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William Caxton—The Beginning of Printing in England

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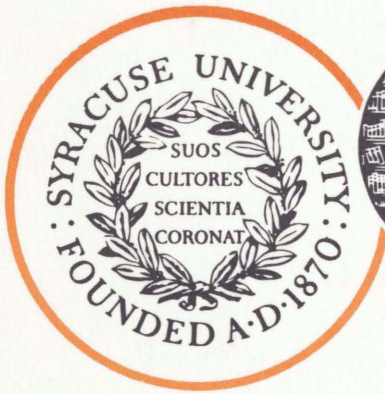
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William Caxton — The Beginning of Printing in England

by Antje B. Lemke

This article is adapted from a lecture given at the Annual Meeting of Syracuse University Library Associates, April 28, 1977.

The year 1977 marked the five-hundredth anniversary of the first book printed in England, William Caxton's edition of *Dictes and Sayings of Philosophers*, in his own English translation, an event which was celebrated in many parts of the English-speaking world. Two of the rarest fifteenth-century items in Special Collections at Syracuse University are from Caxton's press: Caxton's own translation of Virgil's *The Boke of Eneydos (Aeneid)*, printed about 1490, and an English translation of Cicero's essays, "De Senectude" and "De Amicitia" in one volume (1481).

Caxton had a sense of the importance of print which deserves attention today, as our mass communications media multiply. Printing is as essential to our civilization as it is pervasive. Compared to the ephemeral qualities of audio and visual communications, the permanence of print gives the printer/publisher a responsibility which Caxton recognized five hundred years ago.

William Caxton pondered issues that are of concern to today's publishers and editors: how to provide information not only accurately, but also entertainingly, so it would be read and have some impact. Caxton was concerned greatly, also, about the educational responsibility of the press. Thus, Caxton is to us more than a great figure of the past; he is a man with whom we have much in common.

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An attempt to discuss Caxton's personal life would be as futile as the effort to find biographic details of a medieval artist or musician. There is, to the best of our knowledge, no private correspondence; there are no diaries, no pictures of how he looked, and we know nothing about his family, not even his birthdate. Yet, while we know nothing about the private aspects of his life, we have rich sources concerning his work as printer, publisher, author, translator, and critic.

In his eloquent prologues Caxton conveys a lively picture of his aspirations in this new profession and of the special circumstances under which his books were created. Early printers often told their readers in great detail, and not without emotion, why they had selected a certain piece of literature, and what the fine qualities — or the difficulties in production — of the particular book were. This prologue usually concluded with an elaborate dedication to a supporter of the work, or a ruler from whom the printer desired protection.

Gutenberg's 42 line Bible did not have a prologue; indeed there was no title page, and the printer was not identified. Only the artist who added colored initials and decorations added the date on which he completed his work. The reason for this is simple: Gutenberg wanted his masterpiece to appear to be a manuscript, — the most beautiful, aesthetically perfect black letter gothic Bible. He anticipated that it would take some time before people would accept his invention. So the first copies were sold as manuscripts.

The secret could not be kept very long, and it is interesting to see how printing, as the first mechanical means of mass production, was looked upon by many as black magic, as the devil's invention, and as a cheap, despicable medium that might devalue the aesthetic beauty of handmade objects. Many scholars stated that they would not read a printed book because they did not trust a text produced without the process of individual penmanship and individual editing. This resistance was one of the reasons printers wrote elaborate prologues, advertising and describing the book, as well as describing their personal credentials and efforts in the production.

In the preface to his first book *Recuyell of the History of Troy* (a translation of a French version of Homer's *Iliad*), Caxton tells his readers that he grew up in the "Weald of Kent," an area considered backward in fifteenth-century England. Since there is no other evidence of his birth, Caxton scholars today ask, whether, with this remark, he indicated that it did not really matter where he came from — as we might say, "I come from Podunk."

