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**"Teaching Caxton's Prologue to *Eneydos*  
as an Introduction to Renaissance Literary Culture"**

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Over the past few decades, contemporary scholarship on Renaissance literature has increasingly come to intersect with the concerns of book history and material culture. This has been reflected in the classroom, for instance, by instructors who draw attention to variant versions of well-known plays like *Doctor Faustus* or *Hamlet*, encourage students to explore digitized versions of early printed texts using electronic resources like Early English Books Online (EEBO), and design bibliographically or editorially oriented assignments. Is it not curious, then, that William Caxton (c. 1422-91), the man who established and defined the contours of the commercial print trade in early Renaissance England, continues to remain so conspicuously absent from undergraduate syllabi? While his writings are rarely taught in surveys of Renaissance literature, there are several things to recommend Caxton's texts for use in the university classroom. His numerous prologues and epilogues—originally composed to frame, introduce, and justify the texts that he selected to translate and print—are important works of literary criticism. Accessibly short yet often rich in content, these Renaissance paratexts provide firsthand insight into the social, cultural, and material facets of the early English print trade, and this brief essay draws particular attention to the ways in

which Caxton's prologue to *Eneydos* might be used as a fruitful introduction to Renaissance literary culture, more generally.

A discussion of Caxton's biography and output can be a useful way of establishing the continental literary connections as well as the medieval inheritances of England's early printed texts. A Kentish merchant cum diplomat who spent three decades living abroad in locales including Bruges and Cologne, Caxton learned the nascent art of printing on the continent before returning home to England to set up shop in Westminster in the 1470s. Over the course of his subsequent career, he printed a remarkable number of books—nearly one hundred—which included not only editions of popular Middle English works by famed authors such as Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and Thomas Malory, but also a plethora of translations (most of which he personally executed, presumably drawing on a polylinguism cultivated in his years spent abroad) from a wide array of French and Dutch sources.

Printed in c. 1490, *Eneydos* was one of the last works published by Caxton. A translation of Guillaume de Roy's *Le livre des Eneydes*, itself a fifteenth-century French adaptation of Vergil's classical Latin *Aeneid*, this text contains a fascinating and often-cited prologue, in which we find Caxton memorably reflecting on his experience as a literary translator as well as a commercial purveyor of printed vernacular texts. Of particular interest in this prose piece of approximately 1,200 words are the author's

reflections on linguistic change and lexical variety, the pressures that he feels to cater to emerging marketplace demands, and the character of the audience that he anticipates for his printed wares.

At the outset of Caxton's Prologue, he describes the process by which he typically finds literary fodder for his press. At moments when the printer is at loose ends with "noo werke in hand," he peruses "dyverse paunflettis and bookys," using his own taste and judgement to select new materials that might interest or benefit his customers.<sup>[1]</sup> It is thus Caxton's own reading of and admiration for Guillame de Roy's eloquent adaptation of "that noble poete and grete clerke Vyrgyle" that first inspires him to attempt his own English translation of the work (6-7). Taking up "a penne and ynke," he recalls that he "wrote a leef or tweyne" before prudently pausing to "corecte" his work (25-6). When he does so, he is dismayed at the result. The "fayr and honest termes and wordes" that he so admired in his French source seem similarly "fayr" but also problematically "straunge," or suspiciously foreign, when rendered into English (15, 26-7).

Caxton uses this personal account of his habits and activities as a translator and commercial producer of texts as a means of opening a larger discussion about the nature of English and its perceived limitations as a literary language. As this discussion unfolds, we find Caxton not only remarking how difficult it is to locate apposite,

equivalent English words and phrases to represent the “playsaunt” and “wel ordred” lines in his French source (16-17), but also confessing that he cannot construe de Roy’s work in a form “Englysshe” that will be both widely accessible and universally approved by members of the reading public. “Some gentylnen” amongst his readership, he indicates, have “late blamed” him for using too many “over-curious termes” in his translations: that is, these audiences object to his use of aureate, non-native lexicon “whiche colde not be understande of comyn peple” —presumably, the sort of vocabulary that would be derided by a number of later Tudor authors as “inkhorn terms” (28-31). It has been suggested to Caxton by such gentlemen that he ought to “use olde and homely termes” rather than such French or Latinate loanwords (30-31). But, as the author goes on to elaborate, the very notion of the “Englysshe” linguistic purity that such readers would advocate is inherently problematic.

