

WILLIAM CAXTON

ca. 1422–1491

In his early years Caxton was a prosperous merchant who traded mostly in the low countries. In 1470, at the command of his patroness, Margaret of Burgundy, he completed a translation into English of the French *Recueil des Histoires de Troie* (i.e., collection of the stories of Troy), which he had begun earlier in his leisure time. This work, circulated in manuscript, became so popular that the demand for it exceeded the number of copies that could be readily produced by scribes. Caxton thereupon went to Cologne, where he studied the newly developed art of printing, and subsequently set up a press at Bruges in Belgium. In 1475 he printed his translation of the Troy book (the first book printed in English), and in the next year returned to England, where he established England's first printing press, in London. Among his first publications were Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (1478; second edition about 1484). In 1485 he printed Malory's work, with the Preface reproduced here.

A shrewd publisher and practiced writer, as well as a pioneer printer, Caxton gives a most astute and inviting account of Malory's work and the personage after whom it was named. Caxton himself evidently put small credence in the historicity of Arthur, but by appearing—in all modesty—to have been overwhelmed by the faith that eminent people had in Arthur's existence, as well as by the survival of certain relics that seemed to support such faith, he encourages the reader to lay aside his own skepticism (although the warning remains: "ye are at your liberty" to accept or reject the truth of Malory's narrative). In describing the work itself, Caxton is careful to emphasize its exemplary qualities, "the noble acts of chivalry" that knights performed in the old days, from which one may learn virtuous conduct; but he is also careful not to suppress the fact—though he presents it in tantalizing subordination—that the book contains much that is exemplary only in the negative sense: "cowardice, murder, hate, ° ° ° and sin," which for some might, perhaps, enhance the book's appeal.

Preface to *Morte Darthur*

After that I had accomplished and finished divers histories as well of contemplation as of other historial and worldly acts of great conquerors and princes, and also certain books of ensamples¹ and doctrine, many noble and divers gentlemen of this royaume of England camen and demanded me many and oftymes wherefore that I have not do² made and imprint the noble history of the Saint Grail and of the most renommed³ Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian, and worthy,⁴ King Arthur, which ought most to be remembered among us Englishmen tofore all other Christian kings.

For it is notoirly⁵ known through the universal world that there been nine worthy and the best that ever were, that is to wit, three Paynims,⁶ three Jews, and three Christian men. As for the Paynims, they were tofore the Incarnation of Christ, which were named, the first Hector of Troy, of whom th'istory is common both in ballad and in prose, the second Alexander the Great, and the

1. Exemplary stories.

2. Caused to be.

3. Renowned.

4. I.e., one of the Nine Worthies

5. Notoriously.

6. Pagans.

third Julius Caesar, Emperor of Rome, of whom th'histories been well known and had.⁷ And as for the three which also were tofore th'Incarnation of our Lord, of whom the first was Duke Joshua which brought the children of Israel into the land of behest,⁸ the second David, king of Jerusalem, and the third Judas Maccabeus, of these three the Bible rehearseth all their noble histories and acts. And sith⁹ the said Incarnation have been three noble Christian men stalled¹ and admitted through the universal world into the number of the nine best and worthy, of whom was first the noble Arthur, whose noble acts I purpose to write in this present book here following. The second was Charlemagne, or Charles the Great, of whom th'istory is had in many places, both in French and English; and the third and last was Godefroy of Bouillon, of whose acts and life I made a book unto th'excellent prince and king of noble memory, King Edward the Fourth.

The said noble gentlemen instantly required² me t'imprint th'istory of the said noble king and conqueror king Arthur and of his knights, with th'istory of the Saint Grail and of the death and ending of the said Arthur, affirming that I ought rather t'imprint his acts and noble feats than of Godefroy of Bouillon or any of the other eight, considering that he was a man born within this royalme and king and emperor of the same, and that there been in French divers and many noble volumes of his acts, and also of his knights.

To whom I answered that divers men hold opinion that there was no such. Arthur and that all such books as been made of him been but feigned and fables, because that some chronicles make of him no mention ne remember him nothing, ne of his knights.

