

ENGLISH LITERATURE

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WILLIAM CAXTON

BY

ALFRED WILLIAM POLLARD

PHILADELPHIA

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1901



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WILLIAM CAXTON

THE manuscript of the *Morte D'Arthur* has disappeared, and the book is thus the first English classic for which we are dependent on a printed text, Caxton's edition, printed in 1485, being itself so rare that only two copies of it are known, while one of these is imperfect. When Caxton published it he himself had been engaged in printing for about ten years, and the art had been invented for rather over thirty.

Even in the days of manuscripts books had been manufactured for the English market in Flanders and the north of France, and as early as about 1475 a Breviary for English use had been printed at Cologne. By an Act of Richard III. special facilities were granted for the importation of books from abroad, and while one Sarum missal was printed at Basel and others at Venice, numbers of English service-books came from Paris or Rouen, and the Latin grammars for use in English schools were mostly printed in France and the Low Countries. Other books cannot be ear-marked in the same way, but the presses of Venice, Paris, Basel, and Cologne supplied the learned books needed by English scholars with sufficient completeness to deter any English printer from trying to rival them. William Caxton, who set up his press at Westminster in 1476, though a man of real literary taste, was not himself a scholar, and had quite another class of customers in view. Born in the Weald of Kent probably soon after 1420, he had been apprenticed in 1438 to a London mercer, and some time before 1453 had started in business at Bruges. Here in 1462 he

was appointed by Edward IV. to the responsible post of Governor of the English Merchants, and continued in this office for some seven or eight years, at the end of which he entered the service of the Duchess Margaret (sister of Edward IV.), who had married Charles the Bold in 1468. In March 1469 he began to translate Raoul Le Fèvre's *Recueil des Histoires de Troye*, but then laid it on one side till March 1471, when, at the command of the Duchess, he resumed his work and carried it to a completion in the following September. When the book was finished, Caxton was besieged with commissions for copies of it, and as the readiest means of satisfying them turned to the new art of printing. Having watched an edition of the *De Proprietatibus Rerum* through the press at Cologne, 'himself to advance' in the rudiments of the craft, he associated himself with a Bruges calligrapher, Colard Mansion, and at Bruges the two in partnership printed seven books, Caxton's *Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* and its French original, Caxton's *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (a translation from Jehan de Vignay's French version of the *Ludus Scacchorum Moralizatus* by Jacopus de Cessolis), Le Fèvre's *Les Fais et prouesses du noble et vaillant chevalier Jason*, Caxton's English rendering of this, and two French devotional treatises. The translation of the *Chess-book* was finished 31st March 1475, and all these books were probably printed in 1475-76. But in September 1475 Charles the Bold had begun the unlucky campaigns which two years later ended in his death, and even without the inducement of a quieter market which England thus offered, Caxton had good reason to wish to ply his double craft of printing and translating in his native land. At Michaelmas 1476 he rented from the Dean and Chapter a shop in the Sanctuary at Westminster for ten shillings a year, and in 1477 produced the first book printed on English soil, *The Dictes and Sayengis of the Philosophres*, translated by Earl

Rivers, the king's brother-in-law, and edited by himself.

This is not the place to follow Caxton minutely through the ceaseless activity of the next fourteen years, during which he printed upwards of eighty books, or upwards of a hundred including new editions. What we have to remember is that as he took up the craft in order to multiply copies of his first translation, so the work of translation continued his own main employment. Both as translator and editor-publisher his attention was divided fairly equally between imaginative literature and books of popular edification and devotion. Of romances he translated and printed, besides the *Recuyell* and the *Jason*, those of *Godfrey of Boloyne, Paris and Vienne, Blanchardyn and Eglantyne, The Four Sons of Aymon*, and *Charles the Great*—all from the French. His renderings of the story of the *Æneid* and of the fables of *Æsop* were also made from French versions, that of the former bearing very little resemblance to Virgil's poem; for *Reynard the Fox* he had recourse to the Dutch. In poetry he was a whole-hearted admirer of Chaucer, printing two editions of the *Canterbury Tales*, also the *Parlement of Foules* (under the title of the *Temple of Brass*), *Anelyda and Fals Arcyte*, the *Book of Fame*, and *Troylus and Cressida*, besides the prose version of *Boethius*. He printed also Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and some seven poems by Lydgate. In history, at the instance of Hugh Bryce, a fellow-mercator, he translated from the French and printed a compilation called *The Mirrour of the World*, and he also edited and continued Higden's *Polychronicon* in Trevisa's version, and a popular fourteenth-fifteenth century compilation, known from its opening words as the *Chronicle of Brut*, to which he gave the title the *Chronicles of England*. In religious literature his most notable undertaking was the translation of the *Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine,

