

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 139:
THE BUSINESS OF PRINTING**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 139: The Business of Printing. In this episode, we’re going to look at the introduction of the printing press to England and the first books to be printed and mass-produced in the English language. The person who made that happen was a merchant and businessman named William Caxton. He was part of the growing merchant class in England, and his activities reflect the intersection of language and money in the late Middle Ages. In order to understand the ultimate impact of his press on the English language, we have to remember that he was a merchant – not a linguist. His printing decisions were designed to increase sales, not to reform or standardize the language. Those motivations left English with a mixed legacy. In some ways, it encouraged standardization, but in other ways, it had the opposite effect. So this time, we’ll explore the business of printing in the late Middle Ages.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now last time, we looked at the collection of letters written by the Paston family of eastern England. They reflected the fact that England was an increasingly literate society in the late Middle Ages. Though literacy rates were much lower than today, there were still more and more commoners who could read and write. And most of those people only spoke English. So there was an increasing demand for relatively cheap books composed in English. The problem is that books in England were still written by hand, and most of them were written on expensive parchment or vellum. So they tended to be expensive luxuries, and many of them were still composed in Latin or French.

We know from the Paston letters that the Pastons loved to collect books. John Paston’s son – also named John – owned several books, including books by Geoffrey Chaucer and the English poet John Lydgate. [*SOURCE: ‘The Yorkist Age,’ Paul Murray Kendall, p. 442*]. But again, the Pastons were a wealthy family, and those books were probably expensive handwritten versions. The average commoner had very few, if any, books to call their own.

Of course, there was now a technology available to satisfy that demand for affordable books – the printing press. It could generate hundreds, and even thousands, of copies of the same book. And it could print those books on paper. That made books available and affordable to anyone who wanted one. But that new technology was still confined to the continent. At the current point in our overall story in the 1460s, there was still no printing press in England. Even if printed books were imported from the continent, they weren’t written in English. So the demand for cheap English books remained unsatisfied.

Now wherever there is a strong demand for something, someone usually comes along to take advantage of the business opportunity. But the printing press was such a new invention, that no one in England understood how it worked. So it wasn’t like someone could just make their own copy of a press. Ultimately, someone needed to go to the continent and figure out how to use the

new technology and then bring it back to England. That person was likely to be an enterprising businessman, and England had such a businessman. His name was William Caxton.

Very little is known about Caxton's early life, but he later wrote that he was born in Kent. As a young man, he moved to London where he served as an apprentice to a prominent merchant. Around 1450, he moved across the Channel to Bruges in the region of Flanders. As we saw in earlier episodes, England had a very close trading relationship with Flanders because Flanders was a major producer of cloth and textiles. English wool was exported to Flanders where it was turned into cloth. And then, that cloth was imported back into England. Caxton had apparently been involved in that cloth trade, and he relocated to Flanders to take advantage of the business opportunities there. So Caxton's interest in Europe had nothing to do with the printing press. It had to do with the cloth and textile trade.

And it was a good time to be involved in the cloth business because England now had a king who was a strong ally of the merchant class. As we saw last time, Edward of York became king in 1461 when he defeated the Lancastrian king Henry VI at the Battle of Towton. Henry and his wife Margaret and their young son fled to Scotland. When Edward assumed the throne, he became Edward IV – the first Yorkist king of England.

Edward proved to be a strong ally of the English merchants doing business in Flanders. A few months after becoming king, he granted a charter to those merchants who became known as the Merchant Adventurers. 'Adventurer' may seem like an odd name, but I should note that the word *venture* – as in a business venture – is ultimately a shortened version of the word *adventure*. *Venture* is first recorded around this time in the mid-1400s, so *adventure* was still the more common term. Both words involved some form of risk, and for the Merchant Adventurers, it was a business risk.

The charter they received from the new king was intended to better organize the merchants in the region. It was designed to minimize disputes between them and to increase their power relative to the other merchants in the region. The charter directed the merchants to designate a governor who would oversee and manage the merchant activity in the Low Countries. The governor would adopt rules and settle disputes between the merchants. He would also serve as a liason between the English government and the Flemish authorities. A short time later, those merchants designated a new governor. That governor was William Caxton.

All of this points to the fact that the cloth trade continued to provide a very important link between England and Flanders. But the relationship between the two regions was complicated. Flanders was not an independent region. It was actually under the control of the Dukes of Burgundy. Burgundy is a region in the eastern part of modern-day France, but it was largely independent duchy at the time. In fact, the Dukes of Burgundy were rivals of the French kings. And during the Hundred Years' War, you might remember that Burgundy had a close alliance with England against the French king. But when Burgundy walked away from that alliance, it sealed England's fate, and it contributed to England's eventual defeat.

So at this point in the 1460s, there was a fierce debate raging in England. The new king Edward favored a renewal of the alliance with Burgundy. Since the Dukes of Burgundy effectively ruled Flanders, it would foster the trading relationship with Flanders. It would also provide a check on the authority of the French king .

But there was an opposing view. Some officials preferred that England extend an olive branch to France and try to form a closer relationship with its traditional rival. That would help to ensure peace and stability, which would be good for trade and economic growth throughout the entire region, even though it might strain the relationship with Burgundy and Flanders. The leading proponent of this opposing view was King Edward's right-hand man Richard Neville, the earl of Warwick – commonly referred to simply as Warick. I mentioned last time that he was the head of the Neville family, a prominent family in northern England. The main areas of support for the House of York were in the south and west of England, so Warwick's support gave the Yorkists a crucial foothold in the north. And his support was so important that he eventually acquired the nickname 'The Kingmaker.'

Warwick had supported Edward's father, Richard of York. And he supported Edward when he became the first Yorkist king. But now, the close relationship between Edward and Warwick started to fray. Warwick negotiated an alliance with France, while Edward sought to renew the alliance with Burgundy.

