

‘Noble, wyse and grete lordes, gentilmen and marchauntes’: Caxton’s Prologues as Conduct Books for Merchants

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William Caxton’s prologues perform a double duty. In them Caxton constructs a specifically merchant readership for his works and instructs these readers in the art of assimilating the content of the books he offers them for their own purposes. At the same time, he appeals to an aristocratic public. Merchants of the time were especially susceptible to the appeal of his conduct books, in large part because contemporary literature offered them little in the way of a positive group identity of their own. Caxton attempts to fill in this gap, teaching merchants how to make originally aristocratic works their own.

Recent studies of conduct books in fifteenth and sixteenth-century England have used these texts to illuminate some of the re-definitions taking place within the middle and upper reaches of English society during the late medieval and early modern periods. One interesting finding has been that although most conduct books were originally composed for aristocratic readers, many were later appropriated and re-deployed by non-noble readers for their own self-fashioning. Nicholas Perkins, for example, describes how groups of administrators in Westminster used works composed by Hoccleve for the king for ‘individual self-fashioning and moral education....’¹ Another interesting finding has been that medieval

¹ Nicholas Perkins, *Hoccleve’s Regiment of Princes: Counsel and Constraint* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), p. 177. On how the urban elite used Caxton’s *Book of Courtesy* see Mark Addison Amos’s “‘For Manners Make the Man’: Bourdieu, de Certeau, and the Common Appropriation of Noble Manners in the *Book of Courtesy*”, in *Medieval Conduct*, ed. Kathleen Ashley and Robert L. A. Clark (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), pp. 23–48. On the use of conduct or courtesy books by non-noble audiences seeking social advancement, see Anna Dronzek’s article in the same volume, ‘Gendered Theories of Education in Fifteenth-Century Conduct Books’, pp. 135–59 (pp. 139–40), and Frank Whigham, *Ambition and Privilege: The Social Tropes of Elizabethan Courtesy Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), which makes the case for a slightly later period.

audiences treated a wide variety of different types of texts as conduct books. The editors of *Medieval Conduct*, a recent collection of essays on the subject, draw attention to this point and distinguish usefully between ‘courtesy’ and ‘conduct’ books in their introduction. They use the term ‘courtesy’ for ‘prose treatises or poems inculcating the etiquette of court’. In contrast, they use ‘conduct books’ to refer to a broader category that includes any ‘written texts systematizing a society’s codes of behaviour’.²

The prologues and epilogues composed by the prosperous merchant and printer William Caxton for his books support these two findings, for they reveal that Caxton both promoted his products to non-noble readers and that he marketed a number of texts as conduct books which, to maintain the useful distinction drawn by the editors of *Medieval Conduct*, do not conform to the traditional notion of the courtesy book genre.³ Several recent studies have demonstrated that in his prologues and epilogues Caxton constructs a readership based upon gender rather than social status, imagining audiences that include a relatively broad band of society. As Dorsey Armstrong notes regarding *Le Morte Darthur*:

Strikingly, when we compare the attitudes of Malory and Caxton, the former seems intent on designating a class-based audience for his text, while the latter seems much more interested in unifying his readership by means of a gender identification that cuts across class lines.⁴

² See *Medieval Conduct*, p. x. I adopt the editors’ meaning of ‘conduct’ book in the following essay, considering a wide variety of texts printed by Caxton as conduct books. A number of recent studies have read works of literature as ‘conduct books’. Karen Cherewatuk’s ‘Sir Thomas Malory’s “Grete Booke”’, in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory’s Morte Darthur*, ed. D. Thomas Hanks, Jr. and Jessica G. Brogdon (Cambridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2000), pp. 42–67 reads *Le Morte Darthur* in the context of didactic chivalric treatises, suggesting that it can be seen as a variety of ‘great book’, a chivalric miscellany that collected a variety of chivalric documents that taken as a whole create a comprehensive definition of chivalry. Although the ‘great books’ are straightforwardly didactic in a way that Malory’s work is not, *Le Morte Darthur* offers a complex vision of chivalry after the manner of the ‘great books’.

³ See the epilogue to the *Book of Good Manners*, published in N. F. Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose* (London: André Deutsch, 1973), p. 60 and pp. 126–27. On how the urban elite used Caxton’s *Book of Courtesy* see Mark Addison Amos’s “‘For Manners Make the Man’”, pp. 23–48.

⁴ ‘Gender and the Script/Print Continuum: Caxton’s *Morte Darthur*’, *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 21 (2005), 130–50 (p. 135).

William Kuskin makes a similar point with reference to Caxton's 'Nine Worthies series', *Godefroy of Boloynne*, *Le Morte Darthur*, and *Charles the Grete*. 'In using the Nine Worthies as a structural device', Kuskin writes, 'Caxton's critical program draws on the way medieval polity constitutes authority through a sequence of participation and appropriation involving a broad section of the literate population'.⁵ In his prologues to these works, Caxton defines his readers as men of different classes, urging them all to take up the Crusade in the prologue to *Godefroy of Boloynne*. In *Le Morte Darthur*, 'dyuers gentylnen' are portrayed interpreting the book and suggesting its publication. In the prologues to this work and *Charles the Grete*, Caxton authorizes what he clearly conceives of as male readers to appropriate the doctrine contained within for their own ends.⁶ Nor does he neglect female readers. In her analysis of Caxton's dedication to one of his patrons, Margaret Beaufort, Jennifer Summit observes that

gendered narratives of heterosexual romance offered Caxton a set of terms through which to thematise and naturalise the new work of the printing press. His presentation of *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, and of Lady Margaret as its patron, constitutes an important single case in this process.⁷

As for Caxton's promotion of certain texts as conduct books to a non-noble readership, in this essay I draw on these recent studies to explore how the printer uses his prologues and epilogues to construct a specifically merchant readership for his works and to show these readers how to assimilate the products he offers them, even as he simultaneously addresses an aristocratic public. Merchant families of Caxton's time would have been particularly susceptible to the appeal of his conduct books, in large part because contemporary literature offered them no obvious basis for a positive group identity of their own, for a shared set of ideals specific to merchants, in the way that chivalric literature offered the nobility

⁵ 'Caxton's Worthies Series: The Production of Literary Culture', *English Literary History*, 66 (1999), pp. 511–51 (p. 512).

⁶ Kuskin, pp. 517–18.