The difficulties that Caxton faces when deciding *which* “Englysshe” to use are multifaceted—and there is something rather ironic about his dilemma, considering the role that print technologies would later go on to play in helping to standardize English usage. Firstly, the “olde Englysshe” one might find in an “olde boke” is “so rude and brood” and differs so dramatically from the “Englysshe now usid” as to be virtually unintelligible to late fifteenth-century audiences (32-37). In fact, he suggests it is “more lyke Dutche than Englysshe” (38). Secondly, Caxton points to the very rapid changes that he has observed in the English lexicon, even within his own relatively short

lifespan: “certainly our langage now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used and spoken whan I was borne” (39-41). Further complicating this situation is the great array of variant dialects in common usage. As Caxton observes, the “comyn Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another,” and he proceeds to relay a humorous example to illustrate this point (45-6). Caxton tells his audience a story of an English merchant ship that set out from London. Destined the Low Countries, this ship is forced, “for lacke of wynde” to tarry at Foreland in modern Kent (48-9). A hyperbolic scene of miscommunication ensues when an English mercer named Sheffield, one of the ship’s passengers, disembarks and approaches a local Kentish woman requesting that she provide him with “mete” and “eggys” (51-2). Much to Sheffield’s irritation, the housewife responds to his request by assuming that he must be speaking in a foreign tongue and retorts that she “speke[s] no Frenshe” (52-3). Neither does Sheffield, but it still takes a considerable amount of effort and mediation before he is able to rephrase his appeal using English vocabulary that the woman understands, finally asking her for “eyren” rather than “eggys” (56). This comic anecdote highlights the very real concerns that Caxton historically faced as a translator trying to maximize readership in a language divided by regional dialects. As he rhetorically asks his audience, “what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, ‘egges’ [a northern word, derived from Old Norse] or ‘eyren’ [a southern word, derived from Old English]?” (57-58).[2]

What is more, the advice and feedback that Caxton claims to have received from his readers over the years is far from uniform. For every gentleman recommending that he stick to “olde and homely termes” (and there is much more that could be said about Caxton’s repeated characterization of both native English terms and the middling or lower classes as “rude”), there are “honest and grete clerkes” who have alternatively pressured him towards aureate diction, asking that he use “the moste curyous termes that [he] coude fynde” in his translations (63-5) . Stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to marketplace demands, Caxton says “bytwene playn rude and curyous [he] stande[s] abashed” (65-66). He has done his best, he claims, to strike a middle ground in this translation of *Eneydos*, but he also makes it clear that his work is not meant to be assessable to “every rude and unconnyng man” (80). It is hard to miss the sense of social elitism that underlies such statements. In fact, Caxton rather facetiously suggests that those readers who find his diction too difficult should brush up their Latin, or “goo rede and lerne Vyrgyll or the *Pystles* [i.e. *Heroides*] of Ovyde” (77-8). His acute awareness of the range and usage of various vernacular registers thus suggests that Caxton not only recognizes but also seeks to exploit the possibilities of using language for purposes of social exclusivity. After all, as he repeatedly emphasizes, “this present booke is not for” the “uplondyssh” masses “but onely for a clerke and noble gentylman” (69-70).

