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# Translating a Philosophical Style: Thomas Usk's Boethian Prose

In the Middle Ages, not only individual translations, but large cultural systems of translation introduced new genres as well as content to new audiences. The translation movements that inaugurated literary and scientific developments in emergent language traditions are the most visible aspects of medieval translation history. Histories of medieval translation often bear with them questions about translatability, or, more precisely, about what happens in translating: for example, can the genres of French chivalric romance or of classical epic be transferred, without substantial formal and even ideological change, into Old Norse (Würth 1998; Eriksen 2014); or can the content as well as rhetorical purpose of classical historiography remain untouched by the passage into vernacular prose or verse (Fisher 2019)? The question of translatability, or of resistance to translation, looms large in modern theorizing (Venuti 2019). It also haunts the pragmatic and the theoretical interests of medieval translators. Medieval theorists worry about the technical insufficiency or inelegance of the target language (especially in translation from Latin to a vernacular), or about a sacred content that inheres in the very source language (Copeland 1991, 42–55, 97–107; Watson 2008; Lawton 2008). But unlike moderns, they would not concern themselves with the erasure of cultural specifics except as these were necessary to respect a sacred or metaphysical truth that is contained in the literal sense of a sacred text. For even as translators might claim to efface themselves, demurring at the monumental task of converting texts of science or philosophy into new languages, translation, especially of academic writings, was an act of intellectual conquest, a taking possession of prized bodies of knowledge. (Gutas 2022, 1–2; Burnett 2022, 454–455; Copeland 1991, 87–150, 221–229). The aim to appropriate was as much the case for vernacular translators expanding the lexical and expressive scope of their native written languages as for those translating from one established language of learning into another prestige language, for example, translating Greek or Arabic into Latin.

One element of translation that we would now count among the "untranslatables" is style. I take "style" to mean not only literary form (versification, figurative language), but syntax itself, the structuring of thought at the propositional level. Understood on these terms, style would seem to lie beneath the surface of all that is accessible to rendering in a different language. It is this assumption that I want to contest here in relation to a particular mode of medieval translation: translating philosophy into vernacular prose. In this, as I will suggest, a cross-cultural system of translation gives rise to a system of style, a vernacular philosophical style. A large-scale comparative study of vernacular

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philosophical prose across medieval European languages has yet to be undertaken. The parameters I set here are precise and intentional: not vernacular prose in all genres, nor restricted to translations from Latin sources, but a comparative study dedicated to the development of medieval vernacular prose as the vehicle of philosophy. Something like this has been attempted in a descriptive register with Hebrew translations of Latin philosophy and medical and scientific learning in medieval Europe (Fontaine and Freudenthal 2013; Schwartz 2013). Studies of individual translators of philosophy and learning, notably Nicole Oresme and Evrart de Conty for French translations, and John Trevisa for English scientific translation, have laid out welcome paradigms for future comparative work (Souffrin and Segonds 1988; Quillet 1990; Guichard-Tesson 2006; Steiner 2021).

A broad, multi-lingual investigation would entail comparative histories of the conditions under which vernacular prose could become an instrument of precise philosophical argumentation. Here I investigate the conditions under which one writer produced a remarkably supple philosophical prose style, translating not the words of his source but the structuring effect of the Latin syntax that he found there. While this analysis focuses on a single author-translator, as a case study it offers a framework for assessing the professional conditions under which many other vernacular philosophical writings were produced.

The name Thomas Usk will hardly be known to scholars outside of late Middle English literature, and even to specialists in the English fourteenth century Usk's name may be only just recognizable.

Usk's *Testament of Love* forms part of the chain of medieval vernacular receptions of Boethius' *Consolatio philosophiae.* So minor a figure in literary history has Usk proven to be that the only published modern edition of his *Testament* for a hundred years was W.W. Skeat's 1897 *Supplement to the Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer.* During that century, Usk was largely dismissed as a weak imitator of Chaucer. Usk's critical fortunes among literary historians rose during the late 1980s and the 1990s during the wave of New Historicism, because he found his literary voice in the context of the brutal factionalism of London politics in the 1380s. That factionalism was to be his undoing; but because (or in spite) of that, historicist criticism found in Usk's writing the very embodiment of a "cultural poetics" in which the literary is inextricable from the non-literary, in which imaginative fiction feeds historical consciousness (Strohm 1992, 145–60). But if the historicist criticism of the late twentieth century sparked a critical rediscovery of Usk, his work can take us in other directions, away from the specifics of London politics in the 1380s and towards a broad and multi-level analysis in which literary style can illuminate both intellectual and social history. Here I will consider how Usk's Boethian *Testament of Love* achieves a decisively *philosophical* coherence.

