

The Merchant Printer

“He crowned his life-work by introducing the printing-press into England in order that Englishmen, through the medium of good literature, might rise to higher things.”¹

Had William Caxton done no more than introduce the art of printing to England, his place in history would still be solidly entrenched. Had he been just another book merchant, he would not have made the same prolonged impact on English culture as he did. It was the many roles that he served, and the visionary approach that he had, that made for a true and lasting effect on English culture. His dual nature, that of both merchant and printer, combined to create a man perfectly suited to influence, maybe even create, the reading public of 15th Century England.

William Caxton’s exact year of birth is unknown. No definitive record of his arrival has been found, so we must guess at bit at his date of origin. Based on the information that we do have, it is best guessed that he was born about 1422. We do know, from Caxton’s own writing, that he was born in the Weald of Kent to a modestly well-off family. From a relatively young age, William was taught to read and write, though he admits that his English was of a “rude” variety. His family’s connections soon placed him in the apprenticeship of a wealthy merchant in London.

It is here that the story of William Caxton the merchant begins to take shape. The year is 1438, and Caxton is about 16 years old. He was placed in apprenticeship of a London Alderman named Robert Large. A powerful and influential merchant, Large rose to the position of Lord Mayor of London the year after Caxton’s arrival. The merchant made quite an impression on the young Caxton, and propelled him to his own success as a merchant. However, Large’s sudden death in 1441 soon left Caxton without a mentor. Soon after, Caxton left England for Bruges.²

There, in the “great centre of English commerce,”³ Caxton developed into the powerful and highly respected merchant and political leader that Large had been.

These qualities helped Caxton become successful not only in Bruges, but also came into play later on in his life as a printer. While Johann Gutenberg was responsible for developing the art of printing, Caxton “merely introduced it into England.”⁴ What made Caxton so important to English literary culture was not “merely” his introduction of the craft of printing, but his contribution to the creation of a sustained, successful publishing industry in England. While his technical know-how and experience at the press was certainly significant, his long-term success as a printer may never have happened if not for his experience as a merchant.

To understand Caxton the merchant, we must follow his journey to Bruges, where he spent much of the next 30 years. By the 1460s, Caxton was “clearly an influential and possibly a wealthy merchant,” and the level of respect he had attained could be seen in “his election to the governorship of the English nation at Bruges.”⁵ Among his duties was to govern all of the merchants and mariners doing business with England and to decide upon, and pass sentence on, any quarrels that arose. The job was certainly not easy, but it allowed “the governor [to] rule over his countrymen with almost unlimited authority.”⁶ Caxton remained in this position until 1470; but did not print his first book until 1474.

During this relatively short time he studied and learned the craft of printing, translated an entire work into English, established himself as a printer, gained support from royal patrons, and ensured that he had “sufficient financial ability to make it [all] a success.”⁷ His journey from merchant to printer begins in Cologne, the new center of printing in Germany. Caxton arrived in Cologne in 1471. Though the exact reason for his journey is not definitively known, it is guessed that the unstable political culture of England and Bruges made for a less-than-hospitable place for a man like Caxton to stay. Regardless of the reason for his arrival in Cologne, the journey

was serendipitous for Caxton. As mentioned, the printing trade was flourishing in the city. Caxton fell in with a group of printers, translators, and publishers who introduced him to the craft and provided him the opportunity to export the trade back to Bruges and, eventually, to England.

During this time, Caxton was hard at work on his first major translation. The book—*The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy*, [Recuyell means “collection” in old French]—was translated from the French by Caxton himself, ended up being the first book printed in English. His role as translator should not be forgotten in the retelling of his life. While other early printers throughout northern Europe were producing materials in Latin and Greek, Caxton was the first to print a book in the vernacular. The choice to print almost exclusively English texts helped to crystallize a language that was still in transition, passing from its medieval pronunciations and inconsistent spellings into a basic permanence of form.⁸

To many, the moment of its printing is when Caxton became a significant historical figure. However, it would be incorrect to think that Caxton’s life to this point was unimportant. Without his extensive training and experience as a merchant, Caxton would not have been nearly as successful a printer. And without that level of success, the landscape of 15th century English literary culture may have looked very different.