Along with the abovementioned issues, this short text can also be used to illustrate a range of additional points about the character of early Tudor literary culture. The Prologue's dedication of *Eneydos* to Prince Arthur, son of King Henry VII, for instance, might be employed to discuss the role that literary patronage continued to play after the advent of the printing press. Or Caxton's comment that Vergil is "lernerd dayly in scolis specyally in Ytalye and other places" as a further justification for bringing this particular text to the English reading public could be used as a starting point to explore early Tudor conceptions of England's place within a broader, European cultural framework (21-22). Moreover, Caxton's very decision to translate a *French* translation of an ancient Latin original might lead to a useful discussion of how his approach to Vergil is at variance both from the approaches taken by contemporary humanist editors of the classics and also from the approaches taken by later translators of the *Aeneids* such as Gavin Douglas, John Dryden, Richard Stanyhurst, Thomas Phaer and Thomas Twyne, or Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. There are also points to be made about Caxton's emphasis on the ethical utility of reading literature and the implicit moral lessons that his audience—imagined to be comprised of clerks and gentlemen who "understande gentylnes and scyence" and are well versed in "faytes or armes" as well as the precepts of "noble chyvalrye" (81-2, 71-2)—are expected to draw from reading *Eneydos*.

In the classroom, I have successfully paired Caxton's Prologue to *Eneydos* with two other short texts: Geoffrey Chaucer's late medieval "Wordes unto Adam, His Owne

Scriveyn” and Edmund Waller’s seventeenth-century “Of English Verse.” Chaucer’s poetic admonition, directed towards his allegedly negligent scribe, serves as a nice entrée into a discussion of the material realities of commercial book production in the pre-print era and the ways in which the press’s mechanization of this process offered new possibilities for producing and disseminating books to English audiences.

“Chaucers Wordes unto Adam, His Owne Scriveyn” can also be used alongside Caxton’s preface, however, to challenge widespread assumptions that many students hold about the so-called fixity of Renaissance print culture in relation to what is often understood to be a more malleable medieval manuscript culture. To this effect, a useful comparison can be made between Chaucer’s anxiety about inaccuracies creeping into scribal copies of his texts—and his related impulse to personally “correcte and eek to rubbe and scrape” Adam’s sloppy “werk” (5-6)—with the comments that Caxton makes near the end of his Prologue when he calls upon the “poete laureate” John Skelton to “oversee and correcte” the printed text of *Eneydos* (87-88). Furthermore, as a piece that dates from the end of the English Renaissance period, Waller’s “Of English Verse” serves as a nice chronological bookend for Caxton’s prologue. Like Caxton, Waller is also interested in English’s reputation as a “daily changing tongue” (6). His direct references to the increasing unintelligibility of Chaucer’s Middle English for seventeenth-century audiences are pertinent, and Waller’s poem humorously turns on the notion that, given the rapid rate of linguistic change, “an English pen” may be

useful for flattering women in the here and now, but its products are unlikely to be fully appreciated by posterity (26).

Caxton's Prologue to *Eneydos* can be found in a variety of editions. Depending upon how comfortable the group is with reading fifteenth-century English, it is possible to introduce students to this work either in an edition that reflects Caxton's original spelling or in a more modernized version. The most recent edition with modernized spelling is undoubtedly the text included in *English Renaissance Translation Theory*, eds. Neil Rhodes, Gordon Kendal, and Louise Wilson, though an earlier modernization of the text can be found in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books With Introductions, Notes, and Illustrations*, ed. Charles W. Eliot. Editions that retain Caxton's original spelling include: *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. N.F. Blake; *Caxton's Eneydos*, ed. W.T. Culley and F.J. Furnivall; and *The English Language*, ed. W.F. Bolton. Online editions of the text are also available at <http://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/eneidos.html> (Caxton's original spelling, as edited by Jack Lynch) and [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Prologue\\_to\\_the\\_Aeneids](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Prologue_to_the_Aeneids) (a version of the text modernized by Z.A. Simon).

## Endnotes

[1] Throughout this essay, I cite Caxton's Prologue by line number from the text in *Caxton's Own Prose*, ed. N.F. Blake (London: Andre Deutsch, 1973), 2-3. All subsequent references to this text are parenthetical.

[2] The various historical examples associated with the OED's entry for "egg, n." usefully demonstrate the co-existence of these two words in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English.

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