First, some words about Usk's biography and his works. Usk was a London scrivener, low-level bureaucrat, and autodidact. He seems to have been born around 1354, possibly a few years earlier, into a modest artisanal or trade family. He was passionately attached to London, "place of his kyndly [natural] engendrure", where he lived

throughout his short life (*Testament of Love,* ed. Shoaf 1998, 1.6.578). He emerges into view in the 1380's, when he was a copyist, working as a clerk for John Northampton, mayor of London, who was a member of the drapers' guild. Northampton carried on a toxic campaign against the equally toxic victuallers' guildsmen, from whose ranks Nicholas Brembre ultimately won the mayoral election, unseating Northampton. Usk continued in the service and support of Northampton's faction, which agitated to overturn the election of Brembre. Along with other members of Northampton's circle, Usk was arrested in 1384, at which point he changed allegiance and supported Brembre's side, writing an *Appeal* against Northampton in which he revealed the machinations of the former mayor and his supporters to stay in power. It is during periods of detainment between 1384 and 1385, partly under Brembre's custody, that he is thought to have written his *Testament of Love.* The new allegiance with Brembre seems to have kept Usk out of trouble for a few years, and in fact (along with the Brembre faction) he found favor and advancement under royal patronage, becoming among other things under-sheriff of Middlesex. But in late 1387, the fortunes of Brembre and his faction deteriorated drastically, and Usk found himself caught up in the actions of the Lords Appellant, who persuaded Parliament in 1388 to convict and execute members of the circle of Richard II's advisors on the charge of treasonously misleading the king. Among the victims of this purge were Brembre and his recent ally Usk, both executed as traitors in early 1388. Usk's sentence, to be drawn, hanged, and beheaded, with his head humiliatingly displayed over Newgate close to his family home, was unusually brutal even for the time. *The Testament of Love* belongs to one period of low fortune for Usk during 1384–85; at that point he could not have predicted that his lucky escape from trouble under the new protection of Brembre would have led to an even more drastic fall a few years later (*Testament of Love,* ed. Shawver 2002, 7–23; Waldron 2004; Strohm 1992; Lindenbaum 1999, 287–292).

Whatever else he may have written, two works by Usk survive: his *Appeal* against Northampton, whose English and Latin versions come down to us in the London records; and his *Testament of Love*. The *Testament* is framed as a prison narrative in which he receives instruction from Love, who appears to him in his cell, a lady who is the "semelyest and most goodly" to his eyes, who "yave gladnesse and conforte sodaynely to al my wyttes", who has arrived in "so foule a dongeon" because it is in her nature always to remember and comfort her friends and servants (book 1, ch. 2). Whether the "foule dongeon" should be read as reference to actual circumstances or more as an evocation of Boethius' *Consolatio,* marking his debt to that text, need not worry us here: the question remains unresolved in studies of Usk, since the various conditions of his imprisonments in 1384–85 are not clear (*Testament of Love*, ed. Shawver 2002, 24–26; Summers 2004, 24–59). Certain things are clear, however: the work combines the motifs of love complaints and consolations, on the order of Machaut's *Remède de Fortune,* with philosophical consolation. On the pretext of finding favor with his lady Margarete, whose name is revealed in an acrostic, Usk outlines the slanders against him by his political enemies, explaining – in thinly veiled terms –

how he turned against Northampton because of his conscience and to restore the peace in his beloved London: "the peace, that most in comunaltie shulde be desyred, was in poynte to be broken and adnulled, also the cytie of London, that is to me so dere and swete, in which I was forthe growen . . . Thylke peace shulde thus there have been broken, and of al wyse it is commended and desyred" (1.6). Here of course we might hear echoes of Boethius' self-exculpation on account of his love for the Senate in *Consolatio* 1pr4. Over the course of the three books, Love instructs the protagonist how to be worthy of love by understanding the fickleness of worldly Fortune, and ultimately grace, the good freely chosen (as Usk claims of his own choices), truth, and righteousness. Yet it was easy for an early editor like Skeat to dismiss Usk's motives in writing this and to censure him for what seemed a self-serving attack of conscience and a designing *apologia*. Indeed, there is still little agreement on the genre that best describes the *Testament*, whether it should be read as erotic allegory, self-serving political *apologia*, consolation, or philosophical treatise (Strohm 1990, 99–100; Galloway 1997; Turner, 2002; Arch, 2008). The reading that I offer here relocates the question from the exterior contours of genre to the interior movements of style embodying and structuring an argument. Whether or not we call the work a philosophical "treatise", it delivers a philosophical prose that can hold its own against its ultimate source in Boethius.

The *Testament of Love* has a strange textual history because we don't have a manuscript source for it. We have only the print by William Thynne from 1532, a century and a half after Usk's death. Thynne thought the work to be by Chaucer and printed it as such in his collection of Chaucer's works. And so it was through various reprintings of Thynne until the 1890s, when Skeat noticed an acrostic spanning chapters 1 to 11 of Book 1; Skeat showed how the first letters of each of these chapters (after corrections of some of Thynne's ordering mistakes) can be resolved to read "Margarete of Virtw have merci on thin Usk" and established that this was no Chaucerian writing but rather the work of an obscure London actor in the political upheavals of Richard II's minority (*Testament of Love*, ed. Shawver 2002, Introduction, 4–5; ed. Skeat 1897, xix–xx). Skeat's edition of 1897 was the only modern scholarly edition published until R. A. Shoaf's edition of 1998. Virginia Jellech's Ph.D. thesis of 1971 and John Leyerle's 1977 thesis had also produced editions, but only Leyerle's was ultimately published by Shawver in 2002.[1] All of these editions have to be based on Thynne's (somewhat corrupt) sixteenth-century text, our unique witness. For textual materialists, there was an inherent challenge in working backwards from print to missing script, and in conjuring the original scryvenish document that time, infamy, and political intrigue have swallowed up (Middleton 1998).

