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Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing
ed. by William Kuskin (review)

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WILLIAM KUSKIN, ed. *Caxton's Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006. Pp. xxvii, 394. \$60.00 cloth, \$33.50 paper.

This collection of newly commissioned essays is a substantial attempt at a new version of the early history of printing in England. Its ten contributions explore not just Caxton's own activities as printer and translator, but the various ways in which the technology of printing was to be absorbed into the commercial structures of late medieval and early modern book production, and the kinds of impact it was to have on reading, reception, the formation of a literary canon, and cultural history in the broadest sense. The concerns of the essays stretch from the manuscript transmission of fourteenth-century texts forward to sixteenth-century printing of the works of Chaucer and Langland, and onward still, in a "coda" provided by Seth Lerer's overview of "Caxton in the Nineteenth Century," to the formalizing of Caxton's reputation in enterprises like Blades's *Life and Typography of William Caxton* and the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

The essays are grouped in sections ("The Introduction of the Press: The Culture Machine," "Manuscript and Print Strategies," and "Language, Book, and Politics") whose titles flag the political, economic, and social emphases that are foregrounded in Kuskin's own lengthy introduction. Kuskin opens with a quotation from Adorno on the paradox that books can be both material things and vehicles for ideas, and goes on to explore the varieties of "trace" (best understood here as "following," perhaps, without implications of continuity or replication) in the practices of the English book producers who worked alongside Caxton and after him. After summarizing Elizabeth Eisenstein's concentration on the new mechanical fixity of printing and Adrian Johns's arguments about the social relations of the printshop, Kuskin moves to an investigation of the variety of ways in which "trace" informs the transmission of Chaucer's "Gentilesse"—a short poem about ancestry and inheritance—whose successive copyings and printings in the course of the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth centuries (alongside Chaucer's other works) offer a model of the ways in which "the trace of the first stock" can filter through time and change. This is deftly done, and it makes clear that the book will not be simply about book production, but about

the production of culture, and more specifically the production of literary history. The contributors are all professors of English, with a take on the history of English printing visibly shaped by their practices as readers and sometimes as literary or cultural theorists, and their essays are in the main less about printing than about “the symbolic layer of early English books” (p. 7), and the ways in which “English literary history . . . is constructed by a variety of readers, each consolidating previous readers’ efforts in different material conditions” (p. 18).

The essay that broaches most directly here the mechanical practicalities of early printing is David R. Carlson’s informative survey of Caxton’s practice of weaving the printing of ephemera into his work on longer, more labor-intensive volumes, provocatively entitled “A Theory of the Early English Printing Firm: Jobbing, Book Publishing, and the Problem of Productive Capacity in Caxton’s Work.” Carlson urges the abandonment of a sentimental attachment to Caxton’s translations and his large folio volumes, and recommends instead the study of his handbills, indulgences, and smaller pamphlets, giving much enlightening detail on the working practices that enabled them to be turned around between more challenging undertakings. For Carlson, such study illuminates “the class-based means of production current at the time” and indeed the “class struggle” itself, as Marx and Raymond Williams are invoked. Whatever the terminology, exploration of these areas of Caxton’s activities is indeed revealing, and Carlson’s suggestions that Caxton may have had to revise his initial overinvestment in “the potential of the elite, courtly market for his products” (p. 52), taking on the printing of more remunerative service books and devotional works, seems plausible. Upturning the more conventional view of Caxton’s enterprises also highlights the sheer novelty of printing something like the *Morte D’Arthur*, and clarifies the ways in which a concern with productive capacity was probably to determine de Worde’s and Pynson’s relocation from Westminster to Fleet Street.

