

# Leeds Studies in English

## Article:

Norman F. Blake, 'John Lydgate and William Caxton', *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 16 (1985), 272-89

## Permanent URL:

[https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object\\_id=123635&silo\\_library=GEN01](https://ludos.leeds.ac.uk:443/R/-?func=dbin-jump-full&object_id=123635&silo_library=GEN01)



*Leeds Studies in English*  
School of English  
University of Leeds  
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/lse>

## JOHN LYDGATE AND WILLIAM CAXTON

By N.F. BLAKE

It has been recognised for some time that Caxton made use of Lydgate's work in many ways: he may well, for example, have read Chaucer through Lydgate's eyes.<sup>1</sup> However, the primary influence upon Caxton has usually been understood to be his residence in the duchy of Burgundy, which led to his attempt to act as an intermediary for Burgundian culture in England. This attitude towards Caxton has prevented a detailed assessment of Lydgate's influence on him from being undertaken, presumably because it was assumed that there was not sufficient influence to make such a study worthwhile. Recent developments in Caxton scholarship indicate that it is now time to consider more fully what the relationship between these two literary figures was.

William Caxton was both mercer and merchant adventurer. In his latter capacity he participated in the cross-Channel trade and eventually spent considerable periods of his life in the Low Countries, particularly in Bruges. He dealt in various types of merchandise and probably had a hand in the importation into England of Flemish manuscripts, since Flanders was in the fifteenth century an important producer of elaborate illuminated manuscripts which were much valued in Northern Europe. Caxton prospered in his trading ventures and about 1462 he was elected to the position of Governor of the English Nation in Bruges. As governor he became involved in many of the diplomatic negotiations which were then taking place among England, Burgundy and France, and it is possible that he attended the marriage of Margaret, Edward IV's sister, to Duke Charles of Burgundy in 1468, since that was intended to cement the Anglo-Burgundian alliance against France. In 1471 Caxton went to Cologne to acquire a printing press. On his return to Bruges he started publishing and, of the six books he published there, two were his own translations. These two books, *The History of Troy* and *Jason*, were translated from the French versions by Raoul Lefèvre who had been a secretary to Duke Philip of Burgundy. *Jason* had a particular connection with Burgundy since its chivalric order was the Order of the Golden Fleece. The assumption naturally arises that Caxton knew of the ducal library and was imitating its contents in his choice of material to publish.<sup>2</sup> This view gains support from the fact that Margaret of Burgundy is mentioned by Caxton in his prologue to the *History of Troy* as the person who urged him to complete his translation: the finished book was dedicated to her. Furthermore, Burgundy had in the fifteenth century a dominating cultural influence in Northern Europe, and England was particularly

susceptible to its lead in such matters as chivalry and pageantry.<sup>3</sup>

Lotte Hellenga has recently suggested that we need to be more circumspect in deciding what is Burgundian and in evaluating how far Caxton was trying to promote Burgundian culture and reading matter in England.<sup>4</sup> It has also been shown that many of the books he chose for translation came from France rather than from Burgundy, and that even those which do come from Burgundy already had a wide distribution by the time that Caxton translated or printed them.<sup>5</sup> There is little evidence that Caxton was interested in the Burgundian manifestations of chivalry for he certainly makes no reference to any of the major chivalric events of his time. For example, though Anthony Earl Rivers was one of his "patrons", Caxton made no mention of his famous tournaments against the Bastard of Burgundy. He was clearly more concerned with history and with how the past could be exploited for moral commentary, as his editorial preface to Malory's *Morte Darthur* reveals. Furthermore, he was not employed by any member of the court as secretary or librarian, and he therefore occupied a different position from people like Raoul Lefèvre at the Burgundian court; he was not a courtier. He was a merchant whose business was to publish books, and in that business he made use of the names of prominent people (as is indeed still a method of promotion used by publishers).

Caxton started to translate the *History of Troy* in 1469, though after a few quires were completed he put it to one side. He took up the translation again two years later at the insistence, he says, of Margaret of Burgundy who gave him advice about improving his style. The translation was completed in 1471 and Caxton printed the book on his return to Bruges from Cologne; it appeared in late 1473 or early 1474. A feature of Caxton's translation is that it is divided into three books, as is Lefèvre's original which he was using. At the end of the second book there is an epilogue which suggests that Caxton had not originally intended to translate the third book. Part of the epilogue reads: "Whiche werke was begonne in Brugis and contynued in Gaunt and finysshid in Coleyn in the tyme of the troublous world . . . that is to wete the yere of Our Lord a thousand, four honderd lxxi" (p.99).<sup>6</sup> The use of *finysshid* certainly implies that his translation was complete at this point. He goes on in the epilogue to indicate that there was no need to translate the third book since the story in it had been translated recently by John Lydgate, whose qualities as a writer are then praised. However, Caxton decided in the end to translate the third book because of Margaret's instructions to complete the translation, because Lydgate's translation was in verse, and because Lydgate may have used a different source (since his account differs from the one Caxton was following). Whether Caxton was going to limit his edition to the first two books is uncertain, but his association of the edition with Lydgate is important. Margaret may be the arbiter of his style, but Lydgate is the author with whom he associates his subject matter. Lydgate was the most famous English poet of the fifteenth century and not unnaturally Caxton would wish to harness his name to help the sales of his book in England. Caxton's edition could be presented as a complement to Lydgate's poem and this would naturally help to promote it in England. Although by choosing a

work by Raoul Lefèvre to translate Caxton seems to be purveying Burgundian culture, it may well be that the influence of Lydgate on this choice is much greater than we have hitherto realised.

