Symbolic Caxton

Literary Culture and Print Capitalism

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Frontispiece. Caxton's device. The Eneydos, L7th.
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Introduction

A Theory of Literary Reproduction

Assuming an average print run to be no greater than 500, then about 20 million books were printed before 1500.
— Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*

Before 1501, in the incunabular period, some 402 items, 364 excluding broadsides, were printed in four English centres: Westminster, London, Oxford and St Albans, all but 20 or so in the two first named. Those in Latin (120) account for about 33%, in English (214) 59%; in Law French (30) 8%. This compares with an overall figure for European incunabula of something over 70% in Latin and under 30% in the various vernacular languages.
— Lotte Hellinga and J. B. Trapp, *The Cambridge History of the Book*¹

The book is a symbolic object. Taken in the abstract, a book’s material nature seems ancillary to this truth, a side effect of the spirit’s unfortunate need for corporeality. Materiality has a representative function too, however; and in the case of the book it reveals the historical processes by which it was made as well as its passage through the hands of various readers and owners. The relationship between these two trajectories, between what a book says and what it is, is easily masked by the seeming unity of the form overall, one that invites its possessor to rationalize it into a single sense: the name of the author, the meaning of the

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contents, the character of a historical period, the evocation of an emotion. We should not overlook this process of rationalization, for in it a book stops being a static object, and begins to participate in the process of symbolic production: faced with the incoherence of a book’s various representations, readers write an imaginative connection between themselves and the book, and so the book comes to stand for something greater than itself. This process of imaginative production is inherent in a book and reaches beyond its reader or owner, for books are social commodities—even an unread book, one admired by the solitary user, displayed for sale or curiosity, organized on a shelf, carried in a bag, or stored in a box, is symbolic of social meanings beyond the individual statements written on the pages within its covers. Given the compounded nature of this relationship—that a book’s contents merge with its form; that its material organization implies a greater social organization—it is naive to consider literary production without also considering the reproductive function inherent in the book itself. Invested with a self-reflective quality, books are symbolic machines of social reproduction.

The involute nature of books—the way their layers of intellectual and physical representation conspire to a dynamic form of symbolic reproduction—is true for manuscript and print. During the mid-fifteenth century the introduction of metal type fostered a significant transformation of the mode of literary production overall. For England, two central facts stand out. First, by any estimate, millions of books were printed between 1450 and 1500, and, as opposed to the situation on the Continent, the substantial majority of these books were in the vernacular. Second, William Caxton defined the English print market. Historians of print, as well as Caxton’s biographers, have tended to take Caxton’s success for granted, reading it as part of the inevitable replacement of an obsolete mode of production with a more sophisticated technology, and the emergence of a national hero over a handful of anonymous also-rans. On the most superficial level, however, these two facts suggest not the automated advance of technology, but that Caxton successfully negotiated a series of problems concerning the reproduction of books—the power of vernacular literature to formulate its audience, the relationship between rhetorical and political authority, the intimacy of capital and communication, the closeness of commodities and identity—specific to English culture in a way that other entrepreneurs could not. If we accept a generalized view
of technological progression, we allow both the specific relationship between printing, vernacular literature, and Caxton’s particular agenda to appear as the natural fall of events. If we instead return to the premodern past and recognize the symbolic complexity inherent in the introduction of printing, we can better understand the way cultural, financial, and technological instruments intersect in a process of symbolic reproduction that occurred in the past and still occurs today.

Symbolic Caxton: Literary Culture and Print Capitalism explores the introduction of printing in symbolic terms. Its central argument is that by the first half of the fifteenth century English literary production had articulated a number of intellectual structures for vernacular writing: the formation of the mystery of stationers in 1403 represented a coordinated and consolidated institution for London textual production; the definition of Lollardy as the English heresy and its programmatic censorship through Arundel’s Constitutions of 1409 mandated the orthodox nature of English writing; Henry V’s Chancery apparatus after 1417 defined English as the language of the state; and the writings of Thomas Hoccleve, John Shirley, and John Lydgate formalized Chaucer’s historical role as a vernacular poet of authority. Print infused these structures for manuscript production, orthodoxy, authority, and authorship with volume, expanding the pre-existing social economy from within the process of textual production itself. Given the symbolic nature of the book, this material increase in volume simultaneously created an imaginative change. Thus I argue that the manufacture of thousands of English books in Westminster, Oxford, St. Albans, and London, let alone the influx of thousands of books from the Continent, implies a corresponding transformation in English public and private life, in what human beings did for a living and for leisure, in the way they organized their rooms, in what they read, heard, thought, and imagined about the world around them, not because of the revolutionary nature of technology but because of the internal alignment of English culture prior to print. Caxton facilitated this transformation by introducing the printed book according to a critical program in which his press operates as a material vehicle for abstracting the symbolic nature of the book from the more personal context of manuscript circulation, delivering it up to the communities in which he lived: the increasingly literate upper and lower landed gentry, the mercantile and bureaucratic professionals of the
period, and the nobility. Early printing operates neither by slow progression nor radical break; it inhabits the existing structures of vernacular production to force a collateral shift interior to English culture.

More broadly, then, Symbolic Caxton argues for a reassessment of the English fifteenth century. It is a commonplace assumption that the fifteenth century has little direct influence on the formation of the modern vernacular canon or the expansion of print culture. Medievalists describe the period as one of repression, for which there are various explanations: the generation of readers familiar with Chaucer simply died away; the Lancastrian usurpation of the throne at the turn of the century demanded such propagandistic writing from its main poets that there was little room left for creativity; Church officials in the early decades of the century suppressed vernacular intellectual exploration. Scholars of the early modern period tend to view Lancastrian and Yorkist literary cultures as remote from Tudor concerns and are thus comfortable attributing tremendous originality to sixteenth-century poets and editors. Fixated on the transition from manuscript to print culture, book historians are no less invested in the notion of an intellectual break in the sixteenth century. And though the past fifteen years tell of a newfound scholarly interest in fifteenth-century writing, the fundamental sense that a rupture between modernity and its medieval past occurred in the fifteenth century remains an accepted truth. So considered, the story of the fifteenth century is told as an interlude between greater acts, a contrast to Chaucer's isolated genius and foil for Renaissance originality, a transition marking time before the dramatic break that defines modernity. Amazingly, a literary history of connection remains to be told.

