

The following is a text from the *Prologue* to William Caxton's translation of *Eneydos* (the *Aeneids*) from 1490. It is re-written by Z.A. Simon in a modern style as if Caxton would have dictated it to a modern secretary.

William Caxton was born about 1422 in County Kent, and died around March 1492. English merchant, diplomat, translator and printer, he is known to have been the first to introduce a printing press in his country.

**Prologue to his
Aeneids
(1490)**

After diverse works made, translated and achieved, having no work in hand; I sitting in my study *where-as* lay many diverse pamphlets and books. Happened that to my hand came a little book in French, which late was translated out of Latin by some noble clerk of France which book is named (A)Eneids, made in Latin by that noble poet and great clerk Virgil, which book I saw over and read therein. How after the general destruction of the great Troy, (A)Eneas departed bearing his old father Anchises upon his shoulders, his little son Yolus on his hand, his wife with much other people following, and how he shipped and departed with all the history of his adventures that he had before he came to the achievement of his conquest of Italy as all *a-long* shall be showed in this present book. In which book I had great pleasure, by cause of the fair and honest terms and words in French. Which I never saw to fore like, nay none so pleasant nay so well ordered, which book as me seemed should be much requisite to noble men to see as well for the eloquence as the histories. How well that many hundred years passed was the said book of (A)Eneids with other works made and learned daily in schools specially in Italy and other places, which history the said Vergil made in metre. And when I had advised me in this said book, I deliberated and concluded to translate it *in-to* English. And fortwyth took a pen and ink and wrote a leaf or two which I oversaw again to correct it. And when I saw the fair and strange terms therein, I doubted that it should not please some gentlemen which late blamed me saying that in my translations I had *over-curious* terms which could not be understand of common people, and desired me to use old and homely terms in my translations, and ready would I satisfy every man,

and so to do took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my lord Abbot of Westminster did do show to me lately certain documents written in old English for to reduce it to our English now used. And certainly it was written in such wise that it was more like to Dutch than English, I could not reduce nay bring it to be understood. And certainly our language now used varied fairly from that, which was used and spoken when I was born. For we English men been born under the domination of the moon, which is never steadfast but ever wavering, waxing one season and waned and decreased another season. And that common English that is spoken in one shire varied from *a-nother*. *In-so-much* that in my days happened that certain merchants were in a ship in Thames for to have sailed over the sea into Zeland, and for lack of wind they tarried at the foreland, and went to land for to refresh themselves. And on of them named Sheffield, a mercer, came *in-to* an house and asked for meat, and especially he asked after eggs. And the good wife answered, that she could speak no French. And the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but would have eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last *another* said that he would have eggs? Then the good wife said that she understood him well. Loo what should a man in these days now write, eggs or eyren, certainly it is hard to please every man, because of diversity and change of language. For in these days every man that is in any reputation in his country, will utter his communication and matters in such manners and terms, that few men shall understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me and desired me to write the most curious terms that I could find. And thus between plain rude and curious I stand abashed, but in my judgment, the common terms that be daily used been easier to be understood than the old and ancient English. And for as much as this present book is not for a rude Uplandish man to labour therein, nay read it, but only for a clerk and a noble gentleman that feeled and understood in fights of arms in love and in noble chivalry. Therefore in a mean between both I have reduced and translated this said book *in-to* our English not too rude nay curious but in such terms as shall be understood by God's grace according to my copy. And if any man will intermit in reading of it and found such terms that he can not understand let hi go read and learn Virgil, or the (e)pistles of Ovide, and there he shall see and understand lightly all. If he has a good reader and informer. For this book is not for every rude and un-cunning man to see, but to clerks and very gentlemen that understand gentleness and science. Then I pray all them that shall read in this little

treatise to hold me for excused for the translating of it. For I knowlege *my-self* ignorant of cunning to enterprise on me so high and noble work. But I pray master John Skelton late created poet laureate in the university of Oxford to oversee and correct this said book. And expose *where-as* shall be found fault to them that shall require it. For him I know for sufficient to expose and English every difficult that is therein. For he had lately translated the epistles of Marcus Tullius Cicero and the book of Diodorus Siculus, and diverse other works out of Latin *in-to* English not in rude and old language, but in polished and ornate terms craftily, as he that had read Virgil, Ovid, Tullius, and all the other noble poets and orators, to me unknown: And also he had read the nine muses and understand their musical sciences, and to whom of them each science is appropriated. I suppose he had drunken of Helicon's well. Then I pray him and such other to correct, add or minimize *where-as* he or they shall find fault. For I have but followed my copy in French as nigh as me is possible. And if any word be said therein well, I am glad, and if otherwise, I submit my said book to their correction. Which book I present unto the high born, my to-coming natural and sovereign lord Arthur by the grace of god Prince of wales Duke of Cornewall and Earl of Chester first begotten son and heir unto our most revered natural and sovereign lord and most Christian king, Henry the VII*, by the grace of god king of England and of France and lord of Ireland, beseeching his noble grace to receive it in thank of me his most humble subject and servant. And I shall pray unto almighty God for his prosperous increasing in virtue, wisdom, and humanity that he may be equal with the most renown of all his noble progenitors. And so to live in this present life, that after this transitory life he and we all may come to everlasting life in heaven, Amen.