Although Caxton refers only in passing to Lydgate's *Troy-Book* there can be no doubt that he read it and that he knew it quite well. There are several verbal parallels between the two texts; although some of them represent the common themes of medieval literature, cumulatively they suggest considerable familiarity on Caxton's part with the *Troy-Book*. Caxton refers to Lydgate in much the same glowing terms that Lydgate had used of Chaucer. Where Lydgate writes:

Was neuer noon to pis day alyue,  
To rekne alle, bope zonge & olde,  
Bat worpi was his ynkhorn for to holde (V 3528-30),<sup>7</sup>

Caxton has "after whos werke I fere to take upon me, that am not worthy to bere his penner and ynkehorne after hym" (p.99). In the same epilogue to the *Troy-Book* Lydgate refers to his lack of poetic ability and to his general ignorance, but nonetheless he decides to try to make his version of the work:

For to deme per is noon so bolde,  
As he pat is blent with vnkonnynng:  
For blind Baiard cast pereil of no ping,  
Til he stumble myddes of pe lake! (V 3504-7).

Lydgate frequently used the image of blind Bayard for a foolish writer (it occurs again in *Troy-Book* at II 4731), and Caxton imitated his use of this image to represent an ignorant translator who launches blithely onto his work when he wrote: "And forthwith toke penne and ynke and began boldly to renne forth as blynde Bayard in thys presente werke" (p.98). Lydgate also made frequent use of the humility formula by claiming to have no rhetorical expertise and by asking his readers to correct or augment what he has written, as at V 3476ff. He asks his readers' indulgence, he claims to be ignorant and rude, and he invites his readers to amend what he has written. His excuse is that he has followed what his author wrote. Caxton makes the same points in his prologues and epilogues to the *History of Troy*. He throws himself on Margaret's benevolence in the hope that she will take it in the spirit in which it is offered. He has followed the original closely and asks his readers "to correcte hyt and to hold me excusid of the rude and symple translacion" (p.99).

It is interesting to note that when Caxton refers to his completion of the translation in 1471, he identifies that time as "the tyme of the troublous world and of the grete devysions beyng and reygnyng as well in the royames of Englund and Fraunce as in all other places unversally thurgh the world" (p.99). The last phrase makes the passage seem general rather than specific, although England had just gone through the problems of the rebellion of Warwick the Kingmaker with the consequent flight of Edward IV to the Low Countries. France had not been wracked with the same problems, though there was constant trouble between Burgundy and France. Lydgate in his epilogue to book five of the *Troy-Book* refers to the

long-standing wars between England and France and he prays that the two countries will find peace under a united throne, for Henry V will also become King of France on the death of Charles VI. Caxton seems to echo Lydgate here. Both writers also refer to earlier authors who had written on the Trojan War and to the different biases which they had held with the consequent problem of deciding what precisely was the truth. Caxton's reference is fairly brief: "For dyverce men have made dyverce bookes whiche in all poyntes acorde not, as Dictes, Dares and Homerus. For Dictes and Homerus, as Grekes, sayn and wryten favorably for the Grekes and gyve to them more worship than to the Trojans. And Dares wryteth otherwyse then they doo" (pp.100-1). Authors on both sides, however, agree on the essentials of the story. Lydgate frequently refers to these same three authorities, though he is critical of Homer whom he regarded as a liar. Lydgate also notes that both Dictes and Dares agree in essentials (V 3335-40). Finally it may be mentioned that Caxton adds that he undertook to finish the translation to avoid idleness and that everything is written, as St Paul said, for our benefit; and these two ideas, although commonplaces in medieval literature, are commonly found in Lydgate's writings.

In addition to the verbal parallels between the two texts, there are some more general points of similarity. Lefèvre's French which Caxton was translating contains a dedication and prologue. Caxton kept both of these, but he inserted his own prologue between them. This prologue recounts the genesis of his translation in a relatively informal manner. He mentions that he had decided to make a translation since he had some free time and since the French version of the story he was translating was not known in England, for it had only recently been made. He started on the translation, but when he remembered his lack of command of French and English, he fell into despair and put the work to one side. One day he mentioned the fragmentary translation to Margaret of Burgundy, who asked to see it. After looking at it, she suggested some improvements in style and commanded him to finish the translation. Since Margaret had showed Caxton many favours, he dared not refuse this command and so set about completing the translation. The idea of this prologue may have occurred to Caxton because of Lefèvre's prologue, though that seems unlikely since Lefèvre's prologue is formal and contains little more than a note of the command by Duke Philip to make the translation and an outline of the contents of the work. With later works Caxton did occasionally expand and modify the original author's prologue, though he did not do so in this case. He clearly had some model of an informal prologue, and it is likely that his model was Lydgate who frequently introduced accounts of the genesis of his poems (accounts which can be both lengthy and relatively informal). The *Troy-Book* is no exception. In its prologue Lydgate appeals first to Mars and other classical gods and goddesses to assist him in the task of translation. He has not embarked on the project because of pride, but because Prince Henry had commanded him to do it. Henry enjoyed reading old books to learn virtue and to avoid the sin of sloth. Lydgate commenced his translation in 1412. He saw in this book an example of historical writing, for without such books knowledge of the past would disappear and the glory of old heroes would

vanish. Books tell the truth about men and so encourage people to live virtuously. Lydgate then goes on to mention those authors who have written on the Trojan War. He ends by pointing to his own insufficiency as a poet and asks for his readers' indulgence. Many of the same points are taken up again in Lydgate's epilogue following book five. There, however, we also learn that the translation was finished only in 1420. There the translator identifies himself as John Lydgate, monk of Bury. He emphasises his shortcomings and refers to his master Chaucer who acts as his model. History shows how fortune is fickle and encourages us to be virtuous on this pilgrimage through life. He concludes his epilogue with an envoy in which he dedicates the book to Henry V.

