope for future advancement from his new allies," Brembre and Richard II. This both isolates and

empties out these concepts. For example, in Book III, Usk offers an elaborate account of

free will, drawing heavily on the work of the early medieval Christian theologian St.

Anselm of Canterbury. This account is bound up with medieval conceptions of reason,

grace, and divine providence and foreknowledge. In Strohm's analysis, however, Usk's

treatment of free will reveals his desire "to increase his acceptability to the Brembre

faction."[115] Several other major critics have followed Strohm's reading of Usk's text as

an opportunist's series of messages to Brembre and Richard II. Joanna Summers argues

that "Usk may have hoped to win royal favour through the importance given to natural

law," a concept as rich and central to Usk's model of service as free will.[116] Marion

Turner treats the model of service itself as a message to Richard II and Brembre: "Usk

presents Love's servants—including himself—as the ideal courtiers: people who can

take on any role, any opinion, any position, and whose integrity can be utterly

subsumed by the desire of the sovereign."[117]

　　　These readings fail to take into account the complexity of what I see as

fundamental to Usk's politics: his model of service and the accompanying ethical,

political, and theological concepts. In this chapter, I show that Usk weaves his political

history into this model, casting his defection to Brembre's side in 1384 as coherent with

the ethical, political, and theological concepts standardized in the literature of his

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[115] See Strohm, "Politics and Poetics," 100, 99, 102.

[116] Joanna Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing and the Politics of Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 56. See also 46-9.

[117] Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 120.

culture. By doing this, Usk show that his defection, which he classifies as service to

Love, was a virtuous political act which tended towards his perfection in God.[118] Usk's

text offers much more than self-explanation, though. By offering careful explications of

the demands of service and the ideal cultural responses to acts of service, Usk hopes to

reform his society, reeducating it in the principles he believes it must have forgotten, or

else he would not have ended up in jail. My readings across this chapter and the

previous one do not dispute the central claim of the works of New Historicists: Usk *did*

support Brembre and Richard II after his defection. This support, however, is not the

key to his text. Usk writes the *Testament* not because he hoped for "future

advancement" from Brembre or Richard II, but to intervene in and reform a culture he

identifies as vicious.[119]

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[118] Strohm recognizes the theological language in the *Testament* but finds it incompatible with the political aspects of the *Testament*. The secular and the spiritual, for Strohm, seem to be split. However, my analysis of the concepts which constitute Usk's model of service reveals that the secular and the spiritual were, for Usk, quite compatible. For an example, see Strohm, "Poetics and Politics," 103.

[119] Strohm, "Politics and Poetics," 99. Eleanor Johnson likewise reads the *Testament* as a text aiming at social reformation, but she does not connect Usk's reforming impulse to his political history or to his rich model of service. See Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 182-183. While Strohm, Summers, and Turner's respective works represent the dominate way Usk has been read since the 1990s, there are other critics who see in the *Testament* a more philosophical Usk. These critics, however, do not consider carefully how Usk's model of service and its related concepts structure his politics. See Andrew Galloway, "Private Selves and the Intellectual Marketplace in Late Fourteenth-Century England: The Case of the Two Usks," *New Literary History* 28, 2 (Spring 1997): 291-318; Stephen Medcalf, "The World and Heart of Thomas Usk," in *Essays on Ricardian Literature In Honour of J.A. Burrow*, eds. A.J. Minnis, Charlotte C. Morse, and Thorlac Turville-Petre (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 222-251; and David R. Carlson, "Chaucer's Boethius and Thomas Usk's Testament of Love: Politics and Love in the Chaucerian Tradition," in *The Centre and its Compass: Studies in Medieval Literature in Honor of Professor John Leyerle*, eds. Robert A. Taylor, James F. Burke, Patricia J. Eberle, Ian Lancashire, Brian S. Merrilees (Kalamazoo, MI: Studies in Medieval Culture, 1993), 29-70.

2.1. Trouthe and Falsity in Fourteenth Century London

"I ought to beare the name of trouthe" (1.6.175). This is Usk's complaint about

his society after his decision to write his *Appeal* against Northampton (1.6.175). He

reiterates this complaint again and again in the *Testament of Love*. He maintains that he

acted "onely for trouthe"; he states that his society should "maken joye that a sothe" is

now "knowe" because of his *Appeal*; and he characterizes his detractors as the

"enemyes…of truthe" (1.6.147, 145, 1.7.36-37).

As numerous critics have observed, *trouthe* is a pervasive word with a wide

semantic range in medieval literature.[120] In Middle English, as in our modern English,

the term denotes factual accuracy. But the term also held ethical, political, and

theological connotations in the Middle Ages that are less familiar to us today.[121] In the

poem "Truth," for example, Chaucer urges his readers to "dwelle with sothfastnesse":

this is an invocation to act virtuously and leave the "hate," "tikelnesse," and "envye"

characteristic of courtly life (1, 3, 4). He links this to Christ's words in John 8.38: "And

trouthe thee shal delivere" (7). The repeated use of *trouthe* gives the poem its ethical and

theological meaning. There is continuity between the *Trouthe* that is the divine love

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[120] The most thorough discussion of the word remains Richard Firth Green, *A Crisis of Truth: Literature and Law in Ricardian England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). I have also found helpful Elliot Kendall, *Lordship and Literature: John Gower and the Politics of the Great Household* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 182-187, and Justice, *Writing and Rebellion*, 182-188.

[121] Green divides the meanings of *trouthe* into four senses—legal, ethical, theological, and intellectual—and discusses each one. See *A Crisis*, 9-31.

which is freely given and the *trouthe* that is "the rectitude of will" necessary to persevere

in that love.[122] Throughout the *Testament* Usk deploys *trouthe* in its sundry connotations.

But in the sentences I quoted above, he is thinking specifically about the veracity of his

Appeal and the ethics of his defection to Brembre's faction. He implies that his *Appeal*

ought to be recognized as factual. But crucially, he also believes he should be

acknowledged by his society as a paragon of virtue, a model for all who wish to act

according to the *trouthe*.

As his *Testament* makes abundantly clear, however, he is not acknowledged as

such by his culture. Instead, he "lygge[s] ystocked" in a "derke prisone," an outcast

from his society (1.1.38, 14). He attributes his imprisonment to the pernicious effects of

rumor. In Book I, Usk laments "the janglynge," "the noyse," and the "murmure" of his

society, all sourced to a collective Usk calls "the people" (1.5.16, 1.6.152, 1.7.37, 1.6.169).

This collective has been fed "false conspyred maters" about him by the "enemyes of

[Usk's] wyl"—most likely allies of Northampton, including John of Gaunt (1.6.170,

1.7.35).[123] What were these "false conspyred maters" (1.6.170)? Usk does not offer many

specifics, but there is no doubt that it concerned his defection from Northampton's

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[122] I utilize Aquinas's language here: see *Summa*, Ia-IIae.5.7.

[123] Gaunt remained a steadfast ally of Northampton throughout Northampton's political career: he supported his election in 1382 and lobbied for him to receive a less severe punishment after his trial in 1384. See Turner, *Chaucer: A European Life*, 278-279, and Bird, *Turbulent*, 83-84. Shawver speculates that Usk's second imprisonment—which occurred from December 1384 to June 1385, and during which he began writing the *Testament*—was due to Gaunt: "Between December 1384 and June 1385 Usk was once again in Brembre's custody…One may reasonably infer that Gaunt prevailed on the king to arrest Usk for having turned against Northampton and written the *Appeal*." See *Testament*, 20.

faction.[124] Whatever the exact content of the rumors, Usk makes it clear that his

detractors deliberately sought "to make hertes to murmure ayenst [his] persone, to have

[him] in hayne without any cause" (1.7.37-38). This is the problem around which Usk's

complex language of *trouthe* turns.

Usk's language of *trouthe* must be contextualized among a complex web of

cultural behaviors and issues in London. In *Chaucerian Conflict*, Turner illuminates

crucial aspects of this web. She tells us that between 1378 and 1388 the English statues

concerning slander were revised twice, indicating "that slander was a particular concern

of those at the highest levels of society."[125] Indeed, Richard II issued a proclamation in

1387 that sought "to halt the gossip that must have been rampant in London" by "in

essence tell[ing] Londoners and suburbanites not to say anything about anyone."[126]

Alongside these legal documents were written texts which are deeply concerned with

what Turner calls "the power and effects of linguistic conflict": a range of verbal issues

including rumor, slander, "careless talk, spying eavesdroppers, and verbal sparring."[127]

She reads Chaucer's *House of Fame*, a poem Usk knew, and *The Mercers' Petition* as part of

this matrix of texts. The *Testament*, however, is not analyzed alongside these texts.[128]

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[124] Beyond all that we may infer negatively from Usk's self-portrayal in the *Testament*, Usk comments that "some wyl say I ne shulde for no dethe have discovered my mayst[eres], and so, by unkyndnesse, they wol knette infame to pursue me aboute" (1.7.35).

[125] Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 10

[126] Ibid, 9.

[127] Ibid, 8.

[128] In this chapter, Turner briefly mentions Usk's *Appeal* and broadly characterizes Usk as one who sought "to control texts." See ibid, 19, 20.

This is curious given that the *Testament* was written in between these two texts and displays concerns of its own about "linguistic conflict," concerns which resonate with what (in Usk's language) "the noble philosophical poete in Englissh" scrutinizes in his extraordinary dream vision (3.4.231).[129] We can better understand some of the choices Usk makes in the *Testament* by considering these two texts briefly.

Like Usk's *Testament*, Chaucer's *House of Fame* dwells on whispers, noise, and murmurs. In both texts, these are the sounds that constitute rumors and make up fame. In Chaucer's poem, human speech is defined by its relation to Fame. Midway through the poem, the golden eagle argues that "every speche, or noyse, or soun" must "nede come to Fames Hous" (783, 786).[130] His argument is based on a commonplace notion in medieval philosophy:

> That every kyndely thyng that is
>
> Hath a kyndely stede ther he
>
> May best in hyt conserved be;
>
> Unto which place every thyng

---

[129] Ibid, 8. Like most of Chaucer's works, *The House of Fame* cannot be dated with precision. Usk appropriates language from it in the *Testament*, so we know the poem had been written by 1384. I see no reason to assume that Usk had not read the poem as we know it. Alastair Minnis, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Shorter Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), argues that *Fame* could be dated as early as 1379-1380 but also could have been composed later alongside *Troilus and Criseyde*, 171. See also Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 12-13n16. For Usk's use of the poem, see 2.3.41-72 and Shawver's note on these lines. The date given for *The Mercers' Petition* in Chambers and Daunt's *London English* is 1386, but Turner argues persuasively that this date is incorrect and that the text was written in late 1387 or early 1388. See *Chaucerian Conflict*, 26-28.

[130] On Chaucer's sources in the making of the eagle, including Dante's *Purgatorio*, see Minnis, *Shorter Poems*, 201-203.

> Thorgh his kyndely enclynyng
>
> Moveth for to come to
>
> Whan that hyt is awey therfro (730-736).

Human language, the eagle proposes, is naturally ("kyndely") inclined towards Fame's

house, its natural telos (734, 849-852). Later, inside Fame's House, we have a remarkable

figuration of this. Gazing at the monstrous goddess Fame, the narrator suddenly hears

"a noyse aprochen blyve" and a "maner murmurynge": the sounds of a "gret

companye" entering the halls of Fame (1521, 1524, 1528, 1529, 1531). This figuration

roots the eagle's conception of speech in the human desire for fame. Those

"murmurynge" have come seeking the favor of the capricious goddess (1524).

Chaucer's treatment of human speech and human life here is purposely

reductive. In Giles of Rome's *De Regimine Principum*, human language is seen as a

unique gift granted by nature, one which comprises a core component of ethics and

politics. Giles argues that animals are confined to rudimentary forms of communication.

A dog, for example, "berkeþ oþer wyse whanne he is iplesed þanne whanne he is

igreued." But this is the extent of his communicative abilities. Humans alone have been

given "speche" through which we "distinctlich iknowe what is good and what is

euel."[131] For Giles, this proves the Aristotelian thesis that humans are by nature social.[132]

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[131] Giles, *Governance*, 3.1.4.

[132] See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1.2.1253a-1253b. Cf. Giles, *Governance*, 3.1.1-3.1.4.

Giles states that communities are ordained to certain goods—"for to lyue, for to wel

lyue, and for vertuousliche lyue."[133] None of these goods are attainable without human

language. Indeed, the very formation of a community fundamentally depends on

language. But in Chaucer's dream vision, speech is stripped of these ethical and political

functions. The community processing towards Fame has abandoned the goods

envisioned by Giles to court the favor of the "suster" of Fortune, favor which is not

granted, Chaucer shows, based on merit or justice but rather according to Fame's "lyst"

(1547, 1564). Indeed, in a passage Usk may have felt relevant to his own situation,

Chaucer's goddess denies "good fame" to a group of individuals whose virtues merited

it, giving them instead "wikkyd loos, and worse name" (1609, 1620). As a consequence

of this disordered desire for Fame, speech is atomized in the poem. In the eagle's

memorable formulation, it is "but eyr ybroken," its natural telos "Fames Hous" rather

than the virtues or the common good (765, 786, 780-781).

Later, in the House of Rumor, Chaucer reveals what sort of community is

possible once speech has been atomized. There he envisions "shipmen," "pilgrimes,"

"pardoners, "[c]urrours," and "messagers" embroiled at "alle tymes" in the circulation

of "tydynges" (2122, 2127, 2128, 2121, 2124).[134] For this community, the distinction

between truth and untruth has been blurred. In one "tydynge," Chaucer writes, "fals

[133] Ibid, 3.1.2. See also 3.1.4.
[134] Turner argues that Chaucer's "House of Rumor is specifically recognizable as the medieval city." See *Chaucerian Conflict*, 24.

and soth [are] compouned" (2109, 2108). Yet the members of this community do not

consider the ethics of this: "Were the tydynge soth or fals / Yit wolde he telle hyt

nathles" (2072-2073). Why? The community has become subsumed in the circulation of

tidings. Rational reflection and debate about the virtues and the common good, which is

the bedrock of Aristotelian political theory, have been abandoned and forgotten. The

only end this community is capable of conceptualizing and realizing is its desire to hear

and tell new rumors, a desire that is never fully satisfied. Chaucer captures this in a

haunting image which closes the poem:

> For I saugh rennynge every wight
>
> As faste as that they hadden myght,
>
> And everych cried, "What thing is that?"
>
> And somme sayde, "I not never what."
>
> And what they were alle on an hepe,
>
> Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
>
> And clamben up on other faste,
>
> And up the nose and yën kaste,
>
> And troden fast on others heles,
>
> And stampen, as men doon aftir eles (2145-2154).

This is movement unhinged from the teleologies of medieval Aristotelianism. It is

utterly unproductive, resulting neither in the habituation of the virtues nor the

attainment of a common good. Through the practices of Fame and rumor the

community has been radically fractured. The collective is nothing but a cluster of

competing individuals, all driven to see or hear the new "thing" (2147).

Is it possible for this community to reform? In the final lines of the poem,

Chaucer introduces a "man of gret auctorite" (2158). Could this figure order this

community? In theory. In his *De regimine principum*, Aquinas identifies an authoritative

ruler as foundational for an ordered community. Without a ruler or other ordering

principle of government, he thought, communities "would break up into…various

parts," with individuals in these communities "providing only what is convenient for

[themselves]."[135] But Chaucer refuses such a simple answer. We do not know if his

"man of gret auctorite" is capable of ordering this community or not. The poem breaks

off without the inauguration of a new order. What remains at the end of Chaucer's

poem is disorder, atomized individuals flitting from one rumor to the next without a

clear indication that there is a forthcoming ordering principle.

Unlike Chaucer in *The House of Fame*, Usk is quite specific about how his culture

might reform and come once again to recognize the *trouthe*. But how was Usk to

articulate the *trouthe* for a that had (according to Usk) abandoned the virtues and the

common good for the habits of Rumor and Fame (1.6.169)? More troubling, might Usk's

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[135] Aquinas, *De regimine principum*, 1.1. For an account of Aquinas's views on government, see Blythe, *Ideal Government and the Mixed Constitution*, 39-59.

attempt to voice the *trouthe* after his public defection read like *The Mercers' Petition*, a text

bursting with the language of *trouthe* but one unable to point the way out of the factional

conflict it addresses? In this document, the mercers characterize themselves as "trewe"

and Brembre, their enemy, as false.[136] The mercers allege that Brembre himself

"openlich disclaundred" them as "vntrewe & traitors to owre Kyng." Why? The mayor

feared the mercers may reveal his own "falsenesse."[137] Thus, as a political precaution, he

identified the mercers as false. Then he "comaunded to prisone" those who were

"founden trewe": that is, those who were willing to stand for the *trouthe* against what

the mercers represent as Brembre's "falsenesse."[138] The mercers end their petition by

asking Richard II to recognize that they are "trewe [men] to hym" and to correct "alle

the wronges bifore sayde" perpetrated by Brembre.[139] In this text, the language of

trouthe has collapsed under the pressure of the dispute between the mercers and

Brembre, a dispute which was itself, according to Turner, part of the wider conflict

between the Lords Appellant and Richard II.[140] Writing about *trouthe* from within the

factional divide between Brembre and Northampton, as Usk was, risked the language

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[136] Chambers and Daunt, *London English*, 34.
[137] Ibid, 35.
[138] Ibid, 36.
[139] Ibid, 37.
[140] Turner argues that the "petition is written for the new sovereign voice—that of the Lords Appellant—and is masquerading as a brave voice of protest…The mercers present themselves as oppressed victims, eliding their powerful position both as a rich guild and as supporters of the ascendant side." See *Chaucerian Conflict*, 28.

being seen as a mere tool of factionalism, a way for one party to define itself against its

adversary and thus gain an advantage.

Usk attempts to negotiate the threats he faced in 1385 by rooting his work in the

natural law. Shortly after she appears, Lady Love claims "al the lawe of kynde" as her

own law (1.5.50). Love, Usk wants us to believe, is no factionalist; what she says is

invested with the timeless and universal authority of the natural law. Love channels this

authority in two interconnected roles: she is both Usk's teacher and his "witnesse"

(1.3.2). We will consider both of these roles in detail over the course of this chapter.

Through the former role, which we will examine first, Love offers an education in what

constitutes service. In one sense, this education is meant for the imprisoned Usk. At the

beginning of the *Testament*, we learn that Usk, overcome with despair, has fallen out of

service to Love. He fails to even recognize her when she appears in his prison (1.2.42).

Like Boethius, on whose *Consolation of Philosophy* Usk models his *Testament*, Usk must be

reminded of the principles he once loved before he was thrown in jail.[141] This education,

however, is never meant solely for the imprisoned Usk. It is also clearly meant for Usk's

community. Through it, Usk hopes, his community will recognize his defection as an

act of service. This connects to Love's second role. As Usk's witness, Love articulates

what Usk believes are the appropriate societal responses to an act of good service.

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[141] Chaucer translated Boethius's *Consolation*. It is likely that Usk knew Chaucer's translation as well as the Latin original. See Shawver, *Testament*, 26-34.

Altogether these two roles amount to a desperate attempt to offer a path out of the

rumors and factionalism which plagued London in the 1380s and led to Usk's

imprisonment.

2.2 Love's Servant: Usk and the Ethics and Politics of Service

To begin to understand Love's education in service, we must first ask: what

constitutes service? This is a core question in Usk's text which will enable us to see how

Usk defines service through the ethical, political, and theological concepts he knew so

well. In Book III Usk himself poses this question to Love (3.2.38). She replies,

"resonable workynges in plesaunce and profite of thy soverayne" (3.2.39-40). This

definition seems simple, but it is in actuality rather complex as it draws on a range of

poetic and philosophical resources. As such, it requires considerable unpacking. The

word *soverayne* here is drawn from the discourse of courtly love, a discourse Usk

employs throughout his work.[142] The sovereign to whom Love refers is the Margarite-

Pearl, a complex symbol that figures centrally in Usk's text (1.3.23-83). According to a

majority of critics, the Margarite-Pearl represents at least partially Richard II.[143] Usk's

own gloss of his symbol, however, casts some doubt on this reading: "Ryght so a jewel

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[142] Usk's use of this discourse is no doubt influenced by Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, which, like Usk's texts, was most likely written in the 1380s. As Usk does in the *Testament*, Chaucer binds the discourse of courtly love to the ethical and theological accomplishments of Troilus. But unlike Usk, as we will see in the subsequent chapter, Chaucer shows that this discourse cannot be divorced from masculine coercion and violence.

[143] Medcalf, "World and Heart," 229; Strohm, "Politics and Poetics," 102; Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing*, 49-54; and Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 117. For an opposing view, one with which I largely agree, see Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 178-9.

betokeneth a gemme, and that is a stone vertuous…Margarite a woman betokeneth grace, lernyng, or wisdom of God, or els holy Church" (3.9.90-93). Absent from this list are Richard II, Brembre, and possible referents for them. What Usk gives us instead is a rather encompassing gloss which grounds the symbol as a figuration of divine love, something borne out by the Usk's repeated use of theological language for the Margarite-Pearl throughout the text.[144] This is central to my analysis because it indicates that the telos of service for Usk is divine, not secular—God, not Richard II or Brembre. Adding to the complexity already at stake in his definition of service, Usk melds the discourse of courtly love and his own symbol with the language of the natural law: Love claims that "resonable" acts for the sovereign, the Margarite-Pearl, constitute good service (3.2.39). In other words, Love tells her student that to act reasonably is to offer good service to the Margarite-Pearl. But acts of good service are not just defined by their adherence to reason; Love also emphasizes that these acts need to be freely willed (3.2.51). For Usk, then, good service is a rational act, freely willed, which tends towards perfection in God. This complex formulation of service is deeply indebted to medieval ethical and political theory. By considering the concepts *reason* and *free will* in the

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[144] Towards the beginning of the *Testament*, for example, Lady Love defines Usk's desire for the Margarite-Pearl as like a child's for "a mothers pyte," language evoking a tradition of theological writing which represents the relationship between Christ and Christian as one between mother and child (1.8.34). For the representation of Christ as mother in medieval theological writing, see Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), and more recently, Grace Hamman, "Julian of Norwich's Children: Childhood and Meekness in *A Revelation of Love*," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 49 (2019), 169-70.

context of Usk's philosophical tradition, we will come to a much fuller understanding of

Usk's model of service and his use of it throughout the *Testament*.

2.2.1 Reason and Service

Reason is a key word in Usk's work. As we have noted, this word is closely

bound with the natural law in medieval ethical and political theory. The same is true of

Usk's *Testament*. At the beginning of his text, Lady Love—whose law is the natural

law—declares that her consolation will come "by wayes of reason" (1.5.50, 1.2.91).