This book asks whether the current view essentially misrecognizes the logic and importance of the fifteenth century and argues that the latter third of the period is better understood as an age of reproduction than of waning, a culture interested in, if not obsessed with, how the received symbols of authority are manipulated and reproduced. Its thesis is one of transformation, and this is also print's difference: summoned forth by the pre-existing modes of social production, print simultaneously expresses and renovates the culture from which it came. The significance of print is less that it signals a fundamental break with the past than that it reasserts this past by transforming it, restating the symbolic basis for ver-
nacular literary authority through material reproduction. In short, *Symbolic Caxton* argues that the major features of modernity—capitalism, printing, and the vernacular canon—are fundamental to, and transformed out of, fifteenth-century literary culture. The medieval past and the (post)modern present are less comfortably separated than the easy nomenclature of historical period implies.

In *Symbolic Caxton* I argue four main points. First, that fifteenth-century English literary culture is understudied. I identify two significant ways in which this period matters for English literary history as the *Chaucerian inheritance* and the *laureate system of vernacular humanism*, but beyond these I suggest that because William Caxton was involved in both the intellectual contents and material forms of literary reproduction—in the translation and editing of his sources, and in the manufacture of and commerce in books—he offers an excellent illustration of the English fifteenth century’s engagement with, rather than absence from, literary history. So comes a second major point in *Symbolic Caxton*: no literary study is complete without considering how the different aspects of a text coalesce into symbolic meaning. Fifteenth-century English literary culture is self-reflective in the extreme, I will argue, but books are so by nature: setting out ideas in a material form, they present a unified statement greater than the sum of their parts. We often take this arrangement for granted—that an author’s separate compositions can be collected on a shelf, that short verse pieces should be anthologized, that long prose tracts conform to a freestanding hardcover or paperback standard; that the authority of literature inheres throughout these variations—but it is far better that we acknowledge it as a process jointly material and intellectual and in doing so seek to understand the historical reasons for any one particular construction. I term such a methodology for reading *symbolic bibliography*.

Following on this point is a third: texts are simultaneously marked by time and are transcendent of it; scarred into being by their very manufacture, they await an intimate conversation with the future. I find, therefore, the category of the ideal literary work as untouched by editors and in some way separate from the literal vessel, as existing only by abstractions—“authorial intention,” “original state,” “ur-text”—profoundly less interesting than the actual objects, the time travelers, that have come into our hands. Reading the self-reflective symbolic object of the text as
historically significant without recourse to hyperbolic claims to newness or origins demands what I call the *archival imagination*. Thus, my fourth point: theories of literary production reliant on an instance of authorial or historical origins are fundamentally insufficient to explain either the genesis of the text or the development of literary history. Literary history occurs not by break but by a series of fractured developments. Writers and text makers *reproduce* the historical circumstances they know—either by working intellectually with the sources and traditions at hand or by physically implementing the craft techniques of their practice—with a difference; this difference, their labor, produces a specific object, call it a *text of art*, for future consumption. Yet such consumption is never innocent, for it too is a reproduction of pre-existing reading patterns—patterns of ownership, of coterie identity, of reading, of listening, of marketing—which, in turn, produces a new statement. I do not believe the point can be distilled down to some chicken-or-egg koan: any engagement with literary history demands that a *theory of literary reproduction* subsumes the production and consumption cycle.

One bold example of the nature of the scholarly misrecognition surrounding print, not of my own derivation at all, will have to suffice for the many I produce within the book. Paul Needham and Blaise Agüera y Arcas have recently reviewed Gutenberg’s early type using high-definition computer imaging. By digitally filtering for the spread of ink, Needham and Agüera y Arcas have been able to measure the type on the 1456 *Bulla Thurcorum*. The *Bulla* is printed in Gutenberg’s DK type, the same as the 1450 *Sibyllenbuch* and the 27-line *Donatus* fragments, the first pieces of printing, and Needham and Agüera y Arcas have demonstrated that the individual letterforms on these texts fail to match a uniform pattern. “But the earliest characters were different,” Needham writes. “We are therefore led to the conclusion that these earliest European characters were not derived from metal matrices marked with a punch. They were realized by the aid of another procedure in which the contours of the letter were reconstituted within a malleable material like fine sand.” So, Needham suggests that the individual letters were drawn in a plastic material such as sand with a device like a stylus, a process he calls “Cuneiform Typography.” The argument is one of distinction: both sand- and punch-casting produce movable type. Sand-casting is a one-time process, for once the individual letter is cast in sand the matrix must be disturbed if the letter is
to be released and thus must be recreated again and again with each cast-
ing, resulting in a sort of fundamentally unique type. Punch-casting in-
volves the making of a metal matrix that can be used repeatedly in a mold
to create identical letterforms; punch-casting creates uniform type, but
relies upon the precise knowledge of alloys so that the molten mixture of
lead, tin, and antimony does not melt the matrix or mold in the casting
process. By 1475 punch-matrix fonts appear in Italy and are explicitly
recorded in Nicolas Jenson’s will of September 1480, and so Needham
has tentatively proposed a broad dividing line for the transition between
the two technologies, suggesting that type prior to 1470 should be con-
sidered of this manufacture, while type made after 1480 is produced
through a punch-matrix.11

According to Needham and Agüera y Arcas’s account, technol-
ogy has a powerful hindsight: ever perfected in the present, it reveals new
secrets about its own past. Though dramatic, Needham and Agüera y
Arcas’s observation about early type is not new; indeed, it was duly noted
in nineteenth-century Caxton scholarship: Joseph Ames first classified
Caxton’s types in his 1749 Typographical Antiquities, which presents “A
Specimen of Caxton’s Letter.” A century later, G. I. F. Tupper expanded
upon this greatly with the first type synopsis, made for printer-scholar
First Printer, a study heavily influenced by Henry Bradshaw, one of the
founders of modern English bibliography. Here Blades writes “that
Caxton’s types were indeed cast is evident from identity in the face of the
same letter, where even a flaw may be noticed as occurring and recurring
continuously; but of what material the matrices were formed must be to
great extent conjectural,” concluding, “we find the conclusion inevi-
table that hard-metal punches were not used, and that even types them-
selves were used either as punches, or in some analogous way for the pro-
duction of new founts. The use of large types to form matrices in sand
(as in the case at Messrs. Caslon’s foundry, above alluded to), was not un-
common in bygone years.”12 While Tupper, Bradshaw, and Blades could
not measure with the precision of Needham and Agüera y Arcas’s com-
puter process, they apparently came to the same conclusion almost a cen-
tury and a half earlier. Yet their observations were slowly forgotten, the
actual historical practice folded into a popular simplified claim: Guten-
berg invented movable type and this invention marks a major historical
The claim is true, but it is also hyperbolic; it misrecognizes Caxton’s period to suggest a unity of purpose and technique for what was a hybrid and experimental practice.