from the French version of Jehan de Vignay ; but he also translated a *Life of St Winifred* and a *Doctrinal of Sapience*, was engaged at the time of his death on a translation of the *Lives of the Fathers*, and under the title of the *Royal Book* made a fresh version of the *Somme des Vices et des Vertues* of Frère Lourens, which had already entered into English literature in the *Ayenbytt of Inwytt*. Nor did he neglect edifying books of other kinds, translating and printing, besides *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*, the *Fayts of Arms and of Chivalry* of Cristine de Pisan, Alain Chartier's *Curial*, the *Knight of the Tour* (for the better education of girls), and a *Book of Good Manners*. Lord Rivers supplied him with the translation of *The Dictes and Sayengis of the Philosophres* (of which an earlier English rendering already existed), and of the *Moral Proverbs* of Cristine de Pisan, and the Earl of Worcester with that of Cicero, *De Amicitia*, the version of the *De Senectute* being probably by Sir John Fastolfe. Caxton printed also a book of Statutes of Henry VII., a Latin speech made by John Russell, Bishop of Lincoln, at the investiture of Charles the Bold as Knight of the Garter, some diplomatic correspondence between the Pope and the Venetian Republic relative to a war about Ferrara, a few books for teaching children morals and manners, several devotional treatises, some of the smaller service books, and some indulgences. But the total bulk of all these is but small compared with that of the books which Caxton himself translated or edited. He had a shrewd eye for the class of books which the nobles of the court and the rich city merchants cared to read and buy, and he produced them, year after year, mainly by his own literary diligence. Working, as he must have done, always under pressure, and with no French or Latin dictionaries to help him, his translations are often slipshod and full of errors ; but they have a homely and straightforward

style, and the prefaces and epilogues show that Caxton was an excellent critic, and had a pleasant humour of his own. As a specimen of his style we may take first his own account of his edition of *The Dictes and Sayengis of the Philosophres*, the first book printed on English soil :

Here endeth the book named the dictes, or sayengis, of the philosophres, enprynted by me, William Caxton, at Westmestre, the yere of our lord M.CCCC.Lxxvij. Whiche book is late translated out of Frenshe into Englyssh, by the noble and puissant lord, Lord Antone, Erle of Ryvyers, Lord of Scales and of the Ile of Wyght, defendour and directour of the siege apostolique for our holy Fader the Pope in this Royame [realm] of Englund, and Governour of my lord Prynce of Wales. And it is so, that at suche tyme as he had accomplysshid this sayd werke, it liked him to sende it to me in certayn quayers [quires] to oversee, whiche, forthwith, I sawe, and fonde therin many grete, notable, and wyse sayengis of the philosophres, acordyng unto the bookes made in Frenshe, whiche I had ofte afore redd. But, certaynly, I had seen none in Englyssh til that tyme. And so, afterward, I cam unto my sayd lord and told him how I had red and seen his book, and that he had don a meritory dede in the labour of the translacion therof into our Englyssh tunge, wherin he had deservid a singuler lawde and thank, &c. Thenne my sayd lord desired me to oversee it and where as I sholde fynde faute to correcte it; wherein I answerd unto his lordship that I coude not amende it, but if I sholde so presume, I might apaire it, for it was right wel and connyngly made and translated into right good and fayr Englyssh. Notwithstandyng, he willed me to oversee it, and shewid me dyverce thinges, whiche as him semed, myght be left out, as diverce lettres missives sent from Alisander to Darius and Aristotle, and eche to other, whiche lettres were lityl appertinent unto [the] dictes and sayenges aforsayd, forasmuch as they specyfy of other maters. And also desired me, that don, to put the sayd booke in enprinte. And thus obeying hys request and comaundement, I have put me in devoyr