Whereto they answered, and one in special said, that in him that should say or think that there was never such a king called Arthur might well be aretted³ great folly and blindness, for he said that there were many evidences of the contrary. First, ye may see his sepulture⁴ in the monastery of Glastonbury; and also in *Polychronicon*,⁵ in the fifth book, the sixth chapter, and in the seventh book, the twenty-third chapter, where his body was buried, and after founden and translated⁶ into the said monastery. Ye shall see also in th'istory of Bochas,⁷ in his book *De Casu Principum*, part of his noble acts, and also of his fall. Also Galfridus, in his British book,⁸ recounteth his life. And in divers places of England many remembrances been yet of him and shall remain perpetually, and also of his knights: first, in the abbey of Westminster, at Saint Edward's shrine, remaineth the print of his seal in red wax, closed in beryl, in which is written PATRICIUS ARTHURUS BRITANNIE GALLIE GERMANIE DACIE IMPERATOR;⁹ item, in the castle of Dover ye may see Gawain's skull and Cradok's mantle; at Winchester, the Round Table; in other places Lancelot's sword and many other things.

Then, all these things considered, there can no man reasonably gainsay but

7. Available.

8. Promised Land.

9. Since.

1. Assigned.

2. Urgently requested.

3. Imputed.

4. Burial place.

5. A Latin history by Ranulph Higden (d. 1364), an English translation of which was printed by Caxton in 1482.

6. Carried.

7. The Italian Giovanni Boccaccio (d. 1375), whose book *Concerning the Falls of Illustrious Men* ("Concerning the Fall of Princes," according to Caxton) was a favorite of the later Middle Ages.

8. Geoffrey of Monmouth, whose *History of the Kings of Britain* (ca. 1136), begins with the story of the founding of Britain by Brutus, Aeneas's great-grandson, who was believed to have given his name to Britain: hence Caxton's "Brutish."

9. The Noble Arthur, Emperor of Britain, Gaul, Germany, and Dacia.

there was a king of this land named Arthur. For in all places, Christian and heathen, he is reputed and taken for one of the nine worthy, and the first of the three Christian men. And also he is more spoken of beyond the sea, mo¹ books made of his noble acts, than there be in England; as well in Dutch, Italian, Spanish, and Greekish, as in French. And yet of record remain in witness of him in Wales, in the town of Camelot, the great stones and marvelous works of iron lying under the ground, and royal vaults, which divers now living hath seen. Wherefore it is a marvel why he is no more renowned in his own country, save only it accordeth to the word of God, which saith that no man is accept for a prophet in his own country.

Then, all these things foresaid alleged,² I could not well deny but that there was such a noble king named Arthur, and reputed one of the nine worthy, and first and chief of the Christian men. And many noble volumes be made of him and of his noble knights in French, which I have seen and read beyond the sea, which been not had in our maternal tongue. But in Welsh been many, and also in French, and some in English, but nowhere nigh all. Wherefore, such as have late been drawn out briefly into English, I have, after the simple cunning that God hath sent to me, under the favor and correction of all noble lords and gentlemen, emprised³ to imprint a book of the noble histories of the said king Arthur and of certain of his knights, after a copy unto me delivered, which copy sir Thomas Malory did take out of certain books of French and reduced it into English.

And I, according to my copy, have done set it⁴ in imprint to the intent that noble men may see and learn the noble acts of chivalry, the gentle and virtuous deeds that some knights used in tho⁵ days, by which they came to honor, and how they that were vicious were punished and oft put to shame and rebuke; humbly beseeching all noble lords and ladies with all other estates, of what estate or degree they been of, that shall see and read in this said book and work, that they take the good and honest acts in their remembrance, and to follow the same; wherein they shall find many joyous and pleasant histories and noble and renowned acts of humanity, gentleness, and chivalries. For herein may be seen noble chivalry, courtesy, humanity, friendliness, hardiness, love, friendship, cowardice, murder, hate, virtue, and sin. Do after the good and leave the evil, and it shall bring you to good fame and renommee.⁶

And for to pass the time this book shall be pleasant to read in, but for to give faith and belief that all is true that is contained herein, ye be at your liberty. But all is written for our doctrine, and for to beware that we fall not to vice ne sin, but t^exercise and follow virtue, by which we may come and attain to good fame and renommee in this life, and after this short and transitory life to come unto everlasting bliss in heaven; the which He grant us that reigneth in heaven, the Blessed Trinity. AMEN.

Then, to proceed forth in this said book, which I direct unto all noble princes, lords and ladies, gentlemen or gentlewomen, that desire to read or hear read of the noble and joyous history of the great conqueror and excellent king, king Arthur, sometime king of this noble royalme then called Britain, I,

1. More.
2. Having been cited.
3. Undertaken.

4. Have caused it to be set.
5. Those.
6. Renown.

William Caxton, simple person, present this book following which I have emprised t'imprint: and treateth of the noble acts, feats of arms of chivalry, prowess, hardiness, humanity, love, courtesy, and very⁷ gentleness, with many wonderful histories and adventures.