The simplified understanding of early print has fostered a series of collateral misrecognitions concerning the relationship of print to culture. For example, recent scholarship has framed the debate about early print as between oppositions: fixity versus variation, manuscript scarcity versus print abundance, and sudden versus progressive change. I have reviewed these arguments at length in the introduction to Caxton’s Trace: Studies in the History of English Printing; here it is enough to note that they are seriously flawed, married to a notion of culture as unified and of modernity as a break from the past. We can see this, too, in Needham and Agüera y Arcas’s implicit assumption that metal type cannot show variation. In perhaps the most considered answer to Needham’s argument to date, William Pratt argues that the process of hand production in fact produces radically different letters from identical matrices. “Types cast in a handmould are certainly not identical or even virtually identical,” Pratt tells, continuing, “It is generally accepted that Gutenberg used six presses. To keep enough i’s on hand to supply six presses would require perhaps 7000 i’s. It comes as no surprise to us as handcasters of Gutenberg type that there appear to be hundreds of unique i’s.” One point rises from this debate clearly: the notion of fixity is conceptually alien to early print production. Paper is fixed on the tympan, type is fixed in the form, ink is fixed on the paper, and pages are fixed within the covers of a book, but at a very rudimentary level early type and early books are heterodox products: hand finished, neither early typefaces nor the books they impressed are identical in the sense of our own mass-produced tools and shrink-wrapped commodities. Conversely, the notion that the early printed book was conceptually inseparable from a late medieval manuscript—that the introduction and circulation of millions of books into the European commercial market went in some way unnoticed by book producers and buyers, customs agents and overland haulers, priests and poets—is equally untenable. Rather than reduce the fullness of this change to a few categorical oppositions, we should recognize that the introduction of print involved multiple determinations within the cultural economy. These determinations included changes in the physical manufacture of books as well as in the intellectual strategies
for how such commodities might be practically financed and effectively disseminated. In forgetting the complexity of the process, literary and print historians misrecognize its nature and treat one particular technological innovation as a mode of production in its entirety, one launched—like Athena—from Gutenberg’s genius and superimposed upon a pre-existing culture as the prime mover of change. Gutenberg invented movable type, but printing is intertwined with and born from the fifteenth century’s imagination.

Considered as a mode of production, printing is complex and disparate. This is true on the level of individual letters and on the level of the dissemination of books. Early printing shares much with manuscript production: paper making, woodcut printing, binding, line manufacture, even the press itself, all antedate the mode of production overall. Indeed, for print production to have been a viable idea at all, the demand for books and the capital necessary for such large-scale investment, as well as for individual purchase, must have been apparent before the actual invention. Printing is better thought of as an uneven marriage of forms involving manuscript production techniques, mercantile financial and distribution expertise, and a number of individual craftsmen and partnerships interested in refining Gutenberg’s initial invention. To capture the way these multiple determinations create the printed book in all its fullness, the study of the early printing must also be alive to symbolic evidence. There is much to be gleaned from examining the material books, and the archival evidence of fifteenth-century printing demands careful and continual review. But a solitary emphasis on material evidence too easily reduces the complexity of the situation to a blanket appeal to technology as a prime mover of history and the key to its explanation, suggesting that relationships of mechanical efficacy entirely encompass a series of interactions that are literary in the broadest and narrowest senses. Caxton’s contribution to the history of printing, as well as to the history of the period, is not merely technological; it is the articulation of the symbolic relationship among books, individuals, and social context, a process that occurs in his prose and page layout both. Material and discursive, print is an overdetermined mode of production, one that changes the various modes of production surrounding it, not by producing something markedly new, but from within. In this, the introduction of print in England is recursive and self-reflective, not simply because of
its technological nature, but because it arches back on the intellectual structures it inhabits, changing the discursive and physical nature of writing through volume. Rather than understood by a logic of technological progress or break, print is best understood through a logic of reproduction that assembles its mode of production by combining pre-existing practices.

Such a logic of reproduction is clear in Caxton’s early publication of books of hours. A *hora*, or book of hours, consists of a liturgical calendar, a set of passages from the four Gospels, the hours of the Virgin, the psalms, litany, and office of the dead. The English *hora* follows the Use of Sarum, or Salisbury, a fourteenth-century revision of the Roman rite in use throughout England, Wales, and Ireland by 1457. The market for *hora* antedates print: there are two hundred surviving examples of Flemish manuscript versions intended for export to England.¹⁸ The first printed *hora* is the 1473 Roman edition printed by Theobaldus Schenebecher, followed by Nicolas Jenson in 1474 and 1475, and Andreas Belfortis in 1475. Caxton was a pioneer in this market as well, producing his first *hora* (*STC 15867*) in 1475/76, an octavo book of hours that remains only in fragmentary form, possibly printed in Bruges.¹⁹ Caxton printed no fewer than six editions of this text, and Mary C. Erler estimates that between Caxton’s introduction of the *hora* and 1534, a quarter million *hora* were published overall.²⁰ Thus, by Erler’s calculations, the English populace consumed three to five editions a year, *one for every thirty-five Londoners* by the turn of the century.²¹