⁷ 'William Caxton, Margaret Beaufort, and the Romance of Female Patronage', in *Women, the Book, and the Godly*, ed. Lesley Smith and Jane H. M. Taylor, 2 vols., (Cambridge: D. H. Brewer, 1995), vol. 2, pp. 151–64, (p. 153).

a system of values.⁸ It has been amply demonstrated that wealthy merchants, along with administrators and professionals – the so-called ‘urban elite’ – could ascend the social hierarchy into that peculiarly English social class known as the gentry.⁹ But more interested in upward social movement than in constructing an independent group identity that stressed their ties to commerce, merchants of fifteenth-century England seem to have been happy to assume aristocratic reading habits as their own, for their amusement and education. Still, as Lotte Hellinga has noted, they were not ‘accustomed to owning books’, and thus they needed to be shown how to read them.¹⁰ Caxton does just this, teaching them the art of reading originally aristocratic works in his prologues and epilogues. Acutely aware of social differences, however, Caxton does not promote unrestrained imitation of the nobility. Rather, drawing upon his own success as a merchant mingling with the nobility, Caxton shows his merchant readers how to modify the chivalric values described in romances and his other printed works of chivalry for their own use even as they maintain deference towards their social superiors. In the image he puts forward of himself in his prologues and epilogues as modest but intelligent, a man of simple but refined taste who moves easily in aristocratic circles, a man whose literary judgment his buyers can trust, Caxton creates his ideal merchant reader and offers a model for conduct. He trains the audience he creates.

⁸ The subject of chivalry and the chivalric literature that supported it is vast. Some of the standard works include Richard Barber, *The Knight and Chivalry* (rev. ed., Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1995); Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Malcolm Vale, *War and Chivalry: Warfare and Aristocratic Culture in England, France, and Burgundy at the End of the Middle Ages* (London: Duckworth, 1981), and Richard Kaeuper, *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁹ On the development of the gentry see Peter Coss, *The Origins of the English Gentry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially the last chapter, ‘Crystallisation: The Emergence of the Gentry’, pp. 239–54. The career of the wealthy draper Sir Thomas Draper, who managed to buy himself a country residence in Essex and served as mayor of London in 1462–63, offers one example of the relative flexibility of this group. Although Draper was imprisoned for political reasons under Edward IV, he was restored with Henry VI in 1470. See Michael A. Hicks, ‘The Case of Sir Thomas Cook, 1468’, *English Historical Review*, 93 (1978), 82–96.

¹⁰ Lotte Hellinga, *Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* (London: British Library, 1982), p. 101.

The Merchant's Image

The boundaries of late-medieval English society were relatively permeable, allowing successful merchant families to pass into the gentry.¹¹ The group of merchants as a whole included a wide range of incomes, but at the high end, merchants enjoyed significant social prestige. Although the upper nobility was beyond their reach, the wealthiest could marry into the lower nobility.¹² Jenny Kermode writes:

At the very top were men possessed of considerable commercial skill, great wealth and power. They mingled with members of the gentry and royal household within the region, and as MPs a few occasionally moved into metropolitan life at parliament.¹³

This social flexibility was, as Alan Hunt observes, at least in part the result of 'a relative decline of the landed aristocracy *vis-à-vis* the other social classes'. At first, Hunt writes, this situation 'gave rise to a widespread social preoccupation on the part of the upper classes with an anxiety that the social order was in danger'.¹⁴

In response, the first English sumptuary law the 'Statute Concerning Diet and Apparel' was passed in 1363. However, as Hunt writes, this law did not specifically

¹¹ The different social groups making up the expanding 'urban elite', including merchants, have been explored in *Profession, Vocation and Culture in Later Medieval England*, ed. Cecil H. Clough (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1982). Rosemary Horrox argues that 'Soldiers, lawyers, administrators and household servants, as well as the archetypal country squire, could all lay claim to being considered gentle in the fifteenth century', in 'The Urban Gentry in the Fifteenth Century', *Towns and Townspeople*, ed. John A. F. Thomson (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1988), pp. 23–44; D. A. L. Morgan writes of late-fifteenth-century London that 'This is a society in which an earl's younger son might be styled merchant as well as esquire, while from the 1460's knighthoods were conferred not infrequently on London aldermen while in office', in 'The Individual Style of the English Gentleman', *Gentry and Lesser Nobility in Late Medieval Europe*, ed. Michael Jones (New York: St Martin's Press, 1986), pp. 15–35 (p. 23).

¹² See John A. F. Thomson, *The Transformation of Medieval England 1370–1520* (London and New York: Longman, 1983), p. 112.

¹³ *Medieval Merchants: York, Beverley, and Hull in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 15.

¹⁴ *Governance of the Consuming Passions: A History of Sumptuary Law* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1996), p. 151.

target merchants, who were inserted into the rural social hierarchy on the basis of their income. The law divided society into seven different groups, categorizing merchants possessing L500 at the ‘same sumptuary level as gentry possessing L100 a year’.¹⁵ Thus, while social status was still determined to a great extent by descent, income played a role as well. During the 1430s, men whose incomes exceeded 40 pounds per year were invited to become knights.¹⁶ Later sumptuary laws strongly reinforce the impression that membership in the gentry was at least partly a function of income, for during the fifteenth century these laws cease to name merchants as a discrete category. In a statute of 1463, and in subsequent statutes of 1483, 1510, 1514, 1515, 1533, and 1553, the group is not specifically named. What has happened to them? The importance of income as an indicator of social status seems to have run to its logical conclusion. Merchants and the lower nobility have come to be perceived as members of the same group by the upper nobility.

Safely out of the way in a category that they cannot escape, they pose no threat to the upper nobility’s status. The emphasis of the sumptuary laws, rather, falls upon the upper nobility, which is minutely categorized. As Hunt writes, there is a clear ‘attempt to inscribe precise differentiations between the upper nobility as new ranks and subdivisions were created’.¹⁷ He notes that the ‘imprecise categories of “esquire” and “gentleman” became courtesy titles and sumptuary gradations increasingly were imposed on the basis of annual income from lands rather than by rank or title’, concluding that ‘there was certainly no sustained targeting of the pretensions of the merchants, who experienced an expansion in their numbers and their individual and collective wealth during the sixteenth century which was the most fertile period of sumptuary legislative activity’.¹⁸

Wealthy merchants, then, were free to enhance their social status by adopting the trappings of the lower nobility. As Kermode writes of this group:

They were at the core of urban society, accumulating more wealth than most. Through their spending on charity, on public works and on religious observance they played an important part in shaping attitudes and in

¹⁵ Hunt, p. 154.