Indeed, her teaching and witnessing are punctuated by this word. In her discussion of

Usk's reputation, for example, she deconstructs the logic underpinning Usk's disrepute

and tells Usk's society how they may reasonably reply when they hear the rumors about

Usk: "And therfore, every wight, that any droppe of reason hath, and hereth of the

infame, for these thynges hath this answere to say, 'Trewly thou saydest, for thine

adversaryes thy wordes affirmed" (1.7.16-19). Why is the word *reason* bound with the

natural law? In Aquinas's political philosophy, the natural law arises from our rational

participation in God's providence. Through this participation we are given natural

inclinations to certain good ends which befit our nature as rational beings—the cardinal

virtues (prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude) and the common good. The

natural law, accessible through our reason, is meant to guide us to these good ends.[145]

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[145] See Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.91.2, 94.2.

Crucially for Usk, as for all medieval writers, these good ends tend towards our

perfection in God.

Usk could have drawn on a wide variety of medieval literature to help him

explain the ends suitable to rational creatures and their relation to one's perfection in

God, including Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, a poem Usk clearly admired. But his

primary source is Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. In Book II, Usk's Love, like

Boethius's Philosophy, treats the false forms of happiness—wealth, political power, and

renown—in relation to "parfyte bysse" (2.4.9). For Usk, as for all medieval theologians

and philosophers, perfect happiness cannot be found in this world. Instead, it comes, as

Usk writes in the prologue, in the vision of God (1.prol.42-45). This is "the most

soverayne and fynal perfection of man" because it completely satisfies the will of

rational beings (1.prol.42-43).[146] It is the end towards which we are teleologically

oriented as rational creatures participating in God's providence, the end for which we

desire all other ends.[147] In Book II Love's Boethian instruction is designed to

demonstrate that "service" to secular goods cannot terminate in this end and therefore

amounts to little more than "disceite" (2.4.82). It is, rather, the "resonable lyfe" which

tends towards this end (2.11.33). This life is characterized by "vertue" (2.11.119).

Through acts of virtue we attain "felycite in lyveng," the highest form of happiness

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[146] Ibid, Ia-IIae.2.8, 3.8.
[147] Ibid, Ia-IIae.1.6-7.

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available through the natural law (2.11.34). While this life cannot attain to the vision of

God in and of itself—for that we need the gift of grace—it tends towards our perfection

in this vision. So, in summation, to act reasonably is to act virtuously, in ways that befit

our nature as rational beings teleologically oriented to God.

2.2.2 Free Will and Service

As we have seen, Usk's vital term *reason* is grounded in a rich philosophical

tradition that has been elided by critics eager to find in the *Testament* coded messages to

Brembre and Richard II. The same may also be said of Usk's understanding of free will,

another major concept in Usk's model of service. After Love declares that good service

is nothing but "resonable workynges" for the Margarite-Pearl, she stresses that acts of

service must be freely willed (3.2.50-51). Like other medieval writers, Usk considers this

paramount. Without a free will virtuous acts are without merit (3.2.89-106). For Usk,

this would mean that his act of service, his defection, would be without merit in the

moral and theological order of his Christian universe. In his account of free will, Usk

considers two issues which pose potential problems to free will. Tellingly, neither

concerns secular rulers.

First, he considers at great length how free will coheres with God's providence

and foreknowledge (3.2.121-125, 137-142). In Book V of the *Consolation* Boethius's

Philosophy offers a solution to this incipient query. But Usk chooses not to follow

Boethius. Instead, he draws on an eleventh-century work of Christian theology: St.

Anselm of Canterbury's *De Concordia*. Usk follows the first five chapters of Anselm's

text, reaching his two main solutions. First, Anselm concludes that God, who is

incapable of knowing anything but the truth, sees some acts of the human will as free,

and so it must be that we have free will (3.4.36-38).[148] Anselm's second conclusion

coheres with Boethius's solution: God exists in an eternal present, seeing all events—

past, present, and future—at once, and thus his knowledge of what we consider as

future events does not conflict with our freedom (3.4.218-222).[149]

God's providence and foreknowledge are not the only important issues related to

human freedom which Usk elucidates for his model of service. As Love indicates at the

end of her Boethian instruction in Book II, humans require divine grace to persevere in

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[148] See Anselm of Canterbury, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G.R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 440.

[149] Ibid, 442-444. For Lady Philosophy's solution, see 5. pr. 5-6 of Boethius's *Consolation*. I reference the *Consolation* from the following edition: Boethius, *The Theological Tractates and The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H.F. Stewart, E.K. Rand, and S.J. Tester (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973). After reaching Boethius and Anselm's shared solution, Usk asks another question: does God's knowledge come from the things which comprise our temporal existence, or do these things owe their existence to God's knowledge (3.4.223-229)? In response, Love directs her pupil to Book IV of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, seemingly assimilating the views of Chaucer, Troilus, Boethius, and Anselm. These voices, however, are far from unanimous. This problem is extremely complex and beyond the scope of my argument. Yet it is worth comment here. Usk must have believed that he could not offer a "ful" resolution to the issue of free will and divine foreknowledge and providence (3.4.236). In order to give the appearance that there is a "ful" resolution available, however, Usk draws together authoritative voices. Usk's irresolution on the issue of divine foreknowledge, providence, and human freedom may be less odd than it first appears. There was significant debate surrounding this issue in the fourteenth century. Theologians such as William of Ockham challenged the Boethian solution to divine foreknowledge. Recently, Aers has suggested that Chaucer, much like Ockham, may have questioned the Boethian solution, too, and believed that resolution was impossible without divine revelation. See Aers, "Re-reading *Troilus* in Response to Tony Spearing," in *Readings in Medieval Textuality: Essays in Honour of A.C. Spearing*, ed. Cristina Maria Cervone and D. Vance Smith (Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2016), 85-95, 93-4. For Ockham's challenges to the Boethian solution, see Hester Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in Dominican Theology at Oxford, 1300-1350* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 341.

the reasonable life to the vision of God (2.11.35-37). Does grace cohere with free will? To answer this Usk again looks to Anselm's *De Concordia*. Anselm affirms that grace is *cooperative* with free will.[150] We are, then, instrumental in our salvation, even if this supernatural end is impossible to attain through natural reason. Anselm illustrates the cooperation between free will and grace with an analogy: as the generation of a child requires both a mother and a father, Anselm explains, so our salvation depends on the cooperation of grace and free will.[151] Usk was evidently impressed by this analogy as he records it faithfully (3.8.51-58). He does so at the end of his text, after Love has completed her instruction and vanished into Usk's heart (3.7.142-145). This recapitulation of Anselm is thus given entirely to the imprisoned Usk. It is his summary of Love's teaching on grace and free will, part of a string of summaries he offers in this chapter, all meant to demonstrate that the "cloudy cloude of unconnynge" in which he begins his text has broken (1.prol.81). What is important to remember from Usk's account of free will, for our purposes, is both that reasonable acts are without merit unless they are freely willed and that grace cooperates with our free will.

2.2.3 Usk's Definition of Service

Having carefully considered Usk's understanding of *reason* and *free will* within tradition, we are now able to fully define Usk's model of good service. It is a teleological

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[150] Anselm, *Major Works*, 455. For an essential introduction to the cooperation of grace and will in medieval theology, see David Aers, *Salvation and Sin: Augustine, Langland, and Fourteenth-Century Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 1-24.
[151] Anselm, *Major Works*, 458.

system centered on the virtues, freely willed, which (in Usk's memorable phrase) serve

as the "hye way" to our perfection in the vision of God, an end which is ultimately

attainable only through the cooperation of grace and free will (2.12.119). When Usk

writes that he has acted in service to Love, then, he is claiming to have committed an act

of virtue which tends towards his perfection in the love of God. Is there room for a

complex politics within this model? New Historicists seem not to think so. They find

little in Usk's vital concepts relatable to politics except insofar as the concepts might be

read as codes to Richard II and Brembre. Our survey of Usk's use of tradition, however,

indicates quite clearly that Usk is thinking about politics through these ethical and

theological concepts. As we have seen, Usk, like all medieval writers, sees politics not as

separate from but in relation to his divine end. To act virtuously within society, for Usk,

is to act in ways that tend towards his perfection in God.

Usk's role in the writing of this definition of service is purposely contracted. He

portrays himself as merely the recipient and purveyor of Love's education, awakening

from his dream to find before him Love's testament "parfytely…written" in "perdurable

letters" (3.8.7, 12). Usk suggests, then, that this is not how he, an alleged factionalist,

understands ethics, politics, and theology. It is rather how we *all*, as rational beings

created in the image of God, *ought* to understand these issues. This is far from a

controversial assertion because, as we have seen, the concepts he defines are

commonplace within his tradition. Why has Usk chosen to define so painstakingly

concepts that were conventional in late medieval writing? Usk's answer to this question

is connected with both his understanding and presentation of his defection. To answer

it, therefore, we need to return to Usk's narrative of his defection.

2.3. Usk's Act of Service

Midway through Book I Usk recounts his decision to defect and write the *Appeal*

against Northampton. To explain his actions, Usk draws fascinatingly on pagan and

Christian resources. Usk begins with the assertion that he was drawn to Northampton's

party to further the common good, which he defines, uncontroversially, as "not but

peace" (1.6.58).[152] At first, Usk thought Northampton's policies secured this

fundamental social good, but he eventually realized that Northampton only feigned an

interest in the common good and that his policies, in fact, constituted "tyrannye"

(1.6.61). Once Usk realized this, he was overcome with "pure sorowe" for his

furtherance of Northampton's tyranny (1.6.61-62). Later, when he was considering

giving the *Appeal*, Usk recalled that Christians are meant to live peacefully in the body of

Christ (1.6.97-100). This was standard teaching in the Middle Ages. No doubt Usk *could*

develop this thought into writing about the eucharist, a central sacrament in the

medieval church through which, medieval Christians believed, they were unified in the

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[152] In much medieval political writing, peace is the good on which all other social goods depend. For example, John Gower writes in his exquisite poem *In Praise of Peace*: "Withoute pes ther may no lif be glad: / Above alle othre good pes is the beste." John Gower, *In Praise of Peace*, in *John Gower: The Minor Latin Works with In Praise of Peace*, ed. R.F. Yeager and Michael Livingston (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2005), 86-7.

mystical body of Christ.[153] But he does not; instead, he moves quickly to his next

thought, which was of a pagan city: "Also, I remember me wel, howe the name of

Athenes was rather after the god of peace" (1.6.100-101). How does Usk expect us to

understand his use of Christian and pagan resources?   Usk, it seems to me, wants his

defection to be seen as consonant with both pagan and Christian traditions, an act of

unimpeachable virtue which unquestionably *would* be accepted by both good pagans

and good Christians.

As Usk has written it, his defection *is* an act of virtue and thus an act of good

service. As we saw last chapter, Usk claims that his obedience emanated from the

demands of justice: "I thought that every man that by any waye of right, rightfully done,

maye helpe any comune [wele] to ben saved" (1.6.73-74). In Aquinas's ethics, this moral

virtue, in its general form, orders us to the common good rather than our own

individual, particular goods. This form of justice pertains to both rulers and subjects: it

allows rulers to ordain laws for the common good and subjects to obey them virtuously.

To disobey just commands of a legitimate ruler would, in Aquinas's system, constitute

an act of injustice.[154] These are the aspects of justice which Usk wishes to highlight in his

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[153] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIIa.73.3, resp. and ad 3. For the centrality of the eucharist in the medieval church, see
Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale
University Press, 1992), 91-130. Aers, *Sanctifying Signs: Making Christian Tradition in Late Medieval England*
(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), offers an account of the role of the eucharist in
orthodox medieval Christianity and the challenges posed to this sacrament by John Wyclif, 1-28, 53-98.
[154] Ibid, IIa-IIae.58.5-6, 104.5-6. For an excellent account of the aspects of justice discussed here, see Jean
Porter, *Justice as a Virtue: A Thomistic Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 2016), particularly 3-4, 164.

narrative. He depicts himself as an obedient citizen (1.6.69-72, 147-148). He is very careful to define his motivations in his obedience. His defection was not the act of someone "who wants to bend his will to that of the Master."[155] Nor was it driven by his desire for freedom, something his captors mention in their efforts to get him to declaim Northampton's crimes (1.6.67-69). Rather, it was, he claims, his reasoning about the common good which "styred" him to freely obey his superiors and write the *Appeal* (1.6.103). In the terms he defines in his text, Usk has acted reasonably and freely. This act is directed towards the common good, an end suitable to rational beings. As it is all of these things, it tends towards Usk's perfection in the vision of God.

By writing his defection within his carefully defined model of service, Usk elides the particularity of his action. He believes that this is how "every man" would, or at least *should*, respond to this situation: such are the demands of obedience and the virtue justice within a monarchical society. Indeed, across approximately forty lines at the end of this chapter, Usk uses *trouthe* (including its variants and antonyms) nearly thirty times to characterize his behavior and his culture's response to it: an incredible effusion meant to emphasize the simple virtue of Usk's defection and the perversity of a monarchical culture which condemns this act of obedience for the common good (1.6.175-176, 143-180).

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[155] Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 119.

Having contextualized Usk's obedience within his concept of service, we can now return to the question I posed at the end of the previous section: why does Usk devote so much of his *Testament* to defining the ethical, political, and theological conventions so central in much medieval literature? He does so, I believe, because he is convinced that his society has become mired in vice and no longer hears "reason…as…[it] shulde" (1.1.17: see also 2.2.28-89). If it did, he would not be imprisoned but would be celebrated as both a convert and a virtuous citizen. What he offers his culture then is a reeducation in the concepts which, he hopes, will enable it to see his defection as an act of good service.

This is not all that Usk does to reinforce his defection as an act of good service. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Usk also has the authoritative Lady Love serve as his "witnesse" (1.3.2). In her first conversation with Usk, Love states that she stands ready to attest to Usk's "sothe, in what place that ever I shal, ayenst al tho that wol the contrary susteyne" (1.2.154-155). This declaration pairs with Usk's extensive use of *trouthe* throughout his text: all that Usk proclaims as the *trouthe* Love will verify as the *trouthe*. It is through Love's role as "witnesse" that Usk supplements the education Love has offered on ethical, political, and theological conventions: not only does his *Testament* define what it means to render good service, but it also voices the ideal cultural responses to an act of good service. In the subsequent section of this chapter, I address

three major acts of "wytnessyng" through which Love offers clear directions for cultural

reformation (1.6.155).

2.4 Usk's Reforming Witness

Lady Love begins to witness Usk's virtues and address his culture's errors as

soon as she appears, entering Usk's prison "without leave of…[his] kepers" (1.2.24-25).

As she claims the natural law as her own law, her entering Usk's prison in this way

dramatizes a core principle of medieval political thought on which this dissertation

focuses—namely, that positive laws "ought to be underputte to lawe of kynde" (1.5.52).

According to this tradition, positive laws must be derived from the natural law. In

Aquinas's legal theory, a law—whether natural, human, or divine—is a rational decree

ordained for the common good. When a positive law thus declines from the natural law,

it falls out of accord with reason and therefore ceases to function as a law should. These

false laws do not bind the conscience and they need not be obeyed.[156] Love's action

mimes a social restoration of reason: the reformation or elimination of laws which have

fallen out of accord with reason and the natural law. This has an immediate impact on

Usk. Before this moment, as I observed earlier, Usk is overcome with despair. He

describes himself, in his "derke prisone," as "wytlesse-thoughtful," oxymoronic

language denoting intellectual stagnation (1.1.14, 13). In this chapter, in this state, Usk

can find no consolation: he declares that there is nothing left for him but his "ende with

[156] Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.90.4, 95.2, 96.4.

dethe to make" (1.1.58). But in the next chapter, with the arrival of Love, Usk's

disorienting despair begins to break. As soon as she transgresses the barriers which Usk

believes are illicitly imposed by his society, Usk experiences "comforte sodaynely to

al...[his] wyttes" (1.2.18-19).

The second act of witnessing I wish to address is more explicit, with Love

unambiguously voicing both her approval of Usk's actions and her advice to Usk's

society to reform. Later, after Usk recounts his defection, Love wonders how Usk

planned to support his claims about Northampton in his *Appeal*. Usk replies that he was

willing to allow Mars to judge "the ende" of the trial, a reference to trial by combat

(1.7.11). The possibility of such was indeed broached during Northampton's 1384 trial

in Reading. But it did not occur. Usk writes that it did not because Northampton knew

the "sothnesse of...[his] wordes" (1.7.11-12). *The Westminster Chronicle*, however, posits

that it did not because Northampton, in challenging Usk to a duel, overstepped his

authority.[157] No matter which version of events is true, Love is extremely pleased by the

very fact that Usk claims to have been ready for Mars to judge his "ende," for "above al

fames in this worlde, the name of marcial doynges moste pleasen to ladyes of my lore"

(1.7.13-14). This is a fascinating declaration. It characterizes Usk's defection and his

subsequent willingness to defend himself in a Martian trial as a single, consummate act

of good service, one Usk's society, Love pronounces, *should* recognize and celebrate:

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[157] See *Westminster Chronicle*, 93.

"thy fame ought to be so borne" (1.7.15-16). In lines which I quoted earlier, Love treats

as irrational the failure of Usk's society to recognize this as an act of good service, and

states that any rational individual in London, having heard of this error, should now

attempt to rectify it (1.7.16-21). This is a very specific recommendation for reformation,

something individual readers of Usk's text may begin practicing at once.

While Usk believes Love's act of "wytnessyng" here will dissolve issues related

to his defection, it opens up some questions concerning his text. Earlier, as we have

seen, Usk recalls that Christians are meant to live peacefully in the mystical body of

Christ (1.6.90-100). In Aquinas's theology, peace is the result of charity, a theological

virtue that is crucial in the final pages of Usk's *Testament*.[158] Here, Love makes no

mention of this theological virtue or the demands of peace within a Christian

community; instead, she declares that it is violence, in the name of the pagan god Mars,

that most pleases the Margarite-Pearl, a symbol, to reiterate, which Usk glosses as

signifying forms of Christian love. The affirmation of violence alongside Christian

charity will come as no surprise to students of medieval history or literature. What is

fascinating here, though, is that Usk identifies this practice as explicitly pagan, hinting at

its incompatibility with core Christian teachings. But it is only a hint. Usk does not go

on to critique Martian violence and its role in medieval culture as Chaucer does at great

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[158] Aquinas, *ST*, IIa-IIae.29.3, 25.1, 23.4, 6.

length in *The Knight's Tale*.[159] Perhaps Usk, like Chaucer, has some understanding of the

contradictions reproduced across his culture. But he remains unwilling, or perhaps

unable, to challenge these contradictions in his fraught political situation. As I observed

in this chapter and the previous one, Usk was writing under an immense amount of

pressure. What we find in his text is an eagerness to use any tradition that he believes

will help his situation, even at the cost of producing inconsistencies in his text. Thus

Usk treats his readiness to prove his claim through Martian violence as an act of good

service equal to the works of reason Love endorses in Books II and III.

In the final act of Love's "wytnessyng" I will consider in this chapter, Love offers

her most dramatic suggestion for Usk's culture, one immediately relevant to critical

accounts which characterize Usk as a careerist: she posits the possibility that Usk's

culture might reward him for his defection. This recommendation evolves out of Usk's

own account of the interrelations of the natural law, positive law, and divine law at the

beginning of Book III (3.1.91-123). Love is not impressed with her pupil's treatment of

positive law, pointing out that he has failed to mention that a well-ordered system of

laws both "punyssheth brekers of preceptes" and "rewardeth and yeveth mede to hem

that lawe strengthen" (3.2.7-10). She reminds Usk that he maintained the natural law by

defecting (3.2.26). His doing so brought to light errors in the positive laws of London.

Because his society may now amend these errors to make for a stronger system of laws

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[159] We will explore this issue in the final chapter of this dissertation.

and a more just community, Love concludes, it ought to reward Usk, the person who

pointed the way towards reformation: "Reward is worthy to be rewarded" (3.2.27).

What underpins this remarkable assertion is a conventional definition of justice,

something Usk later articulates succinctly: "rightwysnesse evenlyche rewardeth to quyte

one benefyte for another" (3.7.103-104).[160] This definition is grounded in a commonplace

injunction in the Middle Ages, one thought to be at the heart of justice: *redde quod debes*,

"pay what you owe."[161] What is it that Love thinks Usk's society owes him? She offers

three examples of individuals who defected or stood against tyranny and were

subsequently rewarded. Given Usk's tendency to assimilate pagan and Christian

resources to strengthen his arguments, it is especially notable that he does not conflate

these two traditions here. All three of Love's examples are pagans: Lucius Aemilius

Paulus and Perdicas, both of whom aided opposing factions and were rewarded

politically, and Cato, whose renown "amonge the knowers of reason" for his opposition

to Julius Caesar constitutes, in Love's assessment, his reward (3.2.22-23; 16-25).[162] These

examples are presented as consonant with reason. But they are also *bound* by reason. As

Usk understood, pagans could become habituated in the cardinal virtues through reason

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[160] Usk is here paraphrasing Love's own grammatically gnarled definition of the virtue justice: 3.2.108-114.
[161] For Aquinas's relevant writing on justice, see *Summa*, IIa-IIae.58.1; 58.2, 11. While I use Aquinas to illuminate Usk's political thought in this dissertation, it is important to remember that Usk's writing is not completely congruent with Aquinas's. On this issue specifically, Aquinas believes, unlike Usk, that it is *not* the place of law to reward the virtuous: Ia-IIae.92.2 ad 3.
[162] For an additional example of Usk's tendency to conflate pagan and Christian resources, see 1.2.79-84. In his notes to 3.2.17-24, Shawver points out a number of issues with Usk's pagan examples. These issues are unsurprising given some of the tendencies we have observed in Usk's writing. See *Testament*, 279-281.

and the natural law, but because they lacked divine grace they could not order these

virtues to the Christian divine end (2.11.32-37). Indeed, Cato committed suicide, an act

which, in Christian theology, is an explicit rejection of the divine end.[163] It would be

quite odd, then, for Usk to allow Love's recommendation for a secular reward be the

final word in a work which begins with an affirmation that the "soverayne and fynal

perfection of man" is the vision of God (1.prol.42-43).

Sure enough, it is not the final word. I will conclude with Usk's vital

reevaluation of rewards in his discussion of grace, one of the concepts we discussed

earlier which shapes his model of service. With admirable clarity Love instructs Usk

that grace is *not* a reward. It is, rather, a gift freely given "of thy Margarytes goodnesse

and vertue alone" (3.7.100-101). This standard teaching displeases the imprisoned Usk:

should he have no reward for his "travayle" except through grace (3.7.102-103)?[164] Here,

Usk is quite clearly thinking about Love's earlier recommendation that Usk's culture

reward him. Usk reminds Love that she has recently explicated the demands of justice

(3.7.103-104). Does not the Margarite-Pearl *owe him* for the virtues he displayed with his

defection? Usk's incorrect assumptions here are the inverse of standard Christian

teaching in the Middle Ages. As Love corrects Usk, God does not owe Christians. On

the contrary, Christians owe God (3.7.108-111).

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[163] In his *City of God*, St. Augustine treats suicide as an act of despair, a rejection of God's mercy. He also offers a stringent condemnation of Cato. See Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 1.17, 20, 22-24.

[164] For the relevant aspects of grace, see Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.112.1.