Here foloweth the said Tullius de Amicia translated in
to our maternall English tongue by the noble famous
Erle, The Erle of Wurcestre sone & heire to the lord tyn-
toft, Which in his tyme floured in vertue & cunning, to
Whom I knowe none lyke amonge the lordes of the tem-
poralite in science & moral vertue, I beseeche almyghty god
to haue mercy on his soule/ & praye al them that shal here
or rede this litle treatys moche vertuous of frendship in li-
ke wise of your charitee to remembre his soule among your
prayers, And by cause this werke was made by the prin-
ce of Eloquence Tullius intituled de Amicia after that
he had achieved his booke de senectute, as hertofore ye maye
more playnly see at large/ thene me seemeth it requisite &
necessarye that I sette in folowing the said booke/ this booke
de Amicia, Whiche by goddes grace shal playnly folowe

¶ Cicero de Amicia

Quintus Mucius Augur Seuola, This
was his name, Whiche was wonte to telle
many thynges merely / And by mynde of
Celius Telyus his fader in lawe/ And he
was not aserue to call hym a wise man in all his sayen-
ges, To the Whiche Seuola I was put by my fader /
And after that I had taken the clothyng due to the
estate of man / While I myght or that it was seeful
to come so to doo, I neuer departed fro that good olde
mannys syde/ of Whom I lerned many thynges disputed
riperly, And many thynges said compendiously, And be-
houely suche I haue away, wyng my payne by meanes

a 1

Through projection, we can assume that Caxton was born between 1416 and 1422. England, in his day, was marked by civil and religious strife. Four kings ruled in his lifetime, and the church responded to the attacks on the dogma and on the institution by ever stricter control measures. No Englishman was permitted to read the Bible in English, which explains why (in contrast to continental printers) Caxton never printed a Bible. The first English Bible was not printed until 1535 and then on the continent, in Switzerland. (Caxton did include some Bible stories in his *Golden Legend* which, according to Samuel Butler, became one of the principle instruments in preparing the way for the Reformation.)

In 1415, about the time of Caxton's birth, Parliament had enacted: "that whosoever they were, that should read the Scriptures in their mother tongue should forfeit land, cattle, body, life, and goods from their heirs forever, and be condemned for heretics and should suffer death in two manners: that is, first be hanged for treason against the King and then be burned for heresy against God."¹

On the other hand, public elementary education had been encouraged by an earlier act of Parliament, and the demand for books, pamphlets, ballad sheets, and the like was great. The need for a fast means of reproduction was felt everywhere.

Such was the climate when William Caxton started out as a young textile merchant's apprentice in London in 1439. After three years, upon the death of his master, he left England for the Low Countries. Burgundy, and especially the city of Bruges had become a major cultural center under Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. Scholars, poets, artists, scribes, and bookbinders were employed by the Duke, and when Caxton was appointed Governor of the Company of English Merchants in Bruges in 1462, he participated in the life of the court.

Among the most popular literary works in those days were the tales of classical heroes: Ulysses, Alexander, and Aeneas. (The Dukes of Burgundy claimed to be descendants of these Greek and Roman heroes.) Caxton must have enjoyed these texts, since we find many of them in his later English publications.

In 1470, when Caxton was around fifty years old, he resigned from his position as governor and entered the services of Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, wife of Charles the Bold, and sister of Edward IV. While Caxton had most likely been interested in French literature for some time, it was during this period that he considered translating what he enjoyed, to share it with his countrymen.

¹John C. Tarr, *William Caxton, the Man and His Work*, Salt Lake City, Utah, 1934.

As he wrote and distributed the first of his translations, it soon became apparent that there was a great demand for his texts. Thus Caxton, in his fifties, decided to learn the new art of printing. He went to Cologne, a center of the trade, and acquired the skill to become a prolific printer. His first book was published on the continent, in Bruges, in 1474. At the end of the 700 page volume, the aforementioned *Recuyell of the History of Troy*, Caxton writes of how Margaret encouraged him to pursue this difficult project and how she even made corrections of his own rude English. The book is, of course, dedicated to “the right, high, excellent, and virtuous lady Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy,” and he tells his readers that he translated and printed this volume:

...because I have promised to divers gentlemen and to my friends to address them as hastily as I might this said book, therefore I have practised and learned, at my great charge and expense, to ordain this said book in print, after the manner and form as you may here see; and it is not written with pen and ink as other books are, to the end that every man may have them at once. For all the books of this story named the *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*, this imprinted as ye see here, were begun in one day, and also finished in one day. Which book I presented to my said redoubted lady as afore is said, and she hath well accepted it and largely rewarded me.²

That this “one day” can be taken literally is doubtful. It is most likely a symbolic phrase to show the speed of printing as compared with writing. We know that Caxton, like many other early printers, did not have a very large supply of type. He usually set one page at a time, printed 200 — 250 sheets from this, and then broke up the type to set it for the new page.

