

WILLIAM CAXTON, WRITER AND CRITIC.

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TO regard the pioneer as a specialist is easy, but generally wrong. More and more is it likely to be wrong as we think of past ages, and see fields of human effort, now sharply defined, dwindling and fading into each other. Caxton, who first brought the printer's craft into England, has been kept strictly in one cabinet of the museum of the past. Even Blades, our chief authority, has little to tell of Caxton the man of letters. Yet to know that products of his press are among the book-hunter's tallest game is for some people hardly inspiring. Surely, were he back in the flesh, our bargains and record prices would shock his fine humility. There would be scope, too, for his humour, which peeps out so quietly here and there. The two qualities blend in the advice he gave to readers of the *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*: if they dislike Socrates on women, let them "wyth a penne race it out or ellys rente the leef out of the booke." Words to send up the eyebrows of the modern bibliophile! Yet neither humility nor humour is the deepest note in Caxton. It is heard, once out of many times, at the beginning of his preface to the *Canterbury Tales*: "Grete thankes, lawde and honour ought to be gyven unto the clerkes, poetes and historiographs, that have wreton many noble bokes of wysedom." Let who will call this a high-sounding platitude; it reveals the motive power of Caxton's life.

He was before all else a servant of literature. Zeal for his "clerks, poets and historiographs" transfigured the manifold toils of his career. His obvious achievement is the printing and publishing of seventy-one works—about a hundred separate editions—in seventeen years. If some were small service-books or manuals, others were immense compilations like the *Golden Legend* or *Polychronicon*. It should also be remembered that with him, publishing implied edit-

ing, and, in about one third of his enterprises, translation as well. Prefaces and epilogues, often of generous length, accompany most of the works he edited. Further, we are bound to assume that his assistants did not lighten for him very appreciably the mechanical toil of his slow-working press.

The mind reels at such industry ; and it is amusing to remember that the first notion suggested in Caxton's earliest preface is the fear that he might become lazy. He also thought he was growing old, at fifty-two. His literary achievement was the tardy, slow-ripened fruit of middle-age. A successful business career lay behind him ; singular good fortune had preserved him through troubled times. Born "in Kent in the Weald," probably in 1422, and apprenticed to a wealthy mercer, in 1463 he had become governor of the English Merchant Adventurers trading with the Low Countries. For thirty years he lived in Bruges, a city as rich in culture as it was important in commerce. In the libraries of noble patrons he fed the flame of his enthusiasm for letters. Favoured by Charles the Bold, by the Duchess Margaret of Burgundy, by her brother King Edward IV. and the Yorkist aristocracy, Caxton could soon forsake commerce for literature. He came back to England in 1476 a man of wealth, and master of the craft of printing. The great project of his life was no doubt forming itself in his mind ; to print the works he and his friends loved best ; to multiply in England the books he deemed most worthy his countrymen's knowledge.

His taste and his learning have been persistently decried. Less than a century ago the prevailing judgment on them was still the one pronounced by Gibbon : "Caxton was reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers ; to satisfy 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. . . . The world is not indebted to England for one first edition of a classic author." All of which has the true "sneering essence" and imperial roll. That Caxton never issued, to our knowledge, anything about heraldry or hawking is a minor point. Nor could Gibbon be expected to have much use for unauthenticated knights, still less for saints. His last sentence, with its implications, is most to our purpose. No Englishman, it appears, can be a classic author. Chaucer, for example, was in eighteenth-century eyes

“Gothic,” “low,” tedious and pedantic, before the labours of Tyrwhitt revived his fame. So blind can one age be to the things held precious by another. Caxton twice edited the *Canterbury Tales*; the second edition, from a better text he had unexpectedly found, was published solely in justice to his author, with a clear prospect of monetary loss. He gave to the world Chaucer’s *Troylus and Creseyde*, his *Book of Fame* and translation of Boethius, and Malory’s *Morte d’Arthur*. With a sureness of judgment unique in his day he ranked Chaucer above Gower and Lydgate, yet issued, in fairness, some of the best specimens of their work. He made, to be sure, a clean sweep of pre-Chaucerian English, declaring simply that it was “rude speche and incongrue.” But nobody in his day would have troubled to read an obsolete vernacular. His own century, the sordid time of defeats in France and the Wars of the Roses, was no forcing-ground of literary genius. And some of the best writing it had produced, such as the capital prose of the disputatious Pecoock, had been condemned by the Church; Caxton would never have touched it. On the whole it is hard to see what better choice of English works he could have made.