¹⁶ See Thomson, *Transformation*, pp. 110–12.

¹⁷ Hunt, p. 155.

¹⁸ Hunt, p. 156.

establishing collective objectives. This is not to claim that other groups were not also influential, but the combination of commercial and secular power gave merchants a disproportionate prominence in urban affairs.¹⁹

For example, the financial support of the merchants of London was crucial to the king and this motivated the two to enter into agreements to the advantage of both. 'At the simplest level the king needed money and the Londoners wanted self-government which largely (albeit not completely) contributed to their ability to make money', Caroline Barron writes.²⁰ During the fifteenth century, she notes, the rich merchant of London supported the King financially in numerous ways:

he paid customs dues on the goods that he imported and exported; he contributed to Parliamentary taxation assessed on the value of his moveable goods, and he might lend money to the Crown in three ways: as an individual creditor (e.g. Richard Whittington or John Heende), as a merchant of the Calais Staple whose members also provided corporate loans, or as a citizen of London contributing to the city's corporate loans.²¹

But despite the fact that their incomes could allow them access to the lower nobility and despite their economic significance, merchants occupied an uneasy position within the medieval imaginary, arousing an ambivalence that both acknowledged and deplored society's dependence upon them. The mythical but profoundly influential social organization of the three estates excluded merchants from its highest levels, the *chevalerie* and *clergie*, those who fought and those who prayed, forcing them by default into the promiscuous mass of the third estate.²² Exceptions to this way of ordering are rare; however, they do exist. John Stafford, preaching

¹⁹ Kermode, p. 2.

²⁰ Caroline Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200–1500* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 10.

²¹ Barron, p. 14.

²² On the concept of the three estates and its influence see Ruth Mohl, *The Three Estates in Medieval and Renaissance Literature* (New York: Ungar, 1962) and V. J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London, 1971). See also Maurice Keen, *Chivalry*, pp. 3–4 and p. 152, and Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire; the Literature of Social Classes and the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973).

in 1433, ‘combines in one estate the clergy and the nobility, splits off the knights from the nobility and combines them with the merchants, and leaves the third estate of labourers intact’.²³ And from time to time merchants were defended: Thomas Brunton, Bishop of Rochester, ‘preaching in the heart of London amid evidences of such successful industry on every side, declares unreservedly that “merchants are the left hand” of the Body Politic and “citizens and burgesses, placed as it were in the middle, are its heart”’.²⁴

However, a perusal of sermon exempla targeting merchants in G. R. Owst’s *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* reveals how consistently they were excoriated for avarice. Negative depictions overwhelm the positive. As Lester Little has demonstrated, avarice or cupidity began to supersede pride as the deadliest of the sins between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries, a period of profound economic transformation when the development of urban life transformed what had been an entirely agrarian world. Throughout the earlier part of this period, ordinary people feared above all marauding knights who arrogated to themselves the right to destroy. As the urbanization of Europe continued, however, dread of destructive knights gave way to a dread of poverty. As Little writes, ‘In one age those without power were at the mercy of rampaging knights; in the other, those without wealth were at the mercy of ruthless usurers.’²⁵

Certainly the frequent association of knights with pride represented an indictment of chivalry. Chivalry, however, could withstand the criticism. The allegorical figure of Pride was huge and imposing, a thoroughly manly figure, often personified as a knight on horseback. Although the poor and downtrodden quaked before violent manifestations of knightly pride, the chivalric ethos not only did not condemn acts of violence, it glorified them. Richard Kaeuper writes that ‘both imaginative literature and the historical accounts of their lives picture knights enjoying a privileged practice of violence; it suggests that they found in

²³ Alan J. Fletcher, *Preaching, Politics and Poetry in Late-Medieval England* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), p. 147.

²⁴ G. R. Owst, *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), p. 554.

²⁵ Lester K. Little, ‘Pride Goes Before Avarice: Social Change and the Vices in Latin Christendom’, *The American Historical Review*, 76 (1971), 16–49 (p. 39).

their exhilarating and fulfilling fighting the key to identity'.²⁶ But the vice of avarice was different. Depicted as small and grasping, obsessively fixated upon retention, the vice could not be worked into an independent positive model of masculinity, nor could it be assimilated into any existing one.²⁷ Worse, it was explicitly posed as the antithesis of a fundamental chivalric characteristic, largesse. Little notes that the figure is 'often paired with generosity and thus his characteristics are all the more clear, since generosity has relaxed muscles and open fists, and is usually shown dispensing liberally the contents of moneybags and treasure chests.'²⁸ As for its depiction in religious terms, when theologians searched for models to explore the moral significance of the money economy, 'they found only strong opposition to the life of commerce.'²⁹ Although these traditional notions of virtue and vice did keep pace with the reality of the economic transformation that characterized medieval Europe, their hold on the popular imagination was strong.

Associated with the most obvious sign of this transformation – money, and thus avarice – merchants were doomed to unflattering literary representations. Whatever the reality of fifteenth-century economy, according to the ideals of ideals of chivalry and religion, wealth derived from commerce was viewed ambivalently: medieval literature including fabliaux, romances, and estates satire cast merchants

²⁶ *Chivalry and Violence in Medieval Europe*, p. 143. On violence as a central aspect of medieval masculinity see also Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men: Formations of Masculinity in Late Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), ch. 2, 'Mail Bonding: Knights, Ladies, and the Proving of Manhood', pp. 20–66. Theoretically, of course, acts of violence were permitted only under certain conditions, as Andrew Lynch discusses in 'Ideology, Context, and Excess in Malory's War', in *The Social and Literary Contexts of Malory's Morte Darthur*, pp. 24–41. Reading Malory, one realizes that once knights entered into an open battle, 'men were not murdered, but openly slain in fight, and that casualties in such fighting are basically acceptable' (p. 27). See also Lynch's *Malory's Book of Arms* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1997), pp. 43–46 for a discussion of the concept of prowess. Malory defines a good knight as above all good in battle.

²⁷ On medieval models of masculinity see Ruth Mazo Karras, *From Boys to Men*. Anne Laskaya gives an overview of several different conceptions of medieval masculinity in her chapter, 'Dominant Medieval Discourses on Gender' of her own *Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1995), pp. 15–43.

²⁸ Little, p. 37.