Though the fighting in the Wars of the Roses had settled down, the prior king Henry and his wife Margaret were still around, and they still had their supporters. Insurrections continued to flare up in the north, but in 1464, Edward defeated the Lancastrian rebels at the Battle of Hexham, and that brought a temporary end to the fighting. A short time later, the prior king Henry was captured and placed in the Tower of London. He was still suffering from mental illness, but he was now in Edward's custody. However, Henry's wife Margaret was still on the run with her young son – the Lancastrian heir to the throne. And that ensured that the division between the Houses of York and Lancaster would continue to fester.

Around that same time, Warwick the Kingmaker finally worked out an agreement with France. Under the agreement, France would recognize the new Yorkist king Edward as the rightful king of England – and France would stop providing support to the Lancastrian rebels. As usual, the alliance was to be sealed with a political marriage. King Edward was to marry the French king's sister. But as soon as the terms of the agreement were revealed, Edward announced that there was one little problem with the marriage agreement. You see, he was already married.

Edward had recently married a woman named Elizabeth Woodville, and he had been keeping the marriage a secret. Elizabeth was a beautiful young woman who was part of Edward's court. He had fallen in love with her, but she didn't come from a prominent family. And in fact, she had been married before and had children from her prior marriage. So all of that was very controversial. Kings were expected to marry for political reasons, not for love. Even though Elizabeth's prior husband was dead, there was added controversy when Edward's allies realized that he had actually fought for the other side in the earlier battles of the Wars of the Roses. So had the new queen's father and her brother. So the first Yorkist king had married a woman with

close ties to the Lancastrians. Needless to say, the revelation of this secret marriage was a bit of a scandal.

The marriage blew up the potential alliance with France and infuriated Edward's ally Warwick. It also turned out that Edward's new queen had a lot of siblings and close relatives, and they were soon given prominent positions in the government and the royal court. Her siblings were married to prominent nobles throughout Europe. Those were positions and marriages that Warwick had been trying to secure for his own children and relatives. And then Edward started to ignore Warwick's advice altogether. All of this soon led Warwick to abandon his support for Edward.

With Warwick pushed to the side, Edward was free to pursue his alliance with France's rival, Burgundy. As per usual, the alliance was formalized with an arranged marriage. Edward's sister Margaret married the Duke of Burgundy in the summer of 1468. So Margaret now provided a direct link between her brother the English king and her husband the Duke of Burgundy.

Margaret's marriage took place in Bruges in Flanders. And she arrived there at the same time that William Caxton was serving as the governor of the English Merchant Adventurers. The old trading relationship between the two countries was soon renewed and reaffirmed, and English exports to Flanders started to increase once again. But Caxton was apparently tired of serving as the governor of the local merchants. Around this same time, he left his position as governor and went to work for the new duchess Margaret. He was appointed as the secretary to her household in 1469.

His new position was apparently much less stressful, and it left him with a lot of leisure time. He observed the nobility's fascination with courtly romances, and he came across a lot of books in and around the duchess's household. That included some books that had been printed with Gutenberg's new printing press. One of the books Caxton encountered was a collection of stories about the ancient city of Troy and the Trojan War. The book was composed in French by a writer named Raoul le Fevre. It was called "Le Recueil des Histoires de Troyes" – literally 'The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy' – but it meant 'The Compilation or Collection of the Histories of Troy.' Again, it was a French book, but Caxton was fascinated by it, and he decided to translate it into English. In a later account, he wrote that he began the translation to make it available for English-speakers "and also to passe therwyth the tyme" – 'and also to pass therewith the time.'

He wrote that he "had made and wretyn a fyve or six quayers" – 'had made and written five or six quires.' So that's about 40 or 50 pages. But then he recalled that he "fyll in dispayr" – 'fell into despair.' He became frustrated with the translation felling that it wasn't very good. Later, he showed the partial translation to Duchess Margaret, and he recalled that she 'oversaw and corrected' his work. She also told him to finish the translation. And being in her service, he did as she ordered. And it was probably a good thing that he did that because that translation eventually became the first book to be printed in the English language. So at least some of the credit for that innovation goes to Duchess Margaret of Burgundy – the English king's sister. Had she not ordered Caxton to finish that translation, he may have never finished the project, and he may have never bothered to print it for other English speakers to read. It actually took Caxton a

while to finish the translation, and while he was working on the project, things started to fall apart for Margaret's brother in England.

Edward had pursued and formalized his alliance with Burgundy and the Low Countries. And he had given his in-laws prominent positions in the English government. And in the process, he had completely alienated and sidelined his old ally Warwick.

Warwick decided to take matters into his own hands, and he approached Edward's younger brother George who was the duke of Clarence. Warwick's plan was to replace Edward with George. And George even married Warwick's daughter to seal their new partnership. The two soon started an uprising in the Midlands. So this was actually an internal York versus York battle. So it was an internal family feud within the larger family conflict known as the Wars of the Roses. After a few months, Edward was able to put down the rebellion, and Warwick and George fled to France.

It turned out that they weren't the only ones who had taken refuge there. The former queen Margaret had also headed to France after her husband—the former king Henry VI—had been captured and taken prisoner. And in France, Warwick and Margaret, the old bitter enemies, patched up their differences. So Warwick switched sides. The long-term supporter of the Yorkist cause now threw in his lot with the Lancastrian queen. The French king blessed the new alliance by agreeing to give them financial support if they agreed to abandon England's alliance with Burgundy.

A short time later, in 1470, Warwick returned to England with troops paid for by France. He and George landed in the south of England while King Edward was in the north. Warwick's forces quickly seized London and freed the old Lancastrian king Henry from his imprisonment in the Tower. They declared Henry to be the rightful king, and he was briefly restored to the throne, even though his mental illness prevented him from making any decisions on his own behalf. This is why Warwick ultimately became known as the Kingmaker. The speed of Warwick's invasion and Henry's restoration took Edward by surprise. It prevented Edward from mounting an effective defense. So now it was his turn to flee Britain and take refuge somewhere else. And of course, he headed to Flanders where his sister and brother-in-law were in charge.