In addition to the *Troy-Book* Caxton was also familiar with Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes* to which he refers in his epilogue to *Jason*. In that epilogue he mentions that his source, i.e. the French original, did not contain everything about the story of Jason. There is more to be found in Boccaccio's *De genealogia deorum* and in Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*. Since Lydgate referred to Boccaccio, it is possible that Caxton picked up the reference to him from there. At all events it is clear that he knew Lydgate's poems well and that he saw his own work as a complement to them. He tried to build on what Lydgate had done and the reputation he had acquired.

There are many other points of comparison between Lydgate and Caxton. Caxton's French sources tend to have a relatively formal prologue which contains a dedication, though that prologue may indicate the reason for the book's appearance. Thus Raoul Lefèvre wrote *Jason* because of a vision he had in which Jason appeared to him and commanded him to write his story to clear his name. Lydgate's prologues are more diffuse and he inserts interpolations and other remarks at various stages. His *Troy-Book* has a variety of prologues and epilogues, as well as numerous authorial interjections to add moralisings and other comments. The same is true of Caxton. Lydgate's prologues are informal and comment on the genesis of the work, even though the precise reasons for the work's appearance remain uncertain. He was asked to produce the *Troy-Book* by Prince Henry, but where and under what circumstances are not specified. There was also a long gap between its inception and completion, though how this affected his relations with his patron is not stated. Caxton also had a royal patron, but her part in the book's appearance remains ambiguous. Having received a command to complete the work, he went away to Cologne to acquire a press although one might suppose that this would interfere with the completion of the royal command. It took Caxton a long time to complete his *History of Troy*, though not as long as Lydgate had taken, and when finished it was dedicated to the patron though there is little to suggest that author and patron had had any contact in the meantime. Both are, however, long works, and Caxton may have found the courage to translate and print this book because of Lydgate's example. Lydgate's work is in prose and Caxton's in verse, but they do complement each other in most other respects.

What is particularly important about Lydgate's use of prologues to indicate the genesis of the works he was writing and the patronage

he enjoyed is that it is a relatively new feature of English literature. Caxton could hardly have borrowed it from other English poets. Chaucer rarely mentions for whom he wrote a work and as infrequently dedicates it to anyone. It is widely assumed that the *Book of the Duchess* was written for John Duke of Gaunt, but there is nothing in the poem to indicate that the Duke had any hand in the poem's genesis or even received a copy when it was finished. Other poems are often understood to be occasional ones, which may have been demanded by particular patrons. Many scholars interpret the *Legend of Good Women* as a court poem which was perhaps asked for by Richard II himself. Whether these claims are true or not, Caxton cannot have acquired his technique of prologue writing from them, for the only dedicatory prologue Chaucer has is that to little Lewis in his *Astrolabe*, one of Chaucer's works Caxton did not print. It is true that Gower in his *Confessio Amantis* has a prologue in which he claims he was asked to write the work by Richard when they met by chance on the River Thames one day, though this story is not found in all manuscripts and was not present in the manuscript from which Caxton printed his edition. Some other fifteenth-century writers do include prologues, but none do it with the consistency found in Lydgate. John Shirley who issued manuscripts with many of Lydgate's poems in them also wrote prologues to some of these works, and as he acted as a kind of publisher his example may have influenced Caxton as well.<sup>8</sup>

Two features of Lydgate's work in general and of the *Troy-Book* in particular may be mentioned, for they could easily have influenced Caxton. Lydgate composed many historical works, particularly those from classical antiquity, which are moralised. The idea of using the past as a guide to the present is very developed in the fifteenth century, though it finds particular expression in Lydgate. It has been accepted for some time that Caxton's prologue to the *Polychronicon* is based ultimately on that in the *Historical Library* of Diodorus Siculus. It is thought that Caxton may have taken his version from a French intermediary, but it is equally possible that he took it over from an English writer like Lydgate though no earlier English version has so far been discovered. Certainly the views expressed in that prologue reflect the attitude shared by both Caxton and Lydgate towards history. There are many points of contact between it and the prologues in *The Fall of Princes*. The second feature of the *Troy-Book* is that although it is in verse it is divided up into books and chapters. This division enables the work to be divided into sections which can easily be moralised, for each section has a particular point or message. This type of division grew in popularity during the fifteenth century, though its use by Lydgate not only in the *Troy-Book* but also in *The Fall of Princes* may have influenced Caxton in his division of Malory's *Morte Darthur* and in the way he set out his edition of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*. Many of the works published by Caxton are either histories or romances which have a historical bias in that they are not based on some classical source like *Eneydos*; they deal either with historical events like *The Siege and Conquest of Jerusalem* or with an ideal past like *Blanchardin and Eglantine*. All these works are divided into chapters and most have moralising

comments.

Caxton published many of Lydgate's works as well as those which he probably attributed to Lydgate. The former include *The Churl and the Bird*, *The Horse, Sheep and Goose*, *Life of Our Lady*, *Stans Puer* and *The Temple of Glass*; the latter, *The Court of Sapience*, *Medicina Stomachi* and *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*. Some of these were among the very first works published by Caxton on his return to England and so form a natural continuation to his Lydgate-inspired translations of the *History of Troy and Jason*. Most of them are didactic. The same might also be said for verse in the Lydgateian tradition which Caxton published such as the *Book of Courtesy* and Burgh's *Cato*. While this represents a considerable achievement, it is very little when compared with Lydgate's total output. It is notable that Caxton printed none of Lydgate's major works, although he printed both the *Canterbury Tales* and *Confessio Amantis*. From this one might assume that although he was influenced by Lydgate's example, he did not particularly go out of his way to popularise Lydgate's own work. It was rather that he recognised the literary direction Lydgate represented and decided to follow it. This may perhaps be exemplified in Caxton's edition of *Reynard the Fox*.