²⁹ Little, p. 31.

as deceitful and avaricious, grouping them together under one umbrella, regardless of the actual differences of status and income that in fact characterized them. Jill Mann writes that the ‘treatment varies little whatever his rank: the vices attributed to international traders are identical with those criticised in humble retailers’.³⁰ Even when writers praised the frugality and cleverness of merchants, they could not fully embrace the values they represented. Laura F. Hodges shows that merchants in literature are viewed at best with ambivalence, writing

Such merchants are called “Prowde marchandes of pris” in *Wynnere and Wastoure* ... although they are classed among those who exercise thrift and skill, the Wynneres. And John Gower describes merchants as deceitful and cunning at the same time as he acknowledges that good merchants deserve to make a reasonable profit.³¹

Merchants, of course, held a different image of themselves. Guidebooks for merchants, often based upon the Florentine Paolo da Certaldo’s *Libro di Buoni Costumi* of 1350, promoted ‘diligence and thrift’ as positive traits, and by the beginning of the sixteenth century professional manuals that lauded these virtues, calling them ‘benefits to the realm’, were common in England.³² Success in commerce and civil service demanded diligence and thrift, plus a certain amount of dissimulation and rusefulness, and thus it is logical that these qualities were viewed positively within commerce. Still, they were incompatible with the predominant values of the landed gentry and the nobility, who clung to the ideals of chivalry, even if those who were meant to embody those ideals were criticized for their failure to live up to them.

³⁰ On literary representations of merchants in medieval England see Jill Mann, *Chaucer and Medieval Estates Satire*, p. 99.

³¹ *Chaucer and Costume: The Secular Pilgrims in the General Prologue* (Cambridge and Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2000), pp. 77–78.

³² See John F. McGovern, ‘The Rise of New Economic Attitudes – Economic Humanities, Economic Nationalism – During the Later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, A.D. 1200–1500’, *Traditio* 26 (1970), 201–53 (p. 240). This study correlates with Laura Stevenson’s work on representations of merchants in Elizabethan England. Negatively portrayed throughout the Middle Ages, merchants receive much more positive depictions from the late sixteenth century on, often as servants of the realm. See Stevenson, *Praise and Paradox: Merchants and Craftsmen in Elizabethan Popular Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 107–30.

Lacking a positive social image, upwardly-mobile merchants carving out a place among the gentry required strategies for redefining the negative image they had acquired over the centuries and for giving the characteristics particular to their way of life a cast sufficiently positive to make access to the lower nobility seem natural.³³ Caxton provides these strategies, inscribing himself as merchant into his prologues and epilogues and thereby providing an alternative to the prevalent negative depictions of merchants in literature. In his self-representation, he reshapes qualities considered unattractive in the popular imagination by 'converting' them into qualities deemed positive by the aristocracy. As for the content of his books, it presents his aristocratic readers with material they already found congenial to their beliefs. But this same material worked differently upon his non-noble audience, offering for their own adaptation a store of images associated with the nobility. In his prologues and epilogues, Caxton makes these images accessible, highlighting their essentials so that their significance can be easily grasped, and, in an age where the representation of power was to a large extent the exercise of power, used to produce self-representations compatible with the station they claimed for themselves.³⁴

³³ Discussing the conflict between the nobility and the rising urban elite, Mark Addison Amos writes: 'One of the most value-laden and contested sites for this symbolic struggle, one that underwrites and validates many other status objects and behaviours, is courtesy literature, for the behaviours it defines and delineates are at once the most group-dependent and individually enacted form of display. Unsurprisingly, as each of these two constituencies sought methods of producing and displaying a recognizable culture amid these shifts of power, England saw an explosion in the production and consumption of conduct literature – a popularity furthered by the advent of printing technology' ('"For Manners Make the Man"', pp. 24–25).

³⁴ Much of the recent work on conduct books and the social importance of self-representation takes the work of Pierre Bourdieu as a point of departure, particularly his seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984). Bourdieu hypothesizes that a person's status is determined to a large extent by his or her 'cultural' or 'symbolic' capital, the possession of which was assumed to be a function of birth during the Middle Ages. However, courtesy and conduct books codify symbolic capital, which suggests an awareness that it was not simply a matter of birth, but that it could be cultivated.

Caxton's Marketing Strategy: Reflecting and Shaping Merchant Taste

The work of Norman Blake and others demonstrates that Caxton, a mercer by trade and governor of the Company of Merchant Adventurers in the Low Countries, should be viewed first and foremost as a successful entrepreneur. Far from falling into printing by chance, he made a deliberate decision to take up that career, and he chose his material for publication carefully. Blake proposes that long before Caxton returned to England from the Low Countries after over 30 years abroad to set up his press in the sanctuary of Westminster Abbey in 1476, he already had a clear idea of a marketing strategy for England. Blake suggests that Caxton undertook his first translation, the *History of Troy* from the French prose version by Raoul Lefèvre, with the specific goal of one day printing it on a press of his own. In this far-sightedness, Caxton differs from other printers in England who set up shop under a patron, then proceeded to operate without a clear plan of action. Blake describes, for example, the fates of two contemporaries of Caxton who began printing businesses in Oxford and St Albans. They began by producing Latin works, in imitation of continental presses. However, these were not what sold in England. The final products of both presses were English works, indicating a last attempt to adjust printing policy to compete with Caxton before the businesses went under.³⁵ Caxton, in contrast with his unsuccessful counterparts, appears to have identified a market, one that included his own rising merchant class. Although noble readers, who were likely to read French, were able to procure books through the international book trade which was already flourishing in London when Caxton returned, a substantial demand for English works existed.³⁶

Caxton appears to have had an excellent sense of what his merchant readers demanded, but he shaped their taste as well, selling them works that were both edifying and entertaining: books that could help them in their social aspirations.

³⁵ See N. F. Blake's *William Caxton and English Literary Culture* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1991), ch. 4.

³⁶ French works were popular among the nobility, but many in Caxton's targeted market required works in English. There were eager prospective readers in England, Carol M. Meale writes, and Caxton was ready to 'exploit them for their marketing potential' ("The Hoole Book": Editing and the Creation of Meaning in Malory's Text', in *A Companion to Malory*, ed. Elizabeth Archibald and A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge, UK, 1996), pp. 3–18. See also Elizabeth Armstrong, 'English Purchases of Printed Books from the Continent 1465–1526', *English Historical Review*, 94 (1979), 268–90 (pp. 287–88).