How do Christians render what is owed to God? Aquinas considers this issue in his treatise on justice. But because our debt to God is so great, we cannot expect to repay it as we would in matters of secular justice, and so, for Aquinas, the act whereby we render to God what is due cannot be called justice, even if Aquinas thinks it must be treated alongside issues of secular justice. Instead, it is called religion, a moral virtue which specifically orders us to honor God through certain external acts. One such act is prayer. Through prayer we acknowledge our debt to God as the source of our good.[165] Accordingly, Love's final exhortation to Usk is to pray: "Thanke thy Margaryte of her great grace, that hytherto the hath gyded, and praye her of contynuaunce forthe in thy werkes herafter, and that for no mishappe thy grace overthwarthly tourne" (3.7.135-137).

This exhortation is set in dialogue with Love's earlier recommendation for secular reward. For the final time in his *Testament*, Usk considers how he hopes his society will respond to his "travayle" (3.9.81). He does not mention political advancement or renown—the rewards Love's virtuous pagans receive—but rather asks "that every inseer and herer of this leude fantasye, devoute horisons and prayers to God the great juge yelden, and prayen for me, in that wyse that in his dome my synnes mowe ben released and foryeven" (3.9.81-84). Here, Usk evinces no concern for his employability. Indeed, how Usk's society may materially reward him is completely set

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[165] Ibid, IIa-IIae.80.1; 81.1-7; 83.3.

aside. What Usk asks for instead are acts of charity.[166] In Aquinas's theology, this is the

principal theological virtue. Through charity we love God and our neighbors and are

able to order all other virtues to our divine end. Aquinas describes this love as a

friendship: a loving relationship in which we fundamentally wish for the goods of

others, including our enemies. When we pray for others, we act on this love, actively

seeking the goods of others.[167] What Usk envisions—what he hopes for—at the close of

the *Testament* is a charitable community:

> Charyte is love,
>
> and love is
>
> charyte.
>
> God graunt us al therin to be frended
>
> And thus the *Testament of Love* is ended (3.9.97-101).[168]

"Al": the final social vision in the *Testament* is one of unity and peace, all of London

brought together in friendship through acts of charity. The whole of Usk's *Testament* is

drawn into this image of a charitable community: an image of what may be

accomplished through mutual acts of good service. This is a moving image. What Usk

hopes to have provided in his *Testament* is a path towards this charitable community: a

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[166] Summers argues the opposite: Usk "was not writing to save his soul, but to save his career and win release." See Summers, *Late-Medieval Prison Writing*, 59.

[167] See Ibid, Ia-IIae.62.3; IIa-IIae.23.1, 25.1, 7, 8; IIa-IIae.83.7-8.

[168] I have preserved Shawver's editorial decision to render these final lines as poetry. Other editions of the *Testament* treat these lines as prose.

reeducation in the behaviors which are natural to rational creatures created in the image

of God, behaviors which, when ordered by charity, attain to the "most soverayne" end

which Usk defines for his readers at the beginning of his *Testament*: "the… fynal

perfection of man" in the "love of one very God that is inchaungeable" (1.prol.43-44).

2.5 Conclusion: Thomas Usk, History, and Criticism

In 1388, in the Merciless Parliament, Thomas Usk was charged with treason. The

Lords Appellant claimed that Usk, in his position as under-sheriff in Middlesex, helped

to bring "false indictments and attainders" against them. For his alleged crimes, the

Lords Appellant ascribe to him in the rolls of parliament a word from which he, in the

Testament, tries so desperately to distance himself: "faux." As he does in the *Testament*,

Usk claimed to have acted only as his king commanded. This did little to help Usk's

case.[169] The Lords sentenced him to be drawn and hanged.[170] His execution is variously

recorded, different chronicles offering differing commentary. *The Westminster Chronicle*

reports that Usk, after having been hanged, was beheaded, a feat that required "thirty

strokes of the axe." His head was then displayed above Newgate Prison, which was

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[169] Strohm's view that Usk's "admission of having served the king was equivalent to confession of guilt" during the Merciless Parliament is surely correct: "Politics and Poetics," 89. This article is not the place to write an account of the complex antagonisms of the Merciless Parliament. Nigel Saul, *Richard II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), remains an exceptional introduction to this extremely troubled period in medieval England, 176-204.
[170] I quote and reference the rolls of parliament in this paragraph from *Knighton's Chronicle, 1337-1396*, ed. and trans. G.H. Martin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 481, 480, 479. For the charges against Usk and his defense, see III-230, III-234, III-240 of the *Rotuli Parliamentorum*. I have used the excellent digital edition: *The Parliament Rolls of Medieval England*, ed. Chris Given-Wilson, et. al, http://www.sd-editions.com/PROME/

chosen, Henry Knighton remarks, because Usk's "family lived in that part of the city and was much hated," and where, Thomas Favent recalls, Usk's head was "pecked by birds' beaks."[171] So ended the life of a man who, during Northampton's trial, was brought to identify himself before Richard II, Brembre, and other members of London's political elite as "I, Thomas Usk, traitor to the city of London and to the whole realm of England."[172]

New Historicists have utilized aspects of the history of Usk's life provided in the chronicles and rolls of parliament to read his *Testament* as a document of an ambitious courtier. Their work has been hugely influential and helpful, illuminating Usk's fraught relationship with the two mayoral powers in the early 1380s, John of Northampton and Nicholas Brembre, and the connection of these two powers to Richard II and John of Gaunt. Reduced to their simplest forms, these readings tell us that Usk supported Brembre and Richard II. Of this there can be no doubt. But as I have tried to show in these two chapters, this support, as we find it in the *Testament*, is tied up in a web of ethical, political, and theological conventions in the Middle Ages, and is thus far more complex, and perhaps less enthusiastic, than these critics have made it out to be. What seems to have been more important to Usk than his political standing was the state of

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[171] *Westminster Chronicle*, 315; *Knighton's Chronicle*, 500; Thomas Favent, *History or Narration Concerning the Manner and Form of the Miraculous Parliament at Westminster in the Year 1386, in the Tenth Year of the Reign of King Richard the Second after the Conquest, Declared by Thomas Favent, Clerk*, trans. Andrew Galloway, in *The Letter of the Law: Legal Practice and Literary Production in Medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 248.
[172] *Westminster Chronicle*, 91. See also Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 152.

his culture and how he might make sense of his own life within it. His *Testament*

emphasizes that his defection, an act of service to Love, was what reason and virtue

demanded in a monarchical, Christian society. That his culture so evidently failed to

recognize his defection as such spurred him to write a text which aspires to cultural

reformation.

Far from being a bluntly opportunistic political writer, Usk was, in my view, a

man acting and writing under an immense amount of duress, responding energetically,

inventively, and desperately to forces which must have seemed very much outside his

control. What proved attractive to Usk, in the chaos of his situation, were the ethical,

political, and theological concepts the literature of his culture had taught him. Through

them, Usk hoped, he might light the way out of the factionalism of the early 1380s and

towards a society shaped by the ethical, political, and theological concepts and ideals he

knew.   He did not succeed. At the end of his life, Usk was once again branded a traitor.

According to the *Westminster Chronicle*, Usk went to his execution with

reflections similar to the ones we find at the end of the *Testament*. He thought of his sins,

reciting a litany of common hymns, an act which moved the Monk of Westminster to

declare Usk "an example to others to amend their lives by drawing back from evil and

turning forthwith to good." Among the things for which Usk hoped forgiveness was

not, apparently, the act which had come to define his life, his defection and decision to

write the *Appeal* against John of Northampton. In the moments before his death, Usk

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refused to back down from his characterizations of Northampton, declaring once again, and perhaps for the last time, "that every word was true that he had spoken."[173]

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[173] *Westminster Chornicle*, 315-17.

3. "Thise loveres alle": Gender, Power, and the Cultural Role of the Natural Law in *Troilus and Criseyde*

At the beginning of Book II of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Chaucer emphasizes that the pursuit of love is not a homogenous act across time and culture: "Ek for to wynnen love in sondry ages, / In sondry londes, sondry ben the usages" (II.27-28). Implicit in this statement is that love itself *is* universal and transhistorical, even if its "usages" are culturally and historically determined. This is a vital distinction. In the Middle Ages, heterosexual love was thought to belong to the natural law.[174] To love, then, is a fundamentally natural act.[175] But invariably this act becomes entangled with cultural

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[174] This idea buttressed a vicious and dangerous distortion that love is only possible for heterosexual couples. We should not assume that this distortion was universally accepted and adopted in the Middle Ages. On the contrary, as Karma Lochre has argued, "[t]he evidence of medieval literature in the area of gender and sexuality is surprisingly diverse and wide-ranging…Homosociality, passionate friendships, erotic poetry, and mystical visions—the list could continue—constitute only a small part of the evidence for the complex, even sometimes contradictory ways gender and sexuality were understood." While I believe there is much work left to do on the ways in which Chaucer and his contemporaries challenged some vicious natural law formations of sexuality and gender, my focus in this chapter is Chaucer's exploration of how definitions of nature and natural law impact the lives of a heterosexual couple. Karma Lochre, "Configurations of Gender and Sexuality in Medieval Europe," in *The Cambridge History of Gay and Lesbian Literature*, eds. E.L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89-106, quote at 104.

[175] Erotic love is not the only form of love that pertains to the natural law. Virtuous acts, for example, proceed from the love of the good. As we saw in the previous chapter, this idea is fundamental to the ethical and political project of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*. Unlike Chaucer, Usk evinces in his text little

values and practices, ones that might not cohere with nature and reason as it is

understood in medieval natural law theory. Chaucer is very interested in this issue. In

his poetry, he explores whether unnatural values and practices can become naturalized,

recognized by individuals within a particular culture not as vicious but as in accordance

with the laws of nature. In his treatise on the natural law, St. Thomas Aquinas warns

that something like this can happen. He observes that pagan Germanic tribes came to

esteem theft as a virtue against the teaching of nature and reason. For these German

pagans, the precepts of the natural law became unintelligible. As the natural law is

understood teleologically, this meant, for Aquinas, that the virtuous ends given to

humans by nature were replaced in the minds of the pagan Germans by corrupt ends

generated by their culture.[176] Like Aquinas, Chaucer thinks about human lives

teleologically. In the two poems I analyze over the next two chapters, *Troilus and*

Criseyde and *The Knight's Tale*, Chaucer investigates the processes by which the natural

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interest in erotic love, much less in the issues about gender and power that occupy Chaucer throughout his *Troilus*. True, Usk utilizes the discourse of the *fin'amor* tradition throughout the *Testament*. Yet Usk attempts to isolate this discourse from the erotic contexts of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This raises a number of fascinating issues about the relations between Usk's *Testament* and Chaucer's *Troilus*. This is not the place to address these issues. But I remain convinced that our understanding of both the *Testament* and the *Troilus* will be greatly enriched through a detailed analysis of the two texts in concert. Marion Turner has attempted one such analysis. Yet her work lacks attention to the ethical, political, and philosophical ideas that Usk and Chaucer share and that preoccupy them in their respective texts. See Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 93-104. For a recent reading that asserts that Usk wrote his *Testament* in part to a woman named Margarite, see Eleanor Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory in the Middle Ages*, 178-179.

[176] Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.94.4, 6. For instructive readings of this article from the *Summa* in relation to William Langland's ethics and politics, see David Aers, *Beyond Reformation?*, 46-47, 64-65.

law becomes unintelligible and the ethical and political consequences of its

unintelligibility.

In this chapter, I argue that Chaucer's *Troilus* demonstrates that the idea that

heterosexual love is natural leads to the naturalization of practices integral to the male

supremacism of Troy. While there have been many illuminating studies of Chaucer's

dynamic examination of gender relations in *Troilus and Criseyde*, no critic has examined

the role of the natural law in the gender hierarchy of Chaucer's Trojan society.[177] Across

Chaucer's poem, Troilus's friend and matchmaker Pandarus manipulates the discourse

of the natural law to coerce Criseyde, perversely claiming that it is natural, reasonable,

and virtuous for her to return Troilus's love.[178] The natural law, we must remember, is

very closely bound with right reason and the virtues. As rational creatures, our natures

incline us to act reasonably, and so acts that are classified as rational, like an act of the

virtue justice, are also considered natural. In addition to this, Pandarus glosses a

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[177] I have found the following works helpful for understanding Chaucer's meditations on gender, love, sex, culture, and individual agency in *Troilus and Criseyde*: David Aers, *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 117-142; David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity*, 117-152; Carolyn Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 29-64; Dinshaw, "Rivalry, Rape, and Manhood: Gower and Chaucer," in *Violence against Women in Medieval Texts*, ed. Anna Roberts (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1988), 137-160; H.A. Kelly, *Love and Marriage in the Age of Chaucer* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975); and Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002), 14-25, 81-88, 129-133.

[178] The role of the matchmaker was central in the making of marriages in late medieval England. Both women and men were instrumental in arranging marriages. But as Barbara Hanawalt has noted, women tended to have an "informal" role in the making of marriages, whereas "male matchmakers appear in a number of petitions." See Barbara Hanawalt, *The Wealth of Wives: Women, Law, and Economy in Late Medieval London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73. On matchmakers, see also Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 96-106.

number of vicious actions which conflict with the natural law, such as Troilus's possible

abduction of Criseyde in Book IV, as in accordance with and thus supported by the

natural human inclination to sex and love. These corrupt assertions are the products of

a form of power which understands itself and its practices wrongly as natural and

universal. For Criseyde, this naturalized power is entrapping. As I observed in the

preceding chapters, the medieval model of the natural law provides the foundation for

the lawful resistance of such vicious forms of power. In theory, then, Criseyde could

resist the assertions of Pandarus and the power which supports them. Yet how, Chaucer

worries in *Troilus and Criseyde*, might a vicious power be resisted and reformed when it

appropriates the natural law to attempt to control individual lives? This question is at

the heart of Chaucer's dynamic examination of love, sex, and gender in the Trojan

courtly community of the poem, an aristocratic community not unlike his own in

medieval England. But it also extends beyond this Trojan community and its customs to

encompass broader concerns about the efficacy of the natural law in the face of corrupt

forms of power.[179]

3.1 Naturalizing "Loves Craft": Troilus, Bayard, and the Narrator

There are two types of natural inclinations in medieval natural law theory: those

that we share with animals and those that are unique to human beings as rational, free

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[179] As Lynn Staley correctly notes, Chaucer's explorations of gender relations often include a wider diagnosis
of the nature of authority and power in his society. See David Aers and Lynn Staley, *The Powers of the Holy:
Religion, Politics, and Gender in Late Medieval English Culture* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State
University Press, 1996), 181-182.

creatures. The inclination to sex and love, central in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, is an

inclination that we share with animals. How does this inclination relate to the

inclinations that we hold as creatures with reason and free will? For Chaucer, as for

Aquinas, our inclination to sex is lower than and thus subordinate to the higher

inclinations that come from our reason and free will.[180] But as part of his wide-ranging

investigation of the natural law, Chaucer gives his narrator in Book I a version of the

natural law that is coercive and centered around the pursuit of love.[181] In this version,

our higher inclinations are omitted. The purpose of this is not to suggest an alternative

model of nature and the natural law. Rather, this model shows that the discourse of the

natural law can be drawn in and made instrumental to justifications for eroticism that

are denaturing. It is thus an early indication of the lines of Chaucer's explorations of

nature, sex and love, gender, and the natural law in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

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[180] See Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.94.2.

[181] The narrator in *Troilus and Criseyde* is a very complex and widely debated topic among Chaucerians. In my understanding of the role of the narrator in Chaucer's poem, I have found most helpful the work of A.C. Spearing. In his recent article on the place of narrators in medieval narratives, Spearing writes that Chaucer's poem "intertwines" homodiegesis and heterodiegesis: "Chaucer was retelling the lovers' story as part of the history of Troy, a history that existed outside himself, and in that sense he was writing heterodiegetically. But intermittently in the course of that retelling he was also telling for the first time another story, one in which he was a participant—a story of the very process of retelling, a task which included consulting various sources, finding that they didn't always provide the information he desired, speculating about the characters' motives, choosing literary means of conveying the story to his readers, commenting obliquely on the literary means adopted by his sources." I see the narrator's comments on the natural law in Book I, comments Chaucer did not share, as an instance of homodiegesis as Spearing describes it here. See A.C. Spearing, "What is a Narrator?: Narrator Theory and Medieval Narratives," *Digital Philology: A Journal of Medieval Cultures*, Vol. 4, no. 1. (2015): 59-105, 74. See also Spearing, *Medieval Autographies: The "I" of the Text* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 259-263, and *Textual Subjectivity: The Encoding of Subjectivity in Medieval Narratives and Lyrics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 68-100.

At the beginning of Book I, in a remarkable addition to Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, Chaucer's narrator compares Troilus to a horse, raising issues bound with the natural law.[182] We are introduced to Troilus as he leads his knights during the Trojan festival of Palladium. Troilus observes some of his knights staring at the women in attendance and sighing (I.192). Having "herd told" of these cultural forms for love, Troilus is able to identify these knights as "loveres" (I.197, 198). It is from this group of lovers that Troilus wishes to exclude himself, characterizing them as "veray fooles" and their practices as "lewed" (I.202, 198). Troilus's rejection of this community angers the god of Love, prompting him to shoot Troilus with his arrow (I.206-210). This arrow, which inspires Troilus's love of Criseyde, leads Chaucer's narrator to expound on the relations between love, natural law, and animal and human nature:

> As proud Bayard gynneth for to skippe
>
> Out of the weye, so pryketh hym his corn,
>
> Til he a lasshe have of the longe whippe—
>
> Than thynketh he, "Though I praunce al byforn
>
> First in the trays, ful fat and newe shorn,
>
> Yet am I but an hors, and horses lawe

---

[182] I have used the excellent Norton edition of Chaucer's *Troilus* that includes a facing-page translation of Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*: *Troilus and Criseyde*, ed. Stephen A. Barney (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006). For a helpful introduction to Chaucer's extensive use of Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, including tables that outline both parallels between the two texts as well as Chaucer's modifications and additions to the Boccaccio material, see Barry Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50-72.

I moot endure, and with my feres draw"—

So ferde it by this fierse and proude knight

Though he a worthy kynges sone were,

And wende nothing hadde had swich myght

Ayeyns his wille that shuld his herte stere

Yet with a look his herte wex a-fere,

That he that now was moost in pride above,

Wax sodeynly moost subgit unto love (I.218-231).

This passage is rich and challenging, not just because it serves as a foundation for

Chaucer's sublime vision of love in *Troilus and Criseyde*, but also because it shows us the

extraordinary range of resources from which Chaucer draws to create this vision of love.

Classical and Christian material are brought together over these thirteen lines. In the

making of the god of Love and his arrows, Chaucer pulls from Ovid, one of the most

formative sources for medieval love poetry.[183] He draws this Ovidian characterization of

the god of Love into a model of conversion that is Christian. Troilus is converted

"sodeynyl" to the community he criticizes at the beginning of Book I, not unlike St. Paul

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[183] See, for example, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), I.463ff. Ovid's influence is towering in the Middle Ages and in particular on Chaucer. On Ovid's influence in the Middle Ages generally, see Kelly, *Love and Marriage*, 71-100, and, more recently, Marilynn Desmond, "Venus's Clerk: Ovid's Amatory Poetry in the Middle Ages," in *A Handbook to the Reception of Ovid*, eds. John F. Miller and Carole E. Newlands (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 161-173. For a work more specifically focused on Chaucer's interpretations of Ovid, see John M. Fyler, *Chaucer and Ovid* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979). See also the note in the *Riverside Chaucer* on I.206-210.

is converted to the Christian community after persecuting it.[184] This invests love with

spontaneity, with the power to completely reshape one's life. *Unlike* St. Paul, however,

Troilus is not experiencing divine grace, but instead the workings of the natural law.

We are encouraged to interpret Troilus's response to the arrow of the god of Love as

little different than Bayard's reaction to a whip. That is, both Troilus and Bayard are

responding to an inclination they hold by nature. In bringing together these various

poetic, philosophical, and theological strands, Chaucer raises questions about their

compatibility on the subject of love. Do the vocabularies of nature, grace, and Ovid

cohere?[185]

In fact, the inclusion of the natural law here raises some serious ethical issues,

ones which prompt questions about the use of the language of nature to talk about love.

Chaucer's narrator grounds his comparison of Troilus and Bayard on the idea that

neither animals nor humans are able to "fordon the lawe of kynde" (I.238). Because

animals and humans cannot eradicate the natural law, so the narrator reasons, they are

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[184] For Chaucer's use of the narrative of St. Paul's conversion in these lines, see David Aers, "Re-reading *Troilus*," 90. St. Paul's was not the only model of conversion available to Chaucer. For reflections on medieval models of conversion, including the one associated with St. Paul, see David Aers, *Salvation and Sin*, especially 20-24.

[185] While I find Chaucer's questions about love, nature, and the natural law unique, he is not alone among medieval writers in thinking dialogically about love using the numerous—and not always compatible— poetic, philosophical, and theological strands available in the Middle Ages. Perhaps most notably, Andreas Capellanus's challenging *De amore* explores love using Classical and Christian poetic and philosophical resources. For an English translation of this work, see *Andreas Capellanus on Love*, ed. and trans. P.G. Walsh (London: Gearld Duckworth and Co., 1982). For a critical introduction to this work, see Don A. Monson, *Andreas Capellanus, Scholasticism, and the Courtly Tradition* (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

similarly "subgit" to its commands—Bayard to move after the lash of the whip, Troilus

to love Criseyde after "a look." But as Chaucer knew, animals and humans do not

participate in the natural law in the same way, even though they hold some inclinations

in common. Lacking free will and reason, animals are truly "subgit" to their natural

instincts and inclinations. Humans, however, are not. Because we have reason and free

will, we are free to determine how we respond to our natural inclinations. This does not

mean that we are able to will away our natural inclinations. We are not able to will *not*

to be inclined to self-preservation, sex and love, the virtues, and happiness. These ends

are integral to our nature as rational, free creatures. Instead, it means that our natural

inclinations are not binding, reserving for us a crucial sphere of freedom to decide our

own actions. In response to his inclination to sex and love, for example, Troilus might

decide to pursue marriage. For Scholastic theologians, this would be a rational and

virtuous response to this inclination.[186] But he could also choose to live a life of

virginity, which would be an even more virtuous choice than marriage in Scholastic

theology.[187]

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[186] See Jean Porter, *Natural and Divine Law: Reclaiming the Tradition for Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 200-201.

[187] In his treatment of marriage, Aquinas notes that the human inclination to sex and love in no way binds us to a life of marriage: "Accordingly, since the perfection of the human community requires that some should devote themselves to the contemplative life to which marriage is a very great obstacle, the natural inclination to marriage is not binding by way of precept even according to the philosophers." See Aquinas, *Summa*, Supp.41.2. For virginity in comparison with marriage, see IIa-IIae.152.4. On freedom as it relates to the natural law, see Brian Tierney, *Liberty and Law*, especially his comments on Aquinas's treatment of freedom within the natural law: 77-86.