This text has often been considered the odd man out among Caxton's publications because it was translated from Dutch rather than from French and because it is often described as a satire. Although the Dukes of Burgundy had copies of the French *Roman de Renart* in their library, there is no evidence that they were acquainted with the Dutch prose version. The prose version is made "for nede and prouffyte of alle god folke",<sup>9</sup> for it teaches them how to avoid sin and the guiles of the wicked. In its rôle as a guide to behaviour it is similar to the allegorised animal fables. In addition to *Reynard the Fox* Caxton printed a version of *Æsop's Fables* and the two Lydgate pieces *The Churl and the Bird* and *The Horse, Sheep and Goose*. These three works have animals as their main participants and their behaviour is allegorised to make it applicable to humans. In *The Churl and the Bird* Lydgate refers to the assembly held by Noble the lion, which he may have taken from a version of *Reynard the Fox*. In addition Lydgate had translated a versified *Isopes Fabules* from French, though that was not printed by Caxton. At first sight there would appear to be little connection between *Reynard the Fox* and Lydgate, but closer investigation suggests that Caxton's translation and publication of this work may have been prompted by the interest in England for allegorised animal fable which was particularly popularised by Lydgate. The influence is not so much direct as by example.

So far in this paper I have concentrated on Lydgate's influence upon Caxton. But Caxton may be able to give us some insights into Lydgate and his attitudes to literature and its promotion. Particularly important for both men as we have seen was the question of patronage: what was the relationship between a writer and the man for whom the work was ostensibly produced? and how did they get in touch with each other? These are questions that have been much debated about Caxton, partly because of the controversy as to whether

he led or followed popular taste. It has not been given much attention in Lydgate studies, partly because of the paucity of scholarship in general, and partly because it has been assumed that as a "creative writer" Lydgate gave a lead in poetic matters and was besieged by orders from patrons. What Lydgate says about the genesis of his works has usually been taken at face value as though he only included what was fact.

Characteristic of Caxton's relationship to patronage is that there are a lot of different names which occur in his works. He does not have a single patron to whom the majority of his works are dedicated. A large number of patrons occur only once. Some of these were unknown to him. The first edition of *The Game and Play of Chess* is dedicated to George Duke of Clarence and Caxton says specifically that he is a "humble and unknown servant" of the Duke. He may possibly have thought to dedicate the volume to him because he was the brother of Margaret of Burgundy, who was the dedicatee of the *History of Troy*. Caxton was still in Bruges when the book was published and Clarence was in England, and no communication is likely to have taken place between them before the book appeared. What may have been the next book to have a dedicatee, *Jason*, was dedicated to the Prince of Wales who was probably no more than six years old when the book appeared. Caxton writes in his prologue that he intends with the "licence and congye" of the King and with the "supportacion" of the Queen to present the book to the Prince. Although *Jason* was printed in Westminster, it need not follow that words like *licence*, *congye* and *supportacion* mean that the King and Queen had given their written or verbal permission directly to Caxton, or even at all. The Prince was still a boy and Caxton may have felt it politic to include the parents in the dedication, implying that he had their permission. Certainly the Prince did not know the work of the printer, and one may question whether the King and Queen were familiar with *Jason*, although Caxton says he is sure Edward IV has a copy in French. A later work, *Caton*, is dedicated to "the noble, auntyent and renommed cyte, the Cyte of London in Englonde" (p.63). Although Caxton was himself a member of the Mercers Company in London, this dedication was not one which had to have permission from the Lord Mayor or anyone else in London. In many instances then Caxton used the names of people or places without asking their permission and without necessarily knowing them. The names were an attraction in selling the book, and Caxton may well have wished to imply that he was more acquainted with the aristocracy and other leaders of fashion than was in fact the case.

On other occasions he does not dedicate his translations to anyone but he refers to people from the past in much the same way as he refers to his patrons. *Of Old Age* was translated for Sir John Fastolf, whose exploits are recounted in some detail. These details were no doubt borrowed by Caxton from the manuscript he was using. He does not, however, give any details of the translator, and many might easily have got the impression that the book was translated by Caxton himself. Nevertheless, at the end of the prologue he says he is printing the book "under the umbre and shadowe of the noble proteccion of our moost dradde soverayn"

(p.122), Edward IV, who is asked to forgive this presumption. Later in the same volume Caxton included *The Declamation of Noblesse* in the translation by John Tiptoft Earl of Worcester. Once again considerable information is given about the Earl who has been executed in 1469. In both these cases what is important is that there should be a member of the aristocracy who is linked with the book rather than that he should be associated directly with Caxton or its printing. The name simply gives a certain dignity to the material.