Caxton printed two other books in Bruges. One, on the popular game of chess, became a famous guide to the rules of the game, with many interesting social and political undertones. The other book had the rather lugubrious title, *Quatre Dernier Choses: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell*. In a later edition, published in England, he changed the title to *Cordyale!*

After these first ventures as a printer, Caxton returned to London. He had lived abroad for thirty years. The first book printed in England in 1477, the cause for Quincentennial celebration, was the *Dictes and Sayings of Philosophers*, a collection of excerpts from Greek philo-

²Richard Deacon, *A Biography of William Caxton*, London, 1976, p. 87.

sophers, first gathered and translated into French by the renowned Italian/French scholar, Christine de Pisan. This book was not translated by Caxton himself, but by his friend and patron from the days in Burgundy, Anthony Warwick, the Earl Rivers, brother-in-law of Edward IV. This is the Earl Rivers who fell into disgrace after the death of Edward IV and who, in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, exclaims:

Sir Richard Ratcliffe, let me tell thee this:
Today shalt thou behold a subject die
For truth, for duty, and for loyalty.

We find many references to him in Caxton's work and he must, indeed, have been a loyal friend. There is one amusing incident concerning Earl Rivers's translation of the *Dictes*. He apparently left out a chapter concerning women. So Caxton translated it himself and tells us the following in the preface to this book:

I find that my said lord hath left out certain and divers conclusions touching women....I suppose that some fair lady hath desired him to leave it out of his book; or else he was amorous on some noble lady, for whose love he would not set it in his book; or else for the very affection, love, and good will that he hath unto all ladies and gentlewomen, he thought Socrates...wrote of women more than truth; which I cannot think that so true a man so noble a philosopher as Socrates was, should write otherwise than truth...Socrates was a Greek, born in a far country from hence, which country is all of other conditions than this is, and men and women of other nature than they be here in this country; for...of whatsoever condition women be in Greece, the women of this country be right good, wise, pleasant, humble, discreet, sober, chaste, obedient to their husbands, true, secret, stedfast, ever busy, and never idle, attemperate in speaking, and virtuous in all their works; or at least should be so...Asmuch as I had commandment of my said lord to correct and amend where I should find fault, and other find I none save that he hath left out these Dictes and Sayings of the Women of Greece, therefore in accomplishing his commandment..., I purpose to write these same sayings of that Greek Socrates, which wrote of those women of Greece, and nothing of them of this royaume, whom I suppose he never knew.³

³Charles Knight, *William Caxton, the First English Printer*, London, 1844, pp. 166-167.



Caxton's famous printer's mark from the *Boke of Eneydos*, translated from French, printed, and published by William Caxton about 1490. (George Arents Research Library for Special Collections, Syracuse University)

One of the characteristics of Caxton's publishing, that was so different from early books in other countries, was his publication of popular literature, rather than scholarly books or Bibles. It was his mission, and he states so in several prologues, to contribute toward a literary English, while maintaining simple expressions that could be as widely understood as possible. He expresses the hope that through his efforts people would become happier, more civilized and more cultured.

One of Caxton's main contributions is, in fact, his untiring effort to standardize the English language. This was a difficult task in a country in which so many different dialects were spoken, and where the vernacular was just coming into its own. Latin and French had been, as we know, the language of the educated classes for over four centuries. In one of his prologues he gives us a vivid description of his predicament.

After he recommends the reading of Virgil's *Aeneas* "as well for eloquence as for history," he tells us about his linguistic struggles:

After divers works made, translated, and achieved, having no work in hand, I, sitting in my study whereas lay many divers pamphlets and books, [it] happened that to my hand came a little book in French, which late was translated out of Latin by some noble clerk of France, which book is named "Eneydos," made in Latin by that noble poet... Virgil...in which book I had great pleasure, because of the fair and honest terms and words in French, which I never saw to-fore like, nor none so pleasant nor so well ordered, which book as me seemed should be much requisite to noble men to see as well for the eloquence as the histories... I (determined) and concluded to translate it into English... took a pen and ink and wrote a leaf or twain, which I oversaw again to correct it. And when I saw the fair and strange terms therein, I doubted that it should not please some gentlemen which late blamed me, saying that in my translation I had over-curious terms which could not be understood to common people and desired me to use old and homely terms in my translations.⁴

⁴Curt C. Buhler, "Caxton's Prologue to *Eneydos*, rendered into present-day English by Curt C. Buhler," in *William Caxton and His Critics*, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1960, p. 27.