The absence of human freedom in this passage begins to explain the issues with the narrator's invocation of the natural law. It is not, however, just that the narrator elides Troilus's ability to choose one form of life over another. He also makes the natural law a source of subjection, something particularly problematic when it comes to love. In a Scholastic vocabulary, love is not something into which we "fall." Rather, it is something to which we assent freely.[188] In subsequent lines, Chaucer indicates that Troilus does, in fact, assent to love (I.391). But the narrator here works against the notion that love involves the assent of the free will, presenting love not as an inclination but rather as an irresistible, coercive force.[189] We are told that Troilus has been coerced "[a]yeyns his wille," his "fredom" now bound as he is made "subgit" to his nature (I.228, 235, 237, 231). Troilus's experience is not unique, either. The narrator stresses that love can "overcome" the "strengest folk" across culture and history: "This was, and is, and yet men shall it see" (I.243, 245). Lacking freedom before love, then, all humans are made equal to Bayard in this model of the natural law, our hypothetical responses to love equal to Bayard's instinctual reaction against the lash of a whip. In short, we can all be bound by the natural law to love.

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[188] That love requires the assent of the will is quite clear in Aquinas's treatment of love in the *Summa*: Ia-IIae.26.

[189] On voluntary and involuntary actions in relation to the passions, see Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.6.6-7 together with Brian Daives, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 224-225.

It perhaps needs no further emphasis that the narrator offers a version of the natural law that is highly incongruent with the models in medieval legal theory. We must now begin to account for the ethical and political consequences of this inconsistency. Put simply, the narrator's attenuated formulation contracts the scope of the natural law to the realization of love, classifying the acts that tend toward this realization as both natural and necessary. To better understand how this works, it will be helpful to consider one of Arcite's declarations in *The Knight's Tale* in which he defines his own pursuit of love as natural and necessary. This prideful declaration occurs at the beginning of the tale, after Palamon and Arcite first glimpse Emelye (I.1152). As the two imprisoned knights begin to quarrel over who should be able to serve as Emelye's lover, Palamon reminds Arcite that he is his "brother sworn" and is "ybounden" to help him enter Emelye's service (I.1147, 1149). To delegitimize Palamon's claim, Arcite turns to the natural law:

> Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
>
> Than may be yeve to any erthely man
>
> And therfore positif lawe and swich decree
>
> Is broken al day for love in ech degree.
>
> A man moot nedes love, maugree his heed
>
> He may nat fleen it, thogh he sholde be deed,
>
> Al be she mayde, or wydwe, or elles wyf (I.1165-1171).

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At the beginning of this speech, we will recognize one of the political ideas that is central to this dissertation—namely, that the natural law, as the "gretter" law, gives us sanction to resist unreasonable positive laws. But Arcite does not use this idea as we saw Thomas Usk employ it in the previous chapters. Unlike the beleaguered scrivener, who is careful to show that his rebellion against Northampton was informed and supported by "al the lawe of kynde," Arcite confines the natural law narrowly to the pursuit of erotic love.[190] In doing so, he omits the inclinations of the natural law that stem from our nature as rational, free creatures, such as our inclination to the virtues and our inclination to live peacefully in society. These inclinations would make it very difficult for Arcite to justify his breaking his oath to his "brother sworn" on the basis on his love for Emelye. Without them, however, he is able to do so easily. But the implications stretch far beyond just this oath: if love comprises the natural law and is not just a part of it, as Arcite seems to imply, then all positive laws that conflict with its realization can be construed as illicit and all the acts that tend towards its realization can be considered natural. Arcite, however, does not stop there. He joins this characterization of the natural law with the idea that men "moot nedes love," no matter the availability and desires of women. Not only does this impart necessity to the acts he is now able to naturalize, but it also reinforces the structure of relationships on which those acts depend: men "moot" love, and women must respond to these advances.

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[190] Usk, *Testament of Love*, 1.5.50.

Arcite's invocation of the natural law here makes explicit what I think the

narrator's model of the natural law does. That is, it seeks to provide an open-ended

justification for eroticism, but in doing so it dehumanizes lovers. In this model, lovers

are not human beings capable of rational and free choice; rather, they are animals driven

to the pursuit of love. The ethical and political consequences of this are wide-ranging.

Not only does this model dissolve lovers of moral culpability, giving them (as Arcite

gives himself) justification to pursue any act for love, but it also works to obscure the

fact that our natural inclination to love is mediated by class and culture.[191] In other

words, our actions for love cannot at once be as instinctual as a horse's reaction against a

whip *and* something that is learned as part of our class and culture.[192] We are thus

presented in Book I with a diminished model of the natural law that ignores ethical and

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[191] I use the term *class* advisedly. The language of *class*, as we use it today, developed largely in the nineteenth century. Medieval writers thus do not use the language of *class* to indicate social position. Their term is *estate*. One need only consult Book I of Andreas Capellanus's *De amore* to see how love was shaped and regulated according to economic categories in the Middle Ages. Most striking, perhaps, are Andreas's comments that medieval peasants know love only as animalistic desire. Chaucer was extraordinarily conscious of the ways in which his culture defined love according to economic categories. For a succinct and illuminating history of the term *class*, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 26-34. For an analysis of Andreas's comments on love and social class, see Monson, *Andreas Capellanus, Scholasticism*, 238-249.

[192] This is something in which Chaucer is very interested in *Troilus and Criseyde*. Throughout the poem, but especially in Book I after the narrator's invocation of the natural law, Chaucer foregrounds the cultural forms for love in the Trojan society of his poem. For example, when we return to Troilus inside the temple during the festival, we find him "loyknge" at the women in attendance, casting his eye "[o]n this lady, and now on that" (I.269). When he sees Criseyde, he is so "astoned" by her appearance that he sighs. These are two acts that Troilus earlier admits having "herd told" and which he condemns (I.197). With this language, "herd told," Chaucer marks this acts as learned within Troilus's class and culture. Then, as Troilus stares at Criseyde, he notes that "the pure wise of hire mevynge" indicates that she holds "[h]onour, estat, and womanly noblesse," virtues Troilus has learned to value as an aristocratic male in his culture (I.285, 287). For relevant reflections on class and identity in Chaucer's poem, see Aers, *Community, Gender*, 117-152.

cultural distinctions around love. It seeks to define all acts that tend towards the

realization of love may as natural.

How does the narrator's model relate to the comments in Book II with which we

began this chapter? In my view, Chaucer allows his narrator to be drawn into this open-

ended justification for eroticism at the beginning of Book I to offer his readers an

indication of the lines of exploration in his complex poem. From this model, we

understand clearly the deformations that come from collapsing the natural law into a

justification for eroticism. We also see some difficulties involved in application of the

language of nature to love. Perhaps, Chaucer suggests, it is the language of grace, and

not nature, that best captures the extraordinary processes and transformations of love.

Grace is not something over which humans hold control. Nor, however, does it destroy

individual free will. We are drawn by grace to a new form of life, but we must

continually choose this form of life. What the language of nature opens us to are

unbridled justifications for eroticism that are destructive and dehumanizing. From here,

Chaucer shows us how these justifications shape gender relations in the aristocratic

culture of his poem. Who, Chaucer asks, decides what is considered natural about love

in a culture? And how does the cultural definition of what is natural about love shape

the actions of men and women differently? As we will see in the subsequent section,

Pandarus dominates the discourse of the natural law, manipulating it to define for

Criseyde and Troilus actions that *he* deems are natural for lovers. His perverse

definitions of nature tell us much about the structures of power in the Trojan society of

Chaucer's poem.

3.2 Love, Natural Law, and Power in the Trojan Aristocratic Community

Across Chaucer's poem Pandarus falsely defines acts that tend towards the

realization of love for the male as natural, reasonable, and virtuous and, conversely, acts

that conflict with this realization as unnatural, unreasonable, or vicious. Pandarus's

defining acts in this way affords Troilus an open-ended justification for eroticism.

Simultaneously, it also works to bind Criseyde within a dichotomy: she must either

decide to reciprocate Troilus's affections or risk the possibility of being labeled by her

culture as an unnatural and unreasonable woman. In focusing our attention on

Criseyde's thinking about her situation, Chaucer not only demonstrates some of the

vicious consequences of the allocations of power in the aristocratic community of his

poem, but he also shows us the significance of the natural law in maintaining that

power. Criseyde does not lose her agency before Pandarus's manipulations of the

natural law. Nor, however, does she have the resources to meaningfully challenge these

manipulations.

I begin in Book I, as Pandarus works to learn the identity of the woman Troilus

loves. At this moment, Troilus is in "destresse," unable to imagine how Pandarus will

help him attain "blisse" and thus reluctant to name Criseyde as the woman he loves

(I.616, 623).[193] To persuade him, Pandarus declares:

> "I graunte wel that thow endures wo
>
> As sharp as doth he Ticius in helle,
>
> Whos stomak foughles tiren evere moo
>
> That hightyn volturis, as bokes tell;
>
> But I may nat endure that thow dwelle
>
> In so unskilful an oppynyoun
>
> That of thi wo is no curacioun (I.785-791).

In these lines, not found in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Pandarus uses the language of reason

("unskilful") for one of the first times in the poem.[194] How Pandarus uses this language

here to characterize Troilus's behavior tells us much about his conception of reason and

the natural law. Broadly, Pandarus uses this language to denote Troilus's behavior as

irrational. This is not incorrect. It *is* irrational. But not in the way that Pandarus thinks

that it is.

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[193] The "blisse" to which Troilus refers is sexual love. For Chaucer's audience, "blisse" held an additional connotation: the "blisse" that is the vision of God at the end of life. Despite his considerable achievements, Troilus is unable to realize this "blisse." Chaucer and his contemporaries believed that the vision of God remained closed to pagans. For an account of the bliss of the divine end, see Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.2.8, 5.6-7.

[194] His first use is lines earlier: I.764. For helpful definitions of "unskilful" and "skilful," see *The Middle English Compendium*, published online by the University of Michigan Library.

To grasp the nuances of this distinction, we must first better understand the

behavior that Pandarus labels irrational. In this section of the poem, Troilus acts as male

lovers often do in the *fin'amor* tradition. Before Pandarus's arrival, Troilus closes himself

off "allone" in his room (I.547). He languishes (I.569). He sighs (I.596). And he declares

himself overcome with "disespeyr" (I.605).[195] It is this word that is central to our

understanding Pandarus's use of the language of reason. From the previous chapter, we

might recall that Usk is also in despair at the beginning of his *Testament*. Declaring that

he is overcome with "endelesse care" at being shut off in prison away from his love the

Margarite-Pearl, Usk finds in his life nothing left except his "ende with dethe to

make."[196] This is what it means to be in despair. It is the denial that there are good ends

for us, that happiness remains attainable. This is a state of irrationality because it leads

us to reject things that tend towards our happiness, such as the virtues.[197]

As we saw in the previous chapter, it is the job of Lady Love to draw Usk out of

his despair, just as Pandarus sees it as his to lead Troilus from his despair. While Love

and Pandarus both seek to dispel despair "by wayes of reason," the two have entirely

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[195] A passage from the *Roman de la Rose,* a poem Chaucer began translating, is particularly pertinent here:
"When you have given your heart as I have exhorted you, things will befall you that are hard and painful
for lovers. Often, when you remember your love, you will perforce have to leave the company of other
people, lest they notice the pain that torments you. You will withdraw by yourself, apart from the rest, and
then you will sigh and lament and tremble and suffer many other pains. You will endure many sorts of
distress." These acts are some of the commandments of the god of Love. I quote from *The Romance of the
Rose*, trans. Frances Horgan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 2253ff.
[196] Usk, *Testament*, 1.1.9, 58-59.
[197] For an account of the ethical and theological consequences of despair, see Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.20.

different conceptions of what that entails.[198] For Love, this means a thorough education

in the virtues and in Christian philosophy and theology. Through this education Usk

redirects his actions towards the ends suitable for rational creatures—the virtues,

common good, and vision of God. For Pandarus, on the other hand, Troilus's returning

to reason does not involve ethics, philosophy, or theology; rather, it seems to require

only that Troilus reject the notion that the woman he loves is outside his reach. Indeed,

in lines that precede the passage I quote here, Pandarus suggests that the only woman

Troilus might consider wholly outside his reach is a dead one: "What may this be, / That

thow dispeired art thus causeles? / What! lyveth nat thi lady, bendiste?" (I.778-780). We

can here begin to see the deformations of Pandarus's vicious conception of reason. He

does not define reason in relation to the virtues, common good, and vision of God, as

Love does in the *Testament*, but rather in relation to the realization of erotic love for the

male. For Pandarus, Troilus's behavior is irrational not because it prevents his attaining

to the ends Usk comes to value by the end of the *Testament*, but because it denies the

possibility that "curacioun" for his "wo" will come through what Pandarus later calls

the "game" of courtly love (I.868).[199]

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[198] Usk, *Testament*, 1.2.91.

[199] In the making of his instructor, Lady Love, Usk seems to have had in mind not just Boethius's
Philosophy, but also Chaucer's Pandarus. For, as Marion Turner has shown, Usk often gives Love some of
Pandarus's language. Turner considers this "bizarre": "Although one effect (or intended effect) of
reworking *Troilus and Criseyde* might be to demonstrate the 'superior' morality of the *Testament*, it seems
clear that exactly the opposite effect could ensure. The moral platitudes of the *Testament* are subverted
because they are often taken from the lips of Pandarus, a character who lacks moral authority." My own
view differs considerably. Pandarus's language is often rooted in an ethical, political, and theological

Contracted around the realization of erotic love for the male, Pandarus's version of reason and the natural law gives Troilus moral sanction to do anything that satisfies his erotic desires. After the Trojan parliament's decision to exchange Criseyde for Antenor in Book IV, for example, Pandarus tries to console a despondent Troilus by telling him that the natural law directs him to pursue another woman if Criseyde "be lost":

> Thenk ek, thi lif to saven artow holde.
>
> Swich fir, by proces, shal of kynde colde,
>
> For syn it is but casuel pleasaunce,
>
> Som cas shal putte it out of remembraunce
>
> For also seur as day comth after nyght,
>
> The newe love, labour, or oother wo,
>
> Or elles selde seynge of a wight,
>
> Don olde affecciouns alle over-go (IV.372, 406, 414-424).

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tradition that Chaucer and Usk shared. Indeed, some of Pandarus's language is drawn from Boethius's *Consolation*. But as he is a pagan, Pandarus's use of the ideas and language from this tradition is hollow, as we have begun to see here. In the mouth of Love, a Christian instructor, the ideas and language of this tradition are not hollow. By giving Love some of Pandarus's language, then, Usk places this language back in a Christian context and thus restores its full range of meanings. In doing this, Usk does not intend to demonstrate the "superiority" of his text to a poem whose "noble sayenges" he claims he cannot "amende." It seems to me, rather, that Usk wishes to indicate that his text is as ethically and politically serious as Chaucer's and Boethius's. For Turner's comments, see *Chaucerian Conflict*, 99. For Usk's praise of Chaucer's *Troilus*, see *Testament*, 3.4.236-237.

Right before these lines, Troilus declares himself "ded" without Criseyde (IV.372).

Rather than correct Troilus's despondent assessment of his own life, Pandarus reinforces

it, referencing at the beginning of these lines the most fundamental precept of the

natural law: all living creatures must act for their own self-preservation.[200] Traditionally,

this precept is thought to order humans to seek the necessities of life, such as food and

water, and to act in self-defense if we believe our lives are seriously threatened by an

aggressor.[201] In referencing this precept in this context, Pandarus invests it with

meaning utterly alien to medieval natural law theory. Because Troilus believes his life is

endangered by the loss of Criseyde, so Pandarus explains, the natural law commands

him to save his life by finding another woman to satisfy his desires. Pandarus joins this

injunction with two images meant to reinforce the naturalness of Troilus's seeking out

another woman: just as a fire burns out and day passes into night, so too will Troilus's

love for Criseyde diminish. The effect of these lines is to naturalize the incessant pursuit

of "casuel pleasaunce."[202] According to Pandarus, it is natural that a man will grow tired

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[200] Part of Chaucer's point, of course, is that Pandarus cannot correct this assessment effectively, that he lacks the ethical and theological resources to order Troilus to the ends suitable to his nature—the virtues, common good, and vision of God.

[201] See Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.94.2, IIa-IIae.64.7. For a cogent account of Aquinas's careful treatment of self-defense, see John Finnis, *Aquinas*, 275-279.

[202] Chaucer makes it clear that Pandarus cares not "what unthrift" he says as long as it helps pull his friend out of his despair (IV.431). This in itself is indicative of the hollowness of these vital political concepts to Pandarus and suggests something more fundamentally wrong with his courtly community. As Lynn Staley reminds us: "Pandarus's slippery use of language has a far more knowing mind behind it than that of Pandarus himself. Chaucer uses it to indicate a type of political inadequacy that is fundamental to the courtly mode of Troy." See Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power in the Age of Richard II* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 8.

of a particular woman, and as long as he feels his life is imperiled by his being unable to

fulfill his romantic desires, the nature law directs him to seek out a new woman.

This is not the extent of Pandarus's natural law justifications. Once Troilus

makes clear to him that Criseyde is not a "casuel pleasaunce" but someone to whom he

is committed, Pandarus advises Troilus to abduct Criseyde before she is exchanged for

Antenor (IV.596-597). He tells the pagan knight that the natural law supports his doing

so:

> "Forthi tak herte, and thynk right as a knyght:
>
> Thorugh love is broken al day every lawe.
>
> Kith now somwhat thi corage and thi myght;
>
> Have mercy on thiself for any awe (IV.617-620).

Pandarus suggests here that sexual love, as part of the natural law, gives Troilus

sanction to break "every lawe" that conflicts with his desire to fulfill his love. As we

saw in the previous section, Arcite makes a similar declaration at the beginning of *The*

Knight's Tale. Both he and Pandarus draw on the idea that the natural law offers all

humans the resources to resist unreasonable positive laws. But their doing so is quite

problematic. Both wish to erase a crucial distinction within medieval natural law

theory: that is, our natural inclination to love is lower than and subordinate to the

natural inclinations that stem from our reason. Most fundamentally, these inclinations

order us to live peacefully in our society.[203] And to live peacefully, we need to observe

reasonable positive laws as well as the demands of virtues like justice. Erotic love, then,

does not allow us to break "al day every lawe." Indeed, it does not even free us to act in

ways which are vicious but not contrary to the positive laws of our communities. By

eliding this vital distinction, Pandarus and Arcite afford open-ended justifications for

eroticism: if it is for love, then it is natural, licit, and not subject to the moral and political

obligations of positive laws.[204]

    If Troilus accepted Pandarus's interpretations of reason and the natural law in

Book IV, he would be able to sanction a range of vicious acts. But he does not accept

them. Later, we will return to this crucial point of Book IV, to Troilus's explanation for

his rejecting Pandarus's interpretations of what is natural and reasonable. But now I

wish to consider the implications of Pandarus's version of reason and the natural law for

Criseyde. In sharp contrast to Troilus, Criseyde sees her freedom restricted by

Pandarus's perverse version of reason and the natural law. What is natural and

reasonable for her, according to Pandarus, is for her to reciprocate Troilus's affections—

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[203] Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.94.2
[204] Adding to the moral incoherence here, Pandarus also claims in these lines that Troilus's abducting Criseyde would be merciful. In medieval ethics, mercy is a moral virtue through which we have grief for the suffering of our neighbor and work to alleviate that grief. But in Pandarus's counsel, mercy joins the natural law in sanctioning the abduction of another human being, an act that manifestly disregards another's suffering and wellbeing. While Aquinas notes that we might apply mercy to ourselves figuratively, the virtue "is directed, properly speaking, towards another, and not to oneself": see ibid, IIa-IIae.30.1 ad 2. See also Augustine, *City of God*, 9.5.

no matter her own concerns and fears about entering into a relationship with the royal

knight.

This vicious understanding of what it means for Criseyde to act naturally and

reasonably shapes Pandarus's approach to his role as Troilus's matchmaker. Towards

the end of Book I, as he assesses Criseyde as a suitable marriage match for Troilus,

Pandarus reassures his friend that he expects to find that Criseyde will be receptive to

Troilus's love:

> "And for to speke of hire in specyal,
>
> Hire beaute to bithynken and hire youthe,
>
> It sit naught to ben celestial
>
> As yet, though that hire liste bothe;
>
> But trewely, it sate hire wel right nowthe
>
> A worthi knyght to loven and cherice,
>
> And but she do, I holde it for a vice (I.981-987).[205]

In these lines, Pandarus centralizes Criseyde's agency as he simultaneously hollows it

out. According to him, there are two types of love: sexual love and heavenly love (I.976-

979).[206] He believes that Criseyde must choose the former, for it is not appropriate for

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[205] One of the central duties of matchmakers in the late Middle Ages was to identify suitable partners. Class was often central in the assessments of matches, as it is in Pandarus's own assessment of his niece (I.880-881). See McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex*, 97-98.

[206] At this point in Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Pandaro claims that "every woman lives amorously, and nothing else restrains her but fear of shame." In giving his Pandarus a *less* vicious statement, Chaucer seems to draw

her as a young and beautiful woman to dedicate herself to heavenly love. Having set

aside the "celestial" life for her, Pandarus then acknowledges that a relationship

between Troilus and Criseyde depends on her consent. But he does so obliquely, as he

defines what he believes Criseyde must do: consent "to loven and cherice" the "worthi

knyght" Troilus. This is, he believes, the "right" choice for her. For her to do otherwise

would be a "vice"—an act against nature and reason.[207] Here we can see quite clearly

how Pandarus's manipulation of reason and the natural law work against Criseyde. To

be thought of as natural, reasonable, and virtuous in Pandarus's corrupt sense of these

terms Criseyde must conform to the cultural expectation that she will reciprocate

Troilus's love.

In his interactions with Criseyde throughout the poem, Pandarus employs his

version of reason to try to pressure Criseyde into fulfilling Troilus's desires. There are

several examples of this. In a particularly striking one from Book II, Pandarus advises

his niece that the "best is / That ye hym love ayeyn for his lovynge, / As love for love is

skilful guerdonynge" (II.390-392). Here Pandarus draws on the medieval formulation

for justice, a virtue by which we continually render what is owed to another according

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on Virgil's commentary on divine and human love in Dante's *Purgatorio*. But of course, Pandarus does not
communicate the ethical and philosophical complexities that Dante's Virgil does, even if he echoes his
language. For Pandaro's quote, see Boccaccio, *Filostrato*, II.27. For Virgil's commentary, see Dante,
Purgatorio (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), XVII.91-139: compare 91-93 to I.976-979 of Chaucer's *Troilus and
Criseyde*.
[207] Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia-IIae.71.2, resp. and ads. 1-3

to the natural law or positive law.[208] Pandarus's invocation of this virtue works together

with the cultural conception within the poem that love is a bond of service. In Chaucer's

text, quite unlike Boccaccio's, the role of the servant belongs to men: male lovers enter

into the service of the women they love.[209] As her servant, Troilus "laboure[s]" for

Criseyde, undertaking a litany of practices that are meant to express his continual

commitment to her (I.458). And as a consequence of this service, Criseyde is thought to

owe Troilus.[210] It is in relation to this perception of debt that Pandarus appeals to the

virtue justice in his conversation with Criseyde. Broadly speaking, justice aims at

equality. We repay an act with something that is considered equal to the act itself.[211]

According to Pandarus, there is but one way that Criseyde can make an equal return for

Troilus's service, and that is to reciprocate his affection: "love for love." This would be a

reasonable reward ("guerdonynge"). With this malicious claim to justice, Pandarus

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[208] The commonplace injunction *redde quod debes* ("pay what you owe") is fundamental to the medieval
conception of justice. See ibid, IIa-IIae.57.1-2, 58.1-5; Ia-IIae.114.1 together with Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose
Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 198-208. On the Thomistic
conception of justice, see Annabel S. Brett, *Liberty, Right, and Nature*, 88-97, especially 90-92; Jean Porter,
Justice as a Virtue: a Thomistic Perspective (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016);
and M.S. Kempshall, *The Common Good*, 111-129.