According to some accounts, William Caxton helped to find living arrangements for Edward and his retinue when they arrived in Bruges. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B. Costain, p. 355*] But Edward wasn't looking for a permanent residence there. He only remained in Flanders for a few months while making arrangements for his return to England.

In March of 1471, Edward headed back and landed in the north of England. Warwick had never had strong support among the nobles, and now his allies started to abandon him. Meanwhile, Edward's close ties to the merchant community in London helped him to re-secure the capital city. In April, Edward's forces were welcomed back into London by cheering crowds. The old Lancastrian king Henry was promptly sent back to the Tower. The throne of England had become a revolving door, and now the door was opened back up to Edward and the House of York. And it was about to close on Henry once and for all.

Edward rode out of London to meet Warwick's forces on the outskirts of town at what was then the small town of Barnet. The two sides squared off against each other for what would be a decisive battle in the Wars of the Roses. Edward's forces won the day, and more importantly, Warwick was killed while trying to escape the battlefield. The Kingmaker was dead, but the rival Lancastrian king Henry was still alive in the Tower, and a rival Lancastrian army was still being led by Henry's wife Margaret and her young son, the Lancastrian heir. A few weeks later, Edward's Yorkist forces met Margaret's Lancastrian forces at Tewkesbury in the west of England. Once again, Edward emerged victorious. Margaret was captured – and more importantly – her son was killed during the battle. That meant there was no longer a Lancastrian heir. The only remaining descendant from John of Gaunt's first marriage was the poor senile king Henry who was still being held in the Tower of London. And Edward realized that the time had come to bring a permanent end to that rival line. When Edward arrived back in London, it was announced that Henry had died in the Tower.

Henry's death, and the death of his son, brought an end to the first phase of the Wars of the Roses. Edward had secured his position as the king, and the main line of Lancastrians was extinguished. But while there were no more descendants of John of Gaunt from his marriage to his first wife Blanche, there were some living descendants from his marriage to his third wife Katherine Swinford. And one of those descendants had married into a Welsh family called the Tudors. So we're not quite done with John of Gaunt's heirs. As we'll see in a future episode, the Tudors preserved what remained of the Lancastrian claim to the throne. But for now, the main line of the House of Lancaster had come to an end. With her husband and son now dead, the old queen Margaret was permitted to return to France where she died in poverty a decade later. For the remainder of Edward's reign and the rest of his natural life, he ruled England without any more major challenges to the throne.

Around the time that Edward reclaimed and secured his position as the King of England, William Caxton finally completed his English translation of that collection of stories about Troy and the Trojan War. For now, it was just a handwritten text. But then, Caxton took a trip to Cologne in Germany where he observed an actual printing press in action. And while he was there, he learned how to use it.

It isn't clear if he made the trip to Cologne to learn about the press or if he simply encountered it during his travels. But being a businessman, he definitely saw the potential of the new device. While continental presses were producing books in the local languages, they weren't producing any books in English. Caxton knew that there was a demand for English books back in his home country, so it was just a matter of seizing the opportunity and starting his own printing business to produce books in his native language.

He eventually returned to Bruges in Flanders and set up his own printing shop there. He had his personal translation of that French book about the Trojan War. So that was the obvious choice for the first English book to be printed in his shop. And in 1475, 'The Recuyell of the Histories of Troy' became the first book to be printed in the English language by means of a mechanical device. And interestingly, it wasn't printed in England. It was printed in Bruges in Flanders in what is today Belgium.

Caxton's translation was very straight-forward. His primary contribution to the English language was as a printer, not a writer. He was a businessman, and he wanted his books to appeal to the widest possible audience. So he chose to use a form of English that most people would understand. He wasn't really a wordsmith or a poet, and he didn't try to push the boundaries of the language. As a result, he didn't tend to use a lot of new or unusual loanwords. However, there are a few words which are recorded for the first time in this particular book. For example, we find the first known use of the word *happiness*. He also used the word *terribility* in the book. It was a noun form of *terrible*. That word was common in the language for a while, but it later died out.

Caxton's first book also provides the first recorded use of another word which is relevant to the overall theme of this episode. It was the word *industry* – a word borrowed from French. The word *industry* originally referred to a unique skill or ability. We still have that sense when we say that someone is very *industrious*. But the use of that unique skill or ability to make money is what produced the modern sense of the word *industry* as a commercial activity or enterprise. So it is probably appropriate that Caxton's first printed book introduced the word *industry*, and ultimately gave birth to a new publishing industry in England.

After that initial book containing stories about Troy and the Trojan War, Caxton produced a few other English books in Bruges, including a book about the game the chess. And they all proved to be very popular. They were sold to English speakers in Flanders, and they were also exported across the Channel to readers in England. Caxton's book about chess was called 'Game and Play of the Chess.' It's even mentioned in the Paston letters, which continued to be written by later generations of the Paston family. Last time, I talked about John Paston's struggles to retain the family's properties. Well, one of the letters from this period mentions that his son had a copy of Caxton's book about chess. So that confirms that some of these new publications were being exported across the Channel to England. [SOURCE: 'The Oxford History of English,' Lynda Mugglestone, p. 175-6]

Given the popularity of those initial publications, it soon became obvious to Caxton what he needed to do. He needed to move back home to England and set up his press there.

In 1476, he leased a shop near Westminster Abbey, and he set up the first printing press in England. Now you might assume that this was the same process that any modern businessperson would use. Find a good location, sign a lease, and open your business. But it wasn't that simple. This was still an era when trade guilds and craft guilds has a lot of power. The Guild of Stationers in London was the guild that included scribes who still wrote out books by hand. And they were not at all happy at the prospect of having to compete with a machine. The printing press was an early example of people losing their jobs to automation. So in order to open up his printing shop, Caxton needed the support of local leaders to overcome that opposition. And it is generally believed that Caxton had the support of the king himself.