With his first translation, *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, which he printed in 1473 even before he returned to England from Bruges, he debuts his self-portrait as an ideal merchant reader. This figure is self-assured enough to appeal to merchants and self-effacing enough to appeal to aristocratic readers. More important, Caxton carefully defuses and re-deploys the familiar unflattering notion of the merchant as avaricious by depicting himself as industrious rather than grasping and as the creature of a patron offering his handiwork for their mutual honor rather than as a merchant trying to sell it for financial profit. Happening upon a story whose reading gave him 'pleasyr and delyte', he writes in his prologue, he decided that he would translate the story into English so that it would be available in the 'royame of England'. He continues, 'And for so moche as this booke was newe and late maad and drawn in to Frenshe and neuer had seen hit in our Englissh tonge, I thought in myself hit shold be a good besynes to translate hyt into our Englissh ...',³⁷ But in despair over the rudeness of his translation, Caxton writes that he tabled the project until Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy and sister of Edward IV of England, asked to see his work. She found just one fault, one 'defaute', in his English, which she ordered him to 'amende', and, impressed, she convinced him to continue.³⁸ Caxton, feeling encouraged and needing something to occupy his time to avoid 'ydlenes', brought his work to completion. Although he proclaims himself unworthy of the honour the Duchess does him in supporting his project, he acquits himself nicely. Many 'gentilmen' and 'frendes' have requested the book. Moreover, he writes, that Margaret "hath well acceptid it and largely rewarded me..."³⁹

As a merchant, certainly he is out to make money. But in contrast to widespread unflattering literary portrayals of the greedy merchant, Caxton's auto-portrait casts his entrepreneurship with its inevitable goal in the traditional and eminently acceptable terms of the artist requesting patronage, a trope that corrects what might otherwise be viewed as avarice on the part of a merchant. Whether Caxton in fact received significant financial support from the nobles he addresses as patrons in many of his prologues is a matter of debate. Thus far no conclusive evidence has proven whether or not 'Caxton was, in effect, printing to order, with his dedicatee assuming the role of financial guarantor for his printing'.⁴⁰ Russell Rutter argues that 'Caxton's debt to

³⁷ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 97.

³⁸ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 98.

³⁹ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 100.

⁴⁰ A. S. G. Edwards and Carol M. Meale, 'The Marketing of Printed Books in Late Medieval England', *The Library* 6th ser. 15 (1993), 95–124 (p. 97).

patronage has been consistently overstated because an untenable analogy has been drawn between manuscript authorship and the publication of printed books'.⁴¹ In acknowledging 'patrons' like Margaret, Caxton may have been seeking an intangible rather than financial benefit, that is, publicity. As Summit notes, 'Endorsing the printed book's status as a symbol of cultural privilege, the figure of the aristocratic patron paradoxically served Caxton's aim to broaden the appeal of printed books beyond the exclusive enclaves of the aristocratic library ...'⁴²

Still, Caxton never occults his involvement in commerce, but uses it to his advantage to reinforce his modesty topos, depicting himself as someone who just happened to end up in the business of translating and selling books, rather than as someone motivated by literary aspirations. He refers twice to his personal past in the prologue to *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, commenting that he had discovered the story in Bruges and mentioning the 30 years he spent in the Low Countries. He simply has no background in literature, nor does he even have a gift for words, he claims, disparaging both his English, as the broad and rude dialect of Kent, and his French. Yet even while he remains firmly within the bounds of the modesty topos, he advertises his own learning and his ties with the noble Margaret, who recognizes his talent and accepts his language as nearly on a par with her own: his work is almost perfect, except for the one small fault. So much the better. Caxton does not mind being corrected. He does not aspire to social equality. In short, he appropriates a traditional model of self-representation, the artist seeking patronage, and conflates it with another, the merchant selling his wares. In his single figure, he shifts the desire for profit into an acceptable form of self-promotion.

This attractive persona appears in all of Caxton's prologues and epilogues, creating coherence among them along with an impression of intimacy with his readers that would have been grounded in many cases in personal acquaintance. In addition to cultivating an image of himself as a prosperous but unassuming merchant enjoying close ties with various nobles, he includes other merchants among the gentry in a number of the prologues and epilogues, grouping them along with nobles as potential readers. Blake notes that Caxton refers to a limited number of people in the prologues: 'one might go so far as to say that unless you were an author, a nobleman

⁴¹ Russell Rutter, 'William Caxton and Literary Patronage', *Studies in Philology*, 84 (1987), 440–70.

⁴² Summit, 'William Caxton, Margaret Beaufort, and the Romance of Female Patronage', p. 155.

or a mercer you had little chance of appearing there.'⁴³ Still, Caxton does not always include merchants as a separate category, for he sometimes addresses his readership as a group of nobles and 'gentlemen'. The category of 'gentlemen' could encompass wealthy merchants, as I have tried to make clear above. Sometimes, then, merchants are silently but not explicitly included. Caxton recommends Malory's *King Arthur* to 'alle noble princes, lordes and ladyes, gentylmen or gentylwymmen, that desyre to redde of the noble and joyous hystorye of the grete conquerour and excellent kyng, Kyng Arthur ...'⁴⁴ He translated the *Golden Legend* at the request of 'certyn lordes, ladyes and gentylmen ...'⁴⁵

However, Caxton at times draws attention to merchants by singling them out for inclusion among his projected readership. I would suggest that he specifically mentions merchants when he wishes either to note their special contribution to society or to avoid any danger of their being classified with the common people. The prologue to *Tullius: Of Old Age* specifies that the book

is not requysyte ne eke convenyent for every rude and symple man whiche understandeth not of science ne connyng and for suche as have not herde of the noble polycye and prudence of the Romaynes, but for noble, wyse and grete lordes, gentilmen and marchauntes that have seen and dayly ben occupied in maters towchyng the publyque weal ...⁴⁶

The notion of the 'publyque weal', the *res publica*, in fact plays no significant role in this treatise, which is more a reflection upon individual than common good. However, Cicero would have been readily associated with the commonwealth, for although *De re publica* and *De legibus* were not directly read throughout the Middle Ages, their ideas on politics were widely known through citations by Augustine and Lactantius.⁴⁷ Also, in *De officiis* and *De inventione*, which were widely read directly, Cicero reiterates his notions of society. Thus Caxton argues that *Of Old Age* will be meaningful to all those involved in public life, to

⁴³ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 28.

⁴⁴ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 109.

⁴⁵ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 89.