Of his education we know nothing, save the bare fact that his parents “in his youth set him to school.” The man who translated from the French a whole body of prose romance, besides other works, knew the language, by the standard of his times, very well indeed. That standard, of course, condoned inaccuracy in detail, and much interpolation and omission. During his stay in the Low Countries he learned Dutch enough to translate *Reynard the Fox*; his English version of the fable long remained popular. His work on the *Legenda Aurea*, and on other Latin books, argues at least a tolerable knowledge of that language; though when he can get French versions of Latin he uses them with suspicious readiness. His paraphrasing, through the French, of *De Senectute* and *De Amicitia*, his retailing of mediæval perversions of the tales of Jason, Æneas and Troy, must have seemed in Gibbon’s eyes poor second-hand achievement. It all shows, in fact, sound common sense. Caxton knew that texts of the Greek and Latin classics had poured recently from the Continental presses, and poured much more quickly than they had been sold. Even had he been an Aldus Manutius he would have cried such wares in vain in the wilderness of fifteenth-century England. But by publish-

ing vernacular versions he prepared, humbly enough, for the tardy flowering of the English Renaissance. For he helped to awaken, in the growing public that could read, some interest in classic story and eloquence.

He is not, then, to be reckoned a scholar, but a shrewd and dogged disseminator. Yet neither his own blunders nor the bad cultural influences of his time could overlay his fundamental sureness of taste. Among the works we have so far mentioned there is not one without literary import. And others that he issued, of ready appeal to his public—the religious manuals, the primers, the great body of romances—these were at any rate in English which the people could learn to read, in an English, too, which his own press established.

That he went right in this matter is one of his chief claims to our gratitude. English prose of the fifteenth century was for the most part an unlovely thing. On its popular levels it betrayed the welter of dialect still prevalent in common speech. As Caxton says, it was "broad and rude." The learned, when they stooped to it from their Latin, did it doubtful service, for in their hands it lapsed readily into vicious pedantries and affectations. It had found no norm, no safe standard of any kind; only a genius like Malory could make it an instrument of literature. With much humility and embarrassment Caxton tried to pull the language into shape, expounding his difficulties at length in the preface to *Eneydos*. Here he tells the well-known story of the English mercer who, becalmed off the Foreland on his voyage to the Low Countries, came ashore and asked for "eggys" at an inn. "And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe." Nor did she understand until someone said "eyren." "Loo," exclaims Caxton, "what shoulde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, eggys or eyren, certaynly it is harde to playse every man." The salient parts of his preface are these. He is writing of the French version of the *Aeneid* which he translated:

"When I sawe the fayr & straunge termes therin, I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylnen which late blamed me sayeng that in my translacyons I had over curyous termes whiche coude not be understande of comyn peple, and desired me to use olde and homely termes in my translacyons, and fayn wolde I satsfyfe every man. . . . And som honest and grete clerkes have ben wyth me and desired me

to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde. And thus bytwene playn rude, & curyous, I stande abasshed. . . . And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude uplondyssh man to labour therin ne rede it, but only for a clerke & a noble gentylman . . . therfor in a meane bytwene bothe I have reduced & translated this sayd booke in to our englysshe not over rude ne curyous but in suche termes as shall be understanden by goddys grace accordynge to my copye."

Clearly, the language is in the melting-pot. Caxton, by virtue of his new craft, has more influence over the eventual product than any other man of his time. Is he to load English with Latinisms, and thus follow the trend of the "Oxford" or clerical dialect, rife since the days of Wiclif? Or Gallicise freely, as his friends at Court, readers of his translated romances, would like him to do? Or, perhaps, keep the language as Pecoock would have had it, Teutonic to the point of uncouthness? "Fain would he satisfy every man"; that being impossible, he will follow the *via media* laid down by his own common sense and habit of speech. The bulk of his output, including of course all his own translation, is in the "London" dialect, that of his own social class, the dialect which, also used by the law and the legislature, had become the powerful rival of the Oxford type of English. This London dialect, firmly established by Caxton's press, is the ancestor of our modern speech. By great good fortune it held the mean best between Teutonic and Latin elements; from these two founts, as we know, English at its healthiest has always drawn impartially. Thus "in a mean" between Saxon and Latin, as in a mean between "rude" and "curious," the language was henceforth to develop. Not that Caxton posed as dictator; not that he attained his ideal consistently in his own writing. We shall soon see how the plain terms fit for the "rude uplandish man" flow more happily from his pen than does the ornate English which he deems proper for a "clerk" or a "noble gentleman." Yet his instinct was right; his quiet, accommodating, amused common sense was more wholesome for our language than the whims or the theories of a scholar might have been. Half-consciously, at a critical time in the history of English, he hit on a vital principle of its life and health.

