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From Manuscripts to Printing

Devin Courtright

William Caxton has a remarkable place in print history. If Gutenberg is credited with the invention of modern printing, Caxton, an Englishman, is credited for bridging print to the English language. Before becoming a printer, Caxton was a merchant of England who traveled all around Europe trading wool and other medieval goods.¹

Caxton's success as a merchant and negotiator, for England's King Edward IV, eventually earned him the title of "Governor of the settlement of English merchants in Bruges."² It was through Edward IV that Caxton became acquainted with his sister Margaret of York, the Duchess of Burgundy.³ Because Caxton was an "enthusiastic reader and lover of books," he was willing to obey the Duchess's command to translate into English a medieval text popular in the Burgundian court known as *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, a historical romance originally written in Latin and later translated into French by Raoul Lefevre – detailing the history of Troy.⁴ "Despite experiencing a bit of despair" along the way, Caxton, thanks to Duchess Margaret's encouragement, eventually completed his translation of the historical romance for her.⁵ The details of this relationship between Caxton and the Duchess are not entirely clear; while most scholars think the Duchess was just Caxton's patron, N.F. Blake suggests that perhaps there might have been "a closer relationship" between the two.⁶ Whatever the case may be, a paradigm shift was occurring as Latin texts were translated into vernacular languages throughout Europe – especially in England.

While translating *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, Caxton's life became even more mysterious. Around this time the English throne was in turmoil, due to the feud between the House of Lancaster and the House of York in the Wars of the Roses. King Edward IV, from the House of York, was eventually dethroned by Henry VI, the previous king of England from the House of Lancaster, in 1469.⁷ While the war was going on, Caxton "suddenly left Flanders in the summer of 1471" and decided to stay in the German town of Cologne for eighteen months.⁸ Why did Caxton leave Bruges? And why did he move to Cologne? According to some scholars, it is thought that perhaps he was exiled to Cologne because his governorship was compromised when the house of York

¹ N.F. Blake, "William Caxton," *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages* (Hants, UK: Variorum, 1996), 10-18

² Lotte Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* (London, UK: The British Library, 1982), 14

³ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England*, 15

⁴ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* 13-15

⁵ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England*, 13

⁶ Blake, "William Caxton," *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 20

⁷ Blake, "William Caxton," *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 18

⁸ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England*, 15

lost power and as a result had to relinquish his title – which would mean Caxton got into printing by mere chance. Blake, however, disagrees with that notion, saying that was not the case at all because King Edward IV actually ascended back to the English throne in May 1471.⁹ Other sources, such as S.H. Steinberg, believe Caxton specifically wanted to move to Cologne to learn the new art of printing, “in order to publish the book (his translation of *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*) according to his own taste.”¹⁰ This would make sense because according to Blake, “Caxton’s decision to learn printing is one of which appears to have been planned over a period of time.”¹¹

When Caxton settled in Cologne, he finished his translation of *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* sometime in 1471-72.¹² It was around this time he also met up with Johannes Veldener, a German type-cutter and printer, who taught Caxton the art of the printing trade.¹³ This partnership worked out for both men because while Caxton learned the basics of printing, Veldener received compensation and large sums of financial capital from Caxton to fund their printing enterprise.¹⁴ As Blake would say, “Caxton bought himself into the printing trade.”¹⁵ Although Caxton eventually learned how to print, he did not design his own types but rather acquired the majority of the types he used from Veldener – which were Gothic in style, similar to the script seen in illuminated manuscripts.¹⁶ Veldener, according to Hellinga, “began his career in the printing business in Cologne where he must have designed types for several printers, whom he may also have assisted in other ways.”¹⁷ Not only was Veldener the ideal candidate to teach Caxton how to print, but the city of Cologne itself was an excellent location to learn the art of printing as well. At one point the largest and most densely inhabited city in Germany, Cologne was the “center of north-west German printing” since 1464.¹⁸ Caxton, being a merchant at the time, must have been aware of this when he decided to move there. Cologne also had “close connections with England,” which also made it a convenient and logical location for Caxton to look into.¹⁹

After learning the craft, Caxton, along with Veldener and his assistant Wynkyn de Worde, traveled back to Bruges in 1472 to open his first print shop.²⁰ It was there that Caxton printed his translation of *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, the “first

⁹ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 19

¹⁰ S.H. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing* (Delaware & London: Oak Knoll Press & The British Library, 1996) 47