Another feature of Caxton's patronage is that he used both general and anonymous patronage. By general I mean that the book is said to have been produced for gentlemen or for merchants or for some wide class of readers. By anonymous I mean that the book is apparently dedicated to a particular individual, though that individual is not named. This unnamed person may, of course, have been a fiction, though in some cases an identification is possible. General patronage is found in his first book, the *History of Troy*. Although in his prologue Caxton informs us that he was commanded to finish the book by Margaret of Burgundy, in the final epilogue he says "I have promysid to dyverce gentilmen and to my frendes to adresse to hem as hastely as I myght this sayd book" (p.100) and consequently he had printed the book. Since he had had to go to Cologne to acquire the press, if this statement were true it would mean that the translation and printing of this first book was caused more by these anonymous friends and gentlemen than by Margaret. It is more likely that in his first book Caxton wanted to have different sorts of advertising and so included both a named patron and the anonymous gentlemen and friends. It is probable that neither played an important role in the book's appearance. A similar position appertains in his edition of Malory's *Morte Darthur*. This had been printed, he claimed, from a copy presented to him. This copy is often linked by modern scholars with the gentleman who had been most vociferous in asking for a book about Arthur to be printed and in insisting that Arthur had been a historical person. Nevertheless, the book itself is directed in the prologue "unto alle noble prynces, lordes and ladyes, gentylnen or gentylywymmen, that desyre to rede or here redde of the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur" (p.109). There is apparently a single patron, this time anonymous, and a general dedication to all gentlemen and gentlewomen. Frequently only one or the other is found. *The Chronicles of England* was printed "atte requeste of dyverce gentilmen" (p.69). On the other hand, *The Order of Chivalry* was translated "at a requeste of a gentyl and noble esquier" (p.126), though as no further details are given about him he cannot be identified (if indeed he existed). Later in the epilogue the book is in fact formally presented to King Richard III so one suspects that the squire was no more than a convenient fiction.

One of the anonymous patrons is the "noble lady which hath brought forth many noble and fayr doughters which ben vertuously nourissed and lerned" (p.111) who, according to Caxton, requested the translation of *The Book of the Knight of the Tower*. From various hints in the prologue it seems that this lady is Elizabeth Woodville, at that time Edward IV's widow and in sanctuary at

Westminster.<sup>10</sup> As she was in Westminster she was of course a neighbour of Caxton's there, and he may well have seized the opportunity to make her patron of this volume. Whether she had actually asked for it to be translated is another matter.

Finally there are many named patrons who usually are connected with a single volume each. Margaret of Burgundy is the patron of the *History of Troy*; Margaret of Somerset of *Blanchardin and Eglantine*; William Daubeney of *Charles the Great*; Arthur Prince of Wales of *Eneydos*; Henry VII of *Feats of Arms*; William Earl of Arundel of *The Golden Legend*; and so on. Others we have referred to earlier. It seems unlikely that Caxton was known to many of these people personally. It is interesting that in *The Book of the Feats of Arms and Chivalry* he refers to his audience at the court when he was presented to Henry VII to receive the copy to be translated. This description suggests that his appearance at court was sufficiently rare for him to make much of it when it occurred. The idea that kings and other members of the aristocracy dropped into his workshop to discuss what should be published next is a romantic one which may be discounted. Caxton may well have wanted to give that impression, though that does not mean it is something which happened. In many cases there was contact between Caxton and his patron. He presumably did attend court to meet Henry VII. He says that William Earl of Arundel sent his servant John Stanney to him to convey the Earl's request. The patronage was therefore not always done without the knowledge or consent of the patron. But in view of the many patrons there are, it seems more likely that Caxton took the initiative in recruiting the patrons rather than that they sought out the printer with a commission. Arundel had risen to prominence under Richard III when he patronised a book; Henry VII had recently come to the throne when he patronised his book; Elizabeth Woodville was in sanctuary near Caxton when she patronised a book; and Margaret of Burgundy was domiciled in Flanders and Brabant near Caxton when she patronised a book. The pattern suggests that it was the publisher who chose suitable patrons according to the opportunities of the moment. It is unlikely that people came to Caxton to patronise a book as soon as they came into prominence. In only one case was a patron used more than once. Anthony Earl Rivers patronised three books and he may be linked with a fourth. This is rather a special case since the three books were all translated by Rivers who therefore had some interest in seeing them in print. Even in this case Rivers seems to have dealt with the printer through his secretary, who is referred to in *The Moral Proverbs*. If Rivers did have a closer link with the publisher than any other patron, it is nevertheless significant that his name is not used in any other volume. He never became the publisher's principal patron or the arbiter of literary fashion at the time. Either his influence over Caxton was limited or the latter preferred to recruit a wider range of patrons.

What then can we deduce from these facts? Evidently Caxton felt a name was important in the promotion of his books and he preferred the name to be of someone in the public eye. He also preferred variety in his patrons, and he never established a particular relationship with one patron who lent his name to most volumes which

were produced. It is likely that the initiative for involving a person, either directly or indirectly, remained with the publisher, who nevertheless cast himself into the traditional role of the servant of the patron. He often invented an informal narrative to explain why a particular book was published and what the involvement of the patron was, though these occur more frequently with the anonymous patronage. It is probable that Caxton acquired many of his attitudes towards patronage from Lydgate, though these are likely to have been accentuated by his knowledge of books and manuscripts produced abroad in France and the Low Countries. In any case patronage was becoming less important in the fifteenth century, as has recently been pointed out: "Caxton's public existed before Caxton came along, like the shrewd businessman he was, to exploit it. But the implications of this fact for patronage have not previously been noticed. Whereas in the fourteenth century a writer was often to a large extent dependent on an individual patron to help secure himself a public, this situation gradually changed. In terms of sheer volume English literary patronage reached a peak in the fifteenth century, but because of this volume of activity the whole system as it had previously existed was already showing signs of weakness when the new conditions brought about by the introduction of printing led to patrons becoming less essential".<sup>11</sup>

The purpose of the patronage was to sell the books through the implicit recommendation provided by the patron. In this respect translation is no different from creative writing, though in the latter case the patron can only ask for a work to commemorate some event or in some particular topic, he cannot request that a particular work be written as he can do with translation. It is interesting that Lydgate and Gower who both have patrons were interested in the production of manuscripts of their own works, presumably for noble readers. They had some incentive to look for patrons. But Chaucer seems to have been little concerned for the dissemination of his works and so was less worried about patronage. At least no poetic manuscripts date from before his death and it cannot be shown that he exercised any supervision over the publication of his works. The plethora of manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* and *Troilus and Criseyde* does not reflect any involvement by Chaucer in promoting these works. Yet neither Gower nor Lydgate was a secretary to a nobleman or even employed in a household. Lydgate was a monk and he must have experienced some of the same problems facing Caxton in the matter of patronage. Did the patrons seek out Lydgate or did he, like Caxton, take the initiative in recruiting them?