Caxton’s effect on readership in England wasn’t just that he was the first printer of English texts, or that he brought the printing press into the country, but he also “became a publisher rather than a simple printer.”⁹ Caxton had the expertise and wherewithal to be a successful and financially-stable publisher of books. His decision to invest in printing was not made purely for love of the craft or with lofty goals of educating English readers. It was made for economic reasons: Caxton saw a chance to build a profitable business.

This is not to say that he had no personal interest in the field. There is certainly evidence that Caxton was already well-versed in the book trade before he began printing. Bruges was a hub of trade in manuscripts and books in the 15th century and Caxton was an active and enthusiastic participant in the buying and selling of both commodities.¹⁰ He had first-hand knowledge of the money to be made in the book trade. One could even suppose that Caxton saw the amount earned from trading books as a mere drop in the bucket compared to how much could be made if he were to create and sell the texts himself. Acquiring the printing equipment and knowhow was “a form of economic speculation or investment” for Caxton.¹¹

In addition to learning the print trade, Caxton needed to have a firm understanding of his potential customer base. An intelligent and seasoned merchant like Caxton would not have gone blindly into publishing without first developing an understanding of those who would purchase his products. During his time in Bruges he had made connections with booksellers, members of the Burgundian upper class, and the English aristocracy.¹² These connections represented his suppliers, supporters, and potential customers.

In many ways *The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy* can be seen as Caxton’s test product. His first intention with *The Recuyell* was not to rush out and print up hundreds of copies for distribution throughout the English-speaking world. To do so would have gone against his training as a businessman. Instead, he used his existing connections to test the waters. As his first printing, Caxton chose a French variation of the histories of Troy, which he translated into English to reach his target audience. The process was not an easy one, but by 1472 Caxton had a manuscript ready for distribution.

In the Epilogue to Book III of *The Recuyell*, Caxton tells the reader that he has “promised to divers gentlemen and to my friends to address to them as hastily as I might this said book,

therefore I have practised and learned at my great charge and dispense to ordain this said book in print...to the end that every man may have them at once.”¹³

Edward Gordon Duff, among others, have pointed to this passage as proof that *The Recuyell* was so “exceedingly popular at the court” that Caxton was “importuned to set to work on other copies for rich noblemen.”¹⁴ From Duff’s perspective, the clamor for Caxton’s text, coupled with the lengthy production time it would take to replicate the manuscript by hand, “reminded [Caxton] of the excellent invention that he had seen at work at Cologne.”¹⁵ Duff’s analysis, which is by no means without its supporters, might lead us to conclude that Caxton considered printing and distributing *The Recuyell* only *after* witnessing its popularity.

This, however, was not the case. As N. F. Blake declares, Caxton “started to translate the *History of Troy* with a view to printing it.”¹⁶ His decision to print the text was not made after it became popular, but *before*. This was the first, but certainly not the last, instance of Caxton anticipating, even influencing, the whims of his reading public. The popularity of *The Recuyell* proved to Caxton that there was indeed a market for printed works.

In fact, even before completing the translation, Caxton believed that “his book would prove acceptable to the fashionable since it had the approval and patronage of Margaret [the Duchess of Burgundy].”¹⁷ Prior to finishing even the first few quires of his translation, Caxton showed them to Margaret, who strongly encouraged him to finish the work. Her support would be an endorsement and would popularize the final product. With it, Caxton felt more comfortable dedicating his money and his time to learning printing.¹⁸

Following his training in Cologne, we see Caxton return to Bruges as a “laborious writer, skilful printer, and shrewd merchant meet[ing] under one hat” with “reasonable profits pass[ing] from right hand to left.”¹⁹ *The Recuyell* was printed by the end of 1473, but before it was even finished Caxton began work translating his next book, *The Game of Chess*. This second work

bears witness to Caxton's faith in his business and as evidence of his "confidence that there was a market for his wares."²⁰ Blake contends that Caxton translated and printed in English to "capture the English market" and *The Game of Chess* was "a continuation of this policy."²¹ However, Caxton's goal of capturing the market of readers in England was difficult to accomplish from a distance. Since he "found it more difficult to distribute English books from Bruges"²² he decided to return to England in 1476. Upon his arrival, Caxton set up a print shop in Westminster, ready to aggressively and more directly go after the market he sought.

