

In Caxton's Own Prose,  
by N.F. Blake, Andre Deutsch,  
1973.

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36. ENEYDOS (c. 1490)

(a) Prologue

After dyverse werkes made, translated and achieved, havynge  
noo werke in hande I sitting in my studye where as laye many  
dyverse paunflettis and bookys, happened that to my hande  
cam 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 and grete  
clerke Vyrgyle. Whiche booke I sawe over and redde therin  
how after the generall destruccyon of the grete Troye Eneas  
departed berynge his olde fader Anchises upon his sholdres,  
his lityl son Yulus on his honde, his wyfe wyth moche other  
people folowynge; and how he shynped and departed - wyth

<sup>1</sup> Westmestter

Caxton's Own Prose

alle th'ystorye of his adventures that he had er he cam to the  
achievement of his conquest of Ytalye, as all alonge shall be  
shewed in this present boke. In whiche booke I had grete  
playsyr bycause of the fayr and honest termes and wordes in  
Frenshe, whyche I never sawe tofore lyke ne none so play-  
saunt ne so wel ordred. Whiche booke, as me semed, sholde  
be moche requysyte to noble men to see as wel for the  
eloquence as the historyes, how wel that many honderd  
yerys passed was the sayd *Booke of Eneydos* wyth other werkes  
made and lerned dayly in scolis specyally in Ytalye and other  
places; whiche historye the sayd Vyrgyle made in metre.

And whan I had advysed me in this sayd boke, I delybered  
and concluded to translate it into Englysshe, and forthwyth  
toke a penne and ynke and wrote a leef or tweyne whyche I  
oversawe agayn to corecte it. And whan I sawe the fayr and  
straunge termes therin, I doubted that it sholde not please  
some gentylmen whiche late blamed me sayeng that in my  
translacyons I had over-curious termes whiche coude not be  
understande of comyn peple and desired me to use olde and  
homely termes in my translacyons. And fayn wolde I satysfye  
every man, and so to doo toke an olde boke and redde therin;  
and certaynly the Englysshe was so rude and brood that I  
coude not wele understande it. And also my lorde Abbot of  
Westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn evidences  
wryton in olde Englysshe for to reduce it into our Englysshe  
now usid. And certaynly it was wرتون in suche wyse that it  
was more lyke to Dutche than Englysshe: I coude not  
reduce ne brynge it to be understonden. And certaynly our  
langage now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used  
and spoken whan I was borne, for we Englysshemen ben  
borne under the domynacyon of the mone whiche is never  
stedfaste but ever waverynge: wexynge one season, and  
waneth and dyscreaseth another season.

And that comyn Englysshe that is spoken in one shyre  
varyeth from another. In so moche that in my dayes happened  
that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse for to  
have sayled over the see into Zelande. And for lacke of  
wynde thai taryed atte forlond and wente to lande for to  
refreshe them. And one of theym named Sheffielde, a mercer,  
cam into 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 marchaunt was angry for he also coude  
speke no Frenshe, but wolde have hadde eggys; and she

understode hym not. And thenne at laste another sayd that he wolde have eyren; then the good wyf sayd that she understod hym wel. Loo! what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, 'egges' or 'eyren'? Certaynly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage.

For in these days every man that is in ony reputacyon in his countre wyll utter his commynycacyon and maters in suche maners and termes that fewe men shall understonde theym. And som honest and grete clerkes have ben wyth me and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde. And thus bytwene playn rude and curyous I stande abasshed. But in my judgemente the comyn termes that be dayli used ben lyghter to be understonde than the olde and auntyent Englysshe. And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude, uplondyssh man to labour therin ne rede it, but onely for a clerke and a noble gentylman that feleth and understandeth in faytes of armes, in love and in noble chyvalrye, therfor in a meane bytwene bothe I have reduced and translated this sayd booke into our Englysshe not overrude ne curyous, but in suche termes as shall be understanden by Goddys grace accordyng to my cople. And yf ony man wyll entermete in redyng of hit and fyndeth suche termes that he cannot understande, late hym goo rede and lerne Vyrghyll or the *Pystles* of Ovyde, and ther he shall see and understonde lyghtly all yf he have a good redar and enformer. For this booke is not for every rude and<sup>1</sup> unconnyng man to see, but to clerkys and very gentylmen that understande gentylnes and scyence.

Thenne I praye alle theym that shall rede in this lytyl treatys to holde me for excused for the translatyng of hit, for I knowleche myselfe ignorant of connyng to enpryse on me so hie and noble a werke. But I praye Mayster John Skelton, late created poete laureate in the Unyversite of Oxenforde, to oversee and correcte this sayd booke and t'addresse and expowne where as shalle be founde faulte to theym that shall requyre it. For hym I knowe for suffycient to expowne and englysshe every dyffyculte that is therin, for he hath late translated the *Epystles* of Tulle, and the *Boke of Dyodorus Syculus* and diverse other werkes oute of Latyn into Englysshe, not in rude and olde langage but in polysshed and ornate termes craftely, as he that hath redde Vyrghyle, Ovyde, Tullye and all the other noble poetes and oratours to me unknowen.

<sup>1</sup> dna

And also he hath redde the ix muses and understande theyr musicalle scyences and to whom of theym eche scyence is appropred. I suppose he hath dronken of Elycon's well. Then I praye hym and suche other to correcte, adde or mynysshe where as he or they shall fynde faulte, for I have but folowed my cople in Frenshe as nygh as me is possyble. And yf ony worde be sayd therin well I am glad, and yf otherwyse I submytte my sayd boke to theyr correctyon.

Whiche boke I presente unto the hye born, my tocomynge naturell and soverayn lord, Arthur by the grace of God Prynce of Walys, Duc of Cornewayll and Erle of Chester, fyrst bygoten sone and heyer unto our most dradde naturall and soverayn lorde and most Crysten kynge, Henry the vii by the grace of God Kynge of Englonde and of Fraunce Lord of Irelande, byseching his noble grace to receyve it in thanke of me, his moste humble subget and servaunt. And I shall praye unto Almyghty God for his prosperous encreasyng in vertue, wysedom and humanyte that he may be egal wyth the most renommed of alle his noble progenytours; and so to lyve in this present lyf that after this transitorye lyfe he and we alle may come to everlastyng lyf in heven. Amen.