Further claims have been made for him by the least irresponsible of judges. Mr. Saintsbury finds in Caxton's prefaces and epilogues

“probably the first body of critical observations in English.” That this body, though interesting, is in his view “rather infantine” need not deter us from a look at it. To change the figure, our literary criticism springs from the shyest of fountain-heads ; it is overhung and shut in by irrelevancies dear to the mediæval mind. We must work our way through these ; in the end we shall find the pure fount, though it be but a trickle.

Conscious appreciation of æsthetic values in literature scarcely existed in the Middle Ages. Living on the confines of the old and the new way of thought, Caxton is mediæval, for the most part, in his deference to authority. The hand of the Church lay heavy on literature ; for Caxton the Church and her teachings are an infallible court of appeal. In season and out of season he moralises. Does a book, in one way or another, tend to edification and uphold orthodox doctrine ? If so, then it is good. His critical faculty works most readily on the moral plane. Now and then, as in his preface to the *Morte d'Arthur*, he is within hail of æsthetic criticism ; his enthusiasm for these “noble histories” of chivalry, so “glorious and shining,” is unmistakable. Yet even here he drives home their moral application, with a simple force characteristic of many another of his preachments, and of countless others written in his age :

“I, accordyng to my cople, have doon sette it in enprynte, to the entente that noble men may see and lerne the noble acts of chyvalrye, the jentyll and vertuouse dedes, that somme knyghtes used in tho days, by whyche they came to honour, and how they that were vicious were punysshed and often put to shame and rebuke. . . . For herein may be seen noble chyvalrye, curtosye, humanyte, frendlynesse, hardynesse, love, frendshyp, cowardyse, murdre, hate, vertue, synne. Doo after the good, and leve the evyl, and it shal brynge you to good fame and renommee.”

The style of this little sermon is as clear and direct as its matter ; although the list of virtues and vices, and the pleonasm at the end, betray Caxton's usual weakness in the management of abstract terms. With him, the interaction of matter and style is peculiarly important, and cannot be overlooked in our search for his critical faculty. Once only, in his many sermons, does he raise his voice above the quiet tone of the last quotation. In the preface to the *Order of Chivalry* he is clearly indignant at the state of courtly society at the end of the

Wars of the Roses. He would bring back, if he could, the chivalry of Malory at its best, and that in sordid times when little but the show of any such thing remained. He demands of the knights of England, "what do ye now, but go to the baynes & playe atte dyse ? . . . Leve this, leve it, and rede the noble volumes of saynt graal, ofancelot, of galaad, of Trystram. . . . Allas what doo ye but slepe & take ease and ar al disordred fro chyvalry." Is there a knight now, he wonders, who "knoweth his horse and his horse him ?" The slogging fervour and raciness of this passage anticipate Bishop Latimer. And if Caxton the moralist is dwarfed by the greater stature of that master of plain English, Latimer, after all, had professional thunderbolts at his command. Caxton, a modest layman, for once let indignation get the better of him, and then, significantly, wrote some of the best plain prose of his life.

Moral criticism shades easily into satire of the earnest, indignant sort. Yet Caxton, in an age rife with satire, subversive and manifold, had only the gentlest vein of this quality in him. He is quite without venom ; the only satire he knows is a pretty teasing humour. This lets in light on his mind. No man with humour is hopeless as a critic. From time to time, and often unexpectedly, Caxton's face brightens with the twinkle of his master Chaucer. Gravely he tells his simple readers how they are to take *Reynard the Fox*, how they can profit by its lessons. Then he adds : "If any thing be said or wreton herin that may greve or dysplease ony man, blame not me but the foxe, for they be his wordes & not myne." He would disclaim, then, some of the shrewdest thrusts of the fable ; yet we more than suspect he enjoyed them, for in his English version, he added some himself. His humour, innocent in appearance, is really sly ; now and then he manages a pleasant irony. Earl Rivers, the translator of *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*, had left out of his version certain derogatory remarks "touching women," attributed to Socrates. "Marvelling" at this, and teasing his patron with the possible reasons, Caxton as editor puts the remarks in again. Perhaps (he ventures the idea) his lord thought them unfair in application ; Socrates, after all, was a Greek. "I wote wel, of whatsomever condicion women ben in Grece, the women of this contre ben right good, wyse, playsant, humble, discrete, sobre, chast, obedient to their husbondis, trewe, secrete, stedfast, ever besy & never ydle, attemprat in spekyng and vertuous in alle their werkis,

