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CAXTON AND CHAUCER

By N. F. BLAKE

In order to build up that picture of Caxton as a man of letters which they have tried to foster, many writers have tended to highlight his various editions of Chaucerian works as an example of his literary taste. Although his editions of Lydgate and Gower have often been discounted as a mere pandering to the fashions of the time, his appreciations of Chaucer have been hailed as the mark of a man of refined sensibilities. This trend was initiated by Blades, who wrote: "The poetical reverence with which Caxton speaks of Chaucer, 'the first founder of *ornate* eloquence in our English,' and the pains he took to reprint the "Canterbury Tales" when a purer text than that of the first edition was offered to him, show his high appreciation of England's first great poet."¹ In this century, as a result of the controversy which has arisen over whether Caxton printed his works under patronage or on his own initiative, those who have sought to defend Caxton have relied even more on his Chaucerian editions to refute their opponents. Thus Professor Aurner asserted that "In the *Canterbury Tales* we have an *editio princeps* in every sense of the word. First in literary significance, in poetic rank and in date, it was one of the first fruits of England's earliest press, and the selection — apparently without the suggestion of any patron — of the first English printer and publisher."² Professor Aurner also attributed "high rank as judge and critic" to Caxton, not only because he printed Chaucer's works, but also because he did not link Chaucer's name with those of Gower and Lydgate, as was so common at that time. Even Professor Sands, who accepted that Caxton printed many volumes under patronage, has claimed that, when Caxton was free to print what he liked, he showed discrimination in his choice. Naturally his editions of Chaucerian works form one of the main planks in this argument. Sands does not, like Aurner, despise Caxton's editions of Gower and Lydgate, but he stresses that the English poets were produced on Caxton's own initiative and without patronage.³ In view of statements like this it might be considered time to investigate Caxton's attitude to Chaucer in its entirety to see if these claims can be justified. Such an investigation might help to illuminate his general appreciation of English literature, and it should certainly enable us to decide how a typical late fifteenth-century man developed and expressed his literary tastes. One way to tackle Caxton's attitude to Chaucer is to approach it on several different levels. Firstly, why did Caxton print Chaucer's works, and did he print them for any particular person? Secondly, what was Caxton's treatment of the text? How accurate are his editions? Thirdly, to what extent do the various appreciations that Caxton wrote of Chaucer's work represent his own views? This last point will naturally include a consideration of Caxton's printing of Surigone's eulogy to Chaucer.

Caxton printed a considerable number of Chaucer's works. In none of them is the date when he printed the work found, so that the datings have to be arrived at by a comparison with his other printed books. The following is a list of Chaucer's works printed by Caxton with the estimated dates of printing as found in Blades. *Canterbury Tales* (first edition c.1478); *Parliament of Fowls* and other pieces (*ante* 1479); *Anelida and the False Arcite* and *Chaucer's Complaint to His Purse* (*ante* 1479); the prose translation of the *De Consolatione Philosophiae* by Boethius (*ante* 1479); *Canterbury Tales* (second edition c. 1484); *House of Fame* (c.1484); *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1484). One interesting point that emerges from this list is that there were two periods in which Caxton issued Chaucerian texts, one about 1478 and the other about 1484. The main work in each period was the *Canterbury Tales*. One might assume, therefore, that Caxton issued the other texts at about the same time as the *Canterbury Tales* to reap the advantage of the interest in Chaucer which such an edition would create, just as it is common today for a publisher to follow up a success with other texts by the same author. The minor texts would support the *Canterbury Tales*, just as the *Tales* would help to sell them; the publisher was thus able to offer a more complete list of the poet's works. In this connection it is interesting to note that the minor texts printed were different ones in each of the two periods. In both periods it is the *Canterbury Tales* which were printed by request, though none of the other volumes with the exception of the Boethius was ordered by clients as far as we can tell. Whether a volume was actually requested or not, Caxton would almost certainly have assumed that Chaucerian texts were likely to sell well, because Chaucer was held in high esteem by Lydgate and other fifteenth-century writers, and because he must have known that Chaucer manuscripts had been, and perhaps were still being, produced by bookshops in London and the provinces.⁴ When asked to produce an edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, he is not likely to have hesitated long; their known popularity would minimize the risk involved. After the *Tales* it would be a logical step to print the minor works, as I have already suggested.

I stated in the previous paragraph that Caxton produced both editions of the *Canterbury Tales* on request. This has not been accepted by all scholars, and it is necessary to review the evidence for this statement. The evidence comes entirely from Caxton's prologue to the second edition of the *Tales*. Here he tells us that his first edition, which had been set up six years earlier, was printed from a manuscript which had been brought to him.⁵ The best way to interpret this statement is to assume that the manuscript had been brought to him by someone who was wealthy enough to own a manuscript of the *Tales*, with a request that the printer should print it. It is difficult to see who else would have brought a manuscript to Caxton. He naturally does not reveal who brought him the manuscript because he now claims that the manuscript of the first edition was not a good one. That Caxton did set up texts from manuscripts brought to him is well known; and the phrase in the prologue to the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* echoes one in the prologue to *King Arthur* (1485). This latter text was set up "after a cōpye vnto me delyuerd" (p.94); and since Caxton had been urged to print *King Arthur* by various gentlemen, one may assume that it had been brought to him by one of these gentlemen. The same thing probably