[209] On the concept of service in Chaucer's *Troilus* and Boccaccio's *Filostrato*, Windeatt writes: "Chaucer in
translating suppresses any…notion of the woman serving the man in love." The bond of service, however,
does not exist just between men and women in Chaucer's poem. Strikingly, Pandarus pledges to serve
Troilus. This raises a number of fascinating issues around masculinity and sexuality that have not been
fully explored by literary critics. For the quote, see Windeatt, *Troilus and Criseyde*, 229.

[210] Throughout the poem Chaucer expresses the fact that service is continual and thought to impart
obligation through various combinations of three rhyme words: serve, deserve, and starve. For illustrative
examples, see I.424-427 and V.1720-1722. On these rhyme words, I have found helpful James Knowles,
"Love, Labor, Liturgy: Languages of Service in Late Medieval England" (PhD diss., Duke University, 2009),
152-187. For some relevant reflections on service in Andreas Capellanus's *De Amore*, see Monson, *Andreas
Cappelanus, Scholasticism*, 249-258.

[211] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.57.1. See also Brett, *Liberty, Right*, 91.

renders Criseyde's individual assent to love as something that is due according to an

objective standard established by reason. In doing this, Pandarus attempts to bind

Criseyde within a dichotomy that advantages Troilus. If Criseyde returns Troilus's love

with her own love, then she will have acted according to the demands of reason and

justice. If, however, she rejects this formulation, then she will have acted unreasonably

and unjustly.

In a subsequent example from Book III, Pandarus deploys his distorted version

of reason against his niece as part of his plot to get Troilus and Criseyde in bed together.

In order to bring the couple together at his house, Pandarus invites Criseyde to dinner

and, unbeknownst to her, lets in Troilus through a secret trapdoor (III.741-742).[212]

Pandarus then tells Criseyde that Troilus has been told that she loves "oon hatte

Horaste" (III.797). In response to this, Criseyde asks that Pandarus give Troilus a blue

ring as an indication of her commitment to the pagan knight. But Pandarus rejects this,

declaring it evidence that Criseyde is not reasoning well (III.894). He then urges her to

speak with Troilus that night. It would, he argues, not "be skilful to withstonde" this

request (III.938). As in the example from Book II, Pandarus here defines Troilus's

desires (and his own as a matchmaker and voyeur) as reasonable, preemptively labeling

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[212] Throughout the poem Chaucer explores the relation of space, privacy, and romance in the courtly world of his Trojan society. For reflections on this issue, see Paul Strohm, "The Space of Desire in Chaucer's and Shakespeare's Troy," in *Love, History, and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde* and *Troilus and Cressida*, eds. Andrew James Johnston, Russell West-Pavlov, and Elisabeth Kempf (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

potential challenges to these desires as unreasonable. *If* Criseyde were to decline to speak with Troilus, then Pandarus could claim that she was committing an act against reason.

But Criseyde does decide to speak with Troilus, not because Pandarus tells her it is the "skilful" thing to do, but because Troilus is "to hir so deere" (III.920). One of the achievements of Chaucer's extraordinary poem is that it explores the pain caused by Pandarus's manipulations of the discourse of the natural law against Criseyde while also showing that these manipulations are ultimately fruitless.[213] We glimpse some of the pain after Pandarus makes his claim about justice in Book II. Then Criseyde weeps and cries out against the "false world": "Allas, for wo! Why nere I deed? / For of this world the feyth is al agoon" (II.408, 420, 409-410). This is an understandable reaction against a culture that has placed her in a situation she finds "dredful," a situation in which she faces the possibility of vicious scrutiny no matter her decision regarding Troilus (II.426). But the pressure that causes this pain does not bring Criseyde to assent to love Troilus. On the contrary, it surely contributes to Criseyde's "cloudy thought[s]" about what it means to be a woman in love in her culture (II768, 782-784). Her movement towards assent does not come until she hears Antigone's song about the "blisse" and "joye" of

---

[213] Aers observes this literary achievement more generally: "Despite the social and ideological forces Chaucer has evoked with such imaginative depth, and despite his refusal to make them just vanish away, he does certainly create a most powerful example of the way in which fulfilled Eros enables individuals to transcend social pressures, repressions and fears." Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 128.

love later in Book II (II.849, 882). In this song Criseyde finds consolation. Having heard

it, Criseyde begins to fear love "lasse":

> But every word which that she of hire herde,
>
> She gan to prenten in hire herte faste,
>
> And ay gan love hire lasse for t'agaste
>
> Than it died erst, and synken in hire herte,
>
> That she wex somwhat able to converte (II.849, 882, 899-903).

This is not the "full" assent to love that Troilus makes "with good hope" in Book I

(I.391). But Criseyde is moved by Antigone's joyful song and chooses to imprint the

words of that song on her heart, a choice that moves her "somwhat…to converte" to

love. This is the first in a series of choices that leads Criseyde to open "hire herte" to

Troilus in Book III (III.1239). And it is to these choices that Criseyde refers when she

tells Troilus that she is not in bed with him because she has been entrapped by

Pandarus's manifold manipulations, but because she has acted on her own desires

(III.1205-1211).[214]

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[214] On Criseyde's assent, see Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 117-142, especially 126-128, and Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer*, 20-22. For a lucid reading of the lines I cite from Book III here, see Aers, *Community, Gender*, 130-131. However instructive I find Mann's account in general, I have obvious reservations about her characterizing Criseyde's initial movement towards loving Troilus as natural: "Having begun to contemplate her own beauty—to look at herself, that is, with Troilus's eyes—she is led *quite naturally* into fashioning a new image of herself: the picture of sober widowhood which has been the model for her behavior hitherto (II 113-19) gives way to a new conception of herself as her 'owene womman'" (21, emphasis mine). As I argue in this chapter, Chaucer shows us in *Troilus and Criseyde* that the language of nature must be applied carefully to love.

What if, however, Criseyde did not want to speak with Troilus? What sort of

protection does she have against this request? Or against any of Pandarus's claims? As

we saw in the previous chapters, Thomas Usk looked to the natural law as a defense

against John of Northampton and his supporters in his *Testament of Love*. In its ideal

form, the discourse of the natural law is instrumental in the realization of a virtuous

community organized around the common good of its inhabitants. This is how Usk saw

it in 1385, using it to simultaneously challenge his imprisonment and chart a path to a

more peaceful and charitable London. As the natural law is given to all rational

creatures, Criseyde is able to do something similar in her situation. After his first visit to

Criseyde, Pandarus returns again to his niece the following day, this time to deliver a

letter to her from Troilus. "[D]redfully" worried about entering into a relationship with

Troilus at this point in the poem, Criseyde initially refuses to accept the letter, asking her

uncle to reconsider whether his request is "resonable": should she agree to accept his

letter and possibly bring harm on herself? (II.1128, 1135, 1140). This is an invitation for

Pandarus to see the implications of the "game" of courtly love as she does (I.868). In the

Thomistic tradition, true love is always something that is good for us. But as Criseyde

indicates here, there are serious consequences to the "game" of courtly love for her,

consequences that do not exist for men. Namely, she worries about the "wikked tonges"

that might spread disastrous rumors about her if she were to enter into a relationship

with Troilus (II.773, 785, 799-805).[215] In noting that it might not be "resonable" for her to

accept Troilus's letter, Criseyde implicates Pandarus's version of reason as narrow and

distorted. Her flourishing, she indicates, is invisible to this version of reason. This

opens a path to individual reformation. Pandarus could begin to turn away from the

sort of views and declarations that we have examined in this chapter.

But he does not. He rejects Criseyde's claim to reason. *How* he rejects this claim

is as notable as the fact that he rejects it:

> "Now is this the grettest wondre
>
> That evere I seight! Lat be this nyce fare!
>
> To dethe mot I smyten be with thondre,
>
> If for the citee which that stondeth yondre,
>
> Wolde I a letter unto yow brynge or take
>
> To harm of yow! What list yow thus it make?
>
> "But thus ye faren, wel neigh alle and some,
>
> That he that most desireth yow to serve,
>
> Of hym ye recche leest wher he bycome,

---

[215] Chaucer revisits the issue of love and fame in his account of Aeneas and Dido in his *Legend of Good Women*. For some reflections on fame and gender in medieval civic courts, see Carol Lansing, "Conflicts Over Gender in Civic Courts," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe*, eds. Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 118-130, 126-129. Criseyde also worries about the loss of her "libertee" if she were to enter into a relationship with Troilus. On the issue of "libertee," it is instructive to consider Criseyde's fears alongside Giles of Rome's assertion in his *De Regimine Principum* that the "womman" is by "kynde ordre…soget to þe man" in a marriage. Giles, *Governance of Kings and Princes*, 2.1.10.9-11. On the medieval conception that women were by nature subject to men, see McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex*, 138.

And whether that he lyve or elles sterve (II.1143-1152).

The most important thing to note here is the word "wondre." Chaucer's culture defined

wonders in part as things that happen outside the established order of nature as we are

able to know it. By labeling Criseyde's attempt to push back against his version of

reason as a wonder or a miracle, Pandarus marks it as something that is outside

reason.[216] This neutralizes Criseyde's claim to reason, rendering it immaterial to what

Pandarus himself identifies as reasonable. And what he sees as reasonable, as we have

seen, is that Criseyde respond positively to Troilus's service, returning "love for love"

regardless of her own concerns and desires (II.392). This is something that Pandarus

gestures towards once again at the close of these lines as he alleges not for the first time

that Criseyde wields power over Troilus's life in the bond of service. Here we arrive at

some dark reflections on the natural law. Criseyde's careful challenge to Pandarus's

version of reason leads not to individual reformation, but to the reassertion of

Pandarus's own authority over her on the matters of reason. Far from offering

significant protection to those with less power, Chaucer shows us, the discourse of the

natural law can become instrumental in the continued dominion of those with power.

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[216] For a definition of miracles, see Aquinas, *Summa*, Ia.105.6-7 and Ia.110.4, resp. and ad. 2. See also
Augustine, *City of God*, 22.8-10. Across his works Chaucer's interest in nature is often bound with a
fascination in miracles and wonders. In *The Squire's Tale*, for example, Chaucer links the people's curiosity
about the wondrous "thyng[s]" that appear at Cambyuskan's court to curiosity about natural occurrences
like thunder and mist: V.247-262.

3.3 The Limits of Reason: Troilus, Culture, and Politics

I wish now to return to and conclude with Troilus and Pandarus's conversation at the beginning of Book IV. For it is in this conversation that Chaucer continues to explore the urgent issues around power, resistance, and reason that he raises in this interaction between Criseyde and Pandarus. As we will recall, the Trojan parliament decides to exchange Criseyde for Antenor at the beginning of Book IV, and in an effort to console his friend, Pandarus advises Troilus to abduct Criseyde, an act he glosses as in accordance with the natural law. Chaucer's royal knight rejects this advice, declaring it against reason. As Troilus explains his rationale for rejecting his friend's advice, we are able to glimpse a reason freed from the massive distortions that characterize the models of reason on which we have focused in this chapter. Yet this is by no means a representation of an unerring reason. Troilus identifies the exchange of Criseyde as both in accordance with reason and for the common good. It should be evident to Troilus that the exchange is an act against reason and virtue. That it is apparently not points us towards what I believe are some of Chaucer's foremost concerns about the natural law and its role in cultural discourse.

In his conversation with Pandarus, Troilus identifies three central factors that he believes make Pandarus's advice unreasonable. First, he asserts that abduction is not just against the law of Troy but is also a "gret unright" (IV.549-550). Next, he notes that abducting Criseyde would violate "the townes goode" (IV.553). Finally, and clearly

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most importantly for the pagan knight, Troilus notes that an abduction would do

violence to Criseyde and would be disastrous for her reputation: "For if I wolde it

openly desturbe, / It mooste be disclaundre to hire name" (IV.563-564). On the face of it,

Troilus appears to be reasoning rightly here. He recognizes that abduction is morally

wrong and is thus willing to obey the positive law that prohibits it.[217] He places the

common good over his own individual good, something that is integral to coherent

ethical action.[218] And he understands Criseyde's fear of slander not as a "wondre" but

as an issue that is pertinent to reason.[219] Underlining this reasoning is Troilus's

recognition that "desir" does not always correlate with reason, a distinction both

Chaucer's narrator and Pandarus work to erase (IV.572). But however far we are from

the distortions that mark the narrator and Pandarus's versions of reason, Troilus

nonetheless errs decisively in his identification of the common good. The exchange of

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[217] Most fundamentally, the act of abduction violates the precept of the natural law that commands us to live in a community. Any positive law that is determined from the precepts of the natural law may be considered a just law. See ibid, Ia-IIae.94.2, 95.2.

[218] As Kempshall notes, Aquinas believed that the "common good is 'greater', 'better', and 'more divine' than the individual good because it represents a closer approximation to the likeness of God." This does not, however, mean that Aquinas sees the two as disparate goods ever at war with one another. Quite the contrary: "the individual good shares an analogical identity with the universal good, whilst the individual wills what is good for himself in willing what is good in general." That is, to act for the common good is often to act virtuously, which tends towards our final happiness in the vision of God. See M.S. Kempshall, *The Common Good*, 102. On the interrelations between the natural law and the common good in Aquinas's ethics and politics, see Alasdair MacIntyre, "Intractable Moral Disagreements," in *Intractable Disputes about the Natural Law: Alasdair MacIntyre and Critics*, ed. Lawrence S. Cunningham (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 5-6.

[219] Beyond this, Troilus also seems to understand here that women in his culture are often slandered for the actions of men and for outcomes and circumstances for which they are not responsible.

Criseyde for Antenor cannot be for the common good, as Troilus believes it to be, because it is an act against reason and virtue.

This is something Hector tries to indicate at the Trojan parliament against the irrational pronouncements and decision of the Trojan "peple" (IV.183). When presented with the option to exchange Criseyde, Hector notes that she "nys no prisonere" and thus is not subject to the ethics of ransom (IV.179).[220] He then speaks for and about his polity: "We usen here no wommen for to selle" (IV.181). This is not "idealism" but an ethical statement meant to accentuate what Hector believes are the foundational commitments of the Trojan community to its citizens.[221] To "selle" Criseyde, Hector implies, would be to violate these commitments and so become a different sort of polity altogether, one that is willing to set aside the demands of justice and the security and flourishing of its inhabitants in order to secure a perceived advantage over a political enemy. Rather than coalesce around this ethical vision of their polity, the Trojan "peple" erupt in protest against it (IV.183). Rebuking Hector for giving a "shilde" to a "womman" when the Trojan war effort is in need of "folk," the people demand with "al…[their] vois" that Criseyde be exchanged for Antenor (IV.188, 191, 195). Chaucer characterizes this demand as "noyse," a word associated with the Revolt of 1381 and one we encountered in Usk's *Appeal* in the first chapter of this study. Like in the *Appeal*, this word here

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[220] For a recent account of ransom and the treatment of prisoners of war in the Middle Ages, see Rémy Ambühl, *Prisoners of War in the Hundred Years War: Ransom Culture in the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
[221] Dinshaw characterizes Hector's statement as idealistic: *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 61.

indicates an incapacity for rational political reflection. The Trojan people cannot think

rationally about their community and so "desire" their own "confusioun," which is the

exchange of Criseyde for Antenor (IV.186).[222] That Chaucer makes a mob of "peple"

instrumental in ethical and political "confusioun" is not surprising. Across his corpus

Chaucer depicts collectives like the Trojan "peple" as wholly incapable of rational

political action, even in the face of tyranny.[223]

What is more surprising is that Chaucer's virtuous knight does not share in his

brother's vision of the common good but instead comes to participate in the

"confusioun" of the Trojan people. When he first hears about the proposal of the Greeks

to exchange Criseyde for Antenor, Troilus begins to think about how he might resist the

exchange if his polity were to accept it (IV.160). Hector's ethical vision provides a clear

foundation for legitimate resistance. As I have noted, Chaucer's political tradition

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[222] Chaucer also seems to reference in these lines Jack Straw, a leader of the Revolt of 1381: "As breme as blase of strawe iset on-fire" (IV.184). The Trojan parliament scene is as near as Chaucer gets to direct political writing. As critics have observed, he seems to have written this scene with reflections about both the Revolt of 1381 and English parliamentary politics. Beyond this, I think this scene also could have been informed by the London conflicts that engulfed Usk beginning in 1382. This is a context that critics have not considered. Yet as we saw in the previous chapter, it too involved a mass of people whose desires were perceived by Usk, Nicholas Brembre, and the London mercantile elite as against the peace and common good of London. For instructive accounts of Chaucer's political reflections in this scene, see Lee Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 155-160; John M. Ganim, "Chaucer and the Noise of the People," *Exemplaria* 2 (March 1990): 71-88, 74-75; Aers, "Re-Reading *Troilus*," 92; and Marion Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 53-54.
[223] Strikingly, *The Monk's Tale* imagines the downfall of the tyrant Nero as proceeding not from the rational rebellion of the "peple" but through the whim of Fortune: "Now fil it so that Fortune liste no lenger / The hye pryde of Nero to cherice, / For though that he were strong, yet was she strenger" (VII.2519-2522). Like the people who rebel against Nero, the Trojan "peple" are likewise moved not by reason but by Fortune: "For infortune it wolde, for the nones, / They sholden hire confusioun desire" (IV.185-186). For relevant reflections on Fortune in the *Monk's Tale*, see Eleanor Johnson, "Tragic Nihilism in *The Canterbury Tales*: The Monk as Literary Theorist," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* Vol. 49, No. 1 (January 2019): 7-31, especially 20, 22.

argued that obedience is due to laws and commands only insofar as those laws and

commands are reasonable and coherent with the common good. Since, as Hector

correctly argues, the exchange of Criseyde would violate the common good of Troy,

Troilus would be justified in resisting it. Troilus, however, does not recognize this. On

the contrary, his view that Criseyde is exchanged for the common good seems to be so

resolute that it leads him to reject resistance as a morally and politically legitimate act in

his conversation with Pandarus: "I sholde han also blame of every wight, / My fadres

graunt if that I so withstoode, / Syn she is chaunged for the townes goode" (IV.551-

553).[224]

How does Troilus come to err so critically? One possible answer is that Troilus is

unable to reason rightly in the aftermath of the Trojan parliament because he is

overcome with "wo" (IV.363). Yet this answer is not completely satisfactory because

Troilus, as we have seen, is not so overcome with "wo" that he is unable to understand

abduction as against reason. Nor is he incapable of identifying the common good as

superior to the individual good. Should he not thus be able to recognize the exchange of

Criseyde as against reason and the common good? This points us to a more

fundamental and troubling issue: the possibility that Chaucer's virtuous pagan fails to

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[224] Alastair Minnis argues that Troilus does not join Hector at the Trojan parliament or mount any resistance to the decree of the people because he is committed to "the principle of secrecy enjoined by *fyn lovynge*." That is, he "cannot publicly reveal his love for Criseyde without her permission." While this is a factor in Troilus's reasoning, it is I think clear here that that is not the only factor structuring his political reasoning. See Alastair Minnis, *The Cambridge Introduction to Chaucer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 43.

recognize the exchange as against reason and the common good because the trading of

women has become so normalized within his culture that it has for him taken on the

name "reasonable." This possibility cannot be so easily dismissed. For Troilus earlier

extends Pandarus his "faire suster Polixene, / Cassandre, Eleyne, or any of the frape" as

a just return for his friend's "servise" as a matchmaker (III.409-410, 408). His doing so

indicates a comfort with identifying women as objects to be traded, a comfort that

reflects back what the Trojan parliamentary scene reveals are prevailing attitudes and

values of Troilus's culture.[225] Troilus, then, may err because his culture errs. If reason is

corrupted at the level of culture, it becomes very difficult indeed to recognize the

precepts of the natural law.

But with the individual and collective failure to identify the exchange as against

reason, it seems to me, Chaucer is thinking about more than cultural vice. What the poet

is thinking about, what indeed he is thinking about across his poem, is the cultural role

of the discourse of the natural law. As I have noted, this discourse functions

theoretically as a guide, offering ethical and political instruction that is objective,

universal, and timeless. As such, it is instrumental in both the making of virtuous

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[225] In arguing that the "view of women as gifts, tokens of exchange, is more basic to the relations between men in Troy than is the view of women as singular and unique, Dinshaw points to the Trojan parliament, Troilus's offering Pandarus a woman in Book III, and Criseyde's friend's hope in Book IV that the exchange of Criseyde will bring Troy "pees on every syde" (4.692). Aers contends that Troilus's "unquestioningly accept[ing]" the Trojan parliamentary view that Criseyde is exchanged for the common good "reminds one how his identity remains profoundly bound up with the public values of the masculine world [of Chaucer's poem]." See Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Sexual Poetics*, 61, and Aers, *Community, Gender*, 132.

communities *and* the unmaking of vicious orders and forms of power. While this may

have been how Thomas Usk understood the discourse of the natural law as he wrote the

Testament of Love in 1385, it is not how Chaucer sees it in *Troilus and Criseyde*.[226] He

shows us again and again that values, beliefs, and practices that are unique to a culture

can take on the form of the discourse of the natural law.[227] Once this happens, the

discourse of the natural law ceases to fulfill its function within culture as an ethical and

political guide and as a resource for resistance and reformation. It becomes instead a

mirror, affirming and reaffirming the current social order. To follow what is called

"natural" and "reasonable" in such cultures is often to act in ways that tend not towards

happiness, but towards the perpetuation of power. And to dispute the cultural

definitions of nature and reason is often to challenge this power without the protection

afforded by the natural law. The result, as Chaucer shows us, can be nothing less than

ethical and political "confusioun."

  With *Troilus and Criseyde*, then, Chaucer is exploring the possibilities *and* the

limitations of natural reason. Although Troilus attains to the virtues and finds earthly

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[226] How Usk read Chaucer's dark reflections on the natural law in *Troilus and Criseyde* remains for me an open issue.