or atte leste sholde be soo. For whiche causes so evydent my sayd lord . . . thoughte it was not of necessite to sette in his book the saiengis of his auctor Socrates touchyng women." The irony of this delightful passage is twofold. The phrase "or at least should be so" makes it clear that Caxton is laughing both at the alleged reason and at its application. The very redundancy of his style enhances the teasing effect; the ironical piling-up of epithets affords, long before Rabelais, a taste of the humour of the mock-categorical. Even now he cannot leave his patron alone. Perhaps Earl Rivers sat down to translate those sayings, and, unmarked by him, "the wind blew over the leaf." Childish, no doubt; but in that age humour was usually either hard and coarse or non-existent. This gentle mockery, like much of Chaucer's, heralds the coming of a more delicate play of mind and fancy, without which æsthetic criticism is impossible.

But vernacular prose in Caxton's day seldom shook off the bonds of the utilitarian. After moral exhortation, history was its great obsession. That Caxton shared the credulity of the chroniclers of his age was to be expected. The boundary between truth and legend was vague enough for him, partly through imperfect information, partly through his inveterate love of the wonderful. Doubts, even in his day, had begun to clip the blossoms of the full-blown Arthurian story; almost defiantly he marshals his proofs of it, in his preface to the *Morte d'Arthur*. He lived through many "falls of princes"; he moralises them in true mediæval fashion. For us, his reflections on history seldom rise above platitude. Yet the preface to *Polychronicon*, more thoughtful than usual, has one sentence which brings to the mind "shadows before" of the Renaissance: "The vertu of historye, dyffused & spredd by the unyversal worlde, hath tyme, whiche consumeth all other thynges, as conservatryce and kepar of her werke." The sentence is not inharmonious, although the harmony is gained through pleonasm; the sentiment proves that the concern of Shakespeare in his *Sonnets* for the overcoming of Time, and the keen reflections of Bacon on such subjects, are even now not incredibly far in the future. Yet, significantly again, the chief interest of *Polychronicon* does not lie for us in its preface. The work itself contains Caxton's only long and continuous piece of original narrative. He added this to the main body of the chronicle, which he modernised from Trevisa's "rude old English." His own portion covers the years

1357 to 1460 ; from it we quote his description of the battle of Agincourt :

“Then were the Frenchmen at Rolandcourt and Blangy wyth all the Ryal power of France except the Duke of Bourgoyne. And when the kyng saw that he might not pass, he took his felde with such peple as he had, which was not passing 7000 fighting men. And the mooste part of them were sick . . . and the yemanry had their hosen torn or bounden beneth the knee having long iackys, but every man had a good bow and sheef, arrows and a sword. Then he set his felde and set the Duke of York in the vauntward. And ordeyned in the night tofore the battyl that eche man shold make a stake sharp on both thends and pitch it aslope on the ground before hym. And so on the morn he had his confessor, that made them to say a general confession and gaf them general absolucion. And then the kyng rode thro the felde and comforted them, promysyng to them that he wold rather dye that day than yeld hym. And then every man took good heart and courage. And so abode the comyng of Frenshemen, whom they receyved on their stakys, stombing and falling down hors and man, in such wyse that our men felle on them and so fought that thro the grace of god the victory abode with the kyng.”

We are now at grips with Caxton, the literary craftsman. Elementary though it may be in syntax, there are sterling qualities in this passage. The style is surely right, for the matter in hand. There is no inappropriate dallying with “curious terms”; yet the language, though plain, is not prosy. Events are clearly and effectively marshalled; the Saxon monosyllables get to work with a will, and lift the narrative on a breeze of strong enthusiasm. It is the prose of a workman that needeth not to be ashamed. Pedestrian, if you will, but a kind of Malory in the rough; the words do not reach his indefinable vividness and sharpness, but they are at root prose of the same order as that of the solitary fifteenth-century master, whose book Caxton first gave to the world.