⁴⁶ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 121.

⁴⁷ On Cicero's importance to medieval political thought see Cary J. Nederman, 'Nature, Sin and the Origins of Society: The Ciceronian Tradition in Medieval Political Thought', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 49 (1988), 3–26.

all those who have acquired friends, goods, and experiences over a lifetime and which they will in old age regret no longer being in a physical condition to enjoy. Whereas once only the *clergie* or highly educated aristocrats would have been in a position to absorb such a work and take consolation from it, Caxton now adds merchants to that select group on the basis of a point they share in common with the aristocracy – their daily contribution to the public good. In similar fashion, in the prologue to the ‘Royal Book’ Caxton reminds his readers of their essential similarity, remarking that every man ‘is mortal and shal without fayle departe out of this lyf hastely and sone’.⁴⁸ He reinforces the spiritual equality of humankind a few lines later, explaining that the book was first translated into French for Philippe le Bel and then into English at the request of a mercer friend: surely he is implicitly promoting mercers with the comparison.

On the other hand, when Caxton refers to the commoners in his prologues, he forecloses inclusion of merchants in this category by listing them separately. In the exhortation to ‘alle Cristen prynces, lordes, barons, knyghtes, gentilmen, marchauntes, and all the comyn peple of this noble royaume’ to recover the Holy Land with which he opens the story of Godefroy of Boulogne, he once again gives merchants a classification of their own, unwilling to risk their being subsumed by the ‘comyn peple’ rather than the ‘gentilmen’.⁴⁹ He differentiates between merchants and other common people in his introduction to the stories of Renard the Fox, as well. Because of their reputation for avarice, Caxton dared not pass over merchants in silence in this prologue. The comparison with the sly and grasping Renard would have been too easily drawn. Therefore he mentions merchants as a group, placing them among the potential victims of the sneaky, those who could profit from a lesson in how to discern deceit. The knowledge imparted by parables, he explains, is useful to ‘counseylls of lordes and prelates gostly and worldly’ and also to ‘marchantes and other comone people’.⁵⁰

In his self-portrayal, then, Caxton creates a positive merchant persona: diligent, virtuous, and self-effacing, but well-known and esteemed within the highest circles, and he includes merchants – presumably successful merchants like himself – among his readership. Furthermore, he shows these readers how to adapt some of the

⁴⁸ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p.135.

⁴⁹ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 140.

⁵⁰ W. J. B. Crotch, *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton* (London: Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 60.

chivalric ideals that form the matter of his books for their own use in several ways. First, he gives his non-noble readers, male and female, access to the world of nobility by suggesting that they share a common history with the aristocracy. In the prologue to 'the noble hystorye of the Saynt Greal and of the moost renommed Crysten kyng, fyrst and chyef of the thre best Crysten and worthy, Kyng Arthur' Caxton humbly beseeches noble lords and ladies and 'al other estates of what estate or degree they been of that shal see and rede in this sayd book and werke that they take the good and honest actes in their remembraunce and to folowe the same ...'⁵¹ The living, Caxton's contemporaries, reading of good deeds that took place in the past, pick up and remodel in their own memories ('remembraunce') their predecessors' systems of values.

As Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero have written, 'It is clear that, for Caxton, history is a non-"natural" production of identities and identifications ...'⁵² For him, history is the transformation by modern readers of past events for present use. Caxton's historical didacticism is traditional: history for medieval and early modern readers was valuable because of its exemplarity. What is innovative about Caxton's prologues and epilogues, however, is his assumption that men can draw upon tales of their social betters, work through the material in their memories, or 'remembraunce', and assimilate the material for their own elevation. By 'looking' and 'remembering' like an aristocrat, something readers can learn how to do through the books Caxton offers them, they can become like aristocrats, even becoming worthy to exercise power. Caxton writes in the prologues to the *Polycricon*:

Historyes ought not only to be juged moost proffyttable to yonge men whiche by the lecture, redyng and understanding made them semblable and equale to men of greter age and to old men, to whom longe lyf hath mynystred experymentes of dyverse thynges, but also th'ystoryes able and make ryght pryvate men digne and worthy to have the governaunce of empyres and noble royammes ...⁵³

⁵¹ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 109.

⁵² 'Caxton, Foucault, and the Pleasures of History', in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. and intro. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. xiii–xxiv (p. xvi).

⁵³ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 129.

How Caxton understood such a process to work can be gleaned from the prologue to *Charles the Great*, a prologue where he makes his project particularly clear. The story of Charlemagne had served the collective memory of various French groups for many years, functioning diversely as what might be thought of as an emotional refuge for the Counts of Flanders as they were being deprived of their power by Philip Augustus, as Gabrielle Spiegel has suggested, and as the pretext for Capetian laws of succession.⁵⁴ What interest could this French material hold for English readers, especially those of the merchant class? But according to Caxton, history, no matter whose, passed through the individual memory is transformed into useable material. This individually enhanced material provides more effective *exempla* than straightforward external authority, for the reader must engage with scenarios that are not directly applicable to his own experience; he or she must take ‘diverse’ material and make it pertinent. Caxton writes that ‘the thynges passed dyversley reduced to remembraunce engendre in vs correction of unlaful lyf.’⁵⁵ Such a mental process is more efficacious than simple prohibition:

the werkes of the auncient and olde peple ben for to gyve to us ensauple to lyve in good & vertuous operacions digne and worthy of helth, in folowyng the good and eschewyng the evyl; and also in recountyng of hie hystories the comune understandyng is better content to the ymaginacion local than to symple auctoryte to which it is submysed.⁵⁶

Second, Caxton offers his readers access to a whole ‘new’ product, straight from the continent, allowing the merchants the opportunity to own something rare along with the aristocracy. In his prologue to *Jason* he stresses the work’s newness, writing: ‘Thenne for as moche as this sayd boke is late newe made aparte of all th’istories of the sayd Jason ...’⁵⁷ Later in the prologue, he highlights the work’s newness again, when he dedicates the work to the Prince of Wales, not because the English contained therein is particularly beautiful, but for ‘the novelte of the histories whiche as I suppose hath not be had bifore the translacion herof’.⁵⁸ Caxton emphasizes

⁵⁴ For the Counts of Flanders see Gabrielle Spiegel, *Romancing the Past: the Rise of Vernacular Prose Historiography in Thirteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); for the Capetian laws of succession see Spiegel’s ‘The *Reditus regni ad stirpem Karoli Magni*: A New Look’, *French Historical Studies*, 7 (1971), 145–74.