The development of the printed *hora* demonstrates both the potential of manuscript production and the symbolic difference of print. The rapid influx of these books into England is crucial to understanding the authority of its vernacular culture. For a book has multiple uses, only the most obvious of which is reading. Other uses involve writing, such as the marginal notion of personal events in the calendar sections, and still others must remain inarticulate even to the contemporary participants, such as the general sense of spiritual intimacy evoked by the possession of an authoritative object. Nicolas Watson has emphasized the disappearance of innovative English theological writings that explore dis- sent or heterodoxy after 1409, the date of Arundel’s Constitutions, as evidence of a larger reduction in vernacular spiritual writing, arguing that “a theological golden age, an age of vernacular *auctores*” had passed.²²
Here Watson’s view is consonant with a series of studies that discover the sixteenth century to be a break from the past when issues of orthodoxy and heterodoxy once again became the subject of vernacular interrogation. No one would want to claim that a well-used printed horae contains the subtle theological investigation of fourteenth-century writings such as Piers Plowman; indeed, such liturgical apparatuses were instrumental in unifying the Church around a central practice, and would only become more so in the sixteenth century. So, we may choose to see in the demand for printed horae the commodification of the sacred, the dissemination of a centralized practice, or the banality of common people thinking common thoughts about their spirituality; but four facts must be clear: (1) these liturgical texts had appeal enough to sustain a serious financial investment; (2) the printed books of hours are not monolithic but recognize regional difference in their various articulations (Roman Use, Salisbury Use, etc.); (3) many of these books must have been owned by people who would not read Latin but desired a horae as a physical object marking their particular English spirituality; and (4) this desire is related to the books’ symbolic evocation of cultural authority, which to a large degree remains private. The printed liturgy symbolically condenses the authority of the Church into an object, which it makes available for retail sale, and while this does not imply an openly dissenting view of orthodoxy, or even a sustained theological exploration, it certainly suggests a meaningful expression of vernacular theology that can only be heterodox in nature because of its intimacy. Instead of codifying the anti-intellectual climate of the “age of brass in which fifteenth-century readers were actually living,” then, I suggest we acknowledge that the reproduction of pre-existing texts at a new level necessitates a collateral shift in the symbolic production of such authority, one that constitutes a significant revision of the social economy overall.23

We are faced with a choice: we can acknowledge this tension but nevertheless hold to the category of traditional religion and argue for a dramatic cultural break in the sixteenth century, or we can allow for a much more fluid notion of social change.24 I choose the latter: Caxton’s work with the press is tied to the specifically vernacular production of knowledge and this implicates it in a series of irresolvable, yet nevertheless powerfully reproductive paradoxes: vernacularity within Latinity; heterodoxy within orthodoxy; literacy within unread books; and capitalist
nationalism within an economy driven, largely, by manorial tenancy. Scholarship has done much to avoid discussing the obvious implications of these paradoxes: it has forgotten what it once knew about typography; it has erected illusionary oppositions between print fixity and manuscript variation; it has told a story of transitions between vast periods, featuring the long decline of the medieval period and a sudden renaissance of self-discovery. *Symbolic Caxton* contests this series of juxtapositions to argue that print and the vernacular English canon emerge not through a historical break but through an organic transformation of its textual economy deeply intertwined with the production of vernacular authority and identity. In this, it also raises a series of troubling questions about the way intellectual structures such as authorship can coexist with chronologically older forms of literary persona, such as the compiler, about the status of originality on the boundary of production and reproduction, and, ultimately, about blindness and insight in our own practices as literary critics and historians. Print appears according to the manuscript format, but this does not obviate the fact of its difference. Its material difference is simultaneously a symbolic difference. This transformation is fraught and at times paradoxical but is nevertheless a history that remains to be told.

There is a sense in the scholarship on fifteenth-century print production that the narrative contained in a series of masterworks by E. Gordon Duff, H. R. Plomer, H. S. Bennett, and Graham Pollard cannot be complicated. Thus current research on early printing concentrates on precision—the finer identification of dates, titles, and personages; the minute examination of typographic details; the further refinement of codicological patterns—and not on conceptual or thematic revision. As a result, we know more about the details of the past, but these details remain isolated from the larger scholarly understanding of the late Middle Ages, the development of modernity, and the history of the book overall. To bracket the late fifteenth century as in some way separate from this larger discussion is to neglect the historical moment at which point English literature enters large-scale commercial circulation and to allow the material terms of symbolic production—the way art is invested with capital in the marketplace—to remain isolated from the ques-
tions of power, gender, and authorship that occupy medieval and early modern literary studies overall. If we instead imagine that the various practices associated with vernacular canon formation—capital, printing, and authority—develop in the premodern past, we must also admit that modernity does not offer a clean break from this past but is in fact tied to it in material, intellectual, and symbolic ways. Because the arrangement of these practices within the overall mode of literary production changes over time, any general theory that remains married to a claim for origins is fundamentally insufficient. For full understanding of the relationships among capital, print, and the English canon, only a theory of literary reproduction directed at articulating the shifting recombination of practices within the overall mode of production is capable of understanding how the material forms of, and the intellectual strategies within and surrounding literature conspire to a symbolic depth.26

We can begin to sketch a theory of symbolic reproduction through Caxton’s biography. I cover Caxton’s biography in some detail in chapters 1 and 2, but, in brief, it can be divided into four stages. Born between 1415 and 1424, Caxton was enrolled as an apprentice to Robert Large in 1438, and he appears as both a Mercer and a Stapler at various times after this, doing import and export business in the Low Countries and France.27 Caxton was appointed governor of the English Merchant Adventurers in Bruges around 1462, a post that included substantial judicial and diplomatic responsibilities. In 1469 he began translating a prose history of Troy into English, and during this period he is connected to the court of Margaret of York, wife of Charles the Good and Duchess of Burgundy. For reasons that remain opaque, in June 1471 Caxton began an eighteen-month residency in Cologne, and this move sets in motion the second main phase in his biography in which he seems to have resigned his post as governor and learned to print. Here Caxton helped produce three Cologne editions, and in 1473 he returned to Bruges and published the first English book, his translation of the Troy story, the 1473/74 Recuyell of the Histories of Troye (STC 15375). He followed this with a second English edition, The Game and Play of the Chess (STC 4920), and four books in French. Caxton’s editions are the first vernacular printed texts in English and in French.28

The third stage of Caxton’s career begins with his return to England in late 1475 (or early 1476) through to 1486, at which point he emerges
as the only printer in England. Initially, Caxton set up shop “at the red pale” across from Westminster Palace and printed a series of broadsheets and quarto pamphlets on a small press, followed in late 1476 or early 1477 by the first folio printed in England: the *Canterbury Tales* (STC 5082). The shop at the red pale was a highly centralized production center: Caxton sold manuscripts and printed books, rented storage space, ran a bindery, and did import and export business from this location. European printers largely shipped their books unbound, leaving them to be collated by a local stationer who would have them bound for a customer at the point of purchase. Caxton consolidated this action; indeed, though there exists great variety in the binding of his books, records of reman-dered texts all report individually bound units, and it appears that he conceived of certain texts as being bound together. Further, the Westminster location put Caxton near the clerks of Chancery, and this opened his business to the bureaucratic demands of jobbing, the printing of small tracts either in single or half-sheet format, or perhaps in small quartos, for individual commission. This third stage, then, is marked by his centralization and consolidation of production methods, featuring an intertwining of various techniques, including sales, into one location.