Only in plain narrative like this had the prose of the time much chance of being good. We have seen, indeed, that in moral exhortation, as in his address to the “knights of England,” Caxton can on occasion be simple, lively, and strong. But once he leaves the safe ground of plain words and short sentences his weaknesses begin to

appear. The tale of them, already hinted at, must now be unfolded. With no safe models in his own language before him, he often attempted long periods full of ornate terms. He tried to soar, and more often than not he came down catastrophically. Of course English prose, in its unformed, tentative state, had somehow to learn the use of the ampler, more abstract Latin resources in its vocabulary. The task was an amazingly long one, for sure mastery scarcely came in two centuries. Yet without such mastery, our prose would have attained little splendour, and little subtlety; it is hard, in particular, to see how the terms of literary criticism could have been evolved. In the search for an ampler English, Caxton was an early pioneer. With the Agincourt passage in mind, let us judge of his success from the preface to the *Royal Book*, written in his accustomed moralising vein:

“Whan I remembre and take hede of the conversacion of us that lyve in this wretched lyf, in which is no surete ne stable abydyng, and also the contynuel besynes of every man, how he is occupied and dayly laboureth to bylde and edefye as though theyr habytacion and dwellyng here were permanent and shold ever endure, & also practyse how they may gete temporalle possessyons, goodes and rychesses, of whyche they are never contente ne satysfyed as for the moste partye, but contynnelly entende and laboure by many subtyl meanes how they may encrease theyr sayd possessyons and richesses, for to come and attayne to worldly honour and estate, in whiche they wene be veray felycyte and blessydnes, and whan I have wel overseen & examyned these foresayd thynges and lyf, I fynde nothyng in them but vanyte of vanytees and all vanyte. . . .”

This is in sober truth one of his best, not worst, attempts. The sentence does not sprawl indefinitely; it has a good summary ending, which remembers the beginning. This is more than can be said of many of Caxton's sentences. The successive clauses, linked by relatives or conjunctions, do not, as often, stretch out in an aimless line. No links are dropped or redundant, as happens frequently elsewhere, and there is only one grammatical oversight. The chief annoyance to the modern reader is, of course, the endless pleonasm. The sense of the passage, drawn out thin by the co-ordinate syntax, is nearly smothered in the crowd of double terms. “Build and edify,” “habitation and dwelling,” “felicity and blessedness,”—ornate English prose of the fifteenth century is strewn with such things. If any one man is to be

blamed for them it is Cicero, for so long the model of sententious eloquence. On his balanced wings, Caxton aspired to soar; their beat is heard, ampler and more dignified, long afterwards in the book where Englishmen "acknowledge and confess" their manifold "sins and wickednesses." In the fifteenth century there were other temptations to pleonasm—the examples of theological and of legal Latin, and the strong tendency, in the infancy of English prose style, to make written language as different from spoken language as possible. The learned, the high-sounding, the impressive term, must perforce be yoked with the plain native one, or substituted for it. And Caxton was a man of business who had turned writer late in life. With all his humility, and his craftsman's honesty, he may have retained something of the attitude of such people towards literature and the arts in general. They tend to regard them not as necessities of the spirit, but as bedizements. They disdain to read a book; they peruse a volume. Too often Caxton apologises for his "rude and simple" writing, forsakes his good vernacular, and flies to the opposite extreme.

Yet looking again at that floundering sentence, cannot we find better things in it? Even the fastidious reader may have been beguiled by its opening. "The conversation of us that live in this wretched life, in which is no surety nor stable abiding": there is quiet, solemn eloquence here, both in rhythm and in phraseology. Such words are surely fine enough for the Authorised Version. Though the sentence as a whole is a welter, its several clauses are harmonious enough. We are not deceived surely if we hear in some of them a faint prophetic boom of the word-music of our Bible, over a hundred years before the Authorised Version saw the light. Caxton would, of course, rank as a signal precursor of Tindale if the sterling English of certain Scriptural lives in the *Golden Legend* could be safely reckoned as his. Yet at the least it is certain that his higher flights do not always end in disaster. Now and again his wings beat steadily, and there is music in the air around him.

