
Caxton William
Title: The Dictes and sayings of the philosophers. A facsimile reproduction of the first book printed in England by William Caxton in 1477

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The Dittes and Sayings of the Philolophers.
The Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers.

A FACSIMILE REPRODUCTION OF THE FIRST BOOK PRINTED IN ENGLAND BY WILLIAM CAXTON, IN 1477.

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Preface.

Four hundred years ago, in the year 1477, a great marvel appeared in England, and many of her proudest nobles and wealthiest citizens wended their way to the Almonry at Westminster, to see the small wooden printing press which William Caxton had brought from Bruges and there set up in a tenement called the "Red Pale," and to gaze in wonder at its almost supernatural productions.

The "Dictes and Wife Sayings of the Philosophers" was issued as a first-fruit of Caxton's press, and the causes which led to its selection form a story not without much historical interest.

In the year 1470 upon the restoration of King Henry VI. to the throne of England, Edward IV. and his partisans sought refuge at the Court of his brother-in-law, Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. William Caxton was then "Governor of the English Nation abroad," or Merchant Adventurers, whose head-quarters were at Bruges, and he was therefore the most influential among the many foreigners who resided in that city. There can be no doubt that during the few months which elapsed before Edward IV. regained the English Crown Caxton had it in his power to render many important services to his expatriated countrymen, and thus laid the foundations of that
friendship and patronage which in after years proved of so much advantage to him, and which was in all probability a strong inducement to his adoption of a new vocation and settlement at Westminster.

However this may have been, it is certain that Earl Rivers, the brother of Edward’s Queen, Elizabeth, was among the earliest to welcome and encourage Caxton. Good-will towards one who had always been a staunch adherent of the White Rose, and perhaps also a little pardonable vanity in wishing to see in print his own translation, may have led the Earl to patronize the infant press. So it came to pass that on the eighteenth day of November, 1477, was completed the “Dictes and Sayings of the Philosophers,” the book which is indisputably the first issued in this country bearing a distinct indication of its date of printing, and the only sure starting-point in the history of English Typography.

What grave incredulity would have seized the sagacious Earl and his sober printer had they been told that after the lapse of four centuries their countrymen would be honouring their memories in connection with that very work, and that a copy of it, however torn and time-worn, would be thought the brightest gem of which an English library could boast! How would the printer have laughed to scorn the idea that an art which would employ sunbeams instead of types—one almost as useful and precious as his own—would one day be used to reproduce with minutest accuracy this early work of the English press, and that this volume would be deemed a fitting tribute to his memory.

The “Dictes and Sayings” were a kind of sober Joe Miller to our forefathers, who lived in times when the changes and chances of life made men much more grave and thoughtful than at the present day. These worthies gleaned from its pages pleasant stories and smart repartees, wherewith to season their conversation, as well as words of wisdom upon the more serious aspects and events of life.
Preface.

True, the philosophers all talk wonderfully alike, and the pithy sayings put into the mouth of the first, a very apocryphal personage named Sedeclias, would have been equally well placed in that of Socrates; while Solon himself appears but little, if any, wiser than the unknown philosopher, Tac. Many specimens of the philosophic replies of these wise men might be given—we will quote but two. Hermes, when asked why he married not, replied, “he that cannot swim in the sea alone, how should he bear another on his back?” And Diogenes, when questioned as to why he talked so little, returned for answer, “there was great virtue in a man’s ears.”

Much also might be written on the philology and orthography of the work, abounding as it does with French derivations and terminations, but we must pass on to a short account of the outward aspect of the volume.

The first thing which strikes the eye is the absence of any sort of title-page, the book beginning at once with the Prologue of Earl Rivers. We must remember here that the manuscripts of the middle ages had no title-pages, and that it was not until after Caxton’s death that Wynken de Worde, his chief assistant and successor, recognized the advantage of displaying the title of a work alone on the first page.

The next point which attracts attention is the peculiar shape of the characters. They are very picturesque, and as close an imitation of the handwriting of the time as could be made in letters separately cast; so that people accustomed to read manuscripts might not be repelled by any great disparity. Roman type was not introduced into England until several years after the death of Caxton, and even then many long years elapsed before it was received into general favour.

Another peculiarity is the uneven length of the lines, which gives a very ragged appearance to the page. This is a sure sign of early work, and in the case of Caxton’s press is positive evidence that any book in which it occurs was printed before the year 1480.

The space left blank at the commencement of each chapter for
the insertion by hand of an ornamental initial letter, coloured blue or red, is another sign of early work.