happened with the first edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. But if Caxton was indeed asked to print it by someone, it might well be asked why he did not notify us of this detail in the first edition. This question may not have a simple answer, but the following facts should be taken into consideration. Caxton's earliest texts which have prologue or epilogue are all dedicated to members of the royal family or are translations by Earl Rivers. The *History of Troy* is dedicated to Margaret of Burgundy, the *Game of Chess* to the Duke of Clarence, and *Jason* to the Prince of Wales; and the *Dicts of the Philosophers* and the *Moral Proverbs* were translated by Earl Rivers. It was about this time that the *Canterbury Tales* was produced, and Caxton may not yet have realized that there might be commercial advantages to be gained by mentioning the names of the gentlemen for whom he produced a book. In his Boethius edition, produced only a little later than the *Canterbury Tales*, we learn for the first time that a volume had been printed at the request of someone other than a member of the royal family or Earl Rivers. Significantly the name of this person, possibly the mercer William Pratt, is withheld. This "friend" receives little notice in the epilogue, which is used rather to glorify Caxton and Chaucer. The reasons for this oblique reference to the friend I have considered elsewhere;⁶ clearly Caxton felt under some obligation to refer to him, though he did not think the friend's name would promote sales of the edition. It is only when we get to the first edition of the *Chronicles of England* (1480) that Caxton introduces a prologue to inform us that he had been requested to print the book by diverse gentlemen.⁷ It is from then onwards that Caxton used the prologue more generally to give us information about the book, to underline its suitability for genteel readers, and to refer to or name the people who had been instrumental in getting it into print. This development might help to account for the use of the title in the edition of the *House of Fame*, which belongs to Caxton's second Chaucerian period. Although no extant manuscript has a title to the poem which attributes it to Chaucer, Caxton's edition has the title *The book of Fame made by Gefferey Chaucer*.⁸ None of the poems in the first period is issued with title or prologue. Yet in the second period not only is the *House of Fame* issued with a title, but the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* is issued with a prologue. This opens pompously enough "Grete thankes laude and honour/ought to be gyuen vnto the clerkes/poetes/and historiographers that haue wreton many noble bokes of wysedom of the lyues/passions/& myracles of holy sayntes of hystories/of noble and famous Actes/and faittes/And of the cronycles sith the begynnyng of the creacion of the world . . ." (p.90). The opening sentence is largely copied from his prologue to the *Polychronicon* (1482): "Grete thankynge lawde & honoure we merytoryously ben bounde to yelde and offre vnto wryters of hystories . . ." (p.64). This correspondence between the two prologues indicates that, although Caxton was beginning to appreciate the value of prologues, he had not enough literary ability to compose his own grand openings. His prologue to the *Polychronicon* is itself a translation of a prologue by Diodorus Siculus.⁹ It is probable, therefore, that Caxton developed an awareness of the usefulness of the prologue and that this development was not far advanced at the time he issued his first edition of the *Canterbury Tales*.

In his second edition of the *Tales* Caxton tells us the familiar story of how a gentleman came to see him about the text of his first edition, an

episode which naturally raises the question of how Caxton treated the text of the poem. But I shall defer my discussion of this problem in order to consider the identity of the two gentlemen who requested the separate editions. Unfortunately, I do not think it is possible for us today to identify either of the gentlemen. Manly and Rickert suggested that the manuscript used for the first edition may have belonged to William Earl of Arundel, but their grounds seem quite insufficient.¹⁰ I myself have suggested that the name of the gentleman who requested the second edition was withheld for political reasons.¹¹ Although this fact suggests that he was in the Woodville sphere of influence, Caxton tells us too little about him for us to be able to name him. Regrettably neither gentleman can be identified. But although we cannot name them, there is no reason to belittle the part they played in getting Chaucer into print. We owe the two editions of the *Canterbury Tales* to them, as much as to Caxton.

What then was Caxton's attitude towards the text of the poems? As we have seen, it has been widely argued that Caxton was interested in producing a good text of the *Canterbury Tales*, and that it was for this reason he revised his first edition when it was pointed out to him that it was textually corrupt. Caxton says in the prologue to his second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* that six years earlier a text of the *Tales* had been brought to him, which he, assuming it to be a good text, had printed. But now another gentleman had come along, and had told him that his edition was imperfect and that his father had a copy of the *Tales* which was much better. This gentleman promised to try to get his father to lend his copy to the printer, if Caxton was willing to print a second edition. This Caxton agreed to do. When the manuscript came into his hands, he corrected his first edition, which he then reissued (pp. 90-91). Although others have viewed this prologue as an expression of Caxton's sense of responsibility as an editor, I am not convinced that this is the correct interpretation. One noteworthy omission on Caxton's part is the complete lack of any indication as to why he accepted that the second manuscript was better than that used for his first edition, or why he had originally accepted that the first manuscript brought to him was a good one. He does not give us any example of the textual inferiority of the first edition. He does note that some Chaucer manuscripts have verses omitted and added; but this is a general statement without particular reference to his own text. It seems most likely that, when the first manuscript was brought to him by his client, he assumed the text was accurate because it probably never crossed his mind that it might not be. When the second gentleman came along, he accepted that the manuscript belonging to the gentleman's father contained a better text because the gentleman said it did. Caxton apparently agreed to print a second corrected edition *before* he had seen the second manuscript. He can have had no idea as to the quality of this manuscript; he merely believed what he was told. His ideas as to what formed a good Chaucer text were not based on his own knowledge of the manuscripts; they were based on the observations of his visitors. The principal motive for the second edition must have been Caxton's desire to please a noble customer. He could naturally also claim that he did it "to satisfye thauctour" (p.91); but it must be regarded as doubtful whether he knew why the second manuscript was thought to be better than the first edition. Caxton was in no sense a textual critic. He was not sufficiently familiar with

Chaucer's text to realize that what he printed in the first edition was not necessarily accurate; and he did not, as some printers did, employ scholars to produce an accurate text for him.¹² It was the gentleman and his father who knew their Chaucer so well that, when they read the printed edition, they realized it was different from their own text. Whatever credit there is for the second edition belongs to these two, not to Caxton. Furthermore, there were many manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* produced in the fifteenth century, and it should have been easy enough for Caxton, living at Westminster, to acquire other manuscripts if he had wanted to make a collation. If he had wanted to produce as correct a version as possible for his first edition, he would no doubt have got others to do it for him. He did not, and the evidence shows that he merely printed what he was given and believed what he was told.