Caxton then gives several examples of the difficulties he has encountered, including the following:

...in my days [it] happened that certain merchants were in a ship in [the] Thames for to have sailed over the sea into Zeeland, and for lack of wind they tarried at the Foreland, and went to land for to refresh them. And one of them named Sheffield, a mercer, came into an house and asked for meat, and specially he asked after “egges,” and the good wife answered that she could speak no French. And the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but would have had eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last another said that he would have “eyren”; then the good wife said that she understood him well. Lo! What should a man in these days now write, “egges” or “eyren”? Certainly it is hard to please every man, because of diversity and change of language. For in these days every man that is in any reputation in his country will utter his communication and matters in such manners and terms that few men shall understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me and desired me to write the most curious terms that I could find. And thus between plain rude and curious, I stand abashed. But in my judgment, the common terms that be daily used be lighter to be understood than the old and ancient English... Therefore, in a mean between both, I have reduced and translated this said book into our English not over-rude nor curious, but in such terms as shall be understood, by God’s grace, according to my copy.⁵

One method of bringing classical or continental texts to life, and to make them appealing to English readers — a method which Caxton used liberally, — was the substitution of English localities for foreign places, or the addition of recent events to older texts. In one book, for example, he substituted London for a Dutch city. And it must have been patriotism when, in the *Mirror of the World*, he left out uncomplimentary descriptions of Englishmen, and added Oxford and Cambridge, whenever Paris was mentioned as a center of learning.

⁵Ibid.

Over the centuries Caxton has sometimes been criticized for casual printing, missing letters, and missing lines, which testify to poor proofreading. It is correct, that Caxton did not create perfect copies, as Gutenberg or Aldus Manutius did, but it must be remembered that his aims were different, and he should not be seen as a printer only.

The content of his books has also been judged harshly by many a puritan. The *History of Troy* was called “lewd, much like the unsavory doings of Orestes.” The eighteenth-century historian Edward Gibbon criticized Caxton for his choice of authors:

...that liberal and industrious artist was reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers; to gratify the nobles with treatises on heraldry, hawking and the game of chess, and to amuse the popular credulity with romances of fabulous knights and legends of more fabulous saints.⁶

These statements tell more about the critics than about Caxton, whose influence in his own and in the following centuries can hardly be overestimated.

This is not the occasion to review all of Caxton’s work, but it is amazing to find how many of his later publications deal with popular issues that are again, or still, of interest in the twentieth-century. For example, the delightful volume, *Of Old Age, Friendship, and the Declamation of Noblesse*, dedicated to Sir John Falstaff, would be fascinating reading for modern gerontologists. In his preface, Caxton recommends this volume to “noble, virtuous, and well disposed men who are getting along in years, and may find advise and consolation in it.”

Shakespeare was familiar with Caxton’s work, and often inspired by it. Specific instances have been traced from Caxton’s *History of Troy* and the *Book of Jason* to *Troilus and Cressida*, from Caxton’s *Knight of the Tower* to the *Taming of the Shrew*. It is doubtful that the works of Chaucer would have been as widely read in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, had Caxton not made them available. In printing Chaucer, Caxton faced problems common to early printers. The manuscripts were in private hands, and they varied considerably in their texts, since they were produced by different copyists. Thus the editing, comparisons of different versions, and final selection constituted a difficult task. In the prologue to the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* he tells us about the criticisms he received after the publication of the first edition. But he also writes that “we ought to give a singular laud unto that noble and great philosopher, Geoffry Chaucer,

⁶Charles Knight, *William Caxton, the First English Printer*, London, 1844, p. 149.

who for this writing in our tongue, may well have the name of a laureate poet. He writes no void words but all his matter is full of high and quick sentence.... For of him all others have borrowed, and taken in all their well saying and writing.”⁷

When Caxton died in 1491 he had published, as far as we know, about 250 titles, i.e., around 150 books, and 100 pamphlets. He had edited all of the books, written some, and translated over twenty. Today Caxton editions are extremely rare. There is only one recorded copy of the *Golden Legend* (at the Rosenbach Collection in Philadelphia), and of other titles only two or three copies have survived. Syracuse University can be proud to own both Caxton’s edition of *The Aeneid* and Cicero’s two essays in Caxton’s own translation. Both books are gifts of Adrian Van Sinderen.

Caxton research is still in the beginning, and while he has been celebrated as the first English printer, it may well be that his contribution to the English language will become the most interesting aspect of his work. Through the freshness of his prologues he establishes immediate contact with his reader, and we feel some of the “noble chivalry, courtesey and humanity,” that he hoped to convey to his contemporaries.



⁷Richard Deacon, *A Biography of William Caxton*, London, 1976, p. 140.