Another "continuation" represented in the second book was that of patronage. Just as Margaret's name lent credibility to *Recuyell*, the dedication of *The Game of Chess* to the Duke of Clarence "indicated that the book was considered suitable for princes."²³ While monetary gifts and rewards were certainly nice, the real benefit of patrons for Caxton was the appeal that their names gave to his books.²⁴ Yu-Chiao Wang points to Caxton's use of patronage as a type of "celebrity endorsement" that was "a way for Caxton to advertise the books" to his readership.²⁵ This "mass-marketing strategy" was part of Caxton's business plan as he sought to cultivate a large public audience for his works.²⁶ Unlike manuscript patronage, which often had a one-to-one relationship between writer and patron, Caxton was more concerned with establishing a one-to-many relationship with England's reading public. One way to do this was to gain the support (or the inferred support) of the political and societal elite.

Russell Rutter points out that, after his early works, Caxton's use of patronage to promote his books decreased significantly. Between 1480 and 1491 only 10% of Caxton's books had named patrons.²⁷ Rutter sees Caxton's successful marketing and advertising strategies as the reasons he was not reliant on patronage for his later works. These strategies helped Caxton get his works into the hands of the nobility in England. Once this connection was established, Caxton began to cultivate a larger audience:

Caxton, like Dickens later on, knew that people who could not read could nevertheless appreciate a stirring tale, a nugget of information, or a morally uplifting message, and he made sure his customers were reminded that they would be able to share the books they bought with those less literate than themselves.²⁸

This “hearing public” helped Caxton to “increase two-fold the size of [his] audience.”²⁹ With a larger audience, Caxton realized that his customer base had different desires for texts. He recognized these demands and “catered for a wide variety of tastes and of people.”³⁰ Among his books were popular texts on religion, language education, astronomy, history, philosophy, and law. The diversity of his catalog shows how Caxton targeted the most in-demand and profitable sectors of the reading public. Nicholas Basbanes touches on this point when he discusses

Thomas Malory’s *Book of King Arthur*:

These thrilling tales of knight-errantry and derring-do achieved immediate popularity, persuading England’s first printer, William Caxton, to make it one of the major productions of his Westminster press, adapting Malory’s chivalric tales freely for his 1485 edition and changing the title to *Le Morte d’Arthur*.³¹

One could imagine that there was little “persuading” necessary; that Caxton jumped at the chance to print Malory’s tale the minute he realized its popularity. Caxton gave the already popular tale his own spin by changing the title, making it seem like a more exotic and exciting version of the story. With more than one printer putting out the same material, Caxton had to set his version apart from the others.

The shrewdness of Caxton’s marketing strategies shows that he aimed to build a large customer base from the outset. Retitling Malory’s tale was just one of the ways that he popularized his products. Wang focuses on one particular method that Caxton employed to develop his audience:

Among the various strategies Caxton used to promote his [works] was his portrayal, in his prologues and epilogues, of what might be described as an ‘ideal’ readership. In these paratextual additions to his books, Caxton links his romances to royal courts and refers to demands made by noble and gentle readers for such works, even as he implies that they

might find a wider audience. Occasionally he suggests that his texts are exclusively designed for an elite class of readers.³²

Wang points out that these groups of readers do not “represent his target market as a publisher.”³³ Instead, they represent the *ideal* qualities of a Caxton reader, something to aspire to. By purchasing one of Caxton’s books, readers could feel that they shared something of quality with those socially above them. About 450 years after Caxton used this approach to increase sales of his books, noted advertising executive Stanley Resor referred to a similar tactic in advertisements as the *spirit of emulation*: our desire to “copy those whom we deem superior in taste or knowledge or experience.”³⁴ Based on early ownership of Caxton’s works, Wang reveals that his primary customer base was made up of “merchants, clergy, members of provincial landed families, lawyers, officials, and court servants.”³⁵ These people, who circumnavigated the royal court without being a part of it, were most susceptible to the desire that Resor describes.

Caxton knew that the potential reading class in England was growing and, soon, the mass audience would replace royals and other well-to-do patrons as the publishers’ target.³⁶ He used his merchant experience to find the best products for the marketplace. It was his careful selection of material that contributed to his prosperity as a publisher. He was so successful, in fact, that “the three competing printing houses in England—the St. Alban’s Schoolmaster printer, William Machlinia, and Theodore Rood—went out of business in 1486,”³⁷ less than a year after the publication of Caxton’s *Arthur*.