When the second manuscript was brought to him, he did not print the new edition from this manuscript. He corrected his first edition and then reissued it. Caxton may have adopted this method of procedure because it was easier for the compositor to work from a printed book than from a valuable, and no doubt bulky, manuscript. But it also meant that the original text would only be superficially altered; the first edition, which Caxton accepted had a bad text, still remained the basic text. The changes he made are of two kinds: minor adjustments to the order of the tales and small changes in the text itself. Caxton's first edition had been based on a manuscript of group *b*,¹³ which was closely related to the New College and Trinity College, Cambridge, R.3.15 manuscripts. The order of the tales in the first edition is AB¹F¹E²DE¹F²GCB²HI. This order is changed in the second edition in that F¹ and F² are united and placed after E². This means in effect that Caxton found the link between the Squire's Tale and the Franklin's Tale in the second manuscript; and he united these two tales through their link and put them in a slightly different position. The link between the Squire's Tale and the Franklin's Tale is found in most manuscripts of group *a*, and it does not occur in manuscripts of the other groups. It would be natural to assume from this fact that Caxton's second manuscript belonged to group *a* rather than to any other group. It is not possible, however, to equate his second manuscript with a single extant manuscript in this group, because all show further differences in the arrangement of the tales which do not reappear in the second printed edition. This does not mean, as some have assumed, that the second manuscript was of a completely different type from those in group *a*. The most likely explanation is that in the revision of his first edition Caxton took only certain features from the manuscript which he had borrowed. That is to say, the revision was a haphazard affair: Caxton making such changes as caught his attention or as he could manage without a far-reaching reorganization. One need not assume that he made a detailed collation of the two texts.

The changes in the text were probably made in a similarly haphazard way. These are all of a minor nature as will be seen by comparing the following lines from the Pardoner's Tale in both editions:

First edition.

And who so fyndith hym out of suche blame
Comyth vp and offir in goddis name

And I assoyle hem by the auctorite
 Suche as by bull was grauntid me
 By this gaude haue I wonne many a yeer
 An hundrid mark syn I was pardonere
 I stonde lik a clerk in many a Pulpet
 And shewe lewd peple and doun they set
 I preche so as ye haue herd before
 And telle an hundrid false Iapis more

(97-106)

Second edition.

And who so fyndeth hym out of suche blame
 Comyth vp and offyr in goddis name
 And I assoyle hem by the auctoryte
 Suche as by bull was grauntid to me
 By this gaude haue I wonne many a yeer
 An hundred mark syn I was pardonere
 I stonde lyke a clerke in my pulpet
 And whan lewd peple be doun y set
 I preche so as ye haue herd before
 And telle an hundred Iapis more.

I have chosen lines from this tale as an illustration because it was the one edited by Koch from eight different manuscripts, including the two earliest printed editions.¹⁴ Koch concluded from his study of the Pardoner's Tale that Caxton's second manuscript belonged to group *a*, though there are places where his readings differ from any known manuscript; Koch was therefore unable to specify a particular manuscript within this group. Greg, who made a collation of the first 116 lines of the Knight's Tale, was unable to confirm Koch's suggestion, for the readings in the second edition did not indicate a particular group of *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts sufficiently clearly. The manuscript could have belonged to any of groups *a*, *c* or *d*.¹⁵ It is difficult to draw a firm conclusion from these investigations. But from the evidence of the arrangement of the tales in the various manuscripts and editions and from Koch's researches into the Pardoner's Tale, it may be suggested that Caxton's second manuscript probably belonged to group *a* of the *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts. Greg's work neither confirms nor refutes this suggestion, but we may note that he realized that the link between the Squire's Tale and the Franklin's Tale which is found in Caxton's second edition could only come from a manuscript of group *a*. Unless that manuscript was very different from any extant manuscript in group *a*, one can only conclude that Caxton's treatment of the text was somewhat cavalier. He made some changes, but not others, in the order of the tales which must almost certainly have been in his manuscript. He corrected some of the readings in the first edition. But these corrections were not carried out in any systematic way; some indeed may have been made by Caxton himself without the authority of the manuscript. It is because of this haphazard treatment by the editor, to say nothing of possible typographical mistakes, that the second manuscript is so difficult to identify. Such evidence as there is indicates, therefore, that Caxton did not produce his second edition with that care which some modern writers have attributed to him. It was, like so

much else of his work, carried out in haste. Modern editors of his translations have all commented upon the haste with which Caxton carried out his translating work; it would be strange if this were not also the case with his editorial activities on the English poets.

In addition to his treatment of the *Canterbury Tales*, we can learn something of Caxton's attitude to Chaucer's text by examining his handling of the *House of Fame*. This text is interesting because Caxton had a manuscript which was less complete than the two best extant manuscripts. Where the poem in these manuscripts ends at line 2158, Caxton's manuscript ended at line 2094. No doubt the last sixty-four lines had been on the last folio which had become detached from the rest of the manuscript. When he issued the poem in 1484, Caxton added a brief poetic conclusion as well as an epilogue. From the epilogue it is clear that he accepted Chaucer had left the poem unfinished, although he evidently took no steps to discover whether what he had of the poem was all that was extant. Once again he just accepted the evidence of the manuscript he had. In the epilogue he wrote "This noble man Gefferey Chaucer fynysshyd at the sayd conclusion of the metyng of lesyng and sothsawe/ where as yet they ben chekked and may not departe" (p.69). The words he uses echo two lines near the end of the manuscript he possessed: *A lesyng and a soth sayd sawe* (2089) and *They were a chekked bothe two* (2093);¹⁶ and they thus reveal that Caxton did not know of the existence of the other sixty-four lines of the poem. The former line is particularly illuminating. We do not have any of the manuscripts from which Caxton set up his Chaucerian texts, and so it is not possible for us to judge how accurately the printed versions reflect the manuscripts. Yet we may justly conclude that Caxton's line *A lesyng and a soth sayd sawe* contains a typographical error. The extant manuscripts read *A lesyng and a sad sothe sawe* here. The words *lesyng* and *sothsawe* in Caxton's epilogue reflect the order in the manuscripts, *a sad sothe sawe*, not that of his own edition, *soth sayd sawe*. Caxton's manuscript must have had a reading similar to that of the other manuscripts; in his edition *sad* has become *sayd* and been transposed after *soth*. This example shows that Caxton cannot have been so interested in the text of Chaucer's poems that he corrected what his compositor set up. Yet this would have been an easy and convincing way "to satsfyne thauctour."