⁵⁵ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 66.

⁵⁶ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 103.

⁵⁸ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 104–05.

various other characteristics of these 'new' products in his prologues and epilogues. 'Compendiousness' or concision is a trait he seems to value highly, suggesting his concern that his printed works be easily grasped and not excessively long. He expresses his approval of 'compendiousness' and its accompanying comprehensibility in the *Historyes of Troye*, 'whyche was in prose so well and compendiously sette and wreton whiche me thought I understood the sentence and substance of every mater'.⁵⁹ In the epilogue to the *Feats of Armes*, Caxton apologizes for his lack of the 'gaye terms of rethoryk', but only with the intention of drawing attention to his clear and 'compendious' or concise translation, continuing modestly, 'but I hope to Almighty God that it shal be entendyble and understanden to euery man'.⁶⁰ In the prologue to *Blanchardin and Eglantine*, Caxton once again excuses himself for his ignorance of the 'arte of rethoryk ne of suche gaye termes as now be sayd in these dayes and used'.⁶¹ Still, his point here is to stress his clarity of style: 'But I hope that it shall be understonden of the reders and heres: And that shall suffyse'. In printing material originally composed for aristocratic readers, Caxton transforms into easily comprehensible prose what had served as a repository of social values for a restricted group to serve a broader new public.

While certain of Caxton's works are aimed at audiences of diverse social levels and both genders, others construct gendered audiences, stressing the sexual roles that should be common to both aristocratic and merchant audiences. The chivalric ideal of masculinity demanded a rigid division between male and female roles; men performed acts of valor, and women observed, encouraging their lover's prowess. Although women were often depicted intervening in the lives of their lovers in literature, they worked by indirect means, because their power was generally heavily circumscribed by social restraints. Certainly real women could and did control property and participate indirectly in political life.⁶² However,

⁵⁹ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 97.

⁶⁰ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 82.

⁶¹ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 58.

⁶² See for example *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Norman Davis, 2 vols. (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971) or for a slightly later period the correspondence relating to Honor Lisle in *The Lisle Letters*, ed. Muriel St Clare Byrne, 6 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

successful women in chivalric literature appeared to be passive, but were able to manipulate effectively, whereas men acted directly.⁶³

Women of merchant families were also active in family life, and they could and did participate in business. Theoretically this flexibility might have resulted in a more equal relationship between the sexes for Caxton's society. In fact it did not, however. The household, site of business and family life, was dominated by the sign of the father, with the mother subservient, confined to her own sphere. She raised her daughters to remain metaphorically within this sphere by behaving docilely and modestly, even if their duties took them beyond. Felicity Riddy writes that in the

bourgeois ethos the household seems to have represented a distinctive complex of values – stability, piety, hierarchy, diligence, ambition, and respectability – all of which were crucial to the success of those craft and trade groups who were in place in the towns by the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The meanings attached to the household by this ethos were gendered: as a workplace under the control of its male head it was part of the public economy, but it was also a domestic space controlled by his wife.⁶⁴

The division between male and female roles only became more firmly entrenched throughout the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Barbara Correll has described the increasingly rigid sexual stereotypes promoted by both civic and Christian humanists as a 'psychopolitical crisis of masculine identity and authority'.⁶⁵ One of the manifestations of this crisis was that merchants and craftsmen created gender distinctions where they did not exist, designating masculine work as 'productive', and distinguishing it from feminine work, associated with the home. Merry Wiesner writes that the 'gender of the worker, not the work itself or its location,

⁶³ See for example Geraldine Heng's 'Enchanted Ground: The Feminine Subtext in Malory', in *Courtly Literature: Culture and Context*, ed. Keith Busby and Erik Kooper (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990), pp. 148–75.

⁶⁴ "Mother Knows Best" Reading Social Change in a Courtesy Text', *Speculum* 71 (1996): 67–68.

⁶⁵ *The End of Conduct: Grobrianus and the Renaissance Text of the Subject* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 58.

marked the difference between what were considered domestic tasks and what was considered production'.⁶⁶

Caxton's prologues to the works he specifically aims towards a female audience promote the model of masculine distinction and dominance promoted in chivalric literature, and they should be read against the background of merchant anxiety about gender roles. Geoffrey De La Tour-Landry's collection of tales, *The Knight of the Tower*, urges women to be quiet and reserved before men and to submit to their husbands even when they are foolish oafs. Caxton likens the male-dominated merchant household to that of the lesser nobility, noting that the *The Knight of the Tower* is intended 'in especial for ladyes and gentilwymmen, daughters to lordes and gentilmen'.⁶⁷ His prologue to *Blanchardin and Eglantine* does the same, urging noble young men to learn about 'valyayntes' and to earn the love of their ladies and urging 'yonge ladyes and damoyseyllys' to learn how to be 'stedfaste and constaunt' to their men by reading 'auncyent hystories of noble fayttes and valyaunt acts of armes and warre' in order.⁶⁸ This reading material is just as important as books of contemplation, he adds. Although it may seem odd at first glance that the moralistic Caxton would see the value of the romance as equal to that of contemplative works, in fact, his emphasis is on visible behaviour, and as such is perfectly in keeping with the 'bourgeois ethos' described by Riddy. The outward appearance of respectability of the young female urban elite was at least as significant an element of her social status as her inner being. The story of the haughty Eglantine illustrates the Knight of the Tour-Landry's oft-repeated warning that young women should not be overly friendly to young men, spurning their advances until they had proven themselves. Initially, Eglantine vows to have Blanchardin killed for daring to steal a kiss from her! Eventually she falls in love with the knight, but only after a very long wait during which he proves his honorable intentions.

Girls and women, then, should be aloof to suitors and submissive to their guardians. As for masculine behaviour, Caxton takes the mysterious ethos of chivalry with its mixture of intangible and physical qualities, and shows his merchant readers how to adapt it for their own consumption. In the epilogue to the *Order of Chivalry* he implies that the program of chivalry outlined within could be practised by any

⁶⁶ Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, Second Edition), p. 104.

⁶⁷ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 111.