One could claim that, like *Le Morte d’Arthur*, nearly all of the texts Caxton chose to print were selected to capture the attention (and purses) of the English reading class. Much has been made, and rightly so, about Caxton’s impact on literacy in 15th century England, but one must be careful not to see this impact as an outcome of Caxton’s great selflessness. He became a printer not to benefit the masses, but to benefit his pocketbook.

Caxton the merchant, not Caxton the printer, most affected the development of the reading class in England. Caxton the merchant selected the texts that were to be printed; selections that played an important role for the readership of England. Through “publishing programs...and the advertisements designed to publicize them,” Caxton influenced his public’s reading habits.³⁸

William Kuskin takes this thought one step further, concluding that Caxton gave “shape to an English literary culture” for his original readers.³⁹ During his time as publisher, Kuskin states, Caxton “articulate[d] canon, authority, and audience as cogent and interrelated concerns.”⁴⁰ Indeed, Caxton was influential in deciding what texts were introduced to the English reading class and, thereby, influencing how the readership developed. William Caxton certainly made a significant contribution to the literary culture of England. However, it must not be forgotten that he was

a man of business, a prosperous merchant who made strenuous and successful efforts to define a mass market for the volumes he produced...In the future Caxton should be recognized as a pioneer in the mass-marketing of books just as in the past he has been recognized as the pioneer of English printing itself.⁴¹

Caxton was neither solely a merchant nor solely a printer. The two halves of this one man were inextricably linked and forever bound together. To remove or ignore one part of the man in favor of the other would be a disservice to William Caxton and the great impact that he made on literary culture and the history of the book.

¹ Henry R. Plomer, *William Caxton* (London: Leonard Parsons, Ltd., 1925) 172.

² N. F. Blake, *Caxton: England's First Publisher* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) 15-16.

³ William Blades, *The Biography & Typography of William Caxton* (London: Frederick Miller, 1971) 13.

⁴ N. F. Blake, *Caxton and His World* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1969) 13.

⁵ Blake, *Caxton: England's First Publisher*, 17.

⁶ Blades, *Biography and Typography*, 21.

⁷ Blake, *Caxton and His World*, 45.

⁸ Curt Buhler, *William Caxton and his Critics*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1960) 3-4.

⁹ Blake, *Caxton: England's First Publisher*, 19.

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- 10 Ibid.; Blake, *Caxton and His World*, 34-5.
- 11 Blake, *Caxton and His World*, 45.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 William Caxton, "Title, Prologue and Epilogues to the Recuyell of the Histories of Troy," in *Prefaces and Prologues to Famous Books*, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P. F. Collier & Son, 1910) 8.
- 14 Edward Gordon Duff, *William Caxton* (Chicago: The Caxton Club, 1905) 25.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Blake, *Caxton: England's First Publisher*, 20.
- 17 Ibid., 23.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Frederick Tupper, "The First English Press." *The Nation* 124, no. 3217 (1927): 240.
- 20 H. S. Bennett, *English Books & Readers: 1475 to 1577* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952) 12.
- 21 Blake, *Caxton and His World*, 61.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Ibid., 64.
- 24 Ibid., 65.
- 25 Yu-Chiao Wang, "Caxton's Romances and Their Early Tudor Readers," *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (2004): 173, 177.
- 26 Russell Rutter "William Caxton and Literary Patronage," *Studies in Philology* 84, no. 4 (Fall 1987): 444, 449.
- 27 Ibid., 455.
- 28 Ibid., 461-62.
- 29 Ibid., 462.
- 30 Bennett, *English Books & Readers*, 54.
- 31 Nicholas A. Basbanes, *Every Book Its Reader*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) 72.
- 32 Wang, "Caxton's Romances," 173.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Stanley Resor, "The Spirit of Emulation," in *Differentiate Or Die: Survival in Our Era of Killer Competition* by Jack Trout & Steve Rivkin (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 154.
- 35 Wang, "Caxton's Romances," 180.
- 36 Rutter "William Caxton and Literary Patronage," 460.
- 37 William Kuskin, "Caxton's Worthies Series: The Production of Literary Culture." *ELH* 66, no. 3 (Fall 1999): 512.
- 38 Rutter "William Caxton and Literary Patronage," 464-65.
- 39 Kuskin, "Caxton's Worthies Series," 511.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Rutter "William Caxton and Literary Patronage," 469-70.