Because his text of the *House of Fame* was incomplete, Caxton assumed that Chaucer had left the poem unfinished. Although he stated this in his epilogue, he nevertheless took it upon himself to compose a twelve-line conclusion to the poem. He pointed this out to the reader by printing *Caxton* in the margin opposite the first line of this continuation. Since Caxton expresses a high opinion of Chaucer's poetic achievement and frequently confesses to a lack of literary ability on his own part, it is surprising that he should seek to emulate such a poet as Chaucer in this way. If the poem was incomplete, he could have let it remain so in his edition, particularly as his own conclusion is so unsatisfactory — though we may perhaps add that it was for a long time accepted as genuine. It reads:

And wyth the noyse of them [t]wo
I Sodeynly awoke anon tho
And remembryd what I had seen

Caxton

And how hye and ferre I had been
 In my ghoost/ and had grete wonder
 Of that the god of thonder
 Had lete me knowen/ and began to wryte
 Lyke as ye haue herd me endyte
 Wherfor the studye and rede alway
 I purpose to doo day by day
 Thus in dremyng and in game
 Endeth thys lytyl book of Fame.

We may note that Caxton was not inspired to write a continuation as such; we are not to learn what happened at the meeting of *lesyng* and *sothsawe*. His addition is merely a way of concluding the poem as quickly as possible. He made his own conclusion by modelling it on the last stanza of the *Parliament of Fowls*, which he had printed six years earlier. In his edition this last verse reads:

And syth þ^e shoutyng/ whan þ^e song was do
 The fowles made at her flight away
 I woke/ and other bokes toke me to
 To rede vpon/ and yet I red alway
 I hope ywis to rede so somme day
 That I shal mete somme thinge for to fare
 The better/ and thus to rede I wil nat spare.¹⁷

Skeat has suggested that Caxton may have had the last lines of the *Book of the Duchess* in mind as well.¹⁸ But since there is no evidence that Caxton had read this work and since the parallels are not very close, this suggestion may be discounted. It seems that when Caxton noticed the *House of Fame* was incomplete, he used the *Parliament of Fowls* as a model and wrote a brief conclusion for the poem. Why he should have done so remains uncertain; perhaps it is merely an expression of that common medieval wish to have a complete work. He completed the *House of Fame* because he thought it wanted only a brief conclusion; he did not of course attempt a conclusion for the *Canterbury Tales*.

Let us turn now to a consideration of Caxton's opinions of Chaucer. Within his first group of Chaucerian editions only the Boethius volume contains an evaluation of Chaucer. Before discussing the Boethius epilogue in detail, we should note that in 1477 Caxton had published the *Book of Courtesy* which contains a fulsome eulogy of Chaucer and other English poets by an unknown poet. Caxton had by 1478 also become acquainted with Surigone's epitaph to Chaucer, which he printed as part of his epilogue to Boethius. I mention these two because they show that Caxton must have been aware that Chaucer was generally regarded as the greatest English poet. Furthermore, in his epilogue to Book II of the *History of Troy* (c. 1473) he mentions that Lydgate had written an account of the final siege and fall of Troy (p.6); and in Lydgate's *Troy Book* there are several passages in praise of Chaucer. It does not follow that Caxton had read Lydgate's poem merely because he referred to it, but as there is a verbal echo of Lydgate's poem in Caxton's epilogue it is likely that he had in fact done so. Caxton's "[I] am not worthy to bere his penner & ynke horne after

hym" (p.6)¹⁹ probably echoes Lydgate's remark that no-one "worpi was his ynkhorn for to holde" (V, 3530). We may, therefore, confidently assert that by 1478 Caxton was acquainted with at least three eulogies of Chaucer. It was in the shadow of these that he composed his own.

In his epilogue to the Boethius, Caxton opens his praise of Chaucer by describing him as "the worshipful fader & first foundeur & enbelissher of ornate eloquence in our englissh" (p.37). This is a direct imitation of a line in the *Book of Courtesy*: "O fader and founder of ornate eloquence."²⁰ Even Caxton's next phrase "I mene/ Maister Geoffrey Chaucer" echoes a further line from this same stanza of the *Book of Courtesy*: "I mene fader chaucer/ maister galfryde." That Caxton should have modified *fader and founder* to *worshipful fader & first foundeur & enbelissher* may be attributed partly to Caxton's use of doublets and partly to the common application of these expressions to Chaucer. The phrase *first founder* had become a cliché applicable to Chaucer or, in the plural, to the triumvirate of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate. Hoccleve was probably the author of it in his *Regement of Princes*, in which he describes Chaucer as "the first fyndere of our faire langage" (4978); though it later became a commonplace to write that Chaucer was the *first* to make the English language eloquent and ornate. This claim is found in Lydgate's *Troy Book* and it is echoed in Surigone's epitaph. On the other hand, the word *embellisher* is first recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* from this Caxtonian epilogue. But while there is no known earlier use of the noun, it was quite common to write that Chaucer had *embellished* the English language. John Shirley could about 1456 link in the same passage *first foundid* with *bemvelisshing of oure rude moders englisshe* when referring to Chaucer. Similarly George Ashby about 1470 wrote of Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate that they were

Primier poetes of this nacion,
Embelysshing oure englisshe tendure algate
Firse finders to oure consolacion.²¹

So when Caxton wrote that Chaucer was "the worshipful fader & first foundeur & enbelissher of ornate eloquence in our englissh" he was merely filling out the line from the *Book of Courtesy* with critical commonplaces of the day. Caxton follows up this statement with the remark that for his translation "in myne oppynyon he [Chaucer] hath deseruid a perpetuell lawde and thanke of al this noble Royame of Eng lond." This is such a general statement that one would hardly seek to provide an exact parallel. It is sufficient to say that many before him had made similar remarks. Thus Lydgate in his *Troy Book* wrote:

To whom honour, laude, & reuerence,
poru -oute þis londe oue be & songe. (IV, 4244-5)

The rest of the epilogue merely repeats what Caxton has already stated in praise of Chaucer earlier in his epilogue. It is unnecessary to look for further parallels, for nothing new is added.