[227] It was perhaps thinking along similar lines that led Marsilius of Padua to reject the concept of the natural law outright. In his political philosophy, there are not natural laws but "quasi-natural laws." In her outstanding edition to Marsilius's major work *The Defender of the Peace*, Annabel Brett explains Marsilius's decision to reject natural law theory: "Following Aristotle, Marsilius argues that what people call natural law means simply those political standards that are the same everywhere…Knowledge is historical and *by the very same token* political: there is no wholly natural or immediate knowledge, no cognitive grasp that requires no community of understanding." See Marsilius of Padua, *The Defender of Peace*, ed. and trans. Annabel Brett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xviii. On Marsilius's rejection of the natural law, see also Tierney, *Liberty and Law*, 123-127.

"joie" through natural reason, he cannot orient his actions to what Chaucer, Usk, and their contemporaries recognized as "the most soverayne and fynal perfection of man": the "love of one very God that is inchaungeable."[228] It is to this "fynal" perfection that Chaucer turns his attention in the final stanzas of the poem. Unlike his source, who ends his poem excoriating women, Chaucer concludes *Troilus and Criseyde* with a prayer:

> Thow oon, and two, and thre, eterne on lyve,
>
> That regnest ay in thre, and two, and oon,
>
> Uncircumscript, and al maist circumscrive,
>
> Us from visible and invisible foon
>
> Defende, and to thy mercy, everichon,
>
> So make us, Jesus, for thi mercy, digne,
>
> For love of mayde and moder thyn benigne.
>
> Amen (V.1863-1868).

The Trinity, of course, remains unknown to Troilus. But even as this serves as an indication of the limitations of Troilus's natural reason, it cannot be made to encompass and represent these limitations. Chaucer's poem refuses such a simple homogenization.[229] It acknowledges Troilus's paganism while locating his failures within a specific set of relationships in a particular culture. The ethical and political

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[228] Usk, *Testament*, I.Prol.42-44.

[229] For a different account of the homogenizing language in the final stanzas of *Troilus and Criseyde* (V.1828-1832, 1849-1855), see Johnson, *Practicing Literary Theory*, 114-121.

"confusioun" that finally envelops Troilus's culture in Book IV does not belong to all pagan societies. Nor, it seems to me, does Chaucer think it particular to pagan cultures. The social structures that enable and precipitate the "confusioun" of Troy are not alien to Chaucer's own society. When Usk examined his culture in 1385, he saw an opportunity to remind and reform; Chaucer, writing around the same time, saw little hope for reform and instead posed a bleak question: what if our culture becomes a prison of "confusioun"?

4. "A riche contree hadde he wonne": Conquest, Tyranny, and the Natural Law in Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*

Critics have long recognized what V.A. Kolve memorably calls the "epistemological and teleological darkness" of *The Knight's Tale*. Many critics have understood this "darkness" in terms of the paganism of the tale. Kolve himself concludes that "*The Knight's Tale* measures pagan culture against a specifically Christian understanding of the needs and purposes of human life, rendering the limitations of the former with both clarity and compassion." However, no critic, insofar as I am aware, has read this "darkness" as an issue bound with the natural law.[230] This is a puzzling gap in Chaucer scholarship, for it is through the natural law that medieval Christians made sense of pagan lives.

Characteristic of the "darkness" about which Kolve writes are the laments Chaucer gives his pagan knights, Arcite and Palamon, at the end of Part I. These

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[230] V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative: The First Five Canterbury Tales* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1984), 123, 150. Alastair Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), remains an essential introduction to Chaucer's reflections on paganism. On paganism in Chaucer, see also Frank Grady, *Representing Righteous Heathens in Late Medieval England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

laments are not found in Boccaccio's *Teseida*, the major source for the narrative of *The*

Knight's Tale.[231] They are, rather, Chaucer's inventions. In his lament, Palamon claims

that the ontological status of humans is inexplicable:

> O crueel goddes that governe
>
> …………………………………
>
> What is mankynde moore unto you holde
>
> Than is sheep that rouketh in the folde?
>
> For slayn is man right as another beest,
>
> ……………………………………
>
> And yet encresseth this al my penaunce,
>
> That man is bounden to his observaunce,
>
> For Goddes sake, to letten of his wille,
>
> Ther as a beest may al his lust fulfille (I.1304-1318).

Chaucer draws Palamon's lament from Ecclesiastes 3:19: "For the fate of humans and the

fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath,

and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity." In his *Commentary*

on Ecclesiastes, St. Jerome reads what sounds like blasphemy in this verse as an

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[231] Much has been written about Boccaccio's *Teseida* as a source for *The Knight's Tale*. On the complex relations between the *Teseida* and *The Knight's Tale*, I have found the following works illuminating: Piero Boitani, *Chaucer and Boccaccio* (Oxford: Society for the Study of Mediaeval Languages and Literature, 1977); Wallace, *Chaucerian Polity*, 104-124; Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 174-195; Lynn Staley, *Languages of Power*, 12-15; and Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery*, 105-107, 113-114, 125, and 145-146.

indication of the hopelessness of human life before the coming of Christ: "He says this, not because he supposes that the soul perishes with the body, or that there is just the one place prepared for beasts and man, but because before the coming of Christ everything was being taken to Hades together."[232] With this in mind, one might persuasively argue that Chaucer, in writing Palamon's lament, is attempting to convey the metaphysical and ethical limitations and failures of historical pagans who had no access to Christianity.[233] To be sure, this is a dimension of Chaucer's art, both in these lines and throughout *The Knight's Tale*. Medieval Christians had a teleological system of ethics. For them, virtuous action was coherent because they believed that humans are rational beings ordered to a benevolent and merciful God. This is not, however, the system Chaucer gives Palamon. His universe is governed by pagan gods who extol their extraordinary powers for violence: "Myn is the stranglyng and hangyng by the throte, / The murmure and the cherles rebellyng" (I.2458-2459). As St. Augustine writes in his *City of God*, these are gods who "looked after their own interests; they did not care how their worshippers lived, or rather they were content that they should live in corruption."[234] Given this, it is no wonder that Palamon cannot understand why he must "letten…his wille" for his gods (I.1318). There is, however, more at issue in *The Knight's Tale* than the metaphysics of historical pagans. As I have observed, medieval

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[232] St. Jerome, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes,* trans. and ed. by Richard J. Goodrich and David J.D. Miller (New York: Newman Press, 2012), 63.

[233] See Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan*, 131-135.

[234] Augustine, *City of God*, 2.22.

writers did not think pagans wholly incapable of rational action. On the contrary, they believed that pagans could live virtuous lives and organize their communities successfully around the common good. But Palamon fails to identify these as suitable ends. Why?

The most immediate answer is that Palamon is enflamed by the passion envy (I.1299). Like the despairing Usk in his "derke prisone" at the beginning of the *Testament*, Palamon cannot think rationally about good ends in his life because his reason is overwhelmed with passion.[235] This is not, however, an isolated moment. As Kolve noticed, it forms a pattern, one that is simply not found in Chaucer's source. In this chapter, I argue that the vicious rulers of the poem, Creon and Theseus, are the root of this pattern. These rulers obfuscate ethical, political, and metaphysical ends for Arcite and Palamon which medieval writers believed were attainable through natural reason. In *Chaucer, Langland and the Creative Imagination*, David Aers explores the malign consequences of Theseus's power. He shows that the opportunities for the ethical and metaphysical learning of Palamon and Arcite and squashed; Theseus and the patterns of his culture push the pagan knights back into "active aristocratic and courtly life" and "the unexamined worship of the culture's gods."[236] This chapter builds on his work by attending to the ethical and political issues of *The Knight's Tale* as they relate to the

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[235] Usk, *Testament*, 1.1.14.
[236] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 184.

natural law. Under the malign governance of Theseus and Creon, Chaucer shows, the

commands of right reason are very difficult to grasp. What remains for Palamon and

Arcite in a culture built off conquest and maintained through tyranny is nothing but

ethical, political, and metaphysical confusion: "epistemological and teleological

darkness" indeed.[237]

4.1. Tyranny, Conquest, and the Failures of Natural Reason

In her article "The Afterlife of the Civil Dead: Conquest in the Knight's Tale,"

Elizabeth Fowler reads Theseus's conquest of Thebes as a watershed moment. For her, it

marks the "civil death" of Arcite and Palamon, the moment at which the two knights are

"stripped of all civil rights and capacities."[238] Their subsequent behavior, she believes,

must be traced back to this moment of "civil death."[239] Fowler is correct that Theseus is

not an idealized power whose government will lead Arcite and Palamon to the sort of

individual and communal flourishing that Chaucer, Usk, and their political tradition

thought integral to a well-ordered society.

Chaucer problematizes Theseus's form of power at the outset of *The Knight's Tale*.

His narrative begins with Theseus's celebratory ride back to Athens from the conquered

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[237] Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery*, 123.

[238] Elizabeth Fowler, "The Afterlife of the Civil Dead: Conquest in the *Knight's Tale*," in *Critical Essays on Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Thomas C. Stillinger (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998), 66. Susan Nakley has built productively on Fowler's thesis, seeing the troubles of Arcite and Palamon as the consequence of Theseus's "imperial domination" and the resulting "dissolution of home as a stable place" for the Theban knights: Susan Nakley, *Living in the Future: Sovereignity and Internationalism in the Canterbury Tales* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press), 131, 137.

[239] Fowler, "Civil Dead," 66-67.

Amazons and his subsequent engagement in a war against Creon, the tyrant of Thebes.

This war with Creon *could* satisfy the criteria medieval ethical and political theorists

systematized for a just war.[240] A just war, in Aquinas's formulation, must meet the

following three criteria: the agent waging war must have the appropriate authority to do

so; he must have "a just cause"; and he must have "a rightful intention."[241] As a

neighboring ruler whose help is solicited, Theseus has the authority to pursue a war

with Creon.[242] So too does he have a just cause: the widows who seek his help detail

Creon's "tirannye" extensively (I.941, 942-947). Finally, Chaucer writes that Theseus has

a "good entente" in deciding to help the widows by pursuing a war with their oppressor

(I.958). After he declares to the widows his "good entente," however, Theseus sets out

for Thebes and displays his "baner," which is decorated with the "rede statue of Mars,"

the pagan god of war (I.958, 966, 975). This immediately raises serious questions about

the status of Theseus's war as just. The evils of war that are condemned in the just war

tradition are honored by the god Theseus has chosen to display on his banner. Later in

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[240] For a thorough account of medieval just war theory, see Frederick Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975). Just war theory was not strictly the purview of academics but was open to reflection by ordinary knights in the late Middle Ages. Michael Haren, for example, notes that the *Memoriale Presbiterorum*, a medieval confessional manual, urges that a "confessor ought to inquire whether the knight 'on occasion urged his lord—the king perhaps, or an earl or baron—to an unjust war'": *Sin and Society in Fourteenth-Century England: A Study of the Memoriale Presbiterorum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 124.

[241] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.40.1.

[242] Indeed, Aquinas writes that "the occupation of soldiering may be directed to the assistance of our neighbor, not only as regards private individuals, but also as regards the defense of the whole commonwealth": ibid, IIa-IIae.188.3.

The Knight's Tale we see in the Temple of Mars the forms of violence associated with this

pagan god:

> The open werre, with woundes al bibledde;
>
> Contek, with blody knyf and sharp manace.
>
> ……………………………………………
>
> A thousand slayn, and nat of qualm ystorve;
>
> The tiraunt, with the pray by force yraft;
>
> The toun destroyed, ther was no thyng laft (I.2002-2016).

Elizabeth Salter correctly notes that Chaucer adds "an element of startling realism" to

the Temple of Mars not found in Boccaccio's poem. The effect is to stress "the sterile and

destructive nature of Mars."[243] We are given no evidence that the "good entente"

Theseus claims to have in his conversation with the widows influences his actions on the

battlefield (I.958). Rather, Chaucer makes it apparent that on the battlefield Theseus is

drawn to very Martian ends. After he returns to the widows the bodies of their

husbands, Theseus does "with al the contree as hym leste," pulling down "bothe wall

and sparre and rafter" (I.1004, 990). Not all critics agree with Salter. In the lines that she

explicates, Alastair Minnis finds nothing unordinary, writing that they "may well

describe the Athenians 'initial breach of the town's defences, or perhaps a subsequent

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[243] Elizabeth Salter, *Chaucer: The Knight's Tale and the Clerk's Tale* (Woodbury, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1962), 26.

dismantling to render the area easier to control."[244] Minnis's reading, however, sidelines

minute but very crucial modifications Chaucer makes to Boccaccio's narrative. As Aers

observes, Boccaccio's Theseus "has the plain searched so that the wounded could be

given medical help and all the dead properly buried."[245] By contrast, Chaucer's Theseus

takes no such care, following neither reason nor mercy, but instead his desire ("leste") to

ride "crowned as a conquerour" (I.1004, 1027). It is this vicious desire that the knights in

Theseus's army serve by plundering the bodies of the dead Theban soldiers, something

explicitly contrary to just war theory (I.1004, 1005-1019).[246] This plundering is the seed of

nation formation. After Theseus's soldiers discover Arcite and Palamon alive among a

pile of bodies, Theseus decides to imprison them without the possibility of "raunsoun,"

hoping to "have fully of Thebans obeisaunce" (I.1024, 2974).

Fowler thus reads Theseus's conquest correctly as a troubling and devastating

moment. It poses very serious questions about just war theory and the practices of

medieval warfare, questions that remain unresolved in *The Knight's Tale*.[247] But is it the

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[244] Minnis, *Cambridge Introduction to Chaucer*, 64.

[245] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 176.

[246] As Aquinas writes: "Manly exercises in warlike feats of arms are not all forbidden, but those which are inordinate and perilous, and end in slaying or plundering": *Summa*, IIa-IIae.40.1 ad 4.

[247] In his "*Pax Poetica*: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower," R.F. Yeager goes further, arguing that "Chaucer was…a man of peace by inclination" (121). I have no doubt that Chaucer had deep reservations about warfare. But unlike R.F. Yeager, who argues that "Chaucer was…a man of peace by inclination," I do not think that Chaucer was a pacifist. Chaucer's views, I believe, align with Gower's in his *In Praise of Peace*, a remarkable short poem in which Gower affirms Henry IV's "right" to "make werre" but urges him to "[p]ourchace pes" on "Cristes halve." Like Gower, Chaucer believes that there are circumstances which merit military action. Creon's tyrannical desecration of the bodies of Theban nobility is indeed one such circumstance. What troubles Chaucer, in my view, is the potential for these circumstances to lead to unjust

moment at which the two knights are "stripped of all civil rights and capacities"?[248] I do

not think so. How many civil rights can we expect Arcite and Palamon to have reliably

enjoyed under the tyrant Creon? The answer is none: no political theorist in the Middle

Ages would affirm that positive rights exist under a tyrant. As we have noted in this

project, medieval political theory posits that tyrants are unable to enact legitimate

positive laws because tyrants are themselves incapable of acting for the common good.

This completely vitiates the ability of tyrants to make a law that their subjects are bound

to obey. Thus Theseus's conquest, for me, is not the "civil death" of Arcite and Palamon,

but the continuation of malign power. Chaucer imagines the succession of a tyrant who

desecrates the dead bodies of his subjects by a conqueror who tyrannically denies his

captives ransom.[249] *The Knight's Tale* is Chaucer's exploration of the ethical and political

consequences of this continuation of malign power.[250] Aquinas believed that tyranny

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practices of war, as we see in Theseus's war with Creon. See R.F. Yeager, "Pax Poetica: On the Pacifism of Chaucer and Gower," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 9 (1987): 97-121, 121. I quote Gower's *In Praise of Peace* from the following edition: John Gower, *The Minor Latin Works with In Praise of Peace*, ed. and trans. R.F. Yeager and Michael Livingston (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications), 2005, lines 65, 124, 120.

[248] Fowler, "Afterlife of the Civil Dead," 66.

[249] Aers claims that there is "no reason to believe that the poet would have disagreed with Honoré Bonet when he stated that a victor who refused reasonable ransom is a 'tyrant', as Palamon judges Theseus to be (I.1111)": *Chaucer, Langland*, 177.

[250] Unlike Fowler, Lee Patterson links the problems of Arcite and Palamon back to Thebes: "Chaucer had earlier defined Thebanness as having two destructive patterns: the one a fratricidal and self-destructive rivalry that gives full rein to the appetitive self; the other a fatal recursiveness that undermines all progressivity upon which the ideals of secular history are based and condemns chivalric ambition, whether antique or modern, to an endless repetition." For Patterson, the aim of Theseus is to order the chaos of Thebes represented by Arcite and Palamon: "It is in order to disarm this double Theban threat that the new hero Theseus undertakes his campaign against the 'olde Creon' (938) who would continue the course of

posed a great threat to ethics of a culture. As he writes in his *De Regno*:

"Tyrants…endeavour to prevent their subjects from becoming virtuous…For this

reason…few virtuous men will be found under a tyrant."[251] This was not just a

theoretical problem but one that held implications in Chaucer's own culture. After the

deposition of Richard II, a ruler many in Chaucer's England had come to view as a

tyrant, Lord Cobham claimed that the tyrannical king was responsible for the decline in

virtue in England:

> Lord Cobham…said, among other things, that with such a king, such
>
> leaders, and such rulers, the condition of the English people had sunk
>
> lower even than that of heathen peoples, who, although infidels to the
>
> Christian faith and thus erroneous in their beliefs, nevertheless speak the
>
> truth, acknowledge the truth, and act according to the truth. The English,
>
> however, although they are Christians and should therefore profess the
>
> truth and act accordingly, nevertheless, for fear of the loss of their

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Theban barbarity. So too, it is in order to contain Theban self-destructiveness that he first imprisons Arcite and Palamon…and then, when they are at large in the Athenian world, seeks to channel their violence into the culturally sanctioned form of a tournament that Chaucer's contemporaries would have recognized as a 'duel of chivalry.'" Patterson is correct to see Creon and Thebes as sources of the erratic behavior of Arcite and Palamon. My own reading differs in that I see Creon and Theseus as two malign powers who prevent the realization of ends medieval Christians thought attainable by natural reason. See Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 200.

[251] Aquinas, *De Regno*, 1.4. I quote *De Regno* from the superb Cambridge collection of Aquinas's political thought: Aquinas, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

worldly goods, or of being ruined through exile, or even of death—which

may befall even the constant—never dare to speak or act according to the

truth under such rulers.[252]

I do not believe Chaucer fails to consider the effects of tyranny on individual

lives. Rather, he shows that what is impaired under a tyrant—the ability to act

according to right reason and live virtuously—is not healed but is exacerbated under a

rival conqueror who tyrannically does with a country and its subjects "as hym leste"

(I.1004). This amounts to a dramatic revision of Boccaccio's narrative. In the *Teseida*, in

the aftermath of Theseus's war with Creon, Boccaccio's knights retain control of their

passions (however barely) and remain congenial to one another. Indeed, Boccaccio

writes that the knights "comfort" each other in Theseus's prison (III.26). Chaucer rejects

this vision vehemently. His pagan knights are antagonistic and disconsolate, unable to

grasp the commands of right reason. Such are, Chaucer believes, the consequences of

living under a tyrant and now a rival conqueror who denies ransom. Does Chaucer

think these consequences are necessary, something to which *all* living under malign

powers must succumb? Of course not. The Christian tradition is replete with narratives

of martyrs who resisted the commands of a tyrant. Chaucer himself writes powerfully

about this in *The Second Nun's Tale*. What Chaucer is exploring in *The Knight's Tale*, in

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[252] I quote Cobham's speech, as recorded by medieval chronicles, from *Chronicles of the Revolution, 1397-1400: The Reign of Richard II*, trans. Chris Given-Wilson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 204.

my view, is the power of malevolent rulers to confuse and disorient, pushing their

subjects away from their natural inclinations and ends and towards practices and ends

which strengthen and perpetuate their own power. Under such vicious rulers, Chaucer

demonstrates, right reason is difficult to grasp, making it very easy, in Arcite's

memorable locution, to "goon wrong ful often" (I.1267).

I wish to examine now the behavior of Arcite and Palamon in Part I of *The

Knight's Tale*. After they have both fallen in love with Emily, Arcite and Palamon

immediately enter into competition with one another. This competition begins with a

debate over which knight first fell in love with Emily (I.1187). Palamon asserts that he

"loved hire first" and that Arcite is bound to help him by the "ooth" they swore to each

other (I.1146, 1139). Arcite counters Palamon's argument by appealing to the instruction

of "clerkes" and the authority of the natural law:

> I pose that thow lovedest hire biforn;
>
> Wostow nat wel the olde clerkes sawe,
>
> That 'who shal yeve a lovere any lawe?'
>
> Love is a gretter lawe, by my pan,
>
> Than may be yeve any erthely man;
>
> And therefore positif lawe and swich decree
>
> Is broken al day for love in ech degree (I.1162-1168).

As I noted when considering these lines in the previous chapter, Arcite's argument

seems to be that his oath to Palamon, a form of positive law, is invalid because love is

something humans receive from the natural law, which is a higher form of law. This is,

however, a fragmentary understanding of natural law. What Arcite leaves out is that

the natural inclination to sexuality, which we share with animals, does not supersede

our rational inclinations to the virtues or to the common good. Arcite's appeal to this

inclination therefore does not invalidate his oath with Palamon. It merely lends his

desire to pursue a competition with Palamon the veneer of authority and legality.

Soon after this Chaucer reveals the underlying model of politics behind Arcite's

justification of his competition with Palamon. Arcite argues that it is fitting that he and

Palamon are in competition with one another, for "at the kynges court" it is "[e]ch may

for hymself" (I.1181-1182). There is, he claims, "noon oother" model of politics (I.1182).

Yet there is another model of politics, one Chaucer could have found in Giles of Rome's

Regimine: Aristotle's model of natural human sociability.[253] This model famously

imagines political society as a natural formation, arising out of the natural human desire

for sufficiency, something we are unable to attain in isolation. Cooperation, not

competition, is the foundation of this model. In a properly ordered society, in this

model, individuals cooperate to attain a common good— sufficiency, "vertuos

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[253] For the passages in Aristotle pertaining to this model, see the *Politics*, 1.2.

leuynge."[254] This Aristotelian model of natural human sociability, commonplace in

medieval political theory, serves as a justification for government. Medieval political

theorists believed that a just government is needed to order individuals collectively

towards the common good. As Aquinas emphasizes in his *De Regno*:

> If, therefore, it is natural for man to live in fellowship with many others, it
>
> is necessary for there to be some means whereby such a community of
>
> men may be ruled. For if many men were to live together with each
>
> providing only what is convenient for himself, the community would
>
> break up into its various parts unless one of them had responsibility for
>
> the good of the community as a whole, just as the body of a man and of
>
> any other animal would fall apart if there were not some general ruling
>
> force to sustain the body and secure the common good of all its parts.[255]

This model is emphatically not Arcite's. Nor is it Palamon's. In the lament with which

we began this chapter, Palamon complains that he cannot understand why he must

"letten of his wille" for the gods (I.1317). As I noted earlier, paganism does not explain

the extent of Palamon's confusion. Even though Palamon cannot direct his ends to what

medieval writers believed was the highest good, the vision of God, he is able to direct

his actions towards the common good. But does the very concept of a common good

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[254] See Giles, *Regimine*, 3.1.2, 3.1.1-4, 3.2.24-25.
[255] Aquinas, *De Regno*, 1.1.

become unintelligible under a tyrant? Chaucer's answer is *yes*. Having lived under the

tyrant Creon, Arcite can conceive of "noon oother" political alternative to conflict in the

king's court (I.1182). This *seems* natural to him. It is the politics he knows, the one his

experience under malevolent rulers has taught him is inescapable.