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[1] Shawver (based on Leyerle) is an excellent edition to which I sometimes make reference; but Shoaf's equally fine edition is more readily available online through open access, and thus I cite from that here.

Despite the complexities of the textual history and especially the corruption of Thynne's text, and the layers of hypothesis that modern editors have sometimes had to supply in their readings of passages, the overall shape of Usk's syntax is coherent, his prose rhythms are illuminating, and his terminology ultimately self-explanatory.[2] What is striking is not that he was able to translate Boethius' *Consolatio* into vernacular prose: Chaucer's massive *Boece* does that, and Jean de Meun had done the same in French in the thirteenth century. It is, rather, that he is *not* translating the *Consolatio*. In books 1 and 2 of the *Testament*, over some 2500 lines of Middle English prose, he is usually on his own, elaborating or riffing on a conceptual crux sometimes derived from Boethius or one of his other sources (notably Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*), whether proximately or distantly. It is only in book 3, another 1100 or so lines of prose, that he enters into a project of more direct translation, here not of Boethius, but of Anselm of Canterbury's *De concordia praescientiae et praedestinationis et gratiae dei cum libero arbitrio* (The Compatability of God's Foreknowledge, Predestination, and Grace with Free Will). In this portion of his work he seems to have wanted to focus more on the nature of free will itself than on the larger issue of free will and God's providential knowledge that Boethius treats in *Consolatio* 4 and 5, and for this Usk turned away from Boethius to a close reading of Anselm's text, in which he found more immediately useful material. But even here, Usk's close translations of Anselm occupy only about half of book 3 of the *Testament*.

What makes Usk interesting is his "quasi-Boethianism", the impression that the *Consolatio* makes on a medieval text that does not stand in any direct translative relationship to Boethius' own work (Galloway, 1997, 294–295). Such a text demands that we read it through Boethius in more than the merely thematic way that we might read Machaut's *Remede de Fortune* as a variety of consolation literature. This is not just a question of targeting a Boethian passage, as Chaucer does in *Troilus* 4, where he takes the argument of Troilus' monologue on free will and necessity from sentences in *Consolatio* 5, proses 2 and 3. Indeed, in his own discourse on free will, Usk acknowledges that passage from *Troilus* to save himself the trouble of reproducing those dense arguments. Rather, in Usk's *Testament*, it is a question of grasping a philosophical outlook that *precipitates* philosophical writing in a prose that is at once supple and durable enough to sustain the pressure of a serious, hypotactic argumentation. Indeed, as Eleanor Johnson has pointed out, Usk actually refuses the opportunity to follow Boethius into writing poetry, announcing that his competence lies with prose when he says that he will give simply the "sentence" of the poem that Lady Love sings to comfort him (book 2, ch. 2, lines 1–4 of Shawver). Usk is committed to prose as the best instrument for expressing complex thought with directness (Johnson 2013, 169–71). In choosing English as his

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**2** Johnson (2013, 171–2) notes the various views on Usk's style: Skeat, among others, condemned it as overwrought; yet more recent critics have recognized in its ornamented artistry the signature of authorial self-fashioning: see Turner (2002). Shoaf (ed. 1998; Introduction, 4) suggests simple incoherence (at least in the corrupt form that the text was transmitted in Thynne's 1532 print).

prose instrument, he enlarges the scope of that vernacular. Although the *Consolatio* is usually buried beneath the surface of Usk's *Testament*, its method and especially its syntax resonate through Usk's style, that is, syntax that has a philosophical import, the structuring of an argument through the movement of prose.

Usk's sensitivities to a complex style were likely sharpened by his professional familiarity with the *ars dictaminis,* Latin prose rhythms, and the rise and fall of Latin syntax. Yet whatever acuities of prose-thought Usk had developed through his scrivening were surely also heightened by his close reading of Boethius' philosophical exposition. Here I want to distinguish those interlingual encounters from the influence of Chaucer's Middle English translation of the *Consolatio*, a translation that Usk also knew. I begin with an example of a passage in Usk whose source, in terms of ideas, appears to be *Consolatio* 4 pr 6. This is the longest prose in Boethius' work. Eschewing poetic relief for the continuity of expository prose, it gives a decisive account of a providential logic which is never random, despite our myopic perspective. Here is the relevant section of Boethius' Latin text, Chaucer's Middle English version of it, and then Usk's reconception of the argument (passages for particular comparison in bold):

> Nam illud quoque, quod improbis nunc tristia nunc optata proueniunt, ex eisdem ducitur causis. **Ac de tristibus quidem nemo miratur, quod eos malo meritos omnes existimant**; quorum quidem supplicia tum ceteros ab sceleribus deterrent tum ipsos quibus inuehuntur emendant. **Laeta uero magnum bonis argumentum loquuntur, quid de huius modi felicitate debeant iudicare quam famulari saepe improbis cernant**. In qua re illud etiam dispensary credo quod est forsitan alicuius tam praeceps atque importuna natura ut eum in scelera potius exacerbare possit rei familiaris inopia; huius morbo prouidentia collatae pecuniae remedio medetur. (*Consolatio*, ed. Bieler 1984, 4pr6, 43–45).