The conclusion of the epilogue of the Boethius volume is of great interest as it raises another problem. Caxton mentions that Chaucer's body is buried at Westminster Abbey "by whos sepulture is wretton on a table hongyng on a pylere his Epitaphye maad by a poete laureat wherof the cople foloweth &c." (p.37). The epitaph, which is of some thirty lines in Latin, is preceded by three Latin lines, which one may assume were engraved on the *table* by the tomb and copied from there by Caxton. They read:

Epitaphium Galfridi Chaucer. per
poetam laureatum Stephanum Surigonum
Mediolanensem in decretis licenciatum.

In the text the epitaph is also followed by four lines in Latin, which are generally attributed to Caxton himself:

Post obitum Caxton voluit te viuere cura
Willelmi. Chaucer clare poeta tuj
Nam tua non solum compressit opuscula formis
Has quoque suas laudes. iussit hic esse tuas.

Reading Caxton's epilogue, one would assume that on a pillar by Chaucer's tomb there was a tablet with Surigone's epitaph. This epitaph Caxton had copied down in order to print it at the end of his Boethius. However, this is not how Caxton's words are generally interpreted. Blades, who is responsible for the currently accepted interpretation, claimed that "not only did Caxton perpetuate the memory of the great Poet by printing his works but . . . also raised a public monument to his memory before St. Benet's Chapel, in Westminster Abbey, in the shape of a pillar supporting a tablet upon which the above "Epitaphye" was written."²² If this were so, one might well wonder why Caxton was so reticent in the English part of his epilogue about his putting up the tablet. He was not usually slow to draw attention to his own expenses;²³ and there is nothing in Caxton's remarks quoted above to imply that he had actually set up the pillar or the tablet. As Blades makes no reference to Leland's evidence (for which see *infra*), it must be assumed that he based his hypothesis on the evidence of the last of Caxton's four Latin lines. Presumably he interpreted *hic* to mean "here, i.e. on the pillar." But it would be more natural to understand it to mean "here, i.e. in this edition of Boethius"; that is, he has not only arranged for the publication of Chaucer's works, but has ordered the epitaph made by Surigone to be printed in the edition of Boethius. It is only if we read the Latin in this way that it can harmonise with the remarks in English which introduce the epitaph.

It follows from what I have written that I do not think that Caxton's Latin lines were engraved on the tablet. They were written for the edition. Those who agree with Blades must accept that these four lines were engraved on the tablet, if *hic* is to mean "here on the pillar." If this were so it would mean that the tablet must have been set up in 1478, for Caxton mentions printing Chaucerian works and no Chaucer edition is dated before then, and the Boethius volume was itself printed *ante* 1479. If Caxton did

put up the tablet in 1478, we have to discover when and how he managed to get hold of the epitaph by Surigone. Unfortunately not a great deal is known of Stefano Surigone. Originally from Milan, he came to England and taught at Oxford at some period between 1454 and 1464. He may possibly have stayed till about 1471, when we know he was in Cologne, for he matriculated then at that University. He is known to have taught also at Strassburg and Louvain. Weiss has suggested that Caxton may have met Surigone at Cologne in 1471. He has also suggested that Surigone returned to England about 1478 when he seems to have established a connexion with Caxton. "The learning of the Milanese obviously impressed Caxton, who having then an edition of Chaucer's *Boethius* in the press, requested him to compose a Latin elegy in praise of Chaucer to be included in the book. The elegy was printed at the end of the *Boethius*, which Caxton issued in 1478, and it is not to be excluded that he may have availed himself of Surigone's help in editorial activities, as he did later with Carmeliano."²⁴ These are large inferences to be drawn from such slender evidence as is found in Caxton's epilogue. But Weiss also draws on the evidence of Leland in his *De Scriptoribus Britannicis*, in which Leland says that Surigone composed the Latin epitaph on Chaucer at Caxton's request and that the last two lines from that epitaph were engraved on the tomb also at Caxton's request.²⁵ But Weiss neglected the fact that Leland goes on to say that all the verses were inscribed on a tablet (*tabella*) which Surigone had caused to be fixed to a pillar near Chaucer's tomb: ". . . elegos in nivea tabella depictos, quos Surigonus Visimonasterii columnæ, Chauceri sepulchro vicinæ, adfixit." Leland's account of the epitaph is therefore as follows. Caxton asked Surigone to make an epitaph for Chaucer. This epitaph Surigone had inscribed on a tablet which he affixed to a pillar by Chaucer's tomb. The two lines preceding Caxton's additional lines, which form the conclusion of the epitaph proper, were then inscribed at Caxton's request on Chaucer's tomb. This order does make sense, but it is sufficiently unusual for it to seem more likely that Leland merely inferred these facts from Caxton's epilogue. Furthermore, Leland in his transcription of the epitaph includes the four lines which are generally attributed to Caxton. Unless one is to think that Surigone had Caxton's four lines inscribed on the tablet with his own verses, one must accept that Leland got the verses from Caxton's edition of *Boethius* for which they were almost certainly written. Yet if it can be shown, as I think it can, that Leland knew Caxton's *Boethius*, then it is not improbable that what he wrote about Caxton and Surigone was merely what he had deduced from Caxton's epilogue and the Latin verses. Whether the tablet or the inscription on the tomb were still there in his day²⁶ (assuming that there ever had been an inscription on the tomb) is not clear; but I doubt whether we can give much weight to Leland's evidence.

