

As the fifteenth century drew to a close, several changes were occurring within Europe and within England. These were not limited to just governmental or religious changes, but also were felt well into mainstream English society. One of the major changes that occurred was the introduction of printing into England, and the resulting industry that developed over the next few decades. As this printing industry originated and evolved within the late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century, its ramifications would be felt throughout England. Although many areas of society were impacted by the printing industry, two areas were notably affected. The realms of politics and religion would both be heavily impacted by the rise of English printing and the greater means of communication it presented, and people in both of these areas would use printing to further their own agendas. Additionally, political and religious figures would try and exert their control over printing, and try to control what types of books were printed. These close ties to the printing industry did not develop accidentally, nor were they occurrences that happened later on after the printing industry was firmly established in England. Rather, these ties between politics, religion, and printing were present from the very moment that the presses were first built on English soil.

Although printed books had been circulating on the European continent for some time since the invention of the printing press in 1452, no printing industry had developed in England before the 1470s. This did not occur until William Caxton set up his own printing press in Westminster in 1476. Caxton himself is a bit odd, for he was originally a merchant, and did not begin establishing his printing press until he was forty eight years old. There have been varying explanations for why he learned printing at such a late period in his life, including a decline of trade, as well as Caxton learning how to print in order to satisfy the demands of one of his patrons. <sup>1</sup> This idea of a patron is very important, for the presence of patrons and financiers

---

1 Colin Clair, A History of Printing in Britain, (London: Cassell & Company, 1965), pg 15.

would heavily influence much of Caxton's early attempts at printing. The very first book he printed in England in 1477, *The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres*, was not Caxton's own work, but rather a translation provided to him by the Earl Rivers. In return for printing this book, the Earl rewarded Caxton, presumably with a good sum of money.<sup>2</sup> It is important to note the great influence which patrons held over the early printings of Caxton. From the very beginning, the presence of patrons shows how much influence the royal or wealthy members of English society had over printing, and demonstrates the close connection between royalty and even the English crown, and the fledgling printing industry. Caxton's massive output of printed books during the last years of the fifteenth century is due almost entirely to the early efforts of his wealthy patrons, who financially backed Caxton's endeavors. "Of seventy-seven original works published by [Caxton] ... for twenty three of them he was assured of financial support, and the favour of influential personages."<sup>3</sup> This continued support of English aristocracy would further Caxton's publications, and provided his patrons with a way to publish works that interested them. "The last ten years of [Caxton's] career ... saw at least ten new publications expressly put forth at the request of a named patron."<sup>4</sup> Many of these aristocratic patrons did not make use of Caxton's printing press in order to further English literacy, but rather to indulge their own literary whims. This was not limited to just the aristocratic class, but extended even up into royalty. In 1489, Caxton was commanded by King Henry VII to translate into English and print a French manuscript from the royal library. In addition to this manuscript, the *Fait d'Armes et de Chevalerie*, Caxton printed several works of romance, some also at the request of royalty. One romance, *Blanchardyn and Eglantine*, he printed at the request of King Henry's mother, the Lady

---

2 H.S. Bennett, English Books and Readers 1475 to 1557: Being a Study in the History of the Book Trade from Caxton to the Incorporation of the Stationers' Company (Cambridge: Cambridge At The University Press, 1969), pg 12.

3 Ibid., pg 17.

4 Ibid., pg 15.

Margaret Beaufort, who had personally asked him to make an English translation from the French manuscript.<sup>5</sup> As such, the ties between Caxton's early printings and the English aristocracy and royalty were very close. It is obvious that Caxton depended on his aristocratic patrons in order to cover the costs of printing. In a prologue Caxton wrote in a later work he translated, he remarked on the "great coste and charges" of the printing and translation, but hoped that "hys good grace shall rewarde me in suche wise that I shal have cause to pray for his good and prosperous welfare."<sup>6</sup>