Evidence of that support is shown in an accounting entry from a couple of years after Caxton opened his shop. The entry shows that King Edward granted Caxton the sum of 20 pounds for "certain causes and matters performed." [SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B.

Costain, p. 357] Caxton even dedicated some of his publications to the king, as well as to the king's son and brother Richard. [*SOURCE: 'The Yorkist Age,' Paul Murray Kendall, p. 186]*

Caxton's shop was located in a small building near Westminster Abbey. It was in an area where much of the country's legal and government business was conducted. He converted the building into a print shop and a bookshop. So he not only printed books, he also sold them.

The first book that Caxton printed in his new shop in England was a book called 'Dictees or Sayengis of the Philosophres' – literally the 'The Dicts or Sayings of the Philosophers.' It was an English translation of a French book, and it was published in 1477, making it the first known book to be printed on English soil.

From that point on, the press pumped out one book after another. A few months later, Caxton published a copy of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. About a dozen copies of that version of the *Canterbury Tales* still exist. One sold in the late 1990s for \$7.5 million, making it arguably the most expensive fiction book to have ever been sold. There have been some non-fiction books and some political and religious manuscripts that have sold for more, but in terms of fiction, that is pretty much the premium.

Caxton then published a French-English dictionary or translation guide. And he also produced a translation of Aesop's *Fables*, several popular romances, a history of England, and a type of encyclopedia called 'The Myrroure of the Worlde.'

In the 1480s, he acquired an English manuscript which synthesized many of the popular tales that were part of the King Arthur legend. It relied heavily on the versions that had been composed in France. Caxton identified the author as Sir Thomas Malory. Malory called the compilation 'The whole book of King Arthur and his noble knights of the Round Table,' but Caxton gave the work a new shorter title. He called it 'Le Morte D'Arthur' – the Death of Arthur.

This particular book is considered to be the first modern version of the Arthurian legend, and it is really the primary source for the modern stories. It includes all the popular characters and stories – the Knights of the Round Table, the search for the Holy Grail, Lancelot and Guinevere, Merlin, the Sword in the Stone, and Lady of the Lake, Camelot, the Round Table, and so on. Many scholars consider it to be the most important work of English literature between the time of Chaucer and the time of Shakespeare.

Interestingly very little is known about the author, Sir Thomas Malory. Caxton's manuscript gave his name, but that was about it. And for many centuries, Caxton's publication was the only known version of the manuscript. But then, in 1934, a librarian at Winchester College named Walter Oakeshott discovered an old manuscript in a safe at the college. It turned out to be a handwritten version of Malory's book. Further inspection revealed that it pre-dated Caxton's version. And in fact, based on some slight ink smudges on the manuscript, it was revealed that the smudges actually matched the typeface used by Caxton's press. So this was apparently the actual manuscript that Caxton used when he prepared his version of the book. When some of the printed pages were pulled off the press with wet ink, they were apparently laid down on the

handwritten manuscript creating the smudges. This slightly older handwritten manuscript is known today as the Winchester manuscript. Though it is similar to Caxton's printed version, there are some significant differences. Caxton reworked the manuscript – deleting some sections and adding some new parts. And this older manuscript describes the author, Sir Thomas Malory, as a "knyght presoner" – a 'knight prisoner.' That little bit of information helped scholars to determine who the author really was.

There is one Sir Thomas Malory in the historical records who spent time in prison. In fact, he spent a lot of time in prison. He was a bit of a rogue and lived a life of crime. He spent much of his adult life in and out of jail. He fought with Warwick the Kingmaker, and when Warwick turned on King Edward, Malory got caught up in the insurrection and the subsequent retribution. At some point, he was captured and thrown into prison. Over the ensuing years, he apparently passed the time by composing *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

So all of those popular books and movies about King Arthur owe much of their existence to a disgraced knight who got caught up in the Wars of the Roses and spent several years in prison. And they also owe their existence to a printer who was looking for some interesting material that might help him make a quick buck. Caxton didn't show much interest in the ancient classics. He was far more interested in material that he could sell to the average Englishman and English woman. And Arthurian stories were popular in the late 1400s, just as they are today.

From Caxton's first publications in the mid-1470s until his death in 1491, he published around 100 different books and manuscripts. [*SOURCE: 'The History of Early English,' Keith Johnson, p. 166*] And of course, the press pumped out many copies of each book, thereby producing literally thousands of books over the course of that decade and half.

A few of those books were published in Latin or French, but the majority – about two-thirds of them – were published in English. [*SOURCE: 'The Story of English,' Joseph Piercy, p. 87.*] Those were books that had either been composed in English or were translated into English from other languages. For the books that had to be translated into English, Caxton made many of the translations himself.

Now the idea of printing books in English seems like a relatively simple and straight-forward process – because written English is standardized today. We have fixed spellings, fixed word forms, and a fixed grammar. If someone sends you an email in standard English today, you can't really tell where they're from or what accent they have based on the language in the message – because it is a generic written form of English. But that wasn't the case in Caxton's time. He lived in a time before the language had become standardized when people still spoke very different dialects and wrote phonetically. So when people thought about English, they didn't necessarily think of it as a single form of speech. It was a bunch of closely-related dialects. But Caxton wanted to publish books that could be purchased and read throughout the country. So that posed a bit of a problem. The dilemma was made even worse by the changing pronunciations of the Great Vowel Shift which were also underway by that point.

Caxton mentioned this problem in several of the prologues he composed over the years, but the most famous example comes from a book he published late in his life. It was an English version of the great classical work *The Aeneid* by Virgil. Caxton's version was called 'Eneydos.' Caxton's prologue to that book is one of the most well-known passages of the late Middle English period because in it he outlined the challenge of printing a book in English during that period.