Without Leland's comments, the most natural interpretation of the epitaph's history would be as follows. Surigone was in England for some time between 1454 and 1464, and may have stayed till about 1471. During his stay he gave lectures on Latin composition at Oxford and was clearly regarded as a man of learning and a poet of some accomplishment. While in England he either spontaneously or more probably by request composed an epitaph on Chaucer. This was then placed by some admirer or by

Surigone himself on a pillar by Chaucer's tomb. Since many eulogies of Chaucer were written in the fifteenth century and since two gentlemen and one merchant asked Caxton for editions of Chaucerian works, it need not surprise us that someone wanted to put up an epitaph to Chaucer by his tomb. When Caxton came to Westminster, he saw and copied the inscription. This he subsequently printed in his edition of Boethius together with four of his own verses. As Caxton was willing to write Chaucerian verses at the end of the *House of Fame*, it is unlikely that he would hesitate to write Latin verses in imitation of Surigone. Caxton's verses were meant for his edition and were never added to the tablet. This interpretation would be straightforward enough without Leland's comments, for Caxton makes no mention of setting up the inscription or of meeting Surigone or of asking for the epitaph to be written. Leland's information, however, would be crucial if we could decide whether he used any sources other than Caxton's Boethius. Unfortunately, there is no proof as to whether Leland did have any other sources of information; but it seems very likely that he could have inferred what he wrote from Caxton's epilogue. As Blades interpreted Caxton's words in much the same way as Leland did, we need have no hesitation in thinking that the sort of information Leland gives us could have been taken from the Boethius epilogue. If we understand the tablet and epitaph in the way I have suggested there is no need to make Surigone return to England, a visit for which there is no evidence, and there is no reason to make Caxton act in an untypical manner. It would be unusual for Caxton not to state quite openly that he had paid for the inscription to be put up, if he had done so. He had little dealings with the humanists and it is unlikely that he would have commissioned an epitaph from one of them.²⁷ But if there was an epitaph already in situ, this would naturally by virtue of that very fact have had an authority which Caxton might well have wished to use to help to sell his edition. Furthermore, Caxton's opinions about Chaucer were largely second-hand. There is no evidence that by 1478 Caxton had a sufficiently independent appreciation of Chaucer to want to commission a Latin epitaph. There is, however, abundant evidence to show that he used material which was available to him. Caxton appropriated Surigone's epitaph, as he had done the eulogies in the *Book of Courtesy* and Lydgate's *Troy Book*. To conclude, I suggest that an interpretation along the lines I have indicated accounts best for the presence of four Caxtonian lines. One can hardly imagine that Surigone wrote these lines, for the epitaph is rounded off nicely by its last two lines:

Galfridus Chaucer vates et fama poesis
Materne hac sacra sum tumulatus humo.

The addition of another four lines by Caxton destroys the whole balance and elegance of the epitaph; and one cannot believe that the humanist Surigone would have written them or even consented to their appearance on the tablet. They are, however, a typical Caxtonian addition.

We saw that the words Caxton used in praise of Chaucer in the epilogue to the Boethius were for the most part borrowed from other fifteenth-century writers. There is little originality in his comments. It is time now to consider his remarks about Chaucer in the works in his second period of

Chaucerian printings. We should note first that before this second period began he had printed further eulogies of Chaucer. These for the most part are to be found in works by Lydgate or attributed to him. Of these the most important is *De Cura Sapientiae*, printed about 1481, a poem which is no longer accepted by all scholars as part of the Lydgate canon. Also during the time he was engaged in his second series of Chaucerian poems he printed Lydgate's *Life of Our Lady* (c.1484), which likewise contains some extravagant praise of Chaucer. Only two of the Chaucerian works in this second period contain a prologue or epilogue by Caxton, the *House of Fame* and the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*. As the latter is the major work, we may start by considering what Caxton had to say about Chaucer in that work. Caxton opens his remarks by repeating much of what he had written in his epilogue to Boethius. He writes "we ought to gyue a synguler laude vnto that noble & grete philosopher Gefferey chaucer the whiche for his ornate wrytyng in our tongue may wel haue the name of a laureate poete/ For to fore that he by hys labour enbelysshyd/ ornated/ and made faire our englisshe" (p.90). Many of the words Caxton uses here are the same as those in the Boethius epilogue. The only new idea is that Chaucer ought to be called a "poet laureate." This idea was common in fifteenth-century criticism of Chaucer, though it was often expressed in various ways. It was more usual to write that Chaucer was worthy to have the laurel of poetry, as Lydgate did in his *Life of Our Lady*:

The noble rethor Poete of breteine
That worthy was the laurer to haue
Of poetrie [*text: peetrie*].

This and similar expressions were widely used in the fifteenth century. But it is quite possible that Caxton got the expression "poet laureate" from the *De Cura Sapientiae*. In that work a passage in praise of Chaucer is followed by the poet's plea that those who think his writing dull should go to "Galfryde the poete laureate"²⁸ and others. By this *Galfryde* the poet probably meant Geoffrey of Vinsauf, but it is quite likely that Caxton, when he printed the text, understood it to mean Geoffrey Chaucer and adopted it as part of his critical ideas on Chaucer.

Caxton continues his passage by praising Chaucer for his contribution to the elevation of the English language. He writes: "in thys Royame was had rude speche & Incongrue/ as yet it appiereth by olde bookes/ whyche at thys day ought not to haue place ne be compared emong ne to hys beauteuous volumes/ and aournate wrytynges." That Chaucer made eloquent our rude language is another commonplace in fifteenth-century Chaucerian criticism and is found particularly frequently in Lydgate. Thus in his *Troy Book* Lydgate says the English language was

Rude and boistous firste be olde dawes,
þat was ful fer from al perfeccioun,
And but of litel reputacioun
Til þat he cam, &, þoru his poetrie,
Gan oure tonge firste to magnifie,
And adourne it with his elloquence. (III, 4238-43)

Lydgate does not, as far as I can discover, use *incongrue* to describe the English language. It is, however, a word used in other contexts by Caxton and was no doubt introduced by him to form a doublet, a stylistic procedure which we have seen him adopt elsewhere. The reference to "olde bookes" was probably also added by Caxton himself following the hint found in Lydgate. Caxton had recently published Trevisa's translation of the *Polychronicon*, the language of which he modernized, and it may have been works of this sort which Caxton had principally in mind. Caxton's phrase "beauteuous volumes/and aournate wrytynges" may echo a line from Lydgate's *Serpent of Division*, in which mention is made of "the large writings and golden vollums of that woorthye Chaucer."²⁹ But as it cannot be shown that Caxton knew this work, and as Caxton's phrase is similar to one he had used frequently in his earlier prologues, it is more likely that it was modelled on them. For example, in the prologue to the *Polychronicon*, which served as a model for the prologue to the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, he used the phrase "large and aourned volumes" (p.64). A similar phrase, "fair and Aourned volumes" (p.50), is found in the prologue to the *Mirror of the World* (1481) where it translates the French *beaulx & aournés volumes*. Caxton may well have taken a hint from Lydgate which he then expressed in his own way. Caxton concludes this section of his eulogy of Chaucer by noting that he had written many works in prose and rhyme. This statement, we may assume, reflects the fact that Caxton had already printed many prose and poetic works by Chaucer.