Although Caxton printed many of his early books at the express request of aristocratic patrons, the books themselves usually dealt with religious themes. In some ways this was a sign of how conservative Caxton was in his business dealings. Although he did print a variety of works from different disciplines and genres such as romance and poetry, Caxton nevertheless did not desire to print anything that could be considered to be too radical. "Caution remained his watchword: his publications were eminently 'safe', since they were almost exclusively confined to devotional works, reprints and volumes undertaken at the request of a patron."<sup>7</sup> This helped Caxton to ensure that his printed books would be accepted by his patrons and by the public, and would continue to keep him in business. The religious element was particularly strong in Caxton's publications; upwards of forty five percent of his printed books were of a devotional nature.<sup>8</sup>

While Caxton's printings in the late 1400s demonstrated the influence of patrons and established the religious tones to printing, it was not until the 1500s that political and religious factions within England would begin to exert direct control over printed material. When Caxton

---

5 Colin Clair, pg 22.

6 Colin Clair, pg 23.

7 H.S. Bennett, pg 15.

8 Ibid., pg 65.

died in 1491, his business was taken over by his primary assistant, Wynkyn de Worde.<sup>9</sup> By this time, several other printers such as Richard Pynson were also establishing printing presses, and the business of the printing industry was beginning to grow. This is clear from the increasing number of books which printers such as de Worde and Pynson were printing. Where Caxton only printed about 100 books during his fifteen years as a printer,<sup>10</sup> Wynkyn de Worde published 829 editions from 1492 to 1535.<sup>11</sup> Together, de Worde and Pynson were responsible for seventy percent of the books printed in English during the first decade of the 1500s, and this would increase to seventy three percent during the next decade.<sup>12</sup>

This increased amount of trade brought increased competition from other printers, and as such they began to diversify in order to gain larger audiences and sell more books. De Worde himself was a shrewd businessman, and fought hard to capitalize on this new market. Of the eight hundred books he printed during the late 1400s and early 1500s, seventy percent of them were original works, as opposed to the many translations which Caxton had printed.<sup>13</sup> The increasing popularity of printed books began to attract attention from the English Crown, and in the initial years of the 1500s the printer William Faques was appointed as King's Printer by Henry VII. However, Faques only held this position for a couple years before he died in 1508, after which the position was transferred to Richard Pynson.<sup>14</sup> This position entailed that the printer publish the King's Acts and proclamations, and the King's business clearly took precedence over any other work that the printer had. Although allowed to publish other works on his own, printing for the King always took precedence. "The King's Printer had obviously a special place among his fellows, and his output was considerably controlled by the commands of

---

9 Colin Clair, pg 27.

10 Colin Clair, pg 24.

11 Ibid., pg 31.

12 James Moran, Wynkyn de Worde: Father of Fleet Street. (London: Oak Knoll Press, 2003), pg 41.

13 Colin Clair, pg 29.

14 Ibid., pg 42.

the crown.”<sup>15</sup> This prioritizing of the King's work is shown in a contract written between Richard Pynson and John Palsgrave, which commanded Pynson to print “every hoole working day, for the more speding off the saide work, a schete off paper on bothe the sides, and not to cesse for none occasion (except the Kynges grace have any thynges to be prynted).”<sup>16</sup>

Just as English royalty was becoming more interested in printing as a means of communicating, so too were religious elements beginning to notice the effects which printing held for England. Religious or devotional books were published in large amounts, not just by Caxton, but also by later printers such as de Worde and Pynson. Around forty percent of de Worde's and Pynson's works were focused on religious elements.<sup>17</sup> Their reasons for focusing on religion was similar to Caxton's reasons for printing religious works: the demand for devotional works was heavy, and books of this type were almost guaranteed to sell. The demand for religious books was so heavy that the few printers in England could not keep up, and religious works were imported from the European continent in increasing numbers. By the 1550s, upwards of sixty percent of religious material came from overseas presses.<sup>18</sup> In choosing to print so many liturgical works, printers would occasionally run up against religious authorities. In 1526 the printer Thomas Berthelet got in trouble with the Bishop of London for printing the English translations of three works by Erasmus, which were deemed heretical.<sup>19</sup> So too did de Worde come up against religious authorities in the early sixteenth century. After he published a Lutheran tract in 1525, de Worde was called to St. Paul's Cathedral to answer charges of heresy, and was ordered to not sell any more copies of the work.<sup>20</sup>