This is the passage where he gave the famous example of what word he should use for eggs. I told that part of the story in an earlier episode when I first looked at Middle English dialects, and I gave this example to illustrate how different the dialects were during the Middle English period. But now I want to read you an extended version of the passage because it is very revealing. You really get an insight into the challenges that Caxton faced as a businessman trying to reach the widest possible audience. Again, this passage is quite long, so I'll break it up into several parts, and as always, I'll give you a modern version first and then the original version. I should also note that, like in the last episode, I'm going to change some of the vowel sounds to reflect the early stages of the Great Vowel Shift. So the Middle English passages may sound a little different from the passages I read in earlier episodes.

After various diverse works had been made, translated and achieved, and having no work in hand, I was sitting in my study where lay many diverse pamphlets and books, and it happened that to my hand came a little book in French, which had lately been translated out of Latin by some noble clerk or scholar in France, which book is named Eneydos, made in Latin by that noble poet and great clerk Virgil.

“After dyuerse werkes made / translated, and achieued / hauyng noo werke in hande, I, sittynge in my studye where as laye many dyuerse paunflettis and bookys, happened that to my handle came a lytyl booke in frenshe, whiche late was translated oute of latyn by some noble clerke of fraunce, whiche booke is named Eneydos / made in latyn by that noble poete & grete clerke vyrgyle /”

And when I had made myself familiar with this said book, I deliberated, and concluded to translate it into English, and forthwith took a pen and ink and wrote a leaf or two, which I then oversaw again to correct it. And when I saw the fair and strange terms therein, I doubted that it would please some gentlemen who lately have blamed me, saying that in some of my translations, I have used overcurious or erudite terms which could not be understood by common people, and desired me to use old and homely or more familiar terms in my translations.

“And wha I had aduysed me in this sayd boke. I delybered and concluded to translate it into englysshe. And forthwyth toke a penne & ynke and wrote a leef or tweyne whyche I ouersawe agayn to corecte it / And wha I sawe the fayr and straunge termes therein, I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylnen which late blamed me, sayeing yt [pt] [*that*] in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes which coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple/ and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons.”

And wanting to satisfy every person, and to do so, I took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad and unrefined that I could not well understand it. And also, my lord abbot of Westminster did show to me late certain evidences or documents written in an older English, in order to reduce it into our English now used: and certainly it was written in such way that it was more like Dutch than English. I could not reduce it or translate it so as to be understood.

“and fayn wolde I satisfye euery man / and so to doo toke an olde booke and redde therin / and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences wryton in olde englysshe for to reduce it in to our englysshe now vsid / And certaynly it was wreton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden.”

And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken when I was born.... And the common English that is spoken in one shire varies from another. So much so that in my own days it happened that certain merchants were in a ship in the Thames on their way over the sea into Zealand – a region in the Netherlands. And for lack of wind they tarried at Foreland in Kent, and went on shore to refresh themselves. And one of them, named Sheffield, a mercer, came into a house and asked for food, and especially he asked for ‘eggs.’ And the good wife answered that she could not speak French. And the merchant was angry, for he could not speak French either, but he wanted eggs, and she did not understand him. And then at last another merchant said he would have “eyren,” and then the good wife said she understood him well. Lo, what should a man in these days now write: “eggs” or “eyren”?

“And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that which was vsed and spoken whan I was borne /... And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchantes were in a ship in tamyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande / and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. and wente to land for to refreshe them And one of thaim named sheff elde a mercer came in to an hows and axed for mete and specyally he axyd after eggys And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchant was angry for he also coude speke no frenshe. but wolde haue hadde egges/ and she vnderstode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte. egges or eyren/”

Certainly it is hard to please every person, by reason of diversity and change in the language. For in these days every person that is of any reputation in this country will utter their communications in such manner and with such terms that few people will understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me, and desired me to write the most curious or erudite terms that I could find. And thus, between plain, rude and curious, I stand abashed. But in my judgment the common terms that are daily used are easier to be understood than the old and ancient English.

“certynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by cause of dyuersitie & chau(n)ge of langage. For in these dayes euery man that is in ony reputacyon in his cou(n)tre wyll vtter his comyncacyon and maters in such maners & termes/ that fewe men shall vnderstonde theym/ And som honest and grete clerkes haue ben wyth me and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde/ And thus bytwene playn rude / & curyous I stande abashed. but in my Iudgmente/ the comyn termes that be dayli vsed ben lyghter to be vnderstonde than the olde and au(n)cyend englysshe/”

And forasmuch as this present book is not intended for a rough uplandish or rustic man to labor over when reading it, but only for a clerk and a noble gentleman that feels and understands the deeds of arms in love, and in noble chivalry, therefore, somewhere between both, I have reduced and translated this said book into our English, not overrude or rough, nor curious or erudite, but in such terms as shall be understood, by God's grace, according to my copy.

“And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude vplondyssh man to labour therein/ ne rede it/ but onely for a clerke & a noble gentyman that feleth and vnderstondeth in faytes of armes in loue & in noble chyualrye/ Therefor in a meane bytwene bothe I haue reduced & translated this sayd booke in to our englysshe not ouer rude ne curyous but in such termes as shall be vnderstanden by goddys grace accordynge to my cople.”

So that's a lot. Let's break that down and consider what Caxton has to tell us. He tells us that he came across a French copy of the Aeneid, and he decided to translate it into English, but he became frustrated because he couldn't decide whether to use what he called 'curious' terms meaning fancy elevated words, or whether he should use 'rude' terms meaning common ordinary words. So he is alluding to a difference in register. Should he use the speech of the noble upper class, the merchant middle class, or the poor lower class? There was a difference.

Of course, the answer to that question would determine whether he should use a plain ordinary word from Old English or a fancy loanword from French or Latin.

