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Symbolic Caxton: Literary Culture and Print Capitalism

William Kuskin

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Symbolic Caxton is the first study to explore the introduction of printing in symbolic terms. It presents a powerful literary history in which the fifteenth century is crucial to the overall story of English literature. William Kuskin argues that the development of print production is part of a larger social network involving the political, economic, and literary systems that produce the intangible constellations of identity and authority. For Kuskin, William Caxton (1422–1491), the first English printer, becomes a unique lens through which to view these issues. Kuskin contends that recognizing the fundamental complexity inherent in the transformation from manuscript to print—the power of literature to formulate its audience, the intimacy of capital and communication, the closeness of commodities and identity—makes possible a clear understanding of the way cultural, bibliographical, financial, and technological instruments intersect in a process of symbolic production.

While this book is the first to connect the contents of late medieval literature to its technological form, it also speaks to contemporary culture, wrestling with our own paradigm shift in the relationship between literature and technology.

“This is an important book about the origins of printing and print culture in England by North America’s leading younger scholar of William Caxton. It will contribute to debates about the English fifteenth century and the nature of Chaucerian reception. And it will offer a productive qualification and, at times, corrective to larger and more general accounts of print history.” —**Seth Lerer, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities, Stanford University**

“This elegant, closely-argued study is one of the most important books to have yet appeared on Caxton and fifteenth-century English literary culture. Kuskin’s fine-grained attention to book history, his allegiance to the conceptual methodology of ‘history of the book’, and his command of literary history all combine to reconfigure our view of early print production, patronage, commerce, and literary authority. This is a major contribution to the history of vernacular textual production and vernacular knowledge in the fifteenth century—and to media history as a whole.” —**Professor Ruth Evans, The University of Stirling**

"There are certainly recent books on Caxton, but none that takes the literary approach used here, which is what makes the book such an important contribution to the field. It serves as a solid introduction to the subject of printing in England in the fifteenth century. William Kuskin shows how print, through a 'logic of reproduction,' constructs and shapes its audience." —**Maura Nolan, University of California, Berkeley**

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