to oversee this hys sayd booke, and beholden, as nyghe as I coude, howe it accordeth wyth the origynall, beyng in Frensh. And I fynde nothyng dyscordaunt therin, sauf [save] onely in the dyctes and sayengys of Socrates, wherin I fynde that my saide lord hath left out certayn and dyverce conclusions towchyng women. Wherof I mervaylle that my sayd lord hath not wretton them, ne what hath mevyd [moved] hym so to do, ne what cause he hadde at that tyme. But I suppose that som fayr lady hath desired hym to leve it out of his booke. Or ellys he was amerous on somme noble lady, for whos love he wold not sette yt in his booke; or ellys, for the very affeccyon, love and goodwylle that he hath unto alle ladyes and gentywomen, he thought that Socrates spared the sothe and wrote of women more than trouthe, whyche I cannot think that so trewe a man and so noble a phylosophre as Socrates was, shold wryte otherwyse than trouthe. For, if he had made fawte in wryting of women, he ought not, ne shold not be belevyd in hys other dyctes and sayenges. But I apperceyve that my sayd lord knoweth verily that suche defautes ben not had, ne founden, in the women born and dwellyng in these partyes ne regyons of the world. Socrates was a Greke, born in a ferre contre from hens, whyche contre is alle of othre condycions than thys is, and men and women of other nature than they ben here in this contre. For I wote wel, of what somever condicion women ben in Grece, the women of this contre be right good, wyse, playsant, humble, discrete, sobre, chast, obedient to their husbandis, trewe, secrete, stedfast, ever besy and never ydle, attemperat in speking and vertuous in alle their werkis, or at the leste sholde be soo. For whyche causes, so evydent, my sayd lord, as I suppose, thoughte it was not of necessite to sette in his booke the saiengys of his auctor, Socrates, touchyng women. But, for as moche as I had comandment of my sayd lord to correcte and amende where as I sholde fynde fawte, and other fynde I none sauf that he hath left out these dictes and sayenges of the women of Grece, therefore, in accomplishing his comandement, for as moche as I am not in certayn wheder it was in my lordis cople or not, or ellis, peradventure, that the wynde had blown over the leef at the tyme of translacion of his booke, I purpose to wryte the same sayenges of that Greke Socrates whiche

wrote of the women of Grece and nothyng of them of this royaume whom I suppose he never knewe. For, if he had, I dar plainly saye that he wold have reserved [excepted] them, in especiall, in his sayd dictes. Alway not presumyng to putt and set them in my sayd lordes book, but in the ende, aparte, in the rehersayll of the werkis; humbly requiring all them that shal rede this lytyl rehersayll, that yf they fynde ony faulte, to arette [ascribe] it to Socrates and not to me, whiche wryteth as hereafter foloweth.

There is a touch of Chaucer's sly humour in this passage which explains Caxton's enthusiasm for him; and we shall not show the printer-editor at a disadvantage if as a second extract we take his 'Prohemye' to the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. This is full, as usual, of generous praise of the great poet, and interesting also for the light it throws on the difficulties against which the early printers had to contend in their efforts to find the right books to print from:

Grete thanks, lawde and honour ought to be gyven unto the clerkes, poetes, and historiographers, that have wreton many noble bokes of wysedom, of the lyves, passions, and myracles of holy sayntes, of hystories, of noble and famouse actes, and faittes [deeds], and of the cronycles sith the begynnyng of the creacion of the world, unto thys present tyme, by whyche we ben dayly enformed, and have knowleche of many thynges, of whom we shold not have knowen yf they had not left to us theyr monumentis wreton. Emong whom and in especial to-fore alle other we ought to gyve a singuler laude unto that noble and grete philosopher Gefferey Chaucer, the which for his ornate wrytyng in our tongue maye well have the name of a laureate poete. For to-fore that he by hys labour embelysshed, ornated, and made faire our Englisshe, in thys royaume was had rude speech and incongrue, as yet it appiereth, by olde bookes, whyche at thys day ought not to have place ne be compared emong ne to hys beauteuous volumes and aournate [adorned] wrytynges, of whom he made many bokes and treatyces of many a noble historye as wel in metre as in