But it wasn't just a matter of register and class. It was also a matter of region. The people of England spoke different dialects, so which one should he use? That was the point of story about the eggs. *Egges* was the northern dialect word. *Eyren* was the southern dialect word. Both words could be found in a city like London. So again, which should he use? The same was true for regional pronoun forms and grammatical forms which we've examined in earlier episodes. Those were also mixed together in places like London. If he chose the northern forms, he might not be able to sell his books in the south, and vice versa.

And then there was the whole issue of the Great Vowel Shift which was also underway at this time. That meant that people living side by side in the same regions probably pronounced many of their words differently. So that created another whole other set of problems for phonetic spellings. Caxton even alludes to the variation within London English in part of that passage. He wrote, “And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken

when I was born.” Caxton was born only about 20 years after Geoffrey Chaucer died, yet his English was very different from Chaucer’s. And part of that had to do with the differing pronunciations of vowel sounds at the time. Given the suddenness of that change, there was probably a generational divide as well with older people preferring traditional pronunciations and younger people preferring the newer pronunciations.

So all that points to lots of divisions within the language. There were class divisions, regional divisions, dialect divisions, accent divisions, and probably even generational divisions. So how was a printer supposed to choose between those options? What was the correct business decision?

And speaking of business, that word is a good example of the dilemma that Caxton faced.. I’ve mentioned this before, but the word **business** is literally ‘busy-ness’ – the state or condition of being busy. Notice that the word **busy** is spelled B-U-S-Y, but it’s not pronounced /bus-ee/, it’s pronounced /bizzzy/ like it should be spelled B-I-Z-Y. We have this result because the word is an Old English word that had a vowel sound (/ü/) that disappeared in Middle English. As the old sound disappeared, it was replaced by a different sounds in different parts of the country. It became /ih/ in the north and east, and /oo/ west, and /eh/ in Kent in the southeast. People from all of these regions converged in London in the decades after the Black Death. So by Caxton’s time, he would have probably heard all three pronunciations. The modern word **busy** reflects this linguistic variation. It has the spelling of the west with the letter U, but it has the pronunciation of the north and east with the /ih/ sound. Interestingly, Caxton was from Kent where people pronounced the word with an /eh/ sound, and appropriately enough, he spelled the word B-E-S-Y in works like *Le Morte d’Arthur*. So given that type of variation, what was the best business decision – or /bessy-ness/ decision – or /bussy-ness/ decision? As a salesman, what was the best way to reach everyone in the country?

In the end, Caxton decided to use a form of the language that was somewhere in between the various extremes. He chose the common ordinary language of the typical clerk or scholar or educated person who might read his books. He also chose the common speech of London, which was a type of Midland speech that avoided the unique features of the far south and the far north and the far west. It was a type of speech that was somewhere between those extremes, and with some effort, it could be read and understood throughout the country. It was a simple business decision.

There’s also evidence that Caxton sometimes tried to edit or soften the language in order to avoid offending readers. A good example of this occurs in Caxton’s version of *Le Morte d’Arthur*. In Malory’s original version, there is a passage where Lancelot is struck with a spear, and it is pulled out of his side. The original line reads, “And [he] gave a great shriek and a grisly groan, so that the blood burst out, nigh a pint at once, that at last he sank down upon his arse and so swooned down, pale and deadly.” But when Caxton got to that passage, he took out the word **arse** and replaced it with the word **buttocks**. That appears to have been an intentional edit to avoid a term that might offend some readers.[*SOURCE: ‘Words in Time,’ Geoffrey Hughes, p. 99-100.*] Again, it was apparently a business decision. Don’t offend your customers.

Another example of Caxton's use of common language can be seen in the term he used for an object that was very important to a printer. The word for the printed page itself. You may have noticed that in the Prologue I read earlier, he used the word *leaf*. That was the traditional English word for a piece of parchment or paper. The word *page* is a French loanword, and it's actually recorded for the first time in an English document in the 1480s, around the time that Caxton set up his printing shop in England. So Caxton was almost certainly familiar with the word, but it was so new in the language at the time that he apparently preferred to stick with the traditional word *leaf*. Again, this is an example of his somewhat conservative approach to the language.

By adopting a manner of speech found among the common people of London, Caxton set the English language on its way toward standardization. His successors in the printing industry adopted the same basic approach, and over the next couple of centuries, written English gradually became standardized. When that process was completed, the written language no longer matched any specific dialect or spoken form of English. It was no longer a purely phonetic representation of the language.

While much of the progress toward standardization took place after Caxton's death, he did make some small steps in that direction during his lifetime in his publications. For example, he often followed the Chancery standard which government scribes used. I discussed the emergence of that standard a few episodes back. Where there was an inconsistent or conflicting usage in the language, Caxton tended to follow the Chancery standard. It is worth noting that Caxton's printing shop was established in Westminster near the government offices, not in the heart of London itself. His shop catered to the clerks, and lawyers and educated bureaucrats who worked in and passed through Westminster. So given that, it isn't surprising that he would tend to follow the Chancery standard where there was conflicting use.

For example, the word *such* was *swich* in Old English. Both forms were still common in the late 1400s, but Caxton followed the Chancery scribes and used *such*, which became the standard form of the word. [SOURCE: 'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 120] He also used the [g-h] spelling in words like *right* and *might* and *fight*. Even though the sound represented by that letter combination was disappearing from the language, the Chancery scribes tended to represent that sound in their spellings, and Caxton did the same. Similarly, Caxton followed the Chancery scribes in using the '-ly' adverb ending instead of the older '-lich' ending. [SOURCE: 'Inventing English,' Seth Lerer, p. 119]

Caxton also tended to follow the Chancery when it came to the variable pronoun forms. For example, he used the letter *I* for the first person singular pronoun which was the form preferred by Chancery. In the south of England, people tended to say *ich*, but that older form was on its way out. And Caxton generally used the northern third person pronouns with the 'TH' sound – *they*, *them* and *their*. As we've seen before, the south of England had very similar pronoun forms that all began with an 'H' sound. Caxton not only used the northern 'TH' forms, he was actually more consistent in that usage than the Chancery was. [SOURCE: *The Evolution of the English Language*, George H. McKnight, p. 83]

But Caxton's consistency in his use of pronouns did not extend to spellings. Uniform spellings were simply not a priority. As I've noted so many times before, Caxton was a product of a time when there were no fixed spellings. People spelled words phonetically, and sometimes, it seems like they enjoyed finding new ways to spell a word.