> For certes, that adversitate cometh somtyme to schrewes [*rascals*] and somtyme that that they desiren, it comith of thise forseyde causes. **And of sorweful thinges that betyden to schrewes, certes, no man ne wondreth; for alle men wenen that thei han wel desservid it, and that thei ben of wykkid meryt.** Of whiche schrewes the torment somtyme agasteth [*deters*] othere to don [*from committing*] felonyes, and somtyme it amendeth hem that suffren the tormentz; **and the prosperite that is yeven to schrewes scheweth a gret argument to good folk what thing thei scholde demen of thilke welefulnesse, the whiche prosperite men seen ofte serven to schrewes.** In the whiche thing I trowe that God dispenseth. For peraventure the nature of som man is so overthrowyinge to yvel, and so uncovenable, that the nedy poverte of his houshold myghte rather egren [*spur*] hym to don felonyes; and to the maladye of hym God putteth remedye to yeven hym rychesses. (*Boece* 4.6, 284–304, *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson 1987)

> "Lady," quod I, **"somtyme yet if a man be in disease** [*is disparaged*] **th'estymacion of the envyous people ne loketh nothyng to** [*considers not*] **desertes of men ne to the merytes of their doynges, but only to the aventure of fortune, and therafter they yeven their sentence.** And some loken [*consider*] the voluntary wyl in his herte and therafter teleth his jugement, not takyng hede to reason ne to the qualité of the doyng, as thus: If a man be ryche and fulfylde with worldly welfulnesse, some commenden it and sayne it is so lente by juste cause. **And he that hath adversyté they sayne he is weaked** [*wicked*] **and hath deserved thilke anoye** [*that same misfortune*]. **The contrarye of these thinges some men holden also and sayne that to the ryche prosperyté is purvayed into his confusyon,** and upon this mater many autorites of many and great-

wytted cleerkes they alegen. And some men sayn though al good estymacion forsaken folk that han adversyté, yet is it meryte and encrease of his blysse, so that these purposes arne so wonderful in understandyng that trewly for myn adversyté nowe, I not howe the sentence of the indifferent people wyl jugen my fame." (*Testament*, ed. Shoaf 1998, 1.6, lines 512–32)

Usk's themes are not exactly what we find in Boethius: the passage from the *Consolatio* concerns how just rewards, whether evil or good, look from a human as opposed to a providential perspective, whereas Usk is concerned with his own reputation as either an evil-doer (hence his worry about slanderers) or a man of good conscience (hence the examples of his friends who know his "truth"). But that is only a matter of difference at the manifest level of content. The latent level of style tells us something else. Consider, simply, how clean and actually concise is Usk's prose. If we compare, from the quotations above, two sentences that convey similar ideas, one from Chaucer's *Boece* and one from Usk, we can see the briskness of Usk's prose movement:

> *Boece*: and the prosperite that is yeven to schrewes scheweth a great argument to good folk what thing thei scholde demen of thilke welefulnesse, the whiche prosperite men seen ofte serven to schrewes.

> *Testament*: And he that hath adversyté they sayne he is weaked and hath deserved thilke anoye. The contrarye of these thinges some men holden also and sayne that to the ryche prosperyté is purvayed into his confusyon . . .

The passage from Usk has no exact equivalent in the Latin, but if we compare Boethius' Latin of the passage with Chaucer's English, and then bring in Usk's thematically related English, we can see immediately how Usk easily balances equal ideas, a proposition and its contrary, through simple parataxis. I do not suggest that Chaucer is a bad translator; Chaucer's interest here is in grasping every element of Boethius' prose, not in achieving something like the clean thrust of the Latin syntax, with its three clauses pointed by three transitive verbs. Usk's syntax is structured differently, but it is equally clean, free of crowded relative clauses and other messy elements.

Another example can suggest Usk's gift for condensation along with riffing to his own purposes. The transition from *Consolatio* 1pr4, where Boethius laments the injustices of worldly reputation, to the beautiful hymn of 1m5, "O stelliferi conditor orbis", which celebrates a cosmic harmony that ought also to govern human affairs, illustrates how Usk can turn poetry into robust prose. Again the intertext would be Chaucer's *Boece*, but here it is probably more telling to make the comparison directly with Boethius' Latin.

