

WILLIAM CAXTON

*The Booke of Ovyde Named Methamorphose*

The first English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* was the work of William Caxton, not just England's first printer but also a successful merchant, diplomat, and one of the most prolific translators of the fifteenth century. Extremely popular in the late Middle Ages, the stories in the *Metamorphoses* featured in works by Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate. Caxton's translation, which survives only in a single manuscript now in Magdalene College, Cambridge, was made not from the original Latin but from a prose version of the French *Ovide moralisé*, a chivalric adaptation which includes allegorical and historical interpretations of the fables as well as additional classical tales. In the fifteenth century, Burgundian chivalric taste influenced the proliferation of the prose romance, and this genre was, in turn, sought as the height of English literary fashion. The *Booke of Ovyde* is thus a perfect example of how Caxton both reflected and influenced literary tastes of his day.

This critical edition, the first of the entire work, seeks to encourage the study of Caxton's *Ovyde*, both as an example of the late-medieval *mise en prose* and as a significant part of Caxton's considerable *oeuvre*. It also serves as an entry point into the complex textual tradition of medieval Ovidian commentaries. An extensive introduction examines Caxton's method as a translator, his language, and the history of both the *Ovide moralisé* and Caxton's Magdalene College manuscript.

BRITISH WRITERS OF THE MIDDLE AGES  
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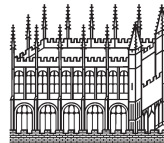
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Edited by  
RICHARD J. MOLL



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Caxton warns that his text may be unsuitable for all readers and cries ‘Ye maydens & doughtirs, withdrawe you þat ye here it not! And yf ye here it, beleue it not.’ My own daughters, Niamh and Ardith, are too young now to read the text profitably, but I trust that if and when they do read it they will heed Caxton’s advice and pass over the racier bits. And so it is with some trepidation (and with the knowledge that they certainly have not helped speed the project along) that I dedicate the volume to them.