A well-known example of this type of variation is the word *thorough*. Researchers have found over a hundred different spellings of that word in Middle English. Even a simple word like *might* is spelled at least twenty different ways in earlier periods of English. [SOURCE: 'Righting the Mother Tongue,' David Wolman, p. 48] No one was really concerned about the 'right' way to spell a word because there really wasn't a 'right' way to spell it yet.

In some ways, Caxton's press actually made spellings even MORE inconsistent because he sometimes altered the spelling of a word to make a given line of text look better on the page. Let me explain. Like many printers, Caxton was concerned about the appearance of his books. He wanted them to resemble the beauty of handwritten manuscripts. After all, that would make them sell better. Well, handwritten manuscripts tended to have justified margins. In other words, both the left column and the right column were even. Each line of text began at the same point on the left margin and ended at the same point on the right margin. Now today, it's very easy to do that with a word processor. You just click a button, and the program automatically adjusts the spaces between the words to justify the margins. It was a little more difficult for a scribe to do that, but the scribe could still adjust the spacing and shape of the letters to make the line come out at the right point. But for a printer, it was much more difficult to justify the right margin. The letters had fixed shapes that couldn't be altered, and if there was too little or too much blank space between the words, the line would look odd.

One way to avoid that problem was to play around with the spelling of the words. If necessary, you could add in a few letters to stretch out the line or take out a few letters to shorten the line. Take a word like *only* – O-N-L-Y. You might remember from an earlier episode that it began as the word 'one-ly.' Well, if Caxton needed to stretch out a given line, he could spell it according to its original etymology – O-N-E-L-Y. He could also stretch it out even further by spelling it O-N-E-L-I-E. That would extend it from four letters to six letters. [SOURCE: 'The Lexicographer's Dilemma,' Jack Lynch, p. 170]

The silent E at the end of many words also provided a way to shorten or extend a given line of text. As we've seen before, the inflectional endings that were once so common at the end of words had disappeared over time. In early Middle English, many of them were reduced to a generic 'eh' sound at the end of the word, and that sound was represented by a letter E. By the time of Chaucer, people were starting to drop those 'eh' sounds at the end of many words, so that letter E at the end became optional for many scribes. Sometimes a given word was spelled with an E at the end, and sometimes the E was dropped. Well, that provided another option for printers.

If they needed to shorten a line, they would drop the E at the end of those words. If they needed to extend the line, they would add the E's back in. So in Caxton's works, we find a word like *good* sometimes spelled as G-O-O-D-E and the word *book* spelled B-O-O-K-E. Caxton

sometimes spelled the word *pity* in its modern way as P-I-T-Y. But sometimes he extended it to P-I-T-T-Y. And sometimes he even stretched it out to P-I-T-T-Y-E. [*SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 137.*]

The main point here is that the spellings used by printers remained variable and inconsistent. And in some cases, that variation was intentional and was purely aesthetic. It was simply a matter of aligning the margins. For a book seller, that was more important than any concern about standardized spellings.

There was also another factor that shaped Caxton's spellings, and ultimately shaped the history of English spelling itself. And that factor had to do with the place where Caxton began his printing operations. When Caxton decided to start his own printing business in Bruges in Flanders, the only presses that were available for purchase were those in nearby Germany or perhaps a few that had just been established in the Low Countries. The printing press included both the press itself, as well as the type or letters that went along with it. And on the continent, they didn't use some of those unusual English letters that had been around since the Anglo-Saxon period. So there was no letter thorn or eth to represent the 'TH' sound. And there was no yogh to represent the guttural fricative sound that was disappearing in much of England. That meant that Caxton didn't have access to those letters when he printed his first books.

So he followed the lead of other scribes and the Chancery in using [TH] in place of the thorn and eth. And he used [GH] for the yogh. That alone made Caxton's publications look modern compared to most Middle English manuscripts.

Caxton also adopted another innovation. Since he didn't have a thorn symbol, sometimes he used a letter Y instead. Remember that the thorn was used to represent the 'TH' sound. Traditionally, the thorn looked like a letter P with the loop in the middle of the stem rather than at the top of the stem. But some scribes tended to elongate that loop and stretch it upwards to the right. And when the stem was drawn in a slightly curved manner, it made the letter resemble a Y. Prior to Caxton, there are a few surviving examples of scribes drawing the thorn and the letter Y exactly the same way. Well Caxton picked up on that idea, and he sometimes used the letter Y for the thorn.

One situation where he tended to do that was for the word *the*. That was obviously a very common word, and sometimes, if Caxton wanted to shorten a given line, he would spell the word with a letter Y and then an E in the form of a superscript. So it was a little E placed above the line. That shrank the word down so it didn't take up much space at all. And that technique ultimately gave rise to the spelling [YE] for the word *the*. That's where we get a phrase like 'Ye Olde Book Shop.' But as I've noted in prior episodes, that *ye* is really just the word *the*. It's simply an alternate spelling. So it should be pronounced 'The Olde Book Shop.' That little bit of linguistic confusion was caused by an early printing innovation to account for a missing letter.

I should note that Caxton did solve this problem a few years after he had re-located to England. He created several new typefaces for his press, and those new typefaces did include some of those old English letters. So his later publications did sometimes use the thorn or yogh. But generally speaking, the printers who followed Caxton didn't tend to bother with those older

letters. They just used the type or letters that were used on the continent. And a short time after Caxton died, the yogh fell out of use in English. The letter thorn – or the letter Y as a substitute for the thorn – survived a bit longer because printers could use it to shorten a word and justify the margins. It survived about a century longer, but it finally disappeared from English in the early 1600s. [SOURCE: *'The Emergence of Standard English,' John H. Fisher, p.14*]

Now there's one other aspect of English spelling that can probably be traced back to Caxton's original printing press in Flanders. It's a specific spelling convention that Caxton's employees used, and they apparently brought it with them to England. Here's what happened.