The late 1470s and middle 1480s describe a period of expansion in the English print market. Theodoric Rood appeared in Oxford in 1478, perhaps replacing an anonymous printer before him, and the Schoolmaster Printer began in St. Albans in 1479, again perhaps replacing a nameless predecessor. John Lettou set up a shop in London in 1480, and was joined by William Ravenswalde (otherwise known as de Machlinia or “of Mechelen”), who subsequently took over his shop, moving it to a location near the Fleet Bridge, and then to Holborn, and married Lettou’s widow, Elizabeth North, some time later. A few other individuals are named as printers, or are recorded as importing books from the Continent, but no texts remain to represent their work. With the possible exception of the St. Albans Schoolmaster, all of these printers are foreign born and backed by English financers: the early Oxford printer seems to have been connected to James Goldwell, Bishop of Norwich, and Rood worked with Thomas Hunte, an Oxford stationer; John Lettou was sponsored by William Wylcoks, a draper and Merchant Adventurer. Again, Caxton’s method involves consolidating a variety of operations—printing and financing—into one centralized arrangement. In further contrast to
Caxton, these printers largely focused on Latin texts, only moving into the vernacular at the end of their careers, and often copying Caxton’s titles, if not his actual texts. In turn, Caxton’s vernacular output from 1482 to 1485 is tremendous, and during this period he produces his major editions of Chaucerian poetry (including his 1483 illustrated edition of the *Canterbury Tales*), courtly romances (including Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur, STC 801*), history (the 1482 *Polychronicon, STC 13438*), and lay piety (his 1483 translation of the *Golden Legend, STC 24873–74*). The mideighties also demonstrate a sustained interest in printing on the part of the central government: in 1484 Richard III’s Parliament passed a significant act including protections for foreign textwriters and printers, and the statute that included this act initiated the printing of English statutes in general. A remaining copy of the 1482 *Polychronicon*, owned by one William Purde, contains a notation naming Caxton regis impressore, King’s Printer. Thus by the end of this phase the central government appears as attempting to sustain the market’s continued expansion; nevertheless, by 1486 all the competing printers seem to have failed, leaving Caxton with an apparent monopoly.  

The fourth phase of Caxton’s career is defined by a sudden contraction in production, for by various estimates Caxton produced little or nothing in 1488.  

From 1489 on, he continued to translate French and Latin texts into English, write prologues, and generally oversee his press until his death in late 1491 or 1492. Wynkyn de Worde, Caxton’s long-time associate, reports that Caxton died just after translating the last lines of the *Lives of the Fathers* in his 1495 edition of that work (STC 14507). Caxton was survived by a daughter, Elizabeth. Overall, he printed over one hundred separate editions, about thirty of which are his own translations, and many of which include prose and verse prologues and epilogues as well as interesting colophons and rubrics. Around the time of his death, a second generation of English printers begins to take shape: Richard Pynson, who claims that Caxton was his master in his edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (perhaps more in tribute than as a historical record; STC 5084), began printing just outside London in St. Clement Danes; de Worde inherited Caxton’s shop; and somewhat later, in 1496–97, Julian Notary, Jean Barbier, and “I. H.” (perhaps Jean Huvain) launched a short-lived press. In 1500 both Pynson and de Worde relocated their operations to Fleet Street in London, de Worde near Shoe Lane, and
Pynson near St. Dunstan’s Church, by which point de Worde had produced 115 editions and Pynson 120, together doubling Caxton’s output in half the time. Other successful printers also emerged; for example, John Rastell, a Coventry-born lawyer and playwright, began printing around 1510, and a number of men who worked with de Worde followed suit: Henry Watson appears to have produced two books in Charing Cross with a Dutch printer, Hugh Goes, and Robert Copland, a writer and subcontractor for de Worde, started an independent shop of his own.

Caxton’s career is traditionally read through a series of static and unresolved oppositions: his wholesale importation of Burgundian literary culture set against his national pride in English language and literature; his slavish devotion to his patrons versus his commercial mentality; his awareness of Continental trends as opposed to his resolutely medieval worldview. I see Caxton’s work as reproductive and dynamic, operating according to a cogent if at times contradictory and paradoxical critical program that works through an intellectual mechanism of appropriation and consolidation. Reproduction is essential to this system, for Caxton creates little ex nihilo: he draws the press from Cologne, his texts from English, Burgundian, and French traditions, his prose from a series of authors. Rather than invent new modes of production, he appropriates pre-existing practices and consolidates them toward his own purposes. For example, even his centralized production facility at the red pale is not entirely innovative: C. Paul Christianson has long argued that the London Bridge tenements, a hivelike building housing a variety of book artisans and coordinated by a stationer, demonstrates just such an operation for manuscript production. Reproduction is the common denominator across all of Caxton’s work, and just as his position as a trader involved him in the reproduction of capital, his work as a printer is chiefly involved in translating and reissuing existing literary works.