As printing became more popular within England, it came under an increasing amount of

---

15 H.S. Bennett, pg 62-63.

16 Colin Clair, pg 38-39.

17 H.S. Bennett, pg 65.

18 Ibid., pg 66.

19 Ibid., pg 34.

20 Colin Clair, pg 30.

both political and religious regulation. In the 1480s, printing was still rare enough that foreign printers were specifically excluded from restrictive trade laws, which allowed foreign printers such as de Worde and Pynson to set up shop in England. Additionally, foreign books were allowed to be freely imported into England.<sup>21</sup> However, as the number of printers in England increased during the reign of Henry VIII, an increasing amount of resentment was felt towards the foreign-born printers who still dominated the book trade. This eventually resulted in new laws that severely restricted the ability of foreigners to become printers. In 1523, foreign printers could not employ any foreign apprentices or journeymen. In 1529 foreigners could not establish a printing press, and finally in 1534, foreign books were no longer exempted from trade restrictions. The reasons given for these increasing restrictions on foreigners was that Englishmen were now operating their own printing shops and their businesses needed to be protected.<sup>22</sup> This increased regulation of the book trade was not just aimed at keeping foreign influences out, but also at preventing seditious or heretical works from being imported into England. “When the printed book began to deal with religious and political controversy, the Government began to act and a relentless war was carried on against all books and tracts labeled as heretical or seditious.”<sup>23</sup>

King Henry VIII himself used the printing industry to further his own political and religious causes. In addition to continuing the practice of a King's Printer begun under his father, Henry VIII allowed other printers to further his causes. This occurred primarily during the 1530s during the Reformation and Henry's break with the Catholic Church. Once separated from the Catholic Church, Henry began to encourage the spread of Protestantism in England, and much of this was done through the dissemination of printed works. He initially allowed new vernacular

---

21 Colin Clair, pg 104.

22 James Moran, pg 39-41.

23 Colin Clair, pg 106.

translations of the Bible to be introduced into England, including publication of the Coverdale Bible in 1535, followed by later translations and printings in 1537 and 1539.<sup>24</sup> These publications of the Bible were very important acts on the part of Henry. By allowing English translations of the Bible to be printed and distributed throughout England, Henry furthered the Protestant cause and contributed to later incidents of religious dissent. “There can be little doubt in fact that study of the Bible was one of the major forces in producing religious dissent and discussion in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”<sup>25</sup> This was also a sly political move on Henry's part. By personally allowing the printed translation of the Bible, Henry was displaying the authority of the King of England over religious matters. In later years, Henry would try and exert his power once more over religious printing by disallowing annotated English Bibles, a reversal of his earlier policy. “An Act of 1543 prohibited the use of Tyndale or any other annotated Bible in English and forbade unlicensed persons to read or expound the Bible to others in any church or open assembly.”<sup>26</sup> This attempt at religious control of Henry's was largely ineffectual, for soon after his death the prohibitions on vernacular Bibles were abandoned.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time as Henry VIII was trying to exert his control over the book trade, religious elements within English society were noticing how influential the printing industry could be. The printing industry proved ideal for the spread of religious ideas, for it allowed people to quickly create large numbers of easily distributable sheets or pamphlets. As seen during Caxton's years, this is not something that occurred only after printing was established in England, but rather was present from the very beginning. It is possible that without the influence

---

24 Alan G.R. Smith, The Emergence of A Nation State: The Commonwealth of England 1529 – 1660. (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1984), pg 32.