When Caxton brought the press to England in the 1470s, he didn't just bring the equipment with him. He also brought some of his employees who had worked in his printing shop in Flanders. After all, no one in England knew how to operate the thing. He needed workers who could set the type or letters in the correct way. We actually know the name of one of those workers. He was Jan van Wynkyn, but he is better known as Wynkyn de Worde. The reason why we know his name is because he took over the printing business when Caxton died. Wynkyn was from Alsace in what is today eastern France, but it was mostly German-speaking at the time, so he presumably spoke a form of German as his native language. He worked in Flanders with Caxton, and he presumably also spoke or at least understood Dutch. It appears that some of Caxton's other typesetters also spoke Dutch because his books sometimes contained common spellings that were used in Dutch. Caxton himself didn't oversee the printing of each page of each book, so the employees were often left to their own devices. And when an English word resembled a Dutch word, they would sometimes spell the word in the Dutch manner. [SOURCE: *'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 139*]

So for example, in a few places, we find the word **good** spelled G-O-E-D like it would have been spelled in Dutch. And the word **rook** – R-O-O-K, which referred to a type of bird, was spelled R-O-E-K like in Dutch. [SOURCE: *'A History of English Spelling,' D.G. Scragg, p. 67.*]

Well, those specific spellings didn't stick in English, but there was one Dutch spelling that did, at least in some words. And that was the use of the letters [GH] to represent the hard 'g' sound (/g/). That spelling was common in Dutch, and when Caxton's typesetters had to render the word **ghost** in the phrase 'Holy Ghost', they spelled it with a [GH] which it still has today. The word **ghost** is actually a common Germanic word, and within English, it had always been spelled with a simple G at the beginning. But in the Middle Dutch that was spoken at the time, the word was usually spelled G-H-E-E-S-T. And it appears that Caxton's typesetters mimicked that spelling in a religious manuscript that was published in the print shop. The book was known as the Royal Book, and for the first time in recorded English, the word **ghost** was spelled with a [GH] at the front. It was actually spelled G-H-O-O-S-T. The same spelling popped up again in a rendering of Chaucer's Book of Fame, as well as other publications. [SOURCE, *'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140*]

Now that spelling didn't catch on immediately, but it appears that Caxton's publications were so common, and other printers were so inclined to follow his lead, that it became common to spell **ghost** with a [GH], and that was the accepted spelling by the time of Shakespeare.

Caxton's workers also spelled the word **aghast** with a [GH], and that spelling also became common over time. By the way, **aghast** is derived from the same Old English root as **ghost**. So it made sense to treat the spellings the same. By the way, **ghastly** also comes from the same root, and it also picked up the same spelling over time. [SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140.]

Now I should note that Caxton's books also spelled other words with the same [GH], but for some reason, the spellings didn't stick in those cases. So for example, we find **guess** spelled G-H-E-S-S-E, and **goose** was spelled G-H-O-O-S, and **girl** was spelled G-H-E-R-L-E. [SOURCES: 'The Stories of English,' David Crystal, p. 258, and 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 140-1] Modern linguists are still not sure why the [GH] spelling stuck to certain words and not others. It seems that there was something unique about the word **ghost**, and the related words **ghastly** and **aghast**, that caused printers to retain the more exotic spelling for those words. Maybe it was the spooky or supernatural nature of those words. We have additional evidence for that when the word **ghoul** was borrowed from Arabic in the late 1700s. It initially appeared with a simple G, but it also acquired a [GH] spelling a short time later, perhaps due to a perceived connection between the words **ghoul** and **ghost**, even though the words are not related.

I should also note that the Italian language used the same [GH] spelling for the hard 'g' sound, so sometimes that spelling appears in English in words borrowed from Italian. That accounts for that spelling of words like **ghetto** and **spaghetti**. [SOURCE: 'Spell it Out,' David Crystal, p. 141]

Now we don't know if Caxton's assistant, Wynkyn de Worde, is the person who is responsible for those [GH]'s that were so common in those early printed books, but we do know that he took over the printing business when Caxton died in 1491. The business continued to grow and flourish under his supervision, and he eventually decided to move the printing business to a new location. His new shop was located in a house on a street in London called Fleet Street. Other printers soon joined him by setting up competing shops nearby, often on the same street. And that's how the British publishing industry became known as Fleet Street in much the same way the US financial industry became known as Wall Street. [SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Thomas B. Costain, p. 359.]

England's new printing industry flourished in the years after Fleet Street became the publishing hub. Within a century and a half after Caxton's death, English printers had published over 20,000 different titles. Some were small pamphlets, and some were massive books, but they all contributed to the spread of knowledge and the spread of the written language to every corner of England. [SOURCE: 'A History of the English Language,' Albert C. Baugh & Thomas Cable, p. 199-200] Along the way, both the grammar and the spelling of written English became more and more fixed. By the end of that period, written English was somewhat divorced from spoken English. It was no longer a purely phonetic representation of the language. As we'll see, there were many reasons for that disconnect, but one of the factors was the continuing evolution of the spoken language. The Great Vowel Shift was still taking place when those printers started to standardize spellings in the mid-1500s. That meant that spoken English was a moving target, and phonetic spellings were never going to work. If the Great Vowel Shift had taken place a

century earlier, or if the printing press had been introduced a century later, English spellings would probably make a lot more sense today. But of course, that's not what happened.

So next time, we'll finally turn our attention to the topic that many of you have been waiting for – the Great Vowel Shift. We'll explore what happened, and we'll try to figure why it happened. And hopefully, I won't completely confuse you along the way.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.