Caxton’s catalogue demonstrates how this logic of reproduction allows him to appropriate individual texts and consolidate them into a canon. For example, from 1476 to 1479 Caxton printed a collection of Chaucerian poetry including folio editions of Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and his translation of Boethius’s *De consolatione philosophiae* (STC 3199), as well as quarto editions of various shorter poems by Chaucer and John Lydgate. In 1483 he printed a second series of Chaucerian poetry, comprising three main works by Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* (STC 5094),
The Book of Fame (STC 5087), and a second edition of the Canterbury Tales (featuring an original prologue, revised passages, woodcuts, and a new, ostensibly more authorial order for the tales; STC 5083), and adding two new texts: John Gower’s Confessio amantis (STC 12142) and Lydgate’s Life of Our Lady (STC 17023). By presenting Chaucer, Lydgate, and Gower in two discrete groups, both focused around the Canterbury Tales, Caxton gives shape to an otherwise open-ended poetic tradition, consolidating the English literary canon around select authors and works. A number of Caxton’s editions fall into this sort of patterning, and Caxton uses his prologues and epilogues to make it explicit: Caxton’s 1477 prologue to the History of Jason (STC 15383) refers his readers to his earlier Recuyell of the Histories of Troye on the grounds that both stem from the literary culture of the Burgundian court; his 1479 Cordyal (STC 5758) emphasizes that this text concludes his printing of Anthony Woodville’s translations of the Dictes and Sayings (STC 6826, 6828, 6829) and Morale Proverbes (STC 7273) of Christine de Pizan; he links his 1482 Polychronicon and 1484 Golden Legend as “noble histories”; and he groups his 1481 Godfrey of Boloyne (STC 13175), 1485 Le Morte D’Arthur, and 1485 Charles the Grete (STC 5013) around the popular figures of the Nine Worthy Heroes. Caxton’s strategy is often critically discounted as simply derivative, no more than marketing, his prologues and epilogues labeled “puffs.” I suggest that the derivative nature of literary reproduction is entirely the point, that the development of marketing strategy in the late fifteenth century is nothing short of remarkable, and that in Caxton’s case it indicates a material and intellectual consolidation of English culture into a coherent imaginative grouping of texts invested with literary authority: the English literary canon.

Print reproduction contains a double action: it appropriates authority from the past and consolidates it into a new object, the printed book, which is in turn geared for subsequent reproduction in the wholesale and retail market. Volume is print production’s guiding principle of innovation and its rule for survival. Volume is fundamentally built into print production as a mandate and goal to reproduce capital, for a working print shop can only be financially viable if it maintains a high enough output to pay off its initial investment in type and presses and thus keep up with the continual costs of labor and raw materials, the most significant of which was, of course, paper. Considering this, Febvre and
Martin’s estimate of 20 million books appears potentially quite conservative, for it is possible to imagine much greater runs than five hundred editions of popular material, and of easy-to-print ephemera such as single- or half-sheet advertisements, announcements, and indulgences. If we acknowledge the role of volume, then, we must also acknowledge that capitalism is a part of English printing from the start, not as the dominant mode of production of English society but as one element within its system of representations, practices, and conflicts. Caxton may not have termed his work “capitalist,” but as I illustrate in chapter 2 he very much saw himself using finances to produce more finances, and further, the language he uses to describe this production process is the same language he uses to define his own self-presentation. Thus, I suggest that early print production, indeed printing in general, is ill served by monolithic terms such as capitalism or print culture, which suggest large-scale divisions between cultural practices, and is better served by an understanding of historical shifts which looks not for moments of originality but seeks out relationships within an ongoing reproduction cycle.

Read as part of an enduring culture of the vernacular book, rather than as the beginning of a linear movement toward print culture, fifteenth-century printing is clearly imbricated in much larger economies of commerce and polity, as well as public and private identity. The nature of the book is to consolidate these various economies into a material object, itself available for appropriation. So, when printing increases the volume of books, it also adjusts their authority to a different register. The concept of authority is crucial to Symbolic Caxton overall, as a term that embodies the connection between material and symbolic economics at its very heart. Fifteenth-century poets and princes looked to existing sources of authority—to the Church, the monarch, past authors—in order to appropriate the right to speak themselves. The technique for doing so was well illustrated to them by Chaucer, whose identity as an author is premised on his manipulation of his sources. Indeed, the main writers of the English fifteenth century—Thomas Hoccleve, John Lydgate, Sir Thomas Malory, George Ashby, Anthony Woodville, William Worcester, Stephen Scrope, John Skelton—all define themselves by reproducing—excerpting, translating, and paraphrasing—pre-existing works. These writers rely upon a cogent system of appropriation and consolidation of literary authority worked out by the generation of writ-
ers immediately after Chaucer through 1450. In chapter 3 I term this system the *Chaucerian inheritance*, and Caxton’s writing works through it as well: he appropriates phrases, themes, and, at times, whole passages for his prologues and epilogues, consolidating them into his own voice.\textsuperscript{35} I suggest that, rather than a mark of aesthetic dullness and intellectual closure, fifteenth-century writers’ techniques, as with the case of the *borae*, epitomize their century’s thinking through of the possibilities for large-scale vernacular cultural production as reproduction. Thus, I argue that originality is the wrong measure of Caxton’s importance; reproduction is a better measure.

Like poetry, print: central to my argument is the idea that literary reproduction is both material and intellectual. Both work according to a process of appropriation and consolidation to reproduce the literary object as symbolically different from what came before. Thus I offer two definitions at the start of *Symbolic Caxton*: by *literary authority* I mean nothing more than the right to speak in letters, a right continually appropriated from established sources and applied to present conditions. This associates literary authority with authorship, and through authorship, literary property, for “it seems likely that the earliest sense of *auctor,*” writes Larry Scanlon, “meant seller or vendor, one with the right to alienate property.”\textsuperscript{36} Thus, my second term, *capital*, is authority transformed into an appropriable form, be that a poetic line or an object that can be purchased. This definition of capital emphasizes capital’s ability to inhabit the objects that constitute the English canon, and its power to move between producer and purchaser, as well as its general ability to extend to individuals the right to speak. It also suggests the ways in which the poetry of the Chaucerian inheritance models the terms for its material reproduction. I intend it, too, to remind us that the printed book is nevertheless a product of individual workers’ labor, and as such represents the command of those individuals in an objectified form.\textsuperscript{37}

In recognizing the manifold ways the printed book is infused with authority we can begin to trace Caxton’s formulation of an English audience. Again, Caxton’s strategy is both intellectual and material: by appealing to established literary conventions Caxton creates a discursive relationship between the symbols of and audience for an English literary canon; by producing his texts as visibly different from the presentation manuscripts the nobility actually commissioned, he makes this
authority available to a wide audience. Testifying to the overlap between the noble and non-noble in English society, the printed book operates somewhat differently from the hand-produced manuscript: it connects a broad range of subjects to English culture. So, Caxton’s broadening of the English canon is attractive to the nobility because it reinforces a symbolic connection between literary production and social authority, in which the literary product appears an extension of that authority. It is also attractive to the classes beneath the nobility because it facilitates the appropriation of that authority as property. The printed text therefore represents authority as mobile but also fixed, appropriable from the court to the market and back through its abstract evocation of English culture in the material body of the book. Accordingly, it operates less to commemorate the arrival of a unified “bourgeoisie” into cultured society than to articulate class position at all. So, as much as the action of consumption extends to various people the role of audience, it allows them to recognize themselves as unified. Print participates in the development of the English canon, the focusing of that canon around political events, and the consolidation of an urban capitalist class protected by international trade barriers and increasingly coming to see itself as a productive force within the English nation. Containing within it the terms not only for consumption but also for renewed production, print production is a form of social reproduction. In short, Caxton’s writing teaches his readers to read in relation to the symbols of authority.

