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DEVOTED TO PRONUNCIATION AND AMENDED SPELLING.

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CAXTON'S PERPLEXITY, OR, SPELLING 400 YEARS AGO.

Caxton, after printing for thirteen years, 1477 to 1490, publisht an English translation he made from another (French) translation of Vergil's *Æneid*. It concluded:—

"Here fynysheth the boke of *Encydos*, compyled by *Vyrgyle*, whiche hathe be translated out of *latyne* in to *frenshe*, and out of *frenshe* reduced into *Englyshe* by me *Wilm. Caxton*, the xxij daye of *Iuyn*, the yere of our lorde. M. iijC lxxx. The fythe yere of the Regne of kyng *Henry* the seuenth."

In its preface he givs some account of his perplexity in choosing word-forms—perplexity ever presnt til they ar fixt. Tho our language is world-wide, not insular as then, like perplexities abound. This trubl arose immediatly on the introduction of printing. Printers hav fixt speling, it is tru, but in most irregular and irrational fasion. Thru these perplexities Caxton took a midl course. He tels us:—

"I delybered and concluded to translate it into englyshe. And forthwyth toke a penne and wrote a leef or tweyne, whych I ouerfawe agayne to correcte it, And whan I sawe the fayr & straunge termes therein, I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylmen which late blamed me sayng that in my translaycons I had ouer curyous termes which could not be vnderstande of comyn peple, and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translaycons. and fayn wolde I satysfye every man, and so to doo toke an olde boke and rede therein, and certaynly the eng yshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it. And also my lorde *Abbot of Westmynster* ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences wryton in olde englyshe for to reduce it in to our englyshe now vsid, And certaynly it was wryton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englyshe I coude not reduce ne bryng it to be vnderstooden, And certaynly our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that whiche was vsed spoken whan I was borne. For we englyshe men, ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, which is neuer stedfaste, but euer wauerynge, wexyng one season, and waneth and dyscreaseth another season, And that comyn englyshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from another. In so much that in my dayes happened that certayn marchants were in a ship in Tamyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into Zeland, and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them. And one of theym named *Sheffelde* a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete, and speccially he axyd after eggys And the goode wyf answered, that she coude speke no frenshe. And the merchant was angry, for he also coude

speke no frenshe, but wolde haue eggys, and she vnderstode hym not, And thenne at laste another sayd that he wolde haue eyren, then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstode hym wel, Loo what sholde a man in thyse daycs now wryte, eggys or eyren, certaynly it is harde to playse every man, by cause of dyuersite & change of langage. For in these dayes every mon that is in ony reputacyon in his contre, wyll vtter his comynycacyon and maters in suche maners & termes, that fewe men shall vnderstode theym, And som honest and grete clerkes haue ben wyth me and desired me to wryte the most curyous termes that I coude fynde, And thus bytwene playn rude, & curyous I stande abashed but in my Iudgment, the comyn termes that be dayli vsed ben lyghter to be vnderstode than the olde and ancyeat englyshe, And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude vplondyshe man to labour therein, ne red it, but only for a clerke & a noble gentylman that feleth and vnderstandeth in faytes of armes in loue & in noble chyualrye, Therefore in a mean betwene bothe I haue reduced & translated this sayd booke in to our englyshe not ouer rude ne curyous but in such termes as shall be vnderstanden by goddys grace accordyng to my copve. And yf ony man wyll enter mete in redyng of hit and fyndeth such termes that he can not vnderstande late hym goo rede and lerne *Vyrgyll*, or the pystles of *Ovyde*, and then he shall see and vnderstode lyghtly all, Yf he haue a good redar & enformer, For this booke is not for every rude and vnconnyng man to see, but to clerkys & very gentylmen that vnderstande gentyles and scyence. Thenne I praye alle theym that shall rede in this lytyle treatys to holde me for excused for the translatyng of hit. For I knowleche myselfe ignorant of comynge to enpryse on me so lie and noble a worke, But I praye *Mayster John Skelton* late created poete laureate in the vnyuersitye of *Oxford* to ouersee and correcte this sayd booke. And t'adresse and expowne where as shall be founde faulte to theym that shall require it. For hym i knowe for suffycyent to expowne and englyshe every dyffyeulte that is therein, For he hath late translated the epystlys of *Tulle* and the boke of *Dyodorus Siculus*, and diuerse others werkes out of *latyn* in to englyshe not in rude and olde langage, but in *polysshed and ornate termes* craftely, as he that hathe redde *Vyrgyle*, *Ovyde*, *Tullye*, and all the other noble poetes and oratours, to me unknown: And also he hath redde the ix muses and vnderstande theyr musicalle scyences, and to whom of theym eche scyence is appropred. I suppose he hath drunken of *Elycons* well. Then I praye hym & suche other to correcte adde or mynyshe where as he or they shall fynde faulte, For I haue but folowed my copve in frenshe as nygh as me is possible, And yf ony worde be said therein well, I am glad, and yf otherwyse I submytte my sayd boke to theyr correctyon."—*Sutcliffe's Cratylus*.

His quaint statement shows that Caxton, first, was perplexed by varying orthoepy; second, took a midl cours; third, so't and accepted counsel and guidance from the scholarship of his time.