The love of "fine language," usually derided, is not wholly a bad thing. The schoolboy whose essays, full of high astounding terms, come back to him blue-pencilled by authority is the type most likely to write well. He has his visions, but cannot bring them to earth; he blazes away at his mark with an absurd waste of powder, and misses it. But he *has* his mark, and the desire to hit it. Time and

practice bring him success. Our fifteenth-century prose, save Malory's, was in this raw condition. Caxton groped after ornate eloquence; Berners, early in the next century, came nearer in his version of Guevara, which set the Euphuistic fashion before Lyly; for Caxton's chains of double terms we now find all manner of elaborate stylistic symmetries, much laughed at, but a good discipline for the language. Prose was ready for the masters; Shakespeare, Donne and Browne showed what could be made of it. Always it lived dangerously; as a fine critic has said, it "could never be sure of doing the day's work in the right fashion." Only in Dryden's age did it learn thrift; and then it had nothing so splendid to say. So that if Caxton in his pedestrian vein points to Latimer and Ascham, his more elaborate English is a tentative first chapter in a long tale of literary glories. He heard the call of ringing word-music, of lofty diction, of weighty sententiousness. This genuine, if raw, feeling for language drew him to Chaucer, who, he tells us, first made the English tongue "ornate and fair."

Certain words of his on Chaucer are his title-deeds as a critic. They echo a well-known line in the description of the Clerk of Oxenford. At last we come to the fountain-heads of English criticism, one of them in the preface to the *Canterbury Tales*:

"He made many bokes and treatyces of many a noble historye . . . and them so craftyly made, that he comprehended hys maters in short, quyck and hye sentences, escheuyng prolyxyte, castyng away the chaf of superfluyte, and shewing the pyked grayn of sentence, utteryd by crafty and sugred eloquence."

Another is in the epilogue to the *Book of Fame*:

"And so in alle hys werkys he excellyth in myn oppynyon alle other wryters in our Englyssh. For he wrytteth no voyde wordes, but alle hys mater is ful of hye and quycke sentence."

It is unfortunate that an essential word in these passages has a meaning now obsolete. "Sentence" (*sententia*) is an opinion, or an aphorism. Chaucer's "short, quick and high sentences" are the terse, lively aphorisms—the jewels of kindly wisdom scattered about his writings; the "picked grain of sentence" is the picked grain of ripened opinion. In an age burdened as no other had been with the vice of long-windedness, Caxton could admire in Chaucer the virtue of getting down to the point. With the imperishable portraits of the Canterbury pilgrims in our minds, we can appreciate Caxton's meaning

when he praises the poet for "writing no void words." And if, living in hasty times, we refuse to put terseness among Chaucer's most shining qualities, we should remember that among the interminable wastes of Lydgate, or of Skelton at his worst, any poem of Chaucer is life and refreshment. The point made by Caxton, if debateable now, was sound enough in his day.

These two passages also make it clear that in his favourite poet Caxton saw his own literary ideals fulfilled. The humble craftsman in letters, conscious of many bunglings, could admire the sure hand of the master. In Chaucer he found a true mean between the rude and the ornate, and a model for economy of workmanship. His praise of the poet's "high sentence" does indeed betray the didactic bias which lingered long in Ascham and others, holding back Elizabethan criticism from the æsthetic way. But a negative ideal for the literary workman of all time is found in "he writeth no void words," and behind the saying lie the struggles of Caxton's own career as a writer. More clearly personal still, and more portentous, is the simple statement: "he excelleth in mine opinion all other writers in our English." Wise after the event, we may patronisingly commend this verdict, forgetting perhaps that Caxton wrote thus of a poet whose language was outmoded, whose prosody was misunderstood, whose fame was outshone in contemporary eyes by the verbose Lydgate. But those words "in mine opinion" are most significant of all. Here at last a writer has forgotten what mediæval authority may say; the Church, the learned, for the time being count for nothing. He has given a personal literary judgment, which lifts him clean out of his age and points to the best criticism of the Renaissance, to the days of freely expressed conviction, of artistic enthusiasm and discovery.

It was a phenomenon typically English that the man who spoke the first quiet word of true criticism in our country should have been no scholar, but a simple-minded craftsman who, having done well in trade, did well, too, in printing, and set himself to give his countrymen something good to read. He gave them Chaucer and Malory; he showed the language the way it should go. He prepared humbly for the coming of a greater age and was himself a herald of its dawn. All this was indeed an achievement for one who is usually thought of in terms of sales and record prices, or as the pioneer of a mechanic art in this country, or even, sometimes, as a name of no importance in literature.