> hoc tantum dixerim ultimam esse aduersae fortunae sarcinam quod, dum miseris aliquod crimen affingitur, quae perferunt meruisse creduntur. Et ego quidem bonis omnibus pulsus, dignitatibus exutus, existimatione foedatus ob beneficium supplicium tuli. Videre autem uideor nefarias sceleratorum officinas gaudio laetitiaque fluitantes, perditissimum quemque nouis delationum fraudibus imminentem, iacere bonos nostri discriminis terrore prostratos, flagitiosum quemque ad audendum quidem facinus impunitate, ad efficiendum uero praemiis incitari, in-

sontes autem non modo securitate uerum ipsa etiam defensione priuatos. Itaque libet excla-
mare:[3] (*Consolatio*, ed. Bieler 1984, 1pr4, 46)

1 O stelliferi conditor orbis,
qui perpetuo nixus solio
rapido caelum turbine uersas
legemque pati sidera cogis,
5 ut nunc pleno lucida cornu
totis fratris obuia flammis
condat stellas luna minores,
nunc obscuro pallida cornu
Phoebo propior lumina perdat
10 et qui primae tempore noctis
agit algentes Hesperos ortus
solitas iterum mutet habenas
Phoebi pallens Lucifer ortu.
Tu frondifluae frigore brumae
15 stringis lucem breuiore mora,
tu cum feruida uenerit aestas
agiles nocti diuidis horas.
Tua uis uarium temperat annum,
ut quas Boreae spiritus aufert
20 reuehat mites Zephyrus frondes,
quaeque Arcturus semina uidit
Sirius altas urat segetes:
nihil antiqua lege solutum
linquit propriae stationis opus.
25 **Omnia certo fine gubernans**
**hominum solos respuis actus**
**merito rector cohibere modo.**
**Nam cur tantas lubrica uersat**
**Fortuna uices? Premit insontes**
30 **debita sceleri noxia poena,**
**at peruersi resident celso**
**mores solio sanctaque calcant**
**iniusta uice colla nocentes.**
Latet obscuris condita uirtus
35 clara tenebris iustusque tulit
crimen iniqui.

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**3** This only would I say, that the final burden of adverse fortune is that as long as wretches are accused of some crime, they are thought to deserve what they suffer. So indeed I, deprived of all my goods, stripped of my honors, and disgraced in public opinion, bore punishment instead of promotion. And here is what I seem to see: the wicked workshops of lawless men overflowing in joy and jubilation; every last degenerate making threats with brand-new deceptions and denunciations; good men fallen, laid low by their fear of this crisis of mine; every last criminal encouraged to dare a crime because he will go unpunished, and to commit it because he will be rewarded; and the guiltless deprived not only of their safety but even of their defense. And so I exclaim: (*Consolatio*, trans. Relihan 2001).

Nil periuria, nil nocet ipsis
fraus mendaci compta colore.
Sed cum libuit uiribus uti,
40 quos innumeri metuunt populi
summos gaudent subdere reges.
**O iam miseras respice terras,**
**quisquis rerum foedera nectis!**
**Operis tanti pars non uilis**
45 **homines quatimur fortunae salo.**
**Rapidos, rector, comprime fluctus**
**et quo** caelum regis immemsum
**firma stabiles foedere terras.** (1m5)[4]

But he that can ne never so wel him behave and hath vertue habundaunt in manyfolde maners, and be nat welthed with suche erthly goodes, is holde for a foole and sayd his wytte is but sotted. Lo, how false for aver [*wealth*] is holde trewe. Lo, howe trewe is cleaped false for wantyng of goodes. Also, lady, dignytees of office maken men mykel comended, as thus: he is so good, were he out [*of office*], his pere shulde men not fynde. Trewly I trowe of some suche that are so

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**4** 1–6 Creátor of the sphére beáring the fíxed stars, / Yoú whó on a thróne everlásting resíde,
Cónfoúnding the sky with the swíft stórm wínd, / Cómpélling the stárs to submít tó láw –
Thus, with líght in her hórns fúll now and brílliant, / Cátchíng fúll fórce fíre from her bróther,
7–10 / Does the moón put to béd dím constellátions; / Thus, with hórns in a shroúd, dárk now and ghástly,
Phoébús hárd by, does she lóse all her líght; / Thús, at first twílight Vésper is síghted,
11–14 Eárl shépherding frígid moon-rísings; / Thén ás Lúcifer, pále at the súnrise,
Hé chánges agaín hís reíns and his path – / Yoú whó in the chíll of the leáf-shedding fróst
15–18 Make the dáy cóntráct, brief in durátion; / Yoú whó púnctuate níght's fleeting hóurs
Whén súmmer appeárs íncándéscént; / Yoú whose strength bálances múltiform seásons,
19–22 So the leáves caúght úp by the sharp Nórth Wind / Thé Wést Wind brings báck plíant and súpple;
23–26 Só seéds ónce sówn únder Arctúrus / Wíll Sírius sínge as ácres of rípe grain –
There is nóthing dischárged fróm the old órders,/Désérting its póst and próper posítion.
Cóntrólling all thíngs towárd their set óbject,/Only húmán deéds you disdaín to rein ín
27–30 In the wáy they deserve – yoú, theír hélmsmán. / So it ís; wh cán slíppery Fórtune
Cause such chánge and such spórt? Hárd púnishment dué / For the breách of the láw quáshes the guíltless;
31–34 Dégenerate wáys on a lóft throne / Crush beneáth theír heél, guílty and sínful,
Thé nécks of the goód in hórrid revérsal. / Ánd glórious ríght is shroúded in shádow,
35–38 Búried in dárkness; thé júst man accepts / Bláme for the wícked.
Nó, nót pérjury, nó proud impósture / Hárms ór húrts thém, dréssed in false cólors;
39–42 Bút whén they delíght in fléxing their múscles, / Gládly they óverthrow próminent prínces,
Thóse whó térrorize númberless nátions. / Nów, nów have regárd for pítiful nátions,
43–48 Whoéver you áre who bínd the world's cóncord. / We are nó poór párt óf thís vást wórld,
Wé mórtals, storm-tóssed on Fórtune's salt ócean – / Ó hélmsman, make cálm the swíft-running seá swell,
Máke stáble the eárth in the sáme concord / Wíth which you pílot the límitless heávens.
(*Consolatio*, trans. Relihan 2001, whose stress marks are preserved here.)