Arcite and Palamon's competition is not the only significant change Chaucer

makes to this part of Boccaccio's narrative. After Arcite and Palamon begin their

competition, Perotheus, a friend of Theseus, requests Arcite's freedom. Theseus agrees

to this on the condition that Arcite never again enter "any contree" ruled by Theseus,

thereby unknowingly barring Arcite from Emily (I.1213). In the *Teseida*, this command

upsets Arcita. But he remains in control of his reason: Boccaccio writes that he "almost"

declares his preference for prison over banishment, but that his "reason" stops him from

doing so.[256] By contrast, Chaucer's pagan knight, having been brought "so lowe…by

tirannye," can maintain no such control of his passions (I.1111). Arcite considers

suicide, announces his "prisoun" is now "worse than biforn," and asserts that he is in

such "greet dispeir" that nothing and no one can "helpe" or provide him "confort":

"Wel oughte I sterve in wanhope and distresse" (I.1224, 1245, 1246, 1249).

It is in this moment, absorbed in his despair, that Arcite offers his lament about

happiness:

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[256] Giovanni Boccaccio, *Teseida delle Nozze d'Emilia*, trans. Bernadette Marie McCoy (New York: Medieval
Text Association), 1974, III.69-70.

We faren as he that dronke is as a mous.

A dronke man woot wel he hath an hous,

But he noot which the righte wey is thider,

And to a dronke man the wey is slider.

And certes, in this world so faren we;

We seken faste after felicitee,

But we goon wrong ful often, trewely (I.1261-1267, 1024).

Like his contemporaries, Chaucer believed that forms of happiness are attainable for

pagans, even as final and perfect happiness remains beyond them. As we saw in the

previous chapter, Chaucer's Troilus achieves happiness through his love of Criseyde

and concomitant attainment of the virtues (III.1691-1694, 1723-1726, 1772-1806). His

happiness in Book III is imperfect, subject to the vicissitudes of earthly existence. But

such is the character of earthly happiness. Arcite, however, sees happiness as an end

that is nearly impossible to attain, something to which the addled agencies of humans

can provide little direction. He believes that we do not know what makes us happy. We

seek "felicitee" continuously, in a variety of different ways, but "we goon wrong ful

often" (I.1266-1267).

Chaucer draws Arcite's language from Book III of Boethius's *Consolation of

Philosophy*. From this work, Chaucer knew that moments of despair and confusion can

precede ethical and metaphysical learning. Like Usk at the beginning of his Boethian

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Testament of Love, Boethius at the beginning of the *Consolation* is in jail and is "cast down with sorrow." Lady Philosophy then appears and dries Boethius's tears. After she does this, Boethius claims that "the clouds of misery were dispelled," thereby enabling him to once again see "the clear light" of philosophy.[257] Chaucer denies Arcite the consolation and philosophical learning that Boethius and Usk give themselves in their respective works: neither Lady Philosophy nor Lady Love appear to dry Arcite's tears and offer consolatory ethical, political, and theological instruction.

A figure does, however, visit Arcite: the pagan god Mercury. Or at least Arcite *thinks* he is visited by Mercury:

> Upon a nyght in sleep as he hym leyde,
>
> *Hym thoughte* how that the wynged god Mercurie
>
> Biforn hym stood and bad hym to be murie.
>
> His slepy yerde in hond he bar uprighte;
>
> An hat he werede upon his heris brighte.
>
> Arrayed was this god, as he took keep,
>
> As he was whan that Argus took his sleep;
>
> And seyde hym thus: "To Atthenes shaltou wende,
>
> Ther is thee shapen of thy wo an ende" (I.1384-1392, emphasis mine).

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[257] Boethius, *Theological Tractates and Consolation of Philosophy*, quotes from 1.Pr.1, 1.Pr.2, 1.Pr.3.

This dream is yet another of Chaucer's inventions. Boccaccio's knight decides to return to Athens after realizing that his lovesickness may kill him anyways.[258] Rather than follow his source, Chaucer draws on the rich tradition of medieval dream-visions to comment on Arcite's impoverished state. In the Middle Ages, as A.C. Spearing notes in his helpful *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, physicians believed that there were three potential sources of dreams (55-56). One might have a dream "of purely physical origin," stemming from "a disturbance of the balance of the four bodily humours." Or a "dream of mental origin; caused by the preoccupations of the waking mind, and reflecting these in its content." Or, finally, a dream might be "produced…by God or by angels or devils."[259] As is indicated in the proem to *The House of Fame*, Chaucer is fascinated by the manifold sources of dreams. Here he blurs the cause of Arcite's dream, just as he does the poet's dream in *The Book of Duchess*.[260] Chaucer writes that Arcite is afflicted by the "humour malencolik," exactly what burdens the poet in *The Book of Duchess* (I.1375).[261] Further, as we have seen in his lament, Arcite feels that he lacks a sense of direction to happiness: this dream, which supplies him "an ende" to his woe, could be a psychological response to his extended reflection on his lack of purposiveness (I.1392).[262]

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[258] Boccaccio, *Teseida*, IV.37-38
[259] A.C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 55-56.
[260] As Spearing shows, the poet's "dream [in *The Book of Duchess*] can be seen as a *somnium naturale* or a *somnium animale* or a *somnium coeleste*" Ibid, 57.
[261] See *Book of Duchess*, lines 16-24.
[262] In his commentary on the psychological source of dreams, Spearing directs us to *The Parliament of Fowls*. There, Chaucer writes, "The wery huntere, slepynge in his bed, / To wode ayeyn his mynde goth anon; / The juge dremeth how his plees been sped; / The cartere dremeth how his cart is gon; / The riche, of gold; the

Finally, the dream could be sent by the pagan god Mercury himself. This final

possibility raises an interesting complication worth considering here. As Nancy Caciola

notes, medieval writers believed that visionaries could either be the "mouthpiece of

God" or the "victim of demonic delusion." If the latter, the vision would "lead…human

beings into falsehood."[263] In response to the threat of demonic visions and false

prophets, medieval theologians devised signs to test visionaries and their visions.[264] I

reference this because it seems to me that Chaucer may be reflecting on the dangers of

demonic visions here. Chaucer makes it clear that Arcite is being deceived by a pagan

god, or, as medieval writers may have interpreted it, by a demon.[265] Chaucer references

Ovid's story of Mercury and Argus, in Book 1 of *The Metamorphosis*, in which Mercury

brutally decapitates Argus after lulling him to sleep: "Arrayed was this god, as he took

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knyght fyght with his fon; / The syke met he drynketh of the tonne; / The lovere met he hath his lady
wonne" (99-105). The point Chaucer makes here is that the subjects on which our waking minds focus can
be the source of our dreams. See Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 56.

[263] Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell
University Press), 2003, 1-2, 33.

[264] Drawing on Chrysostom and Deuteronomy, Aquinas writes in the *Summa* that holy visions may be
distinguished from demonic visions by their veracity (IIa-IIae.172.5 ad 2).

[265] Medieval Christians identified pagan gods as demons. For an example, see Augustine, *City of God*, IV.32.
This was not, however, the only way that they imagined them. They also thought about pagan gods
astrologically. While medieval Christians thought demons and the stars could influence human behavior,
they adamantly believed that neither demons nor the stars could determine the will. Aquinas states quite
clearly that "a demon cannot change the will": *Summa*, Ia.114.3 ad 3: see also Ia.111.2 resp. and ad 2. As for
the influence of the stars on the human will, Gower writes in *Vox Clamantis* that the individual "who is
knowing in the virtue of God will dominate the stars." I quote Gower's *Vox* here from the following edition:
*The Major Latin Works of John Gower: The Voice of One Crying and The Tripartite Chronicle: An Annotated
Translation into English With an Introductory Essay on the Author's Non-English Works*, trans. and ed. Eric W.
Stockton (Seattle, University of Washington Press), 1962, II.5.

keep, / As he was whan that Argus took his sleep" (I.1389-1390). This betrays the malign intention of Mercury: the "ende" in Athens to which he directs Arcite, of course, is not his happiness but his death (I.1392).

Regardless of its source, this dream is not what Spearing calls a "doctrinal vision."[266] Chaucer sets Arcite up for such a vision. He gives Arcite language from Boethius's *Consolation*, perhaps the most famous "doctrinal vision" in the Middle Ages. But then he denies him the doctrinal learning characteristic of the *Consolation* and works in that tradition. Arcite sets back out for Athens with no more sophisticated an understanding of human happiness than when he was banished by Theseus. What is worse, as Aers argues, is that Arcite "stop[s] all philosophical reflection and settle[s] for the unexamined worship of the culture's gods."[267] Chaucer is demonstrating the ethical and metaphysical consequences of a culture shorn of traditional forms of teleological instruction and order. Arcite's despair and confusion cannot lead to Boethian enlightenment and consolation. His world, structured around malign powers both secular and divine, does not enable him a vision of the figure of Philosophy, instructing him about the ends appropriate to his nature as a rational being. Rather, he has Mercury, or *thinks* he has Mercury, pointing him towards his "ende"—his death—in Athens (I.1392).

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[266] Spearing, *Medieval Dream-Poetry*, 18.
[267] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 184.

Palamon fares no better. The questions he raises about metaphysics and ethics in his lament do not give way to *any* sort of vision. He leaves his questions "to dyvynys" (I.1323). But "divines of any kind or creed," as Aers writes, "seem conspicuously absent in Theseus' culture.[268]" His ethical and metaphysical queries are met with silence, a silence emblematic of his culture's lack of traditional forms of teleological instruction and order. This lack poses an obvious threat to natural reason. But it also threatens the social order. Chaucer envisions the societal consequences of this lack at the conclusion of a poem we considered earlier in this project: *The House of Fame.* This poem distills traditional teleological narratives and motifs into a dream which refuses teleological consummation:

> For I saugh rennynge every wight
>
> As faste as that they hadden myght,
>
> And everych cried, "What thing is that?"
>
> And somme sayde, "I not never what."
>
> And whan they were alle on an hepe,
>
> Tho behynde begunne up lepe,
>
> And clamben up on other faste (2145-2151).[269]

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[268] Ibid, 184.

[269] Kathryn Lynch writes cogently about *The House of Fame* as it relates to the tradition of dream-visions Chaucer knew: "The entire movement of the *House of Fame,* indeed, works against the priority of a single, authoritative truth…It pits competing truths against each other without hope that the winnowing powers of

Here, there is no rationality and no order, just frenetic activity with no sense of the ends

to which humans are naturally ordered. There are ends in this society—the people are

running and leaping for *something*—but they are incoherent, utterly unable to order

people together in forms of human flourishing.[270] Mired in passion and fraternal

conflict, with no answers from their culture about their profound ethical and

metaphysical confusions, Arcite and Palamon cannot hope for much better.

4.2 The "ende" of Theseus's Culture: Ethics, Politics, and Metaphysics under Theseus

Thus far we have explored Arcite and Palamon's disconsolation and antagonism

as consequences of a vicious culture stewarded by Creon and Theseus. Their

disconsolation and antagonism culminate in two extraordinary laments in which the

pagan knights admit their bewilderment about ends of human life. At the end of Part I

of *The Knight's Tale*, the pagan knights are unmoored. In Arcite's words, they "noot

which the righte wey is thider" (I.1263). In the grove scene, in Part II, Arcite and

Palamon are given an "ende" by Theseus (I.1844). The end secular rulers are meant to

promote is the common good—that is, in Giles of Rome's Aristotelian vocabulary, "for

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reason and logic will enable a transcendence of the atomism of imagination." See Kathryn L. Lynch, *Chaucer's Philosophical Visions* (Rochester: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 79.

[270] Turner writes that the "House of Rumour is specifically recognizable as the medieval city—medieval London, indeed, was the place that provided the setting for the composition of this poem. Where else would one find a "congregacioun / Of folk' (II.2034-5) squashed so much together that each had hardly 'a fote-bred of space' (I.2042)?" (24). See Turner, *Chaucerian Conflict*, 24.

to lyue, for to wel lyue, and for vertuousliche lyue."[271] To what end does Theseus order

Arcite and Palamon? Is it the common good? Does it address, however partially, some

of the issues with which Arcite and Palamon struggle in Part I? Chaucer is evidently

preoccupied with these questions: Theseus's commands are littered with teleological

language, such as "ende" and "conclusioun" (I.1844, 1845, 1865, 1869).

While he is out on a hunt, Theseus discovers Arcite and Palamon fighting "breme

as it were bores two" in the grove (I.1699).[272] He halts their battle and questions "what

myster men" Arcite and Palamon are to fight without "juge or oother officere" (I.1710-

1711). This, in turn, prompts Palamon to offer a confession "hastily":

> I make pleynly my confessioun
>
> That I am thilke woful Palamoun
>
> That hath thy prisoun broken wikkedly.

---

[271] Giles, *Regimine*, 3.1.2.

[272] Much has been written on Chaucer's use of animal imagery throughout his poetry. Beryl Rowland's *Blind Beasts* remains the authoritative treatment. She concludes that "Chaucer seems to accept the view that the beast exemplified the baser aspects of man's nature." This is evidently the case for Arcite and Palamon here: their fighting like boar indicates an "irrational quality," one Theseus, the hunter, must order. Yet the boar is an interesting choice, one more consequential, I believe, than Rowland recognizes in her analysis of the scene. According to Edward of Norwich's *The Master of Game*, an early fifteenth-century hunting manual, the boar is the most dangerous game: "It is the beast of this world that is strongest armed, and can sooner slay a man than any other." This slightly alters the power dynamics of the scene. As Rowland suggests, Theseus is indeed afforded the position of dominance as the hunter. But, crucially, Theseus is pursuing game which "can slayeth a man at one stroke." See Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), 78-79, quote at 21 and 78, and Edward of Norwich, *The Master of Game: the Oldest English Book on Hunting*, eds. William A. Baillie-Grohman and F.N. Baillie-Grohman (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), quotes at 46.

I am thy mortal foo (I.1710, 1714, 1724-1736).[273]

Palamon claims that his breaking "wikkedly" out of Theseus's prison deserves the death

penalty: "I axe deeth and my juwise" (I.1735, 1739). Before he confesses his own guilt,

Palamon reveals that Arcite, earlier banished from Athens by Theseus, has been serving

as Theseus's "chief squier" and that this deception likewise deserves the death penalty

(I.1730, 1726). The repentance of wrongdoing, according to Aquinas, conforms to the

natural law: "It is a natural law that one should repent of the evil one has done, by

grieving for having done it, and by seeking a remedy for one's grief in some way or

other, and also that one should show some signs of grief."[274] But has Palamon done

something evil? He *has* violated Theseus's law. But as we have observed numerous

times across this project, one is only bound to obey laws that are ordered to the common

good. Unjust laws, on the other hand, impart no obligation to obedience. Is Theseus's

law just? In Part I Palamon does not think so. He sees Theseus's imprisoning them as

an act of "tirannye" (I.1111). There is a strong basis for his view. As we have seen,

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[273] Chaucer's Parson claims that a "condicion of verray confession is that it be hastily doon" (X.998). The Parson outlines various reasons why Christians should confess hastily, none, of course, applicable to Palamon: "Certes, a man oghte hastily shewen his synnes for manye causes; as for drede of deeth, that cometh ofte sodeynly…and eek the drecchynge of o synne draweth in another; / and eek the lenger that he tarieth, the ferther he is fro Crist" (X.999-1000).

[274] Aquinas, Summa, IIIa.84.7 ad 1. Palamon's confession in this scene is obviously not the confession of a Christian to a priest. Aquinas offers a thorough account of the purpose and practices of sacrament of penance: *Summa*, IIIa.84-90. This sacrament "consists…in the removal of certain matter, viz. sin…by the priest saying: *I absolve thee*" (IIIa.84.3). Confession is but one part of penance, the other two parts being contrition and satisfaction (IIIa.90.1). For an account of the practices of penance in the late Middle Ages, see Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 54-55 and 60-62.

Palamon and Arcite's imprisonment stems from the unjust plundering of Theban bodies by Theseus's soldiers and Theseus's tyrannical denial of ransom to Palamon and Arcite. Behind these actions is Theseus's desire to ride "crowned as a conquerour": hardly the end towards which just laws are to be ordained (I.1027).

Why, then, does Palamon confess to wrongdoing rather than resist the demands of an unjust ruler? We are given no indications that Palamon still thinks Theseus's imprisoning him was an act of tyranny (I.1111). Rather, he now thinks that he has "wikkedly" transgressed against Theseus (I.1735). I do not read this as a criminal's conversion, a reappraisal of his own behavior in light of a just punishment. Instead, I see it as another consequence of malign power. Under vicious rulers like Creon and Theseus, Chaucer suggests, notions of law, justice, and rights can easily become muddied in the assimilation of law to the will of the ruler.

Theseus readily agrees to the punishment Palamon suggests for himself. In his first use of teleological language in this scene, Theseus claims that his "short conclusioun" is that Arcite and Palamon "shal be deed, by myghty Mars the rede" (I.1743, 1747). But Theseus does not enact this "conclusioun": Hippolyta, Emily, and "alle the ladyes in the compaignye" intercede, falling on their "bare knees" and asking Theseus to have "mercy" on Arcite and Palamon (I.1743, 1750, 1756, 1757). Paul Strohm identifies this act as bound with the politics of queenly intercession in the late Middle Ages. Late medieval queens, Strohm argues, were "passive contributors rather than

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active participants" in matters of governance. Central to this "passive" contribution was what Strohm recognizes as a "new model of intercessory queenship," which "promised women a particular kind of power, but power premised on exceptional vulnerability." With this power, women could "correct male judgment, so long as that judgment was modified or supplemented rather than overturned."[275] Hippolyta and Emily exercise this power here. They "wepe," having "pitee" for Arcite and Palamon, and kiss Theseus's feet until "aslaked was his mood" (I.1749, 1751, 1760). This is a standard representation of queenly intercession, a moment, Strohm argues, which might lead one to "suppose Chaucer a sponsor of queenly abjection." But, Strohm counters, there is something unusual about this scene which demonstrates Chaucer's "discontent with the whole system of female abjection and male concession": "Chaucer's Theseus is permitted to change his mind."[276]

Indeed: Theseus's "ire" fades and he begins to think more rationally and compassionately about Arcite and Palamon's confession:

He hath considered shortly, in a clause,

The trespas of hem bothe, and eek the cause,

And although that his ire hir gilt accused,

Yet *in his resoun* he hem bothe excused,

[275] Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow*, 95-96.
[276] Ibid, 112.

> As thus: he thoghte wel that every man
>
> Wol helpe hymself in love, if that he kan,
>
> And eek delivere hymself out of prisoun
>
> And eek *his herte hadde compassioun*
>
> Of wommen, for they wepen (I.1763-1769, emphasis mine).

This reflection precipitates Theseus's condemnation of rulers who "wol have no mercy" and his forgiving Arcite and Palamon "al hoolly this trespaas" (I.1773, 1818). Strohm considers this a moment of conversion for Theseus: "Compassionate (as opposed to harsh or leonine) lordship is here explicitly promulgated as a new standard."[277] It *is* a positive moment. Hippolyta and Emily's intercession stimulates Theseus's reason and compassion, pushing him away from imposing on Arcite and Palamon the death penalty, something Augustine condemns vehemently: "Avoid the death penalty…Vent your rage on the failing, which you dislike as much in yourself, and not on the person, who is created just as you are."[278] But it is hardly a conversion. It does not prompt Theseus to criticize his own unjust command from which Palamon had to "delivere hymself" (I.1769). Nor does it facilitate a change in his politics. Theseus remains focused on his own political power.

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[277] Ibid, 112.

[278] I quote Augustine's sermon on Psalm 2:10 from Augustine, *Political Writings*, eds. E.M. Atkins and R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 124-125.

After Theseus announces his forgiveness, Palamon and Arcite ask that Theseus become their lord (I.1827). Theseus agrees and calls his new relationship with Arcite and Palamon a friendship (I.1824). This is not, however, Aristotelian friendship, each individual "wish[ing] good for the other *qua* good."[279] Rather, it is a relationship predicated on Theseus's desire to safeguard and extend his power. Theseus commands the pagan knights to each raise an army of one hundred knights and fight one another in a "bataille" over which he will preside: whoever kills "his contrarie" will receive Emily "to wyve" (I.1853, 1859, 1860). This is, he tells them, their "ende" and "conclusioun" (I.1869). For Kolve, this end is Theseus's attempt "to enforce the rules essential to any civilized resolution of conflict."[280] This is a perplexing assessment, one characteristic of a range of critical responses to Theseus's actions in the grove.[281] Far from an "essential" response to conflict, Theseus's "resolution" is the distinct product of his culture and his metaphysics. As Chaucer knows, metaphysics is bound with politics: a culture's metaphysics shapes its goods, activities, and laws. This is something St. Augustine explores at great length in his *City of God*.[282] The end to which Theseus directs Arcite and Palamon is the end of Mars—that is, violence. But crucially, this violence will be

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[279] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J.A.K. Thomson (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 1156b8-9.

[280] Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative*, 110.

[281] Patterson, for example, argues that Theseus's teleological language in this scene" thematizes" his attempt "to bring Theban self-replication to a definitive end" and "civilize savagery": Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 200.

[282] Augustine claims that the pagan gods did not provide "their worshipping people counsels for right living and behaviour," thereby failing "[t]o prevent" Rome "from perishing": *City of God*, II.22.

governed by Theseus. As many critics have noted, Theseus's presiding over Palamon

and Arcite's "bataille" enables him to control (to an extent) the means of violence.[283]

Most notably, he restricts the weapons available in the tournament and flatly prohibits

the "destruccioun" of "gentil blood" (I.2538, 2539). This is something for which Theseus

deservedly wins the praise of his subjects (I.2561-2564). Yet is Theseus's "ende" the

command of a virtuous ruler (I.1844)? Let us return to Theseus's language in the grove.