English print, capital, and authority are joined, therefore, not just through their joint interest in buying and selling but in their drive toward vernacular literary authority. In this book I focus in on Caxton’s particular interest in processes of transformation—mechanical reproduction, credit, alchemy, translation, allegory, conversion—within his writing and the narratives he prints as a method of establishing his sense of the power of the press overall. I offer these themes as alternatives to a simple historical model of reform or revolution, and argue that in each case Caxton’s work is of a piece with the larger logic of the century: the reproduction sequence of the appropriation and reduction of pre-existing material, which is then multiplied outward. Caxton’s work is part of a process of reproduction that shifts and rearranges discrete practices within a larger cultural totality without breaking from it. Both the form of the book itself—its nature as a durable object and its tendency to be rediscovered
and reprinted long after it was originally made—and its contents present information for reading this fraught passage. This process, let alone the object of the book’s movement through it, is difficult, and thus I emphasize the historical role of paradox throughout my telling; nevertheless, I contend that the notion of historical break is a fundamental misrecognition of the role of the fifteenth century in constituting modernity. Born of paradox, it is mired in contradictions that it can never resolve. Through this sequence, print thrusts the present into the future.

Symbolic Caxton develops through six chapters, each of which is organized around a discrete thematic issue of cultural reproduction: biography, capital investment, canon formation, authorship, community, and finally, what I term vernacular humanism. In the course of these chapters I update the traditional narratives of Caxton’s life and work where appropriate, but my main concern is to deepen the existing story of print production, and so my readings are selective rather than inclusive, and my notes—much reduced from their original length—are intended to point the reader to the vast bibliographies on Caxton more than to identify every single source, my original inclination. Caxton’s world was largely urban and thus much of my argument takes place in the city centers in which he lived and worked: Bruges, London, and Westminster. But books travel, and thus my argument also takes place in English places beyond the M25: in chapter 4 I look to Coventry for an example of pageantry; in chapter 5, to a rebellion in York. I am occasionally driven chronologically back from Caxton’s tenure as a printer-publisher and forward into book history long after his death.

Symbolic Caxton begins with two chapters on the symbolic dimension of fifteenth-century economics. Chapter 1 opens the discussion in the twentieth century by examining the current value attached to Caxton’s name. I pursue this reading through the nineteenth century and back to the fifteenth to discuss the development of Caxton’s printer’s mark, the woodcut stamp with which he identified his editions, as a way into the history of early English printing, and to suggest the importance of his specific merger of economic and literary modes of production within his persona. This is a crucial point, one often overlooked for its obviousness: Caxton takes great pains to associate himself with his books.
In doing so he adopts technologies of authorship from the Chaucerian writers before him and applies them to book making. The only comparable examples in fifteenth-century English writing are those of John Shirley, the London book collector and producer, and Thomas Hoccleve, the Chancery scribe and self-styled Chaucerian poet. The fundamental difference between their work and Caxton’s is, of course, volume: where Shirley and Hoccleve are scribe-poets, Caxton is a merchant-printer, and though he is extremely careful to separate his prose from the economic world he worked in, his persona continually mingles the roles of capitalist, book producer, and reader. In chapter 2 I read how Caxton’s commentary on his first printed book, the Recuyell of the Histories of Troye, and his Advertisement (STC 4890) associate this persona with fifteenth-century capitalism. Some readers will no doubt see my insistence that Caxton’s economic activities are capitalist as hopelessly anachronistic, but as the fundamental mechanism of printing is the investment of capital toward the reproduction of capital, his actions are ill-served by terms such as mercantilism, barter, or trade, all of which imply simple buying and selling. So, chapter 2 argues that Caxton uses capital to produce his books and persona alike, and while his practices do not typify the century as a whole, I believe it is important that we recognize and describe them for what they are: capitalist.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the Chaucerian inheritance. Chapter 3 discusses Caxton's typographical layout of Chaucer and the Chaucerian poets as transmuting an intangible tradition into a series of tangible commodities through his two print series. The chapter argues that rather than creating Chaucer as an author, a concept that Caxton inherits from the first half of the century, Caxton exploits the role of author to consolidate various forms of authority into a discrete product. In a sense, Symbolic Caxton is no more than a meditation on this issue, for whether conceived of through his prose voice, his printed trademark, his promotion of certain individuals as laudable, or his identification of groups of readers as a coherent body of gentleman readers, Caxton’s development of the printed book is interested in unifying authority. Here, however, I make a specific point about the reproduction—the consolidation and articulation—of Chaucer’s legacy in the second half of the fifteenth century: Caxton comes to a pre-existing tradition, the Chaucerian inheritance, and condenses it into a discrete selection of titles. In doing this he identi-
fies a larger imaginary structure as physically tangible, embodied in certain books that can be held up and manipulated. The implication of this argument is that Caxton’s contribution to the history of printing is material—he imported print technology into England and refined it according to his own style—but also intellectual: he emphasized a sense of Chaucerian writing already present in English culture. Chapter 4 argues that though the Chaucerian inheritance could be materialized in printed books, such an authority figure as Chaucer (or Gower and Lydgate for that matter) was uninhabitable for the majority of poets and translators of the century, and thus it suggests ways in which such literary figures—Anthony Woodville and Margaret Beaufort, for example—took up literary roles outside of Chaucer. Specifically, I read Caxton’s editions of Christine de Pizan’s *Morale Prouerbes* and *Fayts of Arms* (*STC* 7269) as providing a crucial model for literary persona for the minor English writer. Thus, in presenting the English author, Caxton not only brings the Chaucerian inheritance to market, he also sets out a dialogue between feminist and antifeminist perspectives to the aristocratic reading communities of the Wars of the Roses in order to secure the role of the literary amateur in print.