It is current thinking to accept that the fifteenth century was an age of court poetry which was set in motion through Chaucer's example. As long ago as 1914 Eleanor Hammond wrote "The dependence of Hoccleve, of Lydgate, of Barclay, of Hawes, of Chaucer himself upon the generosity of the wealthy is more and more recognized as a factor in their choice of subjects, sometimes in their choice of words".<sup>12</sup> Lydgate in particular has been regarded as the poet who was submerged by requests from patrons and who therefore wrote too much. Schirmer noted of him: "Most of Lydgate's works owe their origin to a commission".<sup>13</sup> More recently Green has commented that many of his poems "might also be taken to imply that Lydgate often

attended the court in person during the decade or so after Henry V's death".<sup>14</sup> From the secondary literature one gets a picture of a poet who was more courtier than monk, who had frequent discussions with the aristocracy about literary matters, who was besieged by commissions from nobles and merchants, and who tried to live by his pen because he frequently complained about the financial rewards he received from his patrons. As we have noted, similar claims have also been made for Caxton. The more recent books by Pearsall and Renoir<sup>15</sup> do not controvert this picture (though, of course, their main concern is with the literary qualities of Lydgate's poetry).

The first point worth stressing is that not all Lydgate's poems have patrons or were commissioned. In general it is the longest works which have the patrons, though there is one notable exception. The *Siege of Thebes* has no patron, although it does contain a lengthy prologue in which a patron could have figured. In that prologue Lydgate praises Chaucer who had told the *Canterbury Tales* to which the *Siege of Thebes* was appended as the tale of the monk Lydgate on the pilgrims' return journey from Canterbury. The prologue contains elaborate praise of Chaucer and the words of the host to Lydgate which imitate scenes found in the links of the *Canterbury Tales*. Since the *Siege of Thebes* is dated to 1421, Chaucer's reputation was well-established and many manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* were available. It may be that Lydgate felt a patron for this poem was unnecessary, because its link with Chaucer's poem would be sufficient to recommend it to potential readers. It was not precisely new and so did not need promotion; and we may recall that when Caxton produced the first printed edition of the *Canterbury Tales* he also introduced no patron and did not even bother to have a prologue. Other poems written by Lydgate in imitation of Chaucer likewise have no patrons. In view of this it may be that patronage was a means Lydgate used to promote those works which were unfamiliar, and this in turn would imply that it was the poet rather than the patron who took the initiative in linking a particular name with a book.

In Lydgate's *œuvre* there are two ways of indicating patronage. The first is when the poet includes a reference to his patron and the commissioning of the work in some prologue or epilogue. The second is a reference to the genesis of the work in a prose headnote in English or in Latin. These headnotes are not found in all manuscripts and may not have been included by Lydgate himself. So it is not always possible to tell whether what they include is genuine, for in some cases they may have resulted from intelligent guesses by fifteenth-century scribes or booksellers like John Shirley.

If we take all these examples of patronage to be genuine, we can note certain significant features about them. The patrons are not localised in the Suffolk area around Bury St Edmunds. Although there are signs of local families in East Anglia patronising local writers and translators,<sup>16</sup> Lydgate drew his patrons from a much wider area. In general each patron commissions only one work, though there are occasional examples of the same patron being linked with two works. The patrons are noblemen, high churchmen and London

merchants; that is, they are people whose names carry weight with a potential readership. However, there is also both general and anonymous patronage. Finally, much of Lydgate's output consists of versified translations, usually from French, and it is these which are most likely to have a patron associated with them.

His first major work to have a patron was the *Troy-Book*, which he began c.1412 and finished c.1420. In its prologue, as we have seen, Lydgate appeals to Mars for help, and then says he has undertaken the translation which he began in 1412 at the bidding of Henry Prince of Wales (the future Henry V). He comments next on the virtue of history and the accounts about Troy found in the extant sources and their reliability. He is fulsome in his praise of Guido of Colonna. There is an epilogue to the whole work which repeats many of the same points, but adds that the book was not completed till 1420. Lydgate does not add why he had taken so long to fulfil the King's commission (Henry V having succeeded to the throne in 1413) or why he had turned out other poems in the meantime. He also gives little information about why the Prince had asked for the book, how he received it, or even what he knew about it. The details are very general. There is no formal dedication to the King. I think we do need to question whether this translation represents a formal commission from the then Prince. We ought to consider the possibility that it was Lydgate who proposed the translation to Henry rather than the other way round. After all Henry did not commission other works from Lydgate or from other poets, but Lydgate did have a variety of other patrons. For one's first long work it would be sensible to invoke the name and reputation of the heir to the throne, and in this Lydgate would have been following Gower's example in linking first Richard II and then Henry IV with *Confessio Amantis*. It would have been a fortunate coincidence for Lydgate if the first patron to approach him was the Prince of Wales.