About the end he devises Theseus will allow no debate: "My wyl is this, for plat

conclusioun, / Withouten any repplicacioun" (I.1845-1846). This language marks a

striking, if perhaps unsurprising, regression. Theseus's willingness to listen to

Hippolyta's intercessory counsel, and his changing his command in accordance with her

counsel, would have been understood in the late Middle Ages as an indication of a

potentially virtuous ruler.[284] Here, however, Theseus rejects any form of counsel about

the goods and activities of his new subjects in favor of his "wyl," behavior for which

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[283] Aers argues that Chaucer, in the Temple of Mars, reflects critically on "abstractions such as 'law' and 'order' to reveal the continuities between official, legal violence and illegal." The grove and tournament scenes are other moments in which Chaucer considers "the continuities" between legal and illegal forms of violence (Aers, 178). Outside Theseus's law Arcite and Palamon fight as if they were animals—lions, tigers, boars (I.1656, 1657, 1658). So, too, do they fight as if they were animals within Theseus's law: during the tournament, Arcite is compared to a "tygre" who has "hir whelp…stole" and Palamon to a "leon" who is "hunted" or "for his hunger wood" (I.2626, 2627, 2630, 2631). For Chaucer, the ferocity of violence, both legal and illegal, is a troubling "continuity" lost within the "abstraction" of law, a "distinction" which is "the product of the highly partial official ideology sponsored by militaristic conquerors and their followers." Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 178.

[284] In the political theory and political poetry of the late Middle Ages, the importance of a ruler abiding by wise counsel is routinely emphasized. In Chaucer's own *Tale of Melibee*, for example, Prudence instructs her husband to "'Werk alle thy thynges by conseil, and thou shalt never repente'" (VII.1002).

Richard II was deposed as a tyrant in 1399 (I.1845).[285] This fundamentally characterizes

Theseus's end for Arcite and Palamon. It does not stem from reason and prudence but,

instead, from the desires and the will of the ruler.[286] Further, this end fails to facilitate

fellowship; instead, it "prevent[s]," in Aquinas's words, "the bond of friendship from

becoming established," thereby ensuring Palamon and Arcite "do not trust one another"

and "will not be able to unite against a tyrant's rule."[287] Further, this end, as Fowler

notes, works "to convert [through marriage] dominion that has been established by

conquest into a dominion that will be held by consent."[288] These two issues are plainly

Theseus's concern. Quite explicitly in this scene, Theseus commands Arcite and

Palamon to"swere" that they will never "make werre" with his "contree dere" (I.1821,

1823, 1822). And during parliament later, Theseus discusses his desire to extend his

dominion through the marriage of Emily and Palamon (I.2970-2974). Theseus's break

from "resoun" and collapse back into the "wyl" in this scene is emblematic of his rule

(I.1766, 1845). As we saw with Theseus's war with Creon, Chaucer allows Theseus

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[285] In the parliamentary charges Richard is said to have "act[ed] according to his own arbitrary will" rather than according to the wise counsel of "his justices or others of his council." See *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 177. Richard was widely criticized in late medieval poetry for acting according to his will and following the depraved counsel of his chosen advisors rather than wise counsel. The poet of *Richard the Redeless*, for example, condemns Richard for his "willffull werkis" and for following "cursid conceill": I quote from *Richard the Redeless and Mum and the Sothsegger*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), I.5, 7. For a shrewd account of the natural law in *Richard the Redeless*, see Helen Barr, "The Treatment of Natural Law in 'Richard the Redeless' and 'Mum and the Sothsegger,'" *Leeds Studies in English*, 23 (Jan. 1992): 49-80.
[286] On the relation of prudence to governing with justice and for the common good, see Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.47.10 and IIa-IIae.50.1 resp. and ad 1.
[287] Aquinas, *De Regno*, 1.4.
[288] Fowler, "Civil Dead," 69.

moments of potential breakthrough, moments which seem to work towards the

realization of some common good, but they are later eclipsed by moments of the "wyl"

to dominate (I.1845).

Through the repetition of teleological language in this scene, Chaucer links

Theseus's command, his "wyl," to Arcite and Palamon's confusions about the ends of

human life (I.1845). Chaucer is asking us to think about the confusions and

dissatisfactions of Arcite and Palamon's lives in concert with the possibilities of

Theseus's culture. Towards what sort of life is Theseus capable of ordering Arcite and

Palamon? By pursuing Theseus's "ende," it is clear, Arcite and Palamon will receive

training in the habits of Mars, but little else—nothing, to be sure, that addresses the

penetrating ethical and metaphysical confusions of Arcite and Palamon (I.1844). At the

conclusion of the tournament, moments before his death, Arcite realizes this. He

complains, "'What is this world? What asketh men to have? / Now with his love, now in

his colde grave / Allone, withouten any compaignye" (I.2777-2779). Aers calls this an

"honest response" to Arcite's realization "that the whole framework provided for his life

by his aristocratic culture and its order, guided by Theseus, is groundless."[289]

"Groundless" indeed: the end to which Theseus ordered him has given Arcite no greater

an understanding of the paths to the forms of imperfect happiness than he has in Part I.

He concludes his life as confused about his world as he is shortly after having been freed

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[289] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 183.

from Theseus's prison. Despite his realization that the ends posited by his culture are

empty, Arcite does not sink back into the sorrow, envy, and anger so characteristic of the

pagan knights. Instead, he asks Emily to "[f]oryet nat Palamon" "*if* that evere" she will

"ben a wyf": a benevolent endorsement of Palamon, who earlier calls Arcite his "mortal

foo," and an acknowledgement, however slight, of the consent necessary for a legitimate

marriage, something Theseus sidelines entirely at the end of Chaucer's tale (I.2797, 2796,

1590, emphasis mine).[290] Aers reads Arcite's kindness in his death as "an impressive

manifestation of human love, a glimmer of the human potential distorted and perverted

by the culture over which Theseus presides."[291] Similarly, Salter claims that Arcite "now

understand[s]…the virtue of charity."[292] Indeed, Arcite's actions here stand in sharp

contrast with the habits enjoined by Theseus's laws. His actions make for a surprising

resolution of Arcite and Palamon's violent conflict which Theseus does not—and

perhaps cannot—command or order as a ruler whose favored god is Mars.[293]

 The Knight's Tale works to show that the secular "ende" provided by Theseus is

empty, unable to draw two pagans together in a form of secular flourishing, leaving

them with deep ethical, political, and metaphysical voids (I.1844). Yet one cannot

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[290] Fowler makes a crucial point concerning marriage, consent, and Theseus's actions at the close of Chaucer's tale: "Like English customary law before it, canon law had, since the twelfth century decretals of popes Alexander III and Innocent III, required solely an exchange of mutual consent for the performance of legitimate marriage. Instead of what fourteenth-century Christians would recognize as a lawful, mutual contract between Emelye and Palamon, we are given Theseus's edict, which engulfs their wills in its expansive, sudden use of the royal first-person plural": Fowler, "Civil Dead," 78.
[291] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 185.
[292] Salter, *Chaucer*, 29.
[293] On the relation of law, habituation, and virtue and vice, see Aquinas, *Summa* Ia-IIae.96.2 resp. and ad 2.

circumscribe Chaucer's exploration of pagan politics as his attempt to convey the

"historical truth" about the limitations of pagans.[294] As Patterson argues, "the *Knight's*

Tale is a historical description designed to demonstrate not difference but continuity":

"continuity" between the form of life represented by Theseus and his order and the

practices of fourteenth-century nobility.[295] What does it mean, Chaucer wonders, for

fourteenth-century English Christians to engage in the same practices characteristic of

Theseus's end? Do the Christian nobles for whom chivalric displays of violence are

"ende[s]" and "conclusioun[s]" know better than Arcite the path to "felicitee" (I.1869,

1266)? The answer, of course, *should* be *yes*. But recall Lord Cobham's declaration that

English Christians under the reign of Richard II "never dare[d] to speak or act according

to the truth." For Cobham, the tyrannizing power and politics of Richard II produced

false ends which supplanted in the lives of English Christians ends given to them by

God and nature: because English Christians feared "the loss of their worldly goods" or

their political power, they "never dare[d] to speak or act according to the truth."[296] In

The Knight's Tale, Chaucer is thinking analogically about such rulers and their cultures of

disorientation and corruption, about the powers of these rulers to push their subjects

towards false ends and block out natural ends. Central to Chaucer's exploration of this

issue are Theseus's actions in the grove and his First Mover speech, a metaphysical

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[294] Minnis, *Chaucer and Pagan Antiquity,*
[295] Patterson, *Chaucer and the Subject of History*, 232
[296] *Chronicles of the Revolution*, 204.

speech which is, as Aers persuasively argues, "explicitly in the service of…[Theseus's] dominating and self-centered order."[297] Building on Aers's reading, I set Theseus's speech, in the final section of this chapter, in the context of the issues of natural law we have considered.

4.3 Theseus's First Mover Speech: Miracles, Authority, and the Politics of Metaphysics

Arcite's death is the direct consequence of a "myracle" orchestrated by the gods of Theseus's culture: an earthquake "sent at requeste of Saturne" (I.2675, 2685). This is not, of course, a true miracle. As Aquinas explains, true miracles are solely the work of God, meant to benefit human agents by leading them "to a certain degree of supernatural knowledge."[298] As works of God, miracles are not contrary to the natural order, even if the miracles work against the processes of nature as we understand them (Ia-105.6 resp. and ad 1). Why? It is impossible, Aquinas explains, for God to do anything contrary to the natural order, for "since the order of nature is given to things by God, if He does anything outside this order, it is not against nature."[299] Chaucer

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[297] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 188.

[298] Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.178.1, resp. and ad 1.

[299] Ibid, Ia.105.6 ad 1. This response creates some significant issues for Aquinas as natural law ethicist. In his question on lust in the *Summa*, Aquinas reiterates his argument that God cannot act against nature before turning to the commands of God which seem to conflict with the natural law: "Wherefore that which a man does by God's will and in obedience to His command, is not contrary to right reason, though it may seem contrary to the general order of reason: even so, that which is done miraculously by the Divine power is not

demonstrates the power of true miracles in *The Man of Law's Tale*. There, an event

contrary to the course of nature exposes the false knight's murdering Hermengyld,

thereby exculpating the virtuous Custance and inspiring the conversion of King Alla

and members of his kingdom to Christianity (II.659-686). Medieval Christians believed

that there was no way demons could orchestrate true miracles. However, they did

believe that demons possessed the power to do works which *resemble* miracles. The

purpose of these false miracles is to delude humans, often tricking them into false forms

of worship.[300] This is indeed how Augustine glosses the "marvels" of the pagan gods in

his *City of God*. He argues that these "marvels" were borne from "the arrogance" of

demons who wished "to be the gods of the pagans." Thus these works were not

ordained to "the advancement of…[the Christian] faith," the mark of a true miracle, but

instead were meant to reinforce the power of the demons in the minds of their pagan

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contrary to nature, though it be contrary to the usual course of nature. Therefore just as Abraham did not
sin in being willing to slay his innocent son, because he obeyed God, although considered in itself it was
contrary to right human reason in general, so, too, Osee sinned not in committing fornication by God's
command. Nor should such a copulation be strictly called fornication, though it be so called in reference to
the general course of things." In other words, because God cannot do anything against nature, his
command to Hosea does not conflict with the natural law, though it appears to do so. Because it does not
conflict with the natural law, it should not therefore be called fornication. This passages poses a number of
questions and concerns about God's absolute and ordained power, a topic which has attracted an
extraordinary amount of commentary, from both medieval theologians and contemporary intellectual
historians. For quote, see ibid, IIa-IIae.154.2 ad 2. For an introduction to the complex issues around
absolute and ordained power, see Hester Gelber, *It Could Have Been Otherwise: Contingency and Necessity in
Dominican Theology at Oxford, 1300-1350* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 309-349.
[300] See Aquinas, *Summa*, IIa-IIae.178.2 and IIa-IIae.172.5-6.

worshippers.[301] It seems to me clear that this is the sort of "miracle" Chaucer writes in

The Knight's Tale. The earthquake of Saturn resolves a power dispute between Venus

and Mars, allowing both gods to have their "wille." Arcite wins the tournament, just as

Mars desires. But because of Saturn's deadly miracle, Palamon ends up marrying Emily,

as Venus desires (I.2669). Chaucer describes in great detail the physical human pain

caused by this "myracle" of the gods:

> Swelleth the brest of Arcite, and the soore
>
> Encreesseth at his herte moore and moore.
>
> ……………………………………………
>
> The pipes of his longes gonne to swelle,
>
> And every lacerte in his brest adoun
>
> Is shent with venym and corrupcioun
>
> ……………………………………………
>
> Nature hath now no dominacioun (I.2743-2758).

Arcite's wound is rendered in extraordinarily visceral language. The natural processes

of the body have been so completely disrupted that there is no recourse for Arcite: he

simply "*moot* dye" (I.2761, emphasis mine). Such are the workings of the pagan gods in

The Knight's Tale, workings which, for Arcite especially, resist benign explanation.

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[301] Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.10.

Yet in his First Mover speech, which Chaucer draws from various passages of Boethius's *Consolation*, Theseus attempts to offer a benign explanation for this "myracle" (I.2675). He begins by claiming that the First Mover has created the elements in "certyn boundes" by "the faire cheyne of love" from which "they may nat flee" (I.2993, 2988). The First Mover, Theseus states, extends this control to the lives of humans: he determines the "duracioun" of "al that is engendred in this place" (I.2996, 2997). He claims that this is "preeved by experience" (I.3001). Of course, the painful experience of Arcite contradicts this assertion and poses serious questions about Theseus as a metaphysician. Is it possible, however, that this is the best a pagan can do without Christian theology, that Theseus's metaphysics is contradictory only because he has been deluded by the false miracle of demons wishing, in Augustine's words, "to be reckoned gods" by the Athenians and Thebans?[302] Perhaps. However, as Aers writes, "When we look at the 'experience' the duke now feels is proof of the presence of divine love and its benevolent ordering of our world, the result is to strengthen our sense that he is not given to examining such matters with any scrupulousness."[303] Aers offers a list of "more plausible speculations" about metaphysics which Theseus could have determined from his experience. But Theseus "does not even consider such possible lines of speculation."[304]

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[302] Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.10.

[303] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 189.

[304] Ibid, 190.

Nor would he be much interested in doing so. I am convinced by Aers's argument that Theseus's First Mover speech is a political act designed to attain "fully of Thebans obeisaunce" (2974). Theseus offers this metaphysical speech in his parliament.[305] In addition, Chaucer writes that Theseus's metaphysical vision comes from Theseus's "wille," not from his reasoning well about the ends of human life (I.2986). In my view, Chaucer is linking Theseus's First Mover speech to his commanding Arcite and Palamon's "end" in the grove through the repetition of the word will. Though his means differ, Theseus's intentions remain the same: he wants to extend his political dominion through the marriage of Emily to a Theban. When Theseus broaches the topic of the miracle of Saturn, his speech collapses obviously into what Aers calls a "practical end."[306] Theseus argues that he sees no basis for any disconsolation based on the metaphysics he experiences:

> Thanne it is wysdom, as it thynketh me,
>
> To maken vertu of necessitee,
>
> And take it weel that we may nat eschue,
>
> And namely that to us alle is due.
>
> And whoso gruccheth ought, he dooth folye,
>
> And rebel is to hym that al may gye (I.3041-3046).

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[305] Ibid, 188.

[306] Ibid, 191.

His point is that Palamon and Emily should not complain about the death of Arcite

because it proceeds from the benign will of the First Mover. This gloss of Saturn's

miracle poses troubling and multifaceted issues concerning authority and the

interpretation of miracles, issues which Chaucer explores in an entirely different register

in the Christian universe of *The Miller's Tale*.[307] Namely, how did medieval Christians

discern "true" miracles?[308] From Aquinas's treatment of this issue, we know that true

miracles are works of God meant to benefit humans by leading us to faith. As we have

seen in both Augustine's *City of God* and Chaucer's *The Knight's Tale*, this is not the

teleology of the false miracles of demons. What if, however, a ruler decrees otherwise?

What if a ruler glosses the "miracle" of demons as the product of a benevolent god's

"faire cheyne of love" (I.2988)? And what if, as seems to be the case in *The Knight's Tale*,

there is no other authority to interpret miracles but the sovereign?

     In the final lines of his extraordinary tale, Chaucer recognizes that the authority

to interpret miracles and promulgate laws amounts to an extraordinary concentration of

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[307] Among other strategies, Nicholas, in *The Miller's Tale*, claims to have access to "Cristes conseil" and "Goddes pryvetee" in order to dupe John and sleep with John's wife Alisoun (I.3504, 3558). John the carpenter believes Nicholas because Nicholas is a clerk vested with the intellectual authority to do metaphysics.

[308] As Wendy Love Anderson has shown, this was an issue to which medieval theologians had no simple solutions. See Wendy Love Anderson, *The Discernment of Spirits: Assessing Visions and Visionaries in the Late Middle Ages*. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011). On the belief in miracles in the Middle Ages, see Steven Justice, "Did the Middle Ages Believe in Their Miracles?" *Representations* no. 103 (Summer 2008): 1-29.

power in a secular ruler.[309] In his analysis of the scene, Aers concludes that Theseus uses

metaphysical language to "sacralize…[his] own government." He emphasizes "the

allusion Theseus makes to rebellion against the first mover" in I.3045-3046, writing that

Theseus "simply assumes that the existing social order and its practices, under his

governance, are fully sanctioned by a transcendent God…Any protest about anything is

[thus] branded as folly and any attempt to challenge this order presented as rebellion."[310]

This is correct. As Theseus brusquely asserts towards the end of his speech: "The

contrarie of al this is wilfulnesse"—that is, vicious and unjust disobedience (I.3057).

This has extraordinary ethical and political implications relevant to our concerns

in this project. However confused Arcite and Palamon are in Part I, their ethical and

metaphysical speculation *could* be the seeds of rebellion and revolution; their initial

confusions could lead, eventually, to the realization that their culture is the source of

their confusion—that it offers no coherent model of human life, no "righte wey" to

earthly happiness and flourishing (I.1263). But here Theseus works to neutralize this

possibility. All metaphysical and ethical reflection that raises issues about the forms of

life endorsed by Theseus are blocked out as mere "wilfulnesse" (I.3057). Nothing

remains in Theseus's polity except the ends he institutes: ends that, as we have seen

from the "ende" Theseus commands in the grove, perpetuate violence for the sake of

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[309] Chaucer had some cause to reflect on the dangers of a ruler who does philosophy and metaphysics, for Richard II, as Nigel Saul writes in his biography of the king, consciously cultivated an image of himself as "a philosopher king": *Richard II*, 358: see also 356-357.
[310] Aers, *Chaucer, Langland*, 191.

Theseus's own power rather than encouraging the sort of kindness so movingly displayed by Arcite just before his death (I.1844, 2783-2797). Accordingly, Palamon offers no response to Theseus's speech, no alternative metaphysics based on his own observations and confusions about his universe. The questions he posits in Theseus's prison have been silenced and there is no indication that he will raise them again.

This presents another troubling dimension. We have already seen Theseus command an "ende" that accords with his devotion to Mars (I.1844). What sort of ends are now possible for Theseus to command with both the power to promulgate positive laws and the sole authority to interpret miracles in his society? Might Theseus command or justify a range of vicious acts as things sanctioned by the First Mover? He does not do so here. But the possibility remains disturbingly open. What recourse do his subjects have mired in the disorienting practices of Theseus's culture? This extreme disorientation is the design of Theseus's politics and culture, the design which Aquinas, in his *De Regno*, links to tyranny: a tyrant "impedes them [his subjects] with respect to their spiritual goods…for those who desire to rule their subjects rather than benefit them put every obstacle in the way of their progress, being suspicious of any excellence in their subjects that might threaten their own wicked rule."[311]

Chaucer concludes his examination of malevolent secular power with an idyllic vision of Palamon and Emily's marriage:

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[311] Aquinas, *De Regno*, 1.4

> For now is Palamon in alle wele,
>
> Lyvynge in blisse, in richesse, and in heele,
>
> And Emelye hym loveth so tendrely,
>
> And he hire serveth so gentilly,
>
> That never was ther no word hem bitwene (I.3101-3106).

Happiness at last. But in the context of *The Knight's Tale*, with its penetrating examinations of malevolent power, this amounts to false consolation.[312] Instead of a glimpse of true happiness finally achieved, this vision must be seen as a fantasy, an image of a form of life marked by mutual love, virtue, and happiness which deliberately contrasts with the sort of life Chaucer reveals is possible in the cultures of Creon and Theseus. For Arcite and Palamon in these cultures, as we have seen, the ends of right reason are clouded, made the sources of confusion rather than fulfillment, before being supplanted in their minds by the ends of a theologizing ruler interested in extending his own power.

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[312] Aers links Chaucer's ending to the traditions of medieval romances: "the poet…allows an audience steeped in romance to feel relieved and consoled, latching on to the few brief assertions about the future of Palamon and Emily, feeling reassured at the role of official secular authority in the marital union, and abandoning the disturbing meditations stimulated by the complete work": *Chaucer, Langland*, 194.

4. Conclusion

The period on which this dissertation focuses ended with the successful rebellion

of Henry Bolingbroke against Richard II in 1399. The poem *Richard the Redeless*,

composed after Richard's downfall, allegorizes the rebellion of Henry as the restitution

of the natural law in England. Henry is rendered as the "kynde dame" of the English

people, his decision to rebel against Richard a response to the cries of despair from "his

owen kynde briddis." Through Henry's just rebellion, the poet indicates, England

gained its natural ruler after years suffering under an unnatural one: "For he was heed

of hem all and hieste of kynde / To kepe the croune."[313] And so followed the restoration

of social bonds in England.

In this dissertation, I have argued that the natural law emerged as a vital and

contested literary discourse amid the social rebellions of the 1380s and 1390s. *Richard the*

Redeless typifies much of this discourse. It draws on the natural law to dispel conflict,

even as the natural law itself was the locus of sharp contestation in the 1380s and 1390s.

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[313] *Richard the Redeless*, III.55, 70, 92.

Having attained the throne through rebellion and usurpation, Henry's kingship lacked

the clear lineal legitimation that his predecessor held by default. The poet of *Richard the*

Redeless sidesteps this by drawing on the concept that is at the core of this dissertation.

Namely, the natural law sanctions resistance to and rebellion against a tyrant. Henry,

the poet contends, is England's natural monarch because he heard the cries of its people

and ameliorated them through his just rebellion against the tyrant Richard II. With the

defeat of Richard comes the end of unnatural governance and so too the end of the

problems that have plagued England. All is now well.

The trust that the poet of *Richard the Redeless* places in the authority of the natural

law mirrors not only that of Thomas Usk, who believed the natural law would save both

his culture and his own life, but also that of all late medieval English writers outside of

Geoffrey Chaucer. These writers believed in the universality of the natural law. They

thought that the solution to political conflict was to be found in the ethical and political

inclinations and principles that are supposedly common to all rational beings. Chaucer

did not share this belief. He problematized something that his English contemporaries

accepted without hesitation: the status of the natural law as a concept and discourse that

is not subject to history and culture. For him, the natural law is, like all political

concepts and language, a product of specific cultural forms. In its manifestation as an

escape from history and culture lies its power as a smokescreen for political domination.

Historically contingent political arrangements can be dressed up as natural and

universal. Across his poetry, Chaucer asks, again and again, a question no other English writer asked amid the explosion of natural law writing in the 1380s and 1390s: what hope is there in the natural law as a reforming discourse when it can be made to mirror the very historical and cultural forms it ostensibly stands above?

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Biography

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