praysed, were they out ones, another shulde make him so be knowe he shulde of no wyse no more ben loked after: but onely fooles, wel I wotte, desyren suche new thynges. **Wherfore I wonder that thilke governour out of whome alone the causes proceden that governen al thynges whiche that hath ordeyned this worlde in werkes of the kyndely [*natural*] bodyes so be governed, not with unstedfast or happyous [*fortuitous*] thyng, but with rules of reason whiche shewen the course of certayne thynges: why suffreth he suche slydyng chaunges that misturnen suche noble thynges as ben we men that arne a fayre parsel of the erthe and holden the upperest degré under God, of benigne thinges, as ye sayden right nowe yourselfe – shulde never man have ben set in so worthy a place but if his degré were ordayned noble. <u>Alas, thou that knyttest the purveyaunce of al thynges, why lokest thou not to amenden these defautes? I se shrewes that han wicked maners sytten in chayres of domes [judges' seats] lambes to punysshen there [where] wolves shulden ben punisshed.</u>** Lo, vertue shynende naturelly for [*on account of*] povertie lurketh and is hydde under cloude. But the moone false, forsworne as I knowe myselfe for aver and yeftes, hath usurped to shyne by day light with peynture of other mens praysinges: and trewly thilke forged lyght fouly shulde fade were the trouth away of colours feyned. Thus is nyght turned into daye and daye into night, wynter into sommer, and sommer into wynter, not in dede but in miscleapyng of folyche people. (*Testament*, ed. Shoaf 1998, 1.10, 946–68)

The obvious point that editors and most scholars of Usk would make is that, where Boethius purges his discourse of the self-reference of 1pr4 to ascend to a powerful cosmic theme in 1m5, Usk turns the theme of cosmic harmony into an extension of his own autobiographical complaints. But indeed we expect such appropriation of strong argumentation. However self-interested Usk's comments on the wretched times may be (and is Boethius' lament any less self-serving?), he carves his own path by capturing and condensing, and by steering the cosmic Neoplatonism of the *Consolatio* to the purpose of unembarrassed political outrage. I have indicated Usk's condensation of passages in the underlining and font coding. The underlined section at the start of the quotation from Usk corresponds generally – and indeed loosely – to the underlined passages of *Consolatio* 1pr4. Here Usk has drawn out the inverse implications of Boethius'words: if Boethius claims that an accusation brings with it the assumption that suffering and loss of possessions are deserved, Usk pursues the other side of this claim, that those who lack possessions are held to deserve that injustice by reason of their naïvete, no matter how virtuously they have lived. In the middle section (bold) we can see how, via some deft gestures, Usk summarizes the entire cosmology of 1m5, lines 1–24 (the "kyndely bodyes"), dilating instead on the power of the divine "conditor" to govern, not by chance but by reason, stopping to "wonder" at the impotence of divine oversight when it comes to the "slydyng chaunges" of human affairs. In the section near the end, bold and underlined, we can see how Usk condenses the prayer to the *conditor* with perfectly cadenced clauses, achieving the effect of Boethian anapaests with the accented rhythms of English prose: "Alas, thou that knyttest the purveyaunce of al thynges, why lokest thou not to amenden these defautes?" He sharpens the argument by alluding to the political and legal affairs of his native London, where men win and just as quickly lose office.

And it is to London itself, or Usk's relentless advertising of his attachment to London, that I turn now. In 2pr7, Boethius, having got his autobiographical complaints out of his system, and having been duly instructed about the fickleness of Fortune, turns to a cosmic account of magnitude, in relation to which Rome and the affairs of Roman politics are only a tiny point. We can assume that Usk knew this passage not only from the *Consolatio* itself and from Chaucer's *Boece*, but from Chaucer's use of its themes at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde,* where Troilus's soul looks down from the eighth sphere upon "this litel spot of erthe" and laughs to see the woes of this infinitesimal "wrecched world." Usk's transformation of the passage is not poetic, like Chaucer's in the *Troilus*, but an exercise in ethics and practical political philosophy.

In hoc igitur minimo puncti quodam puncto circumsaepti atque conclusi de peruulganda fama, de proferendo nomine cogitatis, ut quid habeat amplum magnificumque gloria tam angustis exiguisque limitibus artata? Adde quod hoc ipsum breuis habitaculi saeptum plures incolunt nationes lingua, moribus, totius uitae distantes, ad quas tum difficultate itinerum tum loquendi diuersitate tum commercii insolentia non modo fama hominum singulorum sed ne urbium quidem peruenire queat. Aetate denique M. Tullii, sicut ipse quodam loco significat, nondum Caucasum montem Romanae rei publicae fama transcenderat et erat tunc adulta Parthis etiam ceterisque id locorum gentibus formidolosa. Uidesne igitur quam sit angusta, quam compressa gloria, quam dilatare ac propagare laboratis? **An ubi Romani nominis transire fama nequit Romani hominis gloria progredietur?** Quid quod diuersarum gentium mores inter se atque instituta discordant, ut quod apud alios laude apud alios supplicio dignum iudicetur? . . . Sed quam multos clarissimos suis temporibus viros scriptorum inops delevit oblivio! (*Consolatio*, ed. Bieler 1984, 2pr7)[5]

"And certes," quod she, "yet at the hardest [cometh] suche fame into heven. [Is] nat the erthe but a centre to the cercle of heven*?* A pricke is wonder lytel in respecte of al the cercle, and yet, in al this pricke [*i.e. even in this tiny space*], may no name be borne [*carried*] in maner of peersyng, for [*on account of*] many obstacles, as waters and wyldernesse and straunge langages, and nat onely names of men ben stylled and holden out of knowlegynge by these obstacles, but also cytees and realmes of prosperité ben letted to be knowe [*are prevented from being known*] and their [renoun] hyndred so that they mowe nat ben parfitely in mennes proper understandynge. **Howe shulde than the name of a synguler Londenoys passe [*go beyond*] the gloryous name of Lon-**

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**5**  And another thing: There are many peoples who inhabit the enclosure that is this truncated dwelling place. They differ from each other in language, in customs, in their entire way of life; and because of the difficulty of land travel, the mutual incomprehensibility of languages, and the infrequency of trade, the reputation of individuals cannot reach them all; and not only that, not even the reputation of cities can. A last point: In Cicero's time, as he himself records somewhere or other, the reputation of the Roman state had not yet crossed over the Caucasus Mountains, though it was at that time a fully mature nation, inspiring terror in the Parthians and the other peoples in that region. So do you see how circumscribed, how straitened is the glory for whose expansion and prolongation you all work so? Or, where the fame of Rome's name cannot go, shall the glory of a Roman man advance? And what of the fact that the customs and institutions of different peoples are at odds with one another, so that what some deem worthy of reward others deem worthy of punishment? . . . Yet how many men, highly esteemed in their own day, have been erased by that amnesia which is the scarcity of historians for them! (*Consolatio,* trans. Relihan 2001, modified).

> **don, whiche by many it is commended, and by many it is lacked** [*blamed*]**, and in many mo**
> **places in erthe nat knowen than knowen?** For in many countrees lytel is London in knowyng
> or in spech, and yet among one maner of people may nat such fame in goodnes come, for as many
> as praysen commenly as many lacken. Fye than on such maner fame. Slepe and suffre him that
> knoweth prevyté of hertes to dele suche fame in thylke place there nothynge ayenst a sothe shal
> neyther speke ne dare apere by attourney ne by other maner. Howe many great named and many
> great in worthynesse losed han be tofore this tyme that nowe out of memorie are slydden and
> clenely forgeten for defaute of writynges? . . . And so thou sekest rewarde of folkes smale wordes
> and of vayne praysynges. Trewly, therin thou lesest the guerdon of vertue, and lesest the grettest
> valoure of consyence, and uphap thy renome everlastyng. (*Testament*, ed. Shoaf 1998, 1.8, 808–37).[6]

The context of Usk's passage is not a casting away of worldly concerns in view of the
vast cosmos, as in the *Consolatio,* but a reassurance that even political infamy is a
limited thing, that Usk's political mishaps will be shortlived in memory, and that the
virtue of his intentions will be everlasting. While retaining the cosmic theme, the small-
ness of earth compared to the vastness of the heavens, as well as the idea that earth
itself is vast and different according to geography and custom, Usk inscribes his own
London as the center of a worldview. With this he locates his version of "virtue ethics"
in an immediate political environment. Picking his way through Boethian themes – in-
dividual *gloria*, imperial *fama*, diversity of custom, praise and blame, the incomplete-
ness of the written record – he condenses ideas, rearranges them, and reconditions
their import to achieve a completely different effect that is utterly coherent on its own
terms. Decisively, he leaves behind the grand distinctions between heaven and earth
that frame the Boethian account, dilating instead on what it means to be known in
one's own time and place, how praise and blame are fugitive because political life is
ever contingent. Ian Cornelius has described Usk's appropriation of the *Consolatio* as at
once comprehensive and historically particularized (Cornelius 2016, 284), and there is
no better witness to that historical particularity than this passage. It is certainly an ex-
ercise in perfecting an English prose style that can rival the movements of Boethius'
Latin for joining a minor premise to a major premise. Take this sentence (in bold):

> Howe shulde than the name of a synguler Londenoys passe [*go beyond*] the gloryous name of
> London, whiche by many it is commended, and by many it is lacked [*blamed*], and in many mo
> places in erthe nat knowen than knowen?