Chapters 5 and 6 are concerned with the English nation. Chapter 5 continues my exploration of Caxton’s critical program by turning to Caxton’s Worthies Series of romances, which include his editions of *Godfrey of Boloyne* (1481), *Le Morte D’Arthur* (1485), and *Charles the Grete* (1485). This series offers a clear example of the way Caxton strategically links his texts for consolidating a disparate population of readers into an imaginary community. This process is ideological in two senses: it makes specific political claims for the English state, while at the same time suggesting an imaginative organization for the social and personal body. Chapter 6 reads Caxton’s 1480 *Methamorphose* and 1490 *Eneydos* (*STC* 24796) to argue that these texts represent a brand of English humanism—what I term vernacular humanism—more interested in exploiting the authority of classical writing than in translating actual texts of the past, which remain lost to English readers of the time. Importantly, where I see Chaucer’s vernacular writings as often descending from erudition to vulgarity, vernacular humanism presents itself as a scholarly endeavor. Thus, Caxton associates himself with Continental humanists, he asserts Skelton’s academic credentials, and his *Eneydos* is
largely a polemical comparison between Boccaccio’s and Virgil’s rendi-
tions of the Dido story. Caxton is quick to fold this scholarly sensi-
ability into his persona, and I argue that at the end of his career he self-
consciously adapts a retrospective tone, revisiting the themes of the
Recuyell to suggest himself as a vernacular humanist, and associating
printing with the authority of the Tudor state. The book concludes with
a brief reading of a genre Caxton did not print—the morality play—as a
way of suggesting some of the implications of Symbolic Caxton for our un-
derstanding of modernity.

Thus, the six chapters of Symbolic Caxton can be grouped into
three larger units—capitalism, authorship, and social organization—but a
number of themes stand out across them all. Caxton’s enduring interest
in the history of the book, his emphasis on books as documents of his-
tory deeply important to society itself, is unavoidable. The importance
of persona and public identity is equally unavoidable in reading Caxton;
indeed Caxton’s writing is so imbued with his persona that it is easy to
overlook the fact that this is his literary creation. It is the argument of
chapter 1 that, historically, Caxton scholars have too quickly forgotten
this point and believed themselves on personable terms with Caxton.
Less obvious, but strikingly present in his writing and publications, is an
abiding interest in female readers and writers. The fifteenth-century
Chaucerians, too, are preoccupied with feminism: Thomas Hoccleve
devotes large sections of the Regement of Princes to the discussion of fe-
male authority; John Lydgate includes a sequence of defenses against
the charge of antifeminism in the Troy Book, and, of course, John Skelton
writes his own Wife of Bath, Eleanor Rumming. Caxton is no less inter-
ested, and from his prologues and the texts he chooses to print emerges
a particular trope: a female literary figure representing the appropri-
ation of language. This trope is deeply ambivalent: it imagines women
as objects useful to the manipulation of authority, but just so, it writes
female authority into the center of fifteenth-century literary production.
As much as Symbolic Caxton moves thematically and chronologically
through the last quarter of the fifteenth century, then, it also orbits these
three issues: the history of the book, persona, and feminism.

In dealing with Caxton’s texts, I have tried to keep my quotations
as close to Caxton’s terms as possible while maintaining legibility for
the modern reader. My citations from Caxton’s texts come from the
UMI microfilm examples or from particular copies that I have examined. My purpose in this practice has been to capture some sense of the literature as it came out of Caxton's shop, to renew lines of verse now old and familiar, and above all to ensure that I am indeed engaging fifteenth-century texts and not those of earlier or later scribes, printers, and editors. Where possible, I have included signatures for page reference; in lieu of signatures I have tried to make my references clear in my prose. In the few cases where microfilm is not available and I have not been able to look at the text directly, I have used W. J. B. Crotch's 1928 *Prologues and Epilogues* for the Early English Text Society, as I find that it presents Caxton's prose in the most unaltered form. Where modern editions of such texts are available, I have included notes to these editions, all of which I have relied upon. In general, though, I have tried largely to maintain the original orthography, only modernizing long s and expanding and italicizing abbreviations where necessary. I indicate Caxton's slash marks but not line breaks as the resulting combination is confusing. I accompany my first reference to a particular edition by its STC number for clarity. In all cases I date Caxton's texts according to Paul Needham's checklist of Caxton's editions in *The Printer and the Pardoner*, appendix D (83–91), to which I am indebted. Finally, I would like to point out two desk references useful to the study of Caxton by N. F. Blake: his *William Caxton: A Bibliographical Guide* usefully surveys the field; more recently, his *William Caxton for the English Writers of the Late Middle Ages* series provides a strong discussion of Caxton's biography and an excellent review of the primary material.

A word or two on practical vocabulary: throughout *Symbolic Caxton* I have tried to follow the suggestion by G. Thomas Tanselle in *A Rationale of Textual Criticism* and distinguish between works—which are timeless and abstract—and texts—which are mediated by human and mechanical agents. These terms, however, are at times difficult to distinguish, for as Tanselle points out, “the act of interpreting the work is inseparable from the act of questioning the text.”38 I also make a distinction among three main forms of production: material production, by which I mean the physical construction of objects; intellectual production, which I see as a self-conscious and articulate level of authorial, scribal, or editorial control over the text; and symbolic production. As I have suggested above, in the term *symbolic* I mean less the discrete
rhetorical symbols of a work as represented in a text than the way the various elements of production come together in a dynamic and imaginative, if inarticulate, meaning. My thinking on symbolic production comes from Marxist criticism, particularly from Louis Althusser’s notion of ideology in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation).” Althusser’s discussion of the role of the imagination in ideology strikes me as useful because it emphasizes the unconscious and fundamentally creative nature of ideological processes. Nevertheless, I have tried to avoid using this term, ideology, freighted as it is with a long history of general connotations and minute theoretical nuances. For this book, I have used symbolic to suggest the manifold ways books exceed any discrete meaning to reflect and shape their larger social fabric.