⁶⁸ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, pp. 57–58.

virtuous person of sufficient income. The work is a codification of knightly behaviour, a nostalgic view of feudal life. Thus many of the descriptions of the knighthood – as a title tied to land and governance, for example – hold no purchase for merchants. However, the more general descriptions of knightly virtue could easily be adapted by any reader. True, when Caxton stipulates that this book is not ‘requyeste to euery comyn man to have, but to noble gentylnen that by their vertu entende to come and entre in to the noble ordre of chyvalry’ he seems at first to exclude merchants, who might conceivably be gentlemen, but not noble.⁶⁹ But later in the epilogue he widens his readership, noting that this book should belong to ‘yong lordes, knyghtes and gentylnen within this royaume’.⁷⁰ This shift reflects the contents of the text, where chivalry is just once equated with ‘parage’, and then posited throughout as a sort of nobility of spirit.⁷¹ I will return to this point below.

Chivalry has all but vanished; no one practises it. Caxton laments in his epilogue: ‘Allas! what doo ye but slepe and take ease and ar al disordered fro chivalry?’⁷² How can chivalry be revitalized? The year 1484, when Caxton printed the *Order of Chivalry*, was a turbulent time for England. Richard III, to whom Caxton dedicates the book, had seized the throne just the year before. The text insists that knights who are ‘iniuyous and prowde ful of wyckednesse’ are not worthy of chivalry.⁷³ Caxton, however, does not pick up on this facet of the work to complain of the violence or the treachery or the disregard for public welfare that was rife, nor does he rail against the degeneration of chivalry into lethal civil combat, as one might expect at a time commonly acknowledged to have seen the ‘autumn’ of the age of chivalry. Rather, he complains in his epilogue that masterful horsemanship is rare. How many knights are there in England, he demands, who have

th’use and th’exercercyse of a knyghte, that is to wete that he knoweth his hors and his hors hym, that is to saye he beyng redy at a poynt to have al thyng that longeth to a knight, an hors that is acording and broken after his hand, his armures and harnoys mete and syttyng and so forth et cetera.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 126.

⁷⁰ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 127.

⁷¹ William Caxton, *The Book of the Ordre of Chyualry*, ed. Alfred T. P. Byles (London: Early English Text Society, Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 58–59.

⁷² Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 127.

⁷³ Caxton, *Ordre of Chyualry*, p. 44–45.

⁷⁴ Blake, *Caxton’s Own Prose*, p. 127.

He identifies chivalry with the ability to train and ride a horse. While horsemanship was a core element of chivalric identity, it is nonetheless the most literal element, the most easily assimilated by a person of any social status. Men cannot change their lineage, nor can they easily change their natures. However, anyone can learn to ride and train a horse.

Certainly this emphasis upon horsemanship was not unique to Caxton. Obviously the very concept of chivalry depends upon skill in riding. Caxton, however, is not describing courtiers, but the much wider group of all who might claim to be chivalrous in a metaphoric sense. His critique gains its relevance in the social context of the contemporary debate over gentility – whether it was determined by birth or virtue – and it demonstrates what J. P. Cooper has described as ‘men’s capacity for accepting and even trying to act upon quite contradictory explanatory systems ...’⁷⁵ Caxton’s text briefly equates ‘parage’ and chivalry, but it then comes down in favor of the latter as learned behaviour. You should not knight a man who is not of ‘parage’, the text asserts, because to do so is to make chivalry contrary to ‘parage’.⁷⁶ And yet, the following line continues with the assertion that you may not knight a man of ‘vyle’ courage. ‘Noblesse’ is consistently and firmly equated with virtue.⁷⁷ In the epilogue, Caxton associates chivalry not with noble birth but with virtue and good horsemanship. In a literal sense, military service as a career could lead to ennoblement.⁷⁸ Still, very few merchants were knights. Sylvia Thrupp writes that knighthood was perceived to be more onerous than glorious and was not typically sought by any except those gentry families for whom it was traditional.⁷⁹ Caxton thus chooses to emphasize a sign of chivalry theoretically adaptable to merchant life; not only knights, but anyone wealthy enough to own and train a horse could be chivalrous.

As for the more abstract aspects of chivalry, these could be performed by the willing reader as well. In the same epilogue to the *Order of Chyualry*, Caxton advises his public to ‘rede the noble volumes of Saynt Graal, of Lancelot, of Galaad, of

⁷⁵ ‘Ideas of Gentility in Early Modern-England’, in *Land, Men and Beliefs: Studies in Early-Modern History*, ed. G. E. Aylmer and J. S. Morrill (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), pp. 43–77 (p. 46).

⁷⁶ Caxton, *Ordre of Chyualry*, pp. 58–59.

⁷⁷ See Caxton, *Ordre of Chyualry*, pp. 60–61.

⁷⁸ See Morgan, ‘The Individual Style of the English Gentleman’, pp. 22–25.

⁷⁹ Sylvia Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 275–78.

Trystram, of Perse Forest, of Percyval, of Gawayn and many mo. Ther shalle ye see manhode, curtosye and gentylnesse'.⁸⁰ The essence of chivalry is nothing magical, but learned behaviour. Caxton offers his male readers a literal means of acquiring chivalry and thus masculinity.

Caxton's prologues and epilogues did not produce a distinct and sufficient identity for merchants. Describing the images of merchants in Elizabethan literature 100 years after Caxton, Laura Stevenson notes that although the value of merchants and the importance of cultivating their civic pride were commonly acknowledged by the late sixteenth century, English society even then remained grounded in the 'dominant value' system of the landed gentry, which was inhospitable to skills particular to merchants. A gap yawned between the reality of merchants' contribution to society and the available conceptual frameworks for imagining their place in social life. '[T]he consciousness that men of trade had a dignified position in the social hierarchy was pressing against the confines of that dominant value system', Stevenson writes.⁸¹

The same discrepancy existed for Caxton. Faced with the need to convert unflattering representations into positive ones, he reacts in a way that will remain current for at least the next 100 years, by attempting to diminish the distance between merchant and noble behaviour. His result, to transpose Stevenson's words about merchants in Elizabethan literature, was a 'hybrid figure who bounded from shop to battlefield ... a prince in disguise ...'.⁸² According to Stevenson, this construction could not finally provide English merchants with a satisfactory social image, and it faded away after the death of Elizabeth. Only long afterwards, with the Civil War and its assault upon the aristocratic way of life, did the merchant finally become a viable figure with its own distinct set of positive values. Still, Caxton's construction of the figure is innovative in his time and offers one plausible means of inserting merchant life into a rather inflexible social schema.

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⁸⁰ Blake, *Caxton's Own Prose*, p. 126.

⁸¹ Stevenson, p. 130.

⁸² Stevenson, p. 212.