Caxton now launches into a discussion of the virtues of Chaucer's works. This discussion is based for the most part on Lydgate's *Siege of Thebes*. In the first place Chaucer's compositions are "craftyly made." This no doubt echoes Lydgate's phrase "crafty writinge" in his passage on Chaucer in the *Siege of Thebes* (l.57). Then Caxton goes on to write that Chaucer "comprehended hys maters in short/ quyck and hye sentences." This part of Caxton's eulogy is not from the *Siege of Thebes*. In his *Troy Book*, however, Lydgate does describe Chaucer's writing as being of "ful hize sentence" (III, 4248) and Caxton may have taken his cue from this. But Caxton's expression is so similar to a line in the *General Prologue* that one may accept he took it from there, even if, as is not improbable, he quoted the line from memory. In the description of the Clerk of Oxenford we find the line:

And short and quyk and ful of hy sentence.³⁰ (306)

Finally, the passage enumerating Chaucer's virtues ends "eschewyng prolyxyte/ castyng away the chaf of superfluyte/ and shewyng the pyked grayn of sentence/ vtteryd by crafty and sugred eloquence." This passage is probably based on two passages from the *Siege of Thebes*.³¹ These are lines 52-7:

Be rehersaile/ of his Sugrid mouth,
Of eche thyng/ keping in substaunce
The sentence hool/ with-oute variance,
Voyding the Chaf/ sothly for to seyn,
Enlumynyng/ þe trewe piked greyn
Be crafty writinge/ of his sawes swete;

and lines 1907-8:

In eschewyng of prolixite,
And voyde away/ al superfluyte.

The first of these two passages is in praise of Chaucer, though the second is not. Since one may assume that Caxton had recently read this poem, one may accept that he conflated the two passages, though he could have done so unconsciously rather than deliberately. Certainly the manner in which the last words of the clauses rhyme, *prolyxite/superfluyte* and *sentence/eloquence*, reveals that Caxton was borrowing from some verse work. And the occurrence of the adjective *sugred*, so typical of Lydgate's works, and of the phrase *pyked grayn* confirms that this verse work must have been by Lydgate. Caxton often borrowed from various sources and there is no difficulty in assuming that he may have used different passages from the same work. The rest of the prologue consists of some general remarks about the *Canterbury Tales*, which Caxton probably made up from his own reading of the *Tales*; no parallel need be looked for.

The last Chaucerian work to which Caxton added an appreciation of the poet was his edition of the *House of Fame*. After mentioning that Chaucer had left the poem incomplete, Caxton goes on to give his reasons for Chaucer's greatness as a poet. First, he gives a general statement about Chaucer's excellence: "in alle hys werkys he excellyth in myn oppynyon alle other wryters in our Englyssh" (p.69). This statement implies that Caxton put Chaucer above even Gower and Lydgate. But he was not alone in his opinion, for although Chaucer, Gower and Lydgate were the three great English poets, Chaucer was regarded as pre-eminent among them. Lydgate himself frequently gives expression to Chaucer's excellence and pre-eminence. In his *Troy Book* he describes Chaucer as "þe noble Rethor that alle dide excelle" (III, 553). Similarly in the *Siege of Thebes* Lydgate wrote that Chaucer was

Floure of Poetes/ thorghout al breteyne,
Which sothly hadde/ most of excellence
In rethorike/ and in eloquence. (40-2)

As we have seen, Caxton knew the *Troy Book* by 1473 and he drew on the *Siege of Troy* in the prologue to his second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, so he would have been quite familiar with both these passages. Furthermore, Lydgate also referred to Chaucer's pre-eminence in his *Life of Our Lady*, which Caxton printed in c.1484. In this poem the expression of Chaucer's excellence is very different from that found in the epilogue to the *House of Fame*, but I mention it as further proof that Caxton was well acquainted with the current literary fashion which placed Chaucer above all other English poets. After his statement on Chaucer's excellence, Caxton justifies himself by telling us in what it consists: "For he wryteth no voyde wordes/ but alle hys mater is ful of hye and quykke sentence." This claim repeats, with many of the same words, what he had written in the prologue to the *Canterbury Tales*. It is almost as though he could recall some, but not all, of what he had written and then used it again. But he had not used the adjective *voyde* in his prologue, even though he uses

it here in the epilogue. This word does, however, occur in the passage from the *Siege of Thebes* which he had used in the composition of the prologue. In that passage the phrase "Voyding the Chaf" (l.55) had been used by Lydgate. It seems as though Caxton's recollection of the passage from the *Siege of Thebes* had become fused in his mind with the passage in his own prologue; and from this fusion sprang the new expression in the epilogue to the *House of Fame*.