ryme and prose, and them so craftyly made that he comprehended hys maters in short, quyck, and hye sentences, eschewyng prolyxte, castyng away the chaf of superfluyte, and shewyng the pyked grayn of sentence utteryd by crafty and sugred eloquence, of whom emong all other of hys bokes I purpose to emprynte by the grace of God the book of the Tales of Cauntyrburye, in whiche I finde many a noble hystorye of every astate and degre, Fyrst rehercyng the condicions and the arraye of eche of them as properly as possyble is to be sayd, And after theyr tales, whyche ben of noblesse, wysedom, gentylesse, myrthe, and also of veray holynesse and vertue, wherin he fynyshyth thys sayd booke, whyche booke I have dylygently oversen and duly examyned to the ende that it be made acordyng unto his owen makyng. For I fynde many of the sayd bookes whyche wryters have abrydgyd it and many thynges left out. And in some place have sette certayn versys that he never made ne sette in hys booke, of whyche bookes so incorrecte was one brought to me vj yere passyd whyche I supposed had been veray true and correcte. And accordyng to the same I dyde do enprynte a certayn nombre of them, whyche anon were sold to many and dyverse gentylnen, of whom one gentylman cam to me and said that this book was not accordyng in many places unto the book that Gefferey Chaucer had made. To whom I answered that I had made it accordyng to my cople and by me was nothyng added ne mynusshyd. Thenne he sayd he knewe a book whyche hys fader had and moche lovyd, that was very trewe and accordyng unto hys owen first book by hym made, and sayd more, yf I wold enprynte it agayn he wold gete me the same book for a cople, how be it he wyst well that hys fader wold not gladly departe fro it. To whom I said, in caas that he coude gete me suche a book, trewe and correcte, that I wold ones endevoyre me to enprynte it agayn for to satysfye the auctor, where as tofore by ygnoraunce I erryd in hurtyng and dyffamyng his book in diverce places, in setting in some thynges that he never sayd ne made, and levying out many thynges that he made whyche ben requysite to be sette in it. And thus we fyll at accord [came to an agreement]. And he ful gentylly [courteously] gate of hys fader the said book and delyverd it to me, by whiche I have corrected my book as here after alle alonge by the ayde of almyghty

God shal folowe, whom I humbly beseche to gyve me grace and ayde to achyeve and accomplysshe to hys lawde, honour and glorye, and that alle ye that shal in thys book rede or heere wyll of your charyte emong your dedes of mercy remembre the sowle of the sayd Gefferey Chaucer, first auctour and maker of thys book. And also that alle we that shal see and rede therin may so take and understonde the good and vertuoues tales, that it may so prouffyte unto the helthe of our sowles that after thys short and transitorye lyf we may come to everlastyng lyf in heven. Amen.

Caxton's busy life came to an end in 1491, and his printing business was carried on by his foreman, Jan Wynkyn de Worde—that is, of Werden in Lorraine.

Other presses had by this time been established. In 1478 a Cologne printer named Theodorick Rood started at Oxford, and there, by himself or in conjunction with an English bookseller, Thomas Hunte, printed a few text-books, of which fifteen have come down to us. Of these the latest is given a date equivalent to 19th March 1487, and after this we hear of no more printing at Oxford till 1517. In London, John of Lettou, or Lithuania, started a press in 1480, and was joined two years later by William de Machlinia—that is, of Mechlin. The partners seem to have been mainly law printers, but printed other books as well, though sometimes on commission. Their most notable publications, from a literary standpoint, are the *Revelations of St Nicholas to a Monk of Evesham*, the *Speculum Christiani* (from which a few lines of verse have been quoted on page 80), and an edition of the *Chronicles of England*. Lettou disappears about 1484, but Machlinia continued printing till about 1491, Richard Pynson, a native of Normandy, being his successor. A translation by John Kay of a short description of the *Siege of Rhodes*, written in Latin by Gulielmus Caorsin, may have been printed by Machlinia, or by some one not known to us who had a similar but not

identical fount of type. In 1479 or 1480 a schoolmaster at St Albans started a press there, printing altogether eight books of which we know, in types of the same character as Caxton's, and in one instance certainly borrowed from him. Of the eight books six are scholastic treatises, the other two being the then very popular *Chronicles of England* and the treatise on hawking, hunting, and coat-armour commonly known as the **Book of St Albans**, and commonly ascribed to **Dame Juliana Berners**. This ascription rests on the fact that one of the sections of the book, the metrical treatise on hunting, ends with the words, 'Explicit [Here ends] Dam Julyans Barnes in her boke of huntyng.' On the strength of these words the authorship of the whole book is popularly attributed to this otherwise unknown lady, Juliana Bernes or Berners, who is represented as being a daughter of Sir James Berners (executed in 1388), and prioress of the nunnery of Sopwell, a dependency of the abbey of St Albans. As to this, we know that one prioress was elected in 1426, and another superseded on account of old age in 1480, and it is possible that there was a gap between the two which Juliana Berners filled; but we have no shred of evidence as to this, or as to any single fact about her, and if she was really the daughter of Sir James Berners, the dates do not fit in very happily. At the Bodleian Library there is a manuscript poem on the terms of the chase which is said to correspond closely to the poem ascribed to 'Dam Julyans Barnes' in the *Book of St Albans*, but as it is anonymous no conclusion can be drawn from it. Whatever the lady's connection with the 'Book of Huntyng,' there is nothing to suggest that she wrote also the treatises on Hawking and Heraldry, and the probability seems to be that the three works were drawn from different sources and edited by the schoolmaster-printer. As for the 'Treatyse of Fishing with an Angle,' this does not appear

at all in the first edition, though a manuscript of another version of it (first printed in 1883), from the character of the handwriting, is judged to have been in existence before 1480. This treatise was first added to the work in Wynkyn de Worde's edition of 1496, with the obvious intention of completing it as a kind of 'Gentleman's Vade-Mecum.' Throughout the sixteenth century the book remained very popular, its different parts being frequently reprinted. But its popularity was that of a text-book rather than a work of literature, and it is to its attractive subject and the mystery that surrounds its authorship, rather than to any literary merit, that it owes its fame. Here is a typical extract from the 'Book of Hawking':