Material features of printed books, and some of the relationships between their production and their use, form the core of Alexandra Gillespie’s essay, “Followynge the trace of mayster Caxton’: Some Histories of Fifteenth-Century Printed Books,” prompting questions about what can be determined about printers’ intentions from physical evidence like book size or provision of paratext. Gillespie describes some of the means by which printers seem to have produced books both large and small for collection into *Sammelbände* or composite volumes. For comparative

purposes, she uses a folio volume compiled by the mercer Roger Thorney, and a smaller composite book (the "Fisher" *Sammelband*), which includes some of the same material. Thorney's book incorporates both manuscript and print, and may well have been put together in consultation with de Worde, with whom he had close connections. The Fisher compilation, in contrast, is made up of constituent parts that reflect commercially influenced decisions to design books specifically for serial collection. This is an important topic, and Gillespie's well-illustrated examples open the way for further study.

The other essays here are less overtly concerned with the economy or practicalities of production, directing their energies toward individual texts, or trends in the selection and promotion of particular genres and modes of writing. Both the editor (in "'Onely imagined': Vernacular Community and the English Press") and Patricia Clare Ingham ("Losing French: Vernacularity, Nation, and Caxton's English Statutes") cover the potential of print for the symbolic production of national identity, contributing, respectively, a large-scale overview and a detailed, text-specific study. Jennifer Goodman ("Caxton's Continent") and A. E. B. Coldiron ("Taking Advice from a Frenchwoman: Caxton, Pynson, and Christine de Pizan's Moral Proverbs") offer valuable insights into the wider European context of early printing, Goodman by comparing Caxton's English romances with analogues printed abroad in other vernaculars, and Coldiron by tracing the transmission, in both manuscript and print, of a translation of one of Christine de Pizan's shorter works, and its incorporation into the nascent Chaucer canon. Tim William Machan ("Early Modern Middle English") also writes on the printing of Chaucer and pseudo-Chaucer, considering late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century printings of earlier works by Chaucer and his contemporaries and immediate successors as a definable genre, newly "authorized" with prefatory material or special apparatus. The concept of the edition is explored in more abstractly theorized ways, with reference to Bourdieu, in William N. West's "Old News: Caxton, de Worde, and the Invention of the Edition," and Bourdieu features too in Mark Addison Amos's study, "Violent Hierarchies: Disciplining Women and Merchant Capitalists in *The Book of the Knyght of the Towre*," where Caxton's status as a mercer serves as a way into analyzing the economy of familial relationships at the heart of this text.

Taken together, these essays distill a history of English printing very much of our time, mapping onto this history a number of issues and

concerns that are current preoccupations across many disciplines: England and Europe; markets and economies; canon formation and literary history; printing and state power; genealogy and succession. “History of the book” is here proposed and explored as a branch of cultural theory, and with often interesting results, although sometimes a vague sense that evidence is sought to demonstrate the truth of particular models, rather than responded to for what it can suggest on its own terms. The best of the essays ask new questions and suggest some new approaches, particularly in their understanding of the complicated relationships between manuscript and print, between printers and the markets they both cultivated and responded to, and between Englishnesses of various sorts.

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KATHY LAVEZZO. *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000–1534*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. Pp. xiv, 191. \$65.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.

With Kathy Lavezzo as a guide, one feels in capable hands—even in a landscape of daunting proportions. *Angels on the Edge of the World* brings together a swath of understudied material, orders it with a clean argument, and, in so doing, provides a compelling introduction to three discourses whose “subtle [intertwining]” (p. 73) has grown in importance to medievalists of late. Lavezzo’s focal concerns are “geography” (including cartography), “literature” (most often historical writing), and “English community,” a category whose limitations are communicated in the interrogative section title—“A Medieval English Nation?” (p. 8)—that serves as her point of departure. The book’s dates are daringly splayed, but each chapter takes as its focus a carefully historicized textual location. Starring roles go to Aelfric, Anglo-Saxon homilist (c. 950–1010); Gerald de Barri (a.k.a. Gerald of Wales), in his capacity as ethnographer of Ireland (c. 1187–89); Ranulph Higden, compiler of the *Polychronicon* (c. 1327–60); the ubiquitous Geoffrey Chaucer, as represented by *The Man of Law’s Tale* (c. 1394); and—an outlier in disciplin-