¹¹ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 19

¹² Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 21

¹³ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 23

¹⁴ *Ibid*

¹⁵ *Ibid*

¹⁶ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 23

¹⁷ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England*, 51

¹⁸ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 28

¹⁹ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 23

²⁰ *Ibid*

English printed book,” in 1473-74 and dedicated it to Duchess Margaret.²¹ Although Veldener “helped in the early stages of the typesetting” for the *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, he and Caxton eventually went their separate ways in order to open his own print shop in the Flemish town of Louvain.²² However, they apparently left on good terms because even after his departure, Veldener still supplied Caxton with type.²³ While still in Bruges, Caxton also printed such works as *Game of Chess*, *Les Fais de Jason*, *Méditations sur les sept psaumes*, and *Quatre dernieres choses* in 1474.²⁴ Although the first text was translated from Latin to English by Caxton, the other three texts were printed in French.²⁵ Why would Caxton, an Englishman, print books in French? Blake suggests that Caxton “found it difficult to sell English books to customers in England while he and the printing press were in Bruges.”²⁶ In order to adapt and sustain his printing enterprise, Caxton recruited the calligrapher and bookseller Colard Mansion to better gauge the manuscript market in Bruges.²⁷ Mansion was an ideal business partner for Caxton because he had an established workshop that “produced luxurious manuscripts,” which would have easily caught Caxton’s attention while in Bruges.²⁸ In addition, Mansion also had close contacts with Flemish royalty/aristocracy and was a member of the Guild of St. John the Evangelist – which was “the corporation of the booksellers in Bruges.”²⁹ Once again Caxton found himself in a beneficial partnership because while Mansion benefitted from learning how to use a printing press, Caxton in return obtained from Mansion manuscripts and “information about what was being produced and read locally” in the Bruges – not to mention a pool of potential patrons to fund Caxton’s publishing enterprise.³⁰ If Caxton learned how to print in Cologne, it was in Bruges he learned how to be a publisher and bookseller.

Caxton eventually moved his printing operation to Westminster, England in 1476, where he was near Westminster Abbey.³¹ One may ask, “Why would Caxton leave such a successful location as Bruges behind?” Perhaps it was his way of expanding his print business because, according to Steinberg, Caxton “imported books from abroad on a fairly large scale and also exported some to France” around the time he moved to Westminster.³² Maybe Caxton wanted to tap into the English bookselling market because it was dominated by his Dutch, German, and French contemporaries and wanted to be recognized as the first Englishman to do so; “thus Caxton was not only the

²¹ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 19-23

²² Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 23

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 47

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 24

²⁷ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 47 and Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 24

²⁸ Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England*, 38

²⁹ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 26

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 47

³² Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, 47

first English printer-publisher but also the first English retailer of printed books.”³³ As a matter of fact, the first book to ever be printed in England was *Dictes or Sayings of the philosophers* by Edward IV’s brother-in-law, the second Earl Rivers, on November 18, 1477.³⁴ Another first for Caxton was his creation of the “first advertisement in the history of English publishing,” which was a handbill advertising a festival calendar “according to the use of Salisbury.”³⁵ Apart from Caxton’s firsts in the history of printing in England, he is well known for a “flood of printed material issued from his press” around this time while staying in Westminster for the remainder of his life.³⁶ Works such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1480), *Polychronicon* (1482) (Fig. 23), *The Golden Legend* (1483) (Fig. 22), *The Canterbury Tales* (1483), *The Knight of the Tower* (1484), and *King Arthur* (1485) were among his most popular ventures.

Caxton died in 1491 and had no male heirs to inherit his business. As a result, his apprentice Wynkyn de Worde took over his successful printing enterprise after the iconic printer’s death. One cannot help but reflect on this man’s life and think of the many ways Caxton has shaped and influenced our modern perception of printing today. From the time he made his first translation of the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* to his first printed edition of the *Dictes or Sayings of the philosophers* in England, Caxton has guided our understanding towards the paradigm shift from hand written manuscripts to printed books in the fifteenth century. One may think that the new technology of printing killed off the Medieval manuscript tradition but in reality it was embraced by everyone, including the scribes and illuminators whose job was actually made much simpler thanks to the new technology of printing.³⁷ Not only did manuscript makers not have to painfully copy books by hand, but printing fulfilled a demand that had been growing in Europe, a hunger for the written word in a vernacular language everyone in their local region can understand. If Gutenberg is credited for introducing the printed word, Caxton is credited for introducing the printed word in English.

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³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 33

³⁷ Blake, “William Caxton,” *Authors of the Middle Ages: English Writers of the Late Middle Ages*, 30