And if yowre hawke be harde pennyd [strongly feathered] she may be drawne to be reclaymed [pulled by a string to be taught to come back]. For all the while that she is tender pennyd, she is not habull to be reclaymed. And if she be a Goshawke or Tercell that shall be reclaymed ever fede hym [*sic*] with washe meete at the drawyng and at the reclaymyng, bot loke that hit be hoote, and in this maner washe it. Take the meet and go to the water and strike it upp and downe in the water, and wringe the waater owte and fede hir therwith and she be a brawncher [a hawk just able to leave its nest]. And if it bene an Eyesse [a hawk reared in captivity] thow most wash the meete clenner than ye doo to the brawncher, and with a linne [linen] cloth wipe it and fede hir, &c.

The treatise on coat-armour offers rather more scope for the display of literary skill, and it is only fair to make some brief extracts from this also. Here is one on the origin of nobility, a point with which several writers of this period are concerned:

How Gentilmen shall be knowyn from churlis ana how they first began.—Now for to devyde gentilmen from chorlis in haast it shall be preved. Ther was never gentilman nor churle ordenyd by kynde [nature] bot he had fadre and modre. Adam and Eve had nother fadre

nor modre, and in the sonnys of Adam and Eve war founde bothe gentilman and churle. By the sonnys of Adam and Eve, Seth, Abell and Cayn, devyded was the royall blode fro the ungentill. A brother to sley his brother contrary to the law where myght be more ungentelnes. By that did Cayn become a chorle and all his ofspryng after hym, by the cursyng of God and his owne fadre Adam. And Seth was made a gentilman thorow his fadres and moderis blissyng. And of the ofspryng of Seth Noe come a gentilman by kynde.

From another section we may take these few lines, which tell us the vices which a gentleman must especially eschew :

Ther be ix. vices contrary to gentilmen.—Ther ben ix. vices contrari to gentilmen, of the wichæ v. ben indetermynable and iiiii. determynable. The v. indetermynable ben theys : oon to be full of slowthe in his werris, an other to be full of boost in his manhode, the thride to be full of cowardnes to his enemy, the fourth to be full of lechri in his body, and the fifthe to be full of drynkyng and dronckunli. Ther be iiiii. determynable : on is to revoke his own chalange, an other to sley his presoner with his own handis, the thride to voyde from his soueraygnes baner in the felde, and the fifthe to tell his soueraygne fals talys.

Lastly, here is a passage with a pleasant reference to King Arthur :

Here begynnyth the blasynge of armys.—I haue shewyd to yow in this book a-foore how gentilmen began, and how the law of armys was first ordant, and how moni colowris ther be in cootarmuris, and the difference of cootarmuris with mony other thynggis that here needis not to be rehersed. Now I intende to procede of signys in armys and of the blasynge of all armys. Bot for to reherce all the signys that be borne in armys, as Pecok, Pye, Batt, Dragon, Lyon and Dolfyn, and flowris and leevys, it war to longe a taryng, ner I can not do hit : ther be so mony. Bot here shall shortli be shewyd to blase all armys if ye entende diligentli to youre rulyes. And be cause the cros is the moost worthi signe emong al signys in armys : at the cros I will begynne, in the wich this nobull and myghti prynce kyng Arthure hadde

grete trust, so that he lefte his armys that he bare of iii. Dragonys, and on that an other sheelde of iii. crownys, and toke to hys armys a crosse of silver in a feelde of verte [green], and on the right side an ymage of owre blessid lady with hir sone in hir arme. And with that signe of the cros he dyd mony maruelis after, as hit is writyn in the bookis of cronyclis of his dedys.

Extracts like these may serve to explain the great popularity of the book, which gave just the information which a country gentleman would be most likely to prize, and at the same time was written in a tone sufficiently high to explain the readiness of a schoolmaster-printer to edit and publish it. But its main interest can hardly be called literary.

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