25 Alan Smith, pg 33.

26 Elixabeth L. Eisenstein. The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pg 159.

27 Ibid., pg 160.

of religion on the early years of the printing industry, then it would have taken much longer for printing to become as widespread as it did in England. “Not only did the Church legitimize the art of printing, it provided a most important market for the infant industry.”<sup>28</sup> Both Catholics and Protestants were quick to realize the power that the printing press afforded them, and were quick to establish controls on the publication of religious materials. “The printing press was one of the most potent agents of propaganda, and the writers on both sides poured forth their tracts and treatises.”<sup>29</sup> To many religious figures, it was clear that these books must be controlled. Roland Phillips, the Vicar of Croydon, believed that heretical or controversial religious books should be eliminated, declaring: “We must root out printing, or printing will root out us.”<sup>30</sup> In addition to various religious tracts and pamphlets, some of this control centered around printing of the Bible. After Henry VIII allowed publication of the Coverdale Bible in 1535, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer discovered another version which he liked better. Realizing that it would be beneficial to control the publication of Bibles in England, Cranmer wrote to Thomas Cromwell so he could ask King Henry to sanction this new edition, so it would not be threatened by other translations. Cromwell was later asked by the printer of the Bible to provide a market for the expensive book, and to order every monastery to have six copies of the translation. Although this was done, this translation of the Bible proved to be controversial, for it included some references to the Church of Rome. As such, this new edition was replaced by yet another translation.<sup>31</sup> All these varying translations of the Bible and the removal of the annotations were a deliberate attempt by the Church to control the spread of controversial ideas which they did not want the public to discuss. Without the annotations or commentaries, reading the Bible would prove to be extremely difficult for the average English citizen. “Commentaries

---

28 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, pg 155.

29 H.S. Bennett, pg 70.

30 Ibid., pg 73.

31 Colin Clair, pg 62.

were an obvious necessity for a lay public struggling with the innumerable difficulties presented by the open Bible.”<sup>32</sup> These attempts at control by the Church would prove to be futile, for although the Bible itself was regulated, separate books of commentaries and selections from the Bible continued to make their way into England.

Realizing that the control of books was difficult to accomplish, Catholic printers were able to create controversy amongst the English population and the now established Anglican Church by printing works supporting their religion. “Catholic printers proved as skillful as their Puritan counterparts in handling problems posed by the surreptitious printing and the clandestine marketing of books.”<sup>33</sup> At this point, the printing industry was still rather open and unregulated, even after the Acts of Henry VIII which ousted the foreign printers. This would continue for some time into the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, when control was finally established and the Stationers' Company was founded. This would limit printing to members of this company, and would in many ways create the control that these early religious and political elements would try to obtain, but would ultimately fail at.

It is clear that political and religious factions both attempted to utilize the printing industry for their own purposes. King Henry VII interacted with the early English printers and established the position of King's Printer to publish his proclamations. His successor Henry VIII continued this trend, but took the concept of royal control even further. In order to appease the growing crowd of English printers, Henry VIII issued Acts that prevented foreigners from taking part in the trade. He also tried to exert his religious authority by licensing vernacular translations of the Bible in order to show the power and control he had. Much like the English Kings, both the Catholic and Anglican Churches tried to use printing to further their own causes. They also

---

32 H.S. Bennett, pg 75.

33 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, pg 157.

tried to control printing of the Bible, and attempted to control the trade of other controversial religious texts, as can be seen through the fight against heresy which some printers such as Wynkyn de Worde and Thomas Berthelet were questioned about. However, these attempts at control proved to be ineffectual, and controversial religious works continued to flood into England. This was not helped by Henry VIII's own occasionally contradictory policies on what translations of the Bible were allowed. However, these attempts by the political and religious spheres of society at controlling the printing industry were not any late developments. Rather, the antecedents to these movements can be seen in the influences which other royal and aristocratic individuals had on the early printing under William Caxton. These patrons could exert great control over the subjects of the books, and in some instances Caxton was commanded by royals to print certain books. These influential patrons were necessary to cover the costs of printing and develop the printing industry in England, but having patrons established the idea of royal control over printing. Likewise, religious aspects to printing had always been present from Caxton's early works onward. Religious control was present here as well, although it much more self imposed. By trying to reach a large audience, none of the early printers wanted to print anything controversial, and so willingly kept themselves to "safe" religious works. Therefore, to understand the religious and political aspects of the printing industry in the 1500s, the origins of printing in England must also be examined.