We have now completed our investigation of Caxton's editions of Chaucerian works and we may conclude by trying to summarize the results. It is clear that Caxton's views of Chaucer are all second-hand. He followed what authorities he could get hold of and used their words to compose his own appreciations. The principal source Caxton used was Lydgate, and it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that he saw Chaucer through Lydgate's eyes. It does not follow that, because the way in which he expressed his praise of Chaucer was based on others' words, his feeling for Chaucer was not genuine. But we may well imagine that it was not very profound and that it was largely inspired by the taste of those around him. Certainly the impetus for his printing of the major Chaucerian texts came from others, and it may well be that he printed the minor texts to build up a comprehensive list of the poet's works. Commercial gain rather than *pietas* may have been the principal motive behind those works which Caxton printed on his own initiative. Finally, it is impossible to accept the view that Caxton took care to publish as accurate a text as possible of Chaucer's works. He printed the manuscript he had available without worrying about its accuracy or completeness. Some of his readers were anxious about the accuracy of his texts, but even when they pointed out to him the faults in his editions, he did not do all he could have done to put those faults right. Even compositorial mistakes made when the text was set up were not corrected. Such evidence as there is suggests that Caxton treated Chaucer's works in the same way as all the other books he printed; there is nothing special about his Chaucerian editions. They show the same faults and virtues as his other printed books.³²

NOTES

- 1 W Blades, *The Biography and Typography of William Caxton*, 2nd ed. (London and Strassburg, 1882), p.89.
- 2 N. S. Aurner, *Caxton, Mirrour of Fifteenth-Century Letters* (London, 1926), p.163.
- 3 D. B. Sands, "Caxton as a Literary Critic," *The Papers of the American Bibliographical Society*, LI (1957), 316.
- 4 See particularly J. M. Manly and E. Rickert, *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* (Chicago, 1940), I, 561-605.

- ⁵ Caxton's prologues and epilogues to his editions of Chaucer are to be found in W. J. B. Crotch, *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton* (London, 1928). Page references in brackets throughout this article are to this work.
- ⁶ N. F. Blake, "Investigations into the Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XLIX (1966-7), 17-46.
- ⁷ This prologue is not in Crotch; see Blades, p.247.
- ⁸ The question of the ascription of the individual texts to Chaucer is a complicated matter which I cannot discuss in full here. I have assumed for the purpose of the article that Caxton knew all the works were by Chaucer. He mentions Chaucerian authorship of the *Canterbury Tales*, *House of Fame*, the Boethius and *Chaucer's Complaint to His Purse*. Since this last poem was printed with *Anelida and the False Arcite*, it is probable that he ascribed this poem to Chaucer as well. *Troilus and Criseyde* is such a major work that its Chaucerian authorship was probably widely accepted in the fifteenth century. Caxton would have known it was Chaucer's work from Lydgate's *Troy Book*, in which it is referred to in several places. Caxton could likewise have known that the *Parliament of Fowls* was written by Chaucer from the *Retracciouns* which he printed at the end of the *Canterbury Tales*.
- ⁹ S. K. Workman, "Versions by Skelton, Caxton, and Berners of a Prologue by Diodorus Siculus," *MLN*, LVI (1941), 252-258.
- ¹⁰ Manly and Rickert, I, 81. In my paper referred to in footnote 6, I have tried to show that the Earl of Arundel took little interest in the press.
- ¹¹ Blake, "Investigations into the Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton."
- ¹² L. Febre and H. J. Martin, *L'Apparition du Livre* (Paris, 1958), pp. 217-222.
- ¹³ Useful charts of the groupings of the manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, which I have used, are to be found in Manly and Rickert, II, 494-495.
- ¹⁴ J. Koch, *The Pardoner's Prologue and Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer* (Heidelberg, 1902). For his discussion of Caxton's texts see pp.li-iii.
- ¹⁵ W. W. Greg, "The Early Printed Editions of the *Canterbury Tales*," *PMLA*, XXXIX (1924), 737-761.
- ¹⁶ Caxton's text and the manuscript versions are printed in F. J. Furnivall, *A Parallel-Text Edition of Chaucer's Minor Poems* (London, 1871-9), pp. 179-241.
- ¹⁷ Furnivall, p.98.
- ¹⁸ W. W. Skeat, *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Oxford, 1900), III, 287.
- ¹⁹ The *ynkhorn* was probably transformed into *penner & ynke horn* because this was a common doublet, and as such was used elsewhere by Caxton.
- ²⁰ F. J. Furnivall, *Caxton's Book of Curtesye* (London, 1868), p.35.
- ²¹ For both these passages see C. F. E. Spurgeon, *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion 1357-1900* (London, 1914), I, 54.
- ²² W. Blades, *The Life and Typography of William Caxton* (London, 1863), II, 67.
- ²³ For example, he says he set the *History of Troy* up in type at his own "grete charge and dispense" (p.7).
- ²⁴ R. Weiss, *Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 197), p.139.
- ²⁵ J. Leland, *De Scriptoribus Britannicis* (Oxford, 1709), pp. 425-6.
- ²⁶ A new tomb for Chaucer was constructed by N. Brigham in 1555, so it is possible that Leland saw the old tomb, though it has not yet been proved that he did. Several of Leland's statements suggest he was merely filling out Caxton's words. Thus he says Surigone was a well-known poet and famous figure, though very little is known of him (cf. R. Weiss, "Humanism in Oxford," *TLS*, Jan. 9, 1937, p.28).
- ²⁷ The problem of Caxton and humanism is one that has not yet received sufficient attention. I have, however, discussed Caxton's attitude to John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, in my earlier article (note 6 above), 25-26.
- ²⁸ Spurgeon, p.17.
- ²⁹ Spurgeon, p.14.
- ³⁰ It is interesting to speculate whether Caxton thought there was any similarity between Chaucer and the Clerk of Oxenford.
- ³¹ This correspondence was noticed first by E. Ekwall in a review in *Anglia Beiblatt*, XLIII (1932), 302-304.

- ³² This paper was completed before any announcement of the discovery of the first part of Caxton's Ovid was issued. A facsimile of the complete manuscript is now being prepared. When this is ready and available to scholars, it is possible that one or two of the statements made here may have to be modified; but it is not thought that the contents of the manuscript are likely to affect the main conclusions arrived at. For provisional accounts of the manuscript see J. A. W. Bennett, "Caxton's Ovid," *Times Literary Supplement* (24 November, 1966), and *Catalogue of the Celebrated Collection of Manuscripts formed by Sir Thomas Phillipps, Bt. (1792-1872)* (Sotheby & Co., 27-28 June, 1966), pp. 12-16.