Caxton printed three editions of the "Dycetes." The first, which is the one now reproduced, bears date the "xvij day of the moneth of Nouembre and the seuententh yere of the regne of kyng Edward the fourth." The type used for it, and there is but one throughout the book, is that known as No. 2, the first employed by Caxton on English soil, type No. 1 having been used only in conjunction with Colard Mansion at Bruges. Thirteen copies of this edition are known to exist, two of which are in the British Museum and two at Cambridge: these are all of which our public libraries can boast. Earl Spencer also has two copies in his magnificent library at Althorp, one of which possesses an unique distinction of much interest in the addition of the following paragraph printed on the last page, at the end of Caxton's Epilogue:

"Thus endeth this book of the dyctes and notable wyse sayenges of the phylosophers late translated and drawen out of frenshe into our englishe tonge by my forfaide lord Therle of Ryuers and lord Skales: and by hys comandement sette in forme and emprynted in this manery as ye maye here in this booke see Whiche was fynished the xviiij. day of the moneth of Nouembre. and the seuententh yere of the regne of kyng Edward the. fourth."

But the finest copy which has survived the ravages of time is that in the choice collection of Samuel Christie-Miller, Esq., of Britwell.

The second edition, printed about three years later, is an exact copy of the first, only distinguishable by experts, who find that the face of the letter is thinner, showing plain marks of a graver. All the copies known of this edition have the Colophon, which occurs only in the Althorp copy of the first edition. The orthography varies throughout the volume from that of the previous edition.

The third edition, which was not required until about 1490,
was also an exact reprint, even to the original date of 1477, the type used being that known as No. 6.

The value attached to these editions by the lovers of our old literature may be estimated by the fact that upwards of fifty years ago as much as 250 guineas was given for a copy of the first edition, and that a very fine copy would now fetch £1000.

The authorship of these celebrated Dictes of ancient wise men is veiled in obscurity. They were originally compiled in Latin about the year 1350, and soon after attracted the notice of the celebrated Provost of Paris, Guillaume de Tignonville, who in the year 1410 translated them into French; from which version Earl Rivers made his English translation. The causes which led him to undertake this task are narrated in the Earl's prologue, and are remarkably characteristic of the habits and customs of the fifteenth century.

In the extreme north-west of Spain, girt around by rugged and barren mountains, stands the Holy City of Santiago, renowned throughout the middle ages by the pilgrimages to its shrine of Saint James of Compostella. As Cordova was a Spanish Mecca to the followers of Mahommed, so did Santiago become the Pilgrim-city of the Christians who were forbidden by the Pope to engage in the Crusades for the recovery of Jerusalem, so long as the Infidel remained unexpelled from Spain. There, from the twelfth century to the present day, has stood one of the grandest cathedrals in all Christendom, in the foundations of which is said to lie the body of Spain's patron Saint.

The pilgrims to this now forsaken shrine were once very numerous, for almost as many pardons and privileges were accorded to wearers of the Cockle-shell, the emblem of a pilgrimage to Compostella, as were granted to those who accomplished the much longer and more dangerous journey to the Holy Land. Pilgrims from many countries frequented the Shrine of St. James, and during the summer months there was direct communication between England
and Spain for their convenience, ships of the largest burthen failing from Southampton to Corunna.

In the year 1473 Earl Rivers, moved thereto by a grateful remembrance of many perils safely passed during the late civil wars, determined to undertake a voyage to the Jubilee of St. James of Compostella. On board the ship in which he failed was an old acquaintance, Louis de Bretaylles, a Gascon knight well known at the English Court for his bravery and prowess. De Bretaylles, whose character had a literary no les than a fighting side, took with him, to beguile the tedium of the voyage, Guillaume de Tignonville's version of "Les Dictes morauxx des philosophes," which had recently been printed at Colard Mansion's press at Bruges. This book so pleased the Earl that he borrowed it for home perusal, and upon his return to England, being appointed Governor to the young Prince of Wales, he resolved to translate it into English, "thinking also full necessary to my said lord the understanding thereof." The style of the translation must not be criticized too closely, for in the then transition state of the English tongue there was no acknowledged standard. The Earl is certainly very literal, and as though diffident of his own judgment in the choice of words, and well aware of Caxton's success in translating "The Histories of Troye" and "Jafon," brought his manuscript to the printer and requested him to "oversee" it before it went to press. This revision resulted in the addition of a whole chapter containing the "Dictes" of Socrates "touching women," which, having been omitted by the Earl, was translated and printed by Caxton, who excuses himself for so doing with a quiet humour which reveals to us more of the real character of the man than any other of his literary works, and affords, at the same time, evidence of the intimate relations which existed between Earl Rivers and himself. "But I suppose" says Caxton, "that some fair lady hath desired him to leave it out of his book, or else he was amorous on some noble lady, for whose love he would not set it in his book,