

William Caxton

PROLOGUE
TO HIS
TRANSLATION OF *ÆNEID*
[1490]

After dyuerse werkes made / translated and achieved / hauyng noo werke in hande, I, sitting in my studye where as laye many dyuerse paunflettis and bookys, happened that to my hande came a lytyl booke in frenshe, whiche late was translated oute of latyn by some noble clerke of fraunce, whiche booke is named Encydos / made in latyn by that noble poete & grete clerke vyrgyle / whiche booke I sawe ouer and redde therin, How, after the generall destruccyon of the grete Troye, Enens departed, berynge his olde fader anchises vpon his sholdres / his lityl son yolus on his honde, his wyfe wyth moche other people folowyng / and how he shyped and departed, wyth alle thystorye of his aduentures that he had er he cam to the achieuement of his conquest of ytalye, as all a longe shall be shewed in this present boke. In whiche booke I had grete playsyr, by cause of the fayr and honest termes & wordes in frenshe / whyche I neuer sawe to-fore lyke, ne none so playsaunt ne so wel ordred; whiche booke, as me semed, sholde be moche requysyte to noble men to see, as wel for the eloquence as the historyes / Howe wel that many honderd yerys passed was the sayd booke of eneydos, wyth other werkes, made and lerned dayly in scolis, specyally in ytalye & other places / whiche historye the sayd vyrgyle made in metre / And whan I had aduysed me in this sayd boke, I delybered and concluded to translate it in-to englysshe, And forthwyth toke a penne & ynke, and wrote a leel or tweyne / whyche I ouersawe agayn to corecte it / And whan I sawe the fayr & straunge termes therin / I doubted that it sholde not please some gentylnen whiche late blamed me, sayeng that in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes whiche coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple / and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons. and fayn wolde I satysfye cuery man / and so to doo, toke an olde boke and redde therein / and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vndertande it. And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late, certayn euydences wryton in olde englysshe, for to reduce it in-to our englysshe now vsid / And certaynly it was wretton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe; I coude not reduce ne bryng it to be vnderstonden / And certaynly

ÆNEID

our langage now vsed varyeth ferre from that whiche was vsed and spoken when I was borne / For we englysshe men / ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone, whiche is neuer stedfate / but euer wauerynge / wexynge one season / and waneth & dyscreaseth another season / And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in tamyse, for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande / and for lacke of wynde, thei rayed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refreshe them; And one of theym named sheffelde, a mercer, cam in-to an hows and axed for mete; and specyally he axyd after eggys; And the goode wyf answerde, that she coude speke no frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry, for he also coude speke no frenshe, but wolde haue hadde egges / and she vnderstode hym not / And thenne at last a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren / then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel / Loo, what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte, egges or eyren / certaynly it is harde to playse enery man / by cause of dyuersite & chaunge of langage. For in these dayes euery man that is in ony reputacyon in his countre, will vtter his commynycacyon and maters in suche maners & termes / that fewe men shall vnderstode theym / And som honest and grete clerkes haue ben wyth me, and desired me to wryte the moste curyous termes that I coude fynde / And thus bytwene playn rude / & curyous, I stande abashed. but in my Iudgemente / the comyn termes that be dayli vsed, ben lyghter to be vnderstode than the olde and auntyent englysshe / And for as moche as this present booke is not for a rude vplondyssh man to laboure therin / ne rede it / but onely for a clerke & a noble gentylman that feleth and vnderstondeth in faytes of armes, in loue, & in noble chyualrye / Therfor in a meane bytwene bothe, I have reduced & translated this sayd booke in to our englysshe, not ouer rude ne curyous, but in suche termes as shall be vnderstanden, by goddys grace, accordynge to my cople. And yf ony man wyll enter-mete in redyng of hit, and fyndeth suche termes that he can not vnderstande, late hym goo rede and learne vyrgyll / or the pystles of ouyde / and ther he shall see and vnderstode lyghtly all / Yf he haue a good redar & enformer / For this booke is not for euery rude and vnconnyng man to see / but to clerkys and very gentylmen that vnderstande gentylnes and seyence

Thenne I praye alle theym that shall rede in this lytyl treatys, to holde me for excused

ÆNEID

for the translatyng of hit. For I knowleche my selfe ignorant of connyng to enpryse on me so hie and noble a werke / But I praye mayster Iohn Skelton, late created poete laureate in the vnyuersite of oxenforde, to ouersee and correcte this sayd booke, And taddresse and expowne where as shalle be founde faulte to theym that shall requyre it. For hym, I knowe for suffyeyent to expowne and englysshe euery dyffyculte that is therin / For he hath late translated the epystlys of Tulle / and the boke of dyodorus syculus, and diuerse other werkes oute of latyn in-to englysshe, not in rude and olde langage, but in polysshed and ornate termes craftely, as he that hath redde vrgyle / ouyde, tullye, and all the other noble poetes and oratours / to me vnknown: And also he hath redde the ix. muses, and vndertande theyr musicalle scyences, and to whom of theym eche scyence is appropred. I suppose he hath dronken of Elycons well. Then I praye hym, & suche other, to correcte, adde or mynysshe where as he or they shall fynde faulte / For I haue but folowed my cotype in frenshe as nygh as me is possyble / And yf ony worde be sayd therin well / I am glad; and yf otherwyse, I submytte my sayd boke to theyr correctyon / Whiche boke I presente vnto the hie born my tocomyng naturell & souerayn lord, Arthur, by the grace of god Prynce of Walys, Duc of Cornewayll, & Erle of Chester, fyrst bygoten sone and heyer vnto our most dradde naturall & souerayn lorde, & most crysten kynge / Henry the vij. by the grace of god, kynge of Englonde and of Fraunce, & lord of Irelonde / byseching his noble grace to receyue it in thanke of me, his moste humble subget & seruaunt / And I shall praye vnto almyghty god for his prosperous encreasyng in vertue / wysedom / and humanyte, that he may be egal wyth the most renomined of alle his noble progenytours

And so to lyue in this present lyf / that after this transitorye lyfe he and we alle may come to euerlastyng lyf in heuen / Amen:
