

Schlauch, Margaret

## The two styles of Thomas Usk

*Brno studies in English*. 1969, vol. 8, iss. 1, pp. [167]-172

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/118055>

Access Date: 30. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

## THE TWO STYLES OF THOMAS USK

MARGARET SCHLAUCH

*University of Warsaw*

Thomas Usk played a minor role in the factional struggles of London during the 1380's. At first he supported the party of the non-victualler anti-royal merchants and acted as their liaison with John of Gaunt. Later he adhered to the party of victuallers, led by Nicholas Brembre, and turned informer against his previous associates. He issued an 'Appeal' against them (1384). Still later the anti-royal baronial party overthrew the victuallers in the Merciless Parliament. Both Brembre and Usk were imprisoned and finally executed.<sup>1</sup>

Two documents, strikingly different in style and linguistic usage, were written by Usk in connexion with these events. Besides the 'Appeal' already mentioned, he composed in prison a long philosophical piece in Boethian-Chaucerian vein called *The Testament of Love (TL)*. Let us compare the two.

The 'Appeal'<sup>2</sup> has a style consonant with its purpose, which is primarily legal. Yet it contains dramatic charges forcefully enunciated.

A conspicuous trait is the use of verbal repetition and the clustering of synonyms and near-synonyms. This seems to be prompted rather by traditional legal usage than any striving for literary effect. For instance: a patent to the mair... be wichie patent yt was fully assented (26); a-yeins the grete men of the town, & ayeins the officers ek (24); they... be confederacie, congregacion & couyne purposed (29); they han euerich of hem on hys syde stired, confedred, & conspired the matirs to-forn nempned (29); be meigtened euer more afterward with strength of meigtenance (24).

The names of persons accused by Usk regularly appear at the ends of sentences, preceded by the locution 'and herof I apele...' The repetitive device may suggest oratorical indignation, but the formula itself was legal, not literary.

Alliteration appears in some expressions, occasionally associated with an echoing of cognate word-forms, but it is not conspicuous. Here are examples: in this wyse, whan the worthy & wysest of the town had left (24); so that thilk ordinances sholde bothe be stablissed by statut & be meigtened ek by myght of people (25); [a]tte thilk parlement, was pursuwed a patent (26); in the comun conseil of craftes, & after the wardeyns of craftes (28); to meigtene by myght their fals and wykked menyng (29).

Sentence structure and ordering of parts is not particularly complicated in the 'Appeal'. True, there are some quite long sentences, but they are loose rather than periodic. Here and there Usk introduces colloquial turns of expression, as when he says that John Northampton, leader of the non-victuallers, might have 'sette al the town in a rore' (27). The report of his mission with two others to John of Gaunt is lively indeed. It has the ring of authentic speech. First the delegation addresses Lancaster:

'Sir [they say], to day, ther we w[olde] haue go to the eleccion of the mair in goddes peas & the kynges, ther kom in an orrible companye of criers, no man not wh[ic]he, & [t]her, with oute any vsage but be strength, chosen Sir Nichol Brembre mair, a-yein our maner of eleccion to-forn thys vsed; wher-fore we preye yow yf we myght haue the kynges writ to go to a Newe aleccion' (28).

To this the Duke replies vigorously: 'Nay, certes, writ shul ye non haue, auise yow amonges yowr selue' (28). The inverted word order here exemplified is of course not at all exceptional in Middle English, but it is very effective. Compare also Northampton's statement: 'Sirs, thus be ye shape for to be ouer-ronne, & that,' quod he, 'I nel noght soeffre' (28). It is difficult of course to estimate the effect of such inversions on a 14th-century reader, since these were more familiar to him than they are to us.<sup>3</sup>

Very different is the effect created by Usk's *Testament of Love* (hereafter abbreviated *TL*). It is written in the first person and reports a colloquy between the author and an allegorical Lady Margaret<sup>4</sup> who visits him in prison. The situation is of course analogous to that of Boethius, and the influence of *Consolatio Philosophiae* (via Chaucer's translation) is unmistakable throughout. Much of Book I is devoted to Usk's account, not too clearly given, of the political struggles which landed him in prison, and his self-justification. The dialogue then passes over to topics such as the transitoriness of worldly bliss, the nature of true happiness, and the problem of free will versus predestination. The development of this last topic, central to Book III, closely follows that of St Anselm in his highly abstract and intellectual *De Concordia prescientiae et praedestinationis*,<sup>5</sup> with many passages directly taken over, especially in chs. 2—4 and 8—9. Within the same text we can thus observe Usk sometimes freely composing, sometimes imitating his admired Chaucer, and sometimes closely translating St Anselm.

The style of *TL* is throughout distinctly mannered. All sorts of linguistic devices are exploited for planned effect with a frequency probably unparalleled in any other Middle English text.

An extended analysis might be made of Usk's style throughout his *TL*, both the original and translated parts. For present purposes, however, it will be sufficient to concentrate chiefly on one short passage in Book I, ch. 3. Here Usk tells of his flight by ship from a forest inhabited by beasts gone wild. Taken aboard by allegorical characters named Sight, Lust, Thought and Will, the fugitive had experienced a violent storm ending in shipwreck on an island where the Lady Margaret saved him from despair. This lively passage offers a hitherto unnoted analogue to the allegorical experience recorded by John Gower in his *Vox Clamantis* (Lib. I): flight from domestic beasts temporarily deranged (i.e., the English populace during the Revolt of 1381), refuge aboard a ship (the Ship of State), storm, harborage on an island (here obviously Britain, still in social disorder). Usk does not follow Gower verbally, but similarities in detail as well as general conception can be pointed out.<sup>7</sup>

Both authors dream that they are walking abroad alone, Gower in flowery fields, Usk in the lanes of a great forest. Both are terrified by the spectacle of maddened animals. Gower stresses the horror of their transformation from tame to wild: *Qui fuerant domiti nuper, modo fronte minaci / Cornibus elatis debita iura negant* (I. 427 f.). Usk too encounters 'heerdes gonne to wilde' and finds the transformation similarly horrible, since 'nothing is werse than the beestes that shulden ben tame, if they cacche her wildenesse, and ginnen ayein waxe ramage [i.e., wild]' (15). Gower's stormy sea waters overwhelm the land and threaten the ship: ...*maris vnda nimis*

aucta subegit humum./Seuiit in nauem ventis discordibus aura,/ Et maris in remos vnda coacta ruit (I. 1632—34). Usk's ocean seems not dissimilarly to threaten the skies: 'this ship began to move, the wind and water gan for to ryse, and overthwartly to turne the welken' (16). Gower's ship, having escaped the storm, reaches an island at that time even more dangerous than Scylla itself (I. 1952 f.). Usk also is driven to an island which seems a truly 'perillous... haven to cacche' (16), until the Lady Margaret saves and guides him. Gower meets with a crowd of people and questions one of them about the island. Usk on the other hand becomes aware, not of people but 'bothe of beestes and of fisshes, a greet nombre thronging togider' (16). From this point on the two texts diverge completely.

Now as to the stylistic and linguistic traits of this passage, which is typical of the entire *TL*. Some of these are based on sound effects.

In the first place, Usk now indulges very abundantly in alliteration, as in this description already referred to:

... the wind and water gan for to ryse, and overthwartly to turne the welken. The wawes semeden as they kiste togider; but often under colour of kissinge is mokel old hate prively closed and kept. The storm so straungely and in a devouring maner gan so faste us assayle, that I supposed the date of my deth shulde have mad there his ginning (16).

Examples could be multiplied from other parts of *TL*, for instance these taken from a few lines of Bk. I, ch. 1: with swete thy sustenance to beswinke [the reference is to Adam]; Depe in this pyninge pitte with wo I ligge y-stocked; ...ne is cable in no lande maked, that might strecche to me; ne steyers to steye is none; Now than, farwel frendship! and farwel felawes! (6). It will be noticed that one alliterative phrase, 'steyers to steye,' also involves *adnominatio* or juxtaposition of cognate forms.

In the second place, Usk's prose is highly rhythmical according to the patterns of *cursus* recognized by medieval theoreticians.<sup>8</sup> At the ends of clauses (*cola*) he favours *cursus planus* (a sequence 'x x' x) or the abbreviated form I have elsewhere<sup>9</sup> called *cursus anglicus* ('x x'), a choriamb due to loss of final unaccented -e in late Middle English, or sometimes a dactylic rhythm resembling *cursus tardus* ('x x' x x) or occasionally *cursus velox* ('x x' x' x). Alliteration is quite often combined with *cursus*:<sup>10</sup> as lanes with lādels their māste to séche (catalectic *velox*); this shíp gan to móve (*anglicus*); the wind and water gán for to ríse (*anglicus*); prively clósed and képt (*anglicus*); so fāste us assáyle (*anglicus*); shulde have mád there his gíning (*planus*). These cadences, drawn from a few lines (15 f.), could be supplemented from every page of the *TL*.

Echoing of words and cognates is another favourite trick of Usk's, already referred to and illustrated. Another typical example appears a bit after our passage:

and more kyndely love have I to that place than to any other in erthe, as every kyndely creature hath ful appetyte to that place of his kyndly engendrure (28).

In closely reasoned passages, both original and translated, the repetition of words is sometimes dictated by the requirements of clarity, as here in a later section:

for somthing is comming without necessitè, and god wot that tofor; for al thing comming he before wot, and that he befor wot of necessitè is comming, as he befor wot be the case by necessary maner; or els, thorow necessitè, is somthing to be without necessitè... For truely, it is necessary that god have forweting of thing withouten any necessitè cominge (111).

The Latin original<sup>11</sup> has similar repetition of words like *nesesse*, *necessitas*, *praescit*, *futurum*.

Such repetitions and verbal echoes are closely related to the use of paired synonyms, at times amounting to tautology, as in the 'Appeal'. *TL* frequently shows this usage, though not in the short passage here chosen for analysis.<sup>12</sup> The effect is distinctly literary, not legal.

Choice of words and their juxtaposition is sometimes quite striking. After the account of his allegorical shipwreck Usk says of himself: I walowe and I thinke (17); later: Daunger [hath] laced me in stockes (18); still later: Lo, thus I brenne and I drenche; I shiver and I swete (19). The verbs and nouns evoke concrete images effectively in other passages besides, as in this picture of worldly churchmen:

that volunatrie lustes haunten in courte with ribaudye, that til midnight and more wol playe and wake, but in the churche at matins he<sup>13</sup> is behynde, for yvel disposicion of his stomake; therefore he shulde ete bene-breed (and so did his syre) his estate ther-with to strengthen. His auter is broke, and lowe lyth, in poynte to gon to the erthe: but his hors muste ben esy and hye, to bere him over grete waters. His chalice poore, but he hath riche cuppes... (51, with a continuing series of contrasts).

Homely, sometimes very colloquial expressions are introduced, especially in the more rapid interchanges with Lady Margaret. They contrast sharply with the artificial style prevailing in longer speeches. The device anticipates Lyly's in *Euphues* by two centuries. Just before the storm scene the Lady replies briskly to Usk's complaints: Come of, therefore, and let me seen thy hevvy charge (14 f.). Of the people he had formerly served she remarks: If they hadden gotten their purpose, of thy misaventure sette they nat an hawe (33). Of those ignorant of true love she exclaims: Do way, do way; they knowe nothing of this (40); and about men's fickleness towards women: Is this fair? Nay, god wot (55).

Nevertheless most of Usk's sentences are highly formalized. He has a veritable passion for inverted word order. He persistently strives to place a verbal form at the end of a phrase or clause, by no means always in accordance with the traditional patterns of English order. In this respect he deviates from the usage of the 'Appeal'. On a single page we find: that I may the lightlier for thy comfort purveye; list not to wander mervayles to seche; take in herte of luste to travayle; the grete beestes that the woode haunten; forsothe was I a-ferd, and to shippe me hyed (15). A bit later Usk paraphrases the demagogic appeals (as he now sees it) of the leaders he had once supported. He charges that they

also styred innocentes of conning to crye after thinges, whiche (quod they) may not stande but we ben executours of the maters, and auctorite of execucion by comen eleccion to us *be delivered*.... For we out of such degree *put*, oppression of these olde hindrers shal ageyn ageyn *surmounten*, and putten you in such subjeccion, that in endelesse wo ye *shul complayne* (28; italics added).

An exhaustive study of *TL* might well reveal a correlation between this sort of inversion and the achievement of *cursus* effects.

Though Usk's stylistic artificialities are for the most part foreign to modern taste, he can nevertheless produce effects that still appeal to us, especially when he introduces vivid images into his otherwise abstract discourse. He describes the autumnal season of his allegorical experience thus:

in tyme whan Octobre his love ginneth take and Novembre sheweth him to sight, whan bernes ben ful of goodes as is the nutte on every halke; and than good lond-tillers ginne shape for the erthe with greet travayle, to bringe forth more corn to mannes sustenance, ayenst the nexte yeres folowing (15).

Here the parallel syntactic structure reinforces the sequence of pictorial images. Descriptions of the seasons represent a well-known medieval *topos*, but not all writers handled them equally well. The storm at sea is also well portrayed by Usk; for some readers the repetitions strengthened by alliteration may actually suggest the onset of seasickness, and the dominant sibilants—the whistling of the winds. Lady Margaret laments men's defection from her in a series of concrete images. Although really alienated from her,

yet sayn some that they me have in celler with wyne shed; in gernere, there corn is layd covered with whete; in sacke, sowed with wolle; in purse, with money faste knit; among pannes mouled in a whicche [i.e., chest]; in presse, among clothes layd, with riche pelure arayed; in stable, among hors and other beestes, as hogges, sheep, and neet; and in many other wyse (50; note the rime effect of *layd: arayed*).

All of these Uskian traits indicate that the author of *TL* laboured to produce a highly-wrought literary effect by the instrumentality of his language. John Lyly was surely no more conscious in his own striving. The 'Appeal' on the other hand shows Usk employing a quite different style, more appropriate to his forensic purpose. The contrast indicates that he was aware of the possibility of choice, which is an essential for the practitioner of literary style. His achievement may not have been great, but it is truly significant in the history of English prose.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The general situation is clearly set forth by G. Unwin, *The Guilds & Companies of London* (London, 1938). For Usk's part in these events see R. Bressie, 'A Study of Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love* as an Autobiography', University of Chicago, Abstracts of Theses 7. 517—21 (Chicago, 1928—9).
- <sup>2</sup> Ed. R. W. Chambers and M. Daunt, *A Book of London English, 1384—1425* (Oxford, 1931). age references are from this edition. Expanded abbreviations are not indicated.
- <sup>3</sup> The chronicler Higden reports carefully the oral denunciation of Northampton by Usk at the trial in Reading. Even in the Latin rendering the vigor of the original wording is perceptible, *Polychronicon* 9. 45 f. Compare this with the opening of the 'Appeal' in English.
- <sup>4</sup> Just what the Lady is supposed to represent is not clear. As embodiment of the New Testament pearl of great price (Matth. 13: 45—6) she seems to stand for the Kingdom of Heaven or human aspiration to it. The concept has obvious similarities with that underlying the ME poem *Pearl*. But Usk has also made use of some concepts of courtly love in relation to Margaret. See S. K. Henninger, Jr., 'The Margarite-Pearl Allegory in Thomas Usk's *Testament of Love*', *Speculum* 32. 92—8 (Cambridge Mass., 1957).
- <sup>5</sup> *Patrologia Latina* 158. cols. 507—40.
- <sup>6</sup> Page references in parentheses follow the standard edition by W. W. Skeat in his *Chaucerian and Other Pieces* (Oxford, 1897).
- <sup>7</sup> Ed. G. C. Macaulay in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, vol. 4 (Oxford, 1902).
- <sup>8</sup> I have briefly alluded to Usk's fondness for prose rhythm, along with other devices, in my article 'The Art of Chaucer's Prose', *Chaucer and Chaucerians*, ed. D. S. Brewer 161 (London: Nelson, 1966).
- <sup>9</sup> *PMLA* 65. 568—89 (New York, 1950).
- <sup>10</sup> We assume that in prose discourse final *-e* was unpronounced, as often in poetry as well.
- <sup>11</sup> Anselm, *op. cit.*, col. 508 A.
- <sup>12</sup> Typical examples are: let me deye, let me sterve (5); companyes that loos, prise and name yeven (42); no disese, no care, no tene (60, with emphatic repetition of *no*); the springes of May faden and falowen (77, with alliteration).
- <sup>13</sup> Interesting is the shift here from the plural antecedent *suche* to the generic singular pronoun *he*. On this usage I have written a note in *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* 5. 235—9 (Warsaw, 1958).

## RESUMÉ

### Dva styly Thomase Uska

Thomas Usk, současník Chaucerův, zanechal dvě prozaická díla, po stylistické stránce výrazně odlišná. První z nich, denunziace bývalých politických druhů, je psáno prostým stylem, především právníckým, ale místy i hovorovým, bez ozdob. Naproti tomu je *The Testament of Love* neobyčejně vyumělkovaný. Je užito aliterace, rytmických vzorců (cursus), paronomasie, nepřirozeně obráceného slovosledu apod., vedle obrazného vyjadřování a alegorie. Usk vědomě experimentoval se stylistickými možnostmi angličtiny.