Many of Lydgate's other patrons were important noblemen connected with the royal house or with the regency in England and France. As is natural with aristocratic families, some of these patrons had family ties but it need not be thought, as is sometimes suggested, that Lydgate was passed around from one patron to another as a poet who could turn out something for you. It is more likely, as with Caxton, that he chose to recruit people because of their family connections with others he had used as patrons. After Margaret of Burgundy, Caxton chose George Duke of Clarence, her brother, and then the Prince of Wales, her nephew. Similarly Lydgate may have taken Richard de Beauchamp Earl of Warwick as patron of *The Title and Pedigree of Henry VI* because he had earlier used his daughter Margaret Countess of Shrewsbury as patron of *Guy of Warwick*. Naturally, there may be instances where the patron took the initiative, as is true of some of the political material translated and written by Lydgate. The *Title and Pedigree of Henry VI* had been written in French by Laurence Calot at the request of John Duke of Bedford, the Regent in France. So there would be good reason why Warwick should know of it, though equally Lydgate may have spotted an opportunity to make himself useful and so suggested the translation himself.

Perhaps Lydgate's most famous patron was Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, who asked for the translation of Boccaccio's *De casibus virorum illustrium*. Lydgate made his translation from a French prose version. Scholars have noted the paradox that Humphrey who was influenced by the new Italian humanism should have patronised a work which in its essential medieval quality seems quite untouched by that humanism.<sup>17</sup> This paradox could be mitigated if the translation was Lydgate's idea and if it was he who involved Humphrey rather than vice versa. In his prologue to book one Lydgate refers to the French original by Laurence Premierfait and to its source, Boccaccio's *De casibus*. The contents of the book and the moral it contains are then expanded upon. The role of Fortune is an important aspect of this life. Despite his ignorance of good style Lydgate will deal faithfully with his original, but his work will not equal that of Chaucer who refined the language. Many of Chaucer's writings are then listed. Poets were the favourites of kings in the past and Caesar used to listen to the teaching of Cicero. In England there is a Prince who is fond of learning and who upholds the Church by his actions against the Lollards. He knew of Boccaccio's book and asked Lydgate to make a translation of it, which he will do to the best of his ability. It can be appreciated that in this prologue Humphrey Duke of Gloucester plays a relatively minor role: Laurence Premierfait, Boccaccio and Chaucer all seem more important. Gloucester himself is as much praised for his fight against heretics as he is for his love of learning. Once more there is the simple notice of the command to make the translation, but there are no details of how or when this command was given. There is little indication that Gloucester had much personal involvement either with the original or with the translation. What there is comes in the prologue to the second book where Lydgate mentions that as the translation was progressing Gloucester asked him to add an envoy to every tragedy outlining its remedy for the benefit of other nobles. This Lydgate proceeded to do. While this certainly suggests a greater involvement by Gloucester, the provision of such moralisations is typical of the additions Lydgate makes to his translations and it is not impossible to think that the impetus for them came more from Lydgate than from Gloucester. In his prologue to book three Lydgate mentions his weariness at the task and how he keeps going only because he is doing the translation for a lord who recompenses his dependents handsomely. At the end of the work there is one envoy about the translation and the works of previous writers, and another addressed specifically to Gloucester though it is addressed in very general terms of morality and virtue. Some final verses send the book on its way. Although there are some signs of involvement by Gloucester, in general Lydgate makes far more of the literary tradition in which he is writing than of the patronage which he has received. He could certainly have made Gloucester's rôle far more prominent than it is. Gloucester's name is introduced, but not much else.

The same is true of Lydgate's translation of *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*, made at the request of Thomas Montacute Earl of Salisbury. In the prologue Lydgate dilates on the need to remember that worldly possessions are here only for a short time with the

corollary that one needs to be wise in this life. Man's life is a pilgrimage during which man should prepare for the next world. This is the theme of the French version which Thomas asked Lydgate to translate. Thomas was in Paris when the translation was begun in 1426. Lydgate urges the readers to pay more attention to the matter than to his style. Once again we see that little information is given about the patron, Thomas, or why he wanted a translation of this work. Because he was in Paris, it is assumed that Lydgate was too, though he does not say so. He could have been because he almost certainly made at least one visit to Paris, though documentary evidence to support it is not available. And since Caxton often dealt with patrons through their secretaries, the same could have been true of Thomas. Indeed, it is possible that the translation was Lydgate's idea rather than the Earl's.

In most of these cases all we get is the indication of a command by a nobleman to make the translation. No details of the occasion are given and in many instances there is little evidence that the nobleman was interested in or a patron of other literature. Lydgate tells us more about the book being translated, the moral to be drawn from it, and the great writers of the past than he does about his patrons. There are no formal dedications to the patron, as we find in some books written for the Dukes of Burgundy, for example. I think therefore that we do need to be a little careful in assuming that it was the noblemen who took the lead in having the translations made or even that they had much contact, if any, with Lydgate.