The thought process of this passage ascends from the tiny particularity of a single
Londoner (Thomas Usk) to the wide renown of London itself, which is both praised
and blamed by many, but which is ultimately to many more around the world an un-
known entity, a tiny point in the vast heavens and even in the earth itself. The idea is
inspired by Boethius' "An ubi Romani nominis transire fama nequit, Romani hominis
gloria progredietur?" (Or, where the fame of Rome's name cannot go, shall the glory

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**6** Emendations in this quoted passage are based on the apparatuses in the editions by Shoaf (1998)
and Shawver (2002).

of a Roman man advance?) Usk's reversal of that order, beginning with the single Londoner and building to the glory of London itself, is a beautiful unwinding and simplification of the hypotactic structure of the Latin prose. We even have a hint of Usk's rhetorical training, where he foregrounds the detail of praise and blame, the essential components of epideictic rhetoric: thus where London is known in the world, it is the subject of praise or blame, but even that attention does not carry its repute to distant parts.

There are other ways to assess how Usk's prose bears the imprint of professional training in *dictamen.* He would most likely have received instruction in the *cursus,* an accentual rhythm for Latin prose which was part of the teaching of the *artes dictaminis.* The *cursus* was used as a kind of ornamentation, especially at the ends of clauses, and it was so pervasive that it was considered applicable to almost any official prose communication (Denholm-Young 1946; Denholm-Young 2003; Cornelius 2010, 289–330). Because later medieval Latin had become accent-based, the Latin *cursus* could be imitated in a vernacular prose such as English that used a similar distribution of rising and falling cadences (Schlauch 1960, 574–575). Given that Usk knew prose rhythms, it is inevitable that we would find examples of the *cursus* in his prose, although his use of them in English was likely more intuitive than studied, a transference from Latin into English born of a certain familiarity. A micro-analysis would certainly turn up *cursus*-like cadences such as, in the passage just quoted, ´--´-´- (velox): the **glór**yous **náme** of **Lón**don; or ´--´- (planus): **knów**en than **knów**en. Such cadence is a formal principle that is both ornamental (making effects that gratify the ear) and structural (dividing and emphasizing ideas). We cannot not put too much weight on this by itself, as these effects may come as much from his reading of other English prose, including Chaucer's, as from his professional knowledge of the Latin *cursus*; in other words, he may have picked up the sounds of English prose from vernacular reading rather than from his professional use of Latin (Schlauch 1960; Cornelius 2018, 31). But taken together with his sensitive recasting of Boethian syntax, such cadences can show another level of response to the ulterior motivation of the *Consolatio.* What Usk is translating is not a text but a style, a way of writing and hearing philosophical argument. As Johnson has put it, the *Testament* experiments with the logic of prose style to produce a transformative work (Johnson 2013, 178).

Intersecting social histories both enabled and determined Usk's philosophical "translation": the turbulent London politics of the 1380s which enabled the rise of an obscure "local boy" to a position of (dubious) prominence as the object of parliamentary vengeance; and the notarial or scrivening trade, which afforded him an education into Latin and vernacular letters and literature, and which also gave him a professional profile as a member of a class active in almost any urban center across medieval Europe. As an experiment in vernacular style, the *Testament* in turn contributes to the current of intellectual history that would, in the early modern period, begin to see the ascendancy of vernaculars over Latin for philosophical prose. Usk's *Testament* is a rich testcase for studying the invention of vernacular philosophical prose and the conditions that made it possible. Usk grafts style, that "untranslatable", onto a new vernacular

idiom of philosophy. In this his work and its context merit comparison with those of his more famous or at least prolific contemporaries: John Trevisa as well as Chaucer in English; in Italian, Brunetto Latini, Dante, and Boccaccio's philosophical expositions of his *Teseida*; and in French, of course, Oresme, Evrart de Conty, Raoul de Presles, and Denis Foulechat. Moreover, if Usk's prose bears the imprint of professional training in *dictamen*, it would be unsurprising if one common thread of vernacular philosophy across late-medieval western Europe was the stylistic workshops of the *dictatores*, the notaries and letter writers whose practical knowledge of Latin gave them a special sensitivity to the rhythms and syntax of prose. Perhaps Usk's stylistic proficiency was as singular as his unfortunate biography, but I venture, rather, that his work offers a paradigm for broader study of the rise of vernacular philosophical prose.

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