This view is perhaps supported by the frequency of anonymous patronage in Lydgate, since the introduction of anonymous readers or patrons suggests that he was trying to create the impression that there was a demand for his works which would make others want to have copies. For example, *The Serpent of Division* was made "bi commaundemente of my moste worschipfull maistere & souereyne".<sup>18</sup> MacCracken has identified this master as Humphrey Duke of Gloucester, though there is nothing to support this identification.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that the master is a fiction. According to its headnote, *Bycorne and Chychevache* was written "at þe request of a werþy citeseyne of London".<sup>20</sup> A similar headnote mentions that *A Ballade of Her that Hath all Virtues* was written "at þe request of a squyer þat serued in loves court".<sup>21</sup> His *Complaint of a Black Knight* is addressed to an unnamed princess; unidentified French clerks drew his attention to the *danse macabre* painting in Paris which led to his translating the text, though it is not clear whether they sent him the words or whether he was in Paris and copied them down himself; his *Defence of Holy Church* is addressed to an unnamed member of the royal house; and the *Legend of Seynt Gyle* was written for an unnamed patron. Some of these notices about patrons occur in the headnotes and so may not be attributable to Lydgate, but this does not apply to all of them. In his *Legend of Seynt Gyle*, for example, he writes:

Wher-vp-on my purpos to ffulfyllen,  
By Goddis grace, fortune, or aventure,  
Ther was to me brouht a lytell bylle

Of greet devossionn by a cryature,  
 Requyryng me to do my besy Cure,  
 Affter the tenour only ffor Gyles sake,  
 Out of Latyn translate that scripture.  
 Folwyng the copie, this labour vndertake.<sup>22</sup>

Similarly *A Defence of Holy Church* is addressed to a "Most worthi prince" in its first line. In these instances there is clear evidence that Lydgate himself was responsible for the anonymous patronage. Since Schirmer suggested in the case of the *Legend of Seynt Gyle* that Lydgate was using the modesty topos he presumably thought the gentleman referred to was fictitious.<sup>23</sup> This may well be so, unless good reasons can be found for concealing the names.

In the past we have too readily assumed that fifteenth century poetry was part of a court culture and that most poems were produced for patrons.<sup>24</sup> Often this has meant that the poetry produced has been excused because the poets were trying to satisfy the whims of their patrons. We have therefore tended to believe everything that a poet told us about the genesis of his poem. Yet once patronage became a recognised way of promoting a poem or a poet, it could well be that poets searched out patrons rather than that patrons took the occasional book to a poet. Because with Caxton we have been so bemused by the influence of Burgundy upon him, we have not realised that he was influenced by conditions prevailing in England as much as or more than those abroad. And Caxton can tell us something about literary conditions which were operative earlier in the fifteenth century in England. There are so many parallels between Caxton's and Lydgate's use of patronage that it should make us more cautious about accepting much that has been written about Lydgate's attitudes towards his patrons. Lydgate was after all a monk, not a courtier. Although Henry VI and other nobles visited Bury, we do not need to assume that they came with books in their hands. No doubt Lydgate did receive some specific commissions for particular translations, but as he knew the literary scene well it is likely that in many cases he proposed a translation to a patron or even secured a patron after a translation was complete. He may even have used a patron's name without his knowledge. The literary and social pressures which produced this need for patronage are something which require further investigation.

# NOTES

- 1 N.F. Blake, "Caxton and Chaucer", *Leeds Studies in English* n.s. 1 (1967) pp.30-4.
- 2 N.F. Blake, "William Caxton: His Choice of Texts", *Anglia* 83 (1965) pp.289-307.
- 3 G. Kipling, *The Triumph of Honour* (Leiden, 1977), and M. Kekewich, "Edward IV, William Caxton, and Literary Patronage in Yorkist England", *Modern Language Review* 66 (1971) pp.481-7.
- 4 Lotte Hellinga, "Caxton and the Bibliophiles", *Actes du XI<sup>e</sup> Congrès International de Bibliophilie Bruxelles 1979* (Brussels, 1981) pp.11-38.
- 5 N.F. Blake, "William Caxton Again in the Light of Recent Scholarship", *Dutch Quarterly Review* 12 (1982-3) pp.162-82.
- 6 References are to N.F. Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose* (London, 1973).
- 7 References are to H. Bergen, *Lydgate's Troy Book A.D. 1412-20*, EETS ES 97, 103 and 106 (London, 1906-10).
- 8 See A.I. Doyle, "More Light on John Shirley", *Medium Ævum* 30 (1961) pp.93-101; and E.P. Hammond, *English Verse Between Chaucer and Surrey* (Durham, N.C., 1927) pp.191-7.
- 9 N.F. Blake, *The History of Reynard the Fox*, EETS OS 263 (London, 1970) p.6.
- 10 N.F. Blake, "The Noble Lady in Caxton's *The Book of the Knyght of the Towre*", *Notes and Queries* 210 (1965) pp.92-3.
- 11 P.J. Lucas, "The Growth and Development of Patronage in the Later Middle Ages and Early Renaissance", *The Library* 6th ser. 4 (1982) pp.243-4.
- 12 E.P. Hammond, "Poet and Patron in the *Fall of Princes*: Lydgate and Humphrey of Gloucester", *Anglia* 38 (1914) p.121.
- 13 W.F. Schirmer (trans. A.E. Keep), *John Lydgate: A Study in the Culture of the XV<sup>th</sup> Century* (London, 1961) p.23.
- 14 R.F. Green, *Poets and Princepleasers* (Toronto, 1980) p.190.
- 15 D. Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London, 1970) and A. Renoir, *The Poetry of John Lydgate* (London, 1967).
- 16 S. Moore, "Patrons of Letters in Norfolk and Suffolk", *PMLA* 27 (1912) pp.188-207, and 28 (1913) pp.78-105.
- 17 Pearsall p.224.
- 18 See Schirmer pp.82-8.
- 19 H.N. MacCracken, *The Serpent of Division* (London and New Haven, 1911) p.1.

- 20 H.N. MacCracken, *The Minor Poems of John Lydgate*, EETS ES 107 and OS 192 (London, 1911-34) p.433.
- 21 *ibid.* p.379.
- 22 *ibid.* p.162.
- 23 Schirmer p.159.
- 24 For a re-evaluation of court culture see *English Court Culture in the Later Middle Ages*, ed. V.J. Scattergood and J.W. Sherborne (London, 1983).